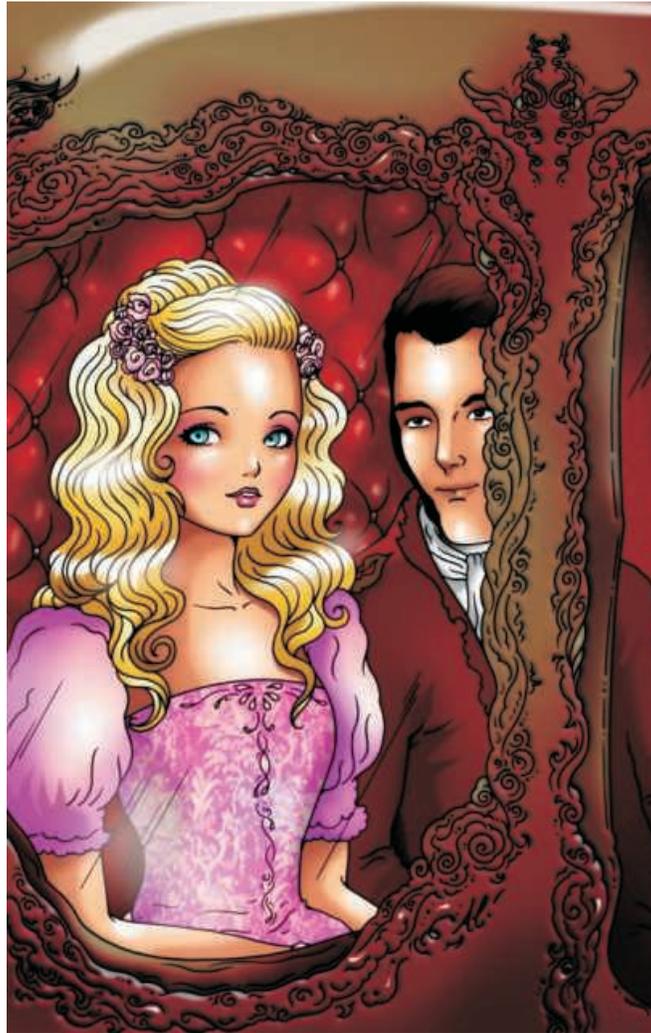




Reluctant Press presents:

My Lady of Sapphires

H. B. Kurtzwilde



AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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My Lady of Sapphires

By H.B.Kurtzwilde

Since arriving at Grayson's Pottery, Suzanne Thatcher had been constantly impressed by how unremarkable she was. Since early childhood she had lived in fear of earning her own keep. The atmosphere in which she had been reared discouraged her from striking out on her own to see what she could make of herself. She had belatedly realized that she was surrendering her own freedom, one golden minute at a time.

Her nature would not allow her to settle for the status quo. Therefore she had taken a risk, seizing hold of what meager opportunity she could find. She had given up a great deal in the way of material security and social status when she stepped away from expectations. The world she had known before was closed to her now. For the first time, she began to know what happiness truly felt like.

Her new home had less money, dirtier streets, and far more people than she had imagined could fit together in so limited a space. But with numbers and poverty came anonymity. She had little reason to explain herself, and few bothered to ask where she had come from. All that mattered was her ability to do her job and obey her employer. It seemed little enough to give for her own independence.

She had parlayed her skills with brushes and paint into a spot at a crowded table of paintresses. With that position secured, she had found a small room for herself in a house full of laborers from all parts of the country. She woke each morning, donned her work dress, blundered through breakfast and joined the crowds that hurried off to tend the vast factories.

The bottle-shaped chimneys of the pottery kilns poured smoke out over the town. The smell was inescapable. Dirt and mud got in at every door. There was nothing to do but

scrape it off and remember that mud was her stock in trade. Suzanne spent her days as just another face among the black-dressed women, daubing paint on dishes intended for tables much finer than any she would ever grace.

At first indulged in childish dreams of charming one of the posh young gentlemen she saw about town. She had only to see the fine young ladies in their cold reserve and nervous helplessness to abandon the idea. Whatever had drained those women of their spark and spirit was nothing she wished to contend with.

The first few weeks in her new home went by in a blur of patterns, paints and new strokes of the brush, each of which she had to master perfectly. The merry girls around her were a wealth of tricks and gossip. Some of them petted and admired her for the elegant way she could write and figure. She spent a great deal of time listening to their idle chatter. By the time she understood that married women were not allowed to be painters, she was too comfortable in her good company to care.

Saturday mornings meant a lazy wash-up all over and tightening her corset strings so that she might fit the one fine dress she could call her own. The sprigged lawn was scattered with clusters of pink flowers, and the skirt came all the way down to the toes of her boots. On her head she put a straw hat decorated with a few narrow feathers. This was not nearly so fine as the ladies she had seen, but she had acquired the costume with her own honest labor and felt finer for that.

Dressed to step out, she secured a few small coins in a secret place and went to see what the local shopkeepers had found to tempt her girlish good taste. She left her savings in her room, so as not to be tempted to overindulge. Having money to both keep and spend filled her full of warmth and hope. She simply could not stay indoors with her mood so fine and high.

The brightness of the early autumn day was blunted by the lingering stench of the kiln chimneys. She took a handkerchief from her sleeve and breathed through it, trying to stifle the smell. She walked along the street, glancing in shop windows. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but took pleasure in the mere act of seeking. At one street corner, she found a wizened old man selling roasted nuts.

She gave him a bright smile and then stepped off the sidewalk to take a better look at his wares. The scent of roasting chestnuts quite overpowered the smell of the factory. She asked the vendor for a packet, and stood watching him choose fat nuts to wrap in a cone of newspaper. She twisted from side to side, idly spinning her skirts about her legs while she waited.

At that moment, between one twist and the next, broad hands clamped about her waist and she was lifted off her feet. On her next breath her feet touched the sidewalk again, and her gasp became a scream. She swatted forcefully at the grasping hands, then fell still and silent as a carriage drawn by two proud horses clattered over the very place she had been standing.

The vendor was missed just barely. Had she not been moved, she wouldn't have been at all. Instantly her cries of reproach became gratitude. She clenched hard to the hands she had recently scorned, and turned shining eyes up to her happenstance benefactor.

"Thank you, good sir. I didn't hear a rumble in the way," she gasped, still breathless from the surprises the last minute had held.

"Thank you for not calling out the coppers," the tall, broad-shouldered man returned. "Though you still might call on that driver. If only we knew whose carriage that was!"

"Certainly it's no country custom to mix a lady with the pavement," Suzanne smartly replied. "I'll have to learn suspicion for these city horses."

"And city gentlemen," the vendor put in, tendering the packet to her with a wink and a grin.

Suzanne paid the vendor and made to turn away, but was stopped again by an unexpected grasp. She looked once more at her rescuer, and found him red-faced with some repressed emotion. Though she was tall for a lady, he was taller still, and she felt quite dwarfed by his intense regard.

"Do you come so newly to town that work has not found you?" he asked.

"Indeed no," she frowned. "I keep to the whistles of Grayson's paint shop. I thank you for your help, but I have secured my own position. Good day."

"But wait! You are a paintress then, and know something of art?" He pursued her doggedly, though she hurried her steps from this sudden imploring.

"I know of artfulness," she sharply replied. "Again, I thank you for your service, but not for this disgraceful pursuit."

"I only want your figure," the man all but cried. "Your proportions are perfection, though there is a flaw about the carriage that study must improve."

Suzanne stopped short, turned on him and stamped her foot. "If you mean to endear and scold in one breath, there are better streets than this for your suit. Go and find them, if you please."

The man looked startled, then glanced guiltily about the crowded road. He tipped his hat. "My apologies, in all respects. Of course you cannot understand my meaning. Another time, I'll make a more respectable entreaty."

"To another subject, I only pray," Suzanne said, then turned about and left him there.

She went on her way too fast and soon found herself breathless from surprise, fear, anger and exertion. Presently she came upon a shop boasting shining windows and a flock of dainty tables within. She made so bold as to enter, sighing happily at the scent of fragrant tea. A boy in a white apron offered her a place to sit, and brought to her a dish of black tea with milk and sugar.

As she sat refreshing herself with hot roasted nuts, all her high temper drifted away. Though she did not intend to dwell, her thoughts roved of their own over the face and manner of the man who had rescued, then accosted her. Both actions were equally bold; though she had fled, the impression lingered that the man had meant her no harm.

She sighed over her own rough treatment of his gallantry, and consoled herself with a second dish of tea. Perhaps she could have been less suspicious, but the surprise of the moment had quite undone her wits. Certainly a well-bred lady would not have scolded

her hero. But then, a gentlewoman would not have been on a street corner making purchases with her own wages.

She was distracted from her musings by the ring of the bell on the shop door and a tinkling of familiar voices. Turning on her chair, she found a trio of friendly faces. She quickly raised her hand to the serving boy to complete her table's number with this happy meeting.

Nellie, Alice and Bella were not sisters of blood, but of paint and gilding and pattern. They made merry greetings to their youngest sister-in-trade and flocked about her teapot, as bright doves to a scattering of crumbs. Each girl had a package from the nearby shops, and showed their little treasures with great pride.

"Have you nothing but nuts to show for your shopping?" Alice wondered. "You looked near to dropping when we saw you through the windows."

"I meant to find something charming, but adventure found me first," Suzanne explained. She recounted to them the wild harrowing she had gotten along with her chestnuts, then leaned her cheek against her palm. "Wasn't that funny of him, to chase after and remark on my person so boldly?"

The girls exchanged worried glances. Then Bella made a bright smile and gaily replied. "Was he handsome or frightful? That would make the difference to me!"

"Handsome," Suzanne confided. "Tall, dark and strong enough to move me from a standstill. That's no mean feat. But his eyes seemed kind, even if they were roving and green. Mother said green eyes are of a lusty nature, so perhaps I was too confused to tell true."

At this description, the others fell silent and exchanged cautious looks among themselves. Then Nellie gave a decisive nod and turned to Suzanne in all seriousness.

"That must have been Anthony Nicks," Nellie pronounced. "He's a sculptor for Mister Greyson's shop."

"The sculptor," Bella corrected. "Designer and colorist too, of the figures and such."

"You mean he invents the patterns we paint?" Suzanne gasped and felt faint once more.

"Hardly," Alice scoffed. "Our brushes never touch the works he creates. They're too fine for us. I can paint a bouquet near as well as life, but he... oh... he makes clay look ready to walk about the glens."

"He's not so much," Nellie contradicted. "But if you see him again, you'll do better to remember your livelihood depends on his genius. Old Greyson banks on his fancies to keep the dishes rolling out the door."

"Well, isn't that just like me?" Suzanne fretted, then made a comical, despairing expression. "Ungrateful and clumsy, every inch of me!"

The others laughed and turned the discussion to other matters, but Suzanne hadn't the heart to follow well. Her thoughts were a tumult, all of them swirling around Anthony Nicks.

Five days was plenty to stop the endless, self-doubting recollections of the Adventure with Chestnuts. Four of those were spent in contemplation of cups, plates and bowls, the flowers and figures thereon, and the delicate scrolls of gilding that made their beauty more delightful. Suzanne had quite put from her thoughts the connection between rescue and the patterns she rendered so patiently with her crafty brush.

She might better have forgotten that the sun rose, and occasionally was known to shine. But her part in the artistic flourishes of the pottery was, to her mind, a small one. She had no knowledge whence her plates had come, nor thither they would go after her loving care. Nor did she make so bold as to enter among the dainty shops that made so much of her handiwork. Though she had a keen eye for ornament, and a steady mind to create perfect imitations of art, the repetition of the patterns seemed as mystical as the invocation of holy texts. She knew the way it was done, and carried on without question.

She was but one faithful devotee among dozens who sat in rows among the sacred paints, heads bowed under sunny windows, brushes making constant reverence to the work. A glance left or right showed her a remarkable thing: she fit here, and drew no notice. That simple fact was her chief satisfaction in life, to have found a place where she would not be thought eccentric and strange.

The factory whistle divided her day. The low, unobtrusive murmurs of her companions ticked minutes by, in their odd convent of turpentine and oil paint incense. No intrusions were permitted to distract from their devotions. Here, Suzanne felt quite safe, not only from the heartless city street, but from the wildness she still hoped to subdue within herself.

It was a shock to her cheerful diligence, then, when the double-doors at the end of the room banged wide open. Hers was not the only head that rose and fixed upon a flock of clay-spattered men who were so daring as to invade this convent of craftswomen. Even as the workmen advanced, the shop mistress came to impede their progress.

At the center of the flurry was a man Suzanne only knew as her benefactor and employer. Mister Grayson was a wide, ruddy man of more than forty years. Though his workday clothes were well-made, they were as bespattered as those of his lessers. The gang of men stopped as Missus Knotts took up a scolding tone with Mister Grayson himself.

"Shortcutting through the paint shop are we, Sir?" Missus Knotts inquired in a businesslike tone. "If my girls and I take a stroll through the pot works, I imagine the disturbance would be equally intolerable."

"I need a girl," one of the men replied.

"Don't come hunting doxies in my shop, and we'll not find husbands in yours," Missus Knotts coolly returned.

"Not just any girl. One in particular, and you have her," the man replied. "Otherwise I wouldn't have dared the dragon's lair. You see I've brought good yeomen to defend me."

The men chuckled, Missus Knotts sputtered, and Suzanne quickly returned to the ring of posies she had begun to apply to a saucer.

"You've run off some nice model again," Missus Knotts presently accused. "No doubt by requiring something vulgar for your fanciful figures."

At that, every girl tittered, each of them scandalized and thrilled by their protector's bold tone.

"I'll thank you not to call my designs and your livelihood 'vulgar,' Missus Knotts," Anthony Nicks calmly informed her.

"Some are not mere vulgarity," Missus Knotts pretended to agree. "Many go straight to clear and obvious obscenity."

"We came not for your opinion, but for a young lady," Mister Greyson halted their bickering. "Just a moment of your time, please, so that she may be discovered."

"A moment? If she is missed at the tables, even just one girl, we'll be hopelessly behind before long," Missus Knotts continued to object.

Anthony left Greyson to deal with his taskmistress. Suzanne did her best to focus only on her work, but belatedly realized this diligence made her conspicuous. The other girls were taking in the argument like fine entertainment. Suzanne put her brushes down again and turned her eyes towards the high, shining windows. Nevertheless, Anthony stopped at her table and stood staring.

"Found her," Anthony said in a low, enraptured tone. "I was sure I heard her right. This will save a great many mistakes, if she will come along."

"She has a name," Suzanne told the windows. "And she is quite content to stay among the dragons, where she belongs."

"Don't be such a goose," Anthony chided. "Up and come along, if you please. Your master has better use for you in another shop."

"Thank you, but you're asking the impossible," Suzanne replied. "I have a very little skill with paints. Nothing more of mine is offered, convivial as the request may be."

"Sensible girl," Missus Knotts approved.

"She's about to sensibly deny herself a great deal more in pay than this position can give her," Greyson harrumphed. He walked down the center aisle, every inch the lord and master of his domain. The steely eye of a man used to obedience fell on her. "Come along, dear. We mean you no harm. I will not permit my paintresses to be casually and publicly disgraced, as you seem to assume."

Alice learned over to Suzanne and whispered. "Might be best to go. Nicks isn't a threat to women anyway. He's a bachelor in the French style."

Suzanne rose from her seat but slowly, feeling every eye in the room on her. The statue-like height with which she had been blessed seemed a great oppression to her then, and her steps sounded unnaturally loud in that still, silent shop. Mister Greyson offered his arm in a fatherly way; with fingers numb with shock, she took hold of him. As he escorted her back the way he had come, the men around him fell again to babbling of clays and ornaments as though speaking in a foreign tongue.

She had previously known the doors they passed through only as the place her dishes came from. Now she saw that it led into a great storehouse of wares ready for decoration. As they passed through the aisle, she stared in wonder at the vast quantities of half-finished works. Surely there was not enough paint in the entire world to adorn so much fine pottery.

Soon enough they passed out into the courtyard, beneath the soot of the kiln. She saw men in various stages of filth going to and fro about the place. The open windows at another shop showed her men and boys at wheels, or pouring slip into moulds, making shapes fit for the fires and the Grayson name.

Beyond the throwing shop was a tall, classically styled brick building. To this she was led, and taken up a staircase of polished wood. Niches in the walls held delicate figures of such fine fashioning they seemed too delicate for human hands. Some were of fanciful animals, or showed flowers forever locked in perfect bloom. Others gave impressions of classical scenes, wherein fauns and satyrs, gods and goddesses, nymphs and youths went about their pastoral pleasures, oblivious to their observers.

At the third landing, Greyson steered her down a hallway to a polished wooden door, which Anthony unlocked with a key at his waist. Within, there was a clutter of paintings and fragments of sculpture quite at odds with the regimented order of the pottery. Damp clothes obscured lumps on a range of worktables. A desk was thickly littered with drawings and other papers. The remains of a meal stood discarded on a tea table by the window. A tall Chinese screen painted in black and gold blocked off one corner of the room.

"Now then," Greyson said, addressing himself to Suzanne once more. "Mister Nicks will see to you suitably. You may take him at his word. So no more of that brash temper, if you please."

"If I don't please, may I go back to Missus Knotts?" Suzanne timidly inquired.

"You'd better just try to please," Greyson sternly informed her. "Mister Nicks is a respectable gentleman, so be a good girl. There's a dear. Nicks, those maquettes won't wait, so no more pickiness out of you, either."

Greyson went away then, taking his flock of lackeys along. Suzanne folded her hands before her skirts and peered curiously about the place, quite overwhelmed by this sudden turn in her fate.

"You said you had a name," Anthony reminded. "What is it?"

"Suzanne Thatcher," she supplied. "The girls in the shop said you were Anthony Nicks, and an artist."

"True on both accounts," he agreed. "Come here, I have something remarkably vulgar and obscene to show you. If you don't faint dead away, I think you'll do nicely as my model."

Suzanne approached his desk and took in the sketches he had ranged about. She recognized the figures. Diana of the Hunt and her little dog; Aphrodite stepping from the foam; Hera in her fiercest aspect; Athena in a warrior-wise pose of thoughtfulness. The renderings were quite fine, though vague in certain details, as well as rather spare in costume.

"Which of these am I to be?" she quietly inquired.

"All of them," Anthony said. "As all women are all goddesses. You think yourself unable to do this task, but do not fear. To me, you're a grain of sand that will not be brushed from my thoughts. And so I must cherish you, and slowly make lustrous what once seemed a mere irritation."

"I think you hope too much of me," Suzanne said, and began to back away. "I'm merely tall and strong. Nothing like these sylphs of dreams and stories."

"True. Compared to you, these are nothing like what I intend to create," Anthony said. "To succeed, I must impose on your modesty, and have your assistance. Are you afraid of what I'm asking?"

"No," Suzanne frankly replied. "If you peek past my modesty, you'll find something that will rather spoil your plans."

"On the contrary," Anthony said. "I see what you try to hide. I see it in your walk, your eyes...but I can change all that. If only you allow me. Shall we begin?"

Suzanne stood behind the Chinese screen dithering over her buttons while Anthony made a ruckus in the studio beyond. There was a tap at the door, a murmured exchange, then Anthony's hands thrust a charming red-painted vanity set behind the screen.

She took the tray and set it on the table beside a tall oval mirror. The pitcher was nearly brimful of steaming hot water. Soft towels and soap stood beside the basin. There was also a straight-edged razor and fluffy shaving brush standing in a mug. Suzanne looked these items over and returned to the business of her innumerable buttons.

"I want you to shave everywhere," Anthony announced in a casual way. "There must be nothing between me and the fine details of your skin. Don't let modesty stop your thoroughness, my dear."

"I still think you're in for rather a shock," Suzanne said.

"I think you are, dear girl."

Suzanne hurried out of her dress and petticoats, corsets and stockings and bloomers. She stood before the mirror, perfectly nude, but her arms and hands reflexively moved to cover those parts of herself that she found unladylike. There was no way to shave in such a pose, so she looked away from the mirror. She focused on her task and soon was spreading a generous lather everywhere her golden hair lay thick and glittering against her flesh.

"I assume you don't wish for me to be bald?" Suzanne called out to Anthony.

"Indeed, no," he chuckled. "Though wigs might be used later, to model different colors and textures."

"Very well," Suzanne agreed, then fell silent again as she made her cheeks smooth with the straight razor.

She took a long time to smooth the curve of her breast, and the narrow line that descended from her navel, down her belly and to the thick patch between her thighs. The warm water trickled from the razor's edge. She caught her lip in her teeth, taking gentle

care about the base of her recumbent phallus and over the tender ovals that descended, pink and sensitive, beneath it. Then she sat upon a low stool to shave her legs silky clean.

Though it seemed an unnecessarily particular detail, she parted her legs and shaved the furrow between her buttocks, then stood and rinsed away the remainders of the foam. Patting her damp skin dry with a soft towel, she turned her back to the mirror and looked at herself in reverse. From that angle, she fancied that she saw what Anthony was looking for in his art.

"Here, put this on," Anthony said, pushing a carton under the screen. "I'm nearly ready out here, so hurry on please."

Suzanne stooped and took up a breastplate, the golden color of which was dull and scratched. There were gold-colored laces up the back, and the various pieces of chilly metal cinched in as she drew the strings tight. A very short skirt of leather and painted metal she girded about her hips, conscious of how exposed this left her pale legs. Upon her feet she put flat sandals and carefully criss-crossed long thongs up her calves, to tie just at the middle of her thighs. Gilded bracers for her arms finished the costume, or so she thought. A narrow, golden tiara sat in the bottom of the carton.

"Who am I supposed to be?" she asked her reflection.

"Athena," Anthony replied.

"Then give me a helm," Suzanne said. "That silly crown won't do at all. Save that for Aphrodite."

There was another great rummaging. She was given a helm with red cockscomb above and an open face instead of the tiara. Suzanne put it on, arranged her golden curls in a tumble down her back, then stepped from behind the



screen before she could hesitate.

"Ah!" Anthony smiled at her, genuinely pleased. "Yes! Well... no... nearly there."

He advanced on her quickly and thrust both hands down the top of her armor. Confident fingers grasped at the soft flesh, lifting and arranging, and exciting all at once. She gasped, tried to step back, but he released his hold and smiled more brightly.

"There you are, lovely lady. Now, up on the box and I'll get you a spear," Anthony said. "I'll need it to make the figure stand steady on the base."

Suzanne looked around for a box and found he meant a rather tall platform arranged before the wide windows.

"Won't people see me?" she frowned.

"One day, formed of clay, but not through this third floor window," Anthony cheerfully replied. "Though the sense of exposure may take some getting used to."

Suzanne shinnied up onto the high platform and turned to take both a shield and a spear from him. He climbed up as well, but stayed kneeling before her. He took hold of her feet, posing her in one stance after another, testing the curve of her toes with his thumb.

"You're to be pointing with the spear, not throwing it," he hurried to explain. "A leader of armies is what I wish to see. Tense your legs, let your muscle stand proudly... yes... yes..."

His hands strayed up her legs, arranged the armored skirts and went on up to set her spine to the slightly twisting angle he desired. He raised her spear arm to direct imaginary forces and let her shield arm hang easily at her side. A lift of chin, an adjustment to helm and hair, then he gave a satisfied nod and hopped down once more.

"There, I was right," Anthony said, triumphant. "Strength and beauty are such a rare combination. I'm lucky it was not lost over a packet of chestnuts."

Suzanne blushed rosily, but kept still in her pose. "Lucky for us both. Bad luck for whatever lady was meant for this job in the first place."

"This was meant for none but you," Anthony said in a conspiratorial kind of way. "Oh, I had planned his collection, but had no inspiration to continue. And then... serendipity."

"You like to flatter me," Suzanne observed. "I wish you wouldn't. Whatever you make of me will either not resemble at all, or not sell at all."

"It might be worse than that," Anthony admitted. "Greyson might not like it and then it never sees the light of day. But you have sunlight in your hair now, and the stern expression that so bewitched me. If you worry that I may find fault with your figure, the remedy lies in my own hands."

"You're a strange man," Suzanne observed. "The girls say you're still a bachelor and harbor... shocking tastes."

"Ah, gossip," Anthony sighed. He retreated to his worktable where a lump of wax stood ready for his work. He took up his tools and began to shape the block of blue paraffin. "It is true that I philander among those who indulge in la vice Angelis, but I am

equally a cad amongst the doxies and opera-singers. My truest immorality is adoring my work above all human creatures."

"I have never before heard a bounder and a cad admit to his condition," Suzanne coolly returned. "How do you manage to cultivate the virtue of honesty among your other pursuits?"

"I'd rather be an honest villain than the kind of lispng, dissipated dilettante that goes at his own ruin by halves," Anthony said, offering a charming smile. "Lower your spear. I want the butt end on the floor. It will weigh on you less, and give the balance I require."

Suzanne gratefully rested her spear, somewhat surprised that she had raised it. "So you find a sort of honor in being a rascal around the clock, rather than in the cover of darkness alone?"

"If I followed the usual career, I would already be wed," Anthony said, scraping wax away from the block at a great rate. "I would be busily deceiving my bride and my unfortunate offspring, spoiling her reputation and reducing all involved to a laughingstock. I only ruin myself."

"But your ruination is sure to be total," Suzanne said. "Have you no thought of redemption?"

"My work is my only hope, and my love," Anthony said. "If you need a reason to excuse your dishabille before me, rest assured you do a great deal to improve an unblushing wretch."

Suzanne opened her mouth to scold his behavior, then realized she had not a leg to stand on. If she were made to give an honest accounting of her history, there was a great deal of self-service behind her choices. There had simply come a day when good opinion and self-denial had no longer held her to the drudging pursuit of what was expected. Abandoning those common expectations had given her the only unblemished happiness she had ever known.

She stood as still as she could, but kept her eyes fixed on Anthony as he scraped, cut and shaped the wax block. At first, he glanced up frequently, offering rakish grins or half-murmured reassurances. Eventually, his eyes became very still, his brow smoothed and an innocent smile took the false expression from his lips. The next time he glanced up, she could tell he wasn't really seeing her any more.

Anthony dropped to one knee, a small tool grasped delicately in his fingers. The wooden handle guided not a brush, but a thin wire, through the wax. The shape of the block kept her from seeing what he rendered. Though he glanced up more frequently as he worked, Suzanne felt his regard was both benign and thrilling. The deeper he fell into communion with his creation, the more pure love shone in his eyes when he looked up at her.

"You're beautiful," he murmured. If the room hadn't been so silent, the words might have gone completely unnoticed.

"Did you mean your Athena?" Suzanne softly inquired.

"My Athena will never live," Anthony said, as if to explain himself. "Her heart will never beat, and so I may give my love to her with impunity."

"That seems an infertile soil on which to cast your seeds," Suzanne said. "Are you sure you love her more than the living?"

"Perhaps it is through her creation, in my effort to achieve my ideal, that I grow to love her," Anthony mused. "If she is not pleasing to me, I have no one to blame but myself."

Suzanne felt her heart flutter, and an embarrassing tension under her skirt. Her ass flexed tight, and a warm blush crept over her. Anthony glanced up at her, froze, then breathed deep as if struck by an unexpected image of pure beauty. Suzanne felt a knowing smile curve her lips all of its own accord.

"That's it," Anthony murmured. "Don't move. You are perfect. Just stay like that for me."

"Are you asleep?"

Suzanne blinked rapidly, startled to realize she was still on her feet. Her arms felt stiff and cold. Her legs were locked tight under her, but she had managed to obey the command to remain perfectly still. She cut her eyes at Anthony and was surprised to find him standing next to his table, all tools put aside.

"Dear God, I've had you standing hours without a rest!" Anthony exclaimed. He looked completely startled, and hurried to relieve her of her props and helm. "Move slowly, flex your hands and say something, blast it!"

Suzanne was so surprised, she laughed. Anthony looked even more alarmed then. He reached out and swept her off her feet. One moment she was locked in pose. The next, every tense muscle was forced in a new direction. Suzanne whimpered as he crushed her to his chest and turned quickly to arrange her on a yellow silk lounge.

"Stupid, Anthony, she's giddy and faint with hunger," Anthony berated himself.

Suzanne only laughed harder, but managed to make a reply. "I'm not faint. I was dozing, I suppose. But I am rather hungry, so if you'll let me dress, I'll go find my luncheon."

"Your supper," Anthony corrected. "I've worked past luncheon, so you have as well. Thoughtless of me, and I do apologize. No model has ever been so patient with my habit."

"I have nothing to compare with your habits," Suzanne said. "I work many hours in a row striving merely to copy the examples other artists have set. Inventing such creations must take more effort than mere imitation."

"A charitable opinion, since you have suffered for my creative fever," Anthony said.

He went to the door and thrust his head out into the hall, bellowing with all his voice in terms she could not readily follow. As he came back into the room, he caught up a red robe off a pile of props and tossed it over her reclining form, as if suddenly startled by her dishabille.

"You've been looking at me all day," Suzanne said. "Doesn't modesty seem odd at this juncture."

"I looked on Athena," Anthony said. "The modesty of Miss Thatcher must be preserved at all costs. Besides, the pub boy will be along directly."

"I hope he brings more than just food," Suzanne said, then laughed as her stomach rumbled loudly. "I... that's going to ruin your opinion of me. But I could surely do with a glass."

"From that I must infer your prior history with a pint," Anthony said, eyes twinkling. "Never fear, there will be enough in my regular order to see about your share."

"I prefer cider when I can get it," Suzanne said. "Since I'm a forbearing soul, and passable Athena, perhaps I can be indulged without much harm."

"You're catching on quickly to the model's position to the artist," Anthony observed. "There will be a great many indulgences between us. If I can win them with mere cider, it will come to you by the barrel."

"Better plan fewer standing poses, then," Suzanne cheerfully agreed. "I could have gone on. I was only practicing flower patterns in my mind."

"You imagine you'll go back to the paintresses?" Anthony asked, surprised.

"When your fad for the Junoesque passes, I'll still need to eat," Suzanne reminded.

"But you'll dine like the goddess you are, before that foul fate befalls you," Anthony said. "Before long, your hand will no longer fit the brush, and you'll be good for nothing but my particular needs."

There was a businesslike rap at the door and Anthony hurried to answer. A small, grubby boy stood gripping a wicker basket nearly half his own size. Anthony set the basket on a nearby table and lifted the lid. The contents were frowned over at length.

"Brockles, you haven't nibbled a bite," Anthony said, pretending amazement.

"Not a pinch, guv," Brockles grinned back.

Anthony chose out an apple pastie and surrendered it to the messenger, along with a small coin. "That's not your tip, mercenary boy. Trot back for a jug of Red Harry. After all else is paid, you may have the remainder."

"Straight away, guv," Brockles said, then rendered himself speechless by endeavoring to consume the whole pastie at one blow.

Suzanne laughed heartily at the boy's bulging cheeks and dignified salute. She felt herself revived enough to get up and take a seat at the dining table. There were dishes aplenty, though a few needed washing. The set was quite mismatched, but that mattered very little to her as she caught the scents wafting from the basket.

"Set the table properly, please," Anthony said. "There's plenty of good food, once the table is laid."

"I can't," Suzanne confessed. "I only know to paint these dishes, not attend them."

Anthony frowned at this news. "That won't do, Suzanne. You must learn to do better. But not now."

He made quick work of deploying the paper-wrapped packets on the table and arranging plates for them both. Once he was satisfied, they began heartily to dine. When Brockles

returned, Anthony poured a painted goblet brimful from the jug, and laughed as she drank eagerly without hesitation.

When at last her hungers were satisfied, Anthony had lit candles around the studio. The rest of the factory was cloaked in shadow, with even the time-whistle fallen silent, it being past working hours. Suzanne lazed on her chair and gazed out over the deepening evening.

"You have a very great deal to learn," Anthony said, though his back was to her. "Of manners and attitudes, both public and private. Don't dawdle at table, girl. Be comfortable upon the lounge."

Suzanne found herself rising to obey before she quite knew what she was doing. She stretched out on her belly and sighed contentedly despite the awkwardness of her armor. She held a fresh goblet of cider in one hand; with the other she tried to ease the edges of the false gold plates. Finding no success, she shifted around, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Here, let me help you," Anthony said, and came to take her robe away. His nimble fingers loosened the breastplate and slid it from under her. "And now, you are ready to help me."

His hands locked down on her shoulders and she gasped, struggling instinctively against his strength. She tried to throw him off, but he straddled her thighs and leaned down harder, pressing his lengthening shaft to part the falls of her armored skirt. The soft cloth of his trousers made a heated caress in the cleft of her buttocks.

"Please, Anthony, don't," she whispered, somehow not able to scream. "Let me go, please."

His hands slid over her as if he knew every inch of her flesh. Finally his fingers traced the inward curve of her hips, to nestle between her thighs. He grasped at her as confidently as he had caressed her pale skin.

Her flesh hardened and lengthened in his encouraging hold. She moaned softly against the yellow silk as a sudden fever rushed over her. Something wild and mad burst full-bloom in her breast, twisting her spine, grinding back against his inexorable weight. He groaned, breath hot against her hair as he learned down hard against the flex of her ass.

"Do you despise me?" Anthony whispered back, stroking her shaft eagerly, riding her wild toss under him.

"Stop, please, or you force me to violence," Suzanne cried out, finally bending her own strength against his.

"How dare you deny your passion?" he demanded, struggling to keep her in place. "I know you want me!"

Suzanne gasped, and got a hand under the edge of the lounge. She hauled with all her might and tumbled them both to the floor. She scrambled away from him, flushed and sweating, burning from the fell of his hands on her. Without thought, she crawled behind the screen and stripped away her skirt. Anthony came after her, so she cast the skirt in his face, driving him back as he cried out in pain.

She made quick work of dressing in her work attire, then came to stand over him as he pressed a handkerchief to his face. Part of her trembled with fear, but the rest of her body rushed with a power she had not realized she possessed.

“Did you somehow lose control of yourself?” she demanded. “Would you blame the drinks, or the lateness of the hour?”

“No.” Anthony turned the cloth, showing that it was well stained with blood. “I wanted you the moment I saw you in the street. I would have kissed those horses for endangering you, for they gave me the moment’s chance I so craved.”

“And today’s work?” she demanded. “Another opportunity to slake your craving?”

Anthony looked up with pure despair in his eyes. “Won’t you understand? I knew, the moment I saw you. I knew. And wanted you. Have you got any idea what that is like?”

Suzanne felt her lips draw hard and thin, but she felt no real anger. Only a profound exasperation. “You lied to me about this work. Did you lie about lessons I might learn, that you could teach?”

“I meant every word,” Anthony said, as solemn as an oath.

“We shall see,” Suzanne said. “Compose yourself, Mister Nicks. After tonight, you must become the most dedicated supplicant a goddess ever knew.”

The walk to the factory was an uncomfortable one for Suzanne the following morning. The girls were both scandalized by what they had witnessed and desperately curious about what had happened after. Suzanne’s reluctance to tell all only made the topic more riveting.

She tried instead to seem nonchalant. “I don’t know why you’re so curious. He had me pose as Athena and made a wax figure for one of his fancy works. I know I’ll never have the gold to have such a thing, so I might as well be one.”

“It’s just fancy mud,” Bella laughed. “Was it... questionable at all?”

“No more questionable than I expected,” Suzanne said, like a confession. “Athena as a warrior is horribly heavy. I had to wear armor, and hold a spear. He worked like a madman, and I was hours standing.”

“At least you could sit if you were only painting,” Nellie said. “Perhaps he’s lost his mania for you, and you can come back with the rest of us.”

The others chattered, agreeing that Mister Nicks was as changeable as the weather and just as unreliable. Suzanne clung to the hope that they were right until they arrived at the factory gate. There stood the sturdy young Brockles, basket held hard in one hand, ready to offer his arm to Miss Thatcher and carry her away. Brockles was as commanding as any man ever born.

“I suppose the mania lives on,” Suzanne sighed.

She wished more than anything for Missus Knotts to appear and claim her for the tables. Any excuse to resist the invitation Brockles represented, and the danger. No such heroine appeared. She was towed along by the energetic Brockles, though every step on the stairs seemed to drag at her feet. Her heart began to pound within her breast as she was turned along the third floor landing and led to Anthony's door once more.

Brockles dropped his lead on her and pushed through the door without so much as a knock. Anthony was already within, though from his rumpled, mad look, he may have never left. Brockles set his basket on the table and cleared his throat loudly.

"Which what?" Anthony muttered, glancing up angrily at the distraction. "Ah, breakfast and model. You're the very devil for earning your tips, my man."

A coin spun through the air and Brockles caught it in his hat. "Well, I ken you got a lady here and don't need me to set the table, then."

"Wrong, young prince," Anthony laughed. "Miss Thatcher, you sit and see how I like it done. We'll see this rogue out of a job by his own cleverness, shall we?"

Brockles held a chair for Suzanne to sit, all the while laughing along with Anthony. Suzanne glanced at the Chinese screen, but saw that it was folded back and put away. Brockles began deploying dishes about the table, muttering to himself about placements all the while.

"Don't complain about my peculiar ways when I can hear you," Anthony gently chided.

"I don't see the sense in it," Brockles complained aloud.

"You will in another few months," Anthony told him. "I'll write a letter about what an accomplished hand you are in waiting on a gentleman's table. That's worth a situation better than running baskets to the pub."

"You never would," Brockles scoffed as he began folding a napkin to a flower shape. "Who ever heard of a gentleman helping a fellow up in the world?"

"Whoever heard of a gentleman living like a common craftsman?" Anthony asked back. "If you wanted a proper education, you would have let on by now."

Brockles laughed heartily at the idea. "No. I'll take the reference right enough, but school was a wasted effort on me, years gone."

Brockles tipped his hat, picked up his basket and marched out, leaving a beautifully set table behind. Suzanne had been lost in the flurry of china and utensils. Even now, she was unsure what to do about having been served breakfast by a butler in miniature.

"I thought an Englishman was never served at breakfast," Suzanne put forward in a strained voice.

"An English gentleman isn't," Anthony agreed. "I, however, am merely en masquerade every day. Much like you are. I won't insult you by pretending I didn't prove that last night."

"So you are no gentleman and don't mean to be," Suzanne said. "We agree on that much, at least."

"I have an excuse for my lewdness," Anthony said. "You do not. Nor do you have an excuse for knowing how to read quite well, or a working knowledge of classical mythology. Can you speak Latin?"

"I... a little..." Suzanne tried to dodge.

"Latin and, I presume also, mathematics are not unknown to you," Anthony said, like an accusation. "You'll get caught out by nearly anyone you meet, especially those stationed above you in life. But even more among those who once were beneath you."

"Why should I meet my betters?" Suzanne laughed. "I went to a girl's school, learned what was taught and am here to support myself."

"Parlez vous Francais?" Anthony asked.

"I don't speak French," Suzanne replied, confused.

"Don't be so tedious, Miss Thatcher. What school teaches girls Latin before French?" Anthony brushed his own question aside with the back of his hand. "Never mind all that. You will learn to walk and dress as a model, en travestie or otherwise. Once you're that attractive, the rest will seem like nothing."

"Why do you seem to insist that I will go on modeling for you?" Suzanne asked. "If all you can do is deride my accomplishments and question my honesty, my career with you will be a short one."

"You are quite accomplished for a gentleman," Anthony said. "Please, forgive my direct remark. You need a greater mask to wear than the one you have devised. Greyson will never let you return to the paint shop unless I give my word. I could, of course, reveal what I know to keep you here, but to that depth I will not stoop. I intend to make you want to stay."

"You can't teach me not to know so much," Suzanne smiled her amusement at him. "I think I do better than you know."

"You're eking out a living among the drudges because you don't know any other honorable way to survive," Anthony said, his tone cold as ice. "I'm suggesting you try something less than honorable. If a person less observant had noticed your little secret, you would be in the Bailey this very moment for crimes against nature. You live in hiding, whether you admit that to yourself or not. I don't wish to see you suffer the worst of what could happen."

"Can you really think that you have magic in your fingertips? That with beauty, you can change the world?" Suzanne scoffed. "You should run away to the Bohemians next, when you're done saving poor little me."

"I did, once upon a time," Anthony confessed. "I would have stayed away, but for the cooking and the politics. I know you have the art in you. I think you felt it in your brush. Now, I'd like to see if we can find it in your body as well."

Suzanne tensed, half-expecting another pounce from Anthony. He did come closer but only to sit across from her at the table. He laced his fingers under his chin, and took her in from head to toe. "All right, eat."

"What?" Suzanne breathed, utterly surprised.

"No more than three or four bites of what's before you," Anthony specified. "Your main concern is my entertainment, my opinion and anything at all you might do to please your dining partner."

"You have lost your mind," Suzanne said, pressed beyond all credulity.

"No, I've lost a different organ entirely," Anthony said. "But before we dissolve in hilarity over my foibles, let us correct your manners."

Suzanne blinked rapidly, saw that he was in earnest, and began serving food onto his plate. She struggled to keep the table neat, and fill the long silences with chatter that felt rather forced indeed. At last, she struck upon the notion of asking him questions and trying to memorize his replies.

At length, Anthony began to smile and relax. Though she was ravenously hungry, she saw his eyes measuring not only how much she ate, but how and when she managed to get a bite in. Eventually she realized that both she and the meal were present for his pleasure alone.

When at last his plate was clean, she was still mildly hungry but not ravenous as she had been. Anthony summoned Brockles and Suzanne had to watch as the leftovers were carried away. When they were alone, Anthony took out a cigarette and began to smoke, ignoring her longing glances towards the fragrant tobacco.

"You have only scratched the surface of what it is when a goddess walks the earth," Anthony said, gesturing with his cigarette. "You have what others envy. Those who desire you may not draw near. And in the presence of any earthly god, from the most lowly to Zeus himself, you are weak and powerless."

"That's not true," Suzanne protested.

"But every woman pretends that it is true," Anthony said. "If you wish to be among their number, you'd better learn to tell their lies."

Suzanne opened her mouth to retort, then closed her lips with an effort. "Yes, Anthony. As you wish."

Suzanne had no trouble setting the hours for Anthony. She knew how to mind the clock, and he was hopeless in that regard. She spent many hours in her Athena regalia, but Anthony changed the pose again and again, even criticizing her posture and carriage.

"If I'm so terrible at this, why do you persist?" Suzanne finally demanded.

"I persist for my own whim," Anthony replied. "If I did it only to vex you, the exercise should go on just the same. Drop your chin, I don't want to look up your nose."

"Oh, for..." Suzanne felt her mouth draw down into a hard, thin line. But she dropped her chin and sighed loudly.

"You're to be my goddess, not my petulant prima donna," Anthony coldly informed her. "I am the primo around here, and don't forget."

"Should I bow?" Suzanne gritted out, then she forced a smile.

Anthony threw his pencil aside in irritation, stood abruptly and clasped his hands to his hair. His eyes flashed with barely contained rage, and he stalked about the room with great thumping of his boots. He glared at wax and paper, clay and drawings but most of all, his sudden anger poured out silently over Suzanne.

"What in the world do you want from me?" he finally snarled. "Shall I rain compliments? You are beautiful and intelligent and profoundly insecure. Don't try to interrupt me! You are charming when you let your uncertainty show. But when you let confusion provoke your temper, you are absolutely intolerable."

"And these are compliments?" Suzanne asked, then gasped at the changes she heard in her own voice. The scorn and rasping tone quite startled her. She swallowed hard and made her speech come more quietly. "Nevertheless, I attend your every word."

"Her voice was ever soft and low, an excellent thing in a woman," he said, as if quoting. "I know you are accustomed to a certain degree of independence, but that must stop. Even if you don't stick with me, you must become a woman of quality for your own purposes."

"I want to..." Suzanne glanced out the window, towards the workshops. "It's not that I want to get up above myself. It's that I had to be less than I was once, to even get close to happiness. But even with what I've done, I don't yet feel..."

"Happy," Anthony finished for her. "Now. Straight spine, low chin, shoulders rolled as I have told you... and just relax. Let the shape of your costume guide your pose. Let your breath fall full and deep."

Suzanne breathed deeply and felt her breast swell against the plate of the costume armor. Her spine relaxed and settled, balancing the weight of the armored skirt about her hips. She held the shield more easily and felt a strange, exciting tension in her rear as she felt her body shift.

"Good girl," Anthony crooned. "Now relax your knees, let your hips go, yes... there..."

Suzanne glanced down at him, surprised and pleased. "Aren't you going to draw me, then?"

"No. Put down the spear," Anthony said, and came to take it from her. "I want you to step down, walk across the room and sit at the table."

Suzanne started to hop down from the posing box, then checked herself and stepped slowly, trying to keep from flashing all her smooth thighs at Anthony. Whatever protections she had thought she might enjoy against men, Anthony was immune to. He went to lean against the wall, hands shoved deep into his pockets as he watched her obey.

"Chin lower, eyes forward, spine very straight and tuck those hips forward," Anthony said, as if repeating himself. "I want that ass firm and plump as a fresh peach."

"I just bet you do," Suzanne quipped.

"Shame on you, young lady!" Anthony cried. "Better to say you don't know what I mean, or go faint with shock than make light of such a remark on your person!"

"But I'm not shocked," Suzanne said.

"That hardly recommends your ladylike history at a charming school for young women," Anthony said. "Pretend you have modesty until you begin to forget the rough side of your tongue and mind."

"But..." Suzanne hesitated. "I don't want to forget. Not all of it. Some of it was... quite exciting. At school, I mean. You must know the kinds of students I was among."

"Oh, my dear," Anthony sighed. "Did someone take advantage of you?"

"Well..." Suzanne said, then felt the words try to stick in her throat. "There was a time when I didn't know any better. I had no idea that the handsome young gentlemen I met might... accept my admiration. For a while, I didn't realize how I might be despised if people knew the truth about me."

"Don't be afraid to tell me the truth," Anthony encouraged. "I want to know everything about you."

Suzanne found she could not sit still. She rose too quickly and found her previous, comfortable attitude. Wandering about that bright, colorful room, the place seemed a whole different world from the one she remembered.

"I'm not really ashamed of what I did," Suzanne said, trying to sound bold and careless. "I was very young, and more eager to be liked than I was sensible. At first I thought there was only friendship on his mind."

Suzanne wandered to the desk and started toying with the drawings there. "One night he came to my room. He had a battle, and shared it with me. I... think he kissed me first. I'm almost certain."

"You were ravished," Anthony said, in a calm and neutral tone.

Something in his voice made her smile. There was a tension in her belly, familiar and hot, that sank deeper into her. The cheeks of her ass clenched flutteringly, as she remembered those youthful, somewhat furtive embraces.

"He didn't force or wound me," Suzanne finally said. "I wouldn't put it much past surprising me. I knew it was immoral... sinful... but I hardly cared. I've improved myself since, but I'm not unaware of my own appeal."

"Don't mistake my instructions as insults," Anthony said, almost pleading. "You know too much to quite imitate the youthful innocence I still see in you. Think of me as you do that boy from school. I'm impetuous, uncontrollably attracted to you, but with a difference. I truly do care for you, and will wait for you to know how you feel about me."

"I may never know what to think of you," Suzanne said, and turned slowly to face him. She took in his fine figure once more, and saw a raw and fragile emotion shining in his eyes. "But I know what I feel. Once more, I know what I desire is wrong... and yet I desire you... wholeheartedly."

Anthony pushed away from the wall and came to her side. His hand rose slowly, reaching out to caress her bare back. He leaned in close and murmured low into her ear.

"If you tell me I must wait, play the gentleman to the mask of your elegance, I shall," he whispered. "But if you wish to have more than art and artifice, more than masks between us, you may depend upon my discretion."

"I can't bear it if, one day, you will look on me with disgust," Suzanne confided. "My appetites are... crude in the extreme, by any standard."

"Anything you desire," Anthony said like a promise. "I will never pass a moment's judgment on you, no matter what you may reveal."

Suzanne turned to him then, looked up into his eyes and leaned closer. His mouth fell on hers, lips crushing her in a kiss. She gasped and he plunged deeper, tongue flicking deftly over hers until she moaned. Her whole body rushed hot and hungry as she yielded to his embrace, all fears and self-recriminations falling to ash in the inferno of her sudden, total craving.

Her knees sagged under her and she slid to the floor, arms wrapping around him in a desperate grasp. She thrust her face against his pants, breathing greedily at his musky scent. Her lips pressed again and again to the stone-hard length of his shaft as she picked open the buttons of his fly with her teeth.

"Clever girl," Anthony chuckled, low and lusty.

He reached down and freed his cock from his pants, then guided the slick tip to trace her lips. She opened her mouth and flicked her tongue out, lapping at the sweet drops of his precome. She looked up at him through eyes half-lidded with pleasure. She gently pushed his foreskin back with her lips and drew the tip of his cock into her mouth.

His head rocked back and he moaned, both of his hands grasping at her hair. She wrapped her arms about his hips, her hands clutching at his tense and rolling ass. She breathed only through her nose as her tongue circled and circled around the pulsing plum of his cock head. Her pleasure-laden cries were muffled by his flesh, but vibrated all along the length of him.

She tightened her arms around his hips, urging him deeper. He responded instantly, thrusting smoothly into her throat, filling her deeply, sparking hungers she had almost forgotten existed. She bobbed her head urgently over his cock, sucking and pulling at him, desperate to taste his come and claim his satisfaction.

"Ohhhhhh Suzanne," he moaned, hands clenching tighter in her hair. "So beautiful..."

She dropped one hand to her lap, grasped her own throbbing phallus and stroked herself with confident, easy rolls of her hips. Fused to him, filled and burning, she humped fast and strong against her own palm. He poured his heat down into her, gasping and groaning, lost in his unbridled desire.

She could not look away from his face, though the surge and retreat of his cock made her eyes run with tears and turned her breaths into helpless sobs. He only took her deeper, harder, and his lips drew back in a wide, wild, feral grin. The whole length of him pulsed and jerked in her throat, on her tongue and she drank his love up greedily.

The scent and taste and passion fused within her and overwhelmed her, pouring out of her as her hips bucked and her fingers clenched, drawing out every tremor. Her scent

mixed with his and she clung to him, panting, sticky, sweaty and satisfied on levels she could barely dare admit to herself.

Finally, he stepped back, then leaned down to kiss her swollen lips. "I think we must not rely on my studio for these private moments," he murmured through his kiss.

"Anything you say, Anthony," she dreamily replied.

"That's my good girl," he chuckled, and drew her up to stand once more. They clung together then, shaking and well pleased with their mutual understanding.

As she dressed for going to shop the next morning, Suzanne was startled by a knock on her door. She made one last check of herself in the mirror before answering, expecting that perhaps Alice or Bella had come to go along with her. She was deeply startled to find Brockles standing there, cap in hand, looking loaded with self-importance right up to the eyebrows.

"Yes?" Suzanne asked in as neutral a tone as possible.

"You're to come, Ma'am, directly, quick as you can get your things to travel," Brockles announced. "You'll be going on to London, and I'm to carry your bags down to the street for you."

Suzanne tried not to sputter at his hopeful, yet commanding tone. "I suppose you're here on Mister Nicks' orders?"

"Nobody else can order me," Brockles proudly informed her. "There was a real row at the pub before sunset, but I'm to go on with him now that it's all settled. I might go on and learn to read a bit, too."

"That doesn't tell me why I'm to come on this adventure," Suzanne pointed out.

"Cause Nicks says and you're to obey, Miss," Brockles said, as if this were entirely obvious. "Unless you're already trying to get y'self sacked, Miss."

"It's Saturday," Suzanne protested. "And I don't recall my duties including sudden trips to London."

Brockles' mouth dropped open in complete shock. "Your job's to do what you're told when you're told it, Miss, unless you got a pot of gold stuffed under your pillow!"

Suzanne shifted her weight from foot to foot, caught on the horns of a dilemma. Young Brockles took her for a penniless factory girl, which she was. Perhaps he was old enough to know the dire straits some girls came to by seeking employment. Though she knew herself well enough to accept and enjoy what Anthony was up to with her, a younger and more naive girl would have been in very real danger of this obedience.

"How... how long will I be gone?" she asked, trying to stall for time to think.

"Lawks, Ma'am, how much do you have to pack?" Brockles asked back, trying to peer around her skirt into the room.

She let the door swing wide to his curiosity. "Not much, as you can see."

"Then it don't matter how long you're to go," Brockles laughed. "If they let the room to someone else while you're away, find another."

"Oughtn't I tell someone where I'm going?" Suzanne asked as she began to gather up her things.

"Got anyone to tell?" Brockles wondered.

"Not really," Suzanne admitted.

"Then there you go," Brockles said. He dragged her bag off a shelf and held it for her while she packed her meager collection of clothes and vanities.

Suzanne fished out her little purse of saving and hid that on her person. Then, almost as an afterthought, she dragged out a box of books and paint boxes that had lain unpacked since she had arrived. Though Brockles looked ready to take on the whole load, she traded box for bag and was ready as she could make herself be.

Brockles marched ahead of her out of the boarding house and into the busy street. He made way for her through the bustling traffic until they came to a narrow side street. There, he went to a carriage, which stood waiting. He handed up her box and bag to the driver, and then opened the door for her. Within, Anthony sat waiting, impatience and worry etched in the lines on his brow.

"Good morning, Mister Nicks," Suzanne greeted, smiling pleasantly. Brockles gave her a hand up into the carriage and she settled down opposite the disgruntled artist. "I hope it is a good morning?"

"It isn't," Anthony shortly replied. "There was a commission to be arranged to weeks from now, which has been changed to Monday with no warning whatsoever."

"How does this concern me?" Suzanne inquired.

"Everything I do is urgent, these days," Anthony said, sounding weary. "I'll be working double... no... triple time. I need you to be available, if for nothing but the modeling. But I hope to make up for this imposition somehow, among all the rest."

"Well, at least you know that this is an imposition," Suzanne said, and found a forgiving smile. "Though it borders on romantic kidnap."

Anthony laughed, surprised, then rapped hard on the roof of the carriage. Soon they were rolling down the busy street, making for the country highway. Though the equipage rumbled and jostled, the ride was much smoother and comfortable than her previous travels had led her to expect.

"I can't help but think this isn't a hired rig," Suzanne mentioned.

"No, it's Mister Grayson's," Anthony said. "Loaned due to the urgency of his need. I've tried to become accustomed to the demands of business. All I have learned is to be demanding and impossible as frequently as possible."

"What could possibly be so very urgent?" Suzanne laughed. "All he does is make cups and plates and things."

"Ah, well... it's not about what he makes," Anthony explained. "We're concerned with who may buy. One substantial order from a quality customer can mean a dozen workers

still making pay. If it were only my money at stake I would not go, but circumstances being what they are..."

"I was supposed to go shopping today," Suzanne sighed. "I suppose that's not much to miss out on."

"No, you shall have all the shopping you like, and in better stores," Anthony said. "I won't have you miss out on something you obviously were anticipating. I shall make a real pest of myself with flattery and indulgence of your every whim. Only do exactly as I say, and abide my every instruction while we are there."

"I can hardly imagine what you have in store for me. Really, I should thank you for this opportunity," Suzanne said. "If I had been able to anticipate the journey, I should have been much more grateful to come."

"Well, enjoy it now, and see if you can't build up some expectations on the way there," Anthony suggested. He reached over and raised the blinds on the windows. Outside the day was growing sunny and bright. Suzanne leaned forward eagerly, taking in the colors and vistas. "Do you enjoy the rustic landscapes?"

"I like all kinds of landscapes," Suzanne said. "You're lucky I put my paints in with my baggage. Otherwise, we would both be spattered from my trying to copy it down while we're on the move."

"I'm just the same," Anthony easily admitted. "Though at the moment I think I would prefer a study of the fine figure before me."

Suzanne felt herself blush at the bold compliment. "Go on as you do, and I'll begin to believe you care for me."

Anthony grinned roguishly, crossed his arms over his chest, stretched his leg out



along his seat and made the most of his strong, handsome figure. Perhaps you would prefer to think I'm heartless and cold. Perhaps, for a time, I have been. But for you... I begin to envy the very schoolboys who have an excuse when they let their passions sweep them away on a merry, loving chase. I, however, am inexcusable."

"Why do you think you need an excuse?" Suzanne chuckled.

"Because on one hand, I must insist you conduct yourself as a lady," Anthony explained. "Whereas on the other hand, I wish only to quite do away with any maidenly virtues you may yet possess."

"Is that not the dilemma most men face?" Suzanne smiled. "But you are lucky, Mister Nicks. The object of your designs is perfectly aware of this double standard. I wouldn't be confused and ruined as a young, well-bred child might be. In fact, I quite enjoy the challenge."

"You will get all the challenge you like, in London," Anthony said. "You're not likely to go unnoticed if I swain you about. There are those who are bound to notice you, as I did, and have far worse designs on your character than I could ever allow."

"As if I don't have enough to worry about," Suzanne said, and gave a rueful chuckle. "I really shouldn't be out and about like this. If I'm seen by the wrong people, I would certainly be recognized."

Anthony frowned deeply, very confused, then burst out laughing. "Oh, no! I don't mean anyone of real society being anywhere near me. I only know that there are those who would covet you, if they saw you. If you have some sheep-witted relations to avoid, then I shall be very useful to you indeed."

"I want to believe you," Suzanne said. "I wish it were so simple, but I do think you are quite mistaken."

"Why?" Anthony asked. "Are you an heir on the run?"

"No."

"Husband in flight from his responsibilities?"

"Certainly not!"

"Ahhh... then you can be no more than a poor relation in the act of failing his potential," Anthony said, sounding very confident. He reached out and patted her hand. "Were you helped to an education? Afraid of being caught ruining the family name?"

Suzanne bit her lip and looked out the window, but knew she couldn't hide her guilty blushing. "I have no reason to complain of what was asked of me. I'm simply incapable, and am more a credit for admitting that much. Their expectations are as unlikely to change as I am."

"Do you miss them?" Anthony gently inquired.

"We barely knew each other," Suzanne sighed. "My father asked his brother to look after me. Uncle tried, but... what could he do? The kindest thing was to let me go and let me be my own ruin. I might have ended up in an asylum if he had taken his promise more seriously."

"That doesn't answer the question," Anthony observed.

Suzanne kept her eyes on the lovely vista that spread out before her window. She tried to think of an honest answer. Did she truly miss that world, and what her place had been? For a certainty, its loss had not been enough to keep her on the straight and narrow path. But there she had been surrounded by elegance and beauty, when she wasn't crammed away with books and study. The real prison had been made of gentleman's clothes and nothing more, but the oppression had been enough to force her choices.

"I was never much of a gallant," Suzanne said. "But I loved watching the young ladies. I simply could not get over the question of how they did what they do. Beyond that amusement, I would wish nothing different for myself."

"I will try to devise a suitable consolation," Anthony said, then reached out and took her hand. "You can not make a good secret of even the least of your connections, my dear. It is written on your lovely face, the thoughtful quality of your speech, the way you understand expectations, and worry over your faults."

"Do I really stand out so badly?" Suzanne asked, surprised.

"Among the worker bees at the pottery? Most certainly," he said, trying to be gentle. "You have taste and refinements you imagined of your peers there, but which they did not possess. Though you don't know you're a flower, it was obvious among the weeds."

"You flatter me quite effectively," Suzanne said. "However, I can't help but notice I've been plucked and carried off from even that small bit of safe haven."

"You'll soon be more suitably arranged," Anthony said, like a promise. "It's not much of a step, from poor relation to kept woman. Many lesser girls have made that fall. You have time to decide if you will give up all hope of respectability for mere earthly happiness. I did, and have few regrets for it."

"You were kept?" Suzanne asked, voice squeaky with shock.

"I was loved," Anthony snapped, whole body going tense. "And later, I was alone."

Suzanne's hands fluttered in her lap, and she stuttered out an apology, trying to soothe that sudden mood shift in him.

"Oh... Suzanne, I'm sorry," Anthony sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I was nothing much, third son of five children and quite expendable. My family is nothing but merchants, but I might have done better. Instead, I'm an artist and a businessman. My father maintains that he is ashamed, but I haven't yet been truly cast out. You might finish me off. I would be quite grateful if you did."

"Are they really so intolerable?" Suzanne asked, concerned.

"They are expensive," Anthony laughed. "My eldest brother will get a fortune, and I am alone among the youngers in trying to make my own. That leaves sisters to marry off, a brother of no account, and future additions that surely must be fed. I suspect my sisters will hang on to John, and I will be stuck with that golden leech, Edward."

"I must admit to enjoying my freedom from such arrangements," Suzanne said, though Anthony seemed on the verge of real anger. "Perhaps I can find a way to be helpful, should such impositions continue to be made on you."

Anthony shook himself all over, as if startled. Then he leaned his cheek on his palm and put on a don't-care smile. "No, don't worry on that. Anyone who counts on me deserves the starvation he will probably get. I'm accustomed to being spoiled. I lately find I enjoy doing some spoiling when I can, but it's nothing like reliability."

Suzanne let him think she had been convinced, but saw the very real worry in his eyes. They ought to have been lighthearted over this sudden holiday, but their moods really seemed quite as one. Anthony abandoned his languid pose and sat up very straight, trying to re-acquire his respectable posture once more.

Without thinking, Suzanne suddenly switched seats, settling back next to Anthony and folding her hands in her lap. She smiled wide at him, then leaned even closer to speak in a conspirator's whisper.

"I think we've both been quite put out of our way by these sudden business dealings," she confided. "I'm all for pandering to the quality, of course. I simply feel that we ought to behave as badly as ever we can manage. It may serve to discourage such impositions in the future."

"Or at least make clear what the price of future imposition is likely to be," Anthony agreed with a chuckle. He leaned closer, breathed in her scent. "God, Suzanne, what I would give to kiss you now."

"What would you give?" Suzanne teasingly inquired.

"A new wardrobe for you, of fine quality, to suit my ideas of you," Anthony promptly replied.

"Then please, kiss all you like," Suzanne brightly replied.

Anthony blinked, startled by her sudden capitulation. Suzanne's breasts tightened with real pleasure at his hungry regard. He had not expected her compliance... perhaps had momentarily forgotten what lay just below the mask. He might have seen that it was no mask at all. Nevertheless, his surprise lasted only an instant.

Then his arms were around her, lifting her as easily as he had on the day they had met. He settled her on his lap, stretched out over the seat, leaning her comfortably against his chest. His mouth was hard and hungry as he teased her lips open and seemed to feed upon her kisses, tongue flicking in and out like he was lapping at her soft sighs and moans.

Suzanne looped her arms around his shoulders and relaxed into his embrace, letting the sway of the carriage rock her over his lap. She felt his cock grow warm and firm against her ass, and snuggled down against that tension. Anthony reached out to lower the blinds again, but never broke their kiss.

In the dim and shadowy privacy of the carriage, he made a study of her body with his fingertips. Their lips met and clung and slid apart time and again as his hands roamed over her back and bosom, down the curve of her belly, and along the columns of her legs. She squirmed helplessly as shivers rushed up her spine and tensed her thighs together.

"Have you kept shaved for me?" he asked against her lips.

"Yes, Anthony," she murmured, and smiled proudly rather than blushing with embarrassment.

"I believe you," Anthony said. "But I'll be checking just the same when we get to town."

"Yes, Anthony."

"If you've been a good girl, then I think you will have more than earned your rewards," Anthony said. "Just stay where I've put you until I say move, and when we have arrived, we shall see."

She held tight to him then, and writhed under his hands, though reward was the least of what she anticipated at journey's end.

The road to London had faded to a blur of deep kisses, post-houses to change horses, and little else. Even returning to the city hadn't really made much impact on her. She felt like she was adrift on the heady sea of pleasure onto which Anthony had launched her.

There had been a flurry at the small but decent hotel where she was consigned to Anthony and Brockles' wake. All questions were answered on her behalf, and most decisions made without her consultation. Brockles was sent up to manage the occupation of a suite for their stay. Suzanne was left ignorant of this fact until she was led back out of the lobby and into the mellow afternoon sunlight.

"Where are we going?" she murmured, and gave Anthony's arm a gentle tug.

"Heaven," Anthony said, and turned an adoring smile on her. "For you, it will be pure heaven, I do assure you."

"Shouldn't I go change clothes then?" Suzanne wondered, hands clutching at her dusty skirts.

"To what? Brockles saw you pack. Don't dawdle, my jewel," Anthony said, and led her along on his arm with great ceremony, but very little sincerity.

Suzanne rested her fingertips on his arm and followed eagerly as he led her to a small hired carriage. She had thought she was quite exhausted and irritable after the long journey. Anthony's cheerful, childish good mood was infectious. She focused on that, instead of the city smell and the strata of humanity that pressed in at all sides.

This ride was much more bumpy, but thankfully the journey was a short one. Anthony led the way out onto the curb and up to a brightly painted storefront. The many-paneled window at the street was stacked deep with charming French gowns and solid but pretty English fabrics. Suzanne froze on the spot, gaping at the sight, but Anthony had his hand at the door and clearly intended to go inside.

Anthony turned around at the tug of her balk. "What in the world is it now, my girl?"

"Are you trying to seduce me?" Suzanne demanded.

"It's a little late to be asking that, don't you think?" Anthony chuckled. "If I am trying, I'd think we're more than halfway there. Come inside and let me finish the job."

Suzanne smiled brightly at him. "Of course you're right, Mister Nicks. Carry on, I just wanted to be sure of your intentions."

Then it was Anthony's turn to look surprised beyond all reason. He laughed off his startlement and opened the door, calling out, "Lenora! I need you!"

"That's what they all say, m'dear." A merry, mellow voice rolled out from the dusty-fragrant depths of the shop.

Suzanne walked in behind Anthony and met a woman who looked more like a rustic mamma than a city shopkeeper. Suzanne tried to smile prettily and said, "How do you do, ma'am?"

Lenora's eyes nearly bugged out of her head as she caught sight of Suzanne. "Oh no, young squire. This one will be far too expensive for you."

"Nonsense, my dear," Anthony said, and ushered Suzanne to a small chair by the wall. "Ring up the girl for tea and let's see what you have ready-made, to being with."

"You look full of ideas," Lenora said, sounding very suspicious. Nevertheless, she rang a small glass bell while Anthony went to a table and began unpacking his ever-present portfolio.

Suzanne wanted to see what Anthony had brought along, but a pretty young girl with ringlet curls came out with a laden tea tray. The pale porcelain of her complexion was rivaled only by the smooth, white dress that held her in with edges of blue silk ribbon. The girl moved lightly in kid slippers and made an artful entertainment of serving the tea.

She carried steaming cups to Anthony and Lenora, who were bent over the stacks of sketches. Suzanne watched the girl move in all that lace flounce with real envy. It was a childish desire, something left over and lingering from ages ago. The girl made a dimpled simper, then spoke to Lenora in rapid, trilling French.

"Don't be saucy about Suzanne," Anthony mildly reproached before Lenore could reply. "I'll have the very gown from your back for her, if I like."

"But I'm the prettier one!" the girl exclaimed, horrified. "So I get the prettiest dress! Just ask Mamma, she'll tell you how it is."

"You're too old for it, and those childish manners," Lenora snapped. There would have been more, but another door opened and Lenora cried, "Ah! The stock, yes. I hope something will be acceptable for you."

"You see, I think she will fit as well as your models do," Anthony said. "You can't add in for alterations that you won't need to make. Just look at her."

Suzanne tried not to gasp, but the effort was a failure. She settled for not letting her jaw hang open like a bumpkin as velvet and silk, cottons and brocades, embroidery and lace of all kinds were brought out in styles usually appealing to young girls not yet out in society. The models came quite close, letting her make full inspection of their offerings.

Her fingers wandered over softness and seams. She tried to be sensible, judge quality and crafting, but the rich jewel tones and soft pastels, furs and soft embellishments held

her quite captivated. She kept glancing up at Anthony, a question on her lips that she never quite managed to form before a new confection was brought for her to admire.

"She has no idea what she wants," Anthony chuckled to Lenora. "I think she can be easily managed and contained. She's not to be coming out this season, anyway, so do be sensible, my dear."

"She can also hear you," Suzanne remarked. She drew her hand back reluctantly and thought of her own meager fortune. She looked Anthony over, and this time forced herself to be truly quite sensible indeed. "Do as you please, Anthony. The Good Lord knows I can't stop you."

"Nice to know you see it my way," Anthony said. "You're no society flower, so you'll have to settle for the simplicity of youth while you can still get away with it."

"But you've no excuse to look like a sack of potatoes either," Lenora said, coming at Suzanne. She was clearly working up a head of steam. "You'll have plenty of fine frocks to suit that figure. Don't fret that, my child. We just can't have men looking on you and wanting what they can't have. You'll have to rely on your..." Lenora hesitated and raised an inquiring eyebrow at Anthony.

"Let's call her my ward, for now," Anthony said. "Entrusted to my care, and the object of my indulgence."

As Lenora went all over Suzanne with a tape measure, she and Anthony chattered brightly about style and impressions. They laughed at each other, endlessly trying to top the other in an argument of good taste. Suzanne quickly understood that they had solutions for her problems that she had never before imagined.

Lenora finally desisted measuring Suzanne and stood her up very straight and tall. Then Suzanne had to suffer through having her posture corrected in a million tiny ways. Anthony's attentions had already gotten her used to that sort of tyranny. When Lenora was satisfied, she took Suzanne off and tugged at her corset until some ideal but painful effect was achieved.

Suzanne felt herself relax into the restriction and correction of her own clothing. This time, the stays of the corset held her perfectly to the attitude, which Anthony had so struggled to teach her. She looked at herself in the mirror and lifted her chin, letting pure pride put a sparkle in her deep blue eyes.

"There, see? Your breath will come more easily now," Lenora said. "You won't have problems with fainting spells."

"I never did have problems with fainting spells," Suzanne said, surprised.

"You'll have to learn to have them, for my clothes won't give them to you," Lenora replied. "I suppose it's too much to hope you know how to dance."

"I know how," Suzanne sniffed. "I simply do not. Nor do I foresee any reason why I should."

"She's not going to a ball," Anthony said, in rather a firm tone. "I won't have her head turned by the foolish worshippers of fashion and fancy. She's too perfect a muse to see ruined."

"You may have good intentions, my boy, but you know you won't be able to resist," Lenora laughed. "You'd better make claims on this one now before your weak will become your undoing. There's more than one ready to charm her away, as you say."

"Just dress her like she has never, nor never will, leave her Papa's home," Anthony said, very final. "You've got Gina turned around backwards from rushing her along towards society. I'd rather have a naive child on my arm than a falsely elegant debutante."

"But she's an old maid," Gina put in from her position behind the tea tray. "Fancy her up or keep her at home. That's what old maids are for, and why I'll never be one."

Anthony reached over and flicked her ear with a hard finger. "One more word out of you and I'll put it round to the local boys what a rude, greedy baby you really are."

Gina looked up at him, eyes wide and wounded. "But... last time... you said how charming you found me."

Suzanne burst out laughing at the little girl's pouting jealousy. "Keep an eye on that child, Anthony. She's old enough to have designs on you already."

"Well, since she's decided to become a fashionable young lady she has lost the charm she had as a girl," Anthony said, coldly dismissing the girl's infatuation. "Why don't you try for me, Suzanne?"

"As long as I'm not left to the breeze as I was in that armor," Suzanne politely agreed. "I'll try to be a spangled lady if you like, but I hardly think it suits me."

"My dear, you have sapphires in your eyes and spun gold in your hair," Lenora said. "Your complexion is fine as alabaster. But there's a freshness and joy that exceeds callow youth. If you can bear to forego the freaks and rush of fashionability, I would instead make you dignified. I'm afraid your figure was made for admiration."

"I don't wish to seem available to the highest bidder, as marriageable young ladies so often are," Suzanne agreed. "Besides, I earn my daily bread. I have no business imitating those weak, useless ornaments to society. I certainly never will be one."

"Sensible girl," Lenora approved. "Once Anthony makes his sensation at the shops, the rumors will fly about him. But that makes no need for you to be caught up in his reputation."

"Just wait until you see that Athena," Suzanne confided with a laugh. "He's determined to ruin me, one way or another."

Lenora frowned at Anthony then, and stalked out of the shop to the back room. When she returned, she carried a bundle of white paper. She unfolded from it a dress that would have been perfect, had Suzanne actually attended a respectable school for young ladies. Her hands rose on their own to touch the full, navy blue skirts and fondle the golden-yellow velvet edging. The puff sleeves, lace trim and voluminous skirts spoke to a part of her heart that she had thought was lost forever.

"You're not too old," Lenora said. "You only need to shed a little of that independent air, to be fitting in such pretty clothes."

"Yes, thank you," Suzanne murmured. "I will."

The time spent with Madame Lenora was heaven, as Anthony had promised. Suzanne supposed it was rather peculiar for her heart to have fluttered over the styles generally left to young ladies not yet presented to society as suitable to wed. Some part of her felt that she had missed out on something, along the way. Anthony had no wry jokes to offer on the topic, so Suzanne felt pretty well satisfied with her adventure.

Standing before Lenora's mirror, wearing a dress of blue and grey striped silk, hair gathered back so all her blonde curls spilled down her back, she felt fresh and innocent. The feel of little white boots on her feet and thin, fine stockings clinging to her thighs made her remember to keep her posture loose and tall.

Anthony took her on his arm and gave a slow, admiring caress to the silken bow in her hair. He petted the bow that fluffed wide at the base of her spine. She smiled proudly up at him as he led her back into the streets to find a hire cab. She heard him call a destination to the driver, but didn't recognize the name.

When the cab stopped at a brightly lit public house, she quirked a questioning frown up at him. He only patted her hand reassuringly and led her into the smoky, food-fragrant establishment. A buxom, florid woman led them to a pair of chairs at a long, highly polished wooden table already crowded with a number of well-dressed young gentleman and what looked like half the cast of a local theater still clinging to their costumes.

Anthony yelled an order to the pub girl, but Suzanne couldn't catch the sense of it in the general roar of greetings. Anthony helped her to sit, then began shaking hands all around. Suzanne kept herself well back in the lee of his shadow, not wanting to draw too much notice from all those strangers.

Anthony finally sat as well and smiled at her. "Do you like roasted beef?"

"I suppose so," Suzanne murmured.

"Well, if you don't, there will be plenty of cider to make up for it," Anthony chuckled.

"Now you can't water that young bird on cider," one of the men at the table scoffed. "Unless you mean for her head to pound like hammers and hellfire all day tomorrow."

"She needs some bucking up," Anthony excused. "She's bound to days of boring work anyway. Old Greyson smells gold somewhere here in town and brought his hound to find it for him."

"Then you won't mind keeping up with the rounds," A red-faced woman said, and guffawed at her own wit.

Nobody seemed inclined to speak with Suzanne directly, but several admiring glances came her way. To her surprise, these were not lust-laden leers, but more the winking smiles offered to girls too young to be considered as fair game. Suzanne sat up very straight, ate what was put before her and drank what Anthony gave her. The cider here was very strong indeed. She soon found it easy to smile up at Anthony with the quiet admiration he had so clearly earned.

"Ah, she's smitten," one of the women said in a motherly tone. "You've done well to get away from those slatterns and low hussies, young Mister Nicks. She just suits your delicate airs."

"You mean her face will sell well," a man laughed loudly. "You're in no place to speak poor of the working girls anyway. You already know every man that might be interested in this morsel."

"Not in front of the girl," Anthony warned mildly. The conversation spun off in another direction, leaving opinions of Suzanne in the dust.

Anthony was content to relax and enjoy a pipe of tobacco until someone pulled out a fiddle and a dance broke out around them. Anthony made some laughing remark about rough entertainment and hustled Suzanne out into the street once more. Though there were many cabs about, Anthony did not hail one. Instead of riding, they walked together through the dimly lamp-lit streets.

"I want you to look," Anthony said. "Scan the road with your eyes, but don't turn your head. You're already being watched, make no mistake about that. But I don't think I will allow you to have even the appearance of impropriety."

"But why?" Suzanne asked, staring wide-eyed at the women who offered themselves on street corners and from high windows. "I thought men liked to show off the woman he had made his own."

"No proud man truly wishes to be attached to women like these," Anthony murmured. "You have an idea of a girl's life, a pure dream, and I want you to keep it. These women are the least of my worries, however. You must beware of any man who would wish to reduce you to such circumstances. Don't pretend you're ignorant of men having such intentions."

"You're not worried about my behavior, or even my morals," Suzanne said in as low a tone as she could manage. "You're worried what will be whispered about your work, if the patrons knew about me."

"I'm making idols of you," Anthony laughed. "Of course you must be pure and unattainable. Even to me."

Suzanne laughed heartily at the very idea. "You don't fool me, Anthony. You're the very kind of man you just warned me against."

"Just so," Anthony agreed. "What you will seem to lack in sophistication, you will gain in reputation as an artist. In this way, you will find that there is no need to make a lewd offering of yourself as so many society women rush to do. They only have to charm one man. You have to charm them all, and surrender to none."

"That little Gigi was quite ridiculous, wasn't she?" Suzanne asked. "She can't be more than fourteen, and already trying to net a man your age."

"Yes, and you're only four years older than her. You're already a sensible girl, if only you will be content with that," Anthony said. "Your attractions should be reserved for the profit of your benefactor, if they're not being used for your personal benefit."

"If you mean only to take advantage of me, I think you would advise me quite differently," Suzanne observed.

"Oh, don't worry. I intend to take full use of my advantage," Anthony chuckled. "I simply don't intend to see either of us ruined over what I desire."

They turned a corner and finally, Suzanne saw a road she recognized. The signs of London's want and poverty washed up to the edges of their hotel's lights. Within the pool of illumination was an island of comfort and refuge. Suzanne hurried on to it, glad of a place to retire.

Anthony led her in, through the clean, well-kept lobby and up a shining staircase. On the third floor he took her to a door and produced a key for the lock. Within, Brockles lay sleeping on a lounge sofa set near the window. Two more doors led away from the front room. Anthony unlocked one of these, and led her into a lady's chamber.

She went to inspect the linens on the bed and heard the door lock. She turned, expecting to find herself alone. Instead she found that Anthony had locked them in together. A thrill rushed up her spine, but she stepped away from the bed, hand straining out to grip the edge of the vanity table.

"You ought to have a maid," Anthony said, wandering over to look out the window. "That would complicate matters somewhat, if you did. Do you think you can manage your dresses on your own?"

"I think so," Suzanne said, but bit her lip with uncertainty.

"Let me see you try," Anthony encouraged.

For a moment, Suzanne could not move. Though she had become accustomed to rather scanty attire at Anthony's request, the idea of disrobing before him was startling in the extreme. Even Madame Lenora had made much of Suzanne's modesty. Still, her hands went behind her back and untied the velvet flounce. She began loosening her buttons, but felt a warm, pink blush creep all over her skin.

She peeled back the pretty silk, the puff sleeves that had been caressing her shoulders. She stepped out of the dress, careful to keep the silk from getting crumpled on the floor. She turned quickly and hung the dress up, then folded her hands into her petticoats and turned back to face Anthony. Though he had seen her wearing less, she couldn't make herself meet his eyes.

"You're a charming girl," Anthony purred as he relaxed down on the window seat. "If you hadn't told me different, I'd almost think you were the pure virgin you look like."

Suzanne laughed, head falling back, golden curls caressing her spine. "A virgin would be crying and begging you not to look. Is that what you would really like?"

"No. I've played that game with more likely women. It isn't what I want," Anthony said. "You are."

Suzanne gasped as her heart skipped a beat. Then her pulse made up for lost time, spiking hard in her breast. Under her petticoats, her flesh began to tense, but couldn't stretch out in the lacy under things Lenora had fitted tight to her. Her thighs tensed and

pressed together, even as her bosom swelled, high and sensitive, against the frilly curves of her corset.

"Come here," Anthony said, voice low and rich with need.

Suzanne went to him, and stopped when her skirts brushed against his knees. He reached out and took her by the arms. He spread his legs as he drew her closer, his thighs pressing tight around hers, the firm heat of his cock radiating through her petticoats. He leaned in closer still, and pressed his cheek to her swelling bosom, breathing deeply of her scent. His mouth pressed gently at her tender, smooth skin. He held her arms to her sides like a warning, then began petting the folds of her petticoats.

He spoke directly against her skin. "One day, I'm going to have you perfectly naked, without a care in the world. But not now. Not tonight. That's not what you want, is it?"

"Please," Suzanne whispered.

His hands trailed down to the hem of her skirts, dipped underneath and started stroking her thin stockings. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, rocking against his strong palms as he found the patch of bare flesh between stockings and frilly panties.

"You're such a treasure," Anthony whispered. "You already know all about how I want you, and you're not afraid."

Suzanne leaned into his touch, remembered the hot length of his cock stretching her throat. She ought to have been nervous, knowing what she knew, but all she felt was a deep, burning need. Anthony's fingers hooked into her panties and drew them down slowly, setting her phallus free to rise and pulse among the soft folds of her petticoats.

He leaned forward, holding her panties so she could step free of them. He brought the lacy cotton up to his face and breathed deeply as if savoring her musky, hungry scent. He smiled up at her, and she shivered, watching a spark of passionate desire spring to life in his eyes.

He leaned back against the window, still clutching her panties in one hand. "I want you to go get on the bed. Get up on your hands and knees."

"How specific," Suzanne chuckled as she moved to obey. The velvet coverlet felt soft and cool under her palms as she stretched out, trying to relax her spine, find her balance, reaching for the symmetry Anthony had craved of her right from the start.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. A wide, welcoming smile stretched her lips, and her tongue snaked out as if seeking a lingering taste of him. Anthony got up and paced a semicircle, eyes taking her in from all angles before he sat down beside her.

His fingertips pressed in under her chin, raising her face up to meet his lips. His kiss was hard, like he was starving for her taste. His tongue forced her lips wide open, stroking deep and sure, owning her mouth with wet, hot tasting.

She moaned into his kiss, felt her whole body go liquid and soft. She tried to lean in closer but he broke away from her and stood up again, hands hurrying to toss his clothes aside. She twisted her hands into the velvet duvet to keep herself in place, and let her ass relax back and up, trying out a new pose on him.

His reaction was immediate and gratifying. He leapt upon the bed, a low rumble of desire pent up in his throat. His hands were caught up in her petticoats and he tossed all that softness and lace up over her back. Suzanne gasped at the sudden exposure of her pale, rounded ass. The excitement bubbled through her and she wriggled, laughter filling the air around them.

His soft, strong hands stroked over her hips, cupped her cheeks, then trailed down inside her thighs. Her ass flexed and relaxed, an offering that set her phallus trembling and aching. He grasped at her shaft, stretching moistened flesh back, letting cool air caress her throbbing, wet skin. He fondled the fleshy globes between her thighs, then leaned over her to nip at her neck and nuzzle her long, blond curls.

"I love you," he whispered against her ear. "Please, Suzanne, you have to know. That's God's honest truth. I love you."

"Show me," Suzanne purred, pumping her hips back, stroking her ass against the long, hard length of his cock. "Make me feel it, Anthony."

He seized her hips and pushed them up higher. The blunt, hot tip of his shaft pressed tight to her fluttering passage. She breathed deep, relaxed, and he must have seen that subtle shift in her body. Anthony thrust once, smooth and confident, moving hot and sure past that rebellious muscle. Half the length of his cock plunged against this crazily sensitive point buried deep inside her.

Suzanne moaned, whole body clenching at the firm cock spreading her wide and filling her deep. Her arms slid out from under her and he raised her ass higher, retreating only a little before stroking fully into her. She gasped and groaned, hearing his triumphant shout echo back off the walls, blending with her own. Then she turned her face to the sheets, pressing her cries down into the velvet.

His bare hips slapped loudly against her ass as he began to thrust, riding and grinding down into her, both strong hands guiding the fast rocking of her body. She let her knees slide wide apart, but he caught her legs in his hands, forcing them up against her sides until she was spread out like a moth. Her turgid phallus pressed down into the heated velvet duvet. Then he let her legs go, wrapped his arms under her. His clever fingers sought out the hot, hard nubs of her nipples amongst the froth of lace and flounce.

He grasped her nipples and twisted, thrust hard into her, sliding her whole body against the velvet. His arms bunched up around her, hands clasping to her heaving bosom. The pulse of his cock was shocking pure, the raw pleasure etched on her silk-smooth flesh, and deep inside her ass. The flex and pull of his arms around her, the maddening grasp on her nipples, both worked together to slide her fast and hot over his cock.

The friction of her body made the velvet under her grow hot as her own skin. She scrambled fast to work her hands down under her. Soft fistfuls of cloth came between her hands and her throbbing, needy phallus. Anthony laughed merrily against her back and slowed his thrusting, though he kept her riding him at a fast, steady pace.

"Are you close?" he teased, drawing his shaft out to the tip and leaning his weight on her when she tried to rise up and take more.

"Yes, yes," she was finally able to gasp, high-pitched and pleading.

He thrust deeply into her again and she groaned, whole body breaking out in sweat once more. Her legs flexed and pushed against the bed as he pounded down into her. She squeezed both hands tight around the velvet, pulling at her flesh, grinding and riding all that heat and need which he poured down into her with thrust after thrust.

"Do you love me?" he demanded, breathless and desperate at once.

"Ohhhhhh yes!" Suzanne screamed.

"Show me," Anthony insisted.

Her spine arched and snapped, ass clenching tight around him. Hot lust poured out of her with her cries, soaking the velvet in her hands. He drove her body back and up, over his cock again and again. His howl was loud and harsh against her hair as thick, burning seed poured out into her.

They tumbled down onto the pillows, laughing and gasping as they tangled up together. After they had caught their breath, Anthony hauled himself up and rolled out of bed, seeking his widely scattered clothing. Suzanne sat up, pushing her curls out of her eyes to watch him.

"I don't suppose you could stay," she said, heart clenching at the ending of this lovely evening.

"Not here," Anthony said as he fastened his pants. He did have the grace to look embarrassed. "There's just no such thing as privacy in a place like this. And Brockles has a nose for impropriety that you wouldn't believe of one so young."

"Of course," Suzanne murmured.

Anthony smiled in gratitude at her understanding, picked up his boots and came to claim a kiss. Suzanne surrendered to it, then started the long work of getting her own shoes off. Anthony went quietly from the room. The street outside sent up the clatter of nighttime labors. Despite that, in the quiet room Suzanne clearly heard the tumblers click in the door as it was locked from the outside.

The next morning was anything but restful. For an alarm, Suzanne had Brockles bumping in with stacks of bags and boxes. Once the boy was unloaded, she had to face the task of dressing herself. She felt some apprehension over the suddenly vast expanses of her wardrobe.

Once she got started, all worry fell away. She gave herself over to the temptation of stroking and petting the soft fabrics, but didn't yield to the idea of trying each item on once more. She was proud to present herself to Anthony at his breakfast table in the receiving room of their suite. The pale blue of her sailor-style day dress brought out the contrasts of blonde in her hair. Anthony took her in from little black boots to the straw hat she had perched on her curls.

"I wish nothing more than to keep you here before me all day long," Anthony said, and shifted on his chair, trying to ease an obvious bulging in his pants. "Sit. Eat. We've been imposed upon by our master."

Suzanne took her place across from him and helped herself to eggs and tomatoes on toast. "To what must we resign ourselves?"

"Pandering to the quality," Anthony grumbled around a mouthful of bacon. "A girl of your background should be well-versed in the practice. Can you do your part?"

Brockles hustled in before she could answer. "Carriage here, sir. Best to hustle on. You're a charming one this morning, Miss."

Suzanne thanked him and hurried to tie her hat again as she followed Anthony out of



the hotel. A grand city rig stood at the door. Anthony opened the door as if he had expected the splendid equipage. His hand felt strong and steady as he helped Suzanne up, so she clung to her hold as he sat down beside her.

"Who in the world worries over china before breakfast?" Suzanne laughed as the carriage lurched forward.

"You have no idea what madness mere money may engender," Anthony chuckled. "I've been sat down to paint full services with a particular pattern just to suit some rich, fat housewife. Trivialities can make or break a man, in my line of work."

"That can't have been so bad," Suzanne scoffed. "I've done work like that myself."

"The painting? No. The housewife in question flirting at and pinching on me was nearly more than I could stand," Anthony explained irritably. "At least I have you to protect me if it comes down to lowly, vulgar servitude once more."

"You really are quite spoiled," Suzanne told him. "I imagine I'll have a hand in making you a hopeless case of self-indulgence."

Anthony laughed, and his improved mood hung on all the way to their destination. The place was a large, well-lit shop set in a clean, neatly cobbled road. Anthony led her through a door of highly polished wood, brass and glass. Beyond it was a dainty world of gems and plate service, ornaments, fans and a staff of dark-suited clerks.

A distinguished, older gentleman hurried forward to offer her a comfortable chair far away from the display cases. Anthony was ushered away to what looked like a business office. Suzanne was left to peer about the place, wondering what all the glitter was about. The clerk presented her with hot tea and golden-brown scones, but offered no other considerations over the half-hour she waited.

When Anthony finally came out, Grayson was with him. They were bracketing a ruddy, heavysset man. Suzanne rose as the men approached her.

"Mister Smith, may I present Miss Suzanne Thatcher?" Anthony asked, very enthusiastic. "She's a paintress at the factory, or was until I thought to make a muse of her. She shall be the model for the figures and ornaments we'll be offering in the new series."

"This little creature is the Athena?" Smith smiled indulgently. "How does such a young face portray such determination?"

Suzanne smiled prettily, very much flattered. "It helps to have a Zeus of adamantine will telling one how she must go."

The men laughed appreciatively and looked very pleased indeed. Smith stroked his chin and turned slowly to survey his shop. For a long moment, every eye in the store was fixed on him, waiting for his so-respected opinion.

"I wouldn't use these ornaments for additions to your table service," Smith told Anthony. "The real money would be in the fancy work itself. Your... how did you call her? Your muse should be admired in full detail or not at all. I think these will be more popular in studies than parlors."

Anthony chuckled, deep and throaty. "Well, I'll see what I can do to narrow my horizons. But you can see how I struggle with the power of this inspiration."

"Never apologize for that, my boy," Smith chuckled. "Now, Miss Thatcher, may I ask if you are engaged for supper?"

Suzanne contrived to look completely confused. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm not out in society. I'm afraid that is simply impossible. Besides, I must continue my training if I'm to help make you gentlemen very rich indeed."

Again the gentlemen chuckled over her opinion.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a private club," Smith said. "Nothing like what you're thinking of. I think you would have a nice time, and enjoy yourself."

"No," Anthony said. "I know the place you're thinking of. I won't have it for her. I don't care if you never sell another of my works again."

Smith's smile wavered only a moment, then something hard and calculating glittered in his eyes. "Far be it from me to interrupt the flow of your creativity. I'll just finish my negotiations with your master, then."

Anthony took Suzanne's hand and ushered her from her seat, excusing them from the business meeting on her behalf. She hung onto his arm, only feeling the cold quivering in her body once they were strolling up the street. She tried to distract herself by peering into the windows as they went. When she saw the quality of the wares, she clutched harder at Anthony's arm.

"What's wrong, my dear?" Anthony murmured.

"Just... realized where we are," Suzanne said, quiet and low.

"You've been here before?" Anthony asked.

"Yes, on holidays from school," Suzanne said. "Never had any reason to go in most of these places."

"Start thinking of reasons," Anthony suggested mildly. "You'll have the money for it if I have my way with Smith. And I will."

"You make it sound so personal," Suzanne giggled.

"He tried to make things very personal indeed with you," Anthony observed.

"Are you always in the throes of lewd conjecture?" Suzanne smiled.

"He would have you quick enough, Miss, if I would let him," Anthony said. "If he insists on impropriety, he'll have to settle for me again. But don't ever dare let on that you know he's a lecherous old bugger, my dear."

Suzanne couldn't stop her own shocked laughter. She knew perfectly well that under the sparkling veneer of wealth, one could usually find permissive self-indulgence. In the lower classes, the realities showed up closer to the surface. Where she was, in the middle, there was very little that would be forgiven when it came to the raunchy or perverse.

She looked up at Anthony, his casual confidence and simple assurance in himself. Somehow, the world around him seemed to the way Anthony Nicks preferred. Even Suzanne felt the gentle persuasion of his personality charming her on as a moth to a flame.

"What do you really mean to do with me?" Suzanne asked. "If I were to only be your doxy, you're going about things all wrong."

"Do you prefer the term 'mistress' for what some people would call you?" Anthony asked, pretending to be serious. "Or perhaps we should give no name to this, or any admission at all? It's up to you."

"You can't pass me off as an innocent girl forever," Suzanne chided. "You'll have to think of something to say for what you're doing."

Anthony reached out to smooth the back of his hand down her silken cheek. "Just don't stop answering to me, and the rest of the world can go hang. I'll always see to your needs, my dear."

"Little Gina will be so disappointed," Suzanne laughed lightly. "Did you admire her before she decided to affect the style of a miniature husband-hunter?"

"Well... I suppose she might have seen it that way. Or rather, her minx of a mamma might have hoped," Anthony said. He stopped before a window and turned her to study their reflections. "You really do look like a pretty little doll. You're tall, but so slender you only look like a gangly schoolgirl. I wish I could get away with giving you a lady doll. You need practice with arranging your clothes."

"A lady doll?" Suzanne smiled and fluttered her eyelashes. "You say that like I never played with such toys. What I want now are real fancies. I guess I'm doll enough, yes?"

"You shall have all the fancies you can find, and a doll as well if you like," Anthony laughed, and urged her on their way. "But not yet. One day you may have to enter society as an artisan. But I'll keep you far away from the love-man boys and men. The last thing you need is merchant's sons finding themselves misled by your charms."

"Or my family noticing I'm not hiding," Suzanne muttered. "Really, Anthony. I have no desire to live among the leisurely and corrupt. I mean to earn my own way, and not on my back as the young ladies and whores do."

"Don't be so sure," Anthony said with a lecherous chuckle. "I don't intend to let you go."

Suzanne blushed crimson and turned her face from him, pretending to study the shop windows. "I didn't mean us."

"That's the only real difference that should enter your mind," Anthony said. "Don't worry on what nice people might think about you, or what they say. Once you decide to stay with me, you can be whatever kind of woman you prefer. For now, I want you as you are. This preference may never change, I warn you."

Suzanne smoothed her hands over her skirts, making sure the sudden tension in her panties was completely hidden. That strange force which Anthony carried seemed to wrap her up, making her feel completely safe in the lee of his protection. One glance at her own reflection told her plainly that so far, Anthony had done nothing but improve her.

"Could you really be happy in a life of tending my needs, inspiring my art, and nothing more?" Anthony suddenly demanded, and pulled at her arm. "Supporting my work, tending my table... housekeep to a craftsman of little consequence? Could you ever live that way?"

"Yes," Suzanne said, and then hesitated. "I don't long for a life of glamour and decadence. Truly, I do not."

Anthony's lips compressed into a thin, hard line, and he nearly glared at Suzanne as he studied her eyes intently. She swallowed hard, then lifted her chin and met the challenge in his examination. She took a deep breath and dared to phrase a question of her own.

"Could you love a person like me? Have me exactly as you describe? You have no hope of children with me," she said. "You know you could never make an honest woman of me. Can you accept that?"

Anthony stiffened, then held her hand even harder. "I don't think I shall fail to make a lady of you, my dear. Nor do I intend to let you be persuaded away by a man who would take more of you, and offer less. I would be very happy indeed to husband you."

Suzanne smiled brightly, but made no reply. Though Anthony remained confident, something darker had come over his mood. She clung to him as they walked on, and lingered over her growing trust in his good intentions.

The day had gone on in bright discovery as Anthony took her about town. He was in search of beauty, though he admitted time and again that his business was not art. Suzanne looked at the work of those artists Anthony admired, and drew her own conclusions. She didn't protest or argue his proclamations. Her admiration for him was apparent. There was no need to make him uncomfortable when he was already a bit agitated over her.

They returned to their suite for lunch. Brockles had them well outfitted and had managed to arrange the receiving room to encompass a space for Anthony's work. Suzanne sat in the sunny window seat while he sorted through figurines that had recently arrived. Anthony made rows of goddesses on the table and floor. His eyes grew wilder as he reviewed the rank and file.

"I'm not sure," Anthony finally said, voice shaking with indecision. "I do not know if I can stand to sell these. The potential is considerable, but... I have put something very personal in these designs."

Suzanne put on a patient smile. "They're finished already?"

"Oh, no. These are only ideas. I've made a few seller's samples, nothing more," Anthony explained, still quite distracted. "The paintresses have quite outdone themselves. Either that, or I've gone quite mad."

Suzanne came to look, and saw that the work was quite elegant indeed. She could not see much of herself in what Anthony had wrought. Anthony himself looked near real illness as he turned the figures in his fingers.

"They're not supposed to look like you at all," Anthony explained, as if suddenly aware of her presence. "None of them really will. But each of them will be only you. Do you understand?"

"I suppose," Suzanne said, and then frowned. "But they are rather... suggestive."

"They're obscene," Anthony said, condemning himself. "Grayson has the sense to appeal to good taste, but I know what symmetry and evocation can do. Your Missus Knotts was right about me from the very start."

"And I'm the model for your work," Suzanne said, finally understanding his dilemma. "You can't have it both ways. A lady would not do the things I've done. Nor would she agree to the things you have proposed."

"I won't stop now," Anthony said. "I've already gone too far. If I abandon you now, my cruelty would be unpardonable. I won't be that particular kind of scoundrel."

"You read too many novels." Suzanne turned her back on the table. "Do you really think your particular behavior will shape and control my future?"

"If I behave badly enough, yes," Anthony said. "Sometimes I forget how young you really are. Other times, that's all I can think of. Neither of these habits is in your best interests."

Suzanne clasped her hands behind her and twisted slowly from side to side, enjoying the feel of her skirts twirling about her legs. Anthony was right. She had hurried on to self-reliance, reaching for freedom. That was all well and good when she cared for no one and no one cared for her. She didn't turn to look at Anthony, only closed her eyes and recalled his bright, energetic smile.

"You must always remember that I am very young," Suzanne said, letting her nerves and worry echo in her voice. "I've tried to be brave about all this, but the truth is, I have no choice. You have decided everything for me. I'm too childish to understand what you're doing to me. I have to trust that you can truly protect me from... all the dangers I imagine."

"I know," Anthony said, like a curse. "I'm responsible for you. And what can I say, but that I have taken advantage of your trust and resilience?"

"Do you truly care for me at all?" Suzanne faintly inquired. "Has this all been a prolonged seduction, or is there any sincerity in you?"

"I love you," Anthony said, sounding torn between passion and self-recrimination. "You are too young for the way I feel about you, the things I want to do. These sculptures are the least of what I desire, and yet they go too far."

"Think of me as your ward," Suzanne quietly suggested. "You wouldn't be the first gentleman to find himself so entangled, should all go as you plan. Even if everything about us is discovered, the worst that could be said of you is that you are a bugger. And that's already said."

"But you're... a girl. Nearly a woman," Anthony said. "If I had only treated you as a lady from the start, instead of assuming that such conventions could never apply to you..."

"You would still have made me your Athena," Suzanne said. "I would still have wanted to become her, if not your Aphrodite as well."

"Turn around," Anthony said. "Slowly, to the light... there. Stop."

Suzanne was turned only halfway to him, but from the corner of her eye she could see him reaching for paper and a bit of charcoal. She smiled triumphantly, lifting her chin and tossing her hair back. Whatever her unusual properties, she could see how he was inspired. Something in her was beautiful to him. He was helpless to that attraction, as much as she was powerless to the heat of his desire.

His mouth was parted and moist as his hands flew over the page. His eyes were lit by a feverish urgency that Suzanne had grown to long for. Her body began to tense and flex in some place, and relax into soft curves in others, but all of her body was attuned to his observation, and the pleasure it gave him.

As she stood in her pose, the sunlight shifted, and Anthony changed page after page as he worked. When the light had moved far enough to bother him, Anthony re-arranged her to sit by the window. Then he took up his materials once more. The longer she posed,

pinned under his gaze, the deeper the throbbing within her grew. She tried to keep still even as he lay her on her back and propped her feet high up against the window. Try as she might, the slow-build ache rose beyond her ability to curb.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" Anthony demanded, testy and impatient. "Are you tired already?"

"Not tired," Suzanne said, and blushed. She shifted her legs and let the skirts of her sailor-style dress fall back to her hips. "I... can't help it, Anthony. It's the way you look at me. Don't you know what you do to me?"

Anthony tossed his charcoal aside, hurried to the door and locked it.

"But what about Brockles?" Suzanne worried. "It's getting dark out."

"I don't give a damn," Anthony said. He strode across the room to stand over her. His fingers, smudged with coal, left gray smears on her stockings as he caressed her legs from the ankles down to her thighs. "I told myself you were only tolerating a lecherous old man."

"You're not old," Suzanne frowned. "And I'm not so tolerant as you imagine."

"I can see that now," Anthony said. His fingers slipped past her frilly pantaloons and grasped at her lengthening phallus. "You want me. Perhaps more than you should."

His hand squeezed tight around her and her knees drew down of their own accord, resting against her shoulders. Anthony's smile became predatory as he tore at the lacy white cloth that yet separated them. Suzanne gasped at the sudden exposure and felt her ass tighten and quiver with anticipation.

Anthony's mouth crushed her lips against her teeth, then sucked at her until she opened to his kiss. She looped her arms about his neck and moaned softly, as his burning need poured down into her. His hands grasped at her buttocks and parted them sharply. His thick, hard shaft slid along the cleft of her cheeks. She had no idea when he had opened his trousers, and hardly cared.

He prodded at her tender opening, breath vibrating between them in deep, hungry growls. She shivered and relaxed all along her spine, letting her body fall soft and easy into total welcome. He moaned lustily and thrust confidently, sliding deep inside her as if his body had never belonged anywhere else.

"My God, how I adore you," Anthony rumbled against her lips. "I may be a scoundrel, but I would do anything to keep you."

Suzanne wrapped her slender legs around him and held on tight as he began to thrust. Her skirts bunched thick and soft between her thighs and his belly. She arched her back, whole body throbbing with the echo of his pulse. He groaned against her mouth and began nipping at her lips in time to his thrusting.

The sharp edges of his teeth traced a fiery line down her chin to her throat. His arms slid under her, lifting her hips up higher, impaling her more deeply on his cock. He buried his face in the soft cloth of her navy blue dress and heated her flesh inside his maddened kiss.

Suzanne flexed her arms and legs against his broad, strong back, dragging herself against her lover from the heat of his mouth to the base of his plunging shaft. She shuddered and moaned, hips bucking hard to stroke her aching body between soft skirts and his powerful taking.

His head snapped back, mouth a perfect red 'O' of surprise as he shuddered in her arms. His whole body fell against her, and her hips convulsed, passion and need and love sending white-hot fire up her spine. She screamed as her phallus trembled, spilling out all of her lust into her skirts.

"Oh Suzanne," Anthony moaned into her hair. "Why can't you be my bride? Why? Why?"

"I shall be," Suzanne said, breathless and annealed. "Since you've been so kind to ask."

"My love," Anthony sighed and held harder to her. "Only stay resolved in this, and I will give you everything."

"All I want is to be by your side, and loved in the way that you love me," Suzanne said.

Anthony smiled down at her and claimed her mouth in a possessive kiss once more. Then he rose and scooped her up off the window seat. She clung to him as he carried her into the bedroom. He lay her down on the bed and went out to unlock the front door of the suite.

When he returned, he slowly began undressing her. She sighed and relaxed as she was laid bare before him. His fingers caressed her silken flesh from shoulders to knees. He smiled down at her and began stripping away his own clothes as well.

He went and locked her bedroom door, then came back and slid into bed beside her. His strong arms gathered her up, nestling her cheek down against his chest. She smiled up at him, petting the lean muscles of his belly, and setting her leg between his thighs. He buried his face in her hair and sighed contentedly.

"When you wake, I will not be here," Anthony murmured. "Don't be afraid. I will return. But when I do, I want to see my flawless and pure bride. Will you do that for me?"

"I... yes, if I can," Suzanne hesitated.

"You can," Anthony assured her. "No matter how passionate you are. No matter what others might whisper and assume. Never forget that I love you... all of you, and will always love my own, only goddess."

Suzanne smiled, perfectly content, and closed her eyes. The safety and comfort of lying in his embrace made her heart feel light and lovely. Though she knew he was planning something audacious, she trusted him. Love, trust and safety fused within her, unbreakable in its power as she drifted off to dreams in her Anthony's embrace.

The remaining time in London was far less idyllic than the first two days had been. Each morning Suzanne woke and dressed, but then had to wait for Anthony to unlock her door from the outside. Her mornings were generally devoted to arranging flowers, sorting

out the newspapers and tending to breakfast. These were suitable occupations for a young lady, if she had still been in her father's house.

At first she had struggled with these simple tasks, feeling too clumsy to manage well. In the afternoons, she got to feel perfectly proportioned and balanced once more as she made a goddess of herself for Anthony. Young Brockles was rather swamped with the carrying of messages from Anthony's desk to all points about London. Each day, a half-dozen calling cards were received, but the actual callers did not appear.

Evenings were a mystery to Suzanne, beyond the scope of her view from the window. Each night, Anthony got dressed up in his social best and went out, God only knew where. His return was rarely at a speakable hour. Suzanne was usually abed and asleep before he returned.

Nearly two weeks went by in this way. Anthony remained affectionate and generous. Nearly every day brought some small gift or a new addition to her wardrobe. But she felt as though she had been cloistered in a nunnery of one, devoted to Anthony's obsession with his artistic ideals. Sometimes she thought he was offering sacrifices to his goddess, rather than paying attention to her.

Then, like a candle being snuffed, the crazed fire of creation went out of Anthony. Suzanne woke and dressed, waited to be set free of her bedroom, and saw the difference in him immediately. Brockles was carefully packing up the figures and drawings, but Anthony didn't even glance at how he proceeded. Instead, he paced up and down the parlor, a cigar clenched between his teeth as he glared at nothing.

"Suzanne, have you made any correspondence to anyone since we arrived?" Anthony demanded the instant she appeared.

"No," Suzanne answered, confused by his mood. "You would have known if I had."

"Be sure now!" Anthony insisted, quite accusing in look and tone.

Suzanne jumped at the harsh tone. "I'm sure. I have neither seen nor spoken to anyone but you and Brockles in a fortnight or more."

That accusing stare softened, and only then did he seem to truly see her. "My poor girl. So patient with me, no matter how unreasonable I become. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I don't know," Suzanne curtly replied. "But you're coming close to undoing it. I want to trust you, but I need to understand what you're doing to me."

"Have you ever heard of the Society of Persia?" Anthony asked, still making no sense at all.

"No, I have not," Suzanne said. "Even if I had, that would be no reason to bully me."

"No reason to..." Anthony's voice trailed off and he stared at her, astonished. "It is a sort of gentleman's club. You know the sort of assertions that sometimes put rich men on the wrong side of Old Bailey's gate?"

Suzanne hesitated in her indignation. "Yes. I've heard of such... secret societies. There's no real secret about what they like to do with each other. I'm not surprised you know one by name."

"I had a patron once, years ago," Anthony said, and at least had the grace to look ashamed of himself. "He brought me to be introduced. These aren't people like you, my dear. I was dressed in girl's clothes, called by a feminine name... it was just a lavish game for them. I absolutely understand the fascination, but I despise their tactics."

"Anthony, what has gotten you so frightened?" Suzanne demanded.

"The patron I spoke of died years ago," Anthony said. "And yet here is an invitation from the Society of Persia for one Miss Suzanne Thatcher."

"Refuse it, or I will," Suzanne said. "Ignore it. I certainly don't care to become involved."

"Are you saying you think they will give you the chance to choose?" Anthony shook his head and gave a cruel chuckle.

"This is why you've been locking me in at night?" Suzanne asked. "I don't know if I should laugh at you or hit you. I'm not helpless, good sir."

"I don't truly suspect that they would try to take you by force," Anthony relented. "The arts of seduction and outright blackmail are what I guard against."

"So I'm to be locked away like an Italian girl to keep me safe," Suzanne said, and sighed. "I haven't seen daylight since we walked back from that museum."

Anthony sat stunned, then looked very angry indeed. "Why didn't you tell me before now?"

Suzanne laughed heartily. "Just be glad I'm not a stray cat you carried home. You would have been reminded, many's the time."

Anthony struggled to hold on to his bad mood, but finally gave in to laughter. "Very well. Put on something charming and we'll go picnic in the park. I've had my entertainment. You've had nothing but hard work."

"Yes, thank you, I will," Suzanne agreed. "Should we bring Brockles along to fend off wandering Persians?"

"An excellent suggestion," Anthony said. "Brockles, get the picnic of your dreams and a cab. Our flower is near to wilting."

Brockles was off like a shot. Suzanne trotted back to her room and caught sight of herself in the mirror. She was dressed fit for a funeral or nunnery. Perhaps she was in as bad a mood as Anthony, but less honest about it.

She tossed open the doors to her armoire and hunted out a light summer dress with blue sprigs of flowers scattered over a brilliant field of sunny yellow. Slithering out of her first selection of the day felt totally natural to her. The delight she felt in donning a more fashionable choice had replaced a previously furtive pleasure.

She buttoned up delicate white leather boots, and tugged her stockings smooth and high. The rustling petticoats that held her skirts out wide and round were nothing compared to truly formal attire. She hurried on to meet with Anthony again.

He took her on his arm and led her out of the hotel with every air of confident self-satisfaction. Brockles was laden with his customary wicker basket full of treats, and waved

them on to a hired cab. Anthony had a word to the driver and then they were off. Suzanne laughed at the sudden speed, and hardly minded the smell of the open street. She looked out on the crowds but didn't feel part of their dreary expressions. Anthony took her hand, and her heart felt lighter still.

"You look like a butterfly set free of the cocoon," Anthony murmured.

"I look like a wad of wet, inky paper?" Suzanne laughed, teasing him. "I think you do not know much about butterflies."

"What do you prefer, for compliments?" Anthony asked.

"A goddess has its own unparalleled appeal," Suzanne said. "Don't expect me to settle for a mere insect on your say-so."

"Very well. If I'm determined to spoil and pet you, I'll have to resign myself to adoring you as well," Anthony said, pretending annoyance. "You must go on making such a lovely idol of yourself, though. That's only fair."

"As you command, O lord of the earth," Suzanne primly replied, then burst out laughing again. She leaned forward eagerly as the dull city colors gave way to bright green vistas. Instead of rugged countryside, she found herself rolling to the gate of a neatly kept garden park. "Oh, how beautiful."

Brockles climbed down as Anthony helped her to alight from the carriage. Brockles hurried on as if he knew exactly what he was about. Suzanne skipped along, held at bay only by Anthony's grip on her hand. By the time they caught up to Brockles, he had a blanket spread on the ground and was busy laying out a selection of fruit, cheeses, cold meats and jugs of drink.

Suzanne sat down and spread her skirts out to keep them fresh and crisp. She looked around the park and only then noticed how many gentlemen were about. The few ladies scattered over the grass were settled at picnic spreads. The bright circles of their dresses shone like flowers among clutches of young men in sporting clothes, some of whom had stripped down to just thin shirts under the warm summer sunshine.

The zing and clang of metal-on-metal brought her head around, seeking the source of the sound. At first she thought she was witnessing a duel, but was soon able to relax from that worry. A cluster of men and boys were gathered in the shade of a tree, taking turns with swords and daggers before a man offering instruction. As she watched, a few other such gatherings formed about the green.

Anthony handed her a plate and urged her to eat, but she had no attention for what she tasted. Instead she drank up the figures of the young fencers, taking pleasure in their strength and skill. The shouts of surprise and victorious laughter quite filled the air. Some hurried from their frays to pay visits among the ladies. Anthony was among the few who remained attentive to his lady beyond the other pleasures about.

"Do you come here to spar?" Suzanne asked. "I thought you would be out soaking up inspiration. Perhaps at art exhibitions, or..."

"Oh, no," Anthony laughed. "Inspiration comes to me without my asking. In the light of your eyes, the curve of your lips... I find poetry enough in your happiness to fuel my fires eternally."

"A pretty sentiment," Suzanne approved. "But if not for inspiration, why do you come here?"

"Don't you like having a gentleman who is prepared to defend your honor?" Anthony asked, but he didn't sound sincere.

"There must be some other reason," Suzanne insisted.

"To avoid being inspired, of course," Anthony chuckled. "I would send myself quite mad if I tried to complete every idea that popped into my head. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"Well, yes..." Suzanne hesitated. "But early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and..."

"Boring," Anthony finished for her.

"I didn't mean to sound so puritan," Suzanne said by way of apology. "You're always working when I see you. I might have known you had your little escapes."

"I do," Anthony smiled. "Grayson says I'm quite a lazy fellow, for I won't keep factory hours as he does. The truth is, he's a lazy old man. When business comes to him at dinner, it must wait till after breakfast when the whistle blows. There's no passion in him. Whereas, I must seek refuge from my own passions, or I could have nothing in my life other than the products of my labor."

"Does it follow that you must escape from me as well?" Suzanne asked. "I must stir up your passions considerably."

Anthony reached out and took her hand. "I don't wish to seem offensive and ungrateful. You've borne a great deal from me since we met."

"I only want to understand," Suzanne encouraged him.

"Then I will tell you the truth," Anthony said, sounding resolved to carry out a wicked deed. "I adore you. I wish to create homage to you, in my workmanlike fashion. I hope you will find the effects flattering one day. But to do such a thing, I must have silence and solitude. Even your quietest presence will only distract, now that the modeling is nearly complete. If I could use a model while still remaining in solitude somehow, I would. Now, doesn't that make me sound like a reclusive old bastard?"

"Should I return to the hotel?" Suzanne asked. "I don't want to ruin your escape."

"Certainly not!" Anthony exclaimed. "Not alone and not without me at your side. I'll do my best to be lively and entertaining, but you are in danger of things that you don't understand. But when I take to my labor once more, you must promise to leave me alone."

"Perhaps I could help," Suzanne suggested. "Mix paints, bring refreshment, or..."

"No, no, no," Anthony insisted. "I want nothing like that from you or anyone. I desire no curious questions of interested parties. I have no patience to explain myself. All I desire is to be left alone in my craft. Judgment and conversation can wait until I have said all I can with my creation."

As he spoke, Anthony twisted handfuls of grass from the turf and tossed them aside. It seemed he had no idea of doing so. His complexion went ruddy, as if he were only barely

holding back some secret fury or frustration. His breath whistled through his teeth, and beads of sweat popped out on his brow. Suzanne could only look on his performance with complete surprise.

"You think I am quite mad," Anthony said, and his shoulders slumped in defeat. "You have labored by the factory's whistle to create things of beauty. Here I sit, in the lap of luxury and leisure. I must be quite spoiled, to go on like this before you."

"No," Suzanne said, and reached out to take his hand. "There is something in you which does not burn in me. If you were in a prison, the dirt at your feet would be made to take the shape that pleased you. If you had all the wealth of the world, your last penny would still go to colors or clays. Your circumstances cannot keep you from this thing that drives you. I can see why you must wish to escape it a little, every day."

"I go to my work to escape the world, and every person in it," Anthony said, as if admitting a shameful secret. "Then, when I've been alone with the insane solitude too long, I turn to other people... to escape myself. It is self-indulgent in the extreme."

"Why do you think so?" Suzanne asked.

"Look around you," Anthony instructed. "I see suffering on every face, anger, ambition, amusement... and not much else. I do nothing about it. I am perfectly happy with my meager skills, producing what will be no more than a new amusement for a person I will never meet. I am content. I have nothing to be proud of, and yet I wish for nothing greater than to go on as I have begun."

"That doesn't mean you are lazy, or mad, or selfish," Suzanne said. "It only means that you have been very lucky. I think you know how privileged you are, and are ashamed of it. That's not the right sort of humbleness to your place. If this life makes you happy, then whatever freaks of your nature come of it, they must be accepted as a price worth paying."

"I am afraid I will leave you rather neglected and ignored," Anthony said.

"I assure you, my spirit and mind kept me quite entertained before you came along," Suzanne said. "Forgive me for saying so, but you are not the only thing in life that can interest me."

"Ah, of course," Anthony laughed. "For you, there is a whole world of delight. For me, there is only art, and you. I'm lucky, as you say, if only for not becoming a monk between my joys and pleasures."

"Then show me you're not a lily-livered dilettante," Suzanne all but commanded. "I'm sure Brockles has brought all that you require. If you've come here to hone your skills, you'll fail miserably while clinging to my skirt."

"You should know much about the matter," Anthony laughed.

"I do," Suzanne reminded. "And I miss my accomplishments, so look sharp. I will be sure to tell you of your faults when you return to me."

Anthony stripped off his jacket then and took up his weapons. Suzanne looked around for Brockles, and saw him mixed in with a gaggle of other boys pinching time from their work. She made herself comfortable on the blanket and turned her attention to Anthony's exertions.

He stood at ease among a group of youths, saber in hand as one demonstrated a riposte with much elegant flourishing. The youths backed off, giving room as Anthony went on the attack and was beaten back by the glittering blade. Anthony called a hold, and paced away to stretch his limbs.

Suzanne smiled contentedly to herself as she admired the way his body flexed and relaxed. His attitude shifted from one of indolent luxury to an elegant efficiency of control. He approached the circle once more, and again went on the attack. His opponent came at him in a whirlwind of steel and jeering. Anthony planted his foot and baffled the flourishes, letting the tip of his blade drop. Anthony drew the boy in, and the tip of his saber rose to meet the boy's throat with perfectly timed precision.

Suzanne laughed along with the group, and added her applause to the rest. Anthony saluted his opponent, and they began again. Though the other man was younger, and employed a more sprightly style, he was soon running sweat and breathless as he came over. Anthony only held his ground, waiting for openings, then striking without hesitation.

As Suzanne watched the match, a very young lady in a pink confection of ladylike charm rose from a blanket and approached the group. She held a glass in one hand, and carried on chattering with her companions as she went. Because her attention was not on the swordsmen, she did not notice the field shifting with the spar.

Anthony reached out and caught his opponent's sword in his hand, stopping it before it took a cut out of the lady's hat. The men all cried out at once. Only then did the girl notice her own peril, and gave a terrified little scream of her own.

"Julia!" the young man Anthony had been sparring with cried out. "What in the world has taken hold of your mind?"

"I only wanted to bring you a glass of water," Julia said, aghast. "You look so hot and thirsty, Charles."

"Stay off the turf or don't come along," Charles said, stepping forward to look at Anthony's hand. "Good job you wear gloves, old bean."

"I take all precautions, since you boys must have your ladies near to hand," Anthony gruffly replied. "Miss, go back to your fellows. We have quite enough distraction just among ourselves."

"Much you can say, Mister Nicks," Julia returned, annoyed. "You have a lady of your own today, and yet you neglect her."

"Good for you if I do," Anthony said, and frowned. He reached out and traced a diagonal line across her face. "For your looks would have been lost to your intrusion, had I been thinking on her, just now."

"It's true," Charles agreed. "Why can't you be more like Suzanne? She waited to be invited, and obeys as she must, to remain. You put yourself forward where boldness may do you harm."

"At least I am not a mere child," Julia said, and stomped her foot. "Come and sit with me a while, Charles. Your friends won't mind."

"I should mind very much," Charles said. "Why don't you go and tell your mother to expect me at tea? She would rather you were safe at home. If she hears I nearly slashed your lovely face, I might never be allowed to see you again. The fault would have been mine, even if the foolishness was yours alone."

Julia let her anger show plainly, quite concealing the former beauty. She flounced away from Charles, then. Suzanne rather doubted that the girl would forgive him his sensible opinion.

"How lovely to see you again, Miss Thatcher," said a voice from quite nearby. Suzanne looked up and saw a clerk from Smith's shop that she could only barely recognize. "We've been hoping so long to see you again."

"How very kind of you," Suzanne murmured, trying to hide her surprise at being recognized. She looked around for Anthony, but he was engaged with another youth. She missed a hand and called to Charles instead, then returned her attention to the clerk. "I'm afraid Mister Nicks is quite distracted. A moment, please."

Charles arrived before the clerk could make a reply. "How may I be of service, Miss Thatcher?"

"May I impose upon you to tell Mister Nicks that one of his associates is here?" Suzanne sweetly inquired. "I'm afraid none of us have been properly introduced."

Charles looked at the clerk, and a strange, dark intensity sprang to life in his eyes. He raised his blade to a defensive position, seemingly without realizing he had. "I'll do better and deliver him to Nicks myself."

"You're too kind," Suzanne agreed, and began to say farewell to the clerk. To her surprise, he was already hurrying away. "My goodness! How strange. I've never seen such behavior. I wonder what it was all about?"

"He's no gentleman," Charles answered. "If he comes again, call as you did. We may be just boys, but we can set that procurer a rout he won't soon forget."

Suzanne laughed to hide the sudden fear in her belly. "But you will tell Mister Nicks who he was? I don't want to make him miss his business associates."

"I will see to it," Charles agreed with an affable air. "And perhaps in return you can persuade Anthony to take tea with the fellows? We've quite missed him, but seeing you now, I certainly understand why."

"I shall attempt to persuade him," Suzanne agreed. "Thank you for your help."

Charles gave a flourish of his blade and loped off across the green once more. Suzanne tried to relax again, but found instead that she could not stop searching the crowd for anyone who might be watching her. Perhaps the encounter was mere coincidence, but Suzanne could not ignore the warnings she had already been given.

Though Anthony made no mention of the meeting at the park, Suzanne could see that he was on edge with worry. He did let Charles have them along to tea at Julia's home. The

gathering was full of energetic young men and ladies, nothing like the stifling affairs that went on in the evenings. Though they enjoyed themselves, neither Suzanne nor Anthony could laugh away the encounter with Smith's clerk.

When the tea party began to break up, Charles invited them to come rowing at a nearby pond. Brockles had long since abandoned the frivolity and returned to his work. Anthony seemed similarly inclined, but Suzanne persuaded him that a long walk back to the hotel was the very thing she wanted.

"I'll come with you," Charles immediately offered. "Without your boy, trouble might come looking for you again."

Anthony frowned at Charles. "What do you know of my troubles?"

"They're the same as all the other young men," Charles laughed. "Some of the old ones, too, if you look at the number of jilted lovers floating around. Ever since this fad for mystical societies caught on, it's all the fashion to be threatened by them. You're the least of whom I might name with such difficulties. I wonder if they really believe we're all so fooled? The whole business is beyond ridiculous."

"It's obscene," Anthony asserted. "I'm surprised you've heard of the Society of Persia."

"There are so many now," Charles sighed. "They form up around weak-minded ideals, and serve no purpose. Naturally, they begin to grow restless and make trouble for themselves."

"I'm afraid I became embroiled in the mess when I was young and quite ignorant," Anthony explained. "Now it seems these ruffians wish to bully and harass poor Suzanne. My reputation isn't so much that I can count on support from my fellows."

"Neither is mine, but I must remain vigilant for Julia's sake," Charles said. "If I were in your place, I would suddenly elope. If you strike a man dead for the sake of your bride, the judges are only going to call you a dutiful husband."

"It's not a bad idea," Anthony mused, and drew Suzanne closer on his arm.

They made their way together, Anthony and Charles keeping watch in all directions. Suzanne couldn't help but be flattered by their gallant attentions. They never let her dawdle at a window or pause to admire an elegant hat. Instead they hurried her onto the hotel and up to the room where Brockles sat waiting with fire-iron in hand.

"There was two lurking about when I come, Mister Nicks," Brockles reported. "I thought you were just suspicious, but they went scurrying as soon as I waved my iron. I don't doubt that they'll be back."

"This all seems rather..." Suzanne hesitated in her protest. "Gentlemen, I'm sure you are trying to protect me from some horrible truth. Please, I only want for someone to speak plainly with me."

Charles took that as his excuse to leave. Brockles went out to keep an eye on the hallway, leaving her to Anthony's decisions. Suzanne sat down by the table and stubbornly waited for her answer.

"Charles is worried about you just as he worries for all the ladies in London," Anthony said. "There were only rumors back when I was mixed up in these societies. Then there

were romantic suppositions among the young girls. We men know what we are capable of against you ladies, and barbarism doesn't begin to cover it. Ladies are being terrorized into marriages or disappearing in strange circumstances. Those that are seen again return as the most depraved of women."

"Some would say that's already true of me," Suzanne pointed out.

"Well, I don't say that, so it had better not become true of you," Anthony snapped. "In most cases, these men are creating the worst sorts of bacchanals. The shock of that sort of voluptuous excess can quite unmake a person's character. Hence, this caution of you. These precautions are no more than what would normally be taken with a desirable young lady."

"I have to admit, I'm rather curious about these... societies... by now," Suzanne said. "What could they possibly do to me that I haven't already done to myself?"

"They can destroy your dignity and pride," Anthony harshly returned. "I won't exhort you to Christian ideals or beg you to fear for your immortal soul. Only think of all you have accomplished for yourself, with very little help from anyone. Then you will know how little these lewd men can offer."

Suzanne pondered her own accomplishments and gave a helpless shrug. "It doesn't seem like much."

"And these others would agree," Anthony said. "They would belittle what you have, and give you things you could never get on your own. Then, you might feel you needed those things to be happy. Once that happens, you would be trapped. Beholden. Owned. By things you neither need nor desire, to be happy."

"You've given me a very great deal," Suzanne reminded. "Things I didn't need."

"I took something from you first," Anthony said. "I stole your chance at independence. I made you wish to be more than you were. A young lady needs to be protected. When I took the right to make you be such a thing for me, I also took a debt to you. I will spend a lifetime trying to be worthy of these things which you have rendered unto me."

"As a practical matter, I should be furious with you," Suzanne calmly replied. "You truly think I am quite incapable of caring for myself. I suppose I feel a bit flattered to have you so thoroughly fooled."

"You can't cook," Anthony said. "I've never seen you eat a bite that hasn't been prepared and set before you."

"That's not my point..."

"You don't clean. Brockles picks up after you just as he does me," Anthony continued. "Mending, housekeeping... these things are quite beyond your abilities. If you were a man without these skills, as I am, you would want a wife very badly. Being a woman so unprepared, you'd better hope to be enough of a lady to need a maid, and means to get one."

"Am I?" Suzanne faintly inquired.

"I'll find a suitable one for you when the time comes," Anthony relented. "Looking and acting the part is only good enough for art. You must either become a dour old hausfrau... which I doubt you ever dreamed of... or yield to a society which states a lady must have a

husband just to begin a life. That is why I beg you to pretend to incapability, in certain respects. Even if you have no faith in me, everyone must believe you are mine alone... my wife."

"You want me to truly become what I pretend to be," Suzanne said. "Things seemed so much simpler at home. No strange men trying to use me, other than you. No women judging me without knowing me. I thought things would be better in London. Really, it's so much worse here... because I hoped for better and am disappointed."

"Only be patient with your cloistering a little while longer," Anthony said. "There are a few more details I must attend, and then we will go. I must return to the pottery at least long enough to finish this job. After that, if you wish, I will abandon everything and be only with you."

"Where would we go?" Suzanne chuckled. "Even in fairy tales, there's no place for us."

"Then we'll make our own life, just as we like it, right where we are," Anthony promised. I do love you, Suzanne. You'll see when I have shown you all I wish to give."

"And I adore you," Suzanne said. "But I won't be driven from the city by horrible men, nor rush into your arms as if I had no other recourse. You speak of preserving my dignity and pride, then cast it all aside as obstacles to our respectability."

"What would you have me do?" Anthony asked, quite bewildered.

"These Persians are quite mistaken about me," Suzanne said. "They play at being men, and put boys in fancy dresses. Isn't that so?"

Anthony closed his eyes, then went so far as to hide his face behind his hands. "Yes, my dear. That is so. And though I have been among the boys so used, I truly do not



know why they preferred me thus rather than as I am. These are their aesthetics, and you are ripe to fall under their sway."

"No, you are quite mistaken," Suzanne said. "I'm a woman. If they wanted women, there are many to be had. But that is not what they desire, so I am not as desirable as they imagine. If we only go on as we have begun, admitting nothing, they will tire of their pursuit."

"You are every bit as attractive as they imagine," Anthony replied gruffly. "The reasons for your beauty will make very little difference. Just as they make very little difference to me, when I yield my passions to you."

"Are you sure?" Suzanne asked, startled. "I thought it would make a difference, that I am not a boy as you were."

"I know what the Persians would have of you," Anthony said, sounding exasperated. "I escaped with only a minor wounding, but the term 'escape' was very real at the time."

'I'm your captive now," Suzanne reminded.

Anthony strode over to her and seized her by the arms. "Very well. You wish to know the difference between what I have done to protect you, and what would come of their stewardship? I shall be happy to enlighten you."

Suzanne struggled against his hold on her, but his fingers bit harder. "Stop it, Anthony!"

"Oh, such cries... let me show you what you get for refusals!" Anthony returned with a cruel laugh.

He lifted her quite off her feet and carried her into the bedroom, set her down and locked the door. He pocketed the key and stalked closer to her again, taking her in with the eyes of a predator. She rubbed at her arms and drew away from him until she bumped into the foot of her bed.

Anthony caught a low wooden stool and slid it across the floor. It came to rest some few paces before her. She stared at it as if it were a viper. Anthony shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it aside. Even at a distance, the familiar, musky scent of his body perfumed the air. Her whole body tensed with a kind of helpless attraction.

"You will do exactly as I say," Anthony told her as he drew nearer. "I will hear no arguments from you. If you dare even one contrary word, I shall remind you of lessons you haven't had since you were a child, if ever. You'll remember it every time you sit, for at least a week. Do I make myself clear?"

"Anthony, please be reasonable," Suzanne said, and glanced at the locked door. "If you dare, I shall scream!"

"Please do," Anthony said, and took that hard hold on her arms again. He dragged her forward to stand beside the stool. "If asked, I'll say you're a spoiled young lady who needed sense thrashed into her. Which happens to be completely true of you, Suzanne."

"I only asked about..."

"I've allowed you twice to argue," Anthony said, by way of warning. "If you were my ward, this is precisely the fury you would face, had you made such curiosities known to me. Now, do you want to be treated like a young lady, or property?"

"I'm not your ward," Suzanne stubbornly insisted. "You're not my benefactor. Is this what I may expect of you as my lover?"

"It is what you may expect of a husband if you talk of debauchery and license with tones of longing," Anthony said. "Yes or no, Suzanne?"

Suzanne licked her lips and looked up at Anthony. Under the stormy look in his eyes, she felt her body begin to tremble. A chaotic whirl of emotion stirred within her, catching her between defiance and desire. She made herself stiffen her spine and stand up very straight.

"If you think you're man enough, I suppose you must try," Suzanne said, and laughed cruelly. "I don't know what you imagine this will accomplish."

"Right."

Anthony moved with the same controlled strength he had demonstrated with his sword. This time, he turned Suzanne in an elegant and powerful shifting of his posture. Suddenly, she was tucked under his strong arm and bent over his hip. His hand came down on the pouf of her skirts and she squirmed hard, trying to escape that embarrassing pose.

"Be still young lady!" Anthony growled as he swept her skirts up over her back. Again and again, he swatted at her rump, but this time he was impeded by the soft ruffles of her bloomers.

"Let me go!" Suzanne cried out.

His fingers hooked into the back of her underpants and pulled hard. Instead of sliding down, the thin cloth tore and he tossed the shreds aside. Suzanne shrieked, kicked hard with her little white boots, beat at Anthony's legs with her fists, but he struck a sharp blow to the center of her bared cheeks. She shouted in surprise, but he went on, raining a hail of loud smacks over her flinching ass, laughing as she pranced helplessly on her toes.

She jerked and twisted, cried out and threw herself against him once more. He only turned and turned again, pulling her in a little circle without allowing her any relief at all. Soon, her shrieks turned to sobs of frustration. She grew breathless as her struggles began to weaken. Anthony sent on with his relentless thrashing until her buttocks felt swollen, hot and tender.

Anthony turned her around and guided her hands down to the stool. The position put her head lower than her ass, and she tried to straighten up. Anthony quickly foiled her attempts, pushing her head lower and arranging her skirts over her back. He gave one more warning swat and stepped away from her at last.

She kept her head down, eyes focused on the wood grain of the stool. Her limbs shook, and a creeping sense of vulnerability built slowly. To her surprise, that ache and trembling gathered and pooled between her legs. She tried to find some scraps of her anger and frustration, but the burning in her bottom and the tension in her phallus rendered her helpless to Anthony's intentions.

She heard his unhurried steps draw near to her again, and felt the soft cloth of his trousers against her thighs. The scent of roses washed over her, and then a cooling caress touched her burning cheeks. She held tightly to the stool as Anthony thrust two fingers into her ass and began to work against her tight muscles. The deep, confident strokes drew groan after groan from her, as he patiently prepared her for his especial use.

"Yes that's it," Anthony murmured low and soothing. "A wife may not refuse her husband, even if she has been chastised. Feel how your body obeys, even when you are reluctant? This ass knows who is its master. You must learn as well, my charming bride."

"Anthony, please..." Suzanne moaned, but her words were cut short as his fingers twisted inside her, seeking out a point of sensitive tension. He rubbed more vigorously, and she screamed.

His other hand rubbed at her thighs, then slid forward to caress her phallus. "Raise your head. Look at yourself now, my dear."

Suzanne obeyed without thought and caught sight of herself in the mirror. Despite her delicate dress and the pretty room, she was a mess. She was sweating and flushed, mouth wet from her moaning, eyes reddened and cheeks glistening from tears she hadn't known she was yielding up to him.

Anthony's fingers went on with their devilish work, stretching and exciting her passage with skillful and possessive thrusts. Her mouth hung open in a perfect circle around passionate gasping. Though she felt fine and high on this edgy burn, she looked like a common whore, presenting her rump quite willingly to the man who wished to use her.

"Oh God, stop, please," Suzanne said, and tried to pull away from Anthony.

His fingers hooked inside her, giving plenty of reason for her to stay where she had been put. There was a rustling of cloth, and then he withdrew his hand. Swiftly, he invaded her with his rampant cock. She cried out and sobbed, all the while seeing herself in the throes of these helpless passions. Anthony rumbled his approval and began to thrust, locking both hands on her hips and working her ass over his shaft in any way he wished.

The pleasure fused with the heat and confusion, and soon she was lending her strength to his claiming. He fisted his hand in her hair and kept her gaze fixed on her own reflection. She moaned and panted, then a senseless patter of pleading began to fall from her lips.

"Look at you," Anthony rumbled, and thrust harder. "Is this what you want to be? Is that what you want to be valued for? Only this and nothing more, to any man who bends and takes you?"

"No! No!" Suzanne cried, horrified.

"Tell me what you want!"

"You! Anthony!" She wailed, lost and overwhelmed. "Only you, please, please, only you, my only love!"

He let go of her hair, fumbled in her skirts and seized her phallus. He stroked her in his hand, pounded her rear, and groaned his pleasure out in primal shouts. Her voice

matched his, and her knees shook, then gave way as the white-hot tempest of need and love tore through her. Anthony kept her impaled on his shaft as his taking went on and on.

Hot come poured out of her in jets and spurts, and yet Anthony went on, driving his cock deeper and harder as her ass convulsed around him. She swayed, boneless and lost to his power and desire. Only when he had wrested the last drops of her release from her, did he redouble his efforts. He turned her hips in his hands, shifting the angle of his penetration until he found the stroke he desired.

"Oh, Suzanne!" he shouted, and thrust deep into her, shaking and grunting as his seed flooded and filled her.

She gasped and squeaked as his cock pulsed inside her. Every twitch told her plainly that she had been taken to the limits of her ability to give. Anthony suddenly released his hold on her hips and stepped back from her with a lewd, wet sound at their separation.

She collapsed to her knees, still clinging to the stool, and lay there panting for breath as Anthony righted his clothes. He barely looked at her as he walked to the door. He took out the key and released the lock, then hesitated.

"I'll leave you alone now to decide your own fate, as that was what was done to me," Anthony said. "You may have romantic ideas of debauchery and license, but you have no power to seek it out. Your only place would be as an object of pleasure and derision. If you want that position, I truly cannot stop you. My only hope is that you will understand I wish to give you something finer, and more lasting."

True to his words, Anthony left without so much as a kiss. Suzanne sat staring at her own reflection and once again began to wonder about herself. She knew she was a woman, to Anthony and to herself. Now she began to be curious about what kind of woman she truly wished to become.

When Suzanne woke and dressed the next day, she wasn't surprised to find her door was locked once more. After the mood Anthony had left in, she wouldn't have been surprised to find he'd sneaked in and taken back a few of her little vanities. She chose the simplest of the clothes he'd purchased for her.

The more she looked at and handled her underpinnings and stockings, the creamy lace of her petticoats and smooth folds of a simple, purely white dress, she began to wonder how to keep her wardrobe so crisply clean. There were so many things she had suddenly acquired, and did not know how to maintain. Chief among those things was Anthony's affection. Even the low patter of his voice outside sent a thrill of anticipation through her.

She went to rattle the doorknob to be let out, then hesitated when she heard a deep chuckle join Anthony's. She leaned her ear to the door and tried to hear more. Certainly, Brockles did not laugh like that. Suzanne hadn't seen another living soul in these rooms since they had arrived, and wondered at the sudden invasion.

"The problem with Miss Thatcher," Anthony said, "is that she doesn't quite grasp her attractions. She's a simple creature, not plagued with vanities and assumptions about the world. I've promised her that she's perfectly safe. What are we going to do?"

"The same thing anyone else would do in this city," Mister Grayson harrumphed. "I've already done as much for my own daughters. No, you're quite right. The wild young men won't curb themselves, so we must be on sharp lookout."

"If it were only young men, I wouldn't worry," Anthony said. "My blade's sharp enough to meet their challenge any day. No, I'm more concerned about those who have hold of our purse strings, and want to take our prize as well."

"Now, Nicks," Grayson tried to soothe. "You can't honestly think one of our patrons would harm our little Suzanne."

"Would you leave your little girl within his reach?" Anthony prodded. "Or your little boy, for that matter? She never would have been noticed if you and I hadn't paraded her right under his nose. She's nothing but a paintress. We're the ones who created this problem."

"Yes, yes..." Grayson replied, and sighed as if greatly troubled. "Are you sure she wouldn't prefer the... er... patronage of... a more established individual?"

"Quite," Anthony said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Well, you'll have to act quickly," Grayson said. "Smith had more than enough to drink last night, and I don't think he retired to his home. I would not have believed he was talking about our girl, but that he called her by name and cursed yours."

"He didn't know you heard?" Anthony asked.

"I'd rather not admit to having been in the same room to hear," Grayson said, and chuckled as if embarrassed.

"Very well," Anthony said, and chuckled along with him. "I won't press the question. But that only creates another problem. Where is she to go? She has nothing, and nobody. I think she gave up the little room she had, just to come along with us. She has trusted us at every step, and may have wandered to the very edge of ruin."

"Well, I think the solution you suggested last week now seems... somewhat more reasonable," Grayson said. "Do as you like, and I'll ask no questions. Just be sure you return the favor, young squire."

"I certainly shall," Anthony said. "Let me see if the child is awake yet."

Anthony's steps approached the door, and Suzanne hurried to sit at her vanity. When the door was unlocked and opened, she was able to turn and smile brightly. "Good Morning, Mister Nicks. Do we have company? I thought I heard voices."

"Indeed we do," Anthony said. "Come say good morning to Mister Grayson, dear girl."

Suzanne went out into the front room with a light step, and shining an easy smile. She offered Mister Grayson refreshment, and settled down to her own breakfast without giving any sign that she'd heard herself discussed. Presently, Grayson asked how she liked London.

"I think it's frightful," Suzanne said. She looked up at Grayson with eyes wide open, as if she was shocked by some unhappy memory. "I can't go anywhere alone, not like at home. I don't know anyone. I'm... I don't want to seem ungrateful. Mister Nicks has quite seen to my every need. But I'm tired of being pent up, sir."

"I see," Grayson said, and frowned at Anthony. "If we sent you home now, have you anywhere to go? Mister Nicks seems to think you let your room go, to travel with us."

"I did," Suzanne said. "But it's no trouble to get another, since you're my employer. It would only take a day or so."

"No, that will never do," Grayson said. "You surrendered your home to please me, and I'm an ungrateful man to not even know and thank you. Mister Nicks will see to this as well. But I want you to be ready to go home. Now. Today. Well, most probably this evening, but very soon, my dear."

"Go and pack your things, Suzanne," Anthony said with a smile. "If that doesn't occupy your whole day, I've not done the shopping properly."

"Well said," Grayson said, and chuckled indulgently. "Well, along with you then, young lady."

Suzanne laughed, half amused and half impatient, but went back to her room without argument. As she folded and prepared her wardrobe, Brockles came bumping in with a shiny new trunk. She had to be very stern with herself to keep from lingering over the many lovely items Anthony had given her.

"You sure don't look like a little paintress any more," Brockles told her. "More like one of those snooty young ladies, if you ask me."

"I may be a young lady, but I'm not a bit vain," Suzanne said. Then she petted folds of velvet and laughed at herself. "Well... I am vain. But I'm not mean."

"No, you're very nice," Brockles said, but his tone was tentative. "It's not just the clothes, Miss. It's the way you act, and the way Mister Nicks treats you."

"I think I know what you mean," Suzanne said, and smiled at him. "As long as you approve, I'm sure all will be well."

"Can't say I really do approve," Brockles said, and sniffed hard. He looked every inch a stern little man telling a lesser creature her faults. "You're nice, but you let Mister Nicks carry on like a rakehell. You ought to influence him and improve his character, as he's helped you, Miss. You can't know the jams I've pulled him from in this town."

"I'll try to curb his enthusiasm," Suzanne said, trying to sound sincere.

Brockles only shook his head and left her to her tasks. His words stayed with her long after he'd gone to look after Anthony's things. The idea of influencing Anthony hadn't really crossed her mind before. Still, Brockles had a point about the way a woman might steady and help a man on his way.

The bustle of decamping from London was as much of a blur for her as the arrival had been. Anthony had been quite right about her needing the whole day to prepare. She laughed again and again, thinking how she'd left home with no more than a couple of boxes, and had needed only minutes to be removed.

She found her box of paints and touched the worn corners gently. She wondered if she would ever have the chance to use those skills again, then glanced at her growing stack of luggage. Her new way of dressing was very nice, but it wasn't enough to make her wish to give up her other pursuits. She finished packing as the sun began to go down, and wondered if Anthony would ever recall where he had found her.

She eventually found herself bundled into a coach, waiting for Anthony. The street traffic around her seemed horribly loud after her days of confinement. When someone rapped on the door and peered in through the window, Suzanne was so startled she screamed.

"You're a pretty one," came in a thick and croaking tone. "You look like you're in an awful hurry, little pretty."

"Get away from me!" Suzanne cried.

A horrid, craggy face pressed tighter to the window. Framed about it was a vast hat in an improbable assemblage of feathers and fruit, all of it dyed a hideous maroon. The woman laughed, exposing teeth long stained by tea and tobacco.

"Don't be so afraid, dearie," she said, and tried on a conspiratorial wink. "I know you. You want to be friends, don't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," Suzanne said, drawing back to the far side of the coach. She shouted as loudly as she could. "Anthony! Brockles!"

Brockles got their first, and hustled the old baggage along without much gentleness about it. She fussed and fluttered, but was soon lost in the crowd. Brockles parked his sturdy form on the coach step, giving evil looks to anyone who dared to meet his eye.

When Anthony climbed in, Suzanne flung herself in his arms. Only then did she realize how frightened she had been by that mad old lady. Anthony just folded her up in a strong embrace and signaled the driver to carry them away. Suzanne clung to him, gasping and upset as she had never expected such a short encounter could make her be.

"Shh, no, it's over," Anthony whispered into her hair. "I'm sorry. I should have been on better guard for such a trick. What fools, sending such a fright to such a lovely girl as you."

"Oh Anthony," Suzanne sniffled. "This is going to sound so silly but... she was so ugly!"

Anthony laughed merrily at her horror. "A guilty secret always makes itself abhorrent. Never fear, I've already rescued you from such a fate."

"I know," Suzanne assured him. "I think I must return the favor very soon."

"Now, what in the world do you think I need rescue from?" Anthony chuckled.

Suzanne did not answer, but held tight to him as the city slid by around them. In the light of day she might have only seen the dirt and chaos of the place. Perhaps there were lovely things in the shops and houses, but she now knew she could not find much brightness through the decay.

By the time they arrived home, Suzanne was beyond surprise at anything Anthony might do. He had kept her on his arm at all times, and gave dirty looks to anyone who strayed too near her. It occurred to her that this was really no different than how he had done all along. She looked up at him time and again, and just had to wonder.

"Anthony, I... want you to understand. If you start with locking me into my room when I get home, I won't be so blasé about it," Suzanne told him. "London is one thing. I just don't want you to think such precautions are truly necessary. Even if they were, I wouldn't tolerate them in my own home."

Anthony looked quite surprised, then smiled at her. "If you were my wife, I could lock you in and worse, if I thought it was necessary."

"You're giving me some good reasons not to wish for you to be my husband," Suzanne observed. "You can't do the honorable thing by me. I might not let you even if you needed to and could."

"Your morals are something rather shocking," Anthony said, sounding very amused. "You simply have no idea what has been said about you. There were gentlemen who offered some rather astounding considerations if I would only make you acquainted with them."

"I know why you locked me up back there," Suzanne said. "You were afraid someone else could offer something more tempting than what you have to give. You're not the first man to have such fears."

"Then I won't apologize for behaving as I did," Anthony said. "Suppose a charming gentleman had stopped by to find me, and found you alone? What if he had asked you to go riding, or to a park? Would you have thought to seek my approval? If I had forbidden you, could you have gladly obeyed? No. Of course not. Better to keep you away from men like myself, if I care for you at all."

"And you do care for me," Suzanne said. She squeezed his hand very hard. "You're planning to be worse than an older brother. I can already tell."

"My dear, any husband would be, with a treasure such as you," Anthony murmured, and leaned in to kiss her throat.

Anthony was right about her lacking the right attitude and reflexes to live like a proper young lady. She thought of the factory, where her friends had worked and lived as they pleased. Propriety was even more important to those in the middle classes than those among the upper and lower social strata.

She supposed that, sooner or later, she might have to pay a price for this happiness. For that, she only enjoyed Anthony's kisses more lingeringly. She let herself be lost in him until the very moment the coach pulled to a stop in the middle of a row of houses. Anthony stepped down out of the carriage and helped her to alight. She looked up at the tiny laborer's cottage, then back at Anthony, rather puzzled.

"I'm only a common craftsman, for all my pretensions," Anthony said, and took his hat in his hand. "But you see I am not entirely worthless, and can have care of all your needs. You deserve a young god..."

"Aphrodite had Hephaestus," Suzanne said, and looked up at the house. "She was simply too vain to understand her good fortune."

"Yes, but if anyone else calls you Hephaestus, I'll kill him," Anthony said, grinning wickedly. "Now, you have worked some witchcraft on me. Don't deny it."

He led her by the arm up the small step, scooped her up and carried her inside. The front room was tiny, and the blank blue-green color on the walls depressing. A few small pieces of well-crafted furniture stood about. Anthony set her on her feet again and let her prowl.

She went upstairs and looked into the few rooms. She found a large bedstead stripped of linens. There was nothing in the drawers of the armoire she explored. Downstairs, the pantry was empty. She went back into the front room and sat down by the hearth to keep out of Brockles' way as he hurried here and there.

"Anthony Nicks, what have you done?" Suzanne asked, slightly numb with surprise.

"I took a house," Anthony said. "Company housing, I don't play the fool with my money. But I had no home to show you when we came back. Ask Brockles. I lived in my office... or damn near to it. Shabby rooms, nothing at all to show for a home. I want you to make one for me, please."

"Anthony, the neighbors..." Suzanne sucked her lips into her mouth, trying not to panic. "We weren't noticed much in London. Before, I was only modeling for you. This is different. This is bound to be noticed."

"You knew I was doing business in town," Anthony said, like he was prompting her. "I'm sure Grayson knew what I was doing, but he didn't stop me. I'm not going to speculate how word got around about you, but that man is a dog for publicity. He has a responsibility to protect you, and I've made him see it that way."

"That won't be enough," Suzanne began to protest. "Not for what you imagine."

"This is his town," Anthony said. "He owns the factory, the houses... owns the jobs. There aren't many who have the means to defy or embarrass him. I certainly cannot. But I can put money in his pocket, and he protects me like a favorite pet monkey. If he changes his mind, I simply don't know what we can do. But for as long as he is pleased, we can be safe here, and together."

Suzanne reached for his hand and stroked his fingers, trying to sooth the worry she heard in his voice. He looked down at her and smiled.

"There are easier ways for you to live, Mister Nicks," Suzanne said. "If you find yourself in an untenable position because of me, simply leave me to my fate. You wouldn't be the first lover to do such a thing."

"No." Anthony reached out to caress her cheek. "You make a gentleman of me, my dear. I always hoped someone would."

"We shall see," Suzanne said, and turned her face up to him for a kiss. They stayed locked together until a small, sharp sniff drew their attention.

"All's unloaded," Brockles said. "I'll be up to grocery in the morning then."

"Ask the lady of the house what she requires," Anthony said. "I leave everything to her decisions. And tell that bastard at the pub that you have a new situation in a gentleman's house."

"Yes, Mister Nicks," Brockles said in a solemn tone, but couldn't keep the happy shining out of his eyes. "What can I bring you, Ma'am?"

Suzanne looked about the place and sighed. "A cookbook, I think. Or someone who knows what's to be done with a kitchen. I'm afraid I don't know quite what to ask. Bring breakfast and we will sort things out, I'm sure."

"Yes, Ma'am," Brockles agreed. "And my congratulations to you both."

"We'll see how you feel about that in the wee hours," Anthony said, and shooed him on his way. He looked out after the boy as he trotted up the road. "I would do more for him if I knew how. I'm a calamity with children. I treat him like an adult and he lets me."

"I wish the two of you knew how much you depend on the other," Suzanne laughed. "We'll keep a weather eye on young Brockles and I doubt he'll need more."

"Anyway, he looks after us more than the reverse," Anthony said. "Maybe I should have just let him be in charge."

Suzanne wasn't as confident. They went upstairs to see what had been carried up. The bed was still bare and she had not thought to buy household linens in London. Anthony, on the other hand, had clearly been in a fever over his preparations. He had to rummage through a number of packages, but was finally able to prove up on his good intentions.

Suzanne felt a little strange about making up the bed with him. The other upstairs room was cluttered with piles of things he'd had brought along on the carriage. She considered in passing the suggestion of making up a bed beyond the thin partition, but could not resolve herself to it before the master bedroom was set right. She could only stand there smiling shyly, wondering how many other women had felt this exact same moment of euphoric uncertainty.

Anthony went to his own luggage and hunted out a small black velvet box. "One day, I hope I can make you out much finer than this. But at least let me make a start in my offerings to you."

He opened the box and took out a golden band. The whole ring was inset with baguette-cut stones of midnight blue, which reminded Suzanne of her own eyes in the depths of pure joy. Anthony slipped the ring onto the first finger of her right hand and kissed her lips for a long, sweet time.

Suzanne might have cared that there could never be true proof of their bond. The taste of her Anthony quite drove all fear from her. She sucked at his kiss and relaxed into his embrace.

He began to loosen her clothes, fumbling inexpertly with the buttons, ties and layers that kept him away from her skin. She tried to help, but he gently slapped her hands away.

Turning her this way and that, he got her free of her dress, then slid her underskirts off her legs.

He went gracefully to his knees before her when there were only her pantalettes in his way. He ran his hands over the soft linen, then gently pushed them aside. He licked his lips and then wrapped a hot, possessive kiss around her phallus. Her knees went weak as he slid his mouth vigorously about her flesh. His strong arms guided her gently down to the bed, where she twisted and writhed on her back against the pillows.

Anthony kicked out of his shoes and started stripping out of his clothes as he sucked vigorously at Suzanne. She stared down at him, dazed by the heat of his kiss, and fired by the sight of him driven to frenzy, rushing to get naked for her.

She tried to resist the heat of his deep tasting, but soon her ass was flexing, hips rising clear of the sheets to thrust deeply into his mouth. Anthony growled low in his throat, pulled back and began kissing his way up her body. Her spine bent, arching her up against his chest even as her thighs parted for his hips to settle between them.

She reached for the fastenings of his pants as his mouth came down on hers in another demanding, possessive kiss. Suzanne was surprised to hear a rich, hungry purr vibrating in her throat as she peeled his pants back and exposed his cock. She seized his pulsing shaft and he thrust eagerly through her grasp. Suzanne slid her own aching flesh into her hand and cried out with Anthony as their heat blended and grew stronger.

Anthony's hands slid down her thighs, caught her knees and lifted her legs to wrap around his back. Suzanne writhed and moaned, even as his cock slid out of her grasp. He arched his hips back, then slid forward again, warming the cleft of her ass with long, teasing strokes.

"Please, Anthony," she gasped. "I need you."

Her ass quivered and clenched. She screamed and bucked under him. He groaned against her hair and thrust once more, stretching and filling her to the limit. Her hands fluttered over his ass. When he drew back and thrust again, her fingers dug into that smooth skin and encouraged him to take her deeper.

Wrapped so tightly around him, her limbs and ass grasping at him, Suzanne felt as though her flesh was burning with devotion and desire. His arms flexed under her, raising her ass up to his powerful thrusts. Somewhere in the rush and heat, her whole body relaxed. It seemed as though Anthony fell deeper into her as their sweat and cries blended between them.

Suzanne thrust her hips higher, stroking her phallus against the moist, hot skin of Anthony's belly. He bore down on her, bending her spine and crushing her lips back against her teeth. She screamed and bucked, eyes rolling back in her head as wave after wave of white-hot release burned down her spine and spilled out all over both of them. Anthony roared, cock pumping faster inside her until his shaft quivered and leaped on the convulsions of his climax.

They lay together in the deepening dark, gasping and victorious as the fusion of their love began to cool and ease. When Anthony turned over, he drew Suzanne along with

him, snuggling her cheek down against his chest. She curled against his side, comforted by the rhythm of his slowing heartbeat.

Her fingers idly toyed with the ring she'd been given. Perhaps there were those who would question and deny the truth of what she'd found with her Anthony. Suzanne smiled to herself, perfectly confident that she had found the treasure that would end her lifetime of searching.

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