

PUNISHING MISS PRIMROSE

PARTS I - V

A story in the Red Chrysanthemum series

By Em Brown

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Punishing Miss Primrose, Part I

From his chair in the far corner of Madame Devereaux's dim and tawdry parlor, Spencer Edelton, the third Marquess of Carey, observed the unhappy flutter of Miss Primrose's eyelashes as she stood before Madame Devereaux. When first he had set eyes upon Miss Primrose, he had been surprised to find she possessed none of the classic beauty he would have expected of a woman rumored to have had as many conquests as she. No rounded cheeks, delicate lips, or slender nose adorned her countenance. Despite her Scottish surname, her darker complexion and ebony hair suggested a mixed heritage—Moor, perhaps. He frowned to think that both his brother, Nicholas, and his cousin, William, had been bested by such a strumpet.

"I am most sincere when I say I require a respite," Miss Primrose said, her voice coming from a deeper part of the throat than most women. "My last spell as a mistress proved rather wearisome."

Mistress. Spencer narrowed his eyes. His grasp tightened about the gloves he held as he recalled the contents of a letter he had discovered in Nicholas' bedchamber. *Mistress Primrose*, it had begun.

To calm himself, he turned his attention to the fake Persian carpet, the heavy damask curtains draped about the lone window, the tarnished candelabras tacked upon walls covered in worn dull silk, and a longcase clock that had arms that did not move. The surroundings reminded him of how remiss he had been in looking after his younger brother. He ought to have placed a tighter rein upon poor Nicholas and limited the latter's friendship with William, a dubious influence.

"This *gentleman* you speak of will be far happier with another choice," Miss Primrose added when she had received no response from her employer. She had not noticed or chose to ignore his presence in the room.

My dear Beatrice," the older proprietress attempted, "with your skills—"

"Libby is far prettier."

Madame Devreaux relented. "The gentleman requested you by name. Apparently he has heard tell of your reputation."

"Molly is adept with the dominant role."

"Perhaps he is partial to a more exotic experience. Our patrons are not exactly men of ordinary tastes, are they? Moreover, the price is more than right."

"The bugger has money then," Miss Primrose said, unimpressed.

"Money and peerage, I suspect."

The information only made Miss Primrose frown more.

"You would be well compensated for your time," Madame Devreaux coaxed.

“Have you the money?”

“He advanced us fifty quid. And another fifty will be paid upon satisfaction.”

The amount seemed to give Miss Primrose pause. Nonetheless, she replied firmly, “No. I have done with fancy bastards.”

Spencer shifted in his seat at this unexpected response. How could money fail to persuade? Was it not the sole objective of whoring? Granted, she had already exacted a grand sum from Nicholas and William, neither of whom were particularly frugal or discrete with their funds. But she could have had more. She could have aspired to a courtesan and leave the pitiful brothel that Madame Devereaux kept, though the patroness insisted that the Inn of the Red Chrysanthemum was not a whorehouse but a club where members indulged their penchant for taboo pleasures.

When Spencer had confronted his brother, Nicholas had admitted to patronizing the Red Chrysanthemum, and claimed he was in love with Miss Primrose and had hoped to tempt her away from the place with all that a woman of her situation could ever hope for and more: a townhome, servants, and an allowance for gowns and baubles. Spencer had never seen the poor boy so desperate, yet *she* had cast off *him*, refusing to ever see him or William again. Perhaps Miss Primrose was not in possession of all her senses. Or perhaps she played a game, as many women were wont to do, withholding her favors to encourage an even greater offer, though Nicholas had already promised her more than his means. At least Nicholas had enough sense not to propose the ultimate prize: marriage.

But Spencer, unsure that his brother would not eventually succumb to such a misstep, had his uncle take the two young men to Spain, hoping time and distance would remove the influence of Miss Primrose. William—easily pleased with wine, women, cards, and horseflesh—was more likely to recover. Nicholas, however, possessed a more delicate constitution. Spencer had never seen a man look as despondent, beaten, and woeful. His younger brother was a mere shell of a man. Spencer did not doubt that, given the chance and despite her treatment of him, Nicholas would crawl, like a pathetic little puppy, back to Miss Primrose.

Something had to be done about her. The quality of her speech suggested she had not been raised in the lower classes, but at best, she was of the bourgeoisie. For her to trifle with men of superior position showed tremendous insolence, a flagrant audacity that was not to be tolerated. Miss Beatrice Primrose required a set-down. She needed to be taught a lesson.

“Beatrice, please,” Madame Devereaux implored, lowering her voice. “How often does fifty quid—in advance, mind you—come our way?”

“I did more than fifty quid for you by way of Nicholas Edelton and that craven cousin of his.”

A muscle tensed along Spencer’s jaw. Nicholas had admitted that, once his own allowance had been exhausted, he had taken to borrowing from friends to sustain Miss Primrose. Spencer briefly wondered that the woman, with all that she had swindled from Nicholas and William, had not procured herself a better frock than the one she currently wore. The fabric was wearing thin and the hem repaired in several places.

“For which I am eternally grateful,” Madame Devereaux said. “If you accept this occasion, I

will have no need to call upon you for a long, long time. You may enjoy your well-earned reprieve, free of concerns. Allow yourself an indulgence. Perhaps take yourself and James to Bath.”

James. She had a lover. Perhaps this fellow was why Miss Primrose had dismissed Nicholas, Spencer thought.

“But the man wants a whole sennight?” Miss Primrose replied with a shake of the head. “What sort of man asks for a bloody sennight?”

“A lonely one.”

“A lecher.”

Madame Devereaux arched her brows. “Do we service any other kind of patron?”

Miss Primrose curled her lips. “And I am to travel to his abode? Why does he not come here?”

“He does not reside in town. It would be an inconvenience.”

“My equipment is here.”

“He has offered to transport most of it and make a carriage available to you.”

Miss Primrose contemplated in silence, then crossed her arms. “A hundred quid you say?”

“He is flush in the purse. If he is pleased, perhaps an additional perquisite will come our way.”

“A hundred quid be a lot to pay for any wench. He must be homely as the devil. Is he an albino like the one that made Jane retch?”

“On the contrary, he is by far the most handsome man to walk through our doors. You’re right lucky, Beatrice. Any number of girls would stumble over themselves to lift her skirts for him—gratis.”

“Then what’s wrong with the fellow? If he is as endowed in body and funds as you claim, he would have no need to come to us.”

“You forget he has a specific interest in *you*.”

“What of me interests him?”

Madame Devereaux sighed and put a hand to her temple. Sensing the proprietress was on the verge of relenting, Spencer rose from his chair and advanced till he had the attention of both women. He stood behind Madame Devereaux and allowed Miss Primrose a moment to assess what she saw. Her gaze took in his rugged build, which he knew to be well accentuated by his talented tailors. Blessed in countenance and form, he expected Miss Primrose to be pleased with what she saw, and her frown did dissipate, but it was fleeting.

“Do you require assistance, sir?” she asked.

“I am the patron being discussed,” he supplied, his manners compelling him to make her a bow though she deserved none of it.

She remained collected. “And you are?”

“My name would serve you no purpose.”

“But you have heard of mine?”

“Nicholas Edelton spoke of you with great...admiration.”

He forced the word, trying his best to contain his anger. He risked revealing his relation by speaking the name of his brother, but the two bore little resemblance, almost as if they had been born of different parents.

“You are a friend of his?”

“No.”

The answer lessened her frown.

“Nonetheless, the vehemence with which he spoke caught my attention. He seemed quite taken by you.”

“And you pay Nicholas Edelton such regard that you would lay down fifty quid for me?”

Spencer straightened. It was clear she did not hold Nicholas in much esteem. He did not fault her for lacking much admiration for Nicholas, who struggled in the shadow of his older brother, but it made her actions far more callous that she bore no goodwill toward him.

“I once attended an impressive performance of *Anthony and Cleopatra*,” he said. “The Queen of Egypt is a remarkable vision. It has been a desire of mine to seek her likeness.”

Madame Devereaux looked at Miss Primrose as if to say, “There you have it.”

Miss Primrose studied him a while longer as if to make him flinch beneath her gaze. He did not.

“Advance a hundred quid, another hundred upon completion, and perhaps I will consider your proposition.”

He suppressed the urge to choke—or ring her neck. The harlot was beyond insolent, though her greed should not have surprised him.

“The original offer is not rich enough that you must double it?”

“If you could part with a hundred, two hundred would be of little difference for a man of your means.”

He struggled to maintain his composure at her impudence, then reminded himself that it was a small price to pay for the chance to avenge his brother. He took a deep breath.

“Very well, Miss Primrose. We are agreed.”

Beatrice shook her head as she mended the tear in her petticoat with needle and thread. The man had to be mad, though his eyes had gleamed with intelligence and his speech had been articulate and collected. Not even Nicholas Edelton would have been inane enough to offer two hundred quid to bed a strumpet. While wealth allowed men to indulge in the ridiculous, her instinct told her something was not right about the situation. For a man who desired her enough to pay an absurd amount of money, he seemed to have little interest in seducing her. No libidinous smiles, no compliments dripping with lust, no attempts to win her with wine and song.

“Perhaps he is merely awkward with women,” Devereaux had suggested when she had shown Beatrice the hundred quid that been delivered the following day.

“Or he supposes money sufficient to move mountains,” Beatrice had thought aloud.

“Does it not? And if you’ve plenty to spare, why not bandy it about?”

Beatrice was fairly certain she had affronted the man with her demand for twice the initial amount. He was a fool to agree to it, but might she be an equal fool to refuse such a sum? She thought of James and how quickly the boy was growing. It seemed his great-aunt was always writing about how he needed new shoes and new clothes. Soon he would need schooling, too. The expenses would only increase.

“And boys’ll eat your day’s wages in one meal,” Libby, with whom she shared a room at the Inn, told her. “I saw your gent. Wouldn’t mind a tumble with that one, I tell you.”

Beatrice did not disagree that the man was fine to behold, but she had no intentions of lifting her skirts for him. That was the beauty in being a Mistress and not a submissive. She possessed the libidinous urgings of a healthy woman, to be sure—having reached the age of three and twenty, those desires had only intensified over time—but she had not joined the Red Chrysanthemum to fulfill her prurient interests. Her mentor, a member of the Red Chrysanthemum known as Mistress Scarlet, had taught her that a Mistress must never relinquish control, and, by withholding her own body, she may increase her dominance.

But in the small interaction she had had with this new patron in Madame Devereaux’s parlor yesterday, Beatrice had not detected any indications that he would truly enjoy playing the role of the subservient. Granted, she had seen men of great standing, from ruthless businessmen to military generals, whimper like a kitten beneath the whip or boot of a proper Mistress. The Red Chrysanthemum had certainly shown her that the bedchamber was capable of coaxing different temperaments and behaviors from the most straightforward of characters.

“Have you once *enjoyed* yourself in your time here?” Libby asked.

“You’ve forgotten Jonathan.”

“Jonathan? You used him to make Nicholas jealous.”

“True,” Beatrice admitted.

Libby shook her head. “You’re an odd one, Bea.”

Beatrice said nothing. She had told no one that her only reason for patronizing the Red Chrysanthemum was to exact revenge upon Nicholas Edelton and his cousin William for what they had done to her sister, Charlotte. And with each passing day, the likeness James bore to his father only deepened.

“If I had a chance at your gentleman,” Libby said, “I would make a right good time of it. Even if he proved a pitiful lover, if his cock be decent, I should have no problem fucking him at all. I be wet just thinkin’ on it.”

Watching Libby fan herself, Beatrice allowed herself a chuckle. Perhaps Libby was right. She had accomplished her mission of retribution. While she could have exacted more penance and thrown him deeper in debt by becoming his mistress, she did not think she could tolerate Nicholas much longer. His presence fueled an anger and pain that proved, over time, exhausting. Perhaps she needed to bury the fury and the sorrow. Surely Charlotte would not have wanted her untimely death to extinguish her sister’s own chance of happiness.

“A decent lover would suit,” Beatrice allowed.

Libby brightened. "Or he might be a superbly skilled lover! If that be the case, you must let me have a turn with him. What a lucky bit of skirt you are!"

Beatrice recalled the gentleman's tall, wide brow, the wave of his lush light brown hair, and the line of his sensuous lips. Though she was taller than the average woman, he still stood a head taller than she, and she liked the length and strength of his frame. Perhaps she had come across a bit of luck and ought to have a little fun with it and make use of the Red Chrysanthemum's true purpose.

Putting aside her misgivings, Beatrice resolved that she would allow herself to be selfish and indulge her carnal desires with the handsome gentleman. The exchange of money meant she was no different than a common whore, but she had long come to terms with what she did or there should be no support for James. Their aunt could not otherwise afford him, and the thought of James in an orphan asylum was something Beatrice would not entertain.

Pulling out a portmanteau from beneath her bed, Beatrice began to pack.

Several hours from London and with two stops at posting inns between, the carriage pulled up before a two-storied dwelling built of Bath stone. Given how he had parted with a hundred quid with relative ease, Beatrice had expected to find a house like the many palaces of Chelsea and was surprised to find a more modest manor. Nonetheless, she counted twelve windows in its façade and the hedges growing between them had been neatly trimmed.

"Blimey," said Allison, the newer servant girl Madame Devereux had been willing to part with to serve as Beatrice's abigail. Spending a sennight with a stranger was no small matter, and Beatrice could not help the feeling that she could not trust the man entirely.

"You landed a rich one, miss," Allison continued as she stepped from the carriage.

Allison hailed from the country and had been but a fortnight in London. She stood in awe of almost everything she saw.

A footman took their baggage and placed them in their perspective rooms. As it was nearly the time for supper, Allison first assisted Beatrice into her evening dress. Beatrice chose her best gown, a fine muslin with short sleeves and a ribbon at the waist. The women of more polite society would deem the simple white dress ordinary, but it draped well upon her body. As she had put on a little weight since the dress was first sewn, the wide neckline displayed the swell of her breasts more than she would have liked for there was no need to call further attention to the fact that she was here on wanton purposes. She wrapped a colorful Turkish shawl about her at an attempt for more modesty. A bandeau secured her thick hair, and a few short curls framing her face softened the look. A pair of earrings would have finished off her ensemble, but she owned no jewelry.

The gentleman stood waiting for her at the dinner table. He seemed taken aback by her appearance; she supposed she must not have appeared particularly alluring that day he had visited the Inn of the Red Chrysanthemum, but by his current pause, his opinion of her might

have improved. Now that she felt more receptive to her sojourn with him, he improved easily in her eyes. He looked quite dapper in his black tailcoat, ivory waistcoat, and layered neckcloth.

“Miss Primrose,” he greeted stiffly and pulled her chair for her.

“Mistress Primrose,” she corrected.

To her surprise, he frowned and the muscle along his jaw tightened. Without word, he went to sit at his end of the table.

Perhaps he only plays the submissive in the bedchamber, she reasoned to herself. The long table made conversation a little difficult. As he was the host, she expected him to begin the dialogue, which he could have easily done by inquiring after her trip or the condition of the roads, but he was silent as the servants poured the wine and set the first course, a rabbit stew, before them.

“My compliments to your cook,” she said after several spoonfuls. She had never tasted such freshness.

He only nodded. They finished the soup in silence. Despite the distance, she could sense his tenseness. Was it the presence of the servants that made him taciturn? Was he, by nature, timid? But he had asserted himself without hesitation at the Red Chrysanthemum. It almost seemed as if he were *displeased*, but Beatrice could hardly guess why, save that perhaps he now harbored second thoughts about their agreement.

“The weather is bit cool for summer,” she tried when they were halfway through the second course.

He waited until the servant had finished refilling his wineglass before replying, “There is no need to attempt a *tête-à-tête*, Miss Primrose. You are not being compensated for conversation.”

She stiffened at his brusque words but decided not to take offense. In truth, she was not here for his colloquy either.

“Indeed,” she agreed. “My services are of a much more *exceptional* nature.”

He did not share her mirth and simply resumed his repast.

What an odd fellow, she thought to herself as she tasted the third course, venison with stewed apples. At least the dinner was enjoyable, being one of the finer meals she had ever consumed. The lack of dialogue made for an awkward time, but she granted he had no need to impress or entertain her. His hundred pounds had permitted that. But for a man who was about to have his carnal desires fulfilled, he looked remarkably gloomy.

“You have the benefit of my name, but I know not how to address you,” she said at another attempt at civility.

“Your lordship’ will suffice,” he replied without looking up.

She raised a brow. “At all times?”

“Yes.”

“Including the...when we...”

This time he looked at her. “Yes.”

Her mouth dropped. This was not what she would have expected from a man who wanted to submit himself to a Mistress.

“And without fail, Miss Primrose.”

She racked her brain to recall what Mistress Scarlet might have said about unorthodox behavior from a submissive. Mistress Scarlet had said that sometimes a submissive might deliberately misbehave in order to merit punishment. A brat, Mistress Scarlet had called them.

Feeling the need to assert her role, Beatrice said, “That does not suit me. If you will not provide a more appropriate name, you may remain nameless.”

He stared at her as if he meant to pin her to her chair. “What did you prefer with Mr. Edelton?”

“My pet.”

It was a term Mistress Scarlet often used with her partners.

“That, most assuredly, would not suit me,” he said, glowering.

It was her turn to frown. It was not his position to set the terms. She decided not to pursue the matter. She required no name for him.

“If you are experiencing reservations or are reconsidering our arrangement,” she said after a sorbet with sweetmeats was set before her, “do not worry of offending me, but know that your initial payment is forfeit.”

She knew she risked upsetting him—and by the darkening of his eyes, she surmised she had—but she did not want him to entertain the belief that he could expect a return of his money.

“Our arrangement stands, Miss Primrose, but the second half of the payment is contingent upon your satisfactory completion.”

“Were you able to convey my, er, implements from the Inn?”

“I have all that is required.”

She met his gaze across the table. There was a hardness in his features that unsettled her, but he turned his attention to his dessert before she could examine it further.

“This is a delightful sorbet,” she said to lighten the mood. “As good as any found at Gunter’s.”

His hand tightened about the spoon he held. He set it down and tossed his napkin upon the table but waited patiently for her to finish. She wondered what she had said to vex him.

“You may wait in your chamber until further notice,” he said when she had finished her sorbet.

His command took her by surprise, but she obliged and headed back to her room. She could not help but feel disappointed. He had paid a good sum for her favors, yet behaved as if he wanted none of her company. Perhaps she had been too accustomed to the dotting attentions of Nicholas. Or perhaps his lordship no longer found her appealing—an unusual circumstance for she had never before failed to garner a look of appreciation from the opposite sex. No doubt it was too much to expect that a man endowed with countenance, wealth, and peerage might also be in possession of charm and wit.

Spencer paced the anteroom of his chambers before heading to the sideboard to pour himself a brandy.

My pet.

He shivered in disgust. Her mention of Gunter's had further incensed him for the tea shop was a favorite of Nicholas'. It was there that a friend had spotted Nicholas with a 'mysterious young lady' who was not known in their circles. Spencer had paid no heed until he discovered those disturbing letters, the nature of which were so strange, he hired a former Bow Street Runner to follow Nicholas. The accounts of what the informant provided had appalled him. He wondered that Nicholas could allow a woman to treat him in such fashion.

Nothing in the letters Miss Primrose had written indicated she bore Nicholas any true affection, only contained promises of bawdy carnality and demands for additional funds. It was clear Miss Primrose used Nicholas and William for money and to satisfy her own vulgar cravings to debase her fellow human beings. Spencer could not require her to return the money Nicholas had freely given to her, and as he could not have her imprisoned without exposing his brother and cousin, he decided he would give her a taste of her own medicine.

For a woman who had lured a considerable sum of money, however, she showed no evidence of it. Her gown tonight was passable—he had to admit she looked quite fetching in it—but she could have afforded better. He knew no woman who would not take the chance to spend a part of her allowance on new gowns, bonnets, baubles and the like. Why would a woman like that horde her funds?

It was none of his affair, he reminded himself as he downed the brandy. As he recalled the vision she presented upon entering the dining room, he could see how a man might succumb to her beauty. She had kept the shawl about her the whole of the evening, but it had slipped often from her shoulder, exposing the bareness of her upper chest. Given what he intended with her, he knew not if it was fortuitous or inauspicious that he should deem her attractive.

He poured himself another glass. He had not quite thought out the whole of his plans, but he knew he wanted her to appreciate the pain and humiliation she had put Nicholas through. He might demand that she write a letter of apology to Nicholas. Spencer hoped in some way to restore what she had taken from Nicholas. And punish her for what she had done. He had had a mind to make her his prisoner for the sennight for surely she belonged in Bridewell. She deserved to be locked in her room and served nothing but bread and water.

But he could not do it—yet. His brother and cousin were not blameless in the matter. If she had confined herself to milking them for money, he would not have been pleased, but he might have restrained himself to a stern talk with her and a warning to stay away from his family at her peril. But she had not. Rather, she had seen fit to demean Nicholas to use his lust against him and strip him of his manhood. The descriptions from the informant of the treatment Nicholas had received at her hands had made Spencer tremble with rage. No one treated a member of the Edelton family with such callous disregard.

No one.

Having sat nearly an hour in her chamber with nothing to entertain herself but the mirror, Beatrice realized a Mistress would not sit idly waiting for word. A Mistress decided what was to come next. The unfamiliar circumstances—instead of the comfort of the Inn of the Red Chrysanthemum, she was a guest at *his* house—had momentarily jarred her from her character. Perhaps *his lordship* did not fully understand the roles they were to assume. Wrapping her shawl about her, Beatrice picked up a lamp and decided to explore the premises.

Expecting to find mostly bedchambers on the upper floor, she headed downstairs. The décor matched the master of the house: stately and not ostentatious. She passed through the hallway and a room she suspected to be the drawing room. Above the fireplace hung a painting of an older man and woman. A husband and wife, Beatrice suspected. Upon closer inspection, the man in the painting could very well have been the father of *his lordship*. Both men had a serious air to them. The woman, too, looked familiar, but for reasons Beatrice could not place.

After spending a few moments admiring the furniture, the silk wallpaper, and paintings of a country estate, she proceeded to the next room. It was a library. The low fire in the hearth suggested the room had been occupied earlier in the evening. The curtains had been drawn over the windows and the candelabras no longer lit. With sofas, winged armchairs, and alcoves brimming with pillows, the room offered many inviting places to sit and read. Beatrice approached a wall of books and looked at the various titles. She had not had the luxury of reading in some time. She was unacquainted with most of the works until she came to a novel by Daniel Defoe.

She removed the book from its perch. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, &c.*

“I thought I told you to wait in your chambers.”

The voice at the entrance startled her, and she dropped the book. Turning, she held up her lamp. His lordship stood with his hands at his hips. He had removed his coat, and his hair was slightly disheveled, as if he had run his hands through it several times. There was a gloss to his eyes that she had not noticed during dinner.

“A Mistress does not receive commands. She gives them,” she informed him as if he were her student. She set the lamp on a table nearby.

The corner of his mouth twitched, as if he were about to smirk.

“And you take great pleasure in commanding others,” he said as he advanced toward her.

Did he mean to accuse her? she wondered.

He stopped and picked up her book, noting its title. “How fitting.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Your pardon?”

“Have you read it?”

“Some years ago.”

“And do you find a kindred spirit in the heroine, a whore, thief, and felon?”

The antagonistic edge in his tone made her defensive. She snatched the book from him,

though it was his property.

“Through Moll Flanders, the author has painted the plight of women with great sympathy. One cannot help but admire the determination and resourcefulness of Mrs. Flanders.”

“A woman of loose virtue, dishonest, scheming—by her own admission. In the end, she and her husband live in sincere penitence for their wickedness.”

“A luxury not afforded to many.”

He paused in thought. “You believe her actions were compelled by her circumstances.”

“A woman must make her own fortune and seek her own justice. She cannot expect these will be granted to her in any easy form. She may be the most moral and honest and intelligent creature, but these virtues are not always awarded. And if a wrong be done to her, who will defend her? Will it ever be made right?”

Seeing his look of surprise, she realized she must have spoken too vehemently. She glanced away to hide her emotion.

“An unfortunate reality,” he said, after a pause, with more compassion than she expected. “But one’s circumstances, no matter how dire, do not absolve a man of wrongdoing.”

“You would that a beggar submit to starvation rather than steal a loaf of bread?”

“Are your circumstances comparable to that of a beggar?”

She stared at him. Why would he ask such a question? What a strange evening this had become! Though she was partly excited to be engaging in a discussion on the merits of virtue—she could think of no one of late with whom she had had such interesting discourse, and he had listened to her opinions without hastily dismissing them—it was wholly unexpected, leaving her perplexed and a little rattled.

“My circumstances are no affair of yours,” she said.

Hoping to place some distance between them so that she could compose her thoughts, she turned away from him, but he reached for the bookshelf beside her, blocking her path with his right arm. He was now closer to her than ever, and she detected the aroma of brandy upon him. Her pulse quickened. She had neglected to devise a strategy for her engagement with this patron, and she sensed the danger of not having done her due diligence, especially as she found herself responding in a most inconvenient fashion to his nearness.

“And if I make it my affair?” he breathed upon her.

Steeling her nerves, she turned to face him, her back pressed against the bookcase. “Surely you did not pay a hundred pounds to hear me tell a tale of woe?”

He was close enough that if he lowered his head, their lips could touch, and for a second, curious if he might prove a good lover, she wished he would kiss her. His right hand came off the bookcase and cupped the side of her face. With his thumb, he tilted her chin up. His fingers came to rest upon the nape of her neck. She became acutely aware of her vulnerability and the difference in their size and strength.

His gaze swept over her physiognomy. “How many men have you ensnared with your loveliness?”

“What does it matter?” she managed to say between uneven breaths. A wealth of sensations

began to percolate from low and inside her body, sensations that had lain dormant while she pursued her retribution against Nicholas. Released from their cage, they now threatened to overtake her, and she was not unwilling to give them the reins.

“*You* have my attention at present,” she prompted, her voice becoming husky of its own accord.

He shook his head. “You’ll not fool me, Miss Primrose.”

His hand tightened upon her, and for a moment, she wondered if she ought to be more frightened. The lust in his eyes was something she was accustomed to seeing, but the influence of liquor could make a man unpredictable.

“But I’ll take your favors all the same,” he finished, stepping into her. His leg grazed hers.

Surrounded by the heat and hardness of his body, she felt a familiar agitation warming her loins. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a calming breath. The sensations had come upon her faster and stronger than she was prepared for.

When she opened her eyes, she assumed her proper stance as Mistress. “When and if I am ready to grant those favors.”

“My money. My rules.”

He was leaning further into her, and she felt the need to come up for air. Desire pooled low and hot within her.

“Fair enough, but if I am your Mistress—“

“You,” he growled, “are the mistress of nothing. You are mine. To command. To enjoy. To torment.”

Torment? She thought she heard the word above the beating of her heart.

“In short, to do as I wish, Miss Primrose.”

He could see the wild confusion, a little clouded by lust, in her eyes. His blood was pounding too fiercely for him to have the patience to explain anything to her. There was too much of her in his sight, his nose, his touch. She had intoxicated his every sense. Even if she were not the object of his vengeance, he had to have her at this moment. To prove his point, he shoved his hips at her as his mouth descended over hers. The pressure between his legs grew tenfold as the taste of her, the moistness between her soft and yielding lips, enflamed his desire.

She allowed the assault upon her mouth. Her lips parted—or perhaps he had forced them—for his tongue to plumb the depths behind them. He was vaguely conscious of his crushing force, but the more he tasted of her, the more his appetite grew. More overpowering than the strongest of liquors or the most potent of opiates, the feel of her, the scent of her, had an effect upon him that he could not fight. He pressed his body into hers, feeling her hips, her breasts, her thighs against him. She shifted the angle of her hips, and her tongue met his several times. The encouragement cast off all remaining reservation.

His hand dropped from her neck to her breast. Without relinquishing her mouth, he pushed

his hand beneath her décolletage to pry one of the full, smooth orbs from the stiffness of her stays. His fervor must have startled her, for she pushed his hand away and tore herself from him. She stumbled and the book fell to the floor once more. He could see her attempting to establish her breath and put some order to her thoughts. In the light of the lamp, he could see the area about her lips flush from his attentions.

Though flustered, she managed to assert, "I am Mistress Primrose. No other proposition was agreed upon."

His body protested her departure. He almost marveled at the effect she had upon him. Either his desire for revenge had augmented his ardor or she possessed some witchcraft. No wonder Nicholas and William had succumbed to her.

"Does it matter?" he returned, advancing toward her.

"Yes," she replied, but she had hesitated first. She took a step back to maintain the distance between them. "If you discovered me through Nicholas, you would have been aware of that—"

"I was aware," he acknowledged brusquely, the mention of his brother prompting his ire, "but it was inconsequential."

The back of her legs bumped into the ledge of a bay window. "Then I think we need to discuss our arrangement."

"As I said, Miss Primrose, you are mine. For a sennight at least."

He saw her look to the opening to her left, and when she moved in that direction, he lunged and caught her about the waist. She landed against the cushions of the alcove with one leg over a pillow and the other foot still upon the floor. Placing a knee between her legs, he pinned her in her place. The better part of him, a sense of *noblesse oblige* that she had provoked with what she had said earlier, the manner in which she spoke about the injustices facing women, objected to his treatment of her. But he had sensed her arousal. She was not without desires of her own. To confirm his suspicions, he reached beneath the hem of her skirts and pushed them up her leg. She fought him, but he fit both her wrists in one hand. Holding her arms above her by the wrists, he continued his ascent with his free hand. She twisted and bucked against him—unfortunate motions for they only fanned the heat coursing through his veins and amassing in his groin.

"The servants!" she tried.

"Dismissed for the evening."

She groaned. His hand had passed the tops of her stockings to the bare part of her leg. His head swam at the softness of her upper thigh, the proximity to that most private paradise of womanhood. With his leg kneeling between hers, she could not bar him access. Slipping his fingers over the curve of her thigh, he triumphed to find her wet, quite wet, between the legs. He brushed a finger against the small nub of flesh there. She let out a shaky moan, then tried once more to free herself, but with only half the energy.

She had succumbed.

What a muddle he had made of her. She could not think properly with him stroking her *there*. His forefinger, coated with the moistness of her betraying desire, slid easily against her, eliciting tremors of pleasure throughout her nether region. But this was not how it was all supposed to happen. She knew only the role of a Mistress at the Red Chrysanthemum. If she had known he intended something else, she might not have acquiesced to his proposal.

But her body cared for nothing but his caresses at present. Helpless as he hovered over her and held her wrists above her head, she could not stop his languid teasing of her clitoris. She wished he would hurry and finish the damned torture. Or not. She could not deny how delightful it felt. He rubbed both his forefinger and middle finger against her, the greater surface area making her moan. The tension inside her mounted. Soon she was writhing, but this time, it was not to escape.

“Ahhh,” she gasped when he slid the fingers inside her and his thumb took over the work of her clitoris.

Her cuntie flexed about the intrusion, but the circling of his thumb was nearly as distracting. She shut her eyes against the intensity of his stare. She knew her desire was written upon her face. Her body had a will of its own, and right now, it wanted to spend more than anything. The valley and peaks of sensation, coaxed masterfully by his fondling, had come to a head. She ground herself into his hand, greedily wanting more of his touch. Her back arched. Every nerve within her now screamed for release. Sensing this, he quickened his ministrations and bore down harder upon her.

She exploded, her body shuddering uncontrollably, her limbs jerking as the most exquisite waves of sensation wracked over her again and again. He softened his caress until the last of the paroxysm had been released. She could feel her blood throbbing in every extremity, her cuntie pulsing. And for several moments, she remained still for fear that any movement might devastate her body further. Only when she felt she could breathe again did she realize how painful his grasp upon her wrists had been. She opened her eyes and saw that he had sat back against the opposite side of the alcove. Lust gleamed in his eyes, and the erection at his crotch was *very* apparent.

She would not mind a repetition of the divine ecstasy she had just recovered from, though the event had not transpired as she would have expected. Undaunted, however, she resolved more than ever to take command of their arrangement. In a moment of weakness and desire, she had allowed him to manhandle her, but Miss Primrose was not to be trifled with for long.

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