

THE PRICE OF TEMPTATION

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BY
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Seventh Window
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For Aunt Billie

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Chapter One

Jamie Riley had been lonely for so long. He stood in Hanover Square and looked up at St. Joseph House with happy anticipation. Four stories tall, the London town house of the Earl of St. Joseph looked more welcoming than imposing, its red brick edifice glowing warm in the October sunshine. The building's painted white columns and classical-inspired pediment above the door spoke of a relatively recent construction: probably within the reign of the current George, but some years before his unfortunate circumstances forced the accession of his son as Regent. Jamie paused to admire its clean lines, and shake his head at the small paved courtyard, so much more practical in the big, dirty city than the cheerful front gardens he was used to back in Yorkshire.

The main attraction of the house, of course, was the family who lived within. Robert and Mary Clair, the Earl and Countess of St. Joseph, had reared three delightful and energetic boys, who were now of an age to require a tutor to both oversee their learning and attempt to keep them in hand. Jamie's dimple flickered as he smiled to himself, looking forward to the challenge. Life from now on would be very different from the quiet existence he had known, just he and his ailing mother scraping by in their rural cottage near Wheldrake. A shiver ran down his spine, and he firmly put those thoughts behind him. Now was not the time to look back to his mother's long illness and the dreadful months that had fol-

lowed her death; it was the time to look forward to his new post, filled with bustle and cheer.

With a deep breath to steady his nerves, Jamie closed the wrought iron gate behind him, and climbed the wide marble steps to the front door. He rang the bell, and the door was soon opened by a tall, white-haired gentleman of an almost uncannily stiff posture. The butler, of course. Jamie's acquaintance in Yorkshire hadn't included much experience with the breed, but this one's hauteur fit his expectations admirably.

"Yes?" The butler flicked his eyes over the young man standing before him, and Jamie wished that he hadn't needed to sell his overcoat to help pay for the trip to London. Still, his black superfine jacket, handed down from the vicar two years ago, was as well-tailored as his mother's clever needle could make it, and his neck cloth was neatly tied. Surely he was imagining the contempt in the other man's visage. Butlers were supposed to be stony-faced, after all.

Even so, Jamie stood up straighter. "Good day, sir. My name is James Riley, and I've come to take up my position with his lordship the Earl of St. Joseph"

The information did not soften the butler's countenance in the least. He regarded the valise clutched in Jamie's hand with faint astonishment, then looked back at his face, eyes narrowing. "His lordship is installing you here? In the household?"

Jamie widened his own eyes in surprise. "Where else? It is, after all, where I'll be performing my duties."

"Rather young for this, aren't you?"

"I'm well-suited to my trade, I assure you." A smile flickered on Jamie's face as he thought of his first meeting with his charges some months back. Good boys, but rambunctious through and through. "I can imagine at times I'll need a young man's energy and stamina just to keep up."

The butler, looking pained, put up a hand. "That's quite enough. Follow me."

Stephen Clair, Earl of St. Joseph, was playing euchre with his valet Charles when his butler, Mr. Symmons, entered the room and stood ramrod straight, by his side. Very correctly waiting to be spoken to before speaking. Since the stakes they were playing for included ownership of the last half-bottle of contraband brandy in the earl's London home, neither player acknowledged the interruption with more than a grunt. Napoleon's defeat last year at Waterloo had allowed good French brandy to become more available, but the ruinous taxes on the legal stuff made the continuation of

smuggling inevitable, and a win today especially desirable.

Mr. Symmons exuded disapproval while he waited, perhaps even less pleased than usual. If such a thing were possible.

Stephen sighed and sat up straighter, one hand rising of its own accord to neaten his cravat. His butler had that effect on him. "Yes, Symmons?"

"Gentleman to see you, my lord," Mr. Symmons announced.

"Oh gad; it isn't Julian, is it?" A moue of distaste marred the earl's generous mouth as he played his next card.

"I believe I said *gentleman*, my lord."

Stephen let the insult slide, intent on studying his opponent's face. Charles was a worthy card player, or would be if he could keep every turn of fortune from registering on his plump, kindly face. Suddenly Charles' expression brightened, causing his lordship's to darken to a corresponding degree. Hell. He needed that brandy. Aunt Matilda had been cursed ungenerous since he'd missed her birthday party, and quarter-day was over two months away.

"My lord?"

Maybe the day could yet be saved. "Not a creditor, is it?"

"I don't believe so, my lord. Certainly not one of the usual bunch."

"Does he have a name?"

"Doubtless, my lord."

Charles played the queen of hearts, taking the trick, then laid down the king, beaming. Stephen looked at his remaining cards, and they didn't look encouraging.

"Might he have shared it with you, Symmons?" Stephen plucked at a card as if he were about to play it.

"A Mr. Riley, I believe he said, my lord."

Stephen fiddled some more with his cards, fine, dark brows pulled together in a frown. "Did he say what he wanted, Symmons?"

"He said, my lord, that you had offered him a position."

Charles said something in an undertone, and they both snickered while Mr. Symmons bristled.

"A position of *employment*, my lord."

"Surely not." His lordship frowned again. "Almost surely not. Was I at all incapacitated when you put me to bed last night, Charles? No, don't answer that. Of course I was," Stephen said, tossing his cards onto the table with relief. "Perhaps I should see him after all, and find out what I had in mind. A replacement for the lovely Julian, I suppose." And then to the butler, "Well, Symmons? Is he at all in the Golden One's league?"

"I am *hardly* the man to judge, my lord."

“All right, then. Charles?”

Charles walked over to the door and peered out into the hall with interest, coming back to make his report. His transparent face showed a struggle to put the best spin on the news, and at last he smiled as something positive occurred to him. “Well, my lord, I’m sure he’d be much less a drain on the pocketbook than Mr. Julian.”

“That bad?”

“Oh, no, my lord. His features are quite regular, I’m sure.” He considered further. “Sort of a cute nose.”

“Ha. Plain as a pikestaff, you mean.”

“Nice fair skin.”

“Whey-faced,” the earl interpreted. “Hair?”

“Oh, yes, my lord,” Charles said. “Quite a lot of it, even.” He paused, then admitted, “Comes almost to his shoulders.”

“Hardly fashionable, then,” said the earl, running his hand through his own ebony curls, cropped à la Brutus. “Blond? Brunet?”

“Neither, really. Sort of lightish brown.”

“Mousy, you mean. Good lord, what was I thinking? What about his eyes? And don’t tell me, yes, two of them. Unless he doesn’t have, I mean.”

“In which case I would hardly say—” Charles broke off as Stephen used his own two eyes to advantage, glaring darkly. “Sorry. Couldn’t really tell, due to the, er, spectacles. Tinted, I’m afraid they were.”

“Spectacles.” Stephen sighed. “Doesn’t sound like my type at all. Unless... built like a stevedore, is he?” the earl inquired, but at this point without much in the way of hope.

“Not *quite*, my lord. Medium height, I’d say. Slender as a reed.”

“Scrawny.”

“I didn’t say that, my lord.”

“You didn’t have to. Lord, I must have been three sheets to the wind.” The earl reached for his discarded hand, resigned to losing the brandy after all. “Symmons, tell the gentleman I am not at home.”

“Wait, Stephen.”

The butler, standing near the door, harrumphed his displeasure at the valet’s flagrant breach of formality, but the other men ignored him.

“It doesn’t really seem fair to just — I mean, if you did lead him to believe—” The valet brightened again. “Besides, when I first opened the door, he was looking at that painting of your mother. On the far wall?”

“Yes. And?”

“*Really* lovely arse, my lord.”

At that Mr. Symmons stalked back out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Jamie Riley had been cooling his heels for some time in his lordship’s hallway, but he had yet to become bored. There were so many things to look at. He marveled at the expensive flocked wallpaper, took his time examining the paintings. Two pretty watercolor landscapes and an oil portrait of a lovely woman with dark hair. Not the current countess as he remembered her, perhaps the dowager? An exquisite table with finely carved legs—surely French? —with a China bowl of delicate, blush-colored roses gracing the top. Expensively out of season. Jamie closed his eyes and once again inhaled their perfume. Bliss. Especially after the last few days of travel, crammed into poorly-sprung, musty coaches with too many fellow travelers

Here at the front of the house, the hall opened on either side into the two largest rooms of the residence. A stiff, formal drawing room was to the right, the delicate tables fluted and gilded, chairs and sofas upholstered in an ice-blue silk. Should the furniture be pushed back to the walls, it was spacious enough to allow dancing room for at least eight couples. Across the hall, Jamie peeked into an equally large dining room. The enormous mahogany table and matching sideboards were of a sturdier, older design than the French Empire décor of the drawing room, too handsome in their own right to be discarded for the vagaries of modern taste.

Two other doors, closed just now, flanked each other across the hall further down, and beyond them a smaller, plainer door probably led to the kitchens. Jamie looked forward to exploring the house later: as the boys’ tutor, he would have daily access into rooms the lower servants would visit only to clean. Incredible that this lovely place was his home from now on. It was still difficult to believe his luck, but he supposed that it would all become real to him once he began looking after the children.

Jamie wasn’t yet concerned that the earl hadn’t come to greet him, assuming him to be a busy man with many duties, but he did wonder at the quiet of the house. With the three young boys in residence, the house should be full of laughter and noise. The young man shrugged to himself. It was a fine, brisk day, perhaps they were out working off some of that energy at a nearby park. Too bad they hadn’t taken the sour-faced butler with them. Might have cheered him up a bit. And who was the plump man who had opened the door briefly and stared at him? Another servant,

perhaps. Jamie shrugged again, and went back to smelling the roses.

A slamming door startled him out of his reverie. It was the butler, back at last, narrow-eyed and looking like he'd been sucking on a lemon.

"His lordship will see you now."

Jamie smiled and said "Thank you," very politely, but the effort seemed to be wasted as the butler stomped ahead of him into the next room down on the right.

"Your Mr. Riley, my lord." It was almost a snarl, and the countenance the butler turned on Jamie was cold. "I believe you already know the Earl of St. Joseph." With that, he marched from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Jamie blinked at the still-vibrating door. "Goodness," he said.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid Mr. Symmons doesn't like me very much," said a rich, warm voice. If hot chocolate could speak, it would be in tones like these.

Jamie turned toward the voice, adjusting his spectacles. He seemed to be in a morning room: smaller and more intimate than the formal drawing room, this was where the Countess doubtlessly received her daily visitors. The décor here was Grecian, with lyre-backed chairs and a low, rose-silk sofa with scrolled arms set comfortably near the fire. Nearer to the door, two men rose from a round table, its top inset with a classical honeysuckle pattern, partially obscured just now with a litter of playing cards.

One of the pair was the plump young man who had inspected him while he waited in the hallway; the other was a complete stranger. Tall, correspondingly broad, thirty-ish, very handsome, dark hair, very dark eyes. Fashionably dressed in buckskins so tight they looked painted on, and a coat cut with such inevitable simplicity that it must have cost... Jamie had no idea what such a garment would cost, just that it was well beyond his means. He smiled uncertainly and looked around. The earl was not present: a huge, benevolent bear of a man, his size and beaming face were unmistakable.

"I understand I offered you employment?" the dark-haired man said.

"I... no, there must be some mistake. I'm looking for the Earl of St. Joseph."

The man raised his brows. "Speaking."

Jamie stared in confusion. "There must be some mistake," he repeated. "The man who hired me... who *said* he was..."

"Was someone else?" The earl let out his breath in obvious relief. "See, Charles? Not so bosky after all. I'm sorry. I don't

know who's played this cruel trick on you—" his eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. This man who pretended to be me. Did he have guinea-gold hair and sea-green eyes?"

Jamie shook his head, dazed. It was an effort to find his tongue. "No, my lord. He was tall, and dark like you, but even bigger." He groped for a better description. "Bear-like. Not so well-dressed. Oh my," his eyes, indeterminate in color behind the lightly tinted spectacles, widened. "Maybe that should have warned me. His jacket didn't fit nearly so well, and surely a true lord...? But he was so... so nice." He stopped, as the real St. Joseph groped blindly for his chair and sat, mouth drawn into lines of pain. The round-faced man was staring open-mouthed.

"Speaking of cruel tricks," said his lordship, dark eyes blazing, "Are you trying to tell me you've seen my brother Robert recently? Because that is quite, quite impossible."

"No," Jamie whispered, putting it together. "Brother. And you're the earl now. So he's—but there were boys—if you've inherited—" Jamie felt sick. Those laughing, mischievous, bright-eyed children... The room swayed, and Jamie felt himself being led to a cushioned chair. He looked up, and the round-faced man was looking at him, concern in his warm brown eyes.

"I'm Charles West, his lordship's valet. Do I understand that you had an arrangement with the *previous* Lord St. Joseph?"

"It seems so," Jamie said. "We met last winter in York. He was staying with mutual friends, on his way back from Scotland. He had read my paper on the Rose Villa—the Roman villa, in Yorkshire, with the rose mosaics?—and we got talking for hours. His lordship offered me a post, on the spot, to tutor his boys. I mean, I went the next day to meet the Countess, to get her approval, of course, and I met the children..." Jamie stopped and swallowed. "They were wonderful people—I liked them so much. They were all so excited about being able to go to the Continent, now that Napoleon is safely tucked away. They wanted me to go with them, but my mother was ill, so they said when they got back in October..."

The earl closed his dark eyes for a long moment, then opened them and gazed steadily at Jamie. "It's just as well you couldn't go with them. Their ship went down in the Mediterranean three months ago. Everyone on board..." He looked away for a moment, then met Jamie's eyes again. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something for you, but I have no children for you to teach. Likely never will. Do you need a few pounds to get you back home to Yorkshire?"

As Jamie sat, tongue-tied with disbelief and despair, Charles spoke up. "Stephen?" he said. "Perhaps you do have a position to

offer.”

The earl looked at his valet with something approaching horror.

Charles flushed with amusement at his lordship’s consternation. “Not *that*. I mean, when you missed your great-aunt’s birthday? You did say that if you’d had a personal secretary to keep track of your correspondence, then you never would have lost the invitation.”

“Yes, well...” Stephen ran his fingers through his curls, obviously hesitating to speak freely in front of a stranger.

Charles was less circumspect. “If you’re worrying about the expense of another servant, may I remind you of what a *costly* mistake missing Aunt Matilda’s party was? Especially if she remains annoyed with you?”

Stephen bit his lip and drummed his fingers on the table for a few seconds. “Can you write a fair hand?” he asked Jamie.

“Oh yes, my lord.” Through his shock, Jamie was daring to hope.

“Keep track of dates, appointments, and the like?”

“Of course, my lord. I am a historian, after all. We do rather specialize in keeping track of—”

The earl interrupted. “Suppose it had just been brought home to you that you had greatly annoyed a very wealthy relation. Do you think you could compose a suitable letter of apology?”

“I suppose I could, my lord.”

“Well? How would you go about it?”

Jamie thought, pulling his mind together with effort. “I suppose—I suppose it’s best to keep as close to the truth as possible. And grovel abjectly, of course.”

“Of course,” the earl agreed. “Well, in this case the truth is I happened to be out of town with... a very particular friend. One she used to find rather amusing, in an appalled sort of way, but since I’ve come into the title she doesn’t think I should be consorting with people like that. She’ll assume I was with him, there’s no getting around that. I think it’s why she’s so angry.”

“Where did you go?”

“To a prize-fight in Hampshire. Aunt Matilda hates boxing, too.” He sighed. “This is not an exercise she would approve of in the least.”

Jamie nodded. “And is there anything in Hampshire your aunt would approve of you doing?”

“What?” The earl looked confused, so Jamie clarified.

“What are her interests? What can you tell her you saw or did there that might interest or amuse her? Does she care for racing? History? Architecture?”

“Oh. Oh. I get you.” Stephen’s dark brows creased in thought. “Well, Aunt Matilda does fancy herself a patroness of the arts. But is there any art of note in Hampshire? If there is, I certainly didn’t notice it.”

Jamie stared. “Not notice Castle Ord? Not only is it architecturally unique for this part of England—the round tower is a feature almost never found outside of Ireland in the eleventh century— but Lady Gregg has a collection of medieval religious paintings that’s quite enormously famous. One couldn’t possibly have passed through Hampshire and not heard of the Saints Gallery at Castle Ord.”

“Yes, but one couldn’t possibly know me and think I would visit such a place.”

“How well does your aunt know your particular friend?”

“They’ve met, but I wouldn’t call them cozy.”

“Well then? Try something like this: *My dearest Aunt Matilda, I was absolutely devastated when I realized I had missed out on your birthday party.*”

“Your eightieth birthday party,” the earl added glumly.

“Oh, dear.” Jamie paused. “*You must know me well enough to imagine my chagrin that I was not in attendance to give you my felicitations on such a glorious occasion. Lay it on thick, then be honest enough so you aren’t insulting her intelligence. You also know me quite well enough to imagine that instead I was up to no good with someone who should remain nameless in polite company, much less to someone I cherish as I do you. Is cherish too much, do you think?*”

“Oh, no. Auntie M. will eat it up. And the truth is, I really am very fond of the old bi—er, besom. We get along quite well. Usually.”

“Good. That will help. Where were we? *I meant to return in time for the celebrations, of course, but instead found myself dragged against my will to Lady Gregg’s Saints Gallery. I expected to be bored out of my mind, but was quite diverted instead. Did it never occur to you that Van Lorn’s St. Sebastian is the very image of Member of Parliament Burdett? Assuming one can imagine him stuck quite full of arrows, something I feel sure is well within your powers.*”

“Now that, Mr. Riley, is brilliant,” the earl said with awe. “How ever did you deduce Auntie’s opinion of Francis Burdett?”

Jamie shrugged. “She’s a rich, elderly aristocrat—what would she think of a radical MP?”

“Go on. Please.”

“All right. *It wasn’t until I saw Paoli’s—hmm, better make it that Italian bloke’s St. Joan lit up like a birthday candle that it*

occurred to me that I was missing your party. If you would deign to allow me to apologize in person, I could tell you who I think St. Catherine's face reminds me of, but it isn't something I would write in a letter; so please, please don't beg. Your own favorite saint, if in name only, St. Joseph. How's that?"

Stephen looked impressed, Charles smug. "Mr. Riley, I do believe you are hired," said the earl. "How much was my brother going to pay you?"

"Fifty pounds, my lord."

"Fifty per quarter?" The earl frowned. "That seems a bit high."

"Oh no, my lord, not—" Jamie hastened to correct the mistake, but Charles was quicker.

"— Not when you consider he was to have three charges, after all, and is, of course, a historian of note." The valet shot a warning glance at the confused young man. "But perhaps since he's only got you to worry about now, and is untried as a secretary, we might persuade him to accept forty per quarter?"

The earl turned to his new employee. "If that's not an insult, Mr. Riley?"

Jamie swallowed. "Not at all, my lord."