

Moonlight Masquerade

A REGENCY ROMANCE



RUTH AXTELL


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LONDON, APRIL 1813

Rees had never seen so many female baubles in his life. Ropes of pearl, gold chains, jeweled tiaras, and bracelets of every description lay nested in their satin surroundings.

The Countess of Wexham's jewelry box contained enough precious stones to feed half of London.

But he wasn't interested in what her jewels would fetch on the market. He was searching for something else among the lady's belongings. Something infinitely more precious—and damaging—if it were found.

Information.

Rees glanced quickly over his shoulder—having imagined the sound of footsteps behind him all evening—before lifting each article of jewelry to make sure nothing lay beneath. He replaced them one by one, endeavoring to leave everything as he had found it. Conscious that the seconds were ticking by, he was still not certain what he was looking for, only that he would recognize it when he saw it.

He lowered the lid and relocked it. Next, he slipped his skeleton key into the narrow drawer in the lower part of the jewelry box and opened it. Rows of amethyst, topaz, ruby, and emerald earrings and rings glinted back at him from the light of his candle.

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He went through every item, probing the satin beneath. Nothing out of the ordinary . . . for a lady of the fashionable world of the London *ton*.

He slid the drawer closed and locked it, expelling a breath. He glanced at the brass clock beside the jewelry box. Ten precious minutes had passed since he'd entered the lady's dressing room. He'd already searched her bedroom and found nothing. He calculated he had at least another hour before she or her maid returned for the evening.

He eyed the piece of furniture the jewelry box sat upon. A mahogany bowfront chest of drawers with brass lion's head pull handles. Forcing himself to continue the disagreeable task of going through someone's personal belongings, he grasped the top two handles and opened the first drawer. Stacks of handkerchiefs sat in neatly folded squares, of every texture and description from snowy white to pale cream and sheerest lawn edged in a wide swath of lace to heavy cambric, monogrammed in the corner, as plain as a man's.

The latter were at odds with their owner, a lady of utmost femininity.

Rees went through each pile, feeling for any object, anything suspicious—a folded piece of paper, a scroll, something cylindrical into which a document could be slipped.

The scent of mahogany and lavender drifted to his nostrils. His fingers encountered a few sachets tied with satin ribbons. He examined each one but felt only the tiny lavender pellets beneath his fingertips.

He reached the bottom of the drawer and touched the paper lining, probing each corner, going so far as sliding his hand under the paper while holding the piles of handkerchiefs in place with the other.

He repeated this motion on each side of the drawer, left, front, rear, and right, then gave it a careful look to ascertain that its contents looked undisturbed before softly pushing the drawer closed.

Where would he hide something if he were a fashionable lady? His narrowed gaze roamed the dainty dressing room, taking in its furnishings—two large wardrobes along one wall, the chest of drawers he

stood in front of, a dresser with a mirror, two comfortable armchairs flanking it, a large, plush carpet in shades of rose and green covering most of the floor. A faint scent of perfume permeated the air, nothing cloying, but light, reminding him of a Sussex village in high summer when the roses festooned the hedgerows, casting out their fragrance when one brushed by them.

He turned back to face the chest of drawers. No help for it but to go methodically through every drawer, every item, just as he'd done in the bedroom.

He hated this aspect of the job—snooping through a lady's private things. A bloody naval battle, crossing swords on the deck of a frigate, was preferable.

The ticking clock reminded him again that he'd better get to it or he'd end up discovered before his first week was up.

Steeling himself for the task, he slid open the next drawer. Thank goodness everything in the lady's terrace house was new and well maintained. He needn't fear any sticking drawers or squeaking hinges. He knew from her dossier that Lady Wexham had only moved here after her widowhood three years ago.

He eyed the drawer's contents in dismay. Silk and lawn undergarments.

Without meaning to, he envisioned the lady they belonged to.

A beautiful woman, dark of hair and eye, more elegant and well-bred than any woman of Rees's acquaintance. And, for the foreseeable future, his employer.

And very possibly a spy against Great Britain.

It was his task to find out.

He stared at the lacy chemises and silk stockings, curling his fingers into his palms.

He reached out, knowing each minute was precious. He must finish his search, no matter how distasteful, and leave the room before anyone chanced by.

Focusing on the task at hand, Rees plunged his hands into the

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drawer, going through every item as he had in the drawer above, feeling to the bottom for anything tucked beneath the paper lining.

Halfway down the length of the drawer, reaching a pile of stays and corsets, he heard the door click open in the next room.

He froze, this time his ears not deceiving him. It couldn't be Valentine, the lady's maid. He had heard her tell the cook that she was going out. As for Lady Wexham, she never returned before midnight, and it was scarcely ten o'clock.

But the soft sound of footsteps like a lady's evening slippers on the floorboards was unmistakable. Rees snuffed out his candle even as his glance darted about the four corners of the dressing room, memorizing the placement of the furniture before being plunged into darkness.

His only hope was one of the armoires. He crossed the room in a few long strides and reached for the second one, the farthest one from the door to the bedroom, calculating it would be the least likely to be opened if the person entered the dressing room. He opened one of its doors, thankful for its well-oiled hinges. In another second, he had the other side opened and was crouching down, feeling for the bottom shelf. It was wide and deep, at least two feet in height. Shoving aside the clothes, he hunched into it, barely able to squeeze his six-foot frame into its confines.

Hearing further movement in the next room, he hugged the candle to his chest, stifling an exclamation as hot wax spilled onto his hand. Quickly, he shoved some of the garments over himself and drew the two doors closed from within. Would the person smell the scent of burning wax from a recently doused candle?

He wasn't able to latch the doors from where he lay on the bottom. The best he could do was grip the second door with his fingertips, praying no one would come into the dressing room or notice that one door was slightly ajar.

His spine pressed against the rear of the armoire, his knees were drawn almost to his chest, the toes of his shoes touched one end of the

armoire, the crown of his head the other. Closing his eyes, he strained to hear, praying he wouldn't be discovered.

Who could have come into the lady's bedroom? It couldn't be Lady Wexham herself. As for her maid, he had seen her leave the house as soon as her mistress departed in her carriage. A Frenchwoman, she was scornful of the other servants except for the French cook, treating the British ones as beneath her notice.

For a long time there was only silence in the stuffy space. Perspiration broke out on his forehead and neck. The scent of walnut mingled with rose and starch of whatever article of clothing he held against himself. He loosened his hold on the candle and rubbed the edge of the garment between thumb and forefinger to distract himself from his uncomfortable position. Silk.

In the scant week he'd been employed in the Countess of Wexham's household, he'd seen her wear a dozen different outfits, changing at least three times in a day. Morning gowns, riding habits, calling outfits, evening gowns. He compared her to his younger sister, Megan, who always looked pretty but who didn't own a fraction of the gowns of his employer. Megan's were simple cotton gowns, copied from a fashion magazine and made at home. But Megan lived in the country and never aspired to the heights of Lady Wexham.

Despite Rees's efforts to distract himself from his cramped confines, the minutes stretched out. He heard nothing more beyond the thick walnut panels of the armoire.

His feet grew numb, then his fingertips from the strain of holding the door in place. Drops of perspiration began to course down his temple and trickle into one eye. He dared not move to wipe it away. The air grew thick and stuffy. He wondered idly if a person could be asphyxiated inside a wardrobe.

He imaged the headlines: "Lady's Butler Found Dead in Her Walnut Armoire Among Her Petticoats."

Don't be so chickenhearted. It's no worse than sleeping in the hold of a ship. You survived enough years of that. Of course, he'd been

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more than a decade younger and a few pounds lighter when he'd been in His Majesty's navy.

Perhaps another maid had come in to turn down the bed and she'd be gone in a few minutes.

At the sound of the door to the dressing room opening, his body tensed anew, every sense on alert. A few footsteps followed by silence. The intruder must have stepped on the carpet. *Intruder?* Rees caught himself. *He* was the intruder.

A soft humming came through the crack in the door.

He knew that hum. He'd heard it before. Lady Wexham stood on the other side of the armoire's doors, just inches from where he lay crammed like a sausage in a bun.

What was she doing home at this hour? Perhaps she'd forgotten something and returned to fetch it?

It didn't make sense. Valentine was there to ensure that her mistress had everything she needed when she went out.

Or could it be that she was home for a reason that had nothing to do with her social life . . . but with something clandestine?

His heart began to pound as anticipation grew at the thought that perhaps this evening he'd uncover something tangible about Lady Wexham's loyalties. If he could prove she was a French spy, he'd be done with this cursed assignment.

The next instant he pictured the sly look of triumph on the senior clerk's face and realized he would get little credit for his discovery. His excitement faded, replaced by disgust at the depths his job had forced him to.

Playing a servant in a countess's household just so his superior at the Foreign Office, young Alistair Oglethorpe, could boast of the accomplishment to the foreign secretary.

"Tsk!"

His senses back on high alert, he strained to hear more. Lady Wexham sounded vexed.

Wishing he could peer through the crack, he remained as still as stone, not moving so much as an eyelid.

“Drat!”

What was she doing?

Then footfalls again and silence.

Had she left? He waited, still not daring to move. His neck developed a crick from the angle it was bent. His feet ached from lack of circulation, and he was forced to shift them a fraction.

What seemed an eternity but was probably only several minutes later, the sound of two female voices neared the wardrobe.

“I do beg your pardon for getting you out of bed, but I find I can’t manage these stays myself.”

“Of course not, my lady, with all the lacing down the back.”

It was one of the young housemaids with the countess. He still didn’t have all of their names straight. Was it Virginia or Sally?

“I’ll undo it for you in a thrice.”

“Valentine’s not here and I really didn’t want to disturb anyone else.”

“It’s no bother at all, my lady. I went to bed because I didn’t expect you home. But I’d a’ waited up if I’d known you’d be home this early.”

“Indeed you shouldn’t have, since there was no way for you to have known I couldn’t abide the crush at Princess Esterhazy’s.” There was wry amusement in Lady Wexham’s tone.

A few seconds later, the maid spoke again. “There you go, my lady.”

“Thank you,” the countess breathed out in obvious relief.

“Is there anything else you need, ma’am?”

“I hate to be a bother, but perhaps some tea. I have a bit of a headache. I daresay it’s this wretched fog. That’s really why I came back so early.”

The maid clucked her tongue. “I’m sorry you’re feeling poorly. You do look a mite pale. I’ll fetch you that tea straightaway.”

The maid’s voice came from different distances as if she were moving

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around. He imagined she was putting things away. As long as she didn't decide to put her mistress's gown in the wardrobe . . .

"I think one of those tisanes would be better for me. Perhaps a chamomile?"

"Very well, my lady. There you go, you'll probably feel a lot more comfortable in your nightgown."

"Oh yes, much, thank you, Virginia. You're a dear."

So it was Virginia who had responded to the lady's summons.

"Let me get your wrap."

"There is no need. I am going right to bed as soon as I wash my face and clean my teeth."

"When I come back, I'll brush out your hair, my lady."

"Thank you, but I can manage that myself tonight."

"Very well, I'll return in a moment."

Rees waited, expecting the door to the wardrobe to be thrust from his fingertips at any moment. But all he heard was water poured from the pitcher and then some splashing.

Again, he waited what seemed an age before he heard the maid's voice. "I've put a mug beside your bed." Her voice moved away from him. "Here, let me plait your hair."

Lady Wexham said through a yawn, "No, I shan't bother tonight."

"Oh, my lady, are you certain? It'll take me only a moment."

"That's quite all right. It's only for tonight."

"If you're certain, my lady." The maid sounded doubtful.

Rees pictured Lady Wexham's chestnut locks, which she usually wore coiled or braided above her head with shorter curls left loose around her face as was the fashion. How long would it fall? At least to her waist, he calculated. He forced such unseemly thoughts from his mind.

"I'm certain, Virginia." Lady Wexham's voice was firm. "I shall drink the tisane you were such a dear to prepare for me at this hour."

"Very well, my lady."

Suddenly Rees heard Virginia's voice right outside the wardrobe door. "Let me know if you should need anything else."

“Oh, don’t bother with those. Valentine will tidy everything in the morning.”

“I’ll just put this gown away, my lady.”

Rees’s heart thudded in his chest loudly enough to vibrate the door panels. Would she notice that the door was not latched?

“Just drape it across the chair for now. Valentine will have a fit if things are not done precisely to her liking. Now, you run along to your own bed. It will be light soon enough.”

“Very well, my lady. Good night then, if you are sure you don’t require anything more.”

“Nothing more tonight. Thank you.”

The voices faded from the room.

Rees counted a full minute in his head before allowing his body to relax the least bit.

Now, to find a way out of this room. There was only the door through Lady Wexham’s bedroom. How long would it take for her to drink her tea and fall asleep?

Clearly, he was in for a long wait yet. He daren’t tiptoe through her room until she was in a deep slumber.

Praying that chamomile tea had sedative properties, Rees eased his cramped feet and loosened his hold on the door. He flexed his fingers to restore feeling to them.

How long he lay curled up in the armoire, he had no idea. He must have dozed eventually. He awoke with a start, dreaming of something. He strove to remember, and it came back to him. He’d been in a coffin, everything completely black before his eyes.

He blinked, realizing just as in the dream, he couldn’t see a thing. Then he remembered where he was and why.

Hearing nothing, he pushed open one of the wardrobe doors a few inches. More darkness and stillness greeted him, so he pushed it a little farther.

Seeing no light from the other room, he dared to open the other door all the way and stretch his legs out of the wardrobe. Immediately pins and needles shot through his feet.

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He had to wait a moment for the sensation to ease. Then he set his candle on the floor and eased his body out of the confining shelf space the rest of the way.

He paused, cocking his ear. Still nothing. The countess must have fallen asleep.

He crouched on his hands and knees, rolling his head around to ease the kinks from his neck and shoulders. Then he attempted to put some semblance of order to the shelf he had lain in for some hours. What would Valentine think when she saw the rumpled clothing? Would she ask her mistress about it? He tried to fold the garments in the dark and pile them atop one another.

Then he stood, picking up his candle and its holder and placing them in his pocket. Pausing again to listen, he carefully closed the doors, quietly securing them.

His eyes, adjusted to the dark, made out the shadowy space of the open door to the bedroom. Feeling in front of him with his outstretched arms, he made his way there step by hesitant step. His feet made no sound on the carpet, but when he reached an area of floorboard right before the door, he slowed his pace even more.

Finally, he was through the door. Now, the faint sounds of even breathing came to him. The curtains around the wide, four-poster bed had been drawn, hiding its occupant.

Rees reached another carpet and was able to walk more easily until reaching floorboards again as he neared the door to the hallway. Two steps later, a loud creak sounded under his sole. It reverberated in the still night. He held his breath, not moving a muscle.

Lady Wexham didn't stir.

Rees shifted his weight to his other foot and slowly eased his first foot—heel, ball, toe—off the noisy floorboard, expecting another creak. “You mistake me, sir.”

Rees froze, turning halfway and peering at the shadowy bed.

Lady Wexham mumbled something in French, and he realized she was talking in her sleep. Her bedclothes rustled, and she sighed.

Rees waited, counting the seconds until deeming her fully asleep.

He reached the door with no further creaks and paused, his hand wrapped around the brass knob. He turned it a fraction. It gave easily. Completing the revolution, he pushed the door open a crack. A second later, he widened it just enough to ease his body through.

He was in the corridor. A faint light from a street lamp at the front of the house shone through the window at that end of the hallway. He shut the door behind him, taking extra care in turning the knob back to its original position. Just the faintest “click” signaled it was fully closed.

He allowed himself to rest a moment against the hallway wall and wipe his brow with his hand, not daring yet to grope for his handkerchief. Time enough when he reached his room below stairs.

The night had proved fruitless. He hadn't been able to complete his search of Lady Wexham's rooms, and who knew when he'd be given another opportunity. Valentine guarded her mistress's rooms like a jail keeper. Tonight had been unusual for them both to be out. If Lady Wexham had anything to hide, the likeliest place would be in her private quarters.

If the maid had opened the wardrobe this evening, how would he have explained his tall form huddled on the bottom shelf? His body shuddered.

He'd have to be more careful. He couldn't afford to be suspected by anyone of the household, least of all by its mistress. Everything depended on her believing him to be nothing but a butler.



Céline's headache was completely gone by morning. She blinked at the clock on her night table. Seven o'clock. She must indeed have fallen asleep right away to be up so early.

Yawning and stretching her arms above her head, she thought about the day ahead. Her best ideas came upon just awakening, so she burrowed back among the pillows and bolsters, reveling in that feeling of relaxation and well-being after a sound night's sleep.

Her lips twisted at the thought of the previous evening. First a long dinner, then a rout. For engagements which promised brilliant company and conversation over the table and in the drawing room, each had proved sadly flat. When was it that each London season had begun to blur into the preceding one?

Perhaps that's why she'd agreed to Roland de Fleury's request.

She punched at one of her pillows, not wanting to think about that, preferring instead to berate the English.

They tried so hard to surpass their rivals across the Channel in thought and manners, but all they succeeded in doing was transforming the dining table into a feeding trough, and as for conversation—she wrinkled her nose. *On-dits* and innuendos instead of stimulating discussion. What did they know of salons where not only the best and brightest convened to debate ideas, but public policy was even

shaped? Céline had grown up on her mother's tales of the brilliant company gathered in those Parisian parlors.

Holland House was the closest the British came to the French salons of Madame Necker, Madame de Roland, and Sophie de Condorcet. But it was all the way out in Kensington. Paris boasted its best literary and political salons in its heart. Even the Terror had not succeeded in closing down this avenue for the exchange of ideas.

She sat up in bed and tugged on the bell pull. It was likely time for another dinner party. It had been over a fortnight since her last, what with poor Mr. Rumford injuring himself and sending his nephew as replacement butler. She hadn't dared a dinner party with an untried butler.

In the intervening time, she'd scarcely heard any news worth passing along to Roland. Perhaps it was time to stir the pot and see if anything rose to the top. By gathering a select company of politicians, journalists, and artists around a dinner table, one never knew what one might hear.

Céline studied her nails, wondering whether to have Valentine buff them again. The soft peach color and shine of the oil rubbed into them was already fading, and the pretty almond shape could certainly use a bit of reshaping.

She brought a forefinger up to her lips and bit on the nail, her thoughts returning to that which she'd rather avoid.

Even after six months, she did not like—or feel at ease with—the task of collecting information. But the cause was a worthy one, as Roland had pointed out. Not only worthy but of the utmost urgency. France needed her help. Whatever happened to Napoleon, the royalists must not regain power.

Céline shuddered, picturing the fat, aging Comte de Provence living in exile at Hartwell House, just beyond London, waiting to return to France as Louis XVIII if ever Napoleon should fail.

With the abysmal news from the Russian front, that likelihood was growing stronger each month. She sighed, not liking to think what

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would happen to her beloved France in the aftermath of this wretched war. She longed for the day of peace, but at what price would it come?

She forced her finger from her mouth, looking in dismay at the damage she'd done. Valentine would scold and file her nails with enough vigor to draw blood.

Napoleon would *not* fail. He had always managed to overcome his adversaries, and he would do so again.

Céline threw aside the bedcovers just as her maid entered the chamber with a can of hot water in one hand and a pile of towels in the other.

“*Bonjour*. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Perfectly fine.” She yawned. “I haven’t slept so well in an age. Virginia fixed me a tisane.”

Valentine stopped before her, eyeing her critically. “You look as pale as bleached muslin.”

“*Merci, chérie*, for your fortifying words.” Even though Céline strove to speak English with her two French servants whenever anyone else was around, in private they usually lapsed into French.

Valentine ignored her sarcasm. “And the headache?”

Céline waved a hand. “Completely gone. But it was enough to make me ill disposed to stand the crush at Princess Esterhazy’s last night.”

Valentine harrumphed. “And your hair! *Quelle horreur!* Couldn’t that good-for-nothing maid manage a simple plait?”

Céline touched her loose locks. When she tried to run her hand through them, she understood Valentine’s horror. “I sent her to bed. The poor girl had been asleep when I rang for her—and I only did so because I couldn’t manage my stays. My head was certainly not up to having someone pull a hairbrush through it,” she ended with a significant look at her maid.

Valentine appraised her a few seconds more, *tsk-tsking* before she was satisfied that Céline was not suffering from a worse ailment than a head of tangled hair. “*Bien*. I will pour this water. Sally is bringing your *chocolat* and *croissant*. I hope that will do something for your looks.”

“Am I that washed out?” Céline walked to the dressing table in the

next room and peered into the mirror. “Oh, my.” Her hair did indeed look a fright.

Valentine poured steaming water into her pitcher and mixed it with cold. “*Pardonnez-moi* that I was not here when you came in. If I’d known you’d return so early, I, too, would have come back.”

“How were you expected to know?” Céline leaned over the porcelain basin, lathering her hands and face with the lavender-scented soap and then rinsing them off. She grabbed up a towel and patted them dry. “Pray, how was your evening?”

Valentine paused from shaking out Céline’s gown and gave a Gallic shrug. “Bah! The usual. Those English, they are so *bêtes!*”

Céline laughed. “Stupid only in that they don’t appreciate your French charm?”

Her maid picked up her garments from the chair where Virginia had laid them. “What can one expect from a land so drenched in fog? Where people eat roast mutton and boiled potatoes without a hint of herbs or wine?” She examined the overskirt of the lemon-yellow gown for any stains or rips.

“Well, you cannot complain in this household. Gaspard is an excellent Provençal cook.”

Valentine checked the chiffon slip. “If one can overlook his tantrums, then, yes, his cooking is worth it.” She frowned at a stain. “You spilled something on this.”

Céline glanced over the towel. “Likely champagne. That bumbling fool Orrington bumped into me before dinner. I think he was already foxed long before he arrived.”

Valentine sniffed her displeasure and set the gown aside. She picked up the silk petticoat and muslin shift from the chair and slung them over her arm.

Céline turned back to her washstand and attempted to run a hand through her hair again. What a tangled thicket. Hopefully, she wouldn’t end with another headache brought on by Valentine’s comb and brush.

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Her hair fell to her waist, and sometimes she was tempted to hack it all off like Lady Caroline Lamb. Valentine would have a fit.

“*C’est quoi cette saloperie?*”

She turned at her maid’s exclamation of outrage. “What’s the matter now? Have you discovered my shoes to be soiled or my tippet to have lost some feathers?”

Valentine was kneeling before the lower shelf of one of the armoires. Céline frowned. “What is it?”

An unintelligible sound issued from the abigail’s throat as she gestured at the rumpled mound of garments spilling out onto the floor.

“Don’t glare at me. I haven’t been rummaging about in there! I know better than to do any such thing.”

“Then it must have been that lazy, good-for-nothing Virginie. I knew I couldn’t trust her to take my place for one evening.”

“I assure you, my dear, poor Virginia had nothing to do with it. I dismissed her as soon as she’d helped me undress and brought me a tisane. I know how particular you are about my clothes, so I told her you would see to everything on the morrow.”

The news did not allay Valentine’s ire. She began pulling out the garments one by one, muttering Gallic imprecations. “Then who made such a mess of your gowns?” Angry sounds issued from between her teeth as she began refolding the gowns. “Do you think I would leave things in such a state? I shall have to iron these anew. Ohh!”

Céline turned at the sudden exclamation. “What is it now?”

Valentine’s mouth a thin, hard line, she said nothing but marched to where Céline sat and thrust a pale blue satin gown under her nose.

Céline stared at the blotch of hardened wax the size of a button on the bodice. “Oh, dear.” She took the gown from her maid. “What a pity. Do you think it will come out?”

“It is ruined.” Valentine’s chin trembled with ire. “*C’est abominable.*” Once again, a string of French imprecations followed, among them how one couldn’t trust this household of English pigs.

She narrowed her eyes at Céline. “I will find who was responsible, and they will pay!”

“I wish you luck, since the maids know enough to leave my things alone. They go in too much fear of you, *ma chérie*, to risk your displeasure.”

Valentine said no more, her back rigid as she put things back to order. Céline returned to her bed and picked up a writing tablet and pencil to begin composing a guest list.

A few moments later, Sally, the other housemaid, entered with Céline’s breakfast tray.

“Thank you. It looks delicious.” Céline pulled the tray toward her and unfolded the napkin, realizing how hungry she was since she had scarcely enjoyed her dinner last evening.

She pulled apart a croissant and inhaled its buttery fragrance. “Nothing like the French to produce a pastry that melts in the mouth.” Spooning a small dollop of marmalade onto the piece of croissant, she anticipated the first bite. “At least the British know how to make jam.” She smiled at the young maid.

The girl smiled back at her. “That they do.”

“I’m glad you brought me my tray and not Virginia.”

Sally stopped in the act of plumping a pillow. “Why is that, my lady?”

“Valentine is quite cross with her—without cause, please assure her.”

The young maid’s eyes widened with worry. “Oh no. What did she do?”

“Nothing at all. Valentine is likely just jealous that I had to ring for Virginia last night when I returned early. Anyway, it’s nothing for her to worry herself about. Just tell her to stay out of Valentine’s way for a few hours.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll be sure to warn her.” Sally returned to her task, her tone still betraying concern.

Céline poured out a cup of steaming hot chocolate from the silver

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pot and unfolded the edition of the *Morning Post*. No earth-shattering news on the front page. “Speaker Addresses Committee in Opposition of Catholic Relief Bill”; “Ackermann’s Repository Illuminated by Gas Light.” Hmm. At least the prints would be more visible. She would judge for herself at Wednesday’s literary reception. She wondered whether the poor émigrés employed in the back room painting screens and flower stands would benefit from this new lighting.

Céline continued perusing the headlines and skimming through the articles that interested her. “Sense and Sensibility: Princess Charlotte Ignores Father’s Advice and Visits Her Mother after Grandmother’s Funeral.”

Céline’s lips curved into a smile at the revised account of the crown princess’s visit to her mother despite the Regent’s estrangement from his wife. Only a few days ago, the *Morning Chronicle* had published an account of Princess Charlotte throwing herself upon her father’s chest in gratitude for allowing her to attend her maternal grandmother’s funeral.

Who knew what to believe in the newspapers? One paper was Tory, the other Whig, the one defending the Prince Regent, the other decrying all his excesses.

Her smile grew at the next story. “Russian Cossack Gives Riding Exhibition in Hyde Park.” She read the article of the visiting military hero performing stunts in his baggy trousers, red tunic, and fleece hat, his shashka at his side, his musket slung on his back.

Despite the amusing account of the man’s skill and bravado, a wave of sadness passed over Céline at the thought of how many brave young Frenchmen had so recently perished in the forests and fields between Moscow and Minsk. How many at the hands of this one Cossack?

All the more reason she must help her countrymen.

Céline laid aside the newspaper and returned to thoughts of a dinner party. Parliament was in session. By now, everyone who was anyone in politics and foreign affairs was in town.

She sipped her chocolate, ticking names off in her head. Yes, Cas-

tlereagh and Lady C., Lord Wellesley—perhaps she'd learn something of his brother on the Peninsula. Would he bring Lady Hyacinthe? She was scorned by all, but at least Céline could speak French with her. Poor woman, if she had lived in France, she would have been accepted everywhere. Even though Wellesley had finally married her, the *ton* still snubbed her because she was a former actress at the Palais Royale. Of course, it didn't help that she didn't make the effort to learn English.

Planning successful dinner parties took the skill of an officer laying out a battle strategy.

Sighing, Céline moved aside the tray and rose. "Valentine, set out my habit." She would go for a ride in the park then go over the dinner preparations with her housekeeper and butler at their morning meeting. Would her new butler be up to a dinner party? He'd scarcely been here a week.

"Are you sure you are well enough?"

Céline laughed aside her maid's concern.

"All that bouncing around in a saddle could bring on the headache again."

"Nonsense. The fresh air will dissipate any lingering effects of that stuffy drawing room last night."

Valentine sniffed and flounced back to the dressing room.