

Abigail Barnette

INFERNAL DEVICES

ALL STEAMED UP

Infernal Devices

An All Steamed Up Story

By Abigail Barnette

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC
2665 S Atlantic Avenue, #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32176

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To my awesome editor, Christine Allen-Riley

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Chapter One

The scrap of paper that Miss Permilia Deering clutched in her black satin glove instructed her to cross the street, go to the door with the little brass plaque in the shape of two playing cards—aces, a heart and a spade—and to pull the bell and wait. It was only the second to last clue in the intricate riddles she'd followed to find the Two Aces, the most notorious club in all of London.

Now, all she had to do was lift her foot and cross the street.

It was easier thought about than done, a fact she wished she would have considered before she'd hired the taxi that had taken her first to the park to meet her friend, Miss Cecilia Watson, who had handed over the paper only after looking this way and that to be sure she was not watched.

“You must not tell anyone where this came from. I can't even tell you how I got it. But I won't have my name mentioned in even the same conversation as that place.” She'd actually blushed as she'd slipped the instructions into Permilia's hands. “I think you are making a very grave mistake.”

Permilia had not argued with her, for it would have been a waste of time, just as Cecilia had known that further argument with her friend would have been pointless, as well. Permilia had been obsessed with the club since the first time she'd heard of it at Lady Covington's summer ball. *Le mot du jour* had been Monsieur LaQuebec's circling of the globe by airship, a pioneering feat in aethernautics that had been much cause for celebration. Lady Covington, feeling quite painless late in the evening, had remarked, “What marvelous things they're building these days! Monsieur LaQuebec's flying machine, the marvelous inventions of those fiends at The Two

Aces...” and her speech had been promptly cut off by Lord Covington while ladies tittered and gentlemen had smirked. After that, it had been as though Permilia’s ears had been permanently attuned to the words “two” and “aces” in any sort of proximity in a sentence. And after she’d learned exactly what people had been talking about behind their hands, playing cards had become positively distracting.

The Two Aces was a debauchery club.

From the stories she had overheard and the information she had deliberately sought out, she’d learned fantastical things. Men and women engaging in marital congress right out in the open. People tied up and left at the whims of club patrons. And machines.

Oh, the machines. She’d heard of machines that could give a woman pleasure no man was capable of, machines that ran on steam and aether batteries and were designed to tease and delight their users—and those who used them on others. She had tried to imagine what such machines would look like, over and over again as she’d lain in her bed at night, slowly stroking herself beneath the covers. One day, she hoped she would go to the club herself, to see what all the fuss was about.

When she’d become engaged, Permilia had redoubled her efforts in finding the club. She felt rather guilty about the whole thing, but what was to be done? She had come this far, and there was no turning back.

Now all she had to do was cross the street.

She took a deep breath. In a few weeks, she would be married to Mr. Wallace “Cold Fish” Sterling, lying beneath him as he grunted politely throughout their perfunctory intercourse. If she did not ring the bell now, she might as well resign herself to feeling nothing below the waist ever again, and that was a predicament reserved for married life.

It wasn’t that she desperately wanted to be married. It was simply expected. She knew it and Wallace knew it, though they had never explicitly spoken of it. But that had to be the reason they had agreed to marry. He certainly showed no interest in her otherwise.

She stepped off the curb and hurried across the street, taking a path between the glowing auras of the street lamps. Once at the door, she checked and double checked the instructions on the paper, the placard on the door. Two aces, a heart and a spade. This was the place. She wiped her hands against her skirt, then, remembering that she wore gloves, rolled her eyes at her own nerves. She had to appear confident. At ease. She had to act

as though she belonged there. She reached for the bell pull and yanked the thick velvet rope once, then twice, then paused for a space of two heartbeats, then rang again.

A slot opened in the door, and eyes, one covered with a brass monocular, scrutinized her.

“Peppermint,” she stammered, then bit her lip.

The door slid closed. Permilia waited a few moments, hoping to hear the click of a bolt or the creak of the hinges. But there was nothing. She looked down at the list in confusion. Why, the paper didn’t say peppermint at all! It said pepperpot. Cursing, she gripped the bell pull. She rang once, twice, then waited two heartbeats and pulled the rope again. But no one responded, even when she stood on tiptoe to get her mouth near the little slot and yelled, “Pepperpot! I meant to say pepperpot!”

She cursed under her breath and turned away, resolved not to think of it as defeat, but a minor setback, when she caught sight of a figure crossing the street. He wore a long, leather coat that slapped at his legs as he walked, a tricorne hat so terribly out of fashion that it was positively arcane, a leather bandit’s mask over his mouth, nose and chin, and a pair of brass goggles that obscured the rest of his face. He looked alarmingly like one of the clockwork men that had become so popular around the ton. The man slowed when he saw her, then came to a stop. It unnerved her to be watched when she could not see his face. She couldn’t even be sure he was watching, but something low in her abdomen told her that he must be. She felt so naked under his gaze.

The mask over his mouth obscured his voice, but he spoke clearly enough to be understood. “They’ve changed it.”

“Excuse me?” Permilia found that her mouth had gone very dry. The man’s broad shoulders and his confident stance made her feel very confused. Then she realized that he had overheard at least a part of her exchange with the impassive door. “Oh, no, I wasn’t—”

“It’s daffodil now, but they won’t let you in tonight, now that you’ve already gotten the password wrong.” He walked towards her slowly, or perhaps he walked toward the door. Without seeing where his gaze fell, she did not know.

“I wasn’t interested in...” she flushed. “I was just curious.”

“You could ask another member to vouch for you,” he continued, ringing the bell once, twice, then waiting for the space of two heartbeats

and pulling it again.

She knew her cheeks must look freshly slapped, from the way they burned. “I don’t know anyone. I don’t know those kinds of people.”

“You are those kind of people,” he responded, sounding bored. The slot in the door opened, and the eyes went from her to the stranger in the leather coat. “Daffodil.”

The door opened at once, and the man swept his arm before him grandly. “After you, miss—”

“Ophelia.” Why had she picked a doomed mad woman? Was it a sign?

“Are you coming in tonight, Ophelia?” the stranger asked, perhaps a bit impatiently.

This was the moment she could choose to follow the stranger and perhaps ruin her reputation, or go home and strive to forget any nonsense about pleasure and debauchery and writhing, naked flesh and—

She stepped through the door.

Chapter Two

Permilia stepped into the small space beyond the door, painfully aware of how close she stood to the stranger. As the door closed, she tried to place a step or two between them, only to find herself face to face with clockwork man. The eyes and the monocular snapped open mechanically, the lens of the monocular rotating to focus on Permilia. With a gasp, she jumped back, and the stranger caught her shoulders.

“Down, Cogsworth,” the stranger said, still holding Permilia’s arms. “So, Ophelia, what brings you to The Two Aces tonight?”

She watched the clockwork automaton swing away from them. The machine had a convincingly sculpted upper body, dressed quite fashionably in a vest and coat, but his form ended in a polished brass stand attached to the wall. The automaton pulled a gear switch, and the whole of the room shuddered and jerked, giving Permilia the very odd sensation that the floor had disappeared from beneath her feet. She clutched the front of the stranger’s coat, then realized what she had done and pulled away.

An eyebrow arched over the top of the stranger’s brass goggles.

“I’m just here to...see.” She looked away, to the upper corners of the room, which appeared to be getting taller. The clockwork man appeared to be rising above their head, though he remained firmly attached to the wall. “Are we descending?”

“This is your first visit, then,” he said, carefully moving her away from the wall. “Stay towards the center, please.”

“Yes, it’s my first visit.” Something about his attitude rankled her. It was as though he found her curiosity tiresome, or he did not believe she belonged there. If that were the case, he shouldn’t have asked her to come

inside. She lifted her chin bravely and informed him, “I want to see the machines.”

He went very still for a moment. “What would a nice young lady like yourself know about the machines?”

In for a penny, in for a pound. “I know that they have been designed to give pleasure. And that many people in London believe them to be better than...marital relations.”

“Indeed? And you’ve experienced ‘marital relations’ then?” That eyebrow shot up again, and she would have dearly loved to see his expression.

“N-no,” she stammered, then took a deep breath. This man was a stranger. What could honesty hurt? “It’s high time I was married, and I want to experience everything I can before I end up shackled to some cold fish of a husband and find that I’ve missed my chance.”

After a moment of silence, he asked, “Why here, though? Certainly there are plenty of men who would love to initiate you. You didn’t have to come here.”

“If you don’t want me here, why did you ask me in?” She bristled at his implication, that she couldn’t find a man to bed her otherwise. “Besides, I don’t know if you’ve been out in polite society lately, but there aren’t exactly all sorts of randy goings on. Everyone is so damned... so damned...”

“Polite?” he asked, as the floor beneath them shuddered to a stop.

“Now what?” Permilia asked, tapping her foot, and the stranger lifted a finger to point behind her.

She turned to see that one wall of the little room was missing, and beyond the opening was a wide foyer with plush chairs and potted ferns. Beyond that, a gold velvet curtain hung across the back wall. The stranger ushered her out of the descending room and into the foyer, where another wall-mounted automaton pulled a lever and sent the floor back the way they had come.

The sound of music and laughter, underscored by lower voices and mechanical hisses and clanks, enticed Permilia to come closer, and she approached the curtain.

“Wait one moment,” the stranger called, reaching into his coat. “If you’re going to be my guest for the evening, I’d like you to look the part.”

She swallowed down a sudden knot of fear as he produced a collar, rather like someone would put on a guard dog, and a length of thick chain. “You don’t mean for me to wear that.”

“I do.” His muffled voice was placid. “Or, if you like, you may go back upstairs and out onto the street and straight home to your safe, proper little existence.”

Whoever this man was, he was infuriating. Still, he had a point. She had come here for adventure. It would be foolish to turn her back on it now. She popped a few of the pearl buttons at the back of her neck and folded down her collar. “I suppose, if it is a necessity, I will wear it.”

He chuckled. “You’re overdressed. Take off your clothes.”

“All of them?” She pressed her hand to her chest to still the frantic beating of her heart. “Right here?”

He said nothing. With a deep breath, she reached behind her and unbuttoned as far as she could reach, but the delicate buttons ran in a line all the way to her hips. She couldn’t undo them herself. She could scarcely believe she was asking a stranger to undress her in a public room, but she said, “I need help.”

With a nod, he slowly moved behind her. As astounding as it seemed, she grew damp between her legs waiting for his hands to fall on her. Would he rip her dress off, sending buttons this way and that? She shivered, then scolded herself. If he did something like that, how would it look when she returned home? People on the street were bound to notice that she’d been ravished.

Despite his gruff manner, the stranger was very careful, taking the time to pop each button. Too much time, so that Permia was able to consider what was happening to her. She had no idea who the man beneath the mask and goggles was, no idea what kind of person he could be. Could she really do something so intimate as letting him undress her? What if someone walked in and saw her? What would they think of her?

Finished with the buttons, he tugged the sleeves down, then pushed the dress over her hips. It fell into a puddle on the floor.

“This is the most undressed I’ve ever been in front of a man,” she said, and her statement, which she had intended to sound amused and self-assured, came out as a whisper.

He leaned close to her ear, brushing her hair with his mask. “So far.”

She held her breath as he walked around her in a slow circle. “Take off your bustle and petticoats.”

Hands shaking, she unhooked the waist of her petticoats and let them drop to the floor with her dress. Standing before him in her combination and corset, stockings and boots, she waited for his next move. He seemed to study her for a long time, but there was no way of telling if he approved of what he saw. She thought back to her mother’s admonitions regarding her figure. Permilia had always been a tad...lush for fashion standards.

Without a word of approval or displeasure, he came forward, unrolling the collar. The touch of the leather against her skin made her jump. She swallowed thickly as he fastened the collar with deft fingers. “I don’t know your name yet.”

“You may call me your Master,” he said, with that same cool indifference that had colored his every word since they’d met on the street. He gave the chain a little tug, not enough to hurt Permilia, but enough to make her want to follow him.

“What about my clothes?” she asked as he led her toward the gold curtain.

“They will be taken care of, and waiting for you when you leave.” He gave the chain another little tug. “Starting now, do not speak unless you are spoken to. If you grow tired of our games, simply say ‘music box’. Do you understand?”

“I understand that I do not like being told what to do!” She took a deep breath. “If I say ‘music box’, what happens?”

“We stop whatever it is we are doing and I escort you from the club.” He swept aside the curtain.

Though Permilia certainly had questions that remained, she could not think of them once she saw the club proper.

The air was hazy with pungent smoke that mingled with the scent of the gaslights that flared in sconces on the walls. Though the room was lit well enough, the smoke and the shadows from what appeared to be hundreds of bodies made it seem dark and small.

“Welcome to The Two Aces,” the stranger said, before plunging into the crowd with Permilia in tow.

Chapter Three

As they moved across the crowded floor, Permilia wasn't sure if she should let her eyes bug out of her head or cover them entirely. Surely she should not, as a virtuous young woman, see the things that were happening all around her. They passed a man who reclined on a settee with a glass of brandy and a cigar, completely nude with a beautiful blonde woman bobbing her mouth up and down on his erect male part. A group of men and women stood in a circle around a couple—no, three people, two men and a woman— who writhed, naked, on huge cushions on the floor.

The stranger gave no notice to the spectacle of debauchery around them, as though it were something he saw every night. It very well could have been the case, she realized. He was obviously a member of the club, and certainly he knew his way around it as they wound their way past a sunken area in which two women cavorted with an automaton for cheering onlookers.

“Where are we going?” she asked, raising her voice above the noise of the crowd before she remembered her promise to remain silent.

He turned his head to look back at her and lifted one gloved finger against his mask.

She swallowed the rest of her questions and looked around her, feeling both underdressed and overdressed at the same time, if that were possible. Her combination and corset were too demure in contrast to the leather all around, and too modest in comparison to the casual nudity of the other club patrons.

The stranger took her down a side hall with doors at regular intervals. From within his coat he produced a ring laden down with keys, selected one

seemingly at random, and unlocked a door on their right. "After you."

With no light in the room, she couldn't see well enough to know what awaited her. That made it somehow more exciting, though she knew it made her actions far more reckless. What was she doing, going into some dark, locked room with a man she hadn't even been introduced to properly?

You're taking control of your destiny, she reminded herself, standing just a tad straighter. With a deep breath, she strode through the door.

The second it was closed, the gas lamps lit the interior and she wished she had thought things through a bit more clearly. There were manacles on the wall! Honest to goodness manacles!

"Do you need help taking off the rest?" the stranger asked, looping the chain to her collar over a hook near the door. Tethering her.

Music box! Music box! her brain screamed, but she shoved her fear down. Something about this stranger seemed trustworthy. Perhaps it was the easy way he took control that reassured her. There hadn't been anything particularly dangerous going on in the club. At least, not physically dangerous. Certainly a danger to her reputation. But she doubted that a masked man would spread lies about anyone. That was what the mask was for, wasn't it? To cover up doings you didn't want anyone else to know about?

She watched as he removed his coat, revealing perfectly normal gentleman's clothing beneath. Permilia laughed, then instantly chastened herself. "Sorry. I was expecting something..."

"More exotic?" he asked, slowly unbuttoning his vest and shedding it.

She nodded, her mouth going dry. He was going to disrobe, right here in front of her. Until five minutes ago, she hadn't seen a man completely naked. Now, she was about to be in a room alone with one. And he expected her to be naked, as well. She gripped the front of her corset and slowly pulled it open, letting each hook separate from its eye individually. He didn't seem to care. He didn't even look at her, too caught up in fastidiously undoing his shirt cuffs.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat, and tapped her booted foot for emphasis.

"I asked if you needed help. You didn't respond." He seemed to concentrate his efforts on the buttons of his shirt, rather than the practically naked girl in front of him. That seemed insulting.

“Are you even interested in what I’m doing here?” she asked, letting the corset fall to the floor.

“You need an audience?” he asked, pulling his shirt off. The light and shadow sculpted dark ridges and smooth rises over his chest and abdomen. He looked like a drawing from an anatomy manual. The shape of a single, dark spade branded his hip, and two silver hoops gleamed in contrast against his brown nipples. Permilia’s knees went weak.

“Are you quite all right?” he asked, and there was a distinct note of amusement in his voice.

“Fine. Just a bit lightheaded. It happens every time I take this blasted thing off.” She kicked the corset aside, praying her face did not look as hot as she felt. “That is very interesting jewelry.”

“Thank you.” He leaned against the wall and set to work on his boots.

“Didn’t it hurt?” she asked as one of his boots fell to the floor.

He finished with the other and came to stand closer to her. So close, she had to crane her head back to look up at the green-tinted lenses of his goggles. She thought she might be able to see his eyes behind them, then realized she saw only the reflection of her own. If she wanted to, she could take a step forward and bring their bodies into contact. And she wanted to, very much, so badly that her skin fairly tingled with wanting to be touched. He leaned down, so their noses almost touched through his mask. “Of course it hurt. That was the point.”

He straightened and took the front of her combination in his hands. “I asked you to undress. That’s the second rule you’ve broken.”

“What was the first?” she asked breathlessly.

“Talking out of turn.” He ripped the fabric apart, exposing her heated skin to the chill of the room. She gasped and reached for the edges of the torn garment, but he gripped her wrists with his leather-gloved hands and forced them behind her back. Her breasts jutted forward, grazing his chest, and she couldn’t help the moan that escaped her. She’d never felt a man’s bare skin against hers, never imagined that the sensation would set off so many explosions of feeling in her body and her mind. She clenched her thighs together, hoping to ease the straining pressure between them. It only made things worse.

“You’re not a very obedient girl, are you?” He took a step forward, and Permilia took a step back. He took another, then she took another, again

and again until her heels hit the wall. He raised her arms over her head, leaned his face close to her ear and said, "Remember...music box."

As he finished speaking, the touch of something cold brushed her wrist, then an audible click made her stomach drop. He had shackled her. He had shackled her to the wall!

While she still stood, frozen with shock, he clamped the other manacle closed on her opposite wrist. She wanted to shout "Music box! Music box!" so loudly that the entire club would hear her. She wanted to be sure that he would keep his word, but at the same time, she didn't want to bring this to an end. Completely helpless to a stranger...when she'd thought of it in the context of her wedding night, the idea had been appalling. Of course, when she'd thought of it in the context of her wedding night, it had been Wallace Sterling she'd been imagining, not a mysterious stranger with pierced nipples and a predilection for shackles.

Still, she felt some caution was in order. Ignoring his talking rule, she blurted, "I'm a virgin."

He shrugged one shoulder. "You won't be for much longer, so I won't hold it against you."

Oh God. Music box. She closed her eyes as he ripped the front of her combination further, exposing her stomach and thighs, then turned his attention to the shoulder seams and ripped them, as well. The top of the garment fluttered to her waist. With her arms held high over her head, her breasts were lifted, bare and waiting for his attention.

"Very nice," he said, capturing one already hard nipple between his gloved fingers.

"T-thank you," she stammered, unable to pull her gaze from the sight of his hand on her. Its twin joined it, the soft leather of his gloves teasing her until she swore she would burst out of her skin.

"Have you ever had a man touch you like this?" he asked, rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

"I told you, I'm a virgin," she snapped, and his hand snaked behind her to pat her bottom. He wasn't gentle or teasing about that, and the touch of his leather-clad hand against her skin made her jump. He was warning her to be obedient.

"That just means that a man has never put his cock in you," he stated, and there was nothing of a reprimand in his statement.

She surreptitiously pressed her bottom against the cool stone of the wall.

“I would love to taste you,” he groaned, pressing his leather-masked face between her breasts. “Another time, perhaps.”

He ran a finger down her belly, over the soft slope to her mound. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She couldn’t believe she was letting him touch her like this, talk to her like this. Maybe there was something truly defective about her, that she would let a stranger take such sinful liberties with her. “No. I’ve never... you’re the first. And I don’t even know your name.”

“You know my name, Ophelia,” he said with a chuckle. He dipped one finger into her cleft, and she blushed at how wet she was. Certainly, nice young ladies did not become so...moist. His gloved finger brushed a spot that made her cry out, then abruptly ceased to move. She rolled her hips, her lip caught between her teeth, and he pulled his hand away. “You know my name. Say it.”

“Please,” she begged, arching her hips toward him. He responded only by kneeling and hooking yet another set of manacles around her ankles.

“Please, who?” he straightened and slowly peeled the gloves from his large hands, then placed them on her hips, his thumbs barely brushing the curls that covered her mound.

A serpent of apprehension and desire coiled in her belly, she whispered, “Please, master.”

But he did not touch her the way she wanted him to. Instead, he turned and walked to the covered table and pulled the linen sheet from it. Permilia’s eyes widened at the assortment of what looked like torture implements on the table. A leather scourge, a blindfold, clips and clamps of various sizes and materials, what appeared to be small, lead weights, and strange rods and phallic objects that left absolutely no doubt in her mind where they were meant to go. The stranger lifted one of these rods, a thick, brass contraption with a gleaming, polished globe on one end.

“You wanted to see the machines,” he began, reaching for a smooth glass and metal canister that had lain beside the globe. The canister fit easily into his palm. “This is one of them.”

She cleared her throat. “What does it do?”

He tilted his head. “I thought I made it abundantly clear that you were not to speak until spoken to.”

Her eyes flicked from the object in his hands to his disguised face. “Forgive me, Master.”

If her apology pleased him, she couldn't tell, but he continued to fiddle with the device in his hands, snapping the canister into the handle. “It brings women to climax. I'm going to use it on you, making you come over and over again, until you beg me to fuck you.”

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Chapter Four

At his words, Permilia's body tightened. She knew what he was talking about. She'd read it so often in books she oughtn't have been reading. But they'd always called it a crisis, and ladies had them from the mere touch of a gentleman's hand against their own or a carriage hitting a rut. If he was talking about what she thought he was talking about, he meant that he would touch her between the legs like she did late at night, and he would make her feel what she always felt at the culmination of such touching. But he wouldn't use his hands, he would use the device he held, and he wouldn't stop after just once.

She shivered.

"This ingenious little friend operates on a chemical reaction. The aether energy stored inside of it reacts with the brass, causing it to hum and vibrate. Now, if left unchecked, a large amount of aether would shake the whole thing apart. That is what this toggle is for," he explained, flipping the switch on the side. "This regulates the amount of energy that is released. This is the first setting."

Without warning, he slid the head of the device between her legs, stroking it over her cleft. It began to buzz, tickling her deliciously. Gently, he parted her with his fingers, bringing the rapidly warming brass to her clit. She gasped as darts of sensation shot through her, and she tried to pull away from the device. The shackles at her ankles inhibited her movement, and she squirmed on her tormenter, a long, pitiable moan wrenching from her throat.

"Oh, you don't like it?" he asked, sounding truly disappointed. "Answer me."

“No!” she gasped. Had she given the right answer? She wasn’t sure. She didn’t want him to stop, but she didn’t want him to keep going. She stood practically on her toes, her calves cramping as her body reached for something intangible.

“Perhaps you would like it more if I turned it to the next setting?” He pulled the device away and fingered the toggle.

“No! No!” she begged, not certain if she wanted him to desist entirely or continue even more mercilessly.

“No? You don’t want to come?” he asked, feigning surprise.

“No, I do!” She rocked her hips, her face burning with shame. What kind of a man enjoyed torturing a woman so?

“Then say, ‘Please make me come, Master.’”

“Please,” she moaned.

“Please what?”

“Please make me come, Master.” She was rewarded with the return of the device, pressing hard against her clit. He flipped the toggle to next setting, and the device hummed at a higher pitch. Permia’s keening wail rose in pitch, as well, as she teetered on the brink of her climax. With bone-shaking suddenness, her hips bucked and her cunt spasmed, an arc of lightning bouncing through her veins. The manacles bit her wrists and ankles as she thrashed, the pain bringing her slowly back to awareness.

The stranger flipped the toggle down, quieting the machine but not moving it away from her throbbing flesh. “Thank you, Master.”

“Thank you, Master.” She panted, as though she’d run up a steep hill.

He braced himself against the wall with one hand high above her head, bringing his masked face close to hers. Though the green lenses of his goggles obscured his eyes, she was sure he was staring right into hers. She stared back, her chest heaving with exertion, acutely aware that he had not withdrawn the device. “Do you remember what I said I would do?”

She nodded, desire curling her belly at the memory of his words, even though she had just climaxed.

“What did I say I would do?” he asked, brushing his masked jaw against her cheek.

The closeness of his bare throat proved too much of a temptation. She craned her neck forward and ran her tongue up the column of muscle that stretched to his ear. He hissed and bent his head toward her, allowing her to bite his earlobe, run her tongue along the curve of his ear. He tossed the

machine aside carelessly and brought his other hand to grasp her wrist over the manacle. His chest pressed against hers, and he ground his hips against her. Even through his trousers she could feel how hard he was, and how big. She'd known the mechanical details of coupling since she and Cecilia had sniggered about them behind the pages of a book in Cecilia's father's library. The male inserted his organ into the female's organ. Medically boring. Permilia had never given any thought, however, to the dimensions of said organs. In fact, the extensive sniggering that she and Cecilia had done at art exhibitions and at sculpture gardens had lead her to believe that the male organ would be very small, perhaps the size of her thumb.

Clearly, this stranger was a freak of nature, judging by the hard length that dug into her stomach.

"I asked you a question," he whispered, his tone full of warning.

Though she wouldn't have been adverse to another smack on the bottom, she answered, her voice quavering. "You said you would make me come until I begged you to...fuck me."

He chuckled, and she imagined a slow smile spreading beneath his mask. "I won't be able to do that if your legs are chained."

The stranger dropped to one knee and quickly unlocked the shackles at her ankles. Then, standing, he began to unfasten his trousers. "Or if I'm still dressed."

"Dressed" was not exactly the word Permilia would have used to describe him at that moment. She thought it might be rude to stare, but she couldn't help it. Her gaze remained riveted to his hands as he unbuttoned, then slowly parted the fabric and pushed the trousers over his hips. When he straightened, her gaze directed itself elsewhere. His erection stood proudly straight out from his body, a silver ring exiting the small slit at the tip and looping back, over the top of the head.

"Before you ask, yes, this one hurt as well." He stroked his hand up and down the wide length a few times, and she realized that he smoothed down the thin barrier of a male shield over his flesh. "Do you think you can take me?"

Unsure of what he asked, she merely chewed her lip.

"In you?" he clarified, cupping her mound in his hand so suddenly it drove a startled gasp from her. A finger probed at her entrance and slipped in. "You're awfully tight."

“Is that bad?” she whispered, suddenly wanting to curl up and hide away from embarrassment over this obvious defect he’d pointed out.

“Not at all.” His finger pumped into her a few times, curling as he pulled it out. Permilia’s knees went weak. It was such a strange feeling, to be touched in a place that had never been touched before. Permilia had tried, once, to touch herself in that way, but her own fear had held her back. Nothing would hold the stranger back, and that both frightened and aroused her. She would let him do anything to her, as long as he kept touching her, kept talking to her in that deep, muffled voice. She spread her thighs farther apart, her eyes drifting closed, only to fly open again when he stopped, abruptly.

“Why did you stop?” she demanded sullenly, pressing her legs tight together as though she could capture the feeling of his finger inside of her and hold it there.

He pressed one finger against his mask, where his mouth would be, and retrieved the device he’d used on her previously. “You haven’t begged yet.”

She licked her lips nervously. Was this the moment, then? She wasn’t officially deflowered, not yet, but maidenly virtue was a ship that had sailed away the moment her dress had hit the floor. Still, the gulf between what she had done and what she would do seemed vast. Did she truly want this to be her first experience with a man? Shackled to a wall in some disreputable club, at the mercy of some man she would never see again?

Did she want her first experience to be with Wallace Sterling?

Just the thought of pale, boring Wallace, with his face like the underbelly of a fish who died of terminal boredom, bungling his way through their boring wedding night, made up her mind. “I am! I’m begging you! I am begging you to fuck me!”

The stranger’s eyebrow shot up over the top of his goggles. He took a moment to compose himself, staring down at the device in his hands. Slowly, he said, “Yes, well...I rather liked my imagining of things better.”

“How did you imagine it?” she hadn’t had a spare chance to imagine anything since she’d arrived at the club, she’d been so overloaded with sensation.

“Exactly like I described it to you. I will make you come over and over again, until you beg me to fuck you.” He paused. “Real begging. Not a calculated declaration.”

He moved toward her, the device already humming in his hands.
“Shall we begin?”

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Chapter Five

Permilia gripped the chains above her, bracing herself for the touch of the device. The cool brass sent shivers over her skin as it came in contact with her heated, swollen flesh. The intense vibration of the machine sent zings of lighting through her. It was too much after her first orgasm, and she stood on her toes to try and escape it. The stranger would have none of it, gripping her shoulder and pressing her down. This time, her release hit her as a surprise. With none of the slow build from before, her toes curled as her entire body spasmed in torturous ecstasy. She writhed, overstimulated, but he did not remove the device.

“You know how to end this,” he purred in her ear. “Simply...beg me to fuck you.”

“Fuck me!” she panted.

He moved the device in lazy circles, sparking new awareness in her tender flesh. “No, you have to make me believe it.”

The next climax came over her after mere seconds, and the pleasure was so intense that it sent painful shocks racing to her toes. She bit her lip hard, thought she might have tasted blood, as another followed on the heels of the last. “Please,” she begged, tears of desperation welling in her eyes. “Please fuck me.”

He tossed the device aside and gripped her hips, pulling one of her legs up to hook around his waist. Still shivering from her climax, she wrapped the other one around him, too, and found herself suddenly suspended between the anchor of his body and the chains on the wall. The smooth silver ring touched her, and she cried out, suddenly coming to her senses. “Please, I’ve never—”

“Better to get it over with quickly, like jumping into cold water,” he said, and guided himself in. Her flesh stretched and burned, and she held her breath as he pushed forward, hard. A gush of wetness and a searing brand of pain, and it was finished. He slid deep inside of her and stayed, unmoving. “There, not so bad, was it?”

She nodded, though she wasn’t entirely sure she agreed. He was so large and so hard, she felt fairly certain she would be bruised there in the morning. If this was what everyone found so bloody fascinating, she certainly didn’t know why.

Gripping her hips, he began to move, withdrawing an increment, then pressing forward again, his strokes growing longer and more aggressive with each one. He was not careful with her, and she wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or insulted. She had thought her virtuous state would have given him cause to be gentle. Of course, the fact that he was at the Two Aces at all didn’t speak highly of his appreciation for virtue. On the other hand, it said the same thing about her. She bucked her hips, trying to get more comfortable, and only succeeded in driving him deeper. She gasped, tears springing to her eyes.

The stranger stopped immediately. “Are you all right?”

“No.” She squeezed her eyes shut to hide her tears. “Music box.”

He withdrew from her body and set her feet on the floor with more gentleness than he’d shown her before. Very quickly, he unclasped the shackles at her wrists, taking great care not to touch her as he did so. Then he turned and pulled the male shield from his still erect shaft, and cursed. “You really were a virgin?”

She looked up from rubbing her sore wrist to see the blood on his hands, which he quickly wiped away on the handkerchief lying in his discarded clothing. Her cheeks burned. “I told you I was!”

“I thought you were playing a game.” He hastily donned his trousers. “It’s not as though many virgins find their way here. What the devil were you thinking?”

Now, the tears wouldn’t stop, no matter how hard she blinked them away. She crossed her arms over her breasts, feeling far too small and naked and foolish in front of this stranger. “I told you! I explained it all when I came in. I told you that I was curious, and I—”

“I thought you were joking!” he interrupted, one hand coming up to furrow through his dark hair. He let out a deep sigh behind his mask.

“Please, forgive me. I’ve made a very—insensitive mistake.”

She nodded and sniffed, then went to collect her ruined combination. She pulled on the drawers and tucked the torn upper half around her hips, praying the garment would stay in place until she returned home. Sheepishly, she picked up her corset and said, “I need help.”

“Of course.” He’d pulled on his shirt, but it hung unbuttoned. With efficiency that would have impressed her maid, he laced her up, then went to the bell pull beside the door. “Someone should bring your clothes.”

“Thank you.” She fiddled with the lace on her corset, smoothed her hands over her stomach and waist, but there was no reason to check for anything out of place. She glanced up at him furtively, watched as he buttoned his shirt and cuffs and donned his vest and coat. “I’m sorry.”

“You needn’t be,” he said quickly. “It was my mistake.”

Silence lapsed between them again, and Permilia wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

A sharp knock visibly startled the stranger, and he opened the door to reveal a man in a similar costume outside. Goggles, bandit’s mask, long leather coat, but in his arms he held a stack of neatly folded clothing. The stranger took the clothes and said, “Enjoy your evening,” before closing the door.

He brought the clothes to Permilia. “Once you are dressed, I’ll return you home in my carriage.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” It was one thing to go into a notorious house of ill repute with a strange man in a disguise. She was not open to the kind of adventures that could occur when one ran about town in a strange man’s carriage.

“It’s late, you shouldn’t go alone,” he argued.

“I found my way here without incident, I feel rather confident that I won’t have any problems finding my way back to the house I’ve lived in all my life.” She jammed her sleeves into her gown rather angrily. “Can you help with the buttons?”

He didn’t argue further, and once Permilia was respectably dressed, she headed for the door.

“Wait,” the stranger called, halting her in her tracks. He stepped close, so that he leaned over her. Her skin tingled with awareness. His hands had been on her body. His...cock had been inside of her. She’d been naked and chained before him, spread out and screaming with release.

He lifted his hand, once again gloved in leather, and stroked it down the column of her throat. Would he kiss her? Her heart pumped wildly at the thought. She wished she had never said “music box”. She wished she’d never even heard of a music box. She would banish them all from her sight, forever.

There was a brief click, and suddenly her throat felt very naked.

“Couldn’t have you leaving with this,” he nearly whispered. “But it will be here for you, if you ever need it again.”

She shivered at the sight of the collar in his hands.

He stood aside, so she could exit the room, but for a moment she could not make her feet work. When she was able to, she couldn’t find the proper courtesy to convey to him upon her leaving. Finally, she settled on, “Thank you for a lovely evening,” then quickly hurried down the hall, into the club proper, then finally into the lift and onto the street.

All the way home, she looked over her shoulder for a stranger in a mask and goggles.

* * * *

Wallace “Cold Fish” Sterling, known amongst the clientele of The Two Aces as the Ace of Spades, pulled off his mask and goggles and tossed them onto his brother’s work bench. Hunched over his latest invention with magnifying lenses of varying sizes and intensities covering his eyes, the youngest Sterling did not even look up. “Bad night?”

“The worst.” Wallace leaned his hip against the table. “What is that you’re working on?”

Richard glanced up, his green eyes huge behind the lenses, and disturbingly, as though there were seven of them. “You’re not going to tell me about it?”

“What do I know about it? You’re the one building it,” Wallace evaded his brother’s question smoothly.

With a sigh, Richard held up the bundle of brass tubes and pistons he currently tinkered with. “It doesn’t have a name yet. But the general idea is that you put your cock in here, and these pistons fire, pumping the internal chamber to replicate the feeling of a mouth.”

“You could give me a house in Kensington and I wouldn’t stick my cock in that, mate,” he said with a grin, and slapped his brother’s boney shoulder.

Richard pulled his magnifying contraption off his head, smearing grease down his cheek as he did so. With a heavy sigh, he pushed his wheelchair back and swung around to face his older brother. “My god, have I found the one thing in all of England that you won’t stick your cock in? Quick, write the Times!”

“You’re terribly clever tonight,” Wallace snapped. “As it so happens, Permilia came here this evening.”

“Here?” Richard fumbled for his spectacles. The normal ones, without ten different magnifying options. He pushed them and ran his fingers through his curly auburn hair. “Did she discover your identity?”

“No, she did not,” Wallace replied, then, in case his brother had missed the meaning behind the sentence, “She came here to have ‘marital relations’ with an anonymous stranger.”

Richard grinned broadly. “And here you thought she wouldn’t fit into the family.”

“Be serious, brother.” Wallace turned away, his black mood turning darker the more he reflected on his situation. He had known that Permilia would seek out the club, because only a fool would have missed her clumsy attempts at extracting the information from London society. He’d even planted the information himself, so that it would find its way into her empty headed friend’s hands. But he had assumed, incorrectly, that this was a sign that Permilia was adventurous and well-schooled in the erotic arts. He’d even fooled himself into believing that she had uncovered his double life. “She wasn’t here to see me. She was here to avoid me.”

A wrinkle of confusion creased Richard’s smooth brow. “Come again?”

As humiliating as it was to admit, Wallace could think of no other reasonable explanation for her presence. “She was here because she wanted to experience passion before being married away to a ‘cold fish’.”

“Oh dear,” was all Richard said in reply.

“Oh, it gets worse. So, so much worse.” Wallace motioned to the shelves over his brother’s work table, the ones laden down with scraps of wire and greasy bolts. Also, a grimy metal flask. “May I?”

He waited for Richard to nod, then took the flask down and took a long drink. “She was a virgin. And I didn’t realize it.”

Richard spread his hands. “If she didn’t tell you—”

“She did.” Wallace screwed the top back on the flask, grimacing at the taste. “I didn’t believe her.”

“Why the devil not?” Richard grabbed the flask from his brother’s hand.

Yes, why the devil hadn’t he? “I thought she was...playacting. Playing a role, joking with me. It made sense at the time!”

“It made sense because all your blood had fled your brain for parts southern.” Richard raised the flask to his lips, pausing to say, “What are you going to do now?”

“I have no idea. It isn’t as though she’ll come here again.” He cursed. “And it isn’t as though she won’t think it odd to find her husband has the exact same tattoo of a spade on his hip.”

“Sloppy work, brother,” Richard scolded. “Still going to marry her?”

“I would have liked to. She’s beautiful, and her father is well-connected. That’s all a man could want in a wife. Now, she’s going to either hate the Ace of Spades so much that marriage to Wallace Sterling is unthinkable, or she’ll fall for the Ace of Spades and want to be with him instead of me.” He slammed his palm down on the table, a dangerous feat considering how many sharp metal shavings littered it. “Damn, I’ve gone and bungled this.”

“Yes, well,” Richard began, taking another sip from the flask. “I believe you’re overlooking a key element to this plot, and that is... both Wallace and the Ace of Spades are the same person.”

Wallace shook his head slowly. “No, they most definitely are not.”

“That, I can’t help you with.” Richard wheeled back into his position at the table and turned a gleaming brass crank set into the tabletop. The shelves above shuddered and lowered on the chains that held them aloft, until Richard could easily reach to hide his flask once more. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

“I will leave you to it.” Wallace was almost to the door when he turned back to say, “If you get stuck in it, for god’s sake don’t tug. It will only make the situation worse.”

He ducked out the door in time to narrowly avoid being hit by a handful of bolts.

Chapter Six

To say that Permilia had become obsessed with the baser desires of the human animal would have been an understatement. When she'd finally arrived home after her excursion to The Two Aces, she'd climbed into bed certain that she would sleep for ages. Her body had ached all over and she'd barely been able to summon the strength to undress herself and hide her ruined combination. But once she'd lain down, a restlessness had stirred in her secret parts, and she'd tentatively reached down to stroke her tender bud until it had been appeased.

The next morning had found her in easily as discomfited spirits. After an uncomfortable breakfast during which her mother had scrutinized her as though she'd known, Permilia had begged off her riding lesson by declaring she had women's troubles. Posting wouldn't have been possible without great discomfort.

She whiled away the afternoon in her room, alternately thinking about the stranger and scolding herself for doing so. There was absolutely no power on earth that could move her to return to The Two Aces.

Except for that demon, Ophelia, who'd come viciously alive at the club. It truly had been as if some other creature had taken up residence in her, forcing her to do things that she very much had wanted to do, but most definitely should not have done.

"Miss, a package has arrived for you," a voice whispered at her door.

Despite her ruse of languishing with feminine frailty, Permilia shot from her bed and dove across the room, opening the door. She did so love receiving presents, and since she had not ordered anything from any of the shops, that must be what awaited her on the other side of the door. She

opened it to admit Molly, a funny girl about Permilia's own age who had served with their family for five years. Permilia had often wished that she had more courage to befriend the girl, but her mother's disapproval was palpable even when Mrs. Deering was not in the room.

"Bring it in, bring it in!" Permilia said, clapping her hands at the sight of the very large package wrapped in brown paper. Her smile faded when the maid set the box down on the bed and Permilia caught sight of the card.

A creme-colored envelope, sealed with wax in the shape of a black spade.

"Are you going to open it?" Molly asked, then clapped her hands over her mouth.

Permilia's blood beat so loudly in her ears, she didn't bother to scold the maid for her impertinence. "Molly close the door."

While the girl did as she was told, Permilia hurried to her writing desk and clasped her pen knife, then brought it to the twine that wrapped the package. She nicked her finger as she sawed through the binding, and the maid moved in to take over. Permilia grasped Molly's wrist. "Whatever you see inside this box, you must breathe a word of it to no one."

Molly's green eyes glittered above her freckled nose. "Is it from Mr. Sterling, then?"

"Hush!" Permilia hadn't thought of her lackluster suitor all day, and she wasn't about to start now. She watched, breath held tightly in her chest, as Molly cut the last of the twine, then Permilia practically shoved her out of the way to get at the paper wrapping. When it all fell away, inside was a large, glossy black box with no imprinting. She lifted the lid slowly, as though something might jump out at her.

"Oh my," Molly breathed at the sight that greeted them.

Her throat suddenly constricting, Permilia reached into the box and lifted out a corset, made of soft black leather, with brass clasps down the front. Flipping the garment over, she saw the leather ties that cinched up the back, and a preposterously wide bow fashioned of leather with long tails that would reach nearly to the floor. A pair of boots, ridiculous boots, matched the scandalous piece in her hands.

She dropped it as though it were on fire.

"Who would send you such a thing?" Molly whispered, her expression caught somewhere between fear and amusement.

Permilia stooped to pick up the card that had fallen to the floor. Straightening, she patted her hair into place before getting up the courage to open the envelope. Inside, in elegant script, someone had written:

Please accept this gift as a token of my extreme apology for our misunderstanding last night. I would very much like to see you again, in person, to make further amends.

It was signed with a perfectly drawn spade.

“Miss, you didn’t go to The Two Aces, did you?” Molly asked, scandalized.

Permilia was about to snap at her that it was none of her business, and how dare she ask, when she realized how foolish that would be. As soon as someone saw this ridiculous underwear, they would know she was up to something. “Molly, you have to promise you won’t tell.”

The maid hastily drew her finger in an x across her left breast. “Cross my heart, Miss.”

Permilia chewed her lip. “What am I to do?”

She hadn’t meant to ask the question aloud. It had been more for her own private rumination. But the damage had been done, and Molly whispered, “Are you going to go back?”

“I suppose it would be the polite thing to do, to thank him for this gift. It isn’t as though I could send him a note in kind.” She frowned. “How on earth did he know where to find me?”

“You went in disguise, didn’t you?” Molly looked worriedly from the note to the open box. “Half of London goes there. If someone recognized you, it would have been easy for anyone, gossips being what they are...”

The maid was right. Horribly, terribly right. “I should have consulted you before I went in the first place. You could have warned me off, since I don’t have the common sense God gave a housefly.”

“Perhaps when you go back, we could disguise you! That would be fun!” Molly clapped her hands in front of her.

“I will not go back.” Even as she said the words, Permilia knew that she would. All of those delicious things he had done to her, the glorious pleasure she had felt... She lifted the exquisite leather, marveling at the softness. “Perhaps just a simple disguise. Nothing that will attract too much attention on the streets.”

Molly grinned broadly.

* * * *

When all the members of the household were safely in their beds, Permilia, clad in the gift from her masked stranger, snuck out the servant entrance, Molly in tow.

“How exciting,” the maid exclaimed, her eyes sparkling behind the velvet masquerade mask Permilia had given her to wear.

Permilia shushed the girl and checked once more that her long woolen coat adequately covered her. The leather corset dipped scandalously low, her large breasts restrained mostly by hope and the ingenious design. Tall points near the pits of her arms allowed the front of the garment to plunge in a low scoop, leaving her creamy skin bare. When she’d checked her reflection, the rosy areolas of her nipples had peaked out above the black leather.

Worse, the stranger had not thought to include any proper undergarments. Or perhaps he had thought, and had purposely omitted them. The fiend.

A delicious shiver ran over her skin, not solely from the kiss of cool outdoor air on her naked flesh. The huge bow at the back nearly covered her bare rump, but nothing shielded her most intimate part from the eye—and other things. At the thought of her masked stranger running his hands up her stockinged thighs, past the neatly tied garters, to part her already moist and wanting flesh, Permilia trembled.

The carriage Molly had arranged waited down the street, a respectable distance from the house. The women ran, as well as Permilia could run in the boots the stranger had given her, which forced her to stand on her tip toes, supported only by the stiff vamp and perilously tall heel. This time, Permilia did not need to follow a series of cryptic clues all over London to arrive at her destination. She directed the driver to take them to the alley she’d visited the night before, and the driver’s expression had melted into a leer that Permilia did not find reassuring.

“I have a pistol under my skirt,” Molly reassured her, loud enough for the driver to hear it and be forewarned. Then, remarkably, she hiked up her skirt to display the clockwork pistol tucked neatly in her plain garter.

Once inside the coach, Molly breathed, “Do you think they’ll let me in? With you? I hope so. I’m dying for a tumble.”

Permilia flushed at the maid’s frank words. “Molly, really. A little decorum.” After a moment, she continued, “I hope so. I don’t see why not. I

know the password, and I was invited. It seems only natural that I should bring along a chaperone.”

The carriage pulled to a stop at the end of the alley, and Molly climbed out first to help Permilia down. The boots would be the death of her, she was certain.

“Your goggles, Miss,” Molly reminded her, pulling a pair of sterling silver and black-leather goggles with red lenses from her apron pocket.

Permilia fixed the goggles over her eyes and took a deep breath. She thought of the stranger, of his nude body, each muscle straining as though it had been carved from pure sin, metal piercings gleaming in the gaslight. Silky wetness dripped down her thighs.

“Into the breach,” she whispered, walking quickly up to the door.

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Chapter Seven

“Ooh yes! Harder!”

Wallace grinned at the spectacle before him. A slender blonde woman, her tight skin bathed in sweat, straddled the lap of a clockwork man. The automaton’s eerily human face remained politely impassive—it was, after all, a machine—while the exposed gears and coils in the rest of its metal body rhythmically tightened and sprang, driving the machine’s realistic phallus into the woman as she rocked her hips against it. Richard had designed this particular clockwork man to do things impossible for a mere mortal man, and the thick cock not only pumped, but twisted and hummed with powerful vibration as the woman rode it.

The pair were displayed in a pit on the common floor of the club, cushions strewn about them and two of the club’s handlers at the ready, should the woman require their assistance. All around the perimeter, men and women seated on chairs and delicate sofas watched, touching themselves and each other while stifling their moans so as not to distract from the truly beautiful sounds of passion the blonde woman made as the machine fucked her.

A low wail emerged from her, building in intensity until it became a scream, and the scream went on and on. Her legs trembled, her back arched, thrusting her firm breasts upward. Perspiration trickled between them, streaming from her throat to her belly, and her mouth froze open in a howl of pure release. The spectators applauded politely, murmuring their approval and eagerness to try out this new invention themselves.

They would have to wait their turns; the blonde ground her hips against the automaton and panted desperately, “More!”

One of the handlers stepped forward, a busty young woman with close-cropped raven hair. Around her lean hips she wore a harness, and dangling from that, an imitation phallus. She greased it liberally and knelt behind the blonde, guiding her cock into the cleft of the blonde's firm ass.

Wallace groaned and reached into the loose linen trousers he wore, freeing his cock and pumping it in his fist. He closed his eyes behind his goggles, just for a moment, and opened them, startled, at the touch of a timid hand around his.

Permilia, Ophelia, as she had named herself, stood beside him, clad in the naughty black leather he had sent her. The tight curls that shielded her mound already glistened with desire, and he released his shaft to run his hand between her thighs, over the damp silk stockings she wore.

"Ophelia," he murmured with a nod of his head. He lifted her knuckles to brush the leather of his mask in a mimic of a kiss. "I had hoped to see you tonight."

Her cheeks flushed almost as red as the lenses in her goggles, and she tossed her glossy black curls, letting the hair trail over her skin the way he wished his fingers were. "I came to thank you properly for this lovely gift."

"I'm glad you like it," he purred, curling one finger up to delve between her velvety petals. "But I fear the pleasure is all mine."

Her teeth caught her lip as she looked around the club. Her presence drew stares from women and men, and strangely, Wallace found that completely unacceptable. "Perhaps we could go view a different spectacle. Somewhere more...private?"

As though she hadn't noticed what went on in the shallow pit in front of them, she turned her head and gasped. The blonde's back was arched, her arms thrown back to twine about the other woman's neck as the two kissed passionately. With one hand on the blonde's hips and the other cupping one of her lush breasts, the raven-haired beauty fucked her ass with an enthusiasm that almost matched the mechanical drive of the clockwork man.

Wallace knew what wicked thoughts warred in Permilia's head. He doubted anyone could look on one of Richard's creations and not strongly desire to try it out. Even Wallace himself had been with a clockwork man, and the memory of that thick cock stretching his ass, the strong vibrations shaking him to the core, only made him crave the experience more.

Tonight, however, he devoted himself to Permilia, and her pleasures. He tucked his aching erection into his pants and stood, taking her hand in his to lead her away from the viewing area.

“I had no idea,” Permilia said, her voice rasping with unsatisfied curiosity, “that...that could be done.”

Wallace led her through the club, toward the Voyeur’s Wing. “What’s that?”

Permilia’s fingers flexed in his. “I didn’t know there was...more than one way for a woman to be penetrated.”

“You have much to learn, I think.” He selected a door with a red ribbon looped around the handle. This indicated that the room was unoccupied and awaiting a voyeur. Or two. Or three.

When he and his brothers had designed the club, it had been Wallace’s idea to have private viewing rooms, and he was quite pleased at how they had turned out. Inside, a padded bench sat adjacent to a large window covered with a red velvet curtain. Other than that, the room was entirely empty.

“Oh,” Permilia said, a little sigh of disappointment.

A smile curved Wallace’s lips beneath his mask. “Something wrong?”

“Oh, no.” Her eyes darted about the room, in search of some exotic delight, but they found nothing. “No, it’s perfectly lovely.”

“Yet you seem dissatisfied with the offering.” He slid his loose linen trousers down, baring himself completely for her. “Isn’t this to your liking?”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, a reluctant smile curving her lips. “You know it is.”

“I don’t,” he reminded her, wagging a finger. “You didn’t stay.”

“You were quite rough,” she reminded him.

“That I was. I promise to be nice and gentle this time.” He patted his knee. “Come, sit. Watch the show.”

Permilia moved to obey, but asked, “The show?”

He nodded to the velvet curtain, which dropped rather suddenly of its own accord, triggered by the couple on the other side of the large glass panel it concealed. A short, plump little redhead with a delicious smattering of freckles across her shoulders stood just inches from the window, bare as the day she was born.

“That’s Molly!” Permilia shrieked, covering her eyes.

“She can’t see us,” Wallace assured her, “though she knows that someone can see her. It’s part of the thrill for some. Being watched.”

The delicious softness of Permilia’s bottom grazed his erection as she relaxed on his lap. On the other side of the one-way glass, Molly stared at her reflection, patting her curls into place, then smoothing her hands over her belly and hips. Behind her, a man with a tattoo of a heart on his hip worked to adjust the settings on a machine that Wallace knew his intended would find interesting. He only hoped that she wouldn’t mind too terribly when she learned that the man who would fuck her friend tonight was his brother, Horace, the second of the Two Aces for which the club was named.

The sound of Molly’s naughty giggle drifted to them through the fluted brass tubes that connected the two rooms for the purpose of funneling every passionate sound the exhibitionists would make for the delight of the observers. The redhead’s hand drifted lazily across her breasts, stopping to roll a pink nipple between thumb and forefinger while her other hand stroked the fiery curls at her center. Wallace studied Permilia’s face as she watched the other woman, and he lifted her breast free of the black leather to mimic the actions of Molly’s hand on his partner’s breast. When the redhead slowly lifted one finger to her mouth, wetting it with her tongue before returning it to her nipple, Wallace turned Permilia slightly sideways so he could lower his head and close his lips over one perfect, pebbled nub.

Permilia arched her back, her eyes fluttering closed, and he grasped her chin in his hand. “Watch.”

She opened her eyes, but leveled her gaze at him instead of the woman behind the mirror. “Yes, Master.”

Her words shot straight to his already straining cock. If he’d been a different sort of man, perhaps he would have been disturbed to see the woman he wished to marry submitting so easily to a “stranger”. Instead, it thrilled him more than any spectacle he’d ever seen at the Two Aces. He felt a powerful urge to rip off his mask and kiss her, had to physically restrain himself from doing so, lest he reveal his identity.

Unaware of how profoundly she affected him—which only added to her charm—she asked, “What is the word this time?”

Damnation! He’d forgotten to establish a word to protect her during their play. Long-time members had been banned from the club for such a mistake, and he of all people should have known better. “Music box again, if you please.”

He didn't know if he would be able to concentrate enough to remember a new one.

On the other side of the glass, Molly worked the tips of the fingers of one hand in a circle over her mound, her eyes closed in concentration, full lips pouting. Breathy moans escaped her as she pleased herself for their enjoyment.

"Touch yourself," Wallace commanded, and Permilia readily complied, parting her folds with two fingers that closed like a vise around her clit. She'd come to the club already wet in anticipation, and he felt a gush of her cream against his thigh, beneath her bare bottom. He turned her to face the window once more, forcing her to straddle his leg, and she jerked her hips as she rubbed herself. The motion was torture. He would rather she ride his cock and not his thigh, because he was sure he would burst if he didn't come inside her soon.

In the exhibitionist room, Horace had made the final adjustments to the machine, and he rolled it on its casters so that it was positioned as close to the glass as possible. Permilia gasped, though whether it was because she had deduced the purpose of the machine or because she approached her release, he didn't know.

Distracted by the noise as Horace positioned the machine, Molly had abandoned her teasing show and turned to survey the apparatus. A long, padded bench, shaped rather like a loaf of bread, the machine was equipped with an adjustable saddle, through which a large, long phallus protruded. Below the saddle-like seat, two wide restraints would hold the user's legs in whatever position the dominant partner desired, and below that, the wheel-arm that controlled the phallus sat motionless, waiting for fuel.

"Are you ready for your riding lesson, Miss?" Horace asked, his voice muffled by a mask similar to the one Wallace wore.

Molly giggled in response. "Yes, Master."

"Hmmm. He's eager to get started. Usually, he tells them suck his cock." Wallace arched a brow. "Is that something you would like to do?"

A shiver went through her. "If my Master commands me."

He slid her off his thigh, her soaking cunt leaving a gleaming trail of wetness on his skin, and stood perpendicular to the glass, so her view would not be hampered. "Get on your knees. Suck my cock."

She whimpered, clamping her thighs together as she sank to the floor. Timidly, she reached for him, and he sank a hand into her carefully piled

curls, jerking her head back to meet her eyes behind her red lenses. “I gave you an order.”

“Yes, Master,” she replied obediently. Then, opening her mouth wide, she took the head of his cock in.

It was Wallace’s expert opinion that no one gave perfect oral pleasure the first time they performed, but whether it was his desperate state of arousal or some natural talent on her part, Permilia came quite close. She licked around the head, murmuring low in her throat as she tasted the salty drop at his tip, then sucked him past her lips, sliding her mouth down as far as she could before dragging it back up. It was almost too sensitive when the ridged roof of her mouth rolled over the head of him, and he hissed.

“Beautiful,” he whispered reverently, freeing her glossy black curls with a twist of his hand and a shower of pins. “Take your tits out.”

She flushed bright red, but did as she was told, releasing his cock with a popping sound from her lips before reaching to pull both of her breasts completely free from the corset. The low-scooped front and high sides forced the globes of flesh together like ripe, round fruit in a painting, her brown nipples pointing up eager and hard.

“As you were,” he reminded her gently, and her “Yes, Master,” reply was somewhat garbled as she drew his cock into her mouth once more. With her right hand, she pumped him eagerly, while her left caressed her own flesh between her thighs.

“Don’t come,” he commanded. “I don’t want you to come until I’m inside of you. I want to feel you shudder around me. I want to feel your beautiful cunt grip my cock until I explode in you.”

She whimpered again at his words, but obediently dropped her left hand.

Horace had unrolled a male shield over the phallus-- a necessity in the club, as protection of their clientele was considered by all three brothers to be their most important priority— and now he set about greasing it. “Up you go,” he said, giving Molly’s round backside a squeeze. Horace loved his women plump, and the larger, the better.

Molly’s breasts swayed as she threw one leg over the machine and settled her cunny over the tip of the phallus. She squealed in delight, “It’s huge!”

“Not too big, I hope,” he responded, then, slowly, he drew down the tight leather breeches he wore.

Permilia, watching the scene, sputtered, releasing Wallace's cock. "My God!"

That was a bit annoying. Though none of the brothers were anywhere close to what could be described as small, Horace was by far the most anatomically gifted of them. It had never bothered Wallace much before—"As long as it comes, it works fine for me," had been his personal motto during all bouts of brotherly teasing—but this woman was his fiancée!

Her eyes glazing with lust, Molly eased herself down on the false cock, whimpering as it stretched her. Or perhaps it was disappointment that she wouldn't get to fuck Horace's huge organ. She obviously didn't know his brother very well.

Once Molly was firmly seated on the device, Horace went to the far wall of the room, where a metal brazier full of glowing coals stood at the ready, as well as several cartridges of aether liquid. Using tongs, he dropped a few coals into the metal drawer of the machine and slid the aether cartridge into its chamber. At once, the machine began to squeal to life. Molly squealed as well, as a jet of aether steam hit her clit. Aether liquid turned to steam at a much lower temperature, and Richard, genius that he was, had designed the release to serve a double function. Molly squirmed under the steady puffs that blasted her sensitive nub, and rocked her hips as the wheel arm began to pump the machine's huge cock into her.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed in delighted approval. "This is amazing."

Permilia groaned, her eyes fixed on her maid riding the machine. The sight of the busty redhead grinding and moaning in the saddle, coupled with the hot suction of Permilia's mouth, almost made Wallace spill then and there. He ordered her, "Get up."

Dreamily, Permilia stood, moving so close to the glass that her breath made an opaque ring on it. Molly's face alternately grimaced and relaxed as she strove toward her climax, and Horace stood by, lazily stroking his erection as he enjoyed the show.

Wallace found a male shield on a table by the door and rolled it down his cock. He lay back on the bench, not the most comfortable of positions, but it would do. "Come, Ophelia. Ride me."

Now, she hesitated. He understood her reluctance. He had not treated her gently the night before, so no wonder she would not be eager for him now. He sat up and beckoned her closer, and caught her hands in his when she neared. "You are afraid?"

She nodded, looking more ashamed of her fright than of anything she had done with him so far tonight.

“Hmm.” He nodded and swung his legs over the bench. “I loathe myself for hurting you, and for making you fear coupling. There is nothing in the world that is better than a slow, thorough fuck. But you have to be ready for it. Turn around, and let me see.”

Confusion crinkled her brow, but she did as he asked with a whispered, “Yes, Master,” and faced the window. He pressed one hand against her knee, slowly sliding his palm up her leg, until his thumb grazed the silky curls at her core. Already, her wetness slicked her thighs, and she parted easily for him to rotate his thumb over her engorged bud.

“Oh god, oh god!” Molly thrust her hips against the machine, then her body went rigid, her head thrown back, mouth agape.

Permilia moaned, clamping her thighs on Wallace’s hand. “Please fuck me.”

“Since you’ve been such a very good girl,” he said with a chuckle, then, gently, he drew her back to straddle his lap. When she stepped close enough, he lifted one of her legs and pulled it back, so her knee rested on the very edge of the bench. The other followed, leaving her poised, flushed and dripping, over his cock. He lowered her by increments, letting her feel every inch of him as he slid into her waiting cunt.

On the other side of the glass, Horace rolled a male shield down his own member and greased himself, then stepped behind Molly and placed a hand at the small of her back. “Lean forward.”

She did as he asked, and he pushed the wide tip of his cock into the crevice between the girl’s buttocks.

Permilia’s arms lifted above her head to encircle his neck, her torso bowing. Her body stiffened. A high pitched wail rose from her throat, and her cunt gripped Wallace’s shaft in a torturous throb as she came.

“I won’t flatter myself that it was solely my attentions that caused that,” he whispered against her ear. “Did you know that the most sexually sensitive part of your body is your mind? The sights you see, the sounds you hear...for me, the way you look right now, flushed and sweating, riding my cock, is far more exciting a spectacle than what’s going on through the glass.”

As arched and extended as her body was, she whipped her hips in a grinding circle, then repeated the motion more slowly, drawing his breath

from between his lips with a hiss.

“This is so much better than before,” she moaned, bucking her pelvis against him. He held her with one hand gripping a breast and the other splayed over her mound, making it so easy to slide one finger between her swollen petals and saw against the hard nubbin there as she rocked his shaft inside of her.

On the other side of the glass, Horace had buried a respectable length of his cock in Molly’s ass. The redhead huffed and panted, caught between exertion and rapture. The machine never slowed, still plowing into her with perfectly timed thrusts.

“Imagine that you are in her place,” Wallace purred, pausing to lick a long path down Permilia’s neck. “Penetrated by two cocks, held between man and machine. Every move bringing you inescapable ecstasy.”

She moaned and ground her hips against him. God, what he wouldn’t give to feel her fully, without the damned shield. Of course, when she was his wife, such precautions wouldn’t be necessary, at least, at home, in their own bedroom.

If she even wants to be married to you, when she finds out.

That sobering thought certainly gave him a bit more control than he’d had a moment before, though it slipped rapidly when Permilia begged, “Harder! Fuck me harder!”

He lifted her from his lap, and while she still whimpered in disappointment, bent her over the bench and positioned himself behind her kneeling form. He entered her in one long stroke that forced the breath from her lungs, then gripped the hair at the base of her neck, not out of cruelty, but a gentle tug that brought her head up.

“You want it harder?” he hissed into her ear, slamming his hips forward, driving himself even deeper into her body.

“Oh yes!” she shrieked, jerking her hips back to meet his.

Though it should have been him giving the commands, he would let her breach of etiquette pass without comment this time. He acquiesced to her plea with vigor, rutting into her so hard that her knees lifted from the floor. Permilia’s cries escalated in melodious concert with the redhead on the other side of the glass, and they reached completion within seconds of each other. Wallace let all thoughts of control flee as he pumped into her with fast, brutal thrusts, erupting inside of her with a roar.

It took him a moment to get his breath, and another to realize that he'd collapsed over her back and pinned her to the bench. He eased himself from her body and stood on trembling legs. On the other side of the window, Horace helped Molly down from the now-silent machine, then pulled a curtain closed on the other side of the glass.

"I suppose that means the show is over," Permilia said with a giggle.

To Wallace's surprise, he laughed, as well, but he quickly smothered the sound. He had a distinctive laugh.

Permilia sat up quickly. "Did you just say something?"

"No." He mimicked a cough. "No, just clearing my throat."

Her forehead wrinkled. Before she could think any further on the subject, he offered her his hand. She took it, climbing to her feet and taking a step back. "Oh dear. I feel a bit..."

"Exhausted?" He held her against him, taking her weight gladly. She filled his arms as though she were made to fit him, and he lowered his nose to her curls to smell the rosewater on her hair.

* * * *

Firmly wrapped in her coat, Permilia allowed Wallace to hand her into the coach. "Before I go, there is one question I would like to ask, if you would permit me."

He nodded, holding up a hand to stall the driver. "Yes?"

"Your tattoo. The man with Molly had one, as well. A heart, and in the same place as your spade. What does it mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Every member of the club has one," he lied smoothly.

Chewing her lip thoughtfully a moment, she countered, "But they don't. Pardon me, I don't mean to argue. I'm merely confused. The few men I have seen...exposed, as it were, in the club do not have the same tattoo."

A surge of protective jealousy caught him quite off guard. "I don't know that I like the idea of you looking at other men while in my company."

"Unless they're on the other side of a secret window," she corrected with a sly smile. "No matter. If you won't give me the answer I seek, I shall find it out elsewhere."

He laughed. "Good luck to you, then, for you will need it."

Something passed over her features, something strangely like suspicion, but it disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. "You don't know

me that well, sir. Good evening, then, Master.”

“Good evening, Ophelia.” He took her proffered hand and brushed her knuckles over his lips through the leather mask. With a signal to the driver, the cab rattled off into the night.

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Chapter Eight

In the posh London townhouse that was the home of the Deering family, every gas light was lit, every sideboard laden down with food, every surface dusted sparkling clean for a party thrown in honor of Miss Permilia Deering and her intended, Wallace Sterling.

Miss Permilia Deering herself seemed to be the only fixture in the home that was not party-ready. “This is a mistake.”

“No, running around London in the dead of night is a mistake.” Molly studied her mistress through dark-ringed eyes. “I should have known better. I swear, my head had only just hit the pillow when it was time to get up again.”

Permilia pursed her lips. Of course Molly would be exhausted. Any woman would be, after what had gone on at the club the night before. But Molly didn’t know that it had been Permilia watching her from the other side of the glass, and it seemed it would be more comfortable for both of them if it were to stay that way. “Are you nearly done?”

Truth be told, Permilia was a bit jealous of her maid. Molly had been so beautiful and free, so seemingly unashamed of her body and its responses. She could be. She was just a servant, who cared what she did in her private life? As far as most of Permilia’s peers were concerned, servants didn’t have private lives.

It would have been so much less complicated.

Molly tucked another of Permilia’s glossy black ringlets into place and secured it with a pin. There were so many in the mass of hair secured at the back of her head that Permilia was certain she must have gained a stone in pins alone.

“Finished,” Molly declared, a skeptical look on her face. “Are you sure you don’t want it arranged the way it was last night?”

“No!” Permilia stood and went to her full-length looking glass and raked her eyes over her reflection. Her gown was lovely, but the furthest thing from immodest. Her hair was tightly, perhaps unfashionably, coiffed. There would be no mistaking her for the seductress that had gone to the Two Aces the night before. “Imagine if someone at this party actually went to...you know where. I wouldn’t want them to recognize me!”

“I suppose if they did, they couldn’t very well call you out. At least, not without revealing that they were there, themselves.”

Permilia scowled. “That’s not the point. Now run off. I have to go downstairs to my—” she made a retching noise, “—intended.”

Downstairs, the guests literally glittered, all decked out in their finest jewels for the social occasion of the year. Even Mrs. Sterling had arrived bedecked in jewels, though it would cause much whispering behind many hands. Widowed now for five years, Mrs. Sterling had been left with only the smallest yearly allowance. Practically a pauper, she had been completely reliant upon her grown sons for her well-being. To their credit, they had provided for her admirably, allowing their mother to live in style. Still, the ton wished to force her into the role of a tragic widow, though she would not comply. Permilia rather liked that about her.

Beside Mrs. Sterling stood two of her sons. Horace, the youngest of the three, was a handsome man with dark hair that grew carelessly to his shoulders. His shirt was not starched, and his coat was wrinkled. Permilia couldn’t remember meeting him at a time when his coat was not wrinkled. Beside him stood her fiance, Mr. Wallace “Cold Fish” Sterling.

“Permilia.” He nodded to her, then reached to take her hand.

It so shocked Permilia that she jerked away quickly. He had never made any physical gesture toward her, proper or improper. Perhaps the official announcement of their engagement would lead to some sort of expression of affection from him. Permilia extended her hand as though she hadn’t just recoiled from him, and he took it cautiously, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. She repressed an unladylike and completely unexpected shiver. She had not thought such a reaction was possible in the context of her intended.

“What a lovely occasion,” he observed mildly.

“Yes, very...lovely.” What on earth was she supposed to talk to him about for the rest of their lives? There didn’t seem to be a strong opinion or unchecked feeling in his entire being!

Of course, that had been one of the things she had quite liked about him when she’d accepted his proposal. He’d seemed harmless, and unlikely to cause any untoward excitement in their shared lives. No gambling, no mistresses, no horrid scandals. Just as Permilia had envisioned her life.

Unfortunately, she suspected that a harmless and unexciting man was quite unlikely to chain her to a wall and make her scream with pleasure.

A hot flush crept up her neck at the memory of her stranger. It was difficult to imagine that beneath Wallace’s immaculately pressed clothes there could be a body of such sinful decadence as the stranger had, or that Wallace’s fingers could possess the same skill to bring her to a crisis again and again.

“Permilia, dear, are you feeling ill?” Mrs. Sterling studied her with narrow eyes, and Permilia realized that she hadn’t responded to Wallace’s statement, and that she stared at him rather intently.

Since the woman had provided her with an opportunity, Permilia nodded weakly and replied, “Yes, I’m sorry. The heat is...so oppressive, I fear I may...”

Wallace caught her by the arm as she listed slightly on her feet, and Mrs. Sterling gasped, alerting the attention of party goers like a pebble disturbing a pond, sending out ripples of gossip that would spread across the most exclusive circles in London.

“For goodness sake, Wallace, take her to get some air.” Mrs. Sterling shooed at them with her hands, and Wallace slipped Permilia’s arm into his to guide her through the crowded parlor and onto the terrace behind the house.

“I’m sorry,” Permilia said, fanning her face with her hand in the cool night air. “I didn’t mean to cause a spectacle.”

“No, of course not,” Wallace said kindly. “Mother will be furious. There’s nothing more scandalous than the bride fainting at her own engagement party.”

Permilia gaped at him. She’d never heard so much as an ill-word from Wallace’s mouth, let alone directed at his mother, and here he was, being almost...sarcastic.

Misinterpreting her silence as a lack of understanding, he hurried to catch her up, “Because they’ll think that you are—”

“Oh, yes, I know what they will think.” That was enough of that line of conversation. She had weeks before she would have to think about bearing Wallace’s children and the act that preceded them.

Still, she couldn’t help but wonder, now that she had a bit of experience with the matter, if Wallace would even be capable of fulfilling his role in the bedroom. This was the first time that he’d even made a suggestion toward their inevitable intimacy, and roundabout though it had been, he didn’t seem at all comfortable having said it.

As if his lack of boldness somehow added to hers, she smiled up at him adoringly and said, “I hope she is not too embarrassed. Especially since I was not faint at all.”

“You weren’t?” He raised one eyebrow, and for a moment Permilía could not help but think of the stranger.

Somehow, she had difficulty imagining that beneath his mask the stranger would look anything like Wallace. No, the stranger would likely have smoldering dark eyes and a face from a classical painting, with a pouting mouth and youthful skin. Wallace, while not hideously ugly, was certainly no one to paint into a renaissance scene.

“I was merely anxious to get you alone.” She went to one of the low stone benches and seated herself upon it, banishing all thoughts of the stranger from her mind. “We agreed to be married rather hastily, and there are a great many things I’m not informed of.”

“You may feel free to ask me any questions that you like, and I will attempt to answer them to the best of my ability.” He seated himself beside her, not too close. “Are you having regrets about accepting my proposal?”

“Regrets?” She shook her head, though inside she screamed her “yes” to the heavens. “No, of course not. I’m just looking forward to our future. I’m not entirely sure what kind of man you are.”

He looked worried at that. “Have I...done something? To spark your suspicion?”

She chewed her lip. This bit was tricky. What if she went too far? What if she shocked him so that he broke their engagement? Not that it would be an altogether horrible thing. She’d have more time to spend with her masked stranger, after all... No! She had to think about how that would

look for her, and for her family. She must tread carefully. “Nothing you have done. Just...things you haven’t done at all.”

“Oh?” He sat beside her, so close that his thigh brushed hers through their clothing. “In what ways have I neglected you?”

“Well, in the first place...the only time you’ve ever actually touched me was just a moment ago.” Her cheeks warmed. She couldn’t believe she was broaching such a subject with him. “What I mean to say is, you’ve been very proper, and I appreciate that you respect the societal strictures that bind us, however—”

“You fear I have no...romantic inclination toward you because I’ve not tossed you over my shoulder and dragged you off to a cave somewhere?”

It took her a moment to realize that he was, in fact, teasing her. “Wallace, you have a sense of humor!”

“I do.” He chuckled, a warm, rich sound that raised prickles on the back of her neck. How odd that his voice had never done that to her before. He continued, “But I am also a good judge of people. I doubted your father would have appreciated it if I had been overly familiar.”

Through the French doors, Permilia spotted her father, the colonel, greeting well-wishers and drinking too many brandies. Above his thick white mutton-chops, his nose sat like a great, red, potato. For all his wealth, her father was still a soldier. He would have made quick work of any man who laid an ill-intentioned hand upon his daughter.

“I suppose you’re right,” she ceded, but added, “however, there is a vast divide between improper advances and treating me as though I were a plague victim.”

“Then I suppose I have misjudged your character, and played my hand far too cautiously.” He placed his hands atop hers where they rested on her knee. “I hope this has no ill-consequence on our engagement. Although, if it should, at least give my mother the reprieve of the weekend before announcing our parting in the papers.”

Now, this was an odd pickle, indeed! If she should wish it, she could end their engagement with a word, and no ill-feelings between them. But how did she intend to spend the rest of her life? Chasing after some strange man in a mask and goggles, who had made no gestures that did not have to do with matters carnal?

“Don’t be absurd, Wallace, I...have feelings for you.” She wasn’t sure what those feelings were, beyond apathy, but she was sure they would develop, eventually. After all, in such a short time she’d developed a number of disturbing affections toward a man whose face she’d never even seen.

“You believe I’m your last chance,” he stated plainly.

Such an insult could not be tolerated. She shot to her feet. “I’ll have you know that you are not the first man who has pursued me!”

“I never assumed I was.” He stretched out his legs, bracing his hands on the stone bench.

Somehow, that was even more insulting. “You know, I think I liked you better when you were silent and boring!”

“Boring?” That got him to his feet. He stepped closer with each word he uttered next. “You think I am the boring one in this couple?”

They stood toe to toe, her skirt brushing over his spats. She composed herself and choked out, “And what would lead you to believe that I am boring?”

“I’m sure embroidering cushions becomes tiresome at some point,” he seethed. “Aren’t you the slightest bit dissatisfied with your life?”

Somehow, they were in an argument. Arguing. With Wallace Sterling. She’d never imagined that Wallace had the passion to become angry over anything, but he loomed over her, dark eyes burning with fury.

Angry though he may be, how dare he question her...whatever it was he was questioning her about. Really, the more she thought about it, the more she got the distinct feeling that whatever he was arguing with her about had nothing to do with why she argued with him. She straightened her spine. “I have very little patience for a drunk, Mister Sterling. Excuse me.”

“I am not drunk!” He grabbed her arm! The man who had never touched her a single time in their entire courtship until their engagement party now made free to...to...manhandle her!

“Let go of me!”

His mouth descended upon hers with an almost cruel urgency. His lips pried hers apart and his tongue invaded, tangling with hers, which, to her horror, fought back with sexual instinct. She did not mind when he pressed her body close to his, delighted to find that he was just as solid as that other male body she’d been recently pressed against. She slid her hands down his arms, then up again to tangle about his neck. It occurred to her that she had

never been kissed before, and she almost laughed at how preposterous that was, considering all she had done with her stranger.

And that thought sobered her instantly. There they were, in full view of anyone who cared to look, kissing the way an engaged couple should not be kissing. What on earth would Wallace think of her now? He, who had been so proper, to the point of cold-fishery, would probably be horrified at the way she responded to him. What had she done to herself, allowing that club and that stranger to turn her into some kind of sex-hungry trollop?

Though her body fairly burned, she did not shove him against the wall and have her way with him. She shoved him away and ran for the French doors. She pushed her way through the throng inside, past her mother who shrilled, “Permilia, where on earth are you going?” and through the front doors. At the curb, she hailed a cab without slowing her steps, and vaulted into it before the driver could climb down to help her in. “Leaden Hall and Bishop, if you please,” she ordered, rather impolitely, but she was certain it wasn’t the first time someone had been impolite to a cab driver.

The gears squeaked and the wheels creaked, and Permilia watched as the lights and sounds of the party were swallowed by the traffic on the street. She settled back and sighed, not a sigh of relief, but anticipation of relief to come.

Chapter Nine

Blast! Wallace pulled his jacket back on and smoothed his hair before following in Permilia's wake. Inside, all eyes fell to him in curiosity and recrimination. Of course, how would it look, that he had been alone with his intended and she had bolted?

"This is why I suggested a chaperone!" his mother cried, looking as though she were about to be in need of some air, herself. "You've ruined both of your reputations, now!"

"Mother, be quiet!" Wallace had never uttered such words to his mother in his entire life, but her sputtering hysterics would only make the situation far worse. "No one has been ruined. Where did she go?"

"Out the front door, like a shot!" a gentleman beside him said, chortling. "Gave her a start, did you? Have to be careful with these young mares, they chafe at the bridle!"

"Really, William!" a woman, probably the man's wife, shrieked, and all at once the entire party became a sea of righteous indignation. Wallace's mother fainted. A woman screamed. A glass broke.

"Now would be the time to make your escape, brother," Horace said, nodding toward the door as his arms were full of their unconscious mother.

Wallace pushed through the throng and down the steps, emerging on the street in time to see Permilia climbing into a Hansom cab. There was little doubt in his mind as to where she was headed. He hurried into the street and whistled. A Hansom pulled up, puffing steam from its clockwork horse. The driver on the back hauled back on the break lever, and sparks shot from the metal hooves of the machine-beast.

“Leaden Hall and Bishop,” Wallace ordered, training his eyes ahead for any cab that might be headed the same direction. What would happen when she arrived and her masked stranger wasn’t there?

Worse, what would happen if he arrived at the same time as she did? He supposed their secret would be in the open then, for all the good it might do him. The way she’d reacted to his advances made him seriously wonder if the Permilia who had been showing up to the club hadn’t been sleepwalking or hypnotized.

Or, she just doesn’t care for you, friend. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but the fact that his intended showed more passion for a total stranger than her fiancé was cause for concern.

Perhaps if her fiancé hadn’t acted like a raving lunatic—he stopped that line of reasoning in its tracks. He only acted like a lunatic because everyone’s expectations were turning him into one: his mother, who wanted him to marry Permilia in the hopes that her family’s fortune would someday line his pockets, his brothers, who felt he should be wholly concerned with the running of the club, his fiancée, who wanted him to romance her, but not too much...it was becoming all too much to bear.

It would all be so easy if he could just reveal himself as the Ace of Spades, but after her reaction to him tonight, that seemed impossible. And yet, there was no way to hide the truth. Once she saw him on their wedding night, she would know. A better man would tell her the truth and call off the wedding. A less honorable man would simply jilt her and protect his own interests. But the man Wallace feared he was would let her marry him, whether she wanted to be with a man as perverse as he, simply because he didn’t want to let her go.

The Ace of Spades wanted her. Did Wallace?

He stewed for the rest of the ride, and urged the driver to slow his mechanical beast’s paces as they approached the intersection of the two streets. The heavy traffic that usually peppered Leaden Hall had abated somewhat, being the dinner hour, and Wallace didn’t wish to be spotted when he alighted from the cab. He tossed the driver a few coins as he swung down and made his way toward the pristine storefront on Bishop Street. He passed within feet of Permilia, who thankfully was too preoccupied counting out payment for her driver to look up. He had but a few seconds before she would venture further down Leaden Hall, to the

alley where she would be admitted to the club, password or no. He'd stupidly made that stipulation when his brother had re-wired the doorman.

He burst through the front door of Sterling Metal Goods, ignoring the "Closed" placard in the window. Inside the darkened shop, silver teapots, candlesticks, platters and bedwarmers crammed the shelves, waiting for a traditionalist to walk in and snap up the whole lot. Not much had changed in the shop since his father's death ten years ago, and it showed in both the painfully outmoded merchandise and the dismal ledgers. Richard had suggested several sure-fire money-makers, but their mother had insisted that store retain their father's vision. Even if the vision had been bankrupting him before his death.

Wallace dropped his coat on the floor as he trod down the main aisle. He unbuttoned his vest and shirt cuffs as he passed the sales counter and began working on his shirt in earnest as he pushed through the door in the back. His brother, Richard, looked up from the meager supper he hunched over, and a guilty expression came over his young face.

"Oh, the engagement party," Richard said, as if just remembering. A total lie, as Wallace himself had reminded him that morning. Since the accident that had left his brother crippled, Wallace had watched Richard gradually withdraw into total hermitage. He kept mostly to his workshop at the club and this tiny backroom in the shop, where he slept on a cot and ate beans from tins like a pauper.

Wallace did not have time to scold his younger brother. "Just passing through. Permilia is headed to the club."

"During your engagement party?" Richard's mouth gaped before he had the good manners to cover it with his napkin. "And I thought I would be the rudest guest not at the party."

"You are, still." Wallace kicked back the rug that covered the steel platform set in the floor. He positioned himself upon it and pulled the lever on the wall to begin his descent. "I'll be back to talk to you later."

"Don't forget to return the platform when you disembark!" Richard called after him. "Don't strand me here."

I'll strand you in the bloody desert, Wallace thought, but as soon as the platform came to a stop, he felt about in the darkness for the lever that would send it upwards once more. Once it was flush with the floor above, Wallace stood in total darkness in the access tunnel that ran beneath the cellars of the buildings above. As subterranean passages go, it was a rather

pleasant one, dry and mostly straight, with a convenient brass rail to hold to keep one from running into walls. Richard had thought to put in gaslights, but Wallace and Horace had both convinced him not to, on the grounds that one suspicious explosion during installation would reveal both the club and its true owners, and their mother's mortification would be like to send her to her grave.

With one hand skimming the rail, Wallace ran to the door at the other end, the one that let out at his office in The Two Aces. He ducked into the welcoming interior and left the gaslights within low. He didn't need anyone wondering how the Ace of Spades suddenly appeared in his office without making an appearance in the club, nor did he wish for anyone to barge in before his identity was concealed. He'd stripped off his shirt and vest on the walk, and he hung them over the back of his chair to quickly doff his trousers and small clothes. Standing naked before the mahogany wardrobe, the first items he donned were his goggles and mask, then long leather gloves. Then he selected a pair of loose linen pants from a drawer and quickly pulled them on, rolling the top so they would sit about his hips, revealing the spade tattoo.

When he exited his office, it was just in time to catch Permilia wandering about the club floor, in full society dress. Looking for him, he presumed. He locked the office door behind him and slipped the key into his glove as he approached her. What was she thinking, showing up here without a disguise for the second time? There were friends of her father here; Admiral Whitting had begged off the party citing a previous engagement, and that engagement appeared to be the young man sprawled beneath him on the corner couch. For Permilia to show up with no mask obscuring her identity, she sent the message that she didn't care to separate herself publicly from the club. She was about to become Mrs. Wallace Sterling, one legal document away from Mr. Wallace Sterling, partial owner of the club and damned well trying to keep it secret.

Even more troubling, she didn't mind flaunting her sexuality with the Ace of Spades, but she recoiled from Wallace's advances. He forced that utterly bizarre jealousy to the back of his mind and slipped into the role he'd costumed himself for.

In the pit in the center of the floor, two men lay sandwiched between automatons, their legs entwined with each others' and the fleshless system of gears belonging to the clockwork men. Permilia's attention was caught

by the sight for a moment, and Wallace slid beside her with enough stealth to startle her. “We can find a seat, if you like.”

She looked up, her pupils flaring wide with each rapid heartbeat, until her dark eyes appeared almost black. “You frightened me.”

“There’s nothing to be frightened of, here.” He ran his fingers down her arm. “You’re quite fancy tonight. Is there somewhere else you’d rather be?”

Her lips compressed in a tight line. “No. There is somewhere I should be, but...”

His heart gave a disturbing lurch as her words died off. He cleared his throat. “I see. Well, you didn’t come here to talk, did you?”

She arched one black brow. “No more than you came here to listen.”

“Shall I find us a room, then?” He slid his hand down her arm, remembering all too vividly the embrace they’d been in on the terrace. “Unless you’d rather stay here and become act two?”

“I thought perhaps...” she blushed furiously. “I thought I might try that machine...the one that Molly tried last time? Only not with so large an audience.”

“Ah. Well, let’s see what we can do about that, shall we?” He offered her his arm and led her away. “So, you prefer to watch, rather than be observed yourself?”

“Is that wrong?” She chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Is it common courtesy to reciprocate by being watched, once you’ve been the one watching?”

He considered his answer carefully as he steered her past the voyeur rooms. “Courtesy has very little to do with such matters. There is much to experience here, but if you are profoundly uncomfortable with an act, there is no reason to submit to it out of politeness. That’s why we have words, like ‘music box’, so that no one is ever put into a position of powerlessness.”

“Would that we had such words in everyday life,” she said, with the most adorable little snort that Wallace had ever heard. “I would dearly love to beg off social engagements with a simple, ‘music box’.”

Her mention of engagements pricked him. He wanted to question her further, to ask if she referred to their engagement, but it seemed unethical to seek answers from her when she had no knowledge that it was him,

Wallace, behind the mask. “Well, if the world were like this club, I think there would be far fewer wars fought, at least.”

She laughed in agreement as he opened the door. The room he had selected was most importantly stocked with the correct device, but it was also his favorite in terms of decor. Not dungeon-like, but decorated much like his home, with dark wood and a large fireplace, and plush cushions strewn on the comfortable furniture.

“This is lovely,” Permilia said as the gaslights illuminated their surroundings. “I prefer this to chains.”

“Oh, we could still have chains,” he whispered beside her ear as he moved past her. “But another time, perhaps?”

He went to the machine in the center of the room and pulled the silk cover from it. He heard Permilia’s intake of breath and didn’t have to see her face to know she would look much the same as she had reacted to it the last time. When he turned to face her, her eyes were fixed on the machine’s large phallus, her mouth parted, bosom rising and falling rapidly inside her gown.

A grin curved his mouth behind his mask. “You are wearing far too many clothes, my dear. A discreet tryst, skirts up against a wall, is fine for some. I prefer total exposure.”

She flushed deeply, endearing when considered in the context of their relationship. She pulled at her gloves and uttered a soft, “Yes, Master.”

“No, let me.” He stepped closer to her and took her hands in his. Slowly, loosening the fingertips of the gloves one at a time, he stripped the satin from her hands, stopping to brush the wild pulse in her wrist with his thumb before moving on to her gown.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he whispered as he unfastened the row of buttons down her back. The damnable mask prevented him from nibbling her ear, kissing her throat. It had been advantageous that she’d run from him on the terrace, or else he might not have been able to stop himself from throwing her against the rose trellis. He’d wanted to taste her skin for so long...the only thing that helped him keep his patience was the knowledge that soon, after they were wed, he could have all of her, without disguises between them.

“The gentleman I wore it for has never seemed to care how beautiful I looked.” Her head dipped for a moment in defeat, then she straightened her spine and pasted on a smile. “Until tonight.”

Oh, Permilia, I've always thought you beautiful. I've been too much of an ass to say it.. What a damnable mess he'd made of things. "He is a fool."

"I do not wish to talk about him now." She turned, the back of her dress hanging open, and faced him as she peeled the gown down her arms. "I don't wish to think of him. I only want you."

Beneath her dress, she wore the black leather corset.

His heart nearly stopped beating. Either she had intended to come here and seek him out—him, the masked stranger—or she had worn it for his enjoyment at the party. Perhaps it was not for you at all, you dolt, he scolded himself. Of course, she might have worn it for some other reason, unrelated to him. But she might not have, and that possibility sent the blood rushing straight to his cock.

"Do you like it?" she asked, pushing the skirt and bustle down from her hips. The long black bow unfurled as it was freed from her skirt. With her hair carefully fixed and her costume ingeniously revealed, she looked like a dancing girl.

He swallowed hard. "You look even lovelier than last time. Although, might I make a suggestion?"

She looked down, checking all over to make sure everything was in place. He reached up, halting her examination, and pulled a few pins from her hair. When she did not object, he removed another, and another, until her shining black ringlets were freed, tousled from their confines.

"There." He lifted a curl to his mask, as if in a kiss. "I like you better wild."

A visible shiver ran through her, and he smoothed his hands over the gooseflesh on her bare shoulders. She leaned her face against his hand, her eyes fluttering closed. Suddenly, a wholly different imagining filled his brain. He saw her in their wedding night bed, all properly shrouded in a filmy nightdress, pressing her cheek to his palm and surrendering to him completely.

Which would not happen, unless he somehow discerned what it was she wanted in Wallace that her stranger could provide.

I've been a fool, he realized. What Permilia wanted was not the polite courting that society dictated. She wanted passion.

He slid one hand to her waist, then buried the other in her hair, pulling her against him. Though he could not claim her mouth the way he ached to,

he nuzzled against her ear, her neck, letting the smooth leather of his mask brush over her heated skin. With a low growl, he lifted one of her legs to hook around his waist.

Permilia gasped, her head falling back as he ground against her core. Her leg tightened around him, and she arched up on tip toe to bring their bodies into closer contact.

“What do you want, sweet Ophelia?” He splayed his hand on her chest, inching upward over her throat until he cradled her upturned chin in his hand. “Say the words for me.”

“I want you to make me come.” She was no longer the shy girl afraid to ask for what she wanted, and her boldness was so natural that it only inflamed him further.

He dropped his hand to cup her mound, finding her already hot and open for him. “Beg me.”

“Please,” she cooed, grinding against his hand. “Please make me come.”

His head reeled at the intoxicating feel of her against him, and he shucked his leather gloves, needing to feel her wet folds against his hand. Slicking his fingers with her juices, he found her pearl and rubbed over it in tight circles with his fingertips. She gasped, and nearly lost her balance, but he supported her with a hand at her back. Her hips bucked, seeking out more, and he obliged her, sliding a finger deep into her channel as he rubbed her with his thumb. Her breath hitched, her body tightened as she panted, “Oh yes, yes.”

“I think that’s enough, then,” he said, pulling his hand free and setting her on her feet.

“You’re very cruel, you know,” she groaned, pressing her thighs together.

He smiled behind his mask and set to assembling the machine.

Permilia watched with impatience as the stranger prepared the machine for her. Very slowly, if her opinion counted for anything. Her body ached where he’d left her trembling on the verge of release. Just a touch would send her over the edge, but she willed her body back from the precipice. She wanted to prolong every sensation, to draw the encounter out until it was no longer possible to deny herself.

He rolled a male shield over the machine's protruding phallus and patted the saddle. "Come up, then."

"Right now?" She squeezed her thighs together, almost moaning with the sweet shock to her core. She'd fantasized about the machine since she'd seen Molly astride it, but now that she was to experience it for herself, she hesitated. Surely, the reality of it could not live up to her expectations.

The stranger lifted his hand and crooked his finger at her. "While we do have all night, I would prefer we spend it doing other, more inventive things."

She went to him and gave him her hand to steady herself as she climbed atop the machine. It seemed much bigger and higher when one was actually astride it, and she wobbled a bit. That was decidedly not the alluring grace she wanted to impress him with.

"Slide yourself onto the machine," he ordered, sounding almost bored. The thick column of his erection pressing against his thin trousers told another side of the story. He lifted two fingers and slid them between her thighs and the machine's saddle, rubbing them against her wet folds. She squirmed on his fingers, letting the delicious lightning in his touch ignite her further. He pulled his hand away and smoothed her glistening wetness over the machine's phallus. "Come now, no need to be timid."

Her body quaking with need, she slid her feet into the stirrups on either side and used them as leverage to raise herself over the hard shaft. The tip of it brushed her delicate curls, and she shivered, slowly easing herself down. The phallus was not quite so large as the stranger's own magnificent cock, but it was harder and felt slightly alien inside of her body. Still, her channel clenched down, grateful to be filled, and she rolled her hips with a moan.

"I'll just add the fuel now," the stranger said calmly, and a loud clank startled Permia. Almost at once, the machine shuddered, and the phallus gave a little jerk inside of her.

"It takes it a moment to achieve full power, of course," the stranger continued. He slipped a hand over her thigh to position the steam nozzle, which already emitted a pleasantly warm stream. The moisture collected in the coiled hair over her center, adding to her own slick wetness. The false cock began to slowly piston up and down, and she wriggled, trying to adjust to the strange feeling.

“Relax,” he urged her, leaning close to her ear. “You might need to get used to the feeling.”

Permilia rather doubted she could get used to the feeling. The machine tirelessly pumped into her, but it was not the same as her stranger’s impressive fortitude. He was warm and alive. This was a cold machine, not acting out any desire for her, but because that was its function. She bit her lip. “I don’t know...it wasn’t what I thought it would be.”

He stepped behind the machine and, to her surprise, climbed onto it behind her. His hard, hot body pressed against her back, he slid his hands around her waist. She shuddered at his touch and leaned into him, letting him support her. “Is it the cold, impersonal nature of the device that leaves you uncertain? I find that sometimes that is the case. No matter how skillfully crafted the machine, the lack of personal touch leaves something to be desired.”

As he spoke, one hand glided up her ribcage to cup her breast, the thumb rolling over her nipple. His other hand dove between her legs, cupping her mound and kneading the plump flesh there as the machine pounded into her.

She gasped as he released her, and a leather mask slipped over her eyes. Totally blinded now, she gripped his naked thighs where they bracketed hers. “Don’t let me fall!”

“You won’t fall.” His mouth slid down her neck, over her shoulder, his tongue laving her heated skin. His hands returned to her body, both cupping her breasts and holding her back to his chest and he nibbled the skin of her throat. The frantic pumping of the machine between her thighs urged her to rock with the motion.

“When you come, I’m going to pull you down from here and fuck you myself,” he whispered, then curled his tongue over the shell of her ear.

Her channel clenched on the phallus driving inside of her. The thought of his cock, his body beneath her, pulled a whispered “oh yes” of agreement from her lips. She knew he would make good on his promise, knew he would force her back to the precipice of her crisis before she had even fully come down.

Those phantom hands grasped hers, guiding them to the apex of her thighs to press them against the dripping column of the phallus where it entered her. Without her eyesight, she used her fingers to see the machine

pumping in and out of her folds, and even dared to curl a fingertip alongside it, entering herself and adding to the almost unbearable fullness.

His hands abruptly left hers, and she jumped in surprise. If she had not felt him at her back, she would have thought he abandoned her. As suddenly as he'd stopped touching her, his hands returned to cover her breasts, kneading them as his hips rocked against hers in time with the machine.

Then, lips touched her ear. He had taken off his mask.

"A machine can't touch you like this." His breath cascaded over her ear, sending shivers down her arms. She fumbled with the mask, twisting to see his face, but he turned her shoulders firmly forward.

"No peeking. Leave the blindfold on."

Her frustration was quickly subdued at the touch of his lips on her throat and the silky swirl of his tongue over her leaping pulse. She'd thought nothing would spur her to greater heights than experiencing the club's machines. Now, she knew the real draw of the club was its patrons.

He lifted her arms above her head, kissing a line down her back from her shoulder to her waist, then curled his body around hers like a serpent and laved at one hard nipple. Coupled with the machine's relentless assault, it was too much to resist. She screamed, shuddering as every muscle in her body tightened and twisted then simultaneously released in a burst of pleasure so keen she thought she would surely die from it. A sudden weightlessness alerted her that he had pulled her down, and her cunt spasmed, reaching for the machine's phallus that had stretched her. He bent her over roughly, one hand tangled in the hair at her nape, and entered her with a forceful thrust, driving the breath from her lungs.

Just as he had promised.

"Tell me," he growled, leaning over her and grinding his cock deeper inside of her, "is this as good as the machine?"

She wished she could see him, could look him in the eyes when she purred, "Better."

He reached between her and the machine she bent over, sliding his fingers over her bud in a maddening, teasing dance while staying still inside of her. She rocked her hips, trying to gain the delicious friction of his cock in her swollen flesh, but his grip on her neck warned her to stay still. For what seemed like ages he tormented her, never consistent in speed or pressure, driving her aching body toward crisis and pulling her back before

she could obtain it. Finally, she felt the telltale speed building toward her unavoidable release. She sobbed aloud with relief and tightened around him. That was the moment he began to move again, in smooth, swift strokes that seemed to touch her most sensitive spot from the inside while his fingers whirled over it on the outside. She bucked beneath him and let out a long, tight wail.

Before they could cross the barrier from pleasure to nuisance, he pulled his fingers away from her and released her neck, choosing instead to seize her hips and drive ruthlessly into her. Even with all of his control, he could not hide the approach of his own climax, and when it arrived and his cock twitched inside of her, another, smaller crisis claimed her.

For a long while, they both slumped against the machine, gasping. When he withdrew from her, he removed her blindfold. "Do be considerate and face away while you dress."

She couldn't help but smile at that. He trusted her. It shouldn't matter. He was a total stranger. Well, not total, but very nearly. Still, it did touch her, to think that he didn't fear she would break the rules.

"So, when shall I see you again?" he asked, and Permilia's heart dropped to her stomach.

Her wedding was fast approaching. Everyone had seen her run out of the party...if someone had followed her, she would have been ruined. Her reckless disregard for physical pleasure and comfort had led her to possibly disastrous choices. She couldn't return. No, she wouldn't return, even if she found a spare moment or some guarantee that she would not be spotted. Who knew the people lurking behind the goggles in the main room.

"I don't think you will." It almost hurt to say it, and she imagined that the words wounded him.

He was silent for a short time, then, in a subdued voice, he said, "Oh, I wouldn't make promises that you cannot keep."

"I assure you, I can keep this one. I am about to be a married woman. I can hardly keep coming here."

"Yes, I'm sure tea with the in-laws will keep you much occupied." There was a false cheerfulness to his words, and she wished she could see his face. But she'd given him her word.

They dressed in silence. She waited until he had replaced his mask and goggles, and when he permitted, she turned. "Thank you for a wonderful evening. And acquaintance."

“The pleasure was...not all mine, but certainly a large portion of it was.” Behind the green lenses, one eye winked.

As Permilia left the club, she refused to ruminate on maudlin thoughts of love lost. It was not love. It was desire. There was a substantial difference.

Wasn't there?

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Chapter Ten

“Mister Wallace Sterling.”

Permilia looked up from her book of dull poetry to face her dull fiancé. She’d feigned a headache to be left at home while the family attended Sunday services, knowing that Wallace would also be in attendance. Her week-long avoidance of him had only put her into a more delicate situation, for now they would be alone together.

He came into the room briskly, like a man about to do business with a feared competitor.

“Wallace.” She held out her hand to him, but he did not take it and kiss it.

“We must speak about a matter of great importance, Permilia.” He stood stiffly, just beside the armchair, and he did not sit.

Permilia smoothed her hands over her skirt as she took her seat. She cleared her throat. “Of course.”

“Our wedding is but days away,” he began. “And you have not spoken to me since the night of the party. Either you are angry with me for my impropriety that night, or you are embarrassed at the fact that you are not outraged.”

The silence hung between them, inviting Permilia to speak out, to tell him the truth. But she didn’t know what the truth was. Did she want to scream that she was sexually infatuated with another man? Or did she want to confess that she didn’t wish to marry him? The practical part of her brain reminded her of the quiet man who’d come to call on her but five months previously. She’d thought him so interesting then, and imagined the depths which she would uncover when they lived together day after day. It had

seemed certain to her then that she would come to love him, but his constant coldness had delayed that love from blossoming. If only he would touch her, or...

She wet her lips. "I am outraged that you did not try the like sooner."

"I had considered that, too," he admitted quietly.

Another horrible silence bound them together in unbearable awkwardness, until finally Permilia could bear it no longer. It had become terribly clear that Wallace did not know how to rectify the situation. Permilia did. "Please, sit down."

He did as he was told, and Permilia was certain she caught a flash of something like amusement on his features before he carefully composed his cold fish mask once more. Well, she would like to see how he kept his calm demeanor when she...well, she wasn't certain exactly what she would do. But it started with seating herself in his lap. "Wallace, I do not wish to wait any longer. Make love to me. I know you must have some passion for me, you proved that the night of the party. I don't want to wait another week. I want to be with you now."

"Permilia..." he began, and for a moment she feared he would reject her. Then he swallowed, his throat flexing beneath his collar. "Do those doors lock?"

She sprang from his lap and made for the doors, but Wallace had the same notion and longer strides. He reached the doors and clicked the lock, then rattled the handles. "How long will your mother and father be at church?"

"An hour more, at least," she breathed, already working at the buttons of her dress that she could reach. "Wallace, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was trying to do things properly. I've been trying to do things properly my whole damned life." He tugged at his collar, and his shirt came open with a few buttons falling casualty. "Come here, my Ophelia."

The strangest feeling, as though she had stepped out of her physical body, came over her. Wallace unfastened his trousers and pushed them over his hips, where a mark that could not be missed stood out in stark black from his pale skin.

"You're..." She took a step backward. "You're him!"

"Yes?" he said, uncertainty in his affirmative answer. "That was what we were discussing, was it not?"

“No!” She turned sharply away from him. She would faint. She would faint dead away and the servants would break down the door and find her unconscious and him without trousers. “I think you should leave, Mister Sterling.”

There was a sound of rustling, as he pulled on his trousers, she presumed. “You want me to leave? A moment ago you were ready to give yourself to me entirely, and now, because you found out our common passion, you want me to leave?”

“How dare you!” She whirled on him, stomping across the distance between them. “You should have told me! You should have told me the moment you saw me standing outside of the club.”

“I thought you were playing a game! I thought you had uncovered my secret and you’d come to surprise me. You certainly spent enough of your time trying to find out about the club!” He angrily buttoned the few buttons left on his shirt and bent to scoop his coat off the floor.

Her face flamed. Had she been so obvious in her pursuit of the club that Wallace, who barely ever spoke to her except about the weather, had known of her intentions? “You are heartless!”

“Heartless?” He laughed. “Heartless is stringing one man along while you caper about with another!”

“It wasn’t another! It was you, you...jackass!” The word visibly jolted him, as though he’d been slapped. “And what were you doing at the club, anyway? You were also engaged. If anyone has been dishonest here, it has been you!”

“I—” he stopped himself, as though suddenly aware of some precarious predicament. “I have to go there, Permilia.”

“You have to?”

“I am duty bound.”

If her eyes had rolled any harder, they would have fallen into her skull. “Duty bound to what? Your cock?”

“No.” He moved past her, back to the settee, and sat upon it, hanging his head. “I own the Two Aces.”

Now, Permilia felt she needed to sit. She slumped in the armchair, her body going boneless with emotional exhaustion. “This cannot possibly be any worse.”

“No one knows,” he assured her. “Not even my mother. Only I, and my brothers.”

She sat up, mortification straightening her back where her spine had deserted her. “Your brothers. Oh dear...the gentleman...with the heart tattooed...oh no.”

“Permilia, please.” Wallace dropped to one knee before her in a sick parody of the afternoon he had proposed. She’d thought him so damnably suitable then. Where had that boring, safe man gone?

He took her hand in his, and though she felt she should tear hers away, she did not. He gazed up at her imploringly, firmly aware that between them, she now held a very valuable asset in the knowledge of his involvement with the club. “My father was a very traditional man. He left his business to his sons under the stipulation that nothing be done to alter his ideals. But those ideals were bankrupting us. We had to do something to protect our mother’s interest, and Richard has always been interested in tinkering with gears and aether and...Permilia, I know it may seem as though I lied to you—”

“Because you did!” She wrenched her hand from his grasp. “How am I to look your brother in the face ever again? After I saw him...Wallace, how could you?”

He had the good sense to look sheepish. “I thought for certain that once we were married and you learned of my identity, you would be open to attending the club more frequently.”

“And what, I was to simply go along with this arrangement without being given a choice? I expected I would marry Wallace!”

“And you will. Part of the time. The rest of the time, you’ll be my Ophelia. Of course, we would still have to comply with societal strictures —”

That comment simply could not be born. She pushed him back, sprawling him on the carpet. “Societal strictures? You and I were engaged for six months before you even kissed me. You barely ever touched my hand, unless you were helping me out of a carriage. And all the while, behind my back, you were running about with harlots and...clockwork whores! Now you dare to talk to me of societal strictures?”

She didn’t want to be Wallace and Permilia and The Ace of Spades and Ophelia. She’d rather hoped it would be either one or the other. It seemed exhausting to keep up this kind of double life.

Yet, Wallace had done it. He’d lied to her, and for what? Her eyes flooded with tears. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She was ready to hear him say anything to make her understand, for as much as she hated Wallace at this moment, she still loved the masked stranger.

But he did not ask her forgiveness. He simply said, “My family would be ruined if this were ever to be revealed. My mother would be irreparably harmed.”

So, that was it. He didn’t care about how his strange duality would affect her. He cared only that his obedient wife play along. “Do you think I took no risks at all coming to the club?”

“You did,” he admitted. “Very silly ones, at that. If you had any idea how many people who know your parents, people who know you, came to the club, you’d be shocked. And for them to connect you to me, to Wallace, I mean, it could have been catastrophic!”

“And leaving me completely in the dark until I was legally bound to go along with your lifestyle, that wouldn’t have been?” She snorted haughtily. “I’m glad to discover this now, instead of after the certificate has been signed!”

“Please.” He looked so truly desperate, she almost laughed at him. “My family would be destroyed.”

Composing herself, she nodded. “I will not ruin your family out of spite, Mister Sterling. If anything, I dare say I shall never speak of it to you again at all. Good day.”

She did not await further reply.

* * * *

“Wake up, you drunken sot!”

Wallace blinked against the light that invaded his bedroom, and winced at the noise of the curtain rings rattling on the brass bar. His mouth tasted of sick and his hair felt as though it might be sticky with the same. He wore the same clothes he’d worn all week, the disheveled shirt with the missing buttons that he’d been wearing the day Permia had cast him off.

Be fair. You cut the ropes yourself.

He cursed his own conscience aloud and pulled the blankets over his head, realizing too late that he was sprawled upon them and not beneath them and his own weight was slowly choking him to death.

“This is a fine picture,” Horace scolded as he watched his brother fight free of the bedding. “I’m so glad that mother did not accompany me up the stairs.”

From somewhere far away, a voice shrill enough to startle a harpy called out, "Tell him that if he does not march down here at once, I shall be forced to drag him to the church as he is!"

Wallace pulled his head from the covers and sat up, gasping. "I swear she must sharpen her voice on a whetstone!"

"You must forgive our mother for being strung a bit tightly this morning, brother, but it is the morning of your wedding and no one has seen you in six days!"

The wedding! He'd neglected the world out of his own sadness, and somewhere between the drinking and destroying household objects, he'd also neglected to inform his family that his wedding was off. "About the wedding...perhaps it would be best if I...did not go."

"Oh, yes, far too many grooms make the dreadful faux pas of showing up." Horace gave him a rather un-brotherly slap against the side of his head. "Get up!"

Wallace gingerly cradled his head in his hands. "I cannot. The wedding is cancelled. Permilia did not react well when informed of my double life."

"Well, this is news to us." Horace folded his arms over his chest, looking like a very strict school master. "To Permilia, as well, I'd wager. She and her family have already left for the church."

Wallace sat up straight, the ringing in his ears setting him slightly off balance. "What?"

"Did you inform your bride that you had called off the wedding?"

"It was her idea!" Hadn't it been? Permilia had every right not to wed him, after the way he'd treated her. All the while he'd been criticizing her for her behavior at the club and worrying about what it would mean for his family, he'd never thought to apologize or atone. There was little he could think of that would be proper penance. What he'd done to Permilia was unforgivable. She'd been charmed by the Ace of Spades, had shared her body and her deepest desires with him, all while Wallace had watched from behind the mask.

What a mess he'd made. He hadn't informed her family, or his, of their quarrel, and now she'd apparently changed her mind? Or had she informed her parents, only to be instructed by the formidable Mr. and Mrs. Deering that she would, indeed, be married? Wallace didn't like to imagine

that scenario, in which Permilia married him only because she had been coerced.

The only way to resolve the situation, at least, the only way that he could see, was to go to the church and straighten things out in person. With Horace's help, he washed and dressed and combed his hair, which badly wanted cutting, but for now there was nothing to be done. Cleaned and shaved and pressed, he hurried down the stairs, past his mother—whose head had begun to resemble an overripe strawberry in her rage—and into the waiting Phaeton.

“Not the most appropriate way to show up for one's own wedding,” Wallace remarked as he helped their mother alight.

Horace shrugged one shoulder. “I knew we would be running late.”

When they were all seated, almost uncomfortably close in the small vehicle, Horace took hold of the gear lever and crank that controlled the clockwork horse. He wound the crank tight, until it could no longer be moved without strenuous effort, then hauled up on the gear lever and the phaeton lurched from the curb, nearly upsetting.

Their mother clasped one hand to her hat and another to her heart. “Horace! You'll kill us all!”

“Hardly, mother,” he replied as he maneuvered the sprinting vehicle into the traffic on the street. They passed between two Hansom cabs, so close that Wallace was certain they made sparks against the other vehicles.

“If you survive to get to the church, the most nerve-wracking part of the day will be behind you,” Mother declared.

Wallace wished that were true, for at the moment he would take being spilled onto the pavement in a grisly accident over what would take place at the church.

* * * *

Permilia checked her reflection again, patting her ringlets, which required no fixing at all, pursing her lips in consideration of the bride that stared back at her. The high collar of her ivory satin gown was augmented with a silk rose that scraped against her chin in a most obnoxious fashion, and the puffed sleeves nearly reached her ears. As ridiculous as she feared she looked, she felt far more so.

Horace had sworn to her that Wallace would appear at the church, but what then? They hadn't spoken in a week, and the last thing she'd done was call off their engagement.

“Dreadful, to be late to one’s own wedding! He’ll make everyone think he doesn’t want you!” Her mother fluffed Permilia’s veil, a scratchy thing held in place by a circlet of silk roses like the one at her throat.

“Mother, please,” she begged politely. It was bad enough that she doubted Wallace would appear, worse somehow that her mother felt that way when she hadn’t even been privy to the disastrous conversation in the parlor. What about her was so unmarriageable that her own mother doubted the groom would show up? It certainly didn’t inspire much confidence.

She should have confessed all to her parents, long before the morning of the ceremony, but something had held her back. No, not something. Someone.

The fact was, she loved him. Though she’d never really known Wallace Sterling, she knew his secret. During his proper, well-mannered days, he wore a mask, as effective as the one he’d worn in the club. If he could stand such a life, so could she. She could force her way through polite conversation during tea, if it meant long nights in the arms of the man who made her quake with passion, and who accepted that passion as a treasure, not unmentionable but necessary trash to be swept under the rug. So, marry Wallace she would, even if it meant carrying out a very confusing affair with the other man that he was.

The clock above the mantle chimed, and Permilia looked about the small rectory room in despair. Now was the moment she should be walking down the aisle. She would either leave today as a bride, or a jilted spinster.

* * * *

Wallace all but sprinted up the church steps. Just as he feared, guests filled the pews and sprays of roses decorated the doors. There really was a wedding planned for today, and he had to be the one to go and cock it all up.

Judging from the number of hothouse flowers strew about the sanctuary, Mister Deering had paid quite a handsome sum to decorate the biggest scandal of the season.

“She’s in there,” Horace instructed, gesturing to a door with “Church Office” etched on the glass.

Wallace paused, momentarily distracted from his primary goal. “Where’s Richard?”

His brother shifted uncomfortably and would not meet his eyes. “Richard...sends his deep regrets.”

It should not have bothered Wallace that his youngest brother was absent. After all, there likely would not be a wedding today. But Richard didn't know that.

"Are you forgetting something?" Horace prompted, striding to the door and opening it. "Through there, in the rectory. Honestly, Wallace, should I march you down the aisle as well?"

He wouldn't require such prompting, but his bride likely would.

He knocked on the door and waited, but it was not Permilia who opened the door. It was her mother, and she looked none too pleased with her impending son-in-law. "Are you ready, then? Finally?"

"I'm here to speak to Permilia." He bent the brim of his hat in his hands, and willed his fingers to unclench.

"Really, this is most irregular!" Missus Deering was a short woman with severe features and ink black hair pulled tight enough to alter the shape of her forehead. "First, you fail to respond to our dinner invitations for an entire week, then you show up late to your own wedding. Well, it's no wonder that my daughter feared she had been jilted!"

"She has been jilted?" Wallace practically roared, then forced himself to calm for the benefit of the guests assembled in the sanctuary. "Missus Deering, I am dreadfully sorry to have snubbed you. The truth is, I have been in the grip of a terrible fever for the past several days, and far too weak to reply to any invitations. In fact it is a miracle I have survived to stand before you today. Now, I would like to apologize to my bride, in person, before she walks down the aisle with any trepidation about my commitment to her."

Mother Deering pursed her lips, but moved aside, pulling the door closed behind her as she left Wallace alone with Permilia.

There had never been a bride so beautiful, or so sad, he decided the moment he laid eyes upon Permilia. Her reflection gazed up at him in the looking glass. "Is it true, you were terribly sick?"

He tossed his hat onto the threadbare chair before the empty fireplace. "You know that was not true."

She nodded, her eyes downcast once more. "I am glad you came."

"What is this?" He gestured to the gown, and to the wall, the other side of which sat everyone they knew socially, everyone who would delight in yet another scandal for the Sterlings. "You don't wish to marry me, yet

you're playing along? Is this some elaborate scheme to humiliate me, then?"

"Not at all." She turned in her chair, hampered by the ridiculous bustle of her gown. "I came here today to marry someone. Just not Wallace Sterling."

As he did not understand, Wallace thought it best to stay silent and await explanation.

Permilia rose, sweeping her gown's short train behind her. "I am in love with someone else. The man I met at the club. The man who showed more passion toward me than I am certain Wallace Sterling is capable of feeling."

"That isn't fair." He swallowed, not entirely comfortable having this conversation aloud, where it could be overheard. "That gentleman does not have a family to keep afloat, a mother to watch over and protect from the truth about her sons' business. That gentleman does not have the crushing responsibilities that Wallace Sterling does."

"I know that." Permilia reached for his hands, and held them in hers between them. "Permilia must be a proper society wife, but Ophelia is free to be wild and reckless. We are more alike than I think you know, Wallace."

That was all very well and good, but he found it unlikely that anything, short of falsifying his own death and fleeing to some far off country, could break him from his proper mold. "I am not like Horace. While he runs about being Bohemian and free, and Richard locks himself away from the world, I must take care of my family. I cannot suddenly abandon that way of life, simply because you prefer the man you met in the club."

"I know that. Which is why I must take both of you, despite your faults." She looked up at him, her sweet brown eyes full of hope. "Wallace, I do still want to marry you. Please say that you'll still marry me."

She'd taken quite a gamble, Wallace realized. What would she do if he turned away from her now? She would be humiliated. He'd treated her appallingly, caring more for protecting his family than the woman he was supposed to be marrying.

She is your perfect match. Are you willing to walk away from that?

She was willing to take on his double life to be with the Ace of Spades. And what of him? How much of him really was the man at the club, and how much of him was the boring cold fish she'd gone to the club

to avoid? “I don’t know if I can ever be the man you’re looking for, Permilia.”

She stood up on tip toe to press a kiss against his jaw. The closeness of her body enflamed him, the soft brush of her breath against his skin intoxicated him. “You already are.”

A sharp rap on the rectory door startled them both, and Permilia’s mother’s voice called, “Your guests are waiting! Really, I cannot condone postponing this ceremony any longer!”

“She’s quite right.” Wallace offered Permilia his arm. “Shall we?”

Permilia nodded toward the door. “That does have a lock, you know.”

With a grin, Wallace strode the door, already loosening his collar. It wouldn’t hurt their guests to wait just a bit longer...

About the Author

The alter-ego of USA Today Bestselling Author [Jennifer Armintrout](#), Abigail Barnette was born during a conversation with author [Bronwyn Green](#), who encouraged Jennifer to develop an elaborate fantasy persona—complete with nom de plume—under which to pen erotic romance. Abigail enjoys long naps in fairy-filled glades, running through corridors in tragically romantic haunted castles, and drinking goblet after goblet of spiced wine.

Abigail loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.abigailbarnette.com

OceanofPDF.com

***Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing***

Glass Slipper by Abigail Barnette

Naughtily Ever After, Book One

When Julien Auvrey promises to help his goddaughter snag a prince, he has no idea that the squalling infant he held in his arms nineteen years ago has turned into a beautiful young woman. Once he sees Joséphine, he knows that she's just what the prince wants in a woman...and just the type of woman that Julien wants in his bed. But Julien is a life-long bachelor, and Joséphine deserves more than just a brief affair. With his help, she'll blossom into a wife fit for the prince—in and out of the bedchamber.

Joséphine Thévenet wants nothing more than to be quit of her father's crumbling house, her stepmother's temper, and her two obnoxious stepsisters. Notorious seducer Julien Auvrey appeals to her desire for escape, and plenty of her other desires, as well. When etiquette lessons turn to carnal instruction, Joséphine fears she will lose her heart before she can win the prince.

Julien can't deny the raw heat between him and Joséphine, but he also can't deny the promise he made to her father. To possess Joséphine, Julien must betray his friend, and give up his own life of indulgence. Can he truly ask Joséphine to turn her back on the chance to be princess for nights of endless pleasure? Can he trust himself to love her as she deserves?

Abducting Andrea by Cheryl Dragon

When an attack is confirmed against the rich and powerful Edington family, Raider's Bodyguard Service springs into action. Jake Raider is assigned the independent but spoiled Andrea. He's protected her before but this time he's bringing the tools to tame her and make her his.

There are plenty of things Andrea wants to do with Jake but none of them involve business. In the past, he rejected her advances but this time he's giving her what she wants and making her beg for more. Exploring the sexual needs they've denied, she's at his mercy and loving it.

Punished by Brynn Paulin

Prim Natalia Cooper lives life on the straight and narrow, never veering into naughty territory. But she wants to. One night, years ago, her boyfriend gave her a few swats on the rear as part of their sex play and she loved it. She wants more. But he's long gone and she hasn't been spanked since. When she learns of a club where she can get exactly what she needs— anonymously—she's so turned on and ready she can hardly bear it.

For Ethan Tavish, The Dungeon has served as a place to exert his dominance without making lasting commitments. He can hardly believe his eyes when he enters the play area to find his secretary, Natalia, bent over the spanking bench in a schoolgirl uniform. They're both masked, but he'd recognize her anywhere. In an instant, he has a plan to give them what they both want...and perhaps a whole lot more.

Faery Surprising by Mia Watts

Flora Harper isn't amused when her faery "gift" transports her in the middle of a self-induced orgasm to a professional football locker room after practice. The fact that it's the team she works for, and their new quarterback, Ian Tate, wants to finish what she's started, flies in the face of the non-fraternization policy.

Ian has been traded to a rival city so he catch a blackmailer red-handed. Time is against him, as are the number of injuries he's had in his career. It sounds like a great deal, except filming the Public Relations specialist in a sexually compromising position leaves a sour taste in his mouth. When he discovers that the PR person is emotionally distant, hard-on inducing Flora, getting a whole lot closer to her feels so incredibly right...until she finds out why he's really on the team.

Not All Who Wander by Dakota Rebel

Sara has always been a wanderer, traveling the world in search of her next big adventure. When she ends up on a tropical island, she's afraid of being trapped forever. Even more, she meets two men who both want her in their bed—the same bed—and she couldn't be more confused. While her body screams yes, she's just not sure she wants to tie herself to any relationship, let alone a ménage.

Gabe and Toby know as soon as they find Sara washed up on the shore of Wyspa that she's the answer to their dreams, the woman they both want as the third in their relationship. They know she's their one. They must overcome her doubts and convince her that not all who wander are lost. Sometimes, finding a home is the biggest adventure of all.

Belonging to Them by Brynn Paulin

On the run from her past, Rayna Halliday is devastated when her old car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. She soon finds that her ex has managed to block her credit cards, her accounts and even her cell phones in an attempt to exert his control over her. Giving in to him is something she refuses to do.

When the owners of O'Keefe's Gas and Repair come to her rescue, they make her an offer that tantalizes the forbidden desires within her—she can

find a way to pay for the car repairs, or she can belong to them for two weeks and they'll see to her repairs for free. At the sexual mercy of four gorgeous men for two weeks... Why not? She can have fun and get things straightened out, all at once. But there are two problems heading her way: an ex on a rampage and her heart that's in for more than just fun.

FU by Mia Watts

When a screw-up by the Fullerton University Housing Office leaves Parker Galloway shackled up with four sexy men, Parker thinks four just might be her lucky number...as long as she can get Kei Yamamoto to join in the fun.

But will taking advantage of FU's mistake end up getting all five roomies kicked off campus, or will it be the closest thing to heaven Parker has ever experienced?

Key West by Demi Alex

What a time for a revelation!

The moment Prince Charming proposes, Addison London realizes that she is about to say "yes" to a lifetime of love and stability—and constancy—having never really lived her life to the fullest, and runs.

As a straight-laced good girl grown into a responsible, respectable woman, Addison is always prim and proper, and...well, boring. She always does the right thing, plays it safe, makes the right decisions, and suppresses her own longings to meet the expectations of others.

But she will have no regrets.

Before committing to a life wrapped in a white picket fence, she will have a little excitement and adventure, she will throw caution to the wind, and she will live out her most secret sexual fantasies—if only for a weekend.

Desperate to break free, she travels to Key West and surrounds herself with willing, gorgeous men. All she has to do is pick one. But with only one weekend in the tropical paradise, and one chance for a hedonistic experience meant to last a lifetime, she discovers that “one” is not enough.

After all, what happens in Key West stays in Key West, right?

Oriana and the Three Werebears by Tia Fanning

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska’s barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she’s forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost...

Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: They have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers...

Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

Just Right by Bronwyn Green

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

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