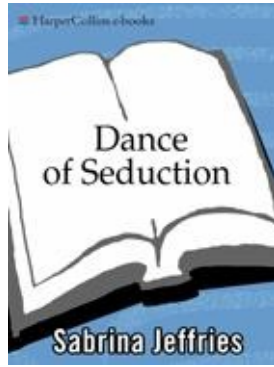


Dance of Seduction

Sabrina Jeffries



SABRINA JEFFRIES

Dance of Seduction

 HarperCollins e-books

*To my parents, my brothers, and my sister,
who have all, in your own ways,
dedicated your lives to making
the world a better place.
Clara and I salute you.*

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Chapter 1

London
May 1819

In Books or Work, or healthful Play
Let my first Years be past,
That I may give for every Day
Some good Account at last.
“Against Idleness and Mischief,” Isaac Watts,
Divine Songs attempted in Easy Language
for the Use of Children

Lady Clara Stanbourne was descended from a long line of reformers and rogues. Her late father’s side had produced Quakers and Whigs whose passion to effect change was surpassed only by their respectable station. Her late mother’s side, the Doggetts, boasted a broad assortment of feckless scoundrels who’d gloried in gambling, delighted in debauchery, and wallowed in wild living. The Doggetts possessed no respectability at all except through their tenuous connection to the Stanbournes through marriage.

Fortunately for England, the Doggetts had virtually died out. Only Clara’s uncle Cecil, the card cheat, carried on the family tradition of wreaking havoc upon the unsuspecting and the virtuous. But he did it in America now, having fled England eight years earlier, when his cheating had landed him on the wrong end of a very large pistol.

Thus Lady Clara was surprised when she came downstairs on a bright spring Monday to learn that her uncle’s American solicitor, a Mr. Gaither, had just arrived at Stanbourne Hall from Virginia. She didn’t even know her uncle possessed something so lofty as a solicitor. Yet Samuel, her new footman, insisted that such a creature awaited her in the front parlor.

With a sigh, she glanced at the clock. “They’re expecting me at the Home any minute. After my being away in the country for two weeks, they’ll worry if I’m late. I suppose you’ll have to send a boy round with a note.”

“Yes, m’lady,” Samuel said nervously, looking very smart in his new footman’s uniform. Samuel was her most recent success from the Stanbourne Home for the Reformation of Pickpockets. Though he was a bit short for a proper footman, he performed his duties well enough, which was all that mattered.

An eruption of barking from the front parlor warned that her aunt, Verity Stanbourne, had reached the parlor first. Clara hastened to the doorway, groaning to find her aunt’s three beribboned miniature poodles dancing around the American. Poor Mr. Gaither teetered on rickety legs atop a footstool, crying, “Shoo! Go on, you beasts! Get away!”

Aunt Verity flapped her hands fruitlessly at the capering, yapping dogs. “Now, Fiddle, you mustn’t—Oh, come away, Faddle! And Foodle, if you don’t stop this—” She cast Mr. Gaither a helpless look. “See how you’ve upset my lassies? They’re all much annoyed, I tell you.” A sharp woof preceded the entrance of an old spaniel bitch. “Lord have mercy, here comes Empress—stay put, Mr. Gaither! If she doesn’t approve of you, she’s liable to bite you!”

Clara crossed the room and threw herself into the midst of the dogs. “Down, all of you, this minute! No one’s biting anyone.” She glared at the poodles until the barking turned to whimpers and three curly heads drooped in shameless obeisance.

When Empress kept woofing at poor Mr. Gaither’s feet, Clara added sharply, “That’s enough, Empress,” and the aging spaniel retreated to Aunt Verity’s side.

Unfortunately, Clara could do nothing about the low growl the dog continued to emit. Empress had taken a distinct dislike to their guest, which boded ill for Mr. Gaither. The dog had an uncanny ability to judge people accurately. Whomever she growled or barked at was eventually shown to possess serious character flaws. Empress was so adept that Aunt Verity used her to sift out good applicants from bad when interviewing new servants. As a result, Stanbourne Hall’s staff was the envy of all Aunt Verity’s friends.

Judging from Mr. Gaither’s scowl, his character flaw was a hatred of dogs.

Clara held out her hand to help him down from the stool. “I’m so sorry, sir. I’m Lady Clara Stanbourne, and I see you’ve already met my aunt. Please forgive us for our chaotic ways. I fear we aren’t much used to visitors.”

“I can see why,” he grumbled as he climbed down. Bestowing glares all round, he brushed at his frock coat to eliminate any remaining essence of canine.

“It’s your own fault, sir.” Aunt Verity sat down on the settee and arranged her skirts as carefully as any coquette. “You wouldn’t let them sniff you, and they don’t like that.” One of the poodles jumped into her lap, and she clutched him close. “You tried to kick Faddle, and she’s very sensitive about these things.”

“Sensitive! She’s a blasted dog! And furthermore, I don’t think—”

“Won’t you sit down, Mr. Gaither?” Clara put in. “Perhaps you’d like some tea?”

That brought him up short. He glowered at her. “No, madam. I’d just as soon attend to business and be done with this.” Fixing his gaze on the still growling Empress, who’d plopped down on Aunt Verity’s feet, the solicitor took a seat as far away from the dogs as possible. “Letting beasts run wild...setting them on strangers... I swear, the whole country is mad.”

Ignoring his complaints, Aunt Verity patted the settee, and Fiddle and Foodle leaped to cram their little bodies into the coveted space next to her. With a sigh, Clara

sat on her aunt's other side. Good Lord, what a day. And it wasn't even noon yet.

Still keeping a wary eye on the dogs, Mr. Gaither opened his satchel to rummage through some papers. "I'm here to inform you, my lady, that Cecil Doggett is deceased."

He made his statement so baldly that Clara was sure she'd misheard. "What? Uncle Cecil? Are you sure?"

"Do you think I'd come all this way and endure these...these creatures if I weren't?" He drew out an official-looking document and handed it to her. "Here is the death certificate."

"Oh." She took it from him, her heart sinking as she scanned the paper. The facts were stated clearly enough.

A lump lodged in her throat. Uncle Cecil might have been a scoundrel, but she'd always harbored a certain fondness for him. He'd humored her hobby of collecting books for children. He'd never called her interest "frivolous" as Papa had been wont to do, or "nonsense" as Mama had. He'd simply given her what she'd craved—sweet little chapbooks of fairy tales and fables and stories of derring-do.

She read the certificate through tear-filled eyes. "It...it says here that he died of heart failure."

Having regained his composure, Mr. Gaither nodded with grave solemnity.

"I don't believe it." Aunt Verity took the paper from her and looked it over. "How very uncharacteristic of Cecil." She glanced up at the solicitor. "Are you quite sure it wasn't poison? Or something equally sinister?"

Oh dear, as usual Aunt Verity was living up to her name.

When Mr. Gaither looked taken aback, Clara figured she ought to explain. "The Doggett men are...*were*...adventurous sorts, you see, and all died badly. My eldest uncle was shot in a duel, and the youngest was hanged in Madrid for forgery."

"So death by heart failure isn't what one expects of a Doggett," Aunt Verity added.

"I assure you that if I hadn't been certain of the circumstances of his death, I wouldn't have left America to come here," the solicitor said loftily. "And I certainly wouldn't be passing on his bequest to her ladyship."

Clara regarded him blankly, but Aunt Verity pounced on his comment. "What bequest? The man never had more than two shillings to rub together."

"When Mr. Doggett died, he possessed fifteen thousand pounds. He left ten thousand of that fortune to Lady Clara. If she agrees to accept it."

Clara's mouth fell open. "Ten thousand pounds!" She tried to assimilate the astonishing news. This was straight out of a fairy tale by Charles Perrault. And like all fairy tales, it seemed much too good to be true. "Did my uncle happen to say how he came by such a fortune? When he left London, he was nearly penniless."

"I was told he won a plantation in a card game. The owner's brother, a wealthy man, offered him money in lieu of the property, and Mr. Doggett accepted. Said he wouldn't much like the life of a planter. But alas, he didn't live long enough to enjoy his newfound fortune."

A weight settled onto her chest at the thought of Uncle Cecil dying all alone in a strange country.

"And...umm...Cecil won the game honestly?" her aunt asked.

Clara groaned. She hadn't even thought of that.

"Of course!" the solicitor exclaimed. "I assure you I would never take part in any illegal endeavor."

Clara flashed him a weak smile. If Uncle Cecil's companions hadn't caught him cheating at the time, there was no point to explaining his proclivities now. And for all she knew, he hadn't cheated.

And pigs flew, too.

"This is quite sudden," Clara remarked. "Are you sure Uncle Cecil meant for the money to be left to *me*? I'm merely his niece. Perhaps you've confused me with one of his...er...mistresses or by-blows. I've heard tell he had several of both."

"Clara!" Aunt Verity clapped her hands over Empress's floppy ears. "You shouldn't speak of such matters before Empress. She's chaste!"

The dog squirmed to escape Aunt Verity's hands, clearly eager to drink up every scandalous word.

Clara shrugged. "Uncle Cecil was always perfectly forthright about his vices, so I don't see why *I* should pretend they don't exist."

"Good lack-a-daisy, niece, you'll shock all of my lassies with such talk. They're very sensitive about the proprieties." When the stony-faced solicitor snorted, Aunt Verity glared at him. "Well, they *are*. They have to be, living in the Stanbourne household as they do. My brother, Clara's father, was a clergyman, you know. A very fine man."

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Gaither retorted, "but I was given to understand that he was the marquess of Pemberton."

Clara gave him a pained look. "He was. Later in life, when he unexpectedly inherited the title. Until then, he was a clergyman. Now, about my uncle's estate..."

"Yes, of course. To answer your question, the other five thousand of his fortune is going to his 'mistresses and by-blows.' So the ten thousand is most assuredly for you. Unless you wish to refuse it? Mr. Doggett did mention that if you refused it, I was to accept that without murmur."

"I suppose you really ought to refuse," Aunt Verity put in. "Your father was always adamant that your mother not accept any proceeds from your uncles' ill-gotten ___"

"She means *ill-conceived*," Clara broke in. "My uncles' *ill-conceived* schemes."

"No, dear, that's not what I meant—" her aunt began.

"Yes, it was," Clara said firmly. Perhaps Uncle Cecil had cheated. She would never know for sure and could do nothing about it.

But she could put ten thousand "ill-gotten" pounds to very good use. Not for herself, of course. Papa had left her a nice annual allowance of a thousand pounds. Between that and Aunt Verity's portion, there was plenty for them both to live comfortably in Stanbourne Hall all their days. But with ten thousand pounds, only think of the improvements they could make to the Home!

"So you do want the money, Lady Clara?" the solicitor asked impatiently.

Ideas already rushed through Clara's brain. "I do indeed."

"Very good, madam." Mr. Gaither began to explain the process of transferring the funds to her.

"If you're taking the money anyway, Clara," her aunt broke in, "you could put it

to good use.”

“Exactly what I was thinking, Aunt Verity,” she said patiently.

“You could finally get married!”

Clara glanced at her, bemused. “What has money got to do with *that*?”

“Why, everything, my dear. With eight thousand pounds added to your present dowry, you’d have your pick of the respectable eligible gentlemen. Especially after we use the other two thousand to fix you up.” She paused to pat Clara’s knee. “Not that you aren’t nicely fixed up already, you understand. For myself, I prefer your way of dress. But I’ve noticed that even respectable men like women with...umm...”

“Expensive clothing?” Clara said archly.

“No, dear. Elegance. Your wool gowns are all very well for reform, but you need elegance to attract a man. Once you’ve got a husband with your elegance and your fine dowry, then you can go back to dressing as you please. But you have to catch him first. Isn’t that so, Faddle?”

Faddle barked enthusiastically. Clara rolled her eyes.

“I hear that the newly widowed Lord Winthrop is looking for a wife,” her aunt went on slyly.

“Good Lord, not Winthrop again,” Clara said.

That had certainly been a tempest in a teapot—the stodgy earl had paid some attention to her during her coming out but had retreated when his mother had protested Clara’s “sordid” connections. Clara had hoped she was done with him forever when he’d married another woman eight years ago, dashing Aunt Verity’s hopes.

Then the earl’s poor wife had gone and died on him, leaving him with five children. So clearly Aunt Verity was back to planning the match. “Once we’ve got you properly done up,” her aunt said, “and he hears of your newfound wealth, he’s sure to look your way again.”

“I don’t want him looking my way again. He was a pompous twit back then, and he’s pompous twit now.”

“Respectable, God-fearing men sometimes are, dear. But with your responsibilities, that’s the sort of husband you need, don’t you think?”

Clara scowled, though her aunt was probably right. When Clara married, it should be to a solid citizen who’d approve of her reform activities. The trouble was, Clara couldn’t seem to warm to such men. Perhaps it was her unfortunate Doggett blood, but she found them so...tedious. One day, she’d have to take her medicine and align herself with such a husband, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it just yet.

Aunt Verity bent down to croon in Empress’s ear. “What do you think, girl? Wouldn’t Clara look lovely in an elegant French gown, with pearls in her hair? Even a high stickler like Winthrop would overlook her mother’s scandalous connections, and —”

“I shan’t use the money for a dowry,” Clara interrupted with an embarrassed glance at Mr. Gaither before her aunt started going on about reticules and pink bonnets and what all. “I intend to use it for the Home.”

Her aunt straightened abruptly. “The Home?”

“With ten thousand pounds, I can expand it enormously.” Excitement built in Clara’s chest. “The children can have a real schoolroom, and we can provide financial incentive for tradesmen to take them on as apprentices. We might even start some little

business of our own that the older children could run.”

“But Clara, must you use it all on the Home? You could give half to the Home and leave half to enhance your dowry.” Her pale brows knit in a frown. “But then there’d be nothing for fixing you up. Hmm, perhaps if we settled for an English modiste—”

“I’m not using one penny for my dowry,” Clara snapped, her patience at an end. “Lord knows it’s ample enough already.”

Her aunt’s hands fluttered against her pigeon breasts. “Dear girl, think what you’re saying. You’re getting on in years, you know.”

“Thank you for pointing that out,” Clara said, mortified to be having this conversation in front of a stranger. “I’m only twenty-eight, hardly old enough to be reduced to buying myself a husband. There’s still plenty of time for marriage.”

“Good lack-a-daisy, Clara—”

“Enough! I’ve made my decision.”

Aunt Verity appealed to Mr. Gaither, who’d been listening to the conversation with smug interest. “Do tell her she can’t use all the legacy on reform.”

For the first time that morning, a smile lit Mr. Gaither’s thin, bookish features. “Mr. Doggett made no stipulation whatsoever on how the money was to be used, madam. He left it entirely up to his niece.”

“Clever man, my uncle,” Clara muttered under her breath.

Mr. Gaither went on, almost maliciously, “If she wants to use it to make gold cages for your little beasts, she’s perfectly free to do so.”

Horror filled her aunt’s face. “Cages! Clara, you would never—”

“Of course not, Aunt. I wouldn’t think of it.” Clara added teasingly, “Unless you persist in this notion of using it for my dowry—”

“I’m only trying to help,” Aunt Verity grumbled. She was no fool—she knew when to retreat, though that didn’t mean she’d given up. “If you insist on ignoring the possibilities, I don’t suppose we can do much about it, eh, lassies?”

The poodles’ yapping wiped the smile right off Mr. Gaither’s face. He leaped to his feet. “I’d best be going. I must pass on those other bequests, you know.”

Clara smiled at the American as she rose, too. “Yes, to Uncle Cecil’s by-blows and mistresses. I don’t suppose you could tell me who—”

“Don’t even think it, Clara Stanbourne,” her aunt protested. “Reforming pickpockets is one thing, but if you begin associating with *those* sorts of women—”

“Actually, madam,” the solicitor broke in, “Mr. Doggett thought that his niece might ask such a thing, and he instructed me to keep everyone’s identities secret. I think he was afraid that if his...er...consorts knew of his exalted connections, they might take advantage of the association.”

Tears sprang to Clara’s eyes again. It was so like Uncle Cecil to try to protect her. “Thank you, Mr. Gaither, for carrying out his wishes so faithfully.”

To her surprise, he winked. “I’ll inform you when all the papers are drawn up, my lady, and you can collect the funds. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Yes, of course, I’ll just see you out.” Clara shot her aunt an indulgent smile. “Aunt Verity, I’m going to the Home, but I’ll be back for dinner.”

“Do be careful, Clara,” her aunt called after her. “Take one of the footmen!”

“I always do,” Clara said irritably as she ushered Mr. Gaither into the foyer.

Samuel jumped to his feet and hastened to bring Mr. Gaither’s overcoat. But as the

young man helped the solicitor into it, she saw his right hand flash.

With a groan, she stepped forward to manacle Samuel's wrist before Mr. Gaither turned around. "Oh, dear, Mr. Gaither," she said smoothly, "I believe you've dropped your purse. Samuel seems to have found it."

Samuel colored, but held the purse out with such lightning speed that nobody but Clara would have known it had resided in his pocket for a full five seconds. "It was on the floor, sir. Is it yours?"

With a look of complete bewilderment, Mr. Gaither patted his pocket, then said, "Bless my eyes, it is indeed."

"It must've fell out when you put on your coat," Samuel said helpfully.

"I suppose." Mr. Gaither eyed Samuel with suspicion as he accepted the purse. Then turning to Clara, he made a sketchy bow. "Good day, madam. I'll send a note round when everything is done. Perhaps it would be better if we meet elsewhere next time."

"Certainly," she agreed quickly. "Good day, Mr. Gaither."

The door had scarcely closed behind him before she whirled on Samuel. "I cannot believe that you—"

"It ain't what you think, m'lady," Samuel hastened to say. "I would have returned the purse before the carriage drove off, truly I would. I was just practicing."

"For what? You're out of that life now."

"I got to keep my skills up, because you never know..." He trailed off as if to keep from saying too much.

But he'd already said enough. She knew what he was thinking. *Because you never know when you'll lose a position. Because one day the dream will vanish as so many others have, and you'll have nothing to stand between you and starvation but your skills.*

She took one look at his anxious face and sighed. "From now on, please practice only on me and the servants, all right?"

He blinked at her. "You mean you're not dismissing me?"

The hopeful yearning in his face made her heart hurt. "No. Though if you ever do anything like that again—"

"Oh, yes, m'lady...I mean no, m'lady...I mean I'll never do it again, I swear!" Grabbing her hand, he kissed it with a slavishness bordering on desperation. "I won't disappoint you. I'll never pick a pocket again, and I'll be the best footman ever to work at Stanbourne Hall!"

"You'll certainly be the most nimble." When he looked downcast, she smiled reassuringly. "There, there, you're a good, hard worker, and I have every faith that you'll put your quick fingers to better use than you have in the past." Gently she extricated her hand. "Now go on with you, and summon my carriage."

With a quick nod, Samuel scurried off. She shook her head as she watched him go. Samuel was one of her successes, yet even he had his moments. How much hardship must it take to bludgeon such a promising young man into believing he had no hope of a future beyond stealing? That he must always expect life to hand him lemons?

She squared her shoulders. She was here to counteract all that bludgeoning, and with this new source of funds, she could do it on a grand scale.

The carriage rumbled up at once. As Samuel took his place on the back, she

climbed inside and began to contemplate plans for her new inheritance. There were the practical improvements, of course, expansion of the children's dormitories and a new stove for the kitchen, not to mention at least two more teachers and a whole slew of books. Mama had always wanted better heating. Indeed if they'd had adequate heating during the cruelly bitter winter of 1812—

She sighed at the dark memory. Her mother had died of pneumonia during that winter. Clara herself had taken ill, for they'd spent many hours at the Home trying to keep the children warm. But her mother hadn't possessed the youthful constitution to survive frequent exposure to the dank, cold air.

Tears stung Clara's eyes, and she brushed them away impatiently. How silly to dwell on what couldn't be changed. The news of Uncle Cecil's death had made her morbid.

She smoothed out the skirts of her practical worsted gown, the sort she always wore to the Home, and straightened her spine. The best way to honor the dead was by making their passing useful to the living. Mama would be pleased to know she'd indirectly contributed to the Home's present windfall. Indeed, if not for Mama's steadfast insistence that Clara associate with the Doggetts as well as the Stanbournes, Uncle Cecil would never have known his niece well enough to warrant giving her such an inheritance.

Clara smiled. She hoped Mama was watching from heaven and smiling, too.

By now they'd entered the grimy, despair-ridden environs of Spitalfields. The passing of her carriage was scarcely noted—the bleary-eyed denizens of the streets were used to seeing the black-and-gold Stanbourne equipage trundle by nearly every morning. Clara had been coming this way alone for the seven years since Mama's death, and for three before it.

They lumbered onto Petticoat Lane, a street notorious for its receivers of stolen goods, who often worked out of pawnshops. She gathered up her leather reticule and striped wool shawl as they rode within sight of the Home.

Then something caught her eye in the alley very near her destination. Normally, she wouldn't give a second glance to two people squabbling, but a flash of red arrested her attention.

Johnny Perkins in his favorite scarlet coat. And the twelve-year-old, a resident of the Home, was having a spirited discussion with a tall, broad-shouldered stranger, who seemed to be restraining the boy from running off.

Reminded of this morning's incident with Samuel, she shouted, "Stop the coach!" As it shuddered to a halt, she opened the door and leaped out. Telling the coachman to go on and Samuel to wait at the top of the alley, she headed toward the imposing gentleman dressed in a ragged frock coat and battered beaver hat.

The alley stank of fried herring and cabbage and the quiet fear that pervaded Spitalfields. It wasn't fear, however, but alarm that spurred her toward the man gripping Johnny's shoulder with firm intent. Because morning sunlight glinted off the gold watch dangling from Johnny's hand, and that could mean only one thing.

Another one of her pickpockets was headed for trouble this morning.

Chapter 2

...converse not with any but those that are good,
sober and virtuous. Evil Communications
corrupt Good Manners.
A Little pretty pocket-book: intended for
the instruction and amusement of little
Master Tommy and pretty Miss Polly, *John Newbery*

Vainly trying to smother her distress, Clara vaulted the rest of the way down the alley. She was just in time to hear Johnny's squeaky voice say, "Now see here—"

"Johnny!" she said sharply.

The boy's head whipped around, and his ruddy cheeks paled to the color of milk. "Bloody hell," he mumbled as she approached.

She leveled on him her famous Stanbourne Stare, which generally sent her children scurrying to behave. "Give the gentleman back his watch this minute!"

Johnny hesitated, then handed the watch over. As soon as the stranger had it, he lifted cool black eyes to her. Fear banished her irritation at Johnny. The only men in Spitalfields with that direct a stare were watchmen. Or worse, officers of the law.

Sick with worry, she stepped up to place a proprietary hand on the other shoulder of her hapless charge. "Please, sir, I'm sure Johnny didn't mean to take your watch—"

"What concern is it of yours whether he did or not, madame? Are you the lad's mother?" The man's hand still gripped Johnny's shoulder and seemed to tighten as they both stood there holding on to the boy.

Her panic increased. The stranger's faintly accented English wasn't a foreigner's exactly, but it wasn't an Englishman's either. Which didn't rule out his being an officer.

She forced a conciliatory smile to her lips. "I'm a guardian of sorts to him."

"Me mum is dead," Johnny interjected helpfully. "This here's Lady Clara."

"Lady Clara?" Instead of tipping his hat or begging her pardon, he muttered a French curse under his breath. Then he surveyed her hair, her gown, and even her boots with a brusque, impersonal scrutiny. "What's a lady of rank doing in Spitalfields?"

“I run the Stanbourne Home for the Reformation of Pickpockets. It’s the brick building on the next corner. Johnny is one of my residents.”

A thin, ironic smile touched the man’s hard mouth. “I see that his reformation is progressing nicely.”

She colored. “Lapses happen occasionally, sir, but they’re unusual. I’m only sorry you had to witness this one. Now if you’d be so good as to release Johnny, perhaps we could better discuss the...er...situation.”

Johnny remained silent, his gaze bouncing anxiously between her and the stranger.

The man stared at her long enough for her to glimpse a native intelligence in his fathomless eyes and wary expression. Then he shrugged and dropped his hand from Johnny’s shoulder. Casting the watch a cursory glance, he shoved it into his coat pocket.

She breathed easier. “Thank you, Mr.... Mr....”

“Pryce.” Then he added, almost as an afterthought, “Captain Morgan Pryce.”

Oh, dear, a captain. But what kind? When he offered no more information, she examined him more carefully. He dressed shabbily—patched fustian coat and waistcoat, decidedly ragged stock, scuffed boots—and his black hair curled far down past his frayed shirt collar. But other details of his appearance revealed a man with gentlemanly habits. He’d tied his stock with considerable care, and his fingernails were clean and well groomed.

Still, that didn’t make him an officer of the law. “Are you a captain serving with the River Police? Or the Lambeth Street Police Office?”

At Johnny’s inexplicable snort, the gentleman cast the boy a quelling glance. “I’m a captain serving Her Majesty’s Navy.”

“In Spitalfields?” she blurted out.

A faint amusement crossed the surprisingly handsome face. “In case you hadn’t heard, England isn’t fighting any wars these days, so there’s little call for naval captains. We’re all on half-pay.”

While his profession explained his educated speech and air of command, it didn’t explain what a foreign-sounding gentleman who’d managed to obtain a captain’s commission was doing in an alley in *her* part of town. “Half-pay or not, surely you can afford to board your family in better surroundings than Spitalfields.”

“I have no family. And I live here because I own a business concern in the area.” He jerked his head toward the tumbledown building on her right with a door that stood half ajar. “That’s the side entrance to my new shop. I sell nautical goods to sailors.”

“But why here, of all places?”

“Why not? Plenty of sailors live in this part of London. Should I have set up my business in the Strand among the milliners and the tailors? So I could tap the lucrative market for young ladies buying compasses?”

His sarcasm made her arch one brow. “Certainly not. But there are parts of town where you’re less likely to risk having your shop robbed.”

Oh, bother, thievery was the last thing she should have mentioned.

He shot Johnny a meaningful glance. “Excellent point.”

She sucked in an anxious breath. Captain Pryce might not be a police officer, but some navy men could be rather surly about such things as being robbed in the street. And he definitely seemed the surly sort. “I hope you realize, sir, that little would be

accomplished by taking Johnny before the magistrate.”

Johnny flashed Captain Pryce a panicked look. “I ain’t going to no magistrate, am I?”

“No,” Captain Pryce said firmly. “Of course not.”

Relief flooded her, but she couldn’t risk the man changing his mind. “Where you’re going is back to the Home this very minute.” She squeezed Johnny’s shoulder. “Go on then.”

“But you gave me leave to visit Lucy this morning—”

“Which you used to ill effect, so your leave has been revoked.” Lucy was Johnny’s sister. If necessary, Clara would take him to visit Lucy herself later. “Now go tell Mrs. Carter I said to put your clever fingers to work in the kitchen. A long stint helping peel potatoes will give you time to contemplate how close you came to disaster this morning.”

“I could connemplay it better dusting the parlor,” Johnny offered hopefully.

“*Contemplate*,” she said, enunciating the consonants. “It means ‘think.’ As in, ‘think about your sins.’ Perhaps you could do it best by cleaning out the chamber pots.”

“Oh no, m’lady!” Johnny looked appalled. “Now that I consider it, peeling potatoes is just the thing for thinking. Aye, just the thing.”

“Good choice.” She shoved him none too gently toward the entrance to the alley. “Go on with you. I’ll be there in a moment.”

Casting Captain Pryce a last furtive look, Johnny scurried off. She held her breath until the boy slipped past Samuel and around the corner, then let it out in a long *whoosh*. Another disaster averted.

Well, not entirely. She still had to deal with the suspicious captain. But when she turned to face him, she read interest rather than suspicion in his eyes.

This time when his gaze swept her, it wasn’t brusque or impersonal. It was slow, thorough, and intimate—the look of a man examining an attractive woman. To her annoyance, it set off an unfamiliar fluttering in her belly. And when his gaze rose to her mouth, as if drawn there by her quickened breath, the fluttering in her belly grew positively frenzied.

How absurd. He was a neighbor, nothing more. A decidedly attractive neighbor, true, and certainly more interesting than any other man she’d met in Spitalfields, but still merely a neighbor.

She fought to regain her composure. “Thank you for your indulgence with Johnny, sir,” she said in a breathier voice than she would have liked. “I know he’s given you the wrong impression of my children, but I assure you that most of them are not like him.”

The gaze he lifted to hers was once more icy and remote. “You mean, they’re not foolish enough to get caught.”

This captain might be handsome, but his manner was worse than the gruff Beast’s in her favorite tale by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont. “I mean, they try to avoid behavior that lands them in trouble.” When he cocked an eyebrow skeptically, she stiffened. “They *are* only children, you know. They do err from time to time.”

“As long as you keep them away from my shop, I don’t really care what they do.”

His bluntness brought her up short. “If you’re worried they’ll steal from you—”

“I’m worried they’ll get underfoot.”

“They won’t.” She forced a smile, determined to be congenial even if he was not. “I assure you that the residents of Spitalfields find us to be very good neighbors.”

Scowling, he glanced to the top of the alley, where Samuel stood polishing the brass buttons of his yellow-and-black livery with a handkerchief. “Tell me, madame, do you spend a great deal of time in the neighborhood?”

“Every day.”

“Your father or husband or whatever man is responsible for you doesn’t object?”

That got her dander right up. “I beg your pardon, but I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself—I need no man to be ‘responsible’ for me.”

“Oh?” He nodded toward the head of the alley. “So why is that incompetent fool there standing guard?”

Thank heavens Samuel was too far off to hear this audacious captain’s insults. “Samuel is my footman. He accompanies me everywhere as a matter of principle. And he’s not an incompetent fool.”

“He is if he thinks he can protect you while remaining several yards away.”

“I *told* him to stand there. Quite frankly, I didn’t think I’d be in any danger.”

He stepped closer, his dark gaze drifting to her lips, then her breasts. It fixed there meaningfully before rising casually to meet hers. “Then you’re as much a fool as he.”

Color rose in her cheeks despite her attempts to squelch it. Though she was draped from neck to ankle in sturdy brown worsted, his look seemed to lay her bare. Or at the very least, imply that he’d *like* to lay her bare. A sudden image of the large, virile captain stripping her clothing from her one piece at a time affected her pulse most alarmingly.

She struggled to regain the upper hand. “Are you always this rude?”

“Are you always this careless of your safety?”

“I happen to consider some things more important than safety.”

“Like what?”

“The well-being of my charges and my fellow creatures. The future of mankind.”

“What lofty concerns for such a *petite jeune fille*,” he said sarcastically. “And here the rest of us merely worry about surviving from one day to the next.”

She lifted her chin. “That’s why I believe being born to privilege means I must help those less fortunate. You might say I do my own part to keep the ship from sinking.”

“By bailing it out with thimbles?” His voice held a taunt. “Take care, my lady, or you’ll find yourself sinking faster than you can bail.”

“If I had a shilling for every time some well-meaning person predicted disaster, I could buy your entire shop, lock, stock, and barrel. Yet despite the naysayers, I’ve managed to place sixty-three of my charges in positions as apprentices or servants throughout the city.”

Surprise showed in his face. “You convinced that many people to hire pickpockets? *Pickpockets*, for God’s sake? *Bon Dieu*, how long have you worked here?”

“Ten years, though I’ve only been in charge for seven. And before you ask how ‘whatever man is responsible for me’ could allow it, I should tell you that my late father is the one who first brought me to work at the Stanbourne Home.”