

*Once Upon  
a Spy*

*A Secrets and Seduction book*

*by*

SHERIDAN JEANE



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ONCE UPON A SPY

## CHAPTER ONE

*Politics have no relation to morals.*  
- Niccolo Machiavelli

London, January 6, 1854

**T**he turning point in a man's life isn't always accompanied by a crash of thunder. Sometimes it's marked by something much subtler and easier to miss, like the flash of a silver gown, or the rich hue of a twist of chestnut hair.

Lord Wentworth managed to dismiss his turning point.

As he caught sight of the woman across the ballroom, her strong allure caught his attention, certainly. But he ignored it, believing his immediate visceral response to be nothing more than a reaction to her beauty.

For him, there could be no future with her. Nor with any woman.

She represented a precipice. Danger. One he needed to avoid.



He chose to turn his back on the silver-gowned woman and her pull of destiny. Instead, he stepped out onto the patio to let the chill January air envelop him. It drove away some of the oppressive heat of the ballroom.

“Robert, come over here,” his brother called to him. “Lord Percival is telling the most preposterous story.”

Robert closed the embassy door. The glow of the flickering torches allowed him to identify Frederick sitting with a group of men at a stone table near the edge of the lawn.

As he strode across the paved patio, Robert considered how fundamentally wrong it was for the Russian Ambassador’s winter solstice celebration to be held in a building so overheated the temperature drove the guests outdoors.

His brother shifted his chair and made space for Robert to join the group. The low oil lamps on the table illuminated the listeners’ rapt faces as Lord Percival recounted his latest yarn.

Everyone greeted Robert with brief smiles and nods before they returned their attention to Lord Percival. He appeared well-groomed, with his neatly trimmed, sable-colored beard, his white gloves, and his perfectly tailored evening coat all speaking to the excellence of his valet, but something seemed slightly off about him. As expected, an aroma of tobacco emanated from this particular group, but Percival’s whiskey-laden breath came as a surprise. The evening was still a fresh, young thing, with flawless skin and a lively demeanor. Wobbly-looking Percival must have been drinking all afternoon to be so inebriated the odor oozed from his pores.

“You’ll love this,” Frederick murmured as he glanced at Robert. The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled.

Lord Percival took a puff on his cigar, pausing for effect, and said "...and I forcibly tossed him from the carriage. He landed directly in a steaming pile of manure!" Lord Percival slapped his hand down on the marble table to emphasize his words, but he accidentally clipped one of the oil lamps.

The container flipped over. Oil flew out, splashing onto the table and the cigar Lord Percival clutched. The cigar immediately burst into flame. He dropped it, letting out a sharp shriek of pain and fear. The cigar landed on the table in the spreading puddle of oil. The men jumped back, knocking the chairs to the ground. In less time than it took for a single flutter of a hummingbird's wings, fire swept down a large swath of the tabletop.

Frederick jumped back too, but his thin evening gloves were already drenched in oil. With mounting horror, Robert watched as his brother froze for an instant. Flames erupted from his hands.

The sickening image chilled him. If Frederick had been a performer on stage, the audience would have burst into applause, but this was no trick. No sleight of hand. It was real, and Frederick's hands were on fire.

Robert lurched forward to help just as Frederick stumbled back on the uneven lawn and shoved his hands under his arms, suffocating the flames.

There had been puddles of ice on the table, and as the spreading flames came in contact with them, they spluttered and sprayed droplets, like water in a skillet. Two other men patted at their clothing, putting out tiny fires from the flying droplets of burning oil before it could spread.

Lord Tamworth couldn't extinguish the fire on his sleeve. He shouted with alarm, his friends quickly

surrounding him. Someone stripped off his own evening jacket and used it to smother Lord Tamworth's arm.

After consuming all the oil, the flames quickly withered and died. Lord Tamworth's friends dragged over a chair and shoved him into it. The door leading from the ballroom burst open, and a small army of footmen came rushing outside, heading directly for Lord Tamworth.

Robert clenched his fists as he took a menacing step toward the man who'd set events in motion. "Good god, Percival, you're a threat to everyone, you bottle-head! You're drunk, and you're dangerous. Get yourself under control. It's a wonder you didn't ignite as well with so much alcohol in your veins."

Lord Percival lifted his hands in supplication. "It was an accident. Surely you don't think I'd intentionally—"

Robert grabbed the other man by his lapels. "You created this situation. Don't try to pretend you bear no responsibility for what happened. This is your doing."

"Let him go, Robert," Frederick said from somewhere behind him. "Come here and help me."

With a sense of disgust, Robert gave the other man a shove, spun on his heel, and stalked into the darkness, toward the sound of his brother's voice.

He found Frederick pacing in circles, stomping a track through the snow near the edge of the lawn and muttering curses under his breath. He still had one of his hands tucked under the opposite arm.

"We should put ice on that to help numb the pain," Robert suggested. "The Russians must have ice here someplace." He locked eyes with an approaching footman who had obviously overheard him.

"I will bring some immediately, my lord," the footman said in heavily accented English.

"And some scotch," Frederick added.

The footman nodded, turned, and hurried into the embassy.

Activity surrounding Lord Tamworth caught Robert's attention. The man's face appeared pale and drawn in the flickering torchlight. The fabric of his clothing had been burned away, and Robert had a clear view of the sickeningly mottled arm and its black and red skin. Robert's stomach knotted as he turned to face his brother. Was Frederick's injury as bad as Lord Tamworth's?

"This is terrible," Frederick said.

Robert's stomach sank. He dreaded seeing the hand. "How bad is it?" he asked.

"Bad. Very bad." Frederick moved even farther away from the others and didn't stop until he came to a decorative railing.

"Does it hurt?" Robert followed his brother.

"What? My hand? Of course it hurts." Frederick looked confused for a moment. "Oh, you thought I was talking about— but that's not what I meant." Frederick glanced around and lowered his voice. "I'm here tonight on an assignment for the Foreign Office."

Robert rocked back on his heels. If Frederick was worried about his assignment, the burn couldn't be too severe, could it? "That explains why you wanted to come to the ball with me at the last minute. Here I thought you wanted to spend time with your estimable older brother. Foolish of me."

"Indubitably. Quite foolish."

The footman returned, bearing a tray with two tumblers of scotch and a bundle of ice wrapped in a white cloth. "Can I bring you anything else?" the footman asked.

Frederick shook his head. "I'll be fine. Don't trouble yourself. Tamworth is the one who needs your attention, not me. My injury is minor."

The footman bowed before hurrying toward the group surrounding Lord Tamworth.

"I can't risk letting anyone examine my hand," Frederick said. "Any undue notice regarding me or my movements tonight could jeopardize my ability to complete my task."

A gust of wind ruffled Robert's dark hair, and he shoved it out of his eyes as he glanced around. Few guests braved the frigid courtyard, so their section of the lawn accorded them the privacy they needed for their conversation. "Why are you telling me about your plans for tonight?"

The bundle of ice clattered as Frederick lifted it. Robert caught a glimpse of the scorched remnants of Frederick's cotton gloves and the large blisters on his fingertips before he pressed the bundle back down.

"With this injury, I won't be able to complete my assignment. I won't have the manual dexterity that's required. I'll need your help."

Robert held up his hands and stepped back. "No. Definitely not. Last year after I was nearly killed, you promised me you wouldn't involve me in another one of your schemes. I'm not cut from the same cloth as you—I hate dealing in subterfuge."

"I know, I know, but this is different. The fate of the world is at stake. We're risking outright war."

"War?" Robert stood stunned for a moment.

"At this moment, there is a book, a church register, sitting in a diplomatic pouch locked in Ambassador Revnik's desk. I'm supposed to pick the locks and retrieve it. How will I manage if I can't manipulate tools with my

fingers? I'll never be able to hold them. If you don't help, England and Russia will go to war."

Robert stared at his brother blankly. "I thought war with Russia was inevitable at this point. Hardly a day goes by without some newsboy chasing me down the street and trying to sell me a newspaper with a headline demanding that Britain respond to the Battle of Sinop."

"It was an atrocity," Frederick muttered.

"The British citizens want justice." Last November, Russian Admiral Nakhimov had discovered a Turkish naval squadron taking shelter in the port of Sinop during bad weather, and he had attacked them using Russia's new explosive shells. He'd easily won within two hours but, even with his victory in hand, he'd continued shelling, destroying all but one stranded ship. The massacre was unconscionable. The destruction, wanton. The suffering, immeasurable.

"The Queen plans to use the church register to demand justice," Frederick said. "It contains sensitive information she'll use to force the czar's hand, but the timing is critical. Everything hinges on what we do tonight."

More chess moves. Trust Frederick to consider every nuance of a plan.

Frederick winced as he gingerly pulled the remnants of his burned gloves from his hands and let them fall to the ground. He swallowed and took a shaky breath.

Frederick's single-minded focus on world affairs in the face of his injuries astounded Robert. Was he telling the truth? Could tonight's actions prevent a war? "Do you agree war with Russia is inevitable? If so, why should you and I put ourselves at risk and steal the book?"

"Inevitable? Perhaps— perhaps not. Remember, the timing and circumstances of a declaration are for the

Queen to decide, not the two of us. I have a mission to complete, and it isn't up for debate. We must retrieve the book before the courier arrives. He'll be here within the hour."

"How can the fate of the world rest on such a small thing?" Robert took a step backward and raked his fingers through his hair. Frederick must be exaggerating. How could something as commonplace as a church register be so important?

"In my experience, it's always the little things that cause the biggest problems. 'For want of a nail the shoe was lost.'" Frederick stared down at his blistered hands.

The corner of Robert's mouth twitched. He couldn't hold back the quip that sprang to his tongue. "Or in this case, for Percival's want of good sense..."

Frederick let out a snort of derision. "The use of my fingers was lost. Yes."

"Are they any better?" Robert asked. Even as he uttered the words, he knew Frederick's burns hadn't miraculously healed in the past two minutes. But one could hope.

"The ice helps, but they still hurt like the blazes. Fortunately, the injury to my left hand is minor, so I'm not entirely incapacitated. I can get through this." He fixed his gaze on Robert. "With your help."

A heavy weight settled over Robert. He dreaded shouldering this yoke of responsibility yet again. It chafed. Unfortunately, he'd have to help. Brotherly duty demanded it.

Frederick viewed life as nothing more than a chessboard. One in which he calculated every possible move in an instant, choosing the one best suited to his purposes while minimizing his risk. But in tonight's game, did he plan to use Robert as his knight, or his pawn?

Given the stakes, did it matter?

“Tell me what we need to do.” Robert dragged his fingers through his hair again. “You know I detest doing this sort of thing— becoming involved in someone else's lies and schemes. Ever since Father forced me to help hide his”— he glanced over his shoulder, afraid of being overheard— “his indiscretion.”

Frederick snorted. “‘Indiscretion.’ That’s a rather mild description. For me, the word ‘treason’ comes to mind.” He shook his head. “I know you detest being dragged into other people’s problems, and I can’t say I blame you. What Father forced you to do was reprehensible, but this is entirely different. What he demanded of you was illegal and corrupt, whereas what I’m asking of you is entirely honorable.”

“But still illegal.”

“Honorable,” Frederick insisted. “This is at the Queen’s request.”

Honor. Frederick was obsessed with it. Perhaps they both were.

Frederick pushed away from the balustrade and stiffened his spine. “It’s time for us to do this. I want to have the book in hand and be well clear of this place before that courier arrives.” At first glance, he appeared quite normal. No one would guess he’d been injured if not for the damp cloth wrapped around his hand.

A footman opened the doors at their approach, and they reentered the glittering ballroom where the elite members of London society gathered for the culminating event of the Russian winter solstice celebration Koliada. They squeezed through the dense crowd as they made their way toward the main foyer. They hadn’t gone far when Frederick stopped abruptly.



“What is it?” Razors of anxiety lanced through Robert. Had something gone wrong already? Had Frederick spotted the courier?

“It’s Lady Harrington.” Frederick licked his lips. “She saw me. I think she’s headed this way.”

Robert’s tension disappeared with the speed of a bursting soap-bubble, leaving him feeling slightly giddy with relief. His brother was having trouble with his ladylove? He grinned. “I thought she was a ‘dear friend’ of yours. Why is having her see you a problem?” A sudden, sobering thought struck him. Unless... “Is she a spy too?” he asked in a near whisper.

Frederick shot him a scathing glance. “Of course not. It’s nothing like that. I merely told her I wouldn’t be here tonight.”

That certainly wasn’t the reply he’d expected, and it left him momentarily dumbfounded. “You mean you lied?” What an interesting turn of events.

The tips of Frederick’s ears reddened. “She always arrives late for these things, and I planned to leave before she made an appearance.”

“Are you saying you want to avoid her so much you lied to her?”

“Who says I want to avoid her?”

Robert gave his brother an assessing gaze. “Something has changed between the two of you.” He leaned closer so he couldn’t be overheard. “You’ve never mentioned what happened the night of your tryst,” he murmured. “Did something go wrong?”

Frederick’s face began to flush as well. “A gentleman doesn’t speak of such things.”

“Considering what’s at stake, why don’t you simply explain so we can get on with it— how much of a risk does she pose tonight?”

The tension stretched between them, as taut as an over-wound violin string. Finally, a sigh burst from Frederick's lips. "Things between us became a bit more complicated than I expected." He glanced down. "Quite frankly, I don't think it's wise to spend more time with her."

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying you have feelings for the woman?"

The tips of Frederick's ears turned a brighter shade of red. "Don't be ridiculous. We don't have time for this nonsense." He focused his gaze on something behind Robert. "Someone waylaid her. Let's go before she breaks free and tries to corner me."

As they entered the large foyer, Frederick pointed out a spot behind an enormous urn near the cloakroom. "We can temporarily hide the book there once we retrieve it," he murmured.

Robert made a mental note of the location and glanced around. Everyone seemed engrossed in conversation. Everyone except the woman in the silver gown he'd noticed earlier.

His eyes were drawn to her yet again.

She stood still, her chestnut-brown hair pinned up with curling tendrils teasing the nape of her neck, gazing up at the balcony. What was it about her that captivated him? Perhaps if he'd stopped to speak with her earlier, tonight would have unfolded differently. Perhaps that explained the odd feeling of fate he'd sensed, and by turning his back on her, he'd chosen this path— one which excluded romantic entanglements.

Frederick hurried Robert through a door that dumped them into a silent hallway dotted with many closed doors. "This is where the embassy's offices are located." He led

them to a servants' staircase and they quickly made their way upstairs.

"While we're up here, we need to act like normal guests who accidentally wandered into a forbidden area while exploring the embassy. After all, the building's renovations were only completed a month ago. Our curiosity will hardly be commented upon."

Robert took a moment to count the number of doors dotting the hallway from the balcony to the hidden servants' staircase. When he'd been at Eton, his friend Daniel had been Robert's partner in crime and had taught him how to sneak around the grounds undetected. Counting doors had been one of Robert's assignments. Daniel had always stressed the importance of an escape route. They'd often slipped down to the school's pantry to pick locks and pilfer some food, or sneaked off school grounds to go into town. They'd rarely been seen, and thanks to careful planning, they'd never been caught.

They came to the balcony overlooking the grand foyer. The marble entryway below appeared deserted except for the footman standing at the base of the staircase with his back to them.

Frederick pulled him away from the railing. "The footman is stationed down there to keep guests from venturing up those stairs," he murmured. "Stay out of sight." He edged over to the balcony, glanced down, and muttered a stifled curse before ducking back.

"What is it?"

"Lady Harrington. She's in the foyer below, and she caught a glimpse of me."

"Will that cause a problem?"

"Maybe. We should hurry."

At that moment, a young boy's sweet soprano tones rose above the other sounds, and the guests immediately

grew silent. After a moment, other children's voices joined in, and the sound evoked another memory of Eton. He'd loved being part of the choir there. He might have disappointed his teachers in other ways, but they'd always praised him for his voice.

"Damn," he muttered. "This was the main reason I wanted to come tonight— to hear the choir."

"We can hear them perfectly from up here."

Robert shook his head. "It isn't the same. My attention is divided." When he focused on music, it transported him. Elevated him. He hated letting it become nothing but another background noise.

Robert glanced down and noticed the fat drops of water falling from his brother's ice-filled cloth onto the hardwood floor. He touched Frederick's sleeve and pointed down.

Frederick's gaze traveled along the corridor, taking in the trail of water on the gleaming surface. "Blast," he whispered. "I need to clean that up. It's as bad as leaving a trail of breadcrumbs."

As his brother lifted the edge of the cloth to glance at the burns, Robert caught a glimpse. The blisters had swollen and looked as though they might burst.

Frederick's determined gray eyes met his. "Let's get to the ambassador's rooms. You can pick the lock while I search for something to wipe up this water. It would be simpler if I had a key, but the locks were all replaced during the renovation and I couldn't get one."

Before asking his brother for the lock picks, Robert tested the porcelain doorknob. It was unlocked. He shot Frederick a relieved smile and pushed the door open. They both slipped inside.

It took Robert's eyes a moment to adjust to the dim glow from the fireplace's dying embers.

He surveyed the suite and spotted the ambassador's desk near a large window overlooking the courtyard below.

"Here," Frederick said, handing him a rolled length of leather. "You'll need these."

Robert recognized the bundle as he took it— as familiar as an old friend. He liked the feel of it against his palm.

Frederick began prowling around the room and Robert turned to his own task. After all, this was why his brother needed him tonight— for his nefarious skill.

In the dim light, he leaned over to examine the enormous pedestal desk. It had a lap drawer in the center with a set of drawers on either side. Only the lower ones looked large enough to contain a diplomatic pouch, but when he tugged on them, he discovered both were locked.

With a flick of his hand, Robert unfurled the rolled length of leather onto the desk with practiced ease. He folded back the top layer of leather, revealing an assortment of lock picks gleaming in the moonlight, each fitted snugly into its pocket. It looked surprisingly similar to his own set, and he realized Daniel must have given them identical gifts.

"I can use this to clean up that water," Frederick said, holding up a cloth as he approached Robert. "Find the book while I'm gone. It's easy to identify. It's battered-looking with a Russian Orthodox cross on the tooled-leather cover."

Robert's hand froze midway in pulling a lock pick from the roll, and he met Frederick's gaze as he licked his lips nervously. "I prefer you stay. This won't take long. What if someone comes in?"

“I’ll be right outside. If anyone shows up, I’ll draw them away, and I’ll do it loudly enough that you’ll hear me. Everyone is busy downstairs. It isn’t likely we’ll be discovered.”

“You can’t expect me to—”

“Yes, I can. You’ll be fine.” Frederick stared at him for a long moment, as though weighing his next words. “When we were children, you stole pastries from the cook when his back was turned. You rode the horse Father forbade you to ride. You convinced the coachman to teach you everything he knew about racing a phaeton. You even brought your new friend Daniel home from Eton for a visit. He turned out to be a wild boy who knew how to pick a pocket, fight with a knife, and open any lock. Admit it. You enjoy taking risks. That’s why I want you to join me in working for the Foreign Office.”

“I won’t be dragged into some scandal again,” Robert protested.

“You’re simply afraid you’ll be obliged to fix someone else’s mistakes.” He gave Robert an easy nod, as though he’d come to some realization that pleased him. “Helping me could be a way for you to finally break free of Father’s influence over your life. After all, the man’s been dead for years. The way I see it, you need to make a choice. Either immerse yourself in this role and become involved in the world around you, or continue to remain apart. Why not change the direction of not only your own future, but of England’s as well? Do it! Commit to something. Be the man you want to be rather than the one Father forced you to become.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Robert’s mouth. “That’s a rousing speech.”

Frederick grinned back at him. “I’m practicing for Parliament. Do you think I have a future?”

“Undoubtedly. As long as they don’t find out you used your untrained brother as a last-minute replacement on a critical assignment for the Queen. ‘For want of a hand, the kingdom was lost,’” Robert paraphrased.

Frederick scowled.

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.” He pushed down his feeling of trepidation and jutted his chin toward the door. “Go. Clean up your trail of water. I’ll be your hands. I’ll pick your locks. I’ll steal the church register. But you owe me.”

Frederick gave a wry smile and silently slipped from the room.

Robert knelt to examine the locks more closely and selected two picks from the set. He started with the drawer on the right, since it was more readily accessible.

He still couldn’t believe he was doing this. If he hadn’t seen Frederick get burned with his own eyes, he’d suspect him of having planned this entire evening.

Chess moves. Perhaps he really was Frederick’s pawn tonight.

The lock gave way. Robert slid open the drawer and reached into its depths, hoping to brush against the form of a diplomatic pouch.

Footsteps in the corridor. He froze.

Was that a woman’s voice? A feminine trill of laughter? He kept listening.

Seconds ticked by. A log settled in the dying fire, sending off a few sparks, but no other noises intruded. Perhaps he’d been mistaken. The voice might have come from downstairs in the foyer.

He reached again into the drawer’s depths, and his hand grazed an object that could be the diplomatic pouch. He held his breath as he extracted it and rose to

his feet. When he set it on the desk, he let out a sigh of relief.

As he bent to examine it, he was surprised to discover the diplomatic pouch was unlocked. No seals had been affixed to it. He'd expected this step in tonight's thievery to be more difficult. Could the ambassador be unaware of the importance of the church register?

Robert opened it and withdrew a small leather-bound volume.

The book was exactly as Frederick had described, right down to the tooled-leather cover bearing the cross of the Russian Orthodox Church. It appeared to have been through a great deal of misuse over the years. Strange for an item which normally resided in a church.

As he thumbed through the book, it fell open to a particular page as though someone had frequently turned to it. In the dim light, he recognized the shapes of the Cyrillic letters. It had been too long since he'd studied Russian and full comprehension eluded him, but he found pages of names and dates, along with annotations regarding important events.

He flipped the book shut. Frederick had been gone too long.

He returned the diplomatic pouch to the drawer, relocked it, stowed the lock picks, unbuttoned his tailcoat, and tucked the battered church register down the back of his waistband. The corners of the little book would be discernible through the fabric of his form-fitting tailcoat, wouldn't they? Robert shrugged. This would do for now.

He slipped out into the silent, empty hallway.

Where in blazes was his brother?



## CHAPTER TWO

*Every fact is related on one side to sensation, and, on the other, to morals. The game of thought is, on the appearance of one of these two sides, to find the other: given the upper, to find the under side.*

*- Ralph Waldo Emerson*

As Robert stepped into the corridor, he reached a definite conclusion. Frederick was insane for wanting to be a spy.

No water drops marred the pristine surface of the hallway. Apparently, Frederick had completed his task and managed to completely disappear. Had he been spotted, or worse, apprehended?

A burst of applause rose from the ballroom. As it faded, the children's choir began a new song. Judging by its simple melody, Robert took it for a Russian peasant song rather than a more formal piece. He probably only had a couple of minutes before it ended.

As Robert crept back down the hallway toward the concealed door, he glanced over the balcony to the open foyer below. Empty. Not even the footman guarding it remained.

The unprotected staircase tempted him to risk a quick escape. Should he take it or stay and search for Frederick? He knew what his brother would say. The book must be his first priority.

Frowning, Robert decided to stash the book near the cloakroom as they'd planned, and then return to search for his brother.

The staircase tempted him, and he edged closer.

A small brown-haired woman rounded the bend on the stairs, startling him as she rushed up the last few steps.

He recognized her. The woman in silver.

Robert stepped back, struck by her intensity of purpose. She remained focused on the foyer below and didn't see him watching her.

She was young, probably twenty or so. Her youth and vibrancy made her attractive, but her delicately sculpted features made her beautiful.

She seemed to have appeared straight out of his imagination as the embodiment of temptation.

She wore an elaborate silvery-gray ball gown with a form-fitting bodice that revealed her curves while concealing all beneath layers of delicate fabric, and she'd anchored her chestnut-brown hair in place with simple hairpins rather than ornate clips, but— where was her glittering jewelry? More importantly, where was her chaperone? He couldn't recall seeing her with anyone else at all tonight.

Her lack of jewels suggested she possessed rank but no money. Robert weighed that bit of information but set

it aside. It had no bearing on the current situation. He needed to take control.

“What are you doing up here?” he demanded. “This area is off-limits. Guests are to remain in the public areas.” He stepped closer, forcing her to crane her neck back to look at him. His height could be intimidating. He’d learned to make it work to his advantage.

Startled, she met his gaze as she paused in mid-movement on the last step of the staircase. He caught a glimpse of irritation on her face, which surprised him. Bewilderment or embarrassment he would expect, but irritation? Or had he been mistaken? Now she appeared relieved to see him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her warm, copper-brown eyes making something deep within him tremble with fascination. “I-I needed to get away from all those people for a moment. I hope I’m not intruding.”

Upon hearing her voice, a burst of awareness fizzed within Robert like a stream of champagne bubbles climbing up the side of a glass. She glowed with vitality. This was a woman who could shape a man’s destiny.

A fresh scent of orange blossoms enveloped her. She looked more like an illusion than a real flesh-and-blood woman. And she was so small. Pausing on the staircase one step down from him, she barely came up to his chest.

Despite her size, he sensed strength in this woman. Her unusually direct gaze gave her away.

Her silvery-gray dress now put him in mind of steel. She all but radiated determination.

An instant later, she lowered her lashes and clutched her hands together, transforming from a strong, proud woman into a fretful one.

He found her sudden metamorphosis both startling and intriguing. Had his senses deceived him? Had he entirely misjudged her?

She fumbled at the side of her ball gown and withdrew a small handkerchief from a pocket, delicately dabbing it under her eye as she stepped up onto the landing. "I don't know what came over me," she said. She swayed slightly, and her lower lip trembled.

"Do you feel faint?" he asked, lurching forward to offer his arm. What if she tumbled down the stairs? When she willingly accepted it, his remaining misgivings evaporated, and when she met his eyes, her beseeching expression pierced him to his very soul.

"I'm a bit lightheaded." Her fingers curled tightly around his arm and she leaned on it momentarily for support.

"Perhaps it's the heat." Robert breathed deeply, allowing her fresh scent of orange blossoms to invade him. But with her nearness, a sudden realization came over him. What about the book? Would she discern its sharp corners poking through his evening coat?

Where the devil was Frederick? Robert kept expecting him to burst from one of the rooms at any moment. He could just imagine what Frederick would say if he caught Robert dallying with this woman he'd conjured from his dreams.

His charming, inconvenient companion leaned against him, causing a sharp corner of the church register to poke him in the back. Robert cleared his throat. "Will you permit me to find your escort for you?"

"No." The single word was sharp and forceful, but then she smiled up at him in a way that soothed the bite of her perfunctory reply. "I'd prefer to avoid the press of the crowd. I'm certain I'll feel better in a moment.

Perhaps if we walk, it will help me recover.” She took a step down the hallway, back toward the ambassador’s suite of rooms.

Blast. His escape route was in the opposite direction.

“We should avoid the residential wing,” he said, turning them around toward the servants’ staircase and his escape.

“Oh, my. Are Ambassador Revnik’s rooms back there? I hadn’t realized.” She widened her eyes, causing him to stare into them. Their not-quite-burnished color of a nearly new copper penny transfixed him. It suddenly struck him that something about her seemed familiar.

Despite his earlier flight of fancy, she hadn’t stepped from his dreams. He’d certainly remember any visions she might grace.

“Have we met?” he asked. “Since we’re alone, I’m afraid I’m obliged to introduce myself. I’m Robert—Robert Woolsey, Earl of Wentworth.” Why on earth had he stumbled and offered her his given name? She’d think him a bumbling fool.

Her eyes widened. Did she recognize his name? A blush suffused her face, making her seem even more vulnerable. “My, but we are alone, aren’t we? You’ve reminded me of how inappropriate it is for me to be here with you, let alone to speak to you without a chaperone. I’m not in the habit of offering my name to a man without a formal introduction.” She pulled away from him, leaving his embrace empty of her.

Robert stiffened. Why had he behaved in such a forward manner? And toward such a gently bred young lady. He dropped his arm as if caught in an illicit act.

The copper-eyed young woman tensed, but after a moment, she inhaled shakily in an attempt to regain her composure. Taking another step down the hallway,

Copper-Eyes kept reaching out and touching the wall as though she needed its solid reassurance to keep from falling.

Robert kept pace with her. Eventually, she smiled up at him in a token of forgiveness. His chest tightened.

She stumbled sideways into one of the shallow alcoves that held a door, and her hand gripped the knob as she steadied herself. Then she linked her free arm through his again, surprising him. As her eyes met his, her smile changed, somehow becoming more enticing— more inviting.

He smiled back, entranced by her. Had this surprising and intriguing woman forgiven him so quickly for his breach of etiquette?

Then her hand turned the white porcelain doorknob, startling him.

What was this?

She pushed open the door and plunged into the darkened room, dragging him with her. In the light from the hallway he could see a bed in the odd, windowless room. Her forwardness shocked him. She rose on her tiptoes, her breath hot on his neck, her hands caressing his chest as they slipped beneath his jacket. She reached around his back and slid her palms up his shoulders as she pressed herself against him.

Robert was no novice in the ways of women, but this brazen behavior left him speechless and more aroused than he cared to admit. She seemed about to kiss him, so he leaned into her. An instant before his lips touched hers, Copper-Eyes shoved him hard in the chest with enough force to make him stumble back a step. She spun around and ran from the room, slamming the door behind her and leaving him alone in the pitch-black room.

He heard a scrape of metal, and then she spoke through the door. "I'm sorry, my lord. Truly I am."

"Wait!" Robert jumped up and scrambled for the door. He located it in the darkness and rattled the doorknob.

Locked.

Where had she found a key? Even Frederick hadn't been able to locate one.

"Open this door!" he shouted, and then paused to listen. He held his breath, but heard nothing.

Nothing at all.

SHERIDAN JEANE



ONCE UPON A SPY