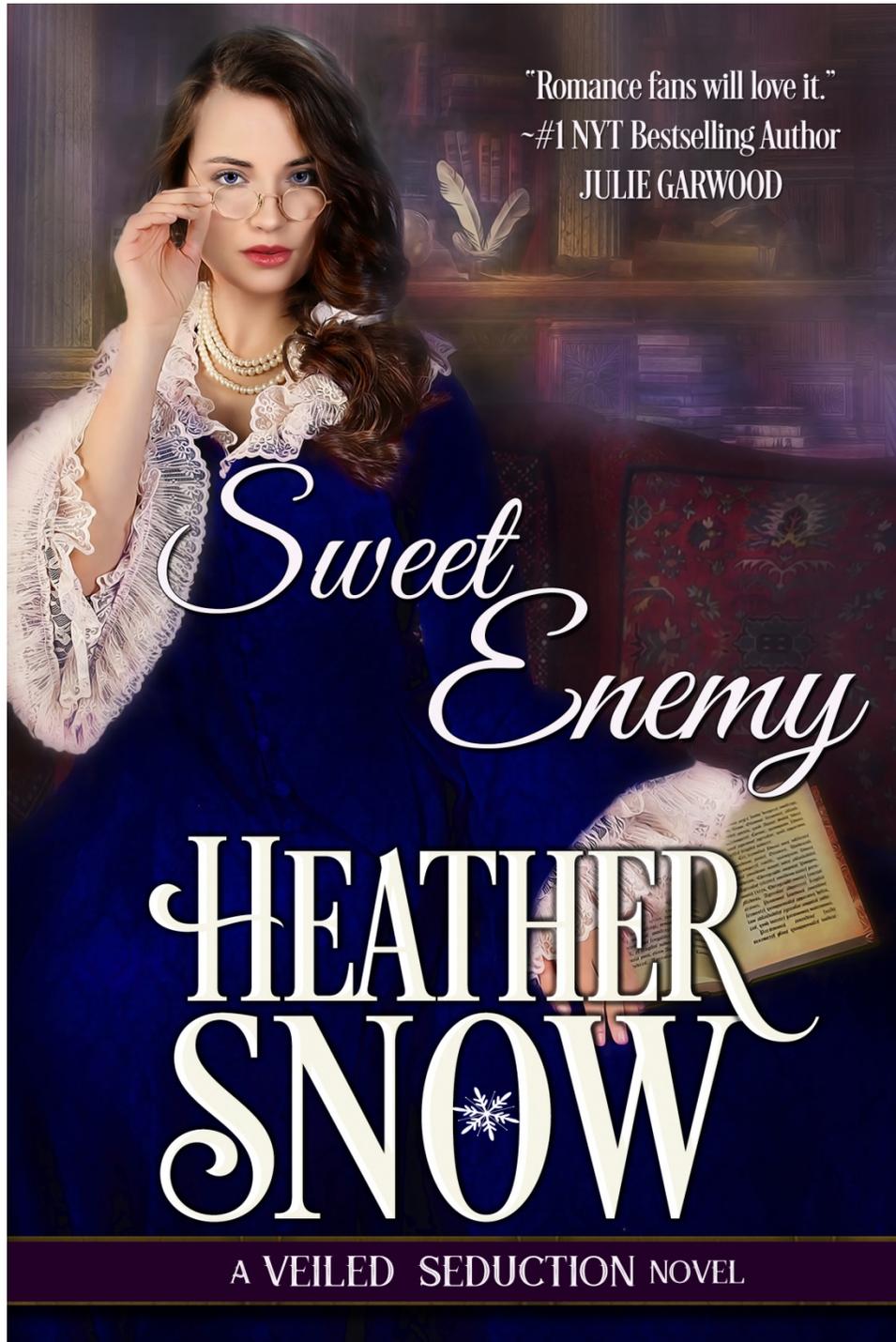


*Sweet Enemy*



Heather Snow

1



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*Sweet  
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HEATHER  
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A VEILED SEDUCTION NOVEL

An excerpt from:

*Sweet Enemy*



**Heather Snow**

## Prologue



*Chelmsford, February 1817*

Rejected. *Again*. Blasted men—they were so shortsighted. Could they just not see what she truly had to offer?

Liliana Claremont entered the cottage through the kitchen, muffling the click of the latch with her wool scarf. She had no wish to wake Carsons, her butler and all-around manservant. She'd given the rest of the staff holiday since she wasn't expected back for a fortnight yet. But after the Royal Society rejected her paper on the possible isolation of chemicals from plant life, she couldn't stomach staying in London another moment.

She removed her hooded cloak with a frustrated tug. She would have swallowed her pride and remained in Town if the Fellows would have allowed her to attend their upcoming lecture. But the only woman ever to make it past the hallowed doors of the Royal Society had been the Duchess of Newcastle, and she only once. Liliana huffed. She was no duchess, but one would think that being the



daughter of an esteemed chemist, she would at least be able to attend a meeting as a silent guest. Particularly since she had the support of his colleague, who'd taken up her scientific education after Papa's death. *Alas, no.* How would she ever become the first woman admitted to their ranks if she couldn't even get past the threshold?

A loud thump jerked her attention to the hallway.

A frown creased her face. What could Carsons possibly be doing at well past midnight?

A rumbling crash came next, followed by a series of bumps. Almost like books hitting the floor . . .

Liliana dropped her cloak and dashed down the darkened hall. Light spilled from the library doorway. Foolish man. Carsons was five and sixty if he was a day. He needn't be moving things, and especially not when there was no one around should he fall.

She flew through the door, scanning the room for the servant. "Are you all ri—" The words died on her lips and shock stilled her feet. She felt her eyes go wide. Books lay everywhere, pulled from their shelves haphazardly like so many feathers plucked from a stew hen. Drawers had been torn from the desk and upended onto the flagged stone floor. The cushions of the settee had been sliced, vases smashed, even plants yanked from their pots, soil scattered all around—

A hand clamped over Liliana's mouth and she was jerked back against a solid chest. A sinewy arm snaked just below her clavicle, pinning her upper arms against her body, and her against the intruder. Her heartbeat spiked with her fear and she drew a sharp breath through her nose. *Who? What?* She struggled, fighting to wrench free.

A calloused thumb moved down to pinch her nose, cutting off her breath. "Be still," a rough voice growled against her ear. She immediately complied. As a scientist, she knew precisely what would happen to her body if she didn't start breathing again—and soon. Her lungs screamed and her blood



pulsed urgently through her veins in a futile attempt to deliver air to her starving system. Yet he didn't relent.

Finally, as black spots danced before her eyes, the man released her nose and Liliana greedily sucked air back into her lungs.

"Where does your mistress hide her valuables?" the voice demanded.

*Mistress?* Liliana's head still spun. Ah, the man must think her a maid. Disheveled and dressed as she was for travel, and given that *she* wasn't supposed to even be in Chelmsford, it was a logical assumption.

He removed his hand just enough to allow her to croak, "Valuables?"

"Jewels and the like."

Liliana scrambled for an answer that might win her freedom. But she had nothing of the sort the thief seemed to be looking for. What would he do to her when he realized? He'd already proven himself a vandal and showed no reluctance to do her harm—and God only knew what he'd done to poor Carsons. Her only hope was escape. "I dunno, sir," she said, mimicking the lower speech of the villagers. "I only just started here 'round Christmas."

The man made a disgusted sound and started to pull her backward, to God knew where. Liliana tried to remain calm, but she couldn't catch her breath, as the clamoring of her heart seemed to take up all of the space in her chest. Her upper arms were still pinned, but she could move her forearms just a bit. She surreptitiously slipped a hand into the deep pocket of her dress, her fingers curling around the tiny decorative tinderbox she carried with her always, as a means to light candles or lamps or spirit burners in the lab. She flicked the catch with her thumb. Its contents were an experimental mixture of her own creation and weren't caustic to the touch—but if introduced to the tender tissue of the eyes



might do damage enough for him to release her. Though it went against everything in Liliana to harm another person, she would do what she must to escape and run for help.

His grip loosened as he tried to maneuver her through the doorway. It was now or never. Liliana dug a sharp elbow into her captor's ribs, taking advantage of his surprise to pull away. She spun, her other arm coming round as she raised the tinderbox to her lips and blew the powder into the man's face.

"Ah! Christ!" he yelled, his hands immediately flying to his eyes.

Liliana didn't waste her chance. She ran—down the hall, through the kitchens and into the night, not stopping for more than a quarter mile, until she reached a neighboring estate.

Three days later, the cottage was nearly back to rights. By the time Liliana had returned with help, the intruder had fled. They'd found Carsons trussed up, with a wicked knock to the head but otherwise unharmed. He'd been recovering nicely with the tincture she'd concocted in her father's old laboratory, which was now hers.

Liliana ran a dust rag gently over a volume on eudiometry before placing it back in the shelves of the library. As most of the books had been tossed during the ransacking, she'd decided to recatalogue her collection. But the entire episode still troubled her. While she'd heard crime had surged in England since the end of the war, hearing and experiencing were two vastly different concepts. The local magistrate had concluded that her cottage must have been targeted because she'd been out of town for several weeks and credited her with chasing the villain off before he could burgle others, too.

She climbed down the rolling ladder and retrieved another volume—this one on Dalton's atomic theory—dusted it on the way back up and slid it into the stacks. It caught on something, not quite



fitting against the back of the shelf. Liliana pulled it out again, looking to see what blocked it, but saw nothing there. She shoved with more force and heard a *click*.

Odd. When she tugged the book out once more, she saw a crack in the wall behind the shelf. No, not a crack, but an intentional division—a *door*. She must have tripped some sort of lock. Her natural curiosity bubbling, Liliana shoved the books aside until she was able to open the door fully. The space couldn't be wider than two hands square. And there was something in it.

She reached inside and pulled out a wrapped bundle, testing its weight. What could it be? It was light, no heavier certainly than one of her thinner books. Papers, maybe?

She scrambled down the ladder, excitement pushing aside her earlier concerns. Given that Claremont Cottage had been in her family for eight generations, there was no telling what the find might be. *But oh, if it were something of Papa's . . .* Just the thought that it could be sped her feet. She had precious little of him. Only his scientific papers and a few scraps of silly coded messages he'd given her to solve as a game they'd played in the last few months of his life. He'd been taken so young, so unexpectedly—the victim of a vicious attack by footpads. Long before a man in his prime might have thought to preserve his legacy.

She cleared the desk and seated herself, laying the bundle out before her. The plain linen had yellowed slightly with age, but it didn't appear too old—no more than a generation. Her father certainly could have been the one to secret the bundle. It took great restraint to unwrap the cloth gently as anticipation buzzed through her. When the material fell away, two packets of letters appeared, tied neatly with red ribbons. Love letters, perhaps? Maybe even between her parents. Wouldn't that be excellent? She'd cherish a glimpse of her mother, whom she couldn't remember at all.

Liliana picked up one of the packets and untied the ribbon. Silk shushed against silk as the knot



gave way. Eager, she plucked the first letter from the stack and began to read:

*26 May, 1803. Spring is glorious this year. None of winter's gloom dare cling to the air. We were fortunate to sell many sheep at the Shropshire festival, more so than in years past.*

*Drat.* Her breath whooshed from her nose as she slumped back into the chair. Not love letters at all, at least not between her parents. Her mother had been dead seven years by then, having died when Liliana was just three.

She skipped to the last page of the letter and found it unsigned. She scanned the others. They were all in the same handwriting, dated between May and December 1803, but with nothing to indicate the author. They weren't even interesting. Full of words but with no real content—just babble about the weather and farm husbandry and such. How disappointing.

She picked up the other packet and tugged the ribbon free. Masculine French scrawl covered the pages. Liliana read, her brow knotting in confusion. These letters had about as much substance as their English counterparts and were also unsigned. Who would have kept such drivel?

She checked the linen and found one loose paper still within its folds. She lifted the vellum. This letter was marked by a broken red wax seal. She flicked open the page, expecting something thrilling—like a treatise on horse manure as fertilizer.

*19 Dec, 1803. We have been compromised. Meet me two days hence. Same time and location.*

Liliana sucked in a breath, choking on her harsh inhalation. December 19th? Two days before her father had been killed?

*Meet me two days hence.*



Her father had *met* someone on the night that he'd been attacked?

Memories of that night flooded Liliana's mind.

*Papa was going to love his Christmas present this year. Maybe even so much that he wouldn't take her to task for playing in his laboratory while he was out. Really, she didn't see why she shouldn't be allowed in the lab without him. She was ten now—not a baby.*

*Liliana pinched the dropper, squeezing fat drips of cobalt chloride into the chemicals she'd already mixed. Her own invisible inks. She didn't know what had Papa so distracted lately. It certainly wasn't any experiment he was working on. He hadn't been focused in weeks. But he still took time to play with her, and for months now, his favorite game had been to leave her coded messages to solve. So she'd decided to create different inks to take their game to a new height. With these mixtures, she could leave him invisible messages and he would have to figure out what chemical revealed them. She couldn't wait to try it.*

*Footsteps scabbled across the floor above her. Liliana looked up. A loud voice shouted something, but she couldn't understand the words, muffled as they were by the layers of carpet and wood and stone that separated her from the upstairs parlor. She hastily stored the precious chemicals and then went straight up.*

*When she came around the corner, her heart squeezed into her throat. Papa had returned? She was caught for sure. But . . . he was on the floor. Carsons was bent over him, calling for a doctor. "Why does Papa need a doctor?" she asked, but no one paid her any mind. She rushed to his side, but when she saw him, she shrieked, recoiling. "Papa?" she asked in a trembling voice, dropping to her knees beside her father. His skin was purple in places, swollen, mottled with bruises, and blood trickled*



*from his nose, his mouth, even an ear.*

*“—street thugs, sir?” Carsons was asking.*

*Papa’s head jerked in a diagonal motion. “Be.” He gasped for breath, a rattling sound that sent chills down her spine. “Trade,” he mumbled.*

*“Papa?” she cried, not knowing what else to say, what to do, how to help.*

*His hand snaked out, grabbing her wrist. He squeezed hard and she moaned, a hot tear slipping down her cheek. The one eye he was still able to open bored into her. “Find them. At summer.”*

*Summer? Terrified and confused, all she could say was, “W-what?”*

*“At . . . summer.” His grip slackened, and he slipped into a coma from which he never woke.*

“Be. Trade,” she murmured. It had sounded so nonsensical at the time. But . . . she looked down at the letter she still held in her hand. *We have been compromised. Meet me two days hence.* Liliana tested the words on her tongue again. “Be-trayed.” Tears sprang to her eyes. Her father’s death hadn’t been a random tragedy. He’d been lured to it. By this note.

She stared at the offensive paper, grabbing the English packet of letters. The handwriting was the same. While they weren’t signed, this last had been closed with a seal. A noble seal.

She rushed to her shelves, searching . . . searching. There! She found a dusty old copy of *Debrett’s*. Its spine likely hadn’t been cracked in fifteen years or more, but it should still contain what she needed. She laid the heavy volume on the desktop and flipped it open, scanning the histories of the noble families of England, looking for the seal that matched the one she held in her hand.

Tonight she’d learn *who* betrayed her father. Then she’d find a way to make sure they paid.



## Chapter One



*Shropshire, April 1817*

He'd never wanted to be the earl, but the one thing Geoffrey Wentworth had learned since becoming such was that an earl could get away with practically anything.

He sincerely hoped that included matricide.

“Let me understand you plainly, Mother,” he growled, resisting the urge to brush the road dust from his coat onto the pristine drawing room floor. “You called me away from Parliament claiming dire emergency . . .” He swallowed, his throat aching with the need to shout. By God, he'd nearly run his horse into the ground to get here, aggravating an old war injury in his haste. His lower back burned almost as badly as it had when he'd been run through. He breathed in, striving to keep the irritation from his voice. “Because you would like to host a house party?”

Genevieve Wentworth, Lady Stratford, sat serenely on a floral chaise near the fireplace, as if he'd politely dropped in for tea instead of racing at breakneck speed to answer her urgent summons. Geoffrey eyed her suspiciously. His mother was typically a calm woman, but he'd been known to send seasoned soldiers scurrying with no more than his glare. She hadn't so much as flinched in the face of his anger. No, in fact, she looked strangely triumphant. His stomach clenched. Mother was up to something, which rarely boded well for the men in her life.



“Geoffrey, darling, do sit down,” she began, indicating the antique caramel settee across from her. “It strains my neck to look up at you so.”

“I should like to do more than strain your meddlesome neck,” he muttered, choosing to remain standing despite the ache that now screamed down his leg. He turned his gaze to the older gentleman standing behind her. “*Et tu, Brute?*”

His uncle, at least, had the grace to look chagrined. Geoffrey shook his head. Uncle Joss always had been easily led. Geoffrey knew his mother played Cassius. This conspiracy had been instigated by her.

Joss squared his shoulders. “Now, m’boy, I must agree with your mother. It’s high time you accepted your responsibilities to this family and provided an heir.”

Hell. So that was what this was about. Well, he wasn’t going to fall in with their scheme. He’d nip this and, after a hot meal and a night’s rest, be on his way back to London. The Poor Employment Act wasn’t going to finish writing itself, and Liverpool wanted it ready to present next month. What was more, Geoffrey had received a disturbing letter that needed to be dealt with. He itched to return to Town to investigate whether the blackmailer’s claims held any credence. The note implied that his late brother had been paying the scoundrel for his silence to protect the family, but Geoffrey couldn’t believe a Wentworth had done anything treasonous. Still, the threat needed to be neutralized.

“Host all of the parties you want, Mother. I’ve never tied your purse strings.” He pivoted toward the door, determined to escape yet another lengthy discussion about duty. Pain flared through his back and leg. Christ, he’d very nearly given his life for duty. Yet his mother didn’t understand that. No, in her mind, duty was defined by one word—*heirs*. “I shall be quite tied up in Parliament for the foreseeable future, so you needn’t worry about inconveniencing me with



your entertainments.”

He’d barely stepped one booted toe into the rose-marbled hallway when her words stopped him cold.

“It is not I, dearest, who is hosting our guests, but you.”

*Me?* He scoffed for a moment before the rest hit him. *Is?* As in right this moment?

The fist in his stomach tightened. The ride to Somerton Park had quite jarred his teeth loose. He’d blamed it on spring rains, but it could have been . . . Hell, it would have taken a *legion* of carriages to rut the road so deeply. He scanned the hallway.

Where were the servants? He’d yet to see one, not even Barnes. Sure, Geoffrey had bounded up the front steps straightaway, but there were always a few maids milling about in the entryway or the main rooms, unless . . .

Unless they were all busy seeing to the settlement of guests.

He turned slowly, his only family rotating back into view. Uncle Joss’ easy smile faltered at whatever he saw in Geoffrey’s expression, but Mother’s widened with a familiar gleam that struck fear into every wealthy titled bachelor in Christendom.

Geoffrey advanced, his boots clicking an irregular rhythm against the drawing room’s walnut floors. He prayed his suspicions were incorrect. “What have you done?”

“Taken matters into my own hands,” his mother confirmed in a satisfied clip. She stood, her skirts swishing smartly as she retrieved a handwritten list from atop her escritoire. “I have been observing ladies of suitable age, station and character for quite some time now.” She waved the list for emphasis. “Since before you returned, even. In fact, wartime is an excellent time to judge one’s integrity, at home as well as on the battlefields. It is imperative that the future Countess of Stratford be above reproach.” She sniffed, probably expecting him to argue, as his older brother



would have done were he still alive. Since Geoffrey wholeheartedly agreed with his mother on that one point, he remained silent.

“Though I’m sad to say we’ve lost some wonderful candidates to marriage recently, there remains an excellent list from which to choose,” she finished, tapping the vellum she held with one perfectly manicured finger.

“Absolutely.” Uncle Joss nodded, his head bobbing several times in quick succession. “I’ve even added a few names m’self. And they are all here on display, just for you.” He winked.

Winked! As if they fully expected that Geoffrey would just fall into line, peruse their list of names and pick a wife at their whim. He imagined they intended him to court said wife during their little house party and propose by the end of the week.

Bloody well not.

Geoffrey straightened his shoulders and raised his chin, slipping into the stance that had become so natural during his military life. “I hope you have better entertainments planned for your guests than Catch an Earl by His Nose or I fear they will be sorely disappointed.” He again turned to the door, lamenting for only a moment the hot meal and good night’s rest he would have to forgo. “As *I* shan’t be here.”

He strode toward the hallway, contemplating the wisdom of pushing his horse another two hours back to the nearest coaching inn. It couldn’t be helped. A man had to stand on principle, after all. He would not have a bride foisted upon him. The earldom, yes. The responsibility of bringing his family back from the brink of financial ruin after more than a decade of his brother’s negligence and reckless spending, certainly. But a bride?

Never. Whom he married would be his choice alone. And he had very specific requirements that his mother wouldn’t possibly understand.



“Before you leave,” his mother called out, her voice still too smug for his liking, “you should know that when I sent the invitations—marked with *your* seal, of course—I made sure to include the Earls of Northumb and Manchester. Oh, and Viscount Holbrooke, I believe, as well as Lord Goddard. They were thrilled to accept.”

For the second time in as many minutes, Geoffrey halted with one foot out the door. *She sent invitations using my name, my seal.* By God. Were she anyone else, he’d have her thrown in Newgate. Hell, the idea sounded rather appealing at the moment. How she’d gotten her hands upon the seal when it was kept under lock and key in his study, he didn’t know. He’d have to see it moved. But now he had a more pressing problem. She’d invited powerful political allies he couldn’t afford to offend. Had she known he was actively courting the support of these particular men?

She must have.

He closed his eyes—embarrassed, really, at having been so outmaneuvered. His mother had managed to arrange this entire farce without even a whisper reaching him. Had he underestimated the French this badly, he’d never have survived twelve long years of war.

As he faced her once again, Geoffrey eyed his mother with grudging respect. Her smile held, but her knuckles whitened as she gripped her list. At least she wasn’t completely sure of his capitulation. Geoffrey took some small satisfaction in that.

Still, she’d left him no immediate choices. He knew when to admit defeat.

“It seems, Mother, that you have won the day,” he conceded with as much grace as he could muster. He gave his relatives a curt nod and, on his third attempt, quit the room.

Geoffrey slapped his leather gloves against his aching thigh as he climbed the grand staircase to his rooms, one thought reverberating through his mind in time with his echoing



footfalls.

*But I am going to win the war.*

Miss Liliana Claremont fixed what she hoped was an appreciative smile on her face as she viewed Somerton Park for the first time. She found the Earl of Stratford's country home rather attractive, for a lion's den. But then, so was the Colosseum, she imagined.

As her aunt and cousin bustled out of the carriage, Liliana studied the imposing redbrick home. A columned temple-like portico dominated the front, forceful and proud. Like the rest of the house, it announced the wealth and power of the Wentworth family.

Liliana swallowed. Had she really considered what she was up against?

"Do hurry, girls!" Her aunt Eliza's anxious voice interrupted Liliana's contemplations. "That infernal carriage wheel has made us terribly late. We'll be fortunate if we have time to make you presentable before dinner." She eyed Liliana and her own daughter, Penelope, shrewdly. "The competition for Stratford shall be fierce. It's not often young ladies have a chance to engage him in a social setting, and you can bet those other chits have spent all afternoon turning themselves out just so." She clucked her tongue, reminding Liliana even more than usual of a fretful hen. "We are so far behind already. First impressions, my dears, can be the difference between becoming a Lady or settling for just plain *Mrs.*"

Penelope turned and gave Liliana a conspiratorial smile. Liliana tried not to squirm. Contrary to what she'd led her aunt to believe, she had only one objective in mind here at Somerton Park, and it *wasn't* to lure the Earl of Stratford into marriage.

No. She wanted to uncover the truth about her father's murder.

Liliana reached into the pocket of her pelisse, fingering the red wax seal of the letter that had



led her here. An unfamiliar chill slithered down her spine, causing her to scan the many windows of the facade. She had the oddest feeling, as if the house itself knew why she had come and was keeping its eye on her. She gave her head a quick shake at the ridiculous thought.

Liliana hardly noticed the elegant front hall with its Roman pillars and prominent dentil moldings, or the grand staircase, as she rushed to follow her aunt and cousin. Their excited chatter rang off the gleaming marble, but she barely heard. Instead, she struggled for breath as the band around her chest tightened with every step she took into the lair of her enemy.

Still, a surge of excited determination shot through her. This was where she would finally unlock the mystery of her father's death. It hadn't taken her long to realize that those letters she'd found had been in code, but none of them had been in her father's handwriting. She could only assume his side of the conversation was hidden somewhere else.

An unexpected jolt of anguish stole her breath. For a moment she missed her father fiercely, pain slicing through her heart as if he'd been taken from her only yesterday. She remembered his gentle smile, his infinite patience as she'd asked him hundreds of questions about his work, about the world . . . about her mother. How she'd loved to listen to him talk.

*Find them at summer.* His last confusing words had often plagued her thoughts. But when she'd learned the seal belonged to the house of Stratford, she'd understood what her father had been trying to tell her. *Find them at summer.* He hadn't said *summer*, as she'd thought, but *Somer*. Yes, the letters she needed to crack his code were here at Somerton Park, and she had just under two short weeks in the Wentworth house to find them.

Maids fluttered about the airy guest room she'd share with Penelope, unpacking dresses and accoutrements to be aired and pressed. Penelope got right to work on her main contribution to the scheme. Sifting through various evening gowns of muted silk, satin and sheer muslin, she



began making selections.

Useless in matters of fashion, Liliana instead unpacked the sketch pad and pencils she planned to use to map out the house. Hers would be an organized search, one she would begin as soon as she could feasibly slip away.

“It wasn’t easy creating the perfect ensemble for you on such short notice. Thank goodness Madame Trompeur values our business.” Pen let out an exaggerated sigh. “Mother was so excited at the prospect of your being willing to consider marriage, she didn’t bat an eye at the added cost for such quick work. It really is a shame to get her hopes up so.” She contradicted her words of censure with a grin.

Liliana winced as her eyes traveled over the array of lustrous fabrics and winking jewels. “She really should have known better, given how vehemently I’ve eschewed every suitor she’s presented over the years. I do feel guilty about the expense, however. I intend to pay it back.” *Somehow*. The inheritance from her father was enough to allow her to live independently, but only if she scrimped.

Penelope, whose back had been turned while digging through a trunk for matching slippers and gloves, straightened and looked over her shoulder. “Bah, we’re rich enough. The entertainment value Mother will get from trying to tempt you to marry will be ample repayment, I’m sure. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the rapturous look on her face when you begged her to secure you an invitation to Somerton Park. She views this as her last chance to see you properly settled. You know it galls her that your father’s will didn’t stipulate you finding a husband. I don’t think you comprehend what you’ve let yourself in for.”

Liliana groaned.

Pen held a gown away from herself and eyed Liliana as though she were one of the paper



dolls they'd played with as young girls, waiting to be dressed and accessorized at Penelope's whim. "Pastels just don't do you justice. A deep blue or a lovely aubergine would suit your darker coloring so much better." Penelope tsked, her blond curls bouncing as she shook her head. "However, as delicate colors are all the rage this season, at least the lavender will bring out the violet in your eyes."

Liliana waited until the maids moved out of earshot. "I have no desire to be all the rage. I leave that to you. I just want to appear as if I'm here to catch an earl, like everyone else. I'm counting on the machinations of the other women to keep Lord Stratford adequately distracted, leaving me free to investigate."

Penelope laid the ensemble out upon the counterpane and turned to Liliana. "And I will do my part, as I promised, out of love for you—even though I'm not entirely convinced the Wentworths are complicit in Uncle Charles' death."

"It's the most reasonable explanation, Pen. It was a letter from someone in *this* family that lured him to his death. It had to have been a Wentworth who betrayed him." Liliana swallowed her frustration. She couldn't blame Penelope for her doubts, since she'd been unable to bring herself to tell Pen the rest of her suspicions.

Once Liliana had realized that the letters had been in some sort of code, a hypothesis naturally formed. Though she had been only ten at the time, Liliana remembered her father acting oddly in the weeks before his death. Hurried. Distant. Secretive. The timing was suspect, also. The Treaty of Amiens had broken down by the time the first letter was written, and hostilities between Britain and France had recommenced in May of that year. So why would her father have coded letters in French *and* from the late Earl of Stratford, dated well after war was declared? Given her father's claims of betrayal and his violent death, the most logical conclusion



was that he and a member of the Wentworth family had been involved in some sort of espionage gone wrong.

But she would never voice such an accusation. Not without proof. Proof she intended to find before she left Somerton Park.

“Well, if that truly is the case,” Pen said, her voice softening in a rare moment of gravity, “the Wentworths will surely not want their involvement known, so please . . . be careful.” Penelope turned to select her own wardrobe for the evening.

Liliana clutched a sketch pad to her chest, mulling over her cousin’s warning.

“La!” Aunt Eliza sailed into the room, dressed for the evening in a turquoise organza gown, a matching turban covering her hair—a concession to the rush to get her charges downstairs, no doubt. “Why are you trifling with that now?” She snatched the pad from Liliana’s hands and tossed it aside, shaking her head as if she’d never understood her niece and never would. Catching Liliana by the elbow, Aunt pulled her to the dressing screen. “You both must get washed and dressed at once.”

A maid came around the screen bearing the lavender evening gown Pen had selected. Liliana gave herself over to the hurried ablutions, turning her mind to the meeting ahead.

Penelope had reason to worry. With the current earl’s connections to Wellington, he was fast becoming a powerful political figure. He would not want any complicity in her father’s death made public. She’d have to school her features well, not betray any emotion or thought. If he suspected what she was about, he’d banish her from Somerton Park without delay.

Or worse. She mustn’t forget that. Not for one moment.

“It is as I feared. We’ve missed the reception line,” Aunt Eliza grumbled as the trio pushed their



way into the crowded salon. Guests milled about in stylish clusters. The assembly, more female than male in number, certainly seemed energized. Bright faces and even wider smiles abounded. And why not? One of London's most eligible bachelors stood on the marriage block.

Aunt raised her voice over the din. "Some other girl has probably already caught the earl's eye," she grouched, stopping just inside the door. She craned her neck in a frustrated half circle. "I can't see Stratford, but judging by the collection of women near the back corner, I'd say he's holding court somewhere in that vicinity." She nodded her head in the direction where, indeed, a small crowd had gathered. "Come."

Liliana followed her aunt and cousin, turning this way and that as they squeezed between rustling skirts of taffeta and silk. Cloying perfumes—a hodgepodge of orange blossom, tuberose, jasmine and plumeria to name but a few—assaulted her nose. The diverse scents proved quite unappetizing when mingled in the same room. The overly sweet haze wafting from dozens of husband hunters only increased the churning in Liliana's stomach, and she quickened her step, anxious to get her first meeting with the Wentworth family over with.

Though taller than most, Liliana struggled to see over elaborate coiffures and plumed headwear. The slow trudge reminded her of one of her earliest experiments. When she was seven, she'd decided to find out how quickly snails could move. She'd meticulously observed and recorded the progress of six different specimens. They'd averaged four inches every seven minutes. Liliana shook her head as her party inched forward. Those snails would have reached the Earl of Stratford before she would.

She strained to get a glimpse of her adversary amongst the glittering masses.

"—more handsome than his brother, don't you think?" an older woman in the crush was saying to her daughter. Liliana turned her head, drawn to any snippet of information she could



collect.

“Wellington himself has said Stratford exemplifies the best of English courage—”

“—almost died saving another man’s life,” came a whisper.

“How heroic,” said another woman with a dramatic sigh.

*Heroic.* Liliana frowned. The word contradicted her expectations of the man—though she had, of course, heard tales of his bravery.

“Sure, he ruffled a few feathers with that poverty relief bill he championed last season, but all great men have their crusades. He’ll step in line, with the right woman’s influen—”

Aunt Eliza tugged Liliana forward before she could hear any more.

These women talked about Stratford like he was some sort of paragon.

Liliana firmed her jaw. Well, maybe he was. But hero, saint or crusader for the masses—it mattered not. She would discover what had really happened to her father, even if she had to ruin Stratford to do it.

“At last,” Aunt Eliza said as they came to the pastel-clad barricade surrounding the earl. Not to be denied, she dug a discreet elbow in here and there until she broke through, Penelope and Liliana in tow. Liliana drew in a lungful of air and braced herself.

“Lady Belsham, you’ve arrived.” A woman, presumably the countess, stepped forward to greet them. Her smile was that of an accomplished hostess, though not a particularly warm one. The countess was flanked by two men of remarkably similar appearance. As one of the men looked obviously older, Liliana assumed the gentleman to be an uncle.

Her eyes fixed upon Stratford. He stood mere feet away, tall, rigid and oddly detached, as if his mind were elsewhere. Black hair complemented winged brows of the same hue. An aquiline nose lay above long, full lips that Lothario himself would envy.



Stratford devastated her senses—she, who was normally very much inured to the physicality of men. The realization shook Liliana. Air expanded in her lungs, relieving the tightness but doing little to calm the unusual tension that thrummed through her limbs.

She lowered her lashes. It wouldn't do to be caught staring, though the desire to observe the Wentworths' faces nearly overwhelmed her. Could you see guilt in someone's eyes? And if so, how did you quantify it?

Liliana kept her head politely bowed through the tale of their broken carriage wheel. But her breath shortened and her nerves tingled. Gooseflesh prickled her arms as an urge to flee swept over her like a frigid breeze. She curled her toes to keep them firmly planted.

When she looked up again, Stratford's attention was on Penelope's introduction, giving Liliana an opportunity to settle herself. She couldn't say what she'd expected upon finally meeting the earl, but certainly not this riot of indefinable awareness. She drew another deep breath. All she had to do was get through the moment and she'd feel normal again.

"And may I present my niece, Miss Claremont?" Aunt Eliza said, touching Liliana's elbow.

Stratford's gaze moved to her, and he stiffened. She'd never seen eyes so sharp, so blue. His eyes narrowed and focused intently upon her.

Liliana's heart thumped—hard—then skipped a beat. Claremont was a common enough name. So why was he looking at her so? Unless her arrival alarmed him because he knew whose daughter she was and guessed why she'd come . . . Unease rolled like waves through her.

She affected a small curtsy, as much to compose herself as because his rank dictated. But as her eyes dipped, she noticed the signet ring on Stratford's pinky and her resolve solidified. The Stratford seal was emblazoned on the ring, only inches from her. She was this close to learning the truth. She straightened, snapping her gaze back to the earl.



The man's expression smoothed to one she could not fathom. "Miss Claremont," he acknowledged with a slight bow, his voice deeper, rougher than it had been when he'd conversed with Aunt or Penelope.

Lady Stratford's mouth creased into a frown. And didn't the uncle's eyes widen, just slightly? A hot flush spread over Liliana's face and neck. Stratford and his family had reacted to her name . . . she was sure of it.

The dinner gong sounded, the reverberating clang startling Liliana. She automatically looked toward the noise. When she turned back, all three Wentworths wore polite, benign smiles. And then they were gone, leading the assembly into the dining room.

Liliana stood still, immobilized by a surreal uncertainty quite unlike her. Had she imagined their responses because she'd expected to see something?

She stared after their retreating forms. Lady Stratford whispered something to her son. Liliana noticed his frown in profile, and her suspicion deepened.

No. If her hosts had nothing to hide, then she would find nothing. If they were guilty, however, she owed it to her father to bring the truth to light.

The question was, if she discovered something of an incriminating nature, to what lengths would the powerful Earl of Stratford go to silence her?

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