

Chapter 17

Ill do they listen to all sorts of tongues,
Since some enchant and lure like Syrens songs.
No wonder therefore 'tis as overpower'd,
So many of them has the Wolfe devour'd.
"Little Red Riding Hood," Charles Perrault,
English translation by Robert Samber,
Tales of Times Past with Morals

Sated and relaxed, Morgan lay beside Clara, one arm about her shoulder and her head resting on his chest. He'd never felt so content in his life. In the past, lovemaking had made him feel only more restless, more alone.

Not with Clara. To have her lying naked in his embrace, with her arm draped over his belly and one of her legs thrown over his, felt utterly natural, utterly right. Utterly pure.

She nuzzled his chest. "I do believe I like lovemaking, Captain Blakely."

He smiled. "My instrument proved sturdy enough after all, did it?"

"Mmmm. Nicely sturdy. A very useful instrument you have there."

"Always glad to oblige, my lady." As a sweet languor stole over him, he indulged his urge to hold her close a few moments longer. "I hope you were right about the Specter being scared off tonight. Because if he comes knocking anytime soon, I fear I'll be too weak to answer the door."

Her head shot up from his chest, her eyes filling with alarm. "Your wound isn't paining you again, is it?"

He laughed, warmed by her concern. "Not in the least, angel. Our lovemaking was what drained the strength out of me."

"Never!" A mischievous smile played over her well-kissed lips. "A big bad wolf like you? Who calls your wound a 'scratch'? I thought you were invincible."

He slanted her a glance. "Don't provoke me, you teasing wench. I can barely summon the energy to breathe, much less bandy words with you."

With a grin, she dropped her head onto his chest. "Well, at least now I know how to end all your lecturing."

Chuckling, he wrapped his arms about her and savored the feel of her in his arms, the intimacy he'd never known with anybody else.

She snuggled against him. "I must say I'm very glad they chose you for this particular spying job."

"So am I." To his astonishment, he realized it was true. Despite his dislike of Spitalfields, he'd enjoyed the challenge of trying to outwit the Specter, the satisfaction of helping Johnny, and most of all, the wonder of knowing Clara.

After a moment, she said, "Morgan?"

"Hmm?"

"Why *did* they choose you? Did you volunteer?"

"Not hardly," he said.

She propped her chin on his chest and stared up into his face. "But I thought you'd done this before."

He stiffened. "Ravenswood told you about that, too?"

"Not really, but your brother did mention the spying, and I got the impression—"

"Oh, the spying," he said, relaxing again. "Of course."

She eyed him solemnly. "What did you think I meant?"

Confound it all. He should have known this blessed sweetness couldn't last. Now he would have to tell her something of his past, if only to show her what she was getting herself into with him. And she would undoubtedly realize how foolish she'd been and thrust him away. So he mustn't let himself grow too accustomed to this sensation of belonging.

Yet when he tried to withdraw, she clutched him tightly. "Tell me, won't you?"

As he stared at her serious expression, he sighed. She had foolish notions about his gentlemanly character that he had to shatter before she learned the truth about him some other way. Like from Ravenswood, who seemed determined to warn her away from any personal involvement with Morgan.

"Actually, I thought you were referring to my thieving." He dragged in a breath, preparing himself for her reaction, then went on. "You asked why they chose me—well, it was largely because I used to be a pickpocket and a thief myself."

Disbelief clouded her features. "But how can that be? You were a baron's son. Even if you weren't raised in England, surely your mother didn't allow—"

"She didn't know I was a thief. And I didn't know I was a baron's son."

"What? When you said your mother took you, I assumed it was in a formal separation from your father."

He gave a harsh laugh. "Not quite. Mother stole me away, actually. She'd had enough of the baron's philandering, so when she gave birth to twins, she bribed the servants to hide it from the family and care for me until she left her childbed. Then she took me and her jewels and fled with her lover, her dancing master. Apparently she thought that since the baron had his heir he wouldn't look for her."

"And did he?"

"No. She'd judged him rightly. He had Sebastian—he didn't much care about anything else. He told the world, including my brother, that Mother had died in childbirth." He glanced away, throat tight. "I didn't know the baron, but by all accounts he was something of an arse."

"I should say so!"

He swung his gaze back to her, surprised by her fervency. "You certainly are an opinionated wench."

"No feeling man who loved his wife would let her simply walk out on him without searching for her, lover or no."

"Ah, but I wonder if English lords *are* feeling men. Their pride often seems stronger than any softer emotion. Though perhaps you're right. I sometimes doubt that the baron ever loved my mother." Neither Uncle Lew nor Sebastian seemed to know one way or the other. It would explain why Mother had never gone back to the baron.

Not that it mattered. The past couldn't be changed.

"Well?" she prodded. "You still haven't explained how that turned you into a pickpocket."

The fact that Clara took this all in stride astonished him. But then she always did astonish him. "Unfortunately, my mother picked the wrong year to run and the wrong place to run to. Not to mention the wrong man to run with. She fled with me in 1788, you see. Less than a year after our arrival in Geneva, the rabble in Paris stormed the Bastille."

Horror filled her face. "Good Lord, you were in Geneva during the revolution?"

He nodded. "And Geneva was affected far more than England. It even had its own Reign of Terror. Almost from the time we arrived, there was chaos in the city. As you might imagine, it wasn't the best place for an English dancing master, an adulterous English lady, and her newborn child to make a home."

"But why Geneva, of all places? Why not America or...or Spain or something?"

"I don't know all of my mother's reasoning, only what she told me when I grew older, but apparently that first lover of Mother's had friends in Geneva. Unfortunately, they were nobility, which didn't help the situation."

"First lover?"

He sighed. "Yes. About a year after we arrived in the city, the dancing master stole all the jewels she'd meant us to live on and then disappeared." He cast her a wry smile. "Mother was never very...wise in her choice of men, I'm afraid."

The clear pity in Clara's face was hard to stomach. He glanced away and went on more stiffly. "With no money, no friends she could claim, and a baby to support, Mother decided that the only way to survive was to take another lover. To be fair, there weren't many options for her. And we did live fairly well with the second man until he fell victim to the guillotine."

He ignored her sharp gasp, though he knew all of this must be hard to fathom. He'd lived with it, so it didn't strike him as odd. But he'd never told this to anybody before, probably because, aside from the mortification of having anyone know the sordid details of his childhood, he knew it sounded like something out of a novel.

The only other person who knew everything about the early history of his life in Geneva was his mother's brother, and that was only because Mother had told Uncle Lew in her last days of life. Ravenswood only knew about the thieving, and Sebastian knew nothing, which was the way Morgan wanted it.

"Anyway," Morgan continued, "that's how Mother supported us—by taking lovers. But it was a dicey existence at best. Her value as a pretty Englishwoman plummeted in Geneva once the Terror began."

"So you decided to supplement the family income by picking pockets," she said with quiet sympathy. "How young were you when you started?"

A vise tightened around his heart. He was tempted to stop the conversation here. He didn't even like thinking about those days, and it unnerved him that Clara could guess his motives so easily. Or that she might see him as one of her sad little urchins. Though he supposed that was indeed what he'd been.

Yet he answered her, compelled by some unnamable urge to tell it all. "I was six the first time. It wasn't planned. Mother was arguing with our current 'benefactor,' a very stingy man. I left to escape the shouting. I was hungry, so when I came upon a baker setting out baguettes I waited until his back was turned, took one, and ran. A pickpocket saw the whole thing and befriended me. He taught me how to filch things and sell them to a fence." He cast her a grim smile. "I even developed a specialty. I was what the boys around here would call a silk snatcher."

"You stole bonnets and hoods from people in the streets."

"Very good. You know your thieves' cant."

"After spending so many hours in the company of thieves, one can't help but pick up a little. But why bonnets?"

He stared down at her own bare head of tousled chestnut hair. "Mother liked them. For every ten or so I stole and sold to the fence, I'd keep one for her. It was foolish, I know. She could have used the money more, but—"

"It made the stealing all right."

"*Nothing* made the stealing all right," he said fiercely.

She soothed him with the stroke of a hand over his chest.

"No, of course not." Her fingers drifted idly down his waist. "In my experience there are two sorts of thieves—those who steal to survive and would prefer a real job if they could get it, and those who begin by stealing to survive but soon learn that it's an exciting way to make a living. The former are easier to reform. The latter...well, let's just say that not all my boys end up living useful, productive lives."

"So which sort was I?" he asked, the vise around his heart threatening to crush it entirely.

"The former, of course." She said it as if it should be obvious. "The latter have little shame for what they do. I mean, it was shame that kept you from telling your mother about the stealing, wasn't it?"

He blinked at her. "How do you know it wasn't a fear of how she'd punish me?"

"Because she doesn't sound like an uncaring mother."

That Clara could accept the necessity of his mother's whoring without also assuming it made her a bad mother awed him. He'd never met another person who saw the difference. "She was the best mother she could be under the circumstances."

She nodded. "And you were the best son you could be."

The vise snapped, and he could feel his blood rushing freely again. She understood about his mother. Not even his otherwise understanding uncle had understood that.

Words poured out of him, words he couldn't seem to stop. "I always gave Mother some excuse for where I got the money. I told her I got it plucking chickens for a poulterer or running errands for the painter next door or whatever I could think of."

He snorted. "As if such jobs were to be had. Jobs were scarce enough during those tumultuous times, even for natives of Geneva. But I was a fatherless boy whom everyone assumed was the 'English whore's' by-blow, so there were certainly none for me." He ruffled Clara's hair. "And no Home for the Reformation of Pickpockets, either."

"I wish there could have been one." Clara tightened her arm about his waist. "No child should have to suffer such responsibility alone."

The passionate outrage in her face on his behalf made a lump settle in his throat. "I wasn't entirely alone in my hell, you know. I did have my mother."

"Yes, but you couldn't talk to her about it, and that makes all the difference. You had to bear the weight of your guilt alone." She rubbed her cheek over his chest. "But were you never caught?"

"A few times. They didn't find the goods on me, however, so I always managed to convince the judge I wasn't guilty. But I spent the night in jail each time. I told my mother I stayed with friends. Since I often liked to be gone when one of her lovers was

there, she accepted that explanation.”

“Are you sure? Many mothers know when their children are lying, although they may not admit it.”

“I think she chose to believe my lies. The alternative was facing the truth of how far we’d sunk, and she just couldn’t. It would mean acknowledging how badly she’d blundered by trusting her first lover. I suppose that’s why she didn’t tell me about the baron until the very end.”

Clara cast him a questioning glance. “Why do you call him the baron?”

Bitterness clogged his throat. “What should I call him—Father? He wasn’t father to me in any respect. Even after my uncle fetched me, the baron wanted naught to do with me. Uncle Lew was the one who administered my care from that moment on.”

“I don’t understand—your uncle sounds like a good man. So when things deteriorated in Geneva, why didn’t your mother return to England? Surely her brother would have helped her even if your father would not.”

“I’ve often wondered about that. There were the practical problems of escaping Geneva during the Terror and then afterward, with Napoleon taking control...I suppose it would have been difficult.”

As Clara listened, she stroked him, wordlessly giving him her sympathy. And oddly enough, her coddling didn’t make him as uncomfortable as he’d expected. In truth, it soothed him.

“But it was more complicated than that,” he went on. “For her to come back, after having been pronounced dead, meant bringing shame upon her family. The truth would have come out, and they would have had to bear the scandal of her disgrace. At least in Geneva she was anonymous, and her shame didn’t stretch to anyone else.”

“Except you,” Clara said softly.

“Yes, but in England it would have stretched to me, too. They probably would have taken me from her, and I don’t think she could have borne that. I was all she had left.” He shrugged. “And Mother always had high hopes about the men who entered her life. She was always convinced that her latest lover was a good man who would set us up for life, treat her well, and take me under his wing. She was a woman of endless hopes until—”

“Until what?”

No, he couldn’t tell her about that. He just couldn’t. “Until she realized she was dying.” He dragged in a ragged breath, fighting down the pain. “Then she knew she had no choice but to provide for my future. So she wrote to my uncle, and he used his influence to gain passage into Geneva, since it was under Napoleon’s rule by then. That’s when we learned that Uncle Lew had never given up hope of finding his sister, though he’d had no success tracing her flight from England. Thank God he had a few days with her at the last.”

“What did she die of?”

“Consumption.” The lie came easily. He’d said it often enough—to Sebastian, to Ravenswood, to whoever asked about his mother. Only he and his uncle knew the truth.

Clara cast him a searching glance as if she sensed he was lying. But how could she? Nobody else ever had.

He shook off the eerie sensation. “You know the rest of it, for the most part. After I left Geneva, I was sent to a school in Ireland until I was old enough to be put in the navy.” He smiled. “The navy proved perfect for me. All the discipline and all those pesky rules were just the thing to set straight the wild boy I’d become. I had an excellent captain who whipped me into shape—”

“Not literally, I hope. I know that there are harsh captains.”

“Mine wasn’t, thank God. He was a very good man. By the time we first saw battle, I was itching to fight, to prove myself to my uncle who’d saved me from a life in the streets of Geneva and to all the others who’d given me a chance. So I fought like the devil and distinguished myself.”

“Until you ended up a captain yourself.”

“Yes.”

“And a spy in Spitalfields.” She paused. “But you said you didn’t volunteer, and I get the distinct impression that this isn’t the sort of assignment you would have wanted.”

“No.”

“So why are you doing it?”

“Ravenswood has promised me a first-rater ship to command. It may be the only way for me to go back to sea.” He didn’t mention Ravenswood’s offer of a position in the Home Office. She would never understand why he’d prefer going back to sea to that.

She turned her head to stare off across the room. “And are you...very eager to return to the sea?”

He couldn’t mistake the hitch in her voice. She was certainly a Woman with Expectations. And what was he to tell her now that he’d ruined her? She had a right to her Expectations, after all. He might not be a gentleman, but he’d never been a cad.

“I’m eager to return to commanding a ship, that’s all. It’s been a few years now. The navy has been a bit perturbed with me, you see, because I...er...got into that sticky business with the pirates, and although I was cleared of blame—”

“Lord Ravenswood told me about that. And even if he hadn’t, I knew a lot about it from Lord Winthrop.”

“Don’t believe a word Winthrop says.” Morgan scowled. “I had naught to do with his being robbed. I was merely a sailor on the Pirate Lord’s ship, earning my way back to England. I didn’t receive a shilling of the prize money, yet Winthrop acts as if I masterminded the entire attack.”

She surprised him by laughing, then running a caressing hand down his thigh. “Yes, well, Lord Winthrop is a rather unpleasant man.”

“So I gather.” He paused, then added in as light a tone as he could manage, “He has his eye on you, it appears.”

With a teasing smile, she rubbed her foot along his calf. “Are you jealous of Lord Winthrop?”

He wished she would stop touching him so temptingly. It was rousing him where it shouldn’t, and she probably didn’t even realize it. “That arse? Certainly not.”

“You ought to be. My aunt is determined to see a match made between me and Lord Winthrop. She thinks the earl would make me the perfect husband.”

When she innocently laid her hand near his already burgeoning erection, he sucked in a breath. “And what do you think?”

“I think that if I married him, I would either die of tedium or brain him with a poker within the week. The last man on earth I shall ever marry is Lord Boring. He possesses none of the qualities I desire in a man.”

“Oh?” he eked out as her hand inched in an unmistakable direction. “And what qualities might those be?”

“A quick brain. A good heart. A generous temper.” She caught his now rampant erection in her hand. “And a very sturdy

instrument.”

She knew exactly what she was doing, the little witch! With a growl, he rolled her beneath him. Staring down into her laughing face, he rubbed his hard length against her soft nest of hair. “Don’t tease me, angel, unless you’re prepared to face the consequences.”

She smiled impishly, then entwined her arms about his neck and pulled him down to her. “Don’t tease *me*, sir, unless you’re prepared to face the same.”

He didn’t even attempt to fight her. Not when her concern for him made him desire her again with a fierceness bordering on pain. He wanted to lose himself in her warmth, bury his past in her soothing smile, find peace in her embrace. He didn’t know what god had sent him such an angel, but he was devil enough not to resist when heaven was handed to him.

Much later, when they’d finished a second soul-searing consummation and Clara lay asleep, he slid quietly from the bed and reached for his drawers. But before he could put them on, he spotted the blood smearing his thighs. It startled him. For a second, he thought his wound had started bleeding again.

Then he realized what it was. Clara’s blood. Her virgin’s blood.

Self-disgust roiled in his belly at the sight. Moving quietly so as not to disturb her peaceful sleep, he found a stray towel and washed the crimson stain from his loins.

He wished he could wash it from his conscience as well, but that was impossible. How could he have deflowered a woman he admired so much? He’d stolen from her what most people of her station prized, and without offering so much as a promise of marriage.

Such a promise must be given now, no matter what difficulties it presented. He’d often ignored his uncle’s teachings about gentlemanly behavior, but one stricture he’d always abided by: no man worth his salt took advantage of a woman.

If he did—as Morgan in a moment of weakness had taken advantage of Clara’s sensual nature—then he paid the consequences. Very well, Morgan would marry her. He refused to be like his mother’s lovers, satisfying his own needs at the expense of a woman’s reputation and future. Whatever it cost him, he would make it right.

And if she refused his suit? Morgan eyed her thoughtfully as he drew on his drawers. From what he’d heard, she’d never sought a husband.

But then she’d never bedded any man either. No, she was too sensible not to accept his suit. Women like her didn’t take lovers, and if they did let themselves be seduced, they prayed that their seducers would marry them.

So Morgan would marry her, even if the thought scared him witless. Marriage to Clara...oh, God. She would try to make him into a replica of Ravenswood and his brother, a gentleman in truth instead of in name. She would meddle in his affairs, expect him to come to heel, want him to behave as his station demanded.

And care about him, fuss over him, cradle him in her welcoming arms.

That was worst of all. Because he craved that too damned much, and craving something was the surest way to lose it. It was safer not to yearn—he knew that in his head. Yet he still hadn’t driven the yearning from his heart.

It was this cursed Spitalfields, where the yearning was amplified in every person around him. It hung in the air like fog, seeped into house and tavern. It drove boys to steal, women to sell their bodies, men to drink. And it drove him to desire things he’d given up on long ago. Love. Children. Happiness.

He had none of that at sea. He didn’t want it or miss it there. Once buried in the routine of ship life, breathing air that smelled of naught but salt and fish, he could function like a cog in a wheel. Something always needed doing on a ship. Battles must be fought, ports explored, maneuvers attempted. He could forget for months at a time all the things he craved so badly.

All the things Clara made him crave again. That’s why he must marry her and return to sea before she found out what he really was and turned from him in disgust. Before he was lulled into thinking his cravings might finally be satisfied.

Yes, he could handle that sort of distant marriage. She could live here and take care of her beloved Home, and he would see her between his sails to Africa and Gibraltar and wherever duty took him.

So why did that prospect seem suddenly so unappealing? Casting her a quick glance, he sighed and moved toward the front shop. He had to get some air. He needed to make plans that didn’t involve holding her close every night for the rest of his life, and he couldn’t do that with her lying there so sweetly sleeping, making his blood thunder in his chest and his throat draw tight with longing.

He started for the front room of the shop, then halted to grab his knife as an afterthought. Sliding it inside the waistband of his drawers at the small of his back, he left the back room and closed the door behind him. He felt his way to the side door and found the candle he usually kept there, the one he should have looked for when they’d first come in. Lighting it, he walked to the front and set it on the counter.

As he stood in the shadows near the window, he started out at the nearly deserted street. A glance at the clock said it was 3 A.M. Soon he’d have to wake her. No matter what she said, he refused to have her leave his shop in broad daylight when anybody might see. If she covered her head and face, he could easily sneak her into a waiting hack tonight, and she could go home.

Home, away from him. And she’d have to stay away from him for as long as his investigation continued. Unfortunately, it might be months before this mess was settled, and that presented another problem. What if after tonight she found herself with child? What then?

The thought of Clara carrying his babe filled him with a yearning so intense it terrified him. *Bon Dieu*, but he should never have gone so far with her. He should have kept his damned prick in his breeches.

A knock at the side door broke into his thoughts. He tensed. It must be the Specter, which meant it was time to return to business. Checking to be sure the door to the back room was firmly closed, he strode to the side door and opened it.

The hooded figure who stood in the alley a few feet away bore little resemblance to the one Clara had described. For one thing, there was no hint of a face beneath the deep hood, not a single flash of the pale, clean-shaven chin Clara had spoken of.

Despite himself, Morgan felt a chill skitter along his skin. Of course the man had a face—he was no supernatural being. Yet it was strange how he could hide it so entirely beneath that hood of his. Morgan had the unsettling impression that if he jerked the hood back, there would be nothing underneath.

He shook off the ridiculous thought. Leaning against the doorway, he said, “You’re here for your answer, I suppose.”

“Come outside, Captain Pryce,” the Specter rasped, his voice disguised as before. “We wouldn’t want you to disturb your lady friend. And we certainly wouldn’t want her to overhear our discussion.”

Alarm knotted in his gut. The Specter knew Clara was here? Ah, but perhaps he thought his “lady friend” was merely a tart.

"What lady friend do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. Did you think I missed that ridiculous confrontation earlier? The impostor trying to frighten Lady Clara? Your springing to her rescue so gallantly?"

The arse knew it was Clara, damn him. She'd been right—the Specter *had* been watching all along.

Morgan walked out into the alley, ignoring the dirt beneath his bare feet, the brisk air stippling his skin with goose bumps. Closing the door behind him, he thanked God he'd thought to don his knife. It gave him a distinct advantage, since the Specter probably thought him unarmed. Otherwise the man would never venture close enough to risk Morgan's killing him. Not that Morgan was ready for that yet.

Morgan turned to his enemy and said noncommittally, "So I have a woman here. What of it?"

"Not just any woman. I must say I'm impressed. I expected you to be talented with the ladies, but this is talent beyond measure—to seduce the moral and lofty Lady Clara."

Morgan tensed, even though he knew that the door to the windowless back room had been closed the whole time and it was impossible that the Specter could have known what they'd done. "What makes you think Lady Clara would relinquish her virtue to a man like me?"

"I'm no fool. It's 3 A.M., you're wearing only drawers, and the lady has been here two hours at least. Can you blame me for drawing the obvious conclusion?"

Morgan scrambled to think of a response that wouldn't ruin Clara, his investigation, or both. "This particular lady had become a nuisance, so I silenced her the best way I know how, short of murdering her and drawing unwanted attention to myself." When he realized this might provide him with the chance to determine the Specter's connection to the police offices, he added, "Did you know the wench actually reported me to the magistrate?"

"I've heard of the trouble she's made for you. She hasn't exactly been discreet in her disapproval."

And the Specter's words hadn't exactly revealed anything, curse his hide. The man was too crafty for such a blatant ploy.

The Specter went on in a deceptively casual voice. "So you seduced her to gain her silence, did you?"

Morgan shrugged. "What else could I do? She was making too much trouble."

"Indeed. Though I'm surprised you could coax her into your bed. Considering that she wants to save the very pickpockets you'd like to recruit, I can't imagine how you convinced her to overcome her personal objections to your profession." The suspicion in the Specter's voice was unmistakable.

Morgan knew he treaded dangerous ground, but he saw no other way out. "I didn't even attempt to overcome her objections—as you say, she's too moral a lady to overlook my sins. Instead I persuaded her that her information about me and my sins was wrong."

"Oh? How did you manage that?"

"For one thing, I pointed out that I hadn't had Johnny pinch one item for me since he began his stay here."

"Yes, I know. I'd wondered about that."

Damn. The man had eyes everywhere. "Surely you didn't think I'd be that foolish. How did I know the boy wasn't Lady Clara's spy, planted in my shop to catch me in the act so she could persuade the magistrate to have me arrested?"

"Good point. And very clever of you to think of it. Though if you didn't want him to steal for you, why did you take him in?"

The man sounded less suspicious now. Sensing he was gaining the advantage, Morgan pressed on. "Her ladyship's charges are her weakness, you know. I can afford to be kind to Johnny if it gains me her help in the end."

"Her help?"

"All those pickpockets, of course. She has an entire houseful of willing little thieves only waiting to be tapped. Just think of what I can accomplish with them under my charge. And the authorities wouldn't touch her, since they think her a moral sort, so I wouldn't even have to worry about their interference. A tidy setup indeed. I'm surprised you haven't attempted it yourself. Or at least worked to woo her children to your side."

"I've considered it. But I don't like to draw attention to my activities by public scraps with a well-known lady philanthropist, so I left well enough alone, thinking she would do the same. Which she has." He shrugged. "But then I didn't realize that seduction would work on Lady Clara, or I might have attempted more."

Though the idea of the Specter seeking to seduce Clara nauseated him, Morgan forced himself to continue the loathsome conversation. The villain would only let his guard down if he felt comfortable with Morgan. And if he thought Morgan was as vicious, sly, and unscrupulous as he.

"You know these moral sorts," Morgan said casually, "all prim and proper on the outside, but secretly burning for a man on the inside. Once I gained her interest, I was able to persuade her of whatever I liked. A lusty woman would rather believe a lie—no matter how far-fetched—than admit that her desires have overwhelmed her good sense. I only gave Lady Clara what she wanted by telling her what she needed to hear."

Morgan held his breath, praying that the Specter was cynical enough about women to believe the tale. When the Specter chuckled, Morgan nearly slumped in relief. He'd passed the test.

"You're more devious than even I gave you credit for, Captain Pryce. Though if she turns moral again—"

"She won't." Morgan tucked his thumbs inside his drawers suggestively. "I know how to keep a woman happy. But if she should have temporary moments of rationality, I can use blackmail to squelch them. After all, how long do you think her Home would last if a scandal about her criminal lover erupted?"

A low whistle escaped the Specter's lips. "God help the poor woman once you have her entirely under your thumb. You're certainly going about it the right way. To control a woman, one must tread carefully, lulling her natural fears, taking one's time in building her gilded cage around her until she doesn't even see the bars."

"Exactly," Morgan answered, though the Specter's callous assessment of womankind unsettled him. "And once I have the bars around her cage, I'll have her pickpockets out of theirs."

The Specter gave a brief bow. "Very good, Captain Pryce. You're clearly a man after my own heart." Then he stepped suddenly nearer. "The question is, are you a man after my business as well?"

Morgan chuckled. "Don't tell me I've got the great Specter worried."

"Not at all." A knife flashed suddenly in the Specter's hand. "*You're* the one who stepped into the alley unarmed."

Morgan drew his own blade before the man could even blink. "And you're the one underestimating me. I never go anywhere unarmed."