

The Lure of the Moonflower: A Pink Carnation Novel (Pink Carnation series Book 12)

By Lauren Willig

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Portugal, December 1807. Jack Reid, the British agent known as the Moonflower (formerly the French agent known as the Moonflower), has been stationed in Portugal and is awaiting his new contact. He does not expect to be paired with a woman—especially not the legendary Pink Carnation.

All of Portugal believes that the royal family departed for Brazil just before the French troops marched into Lisbon. Only the English government knows that mad seventy-three-year-old Queen Maria was spirited away by a group of loyalists determined to rally a resistance. But as the French garrison scours the countryside, it's only a matter of time before she's found and taken.

It's up to Jane to find her first and ensure her safety. But she has no knowledge of Portugal or the language. Though she is loath to admit it, she needs the Moonflower. Operating alone has taught her to respect her own limitations. But she knows better than to show weakness around the Moonflower—an agent with a reputation for brilliance, a tendency toward insubordination, and a history of going rogue.

READERS GUIDE INCLUDED

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the Novels of Lauren Willig

“Willig’s series gets better with each addition.”—*Booklist*

“Jane Austen for the modern girl.”—*New York Times* Bestselling Author Christina Dodd

“This genre-bending read…has it all: romance, mystery, and adventure. Pure fun!”—*New York Times* Bestselling Author Meg Cabot

"Fans can rejoice in finding the outstanding features they’ve come to count on: intriguing historical details, double-crossing deceptions, complex characters, and plenty of romance.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

About the Author
Lauren Willig is the award winning, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Pink Carnation novels, set in the Napoleonic Era, as well as other historical novels, including *The Ashford Affair* and *That Summer*. She received a graduate degree in English history from Harvard University and a J.D. from Harvard Law School, though she now writes full-time. Willig Lives in New York City.

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Prologue

Sussex, 2005

Reader, I married him.

Or, rather, I was in the process of marrying him, which is a much more complicated affair. Jane Eyre didn’t have to plan a wedding involving three transcontinental bridesmaids, two dysfunctional families, and one slightly battered stately home.

Of course, she did have to deal with that wife in the attic, so there you go.

There might occasionally be bats in Colin’s belfry, but there were no wives in his attic. I’d checked.

“Hey! Ellie!” My little sister drifted into the drawing room, where I was busily and profanely engaged in tying bows on the chairs that had been set up for the reception. Silk ribbon, I was learning, might be attractive, but it was also more slippery than a French spy in a Crisco factory. “Delivery for you! Is that supposed to look that way?”

“It’s a postmodern take on the classic bow,” I said, with as much dignity as I could muster. “Think . . . Foucault’s bow.”

Jillian cocked a hip. “Or you could just call it lopsided.”

“O, ye of little faith.” I abandoned my attempts at Martha Stewartry. The guests wouldn’t care if there were bows or not. They just wanted us to be happy. And an open bar. “You said there was a delivery? Please tell me it’s the port-a-loos.”

“There’s a perfectly good bathroom down the hall. If you want to, you know, wash off that thing.” Jillian gestured at the tectonic layers of mud that were beginning to crack on my face.

No, I hadn’t fallen in the garden. I had fallen prey to my oldest friend, Pammy, and her Big Box of Beauty Aids. Which appeared to involve highly priced purple-tinted garden mud.

“Not for me. For the reception,” I said patiently. Well, sort of patiently. My mud mask was beginning to itch.

I was pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to itch.

“Not unless it’s one for midgets,” said Jillian.

“Cutlery? A tent?” I followed Jillian down the hall, ticking off items, and rather wishing we’d thought to invest in item number one: a wedding planner.

’Twas the afternoon before my wedding, and all through Selwick Hall nothing was where it was supposed to be, not one thing at all. We had chosen to be married in Colin’s not-so-stately home, on the theory that if you pour enough champagne, no one will notice the cracks in the plaster or the faded bits in the upholstery. We were having the ceremony in the drawing room and the reception on the grounds, which had sounded romantic in theory.

Like many things that sounded romantic in theory, it was proving more difficult in fact. Right now I was awaiting the delivery of a tent, several cartloads of china, folding chairs, half a dozen port-a-loos, and Colin’s best man, who had inexplicably failed to arrive, although his explanation through the crackling cell phone connection had hinted at obstacles including pile-ups on the A23, an overturned lorry just out of London, and the sheeted dead rising and gibbering in the streets.

Translation: he’d overslept and was just now leaving.

My future mother-in-law, on the other hand, had arrived safe and sound, which just went to show that there were times when the universe didn’t have its priorities straight.

With twenty-four hours left to go, I was beginning to wonder whether I shouldn’t have taken my mother’s advice and just had the wedding in New York.

But it was Selwick Hall that had kind of, sort of brought us together. Or at least given us the opportunity to find each other, depending on how you preferred to look at it.

I hadn’t come to England for love. I’d crossed the pond in search of a spy. And if that makes me sound like an extra from a James Bond movie, it couldn’t be further from the truth. The spy I was looking for was long since out of commission. My hunting grounds weren’t grotty clubs or the glass-walled lair of a villain with a taste for seventies-style furnishings, but the archives of the British Library and the Public Records Office in Kew; my weapons, a few heavily underlined secondary sources and ARCHON, which might sound like the sort of acronym chosen by a criminal cartel, but was really the electronic search engine for manuscript sources in the UK. Plug in a name and—voilà!—it would locate that person’s papers. Letters, diaries, random ramblings, you name it.

There was one slight problem: To find the papers, you needed a name. Spies tend not to use their real names.

Unless they're Bond, James Bond. I'd always wondered why, with such a public profile, no one had succeeded in bumping him off between missions.

The Pink Carnation hadn't made the same mistake. The spy who gave the French Ministry of Police headaches, who had caused Bonaparte to gnash his molars into early extraction, didn't go by his real name. He was everywhere and nowhere, a pastel shadow in the night. Oh, people had speculated about the Carnation's identity. Some argued that he wasn't even English, but a Frenchman, cunningly pretending to be an Englishman playing a Frenchman. And if that isn't enough to make you want to reach for a gin and tonic, I don't know what is.

But I had one lead. Sort of. When you're desperate, "sort of" starts looking pretty good. According to Carnation lore, the Carnation had his start in the League of the Purple Gentian, a spy unmasked fairly early in the game as one Lord Richard Selwick, younger son of the Marquess of Uppington.

So I'd done what any desperate grad student would do: I'd written to all the remaining descendants of Lord Richard Selwick, asking, pretty please, if anyone might happen to have any family papers lurking about in the attic or under a bed or tucked away among the lining of their sock drawers.

Did I mention that Colin just happened to be a descendant of that long-ago Lord Richard?

I found documents. I found love. I found the identity of the Pink Carnation. I didn't quite find my doctorate, but that was another story. It was all ribbons and roses and happily-ever-afters, or at least it would be as long as the caterers catered, my mother didn't kill my future mother-in-law before the ceremony, and all the bits and pieces made their way into place by roughly ten a.m. tomorrow.

I say ten a.m. because we were doing this the traditional way, morning suits and all. Everyone would be blotto by noon and hungover by sunset, but that seemed a small price to pay for the sight of Colin in a morning suit.

And yes, I may have watched *Four Weddings and a Funeral* one too many times.

"Delivery?" I reminded Jillian.

"It's a box," said Jillian informatively. "I signed for it for you."

"Did it clink?" I asked plaintively. Booze. Booze would be good. Wedding guests would forgive lopsided bows and a missing best man as long as there was enough booze.

"See for yourself." The deliverymen, in the way of deliverymen, had dropped the box smack in the middle of the hall, where it was currently impersonating a large speed bump.

Just what our wedding was missing: a do-it-yourself obstacle course.

Although, come to think of it . . .

I abandoned that tempting thought. Survival of the fittest is a principle best not applied to wedding guests. The person most likely to wipe out on the box was me, after a few gin and tonics too many at our rehearsal dinner.

I was not looking forward to the rehearsal dinner, that intimate occasion where one's nearest and dearest can shower blessings on the impending nuptials. The big problem was that Colin's nearest . . . Let's just say they weren't always dearest. There was enough bad blood there to give a vampire indigestion.

It was tough enough for Colin that his mother had run off with a younger man, a man only a decade older than Colin. Worse that she had done so while his father was dying, slowly and painfully, of cancer. But the real kicker? The younger man was Colin's own cousin.

It got even more fun when you factored in Colin's sister joining with his mother and stepfather in a coup against Colin the previous year, when they'd used the combined voting power of their shares in Selwick Hall to saddle Colin with a film company on the grounds of the Hall.

Never mind that Colin was the one who actually, you know, lived there.

For the most part, it had all been smoothed over. Colin and his sister were speaking again—just. And Colin and his stepfather had reached a tentative peace. As for Colin and his mother . . . that relationship made no more sense to me than it ever had.

The one saving grace in the mix—other than my groom himself, of course—was Colin's aunt, Arabella Selwick-Alderly. I wasn't sure whether it was her natural air of quiet dignity or the fact that she knew where all the bodies were buried, but either way, she was very effective at exerting a calming influence over feuding Selwicks.

I looked down at the box in the middle of the hall. It wasn't a box so much as a trunk, the old-fashioned kind with a domed lid and brass bands designed to hold it together through squall, shipwreck, and clumsy customs officials. It looked as though it had been sent direct from Sir Arthur Wellesley, from his headquarters in Lisbon.

"Maybe it's a wedding present?" said Jillian dubiously.

I looked from Jillian to the trunk, a smile breaking across my face. "That's exactly what it is."

Mrs. Selwick-Alderly had already given us a wedding present, and a rather nice one: a Georgian tea set, made of the sort of silver that bent the wrist when you tried to lift it. But there was no one else this could be from.

Unless the Duke of Wellington really had sent his campaign trunk from beyond the grave.

Ignoring the flaking mud on my face, I knelt down before the trunk. The box looked like it had been through several wars. The boards were warped with age and the elements; the brass tacks were crooked in parts and missing in others. But it had held together. Rather like the Selwick family.

It was also quite firmly locked. Again like the Selwick family.

I sat back on my haunches. "Was there a note? A key?"

Jillian held up her hands, palms up. "Don't look at me. I'm just the messenger."

"Eloise?" I could hear the slap of my mother's Ferragamo pumps in the passage from the kitchen to the hall. Enter Mother, stage right, looking harried. "There's a circus tent going up in your backyard."

Poor Mom. She would have been much happier with a wedding at the Cosmopolitan Club, where all the arrangements simply happened, and no one had to figure out the placement of tents. My family has never gone in for camping. Or, for that matter, circuses.

I tried to sound reassuring. "That's the marquee, Mom. It's where we're having the reception."

My mother looked unconvinced. “Are you sure they didn’t rip off Ringling Brothers?”

“I don’t think they have Ringling Brothers here.”

My mother cast a dark glance over her shoulder. “Not anymore, they don’t.”

“Send in the clowns . . . ,” sang Jillian, not quite sotto voce. “Don’t bother. They’re here.”

I glowered at my sister over the domed lid of the Creepy Old Trunk. “Funny. Don’t you have a senior essay to write or something?”

“Not until next month.” Jillian smiled beatifically at me. “Until then, I’m all yours.”

“Lucky me,” I said dourly. Which, of course, really translated to *I love you*. It was, as Jillian would say, the way we rolled. We snarked because we loved. “Have I mentioned that I’m really glad you’re here?”

“I know,” said Jillian serenely. She gave me a one-armed hug that somehow managed to be equal parts comfort and condescension, as only a college senior knows how. “Nervous?”

“I can’t imagine why.” Drawing up a Selwick seating chart was like navigating a field full of land mines. And we all know how well that usually goes. Before the evening was over, someone was going to blow.

I just hoped it wouldn’t be me.

“Oy,” said someone from the doorway. His voice was rather muffled by the large, rectangular object on a dolly in front of him. “Where’d you want this?”

“Not in the house,” I said quickly. “If you just take the path around the back to the garden, and make a right past the tent . . .”

“I’ll show him,” said my mother, with her best martyr look. “You can go . . .” She gestured wordlessly at my face.

“Make yourself look a little less like Barney?” Jillian suggested.

“You used to love Barney,” said my mother reprovingly, and shooed the port-a-loo guys out the door.

“I was three,” said Jillian, to nobody in particular.

“Yup. I’m saving that for *your* wedding.”

“Hmm,” said Jillian, with a look of deep speculation that did not bode well for tomorrow’s maid-of-honor speech. “Where’s Colin?”

“Relative wrangling.” I’ll say this for the Selwicks: they’d all come out of the woodwork for our wedding, flying in from the far corners of the Earth, or stumbling in from the pub down the road, depending. There was a large Canadian delegation, as well as a bunch fresh off the plane from the UAE; there were Posies and Pollys and Sallys and enough hyphenated last names to make writing out place cards an exercise in wrist strain. The Posies and Pollys and Sallys were all very well. The main concern was that Colin not be left alone with his mother or stepfather for more than five minutes. I couldn’t even check in with him, since he’d left his cell phone with me, in case the tent people or the caterers called. “Oh, Lord. Would you—”

"On it," said Jillian, and whisked out the door in search of her future brother-in-law. Pity the Selwick who got in her way.

There were all sorts of useful things I could be doing: tying bows on favors, chipping off my mud mask, promoting world peace, but instead I knelt beside the trunk.

The note was there, half stuck beneath the trunk, the creamy stationery grimed. I wrestled the envelope out from under the edge.

Eloise, it said, in letters that had never seen a ballpoint pen. The handwriting was as elegant as ever, but, I noticed with a pang, less certain than I had seen it before. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly had seemed ageless when I first met her, but she wasn't ageless, any more than the rest of us, and the last two years had taken their toll.

With hands that weren't entirely steady, I slid the note from the envelope.

My dear Eloise,

As you have no doubt guessed, this trunk was once the property of Miss Jane Wooliston. It traveled with her from Shropshire to Paris, from Paris to Venice, and from Venice to Lisbon.

Miss Jane Wooliston. I lowered the note, looking at the trunk with something like awe. I had spent the past three years tracing the steps of the spy known as the Pink Carnation, following her from Shropshire to France, from France to Ireland, from Ireland to England. But in all of that, I had never encountered anything that had belonged directly to her.

This was her trunk. She had used it in her travels, packed it with her disguises. It might, I thought with rising excitement, hold secret compartments, letters, clothing, clues to the Carnation's personality.

And more than that. I had hit a wall in my research back in the fall. I could trace the Carnation to Sussex in 1805—but no further. In the spring of 1805, she had dissolved her league and gone deep undercover. So deep that none of the avenues I had explored had yielded any trace.

I had my guesses, of course. There were activities in Venice in the summer of 1807 that smacked of the Carnation's style, especially as the episode also involved the French spy known as the Gardener, the Carnation's colleague and nemesis. But I didn't speak any Italian. I could have hired someone to go to the relevant archives for me, but . . .

By then, grad school and I had already parted ways.

Like all breakups, it gave me a pang to think of it. I knew intellectually that I'd made the right choice in jettisoning my academic career, but it was still hard not to feel nostalgic sometimes. I missed it. I didn't want to go back—and I certainly didn't want to be grading student papers—but I missed it all the same.

It was Colin who had suggested that I take my notes and turn them into something else entirely, spinning the Pink Carnation's story from truth to fiction. So I'd dropped my footnotes into the garbage and spent a fevered seven months banging out the first episode in the Pink Carnation's career, closing my eyes in the midst of a Cambridge winter and trying to imagine myself back in France in the spring in 1803, when a young Jane Wooliston and her cousin, Amy Balcourt, had arrived in France.

Oh, yes, and trying to plan my wedding.

Between wedding and writing, finding out what had happened to the Carnation after that break in 1805 had

drifted into the background.

Until now.

I returned to Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's note, but, maddeningly, she danced away from the main point.

The trunk was abandoned in Portugal in late 1807, at which point it disappeared from view for the better part of two centuries. Why it was abandoned and how it came into my possession are both tales for another day.

I could practically hear Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's voice as I read, and see that spark of mischief in her eyes. As with all good fairy godmothers, one always had the sense that there was one last trick she was holding in reserve.

As long as she didn't turn us all into mice, I was good with that.

It seems only fitting that the trunk end its journeys at Selwick Hall. I give it into your care, trusting that you shall do your utmost to preserve the trunk and the treasures it contains.

I remain, affectionately, Arabella Selwick-Alderly

There was nothing at all about a key. For that matter, I realized, swiping at the cracking mud on my face, although there was the usual brass plate on the front, there was no keyhole. It was as blank as a building without windows.

The trunk was like the Pink Carnation herself, a puzzle.

Like other trunks of its type, brass tacks marched in long lines down the sides and across the lid. Ordinarily they might have been used to spell out a monogram, but here there was none, just the workmanlike lines of tacks.

Two of which appeared to protrude slightly more than the others.

It would, I thought, be very like the Carnation to hide the solution in plain sight, something so simple that one wouldn't expect it to be right. I reached out to press the tacks. . . .

And my jeans began vibrating.

No, no curse had been placed on the trunk. After my first nervous jump, I realized that it was Colin's phone buzzing in my pocket. I wriggled it out of the pocket of my jeans, hoping fervently that it wasn't the caterers with yet another last-minute polenta-related emergency. If it was, I might just have to go Napoleonic on someone's nether regions. In translation: I would be politely dismayed in a rather chilly tone.

What can I say? I study the early nineteenth century, not the Middle Ages. Or rather, I had studied the early nineteenth century.

The display on the front said, RESTRICTED. Not the caterers, then.

"Hello?" I said quickly.

The voice on the other end said something staticky and incomprehensible.

“Hello?” I said again, the mud cracking around my mouth as I raised my voice. “Hello?”

Through the buzz, I heard only, “—Selwick.”

“This is his fiancée,” I said. “May I take a message?”

Wherever this guy was calling from, it sounded like he was underwater in a Harry Houdini cage. “Tell him . . . bring the box.”

“Is this Nick?” No connection was that bad by accident. And Colin’s best man was the prank-pulling kind. I knew only about half of what had gone on when they were at Oxford, and that half was more than enough. “Because if it is—”

A raspy voice interrupted me, sounding like a combination of a chronic cold and nails on sandpaper. “Tonight. Two o’clock. At the old abbey.”

Donwell Abbey, presumably. The ruins lay in the backyard of the current manor house, next door to Colin’s estate. If a twenty-minute drive over a bumpy road or an even longer walk along the more direct footpath counted as next door.

Yep, this was right up Nick’s alley. He’d just love to dress himself up as the Phantom Monk of Donwell Abbey, complete with hooded robe and phosphorescent paint, and drag Colin out at two in the morning on the night before his wedding. The real question was whether he could refrain from snickering long enough to remember to shout, “Boo!”

“Not funny.” I rolled my eyes. “If you’re at the services wasting time making prank calls—”

“It’s not Nick!” The voice on the other end forgot to rasp for a moment. It sounded vaguely familiar, but it definitely wasn’t Nick. Dropping back into film-noir mode, the voice went on. “Tell Selwick to follow instructions—or else. . . .”

“Or else?” I should have let it go to voice mail. But underneath my annoyance I could feel a little prickle of unease. There was something seriously disturbed about that voice. “Look, I’m going to—”

“Eloise?” It was a different voice, crackly with static and tension. A voice I knew. “Eloise—”

“Mrs. Selwick-Alderly?” She’d told me to call her Aunt Arabella, as Colin did, but in the tension of the moment, I forgot. “What on—”

But she was gone. “Tell him. Bring the box.”

And the line went dead.

Chapter One

Lisbon, 1807

The mood in Rossio Square was nasty.

The agent known as the Moonflower blended into the crowd, just one anonymous man among many, just

another sullen face beneath the brim of a hat pulled down low against the December rain. The crowd grumbled and shifted as the Portuguese royal standard made its slow descent from the pinnacle of São Jorge Castle, but the six thousand French soldiers massed in the square put an effective stop to louder expressions of discontent. In the windows of the tall houses that framed the square, the Moonflower could see curtains twitch, as hostile eyes looked down on the display put on by the conqueror.

The French claimed to come as liberators, but the liberated didn't seem any too happy about it.

As the royal standard disappeared from view and the tricolor rose triumphant above the square, the Moonflower heard a woman sob, and a man mutter something rather uncomplimentary about his new French overlords.

The Moonflower might have stayed to listen—listening, after all, was his job—but he had another task today.

He was here to meet his new contact.

That was all he had been told: Proceed to Rossio Square and await further instructions. He would know his contact by the code phrase "The eagle nests only once."

Who in the hell came up with these lines?

Once, just once, he would appreciate a phrase that didn't involve dogs barking at midnight or doves flying by day.

The message had given no hint as to the new agent's identity; it never did. Names were dangerous in their line of work.

The Moonflower had gone by many names in his twenty-seven years.

Jaisal, his mother had called him, when she had called him anything at all. The French had called him Moonflower, just one of their many flower-named spies, a web of agents stretching from Madras to Calcutta, from London to Lyons. He'd counted himself lucky; he might as easily have been the Hydrangea. Moonflower, at least, had a certain ring to it. In Lisbon he was Alarico, a wastrel who tossed dice by the waterfront; in the Portuguese provinces he went by Rodrigo—Rodrigo the seller of baubles and trader of horses.

His father's people knew him as Jack. Jack Reid, black sheep, turncoat, and renegade.

Jack turned up the collar of his jacket, surveying the scene, keeping an eye out for likely faces.

Might it be the dangerous-looking bravo with the knife he was using to pick his teeth?

No. He looked too much like a spy to be a spy. In Jack's line of work, anonymity was key. Smoldering machismo and resentment tended to attract unwanted attention.

There was a great deal of smoldering in the crowd. Since the French had marched into Lisbon, two weeks ago, with a ragtag force that could scarcely have conquered a missionary society, they had proceeded to make themselves unpleasant, requisitioning houses, looting stores, demanding free drinks.

The people of Lisbon simmered and stewed. This lowering of the standard, this public exhibition of dominance, was all that was needed to place torch to tinder. Jack wouldn't be surprised if there were riots before the day was out.

Riots, yes. Rebellion, no. For rebellion one needed not just a cause, but a leader, and that was exactly what they didn't have right now. The Portuguese court had hopped on board the remaining ships of their fleet and scurried off to the Americas, well out of the way of danger, leaving their people to suffer the indignities of invasion.

Not that it was any of his business. Jack didn't get into the rights and wrongs of it all, not these days. Not anymore. He was a hired gun, and it just so happened that the Brits paid, if not better than the French, at least more reliably.

There was a cluster of French officers in the square, standing behind General Junot. They did go in for flashy uniforms, these imperial officers. Flashy uniforms and even flashier women. The richly dressed women hanging off the arms of the officers were earning dark stares from the members of the crowd, stares and mutterings.

Some were local girls, making up to the conqueror. Others were undoubtedly French imports, like the woman who stood to the far left of the huddled group, her dark hair a mass of bunched curls beneath the brim of a bonnet from which pale purple feathers molted with carefree abandon. Her clothes were all that was currently à la mode in Paris, her pelisse elaborately frogged, the fingers of her gloves crammed with rings.

A well-paid courtesan, at the top of her trade.

But there was something about her that caught Jack's eye. It wasn't the flashing rings. He'd seen far grander jewels in his time. No. It was the aura of stillness about her. She stood with an easy elegance of carriage at odds with all her frills and fripperies, and it seemed that the nervous energy of the crowd eddied and ebbed around her without touching her in the slightest.

Her features had the classical elegance that was all the rage. High cheekbones. Porcelain pale skin, tinted delicately pink at the cheeks. Jack had been around enough to know that it wouldn't take long for the ravages of her trade to begin to show. Those clear eyes would become shadowed; that pale skin would be replaced with white lead and other cosmetics in a desperate simulacrum of youth, a frantic attempt to catch and hold the affections of first one man and then another, until there was nothing left but the bottle—or the river.

Better, thought Jack grimly, to be a washerwoman or a fishwife, a tavern keeper or a maid. Those occupations might be hell on the hands, but the other was hell on the heart.

Not that it was any of his lookout.

The courtesan's eyes met Jack's across the crowd. Met and held. Ridiculous, of course. There was a square full of people between them, and he was just another rough rustic in a shapeless brown jacket.

But he could have sworn, for that moment, she was looking fully at him. Looking and sizing him up.

For what? He was hardly a likely protector for a French courtesan.

Go away, princess, Jack thought. *There's nothing here for you.*

The French might hold Portugal, but not for long. Rumors were spinning through the crowd. The British navy was sending ships. . . . There were British spies throughout Lisbon. . . . The royal family were returning to raise their army. . . . There were troops massing on the Northern frontier. . . . Rumor upon rumor, but who knew what might have a breath of truth?

It would all go into Jack's report. Provided he ever found his bloody contact, who appeared to be late. The review was almost over, and still, no one had approached him.

That did not bode well.

The soldiers began to filter out of the square, marching beneath the baroque splendor of the Arco da Bandeira, the cheerful yellow of the facade in stark contrast to the bleak weather and even bleaker mood of the populace.

"Pig!" a woman hissed, and tossed a stone.

"Portugal forever!" rose another voice from the crowd.

The officers milled uneasily, looking to their leader. Junot turned, speaking urgently to the man at his side, one of the members of the Portuguese Regency Council, the nominal government that had replaced the Queen and Regent.

A bottle shattered against the tiles, among the feet of the departing soldiers, spraying glass.

"Death to the French!" shouted one bold soul, and then another took it up, and another.

Projectiles were hailing down from every direction, stones and bottles and whole cobbles pried from the street. Abuse rattled down with the stones. The French troops ducked and milled, looking anxiously to their leader, who appeared to be in the middle of a fight with the regency council, none of whom could agree with one another, much less anyone else.

And then, the sound that could turn a riot into a massacre: the crack of an old-fashioned musket, shot right into the ranks of French soldiers.

It was, Jack judged, not a healthy time to stay in the square.

Any moment now, the French were going to start firing back, and Jack didn't want to be in the middle of it. If his contact hadn't appeared by now, he wasn't coming. One thing Jack had learned after years in the game: saving one's own skin came first.

He slipped off through the heaving, shouting crowd. The various approaches to the square were already crammed with people: people surging forward, people fleeing, people fainting, people shouting, mothers grabbing their children out of the way, fishwives scrabbling at the cobbles, old men running for ancient weapons, French émigrés and sympathizers running for their lives as the crowd hurled abuse and missiles at the collaborators. Rioters were fighting hand-to-hand with French soldiers; Junot's face was red with anger as he shouted, trying to be heard above the square. A runner was making for the French barracks, undoubtedly to call up reinforcements.

Jack ducked sideways, down the Rua Áurea.

A hand grabbed at his arm. Jack automatically dodged out of the way. This wasn't his fight. And then a musical voice said, "Wait!"

It was the courtesan—the courtesan he had noticed across the square, her curls flying, her bonnet askew.

"Please," she said, and she spoke in French, a cultured, aristocratic French that caught the attention of the mob around them, made them stop and stare and growl low in their throats. "I need an escort back to my

lodgings."

He'd say she did. Her voice was already attracting unwanted attention.

But Jack didn't do rescues of maidens, fair or fallen. Don't get involved—that was the only way to survive. Even when they had a figure like a statue of Aphrodite and lips painted a luscious pink.

"Sorry, princess," he drawled, his own French heavily accented, but serviceable. "I'm no one's lackey." He nodded towards the embattled French soldiers. "There's your escort."

"They can't even escort themselves." Her pose was appropriately beseeching, the epitome of ladylike desperation, but there was, even now, in the midst of all the tumult, that strange calm about her. It was the eyes, Jack realized. Cool. Assessing. She lifted those eyes to his in a calculated gesture of supplication, her gloved hands against the breast of his rough coat. "Please. You know that the eagle nests only once."

All around them, the hectic exodus continued. In the distance Jack could hear the ominous clatter of horses' hooves against the cobbles, signaling the arrival of the cavalry.

But Jack stood where he was, frozen in the middle of the street, locked in tableau with a French courtesan. And a very pretty tableau it was. Pretty, and completely for show.

Beneath the heavy tracing of kohl that lined her eyes and darkened her lashes, her gray eyes were shrewd, and more than a little bit amused.

She raised her brows, waiting for him, giving him the chance to speak first. It was a damnable tactic, and one Jack used himself with some frequency.

He didn't much appreciate being on the other end of it.

"The eagle," said Jack, his gaze traveling from the plunging depths of her décolletage to her painted face, "sometimes nests in uncommon strange places."

The woman didn't squirm or color. She said calmly, "The more remote the nest, the more secure the eggs."

"Puta!" taunted one of the crowd, jostling towards them.

The woman raised her voice, putting on a convincing display of arrogance tinged with fear. "I will pay for your escort. My colonel will reward you well for seeing me safely home."

"I'll see her—" shouted one man, and made a graphic hand gesture.

Loudly, in Portuguese, Jack said, "When coin is lying in the gutter, it would be foolishness not to take it, eh?" Under his breath, in French, he added, "Squeal."

Without waiting for a response, he scooped her up, over his shoulder. A ragged cheer rose up from their viewers, combined with some rather graphic suggestions. Jack waved his free hand, and then hastily had to clap it back over her bottom as she squirmed and bucked and squealed, putting on, he had to admit, an excellent show. That is, if she didn't unbalance them both.

"Easy there, princess," called Jack, with a wink for the crowd, and, with a hard hand on her bottom, hoisted her more securely over his shoulder.

Something banged into his collarbone, making him wince.

Not all flounces, then. He'd eat his hat if that wasn't a pistol tucked into her stays.

Who—or what—in the devil was she?

"Where to?" he asked beneath his breath, staggering just a little. The woman was slim, but she was nearly as tall as he was, and burdened with a superfluity of flounces and ruffles. The street was slick beneath his feet with mud and offal.

"Down Rua Áurea and turn left on the Rua Assunção," she said, as briskly as though she were giving directions to her coachman. And then she began whacking him on the back with her parasol, screaming for help.

"Right," Jack said under his breath, and took off. Bloody hell, did she need to hit so hard? "You might be a little less convincing," he muttered.

"And ruin the deception?" Amused. The woman sounded amused.

They were past the mob now, out of the way of the men who had witnessed their little scene. Jack set her down with a thunk, right in a patch of something unmentionable. It did not do wonders for the lilac satin on her slippers.

"Sorry, princess. I'm not your sedan chair. You can walk the rest of the way."

He half expected her to argue, but she cast a look up and down the street and nodded. "Follow me."

She knew how to stay in character; Jack had to give her that. She minced along, constantly readjusting her bonnet, fidgeting with the buttons of her pelisse. Jack followed, in the slouch he'd developed in his role as Alarico the drunk, keeping an eye out for pursuers, and trying to figure out what to make of the woman trip-trapping ahead of him, making moues of distaste as she picked her way through the sodden street, her flashing rings practically an invitation to a knife at her throat.

But there was an alertness to her that suggested her attacker wouldn't fare well.

Jack remembered the hard feel of the pistol beneath her stays. That, he realized, explained the fiddling with buttons. And the hat? Jack regarded the woman in front of him with new interest. He'd be willing to wager that there was a stiletto attached to that bunch of feathers on her hat.

As for those rings, those foolish flashing rings . . . Most would-be assailants would be so dazzled by the gleam of gems on her hands that they wouldn't notice that those hands were holding a knife until it was too late.

Grudgingly, Jack had to admit that whoever the woman was, she knew what she was doing.

Which made her both very intriguing and very, very dangerous.

The house to which she led him was a private residence. Jack followed her through a gate, across a courtyard, and up a flight of stairs to a narrow iron door. His fingers briefly touched the point of the knife he kept in a sheath at his wrist. The woman might have known the code phrase, but that didn't mean this wasn't an ambush. No secret organization was inviolable, no code unbreakable. The woman's French was impeccable, her clothes Paris-made.

Which could mean anything or nothing.

How far did her masquerade go? Jack wondered. Was there a colonel who had her in keeping? It had been done before. Sleeping with the enemy was the surest way of securing information. A man might share with a mistress what he wouldn't with a friend.

Jack's imagination painted a picture of the rooms they were about to enter: lush carpets on the floor, a gilded mirror above a dressing table laden with mysterious creams and powders, a hip bath in one corner, silk draperies falling around a wide bed. The perfect nest for a French colonel's woman.

Jack didn't consider himself prudish or squeamish; a job was a job, and they all got it done as best they could. So why the instinctive feeling of distaste that this woman, this particular woman, might sell her body for information?

From a reticule that looked too small to contain anything of use, the woman took a heavy key and fitted it into the door.

It opened onto a spartan room, the walls whitewashed, the only furniture a table, a chair, and a divan that looked as though it doubled as a bed. There was no dressing table, no gilded mirror, no bed draped with curtains.

"Surely," said Jack mockingly, "the colonel could afford better."

The woman closed the door behind them with a snap. "There is no colonel."

Now that they were inside, her movements were brisk and businesslike, with no hint of coquetry. She tossed the key on the table and crossed the room, testing the shutters on the window.

"No?" Jack lounged back against the doorframe, his hands thrust in his pockets. "You surprise me."

"I doubt that." The woman plucked the bonnet off her head, taking the dark curls with it.

Beneath it, her own hair was a pale brown, brushed to a sheen and braided tightly around and around. Without the coquettish curls, her face had the purity of a profile on a coin, the sort of face to which men ascribed abstract sentiments: Liberty, Honor, Beauty. All she needed was some Grecian draperies and a flag.

She dropped the bonnet on the table. "You have a reputation for keeping a cool head. Or have we been mistaken in you . . . Mr. Reid?"

Jack straightened slowly. "I am afraid you have the advantage of me."

No names. That was the rule. Never names. Only aliases.

One by one, the lady plucked the rings off her fingers, setting them each in a bowl on the table. "Your full name is Ian Reid, but no has ever called you that. Your family calls you Jack. You were born in Madras to Colonel William Reid, a Scottish-American officer in the East India Company's army and his—"

"Concubine?" drawled Jack.

"—companion," the woman corrected primly, "a Rajput lady of high birth."

His mother might have been a bazaar girl for all it mattered to the English community in Madras. Her high

birth had meant only that she had felt her fall all the more, reduced from a princess among her own people to a cavalry officer's kept woman.

Jack didn't like to talk about his mother. He liked it even less when other people talked about his mother.

Years of taking hard knocks kept Jack's face wooden. The only reaction was his very stillness, a stillness he knew betrayed him as much as any response. "Does this fascinating exposition have a point?"

The cool, controlled voice went inexorably on. "You served for some years in the army of the Maratha chieftain Scindia, before Scindia's French allies recruited you, and renamed you the Moonflower." The last ring clattered into the bowl. The woman stretched her bare fingers, like a pianist preparing to play, before glancing over at Jack. "You fell out with the French three years ago. People tend not to like it when you work for someone else while pretending to work for them. They like it even less when you abscond with a raja's horde of jewels."

Jack shrugged. "All's fair, they say."

The woman raised a pale brow. "In love or in war?"

From his limited experience, Jack didn't see much difference between the two. Except that those one loved might hurt one the most. "They're one and the same, princess." His eyes lingered on her décolletage with deliberate insolence. "I had thought you would know."

The woman brushed that aside, continuing with her dossier. "As a result of your little escapade with the jewels, you relocated to Portugal, where you have been positioned ever since."

Jack tilted his hat lazily over his eyes. "You are well-informed," he drawled. "Brava."

The woman's lips turned up in a Sphinx-like smile. "It *is* what I do."

She sounded so pleased with herself that Jack decided that turn and turnabout was only fair play. He'd see how she liked it with the shoe on the other foot.

"We've ascertained that you know all about me." Jack straightened to his full height, favoring her with a wolfish smile. "Now let's talk about you."

"I don't—" she began imperiously, but Jack held up a hand.

Pushing back from the wall, he prowled in a slow circle around her. "You speak French beautifully, but it's not your native tongue. You wear your French clothes well, but they're a costume, not a personal choice. Left to yourself, you don't go in for furbelows."

His eyes went to her neck, where she wore a gold locket on a silk ribbon. The rest of her jewelry was showy, and undoubtedly made of paste. The locket was simple, and it was real.

Jack nodded at her neck. "Except, perhaps, one. That locket."

The woman's hand closed over the bauble, a small but telling gesture. "Very nice, Mr. Reid. You are quite perceptive."

Jack smiled lazily. "That's what they pay me for, princess. Now, do I go on—or are you going to tell me who you are?"

He half expected her to demur. Any other woman would have. Any other woman would have teased and played.

Instead, this woman, with her elaborate rings and plain locket, looked him in the eye and said simply, “You may know me as the Carnation. The Pink Carnation.”

Jack stared at her for a moment, and then he broke out in a laugh. “Pull the other one, sweetheart.”

Chapter Two

Laughter wasn’t quite the reaction that Jane Wooliston had expected.

Napoleon Bonaparte was said to break crockery at the mere mention of the name of the Pink Carnation. Hardened soldiers quailed; courtiers checked beneath their pillows for notes with the telltale pink flower; even Fouché, Napoleon’s Minister of Police, was rumored to look over his shoulder and walk a little faster when there was a hint of floral scent in the air.

Some of it, Jane knew, was a reflection of her own skill, of knowing when to strike and when to retreat and, most of all, how to remain in the game. There was something to be said for longevity. Other spies, the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian, had been unmasked, their leagues unraveled. Still others, Petunias and Orchids and a regular blight of Begonias, had hardly made it across the channel to France before being unceremoniously nabbed and dropped into the darker regions of the Temple prison.

But the Pink Carnation remained at liberty. And, by remaining so, acquired a reputation that owed a little to the truth and far more to the power of imagination. Any French reversal, from Napoleon’s failure to launch his fleet to the burning of his breakfast croissants, was laid at her door. The Imperial Guard heard her in every shutter that creaked in the night; they looked for her under the bed. Without intending to, Jane had become something greater than herself. She had become a myth, larger than life, cloaked in mystery.

There were times when she caught sight of herself in the mirror, of her own familiar face, just a face when it came down to it, eyes and nose and lips and skin pale from the protection of bonnets and hoods, and wondered at the absurdity of it all.

There were other times, however, when it was rather convenient to be a myth. Particularly when dealing with insubordinate agents. From everything she had read in his file, insubordination was Jack Reid’s middle name.

Or if it wasn’t, it should be.

Whatever Jack Reid did, one could be sure it was what he wasn’t meant to be doing. Sent as an apprentice to a printer, he ran away and hired himself out as a mercenary. Offered a permanent position in a prince’s retinue, he accepted a job spying for the French. When the French promoted him to a position of trust, he began feeding information to the English. Jack Reid had a talent for defying expectation, and, not so incidentally, orders.

He also happened to be very good at what he did. Everyone agreed on that. He had a knack for languages, an instinct for operating unseen. And Jane was in uncertain territory, in a country where she knew only as much of the language as could be crammed into five days of study, about to embark on a mission that would take her deep into a countryside well removed from her usual networks of agents and informers.

Like it or not, she needed Jack Reid. More than that, she needed his cooperation. She needed him to follow her lead without argument, without question. In their line of work, a moment's hesitation could mean the difference between life and death.

It had been a calculated risk, revealing her nom de guerre. The more prudent course would have been to identify herself as the Moonflower's contact, nothing more. But while a man might quibble at the orders of a fellow agent, especially if said fellow agent were both female and young, no one said no to the Pink Carnation.

Almost no one.

Jane didn't waste her time arguing. That would only make her look weak. So she did what she did best: she waited. She waited until Jack Reid's laughter subsided from a guffaw into a rich chuckle. She waited until his grin faded into a frown, until his amusement turned to uncertainty.

And then she arched one brow.

"If you have done amusing yourself, Mr. Reid," said Jane, in a voice designed to evoke every governess and schoolmaster who had ever taken a ruler to his palm, "there is work to be done."

There was nothing like dignity to make a man squirm.

Mr. Reid wasn't so easily broken, however. His eyes moved over her with deliberate insolence, from her smoothly coiled hair to the absurd flounces at her hem. "The Pink Carnation has been in operation for five years, at least. You're—what? Twenty-four? Twenty-five?"

She would be twenty-six in February, although there were times when she felt at least twice that.

Not that Jack Reid should throw stones. He wouldn't be twenty-six until July, for all that he affected the world-weary air of a corsair who had raided the world twice over and found nothing in it to interest him.

It was the stubble, Jane decided. If that was stubble and not just artistically applied dirt on his chin. She'd used that trick a time or two herself, when circumstances required her to pose as a man.

"Age has nothing to do with it," Jane said quellingly. "Alexander the Great conquered Greece at the age of twenty."

Mr. Reid was unimpressed. "Alexander the Great lived in different times."

Jane knew what he really meant. "And he didn't wear a skirt."

"Actually, he did. And a rather shorter one." Jane resisted the urge to tug at her skirt as Mr. Reid conducted a lengthy perusal of the garment in question. "He also had cavalry."

"You, Mr. Reid, are my cavalry. Such as you are. You are on loan, Mr. Reid. To the League of the Pink Carnation."

"The Pink Carnation in person." The Moonflower had switched from French to English, his diction clipped, well educated, with just a hint of a lilt. His French was good, but his English was better, laced with a cutting sarcasm. "From reports, I would have thought you would be seven feet tall and carrying a saber between your teeth."

“I’m sorry to disappoint,” said Jane, “but I left my saber in my other reticule. Now, if we could turn to the matter at hand . . .”

“Ah, yes. My secondment.” He drew out the word, making it a mockery. “I assume you have orders for me?”

“Wasn’t the eagle’s nest enough for you? Or do you need documents drawn up by a lawyer and signed in triplicate?” Jane smiled condescendingly at the Moonflower. “It would be an amateur’s error to carry anything in writing. And I, Mr. Reid, am not an amateur.”

His pose was relaxed, but his eyes were far too keen, sizing her up, ferreting out her untruths.

“No, you’re not.” It wasn’t intended as a compliment. He folded his arms across his chest, regarding her with unveiled suspicion. “What could so illustrious a figure as the Pink Carnation wish of my humble self?”

Right now, the Pink Carnation wished him to perdition. Jane suspected the effect was both deliberate and carefully cultivated.

Jane seated herself in a straight chair, keeping her voice brisk, businesslike. It was always best to start as one meant to go on. She gestured to Mr. Reid to sit. “What do you know about Queen Maria?”

Instead of sitting, Jack Reid leaned lazily back against the wall. “Other than the fact that she’s stark, raving mad?”

Jane wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of showing annoyance. “Other than that.”

“I don’t know, princess,” said Reid, his voice silky. “You tell me.”

There were times when Jane dearly missed her old headquarters in Paris, where she had carried out her shadowy activities with a well-trained cadre of underlings who followed her orders without question.

But Paris was closed to her now.

Jane kept her voice level. “Queen Maria was meant to take passage on a ship bound for her colony of Brazil.”

Jack Reid tipped his hat down over his eyes. “She did. I saw her.”

Jane sat a little straighter. “Did you, Mr. Reid? Did you see her with your own eyes? Or do you merely repeat what others have reported?”

Jack Reid let his lids sink down over his eyes, the picture of boredom. “It was a closed carriage. But I certainly heard her. You could hear her from here to the Azores.”

It was hard not to feel just a little bit smug. “What you heard, Mr. Reid, was her sister, Dona Mariana. Dona Mariana shares Her Majesty’s unfortunate malady.”

Jack Reid shrugged. “The Braganzas are so inbred it’s a wonder they aren’t all barking like dogs. So she wasn’t in that carriage; she was in another one. Either way, she’s halfway to Brazil by now.”

Jane rose from her seat, resting her hands on the table. “Oh? I gather there was some . . . disorder . . . attending the court’s departure.”

Jack Reid snorted. “Some? It was a rout. I’ve seen whole armies in retreat with less baggage left behind. But they would hardly forget their monarch.”

“Are you so sure, Mr. Reid?” Jane strolled towards the window, giving Jack the option of either following or shouting at her back. “From what I have been told, everyone assumed that someone else had seen to the Queen. Her Majesty, it appears, is not an easy charge.”

Reid remained stubbornly where he was. “She’s mad and she’s violent. There’s more than one of her ladies-in-waiting who would happily see her overboard with no questions asked.”

“But for the fact that she is the Queen,” said Jane, turning to face him across the room. “That still means something.”

Reid smiled pityingly. “Does it? I hate to disillusion you, princess, but royal heads have been known to roll. A monarch is as mortal as any other man. Or woman.”

It sounded like a warning. Perhaps it was. But Jane wasn’t that easily intimidated.

“It means something to her people. And,” Jane added quietly, “it means something to the men who seek to rule those people. In the wrong hands . . .”

She didn’t need to say more. Jack Reid gave a low bark of laughter. “Are you telling me that someone spirited the Queen away from the docks? And no one noticed? Try again, princess.”

Jane met Mr. Reid’s eyes. Between his slouch and her high-heeled slippers, they were nearly of a height. “It was two days before anyone realized that she was missing. By then, it was too late to turn back.”

Jack Reid’s lips twisted. “I’d always known the Regent wasn’t the sharpest knife in the block, but this—this rises to a new triumph of incompetence. I doff my hat to Don John, the man who lost first his kingdom and then his mother. One wonders what he will manage to misplace next.”

“They weren’t misplaced,” Jane reminded him. “They were taken. Both of them.”

Jack Reid shrugged, the muscles of his shoulders moving beneath the rough material of his jacket. “I can’t imagine anyone will miss her. Her son is probably breathing a sigh of relief. Have you considered the option that he might have got rid of her himself?”

There was something strangely disturbing about that prospect. “You have an odd notion of filial obedience, Mr. Reid.”

“Obedience ought to be earned, not given as a right.” There was steel beneath his voice, and a vulnerability that he quickly masked by flinging back at her, “Do your parents know where you are?”

“As much as yours do,” Jane snapped, and then regretted it.

Reid raised his brows, sensing weakness, probing at the wound. “Ah, but I’m not a gently bred young lady.”

He was good. She had to give him that. Very, very good. That was her cue, she knew, to protest, to tell him more than she ought.

But for the fact that she was also good. Very, very good.

“Whatever Don John may feel, or not feel, for his mother as her son, she is also his queen,” said Jane coolly. “There are practical as well as personal considerations at work. The Regent will hardly be pleased if the French employ the Queen to set up a figurehead government in Lisbon.”

Jack Reid watched her with hooded eyes, but he didn’t press the point. “The French already have a figurehead government. It’s called the Regency Council.”

He was lulling her; he would come back to the attack later. It was a technique she’d used herself.

“The Regency Council won’t last a month.” Jane had had a week on the boat from London to come to grips with the situation on the ground in Portugal, spending long nights in her cabin reading through one report after another, tackling unfamiliar names, an unfamiliar language. She spoke with more authority than she felt. “You saw what happened in the square. The Regency Council has no authority and Junot has no patience. He’ll dismiss them on some pretext before the year is out. The people place no reliance in the Regency Council. But they do in their Queen. If their anointed Queen tells them to bow to the French, what are the Portuguese people to do?”

Jack Reid shook his head. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, sweetheart. If Junot had Queen Maria, he’d have paraded her for all to see.”

Jane had reached much the same conclusion. She knew General Junot of old, from Paris. He was a man of strong appetites, without the discipline to rule them. Subtlety wasn’t Junot’s strongpoint. “We don’t know who has her. But we need to find out. And get her back.”

Jack Reid pushed away from the wall, prowling towards her with the graceful, lazy gait of a tiger assessing his prey. “Tell me one thing, princess. Why should the illustrious Pink Carnation waste her time on a small, regional matter such as this? If,” he added, “you are the Pink Carnation.”

Jane ignored the one point and focused on the other. “When Paris ran away with Helen, was that a small, regional matter?”

The room wasn’t large, and it felt still smaller with Jack Reid closing the space between them. “Queen Maria is hardly the sort to launch a thousand ships.”

Jane looked him in the eye, refusing to draw back. “Didn’t she just? If not a flotilla, at least a fleet—a fleet which Bonaparte dearly desires.”

She’d made him think, she could tell. Reid paused, assessing her. “Even if Bonaparte gets his hands on the Queen, he can hardly order the ships back from Brazil.”

Jane spoke with confidence. This much she knew. “It’s not just the ships, not anymore. Bonaparte secured the connivance of the Spanish crown for the invasion of Portugal. He has marched troops across the Spanish border, large numbers of troops. How long before he turns on his allies? How long before he lays claim to Madrid, and from there to the entire peninsula? Bonaparte’s goal is a continent under his sole subjection—and Portugal is his gateway.”

There was a silence and then Jack Reid put his hands together, clapping once, twice. It made a hollow sound in the high-ceilinged room.

“Very nice,” he said mockingly. “All you need is a few draperies blowing in the background and a spear in your hand and you’ll be the very picture of Britannia.”

Jane stiffened her spine. “Say what you will. If ever I were needed, it’s here, now. If we can stem Bonaparte’s ambitions in Portugal, we can put paid to his plans for Spain.”

Jack Reid’s amber eyes were focused on her face, intent. “A large task for one woman acting alone.”

“But not for the Pink Carnation.” Jane looked the Moonflower in the eye and said deliberately, “I’ve done more with less.”

It might sound like arrogance, but if they were to work together, she needed him to acknowledge her authority. She was a woman and a young one. In the early days that hadn’t seemed to matter; she had built her league herself, by trial and error, half by accident. It was a game, and she was the one who determined the rules.

But the game had turned darker somewhere along the way. It had gone from a game of wits to a struggle for survival, where there were no points for cleverness, only for results.

The way to succeed was to show no vulnerability.

I should like to lure you off your pedestal. The voice echoed in her memory, flavored with a lilting French accent, a voice she knew far too well for comfort.

She had ventured off her pedestal once, and found the ground uncommonly hard and rocky.

She would take the high road, thank you very much.

Jack Reid held her gaze. Whatever he saw there, the mockery was gone from his voice as he said abruptly, “Have you ever been to Portugal before, princess?”

“I have not previously had that pleasure, no.”

Jack Reid stepped back a pace, folded his arms across his chest. “And your command of the language . . . ?”

Jane raised her chin a little higher. “I speak French, Italian, and German.”

“But not Portuguese.”

“I purchased a grammar.” Jane was aware of how ridiculous it sounded, how painfully inadequate.

“A grammar.” Jack Reid adopted a lilting falsetto. “Excuse me, sir, can you tell me the way to the nearest Moorish ruin?”

Even as a schoolgirl, she had never sounded quite that daft. “Did you speak Portuguese when you arrived here three years ago, Mr. Reid? You learned. You learned quickly.”

Jack Reid shot her a quick, incredulous look. “Not that quickly. You don’t have time to engage in introductory grammar. You have, what? A week? Two at best? If you’re to find the Queen before someone else does, you’ll need to move fast.”

You, not *we*, Jane noticed.

“Which is where you come in,” said Jane crisply. “You, Mr. Reid, are to be my mouth and ears. Our first order of operation is to discover whether there were any disruptions to the Queen’s domestic arrangements in

the days before the fleet departed."

"You mean other than invasion by the French?"

Jane ignored the sarcasm. "Yes. Once the word came that Junot was on the march, someone laid his plans. We need to go to the palace at Queluz to interview the Queen's servants, discover who might have got close enough to move her."

It shouldn't be difficult. The palace at Queluz was within easy reach of Lisbon; she'd checked on her map. She would have to rely on Jack Reid for the interviewing, since her Portuguese was still at the rudimentary stage—she had only had a week, after all—but she could observe their faces, their movements, the little tells that often told more than words.

The Queen's pavilion at Queluz, the palace where she had been immured since her madness became known, was the obvious place to begin.

"No," said Jack Reid.

"No?" Jane wasn't used to no.

"You're wasting your time at Queluz. Don John picked the palace bare. There's not a tapestry or an armoire left in the building. He took everything but the stones—and that was only because he couldn't find a way to pack them. You won't find anything in Queluz."

He sounded very sure.

"All right, then, Mr. Reid." Jane hated asking for advice, but he was the expert here, not she. "What do we do?"

"Cut your losses and go home."

"I beg your pardon?"

He spoke to her patiently, as to a small child. "I don't know who you are, or what you're really after, but I can tell you one thing: you don't want to be here. This mission is a fool's game." As Jane opened her mouth to protest, he said, "You haven't met Her Majesty. I have. The woman is delusional. She's violent. And above all, she's loud. Once you get your hands on her, you'll have every French troop in Portugal down on you before the Queen can shout, '*Ai, Jesus!*' Your mission is a fool's errand."

"If so," said Jane smartly, "why has no one yet discovered her?"

Jack Reid shrugged. "At a guess? Opiates."

"Ah, yes. Opiates." Among his other dubious activities, Jack Reid had once smuggled opium to a rowdy bunch of bored aristocrats whose Hellfire Club had made a brilliant front for other illegal activities, including a thwarted plot to kidnap the King. "I believe you have some experience of those."

Jack Reid held out his hands, palms up. "Sorry, princess. I'm out of that line of work. So unless you've brought enough laudanum to drug an elephant . . . Queen Maria is about the size of one, and far less amiable."

She had just enough powder in the compartment in her ring to send a man deep into drugged slumber. "That,

Mr. Reid, is a chance I have to take."

"A chance you choose to take, princess. Not I." He favored her with a benevolent smile that set Jane's teeth on edge. "My orders were purely observational. That's what they're paying me for, and that's what I intend to do."

"Your orders have changed," said Jane sharply. "When Don John bowed to Bonaparte's pressure and exiled the English from Lisbon, he exiled our agents as well. You, Mr. Reid, are what is left. For good or for ill."

"I see." He rubbed the back of his neck, a studiedly rustic gesture. "Rare commodities command high prices. Do you care to start the bidding?"

She had known he was a soldier of fortune, but it set Jane's teeth on edge all the same. "You're already being paid."

"Not for this."

Jane raised her chin. "I can offer you the accolades of a grateful nation."

"One can't eat accolades, princess. Have I committed a *betise*? My apologies. I ought to have realized that the Pink Carnation is above such base concerns. Myths sup off moonshine and sip drops of dew. There's no need to bother about such base and vulgar matters as food and lodging. Or expensive gowns."

The gown was one of the last of her Paris gowns, refurbished by her own hand. The days when she had money to spare for such things were gone.

More sharply than she'd intended, Jane said, "I shouldn't have thought the man who made off with the jewels of Berar would quibble over the odd tuppence."

"Ah, we come to the point." Jack Reid regarded her with mingled resignation and regret. "Shall we abandon this cock-and-bull tale of missing monarchs? If it's the jewels you're after, you need only say." He cocked a brow. "If you want to charm them out of me, you might try a little harder."

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