

## Saving Persephone

*In 1805 Robert Bittlesworth's little sister and her two best friends decided to create a "boys club" because boys have more fun. Most protective older brothers would have discouraged such a thing. But Robert saw opportunity and began training them.*

Robert Bittlesworth has worked tirelessly in the Home Office for years, managing intelligence in the war against Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna. He also executed a plan to have his father exiled. Now that plan backfires when one of his father's cronies kidnaps the Haberdashers... and the first woman he has ever truly cared about.

Imogen Grant, lately of Boston, has traveled the world with her mother's shipping company. She considers herself an exceptional judge of character, but she has never met anyone like Robert Bittlesworth. He is either the very best or the very worst man of her acquaintance. Can she decide which before she loses her heart?

*“There is no sinner like a young saint.” ~ Aphra Behn*

*“Certain souls may seem harsh to others, but it is just a way, beknownst only to them, of caring and feeling more deeply.” ~ Marquis de Sade*

*“One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love.” ~ Sophocles*

# Chapter One

*September 1815, London*

Everything in Robert Bittlesworth's life went according to plan. Just this morning he met with two cabinet ministers and achieved precisely the outcome he planned. For luncheon he ate exactly what he intended to eat. From very large to very small things, Robert knew how to arrive at the solution he wanted. He could react to immediate issues, anticipate myriad risks, organize large and disparate groups toward a common goal, and maintain the patience of Methuselah to achieve his ends. He could even, when it suited his purposes, act like a real human being. He was fortunate it didn't often suit his purposes because he found it tiresome. In fact, his position with the Home Office fairly much precluded the need, for which he was suitably grateful.

Today he was walking down a street lined with various shops because it was the most efficient route, even accounting for the traffic. He had precisely ten minutes to arrive on time to his next appointment, where he would collect information on the rumblings of incipient riots. The bloody Corn Laws with their grain taxes had only made things worse. Soldiers returned home to neither jobs nor affordable food. Bored, hungry men trained in the art of killing weren't the easiest citizens to keep pacified. As he walked he mentally reviewed his list of appointments and tasks for the rest of the day, considered what assignments he would like to pass on to his staff in the morning, and contemplated what he would request Cook prepare for dinners next week. Robert often liked to be thinking about multiple things at once. His thoughts strayed to the unpleasantness with Sims, the agent who betrayed the Crown for the Prussians and attempted to abduct George Rokiczana, but he firmly returned them to food.

Planning meals was one of his hobbies. Sometimes he would reorganize the menu in his mind for the entire week, thinking about the mixture of flavors, the scents, how the foods would mix, how the meal might settle. Cook most likely had no idea how much thought had gone into the menu that was sent downstairs each Saturday morning, scribbled on a small square of paper, but it was well-known that even a tiny deviation from the planned meals and ingredients required consultation with Robert himself. At times, he would throw out an entire week's plan due to a single missing ingredient. It most likely wouldn't bother anyone else, but to Robert everything had two functions: what it was in and of itself, and how it reacted with everything around it. All things had a ripple effect. Too few people were cognizant of that fact.

With his ten-minute deadline he was walking a bit more quickly than most citizens strolling in this part of the city. Or at least he was, until he heard a bell at the shop door to his left and almost immediately collided with an armful of soft, lusciously scented woman. She squeaked and wobbled. He braced a hand on the doorframe to keep from falling over her, the other hand reaching out to steady her.

"I am awfully sorry," she said. An American accent, but her voice was a rich contralto. She tilted her head back to peek at him from under her bonnet and he saw a generous mouth tipped up in a self-deprecating smile. And her eyes. His mind struggled to identify the color. Neither precisely blue nor green, but a bright, crystalline combination of the two. Aquamarine, like the gem. A ginger curl lay on her cheek, escaped from the bonnet, and he felt a compulsion to smooth it back to her hairline. Generally he didn't care for Americans or gingers, but he made an exception in her case. She was tall, shapely, and smelled of some heady flower he couldn't name. She was so tall, he would merely need to dip his head to kiss her. Was tempted to do just that.

Then he realized he was standing on a busy street holding a woman he didn't know. He released her and took a step back. "Entirely my fault, miss. Terribly sorry."

Her smile brightened. "You have a lovely voice."

Accent aside, *she* had a voice that made him think of silk sheets and hours spent in sensual abandon. He already knew that he needed to set aside time this afternoon for imagining her on those sheets. Potentially, he would need to set aside time for the rest of the week and include a visit to Madame Blythe's. It had been years since he had met a woman who distracted him so easily. He realized his finger was smoothing back the curl. She didn't shy from his touch, but continued to hold his gaze.

He cleared his throat and backed up another step to ensure he stopped touching her. Nodding politely he said, "Apologies again. Good morning, then."

He stepped around her to continue on his way, but her siren's tone stopped him with a question.

"I wonder, Mr. -"

"Bittlesworth," he supplied.

Her beautiful mouth pursed as though considering how his name tasted. "I wonder, Mr. Bittlesworth, if you would like to make it up to me?"

His body responded to her questioning tone with an unequivocal *yes*. He knew he was a man of lusty appetites, but couldn't recall ever wanting to make love to a woman on a crowded public street. "If I can, Miss --"

“Grant.” She set her fingertip on her lips and cocked her head to the side as if considering what he could do for her. It gave him an unreasonable desire to get down on his knees and beg her to tell him what she needed. He wasn't a gallant by inclination. Indeed, his most fervent hope was that her needs were of a carnal nature. But her effect on his person both thrilled and concerned him.

“My cousin is having a dinner party tomorrow and you, Mr. Bittlesworth, might be just what we need to even our numbers.”

Robert hated useless social occasions. When he attended an event it was always for a reason. As he wasn't the type to dally with ladies, not even willing and quite unattached ones, he had absolutely no reason whatsoever to accept. Hell, as she was an unmarried young woman, even if perhaps his age or older, he had every reason to refuse. He smiled at her. “If only all transgressions could be so easily and delightfully remedied. I am your servant.”

She gave him their direction and left for her next destination. He glanced at the shop she had exited before running into him. An apothecary. He filed that away in his mind and resumed his walk. Today he wouldn't be on time for his meeting, but it didn't bother him. He thought instead about ginger hair spread out upon a pillow. Lips that begged to be kissed until they were swollen.

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Imogen smiled to herself as she walked away from Mr. Bittlesworth. An odd name, quite a mouthful, but he had been interesting for an Englishman. One of her entertainments while in London was saying shocking things, simply for the reaction it caused. Her bold invitation to the dinner party had caused that moment of shocked silence at which the British excelled. But Bittlesworth was a fascinating combination of contrasts. Cold eyes and warm hands. Tense British accent over a voice like honeyed brandy. And his aura, it was unusual. The first thing she had noticed, of course, was the red. Bright, clear red like the finest ruby. So much passion and intensity that it was almost overwhelming. And then the black lurking at the edges of him. He had been hurt and continued to carry the pain and anger of it. But last, almost hidden like a treasured secret, the emerald green. That had been the interesting part. With all the energy he obviously had, was it directed more by his pain or his heart? A most interesting question. But he was certainly capable of both great and terrible things.

And that didn't even address what was most noticeable about him. The man was stunningly gorgeous. His eyes were the exact color blue as an iceberg she had seen in the sea

off Greenland. He kept his hair unfashionably short, but her fingers had wanted to furrow through the sable silkiness of it. Having collided with him, she knew he was solidly built. And heavens, did he smell lovely. Like an illicit midnight rendezvous in a garden. Her mouth watered just thinking about him. It had been some months since her last lover and she was hopeful Bittlesworth would be a suitable replacement for the time she was in London. Meanwhile, now cousin Violetta needed to invite another lady to the dinner party to even out the numbers.

## Chapter Two

Robert had enough presence of mind to be entertained with himself. Having dressed carefully he was now a few minutes early to a blasted dinner party. He had convinced himself that attending would only be polite, and was now regretting it. Having reviewed the expected list of attendees he knew that it was unlikely that he would have any opportunities to work this evening. Only two members of Parliament were in attendance, and they were not active in the House of Lords. The rest on the list were even less likely to be of concern to the Home Office. What had particularly amused him, however, was that based on the copy of attendees he had procured he would create an uneven number.

After only moments chatting with his host, Baron Chester, he was already bored. Hopefully something in their repast this evening would give him new fodder for his menu planning. It wasn't often that he discovered a new dish that he particularly enjoyed, but that was what made it all the more pleasing when it happened. What he shouldn't do at the moment was let his mind wander onto the topic of Miss Grant, because the things he wanted to do with *her* were far too distracting for polite conversation. He heard her laugh in the hall. He wasn't quite sure how he knew it was her, as he hadn't heard her laugh before, but he no more doubted it than he did his own name. He waited until he heard footsteps and then swept his gaze to the doorway as she entered.

She stopped when she saw him. For a few moments it was as though no one else was in the room, just the two of them. He wanted to cast aside his drink and stride over to her, take her lips in a brutal kiss. Pull that gown off her shoulders and kiss his way down that lovely valley between her breasts. Bloody hell, he was getting hard looking at her in a drawing room.

He raised his glass to her in acknowledgment and went back to chatting with a widow. A perfectly respectable widow, if one didn't know about her predilection for young boys. Having uncovered that information while reviewing the guest list earlier, he still wasn't quite sure what he was going to do with it. For now it was just information filed away until it proved to be useful later.

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Imogen came downstairs late on purpose. She wanted to make sure he was there when she made her entrance. The gown of teal silk overlaid with gold netting that she wore was

modest enough for a simple dinner party, but had been chosen specifically for how it highlighted the warmth of her hair and depth of her cleavage. It gathered just below her bosom and fell in a sleek column to the floor. Yes, she had hoped to gain his attention. Yet when he had caught her eye as she entered, the intensity of his gaze had almost made her blush. When his gaze moved down her body it had been as intimate as a caress. That red aura blazed brightly and she knew he had been thinking about making love to her. Then he turned back to his conversational companion and the bright aura winked out as quickly as a candle flame. Now the black figured prominently, with touches of red simmering below. It only served to intrigue her more because so few people had such control over their energy.

Any accomplished flirt would avoid him until he sought her out, feigning disinterest until it was clear he had been hooked like a fish on a line. Typically that would be her approach, but she found she had no patience for it. Sensed no need for it with him. She wanted to talk to him, hear his voice, and watch his gaze roam over her. Rather than be coy, she walked directly to him. As the widow Ludridge was still talking, he merely nodded in greeting and shifted slightly to include her in the conversation circle.

After a moment the widow said, "Good evening, Miss Grant. It is so good to see you. Have you met our Mr. Bittlesworth yet?"

Imogen could see that the widow's aura was dark. Given her druthers, Imogen would be nowhere near the wretch. It was a wonder the poor woman could choke out words in such a polite tone, consumed as she was by avarice. Rather than address the widow directly, Imogen looked up at Robert through her lashes. "I'm so delighted to see that you could come."

"How could I disappoint you, when pleasing you was as easy as my coming?"

The intimacy of their tone seemed to make the widow realize that retreat was the better part of valor, and she murmured excuses before removing herself across the room.

"May I get you a drink, Miss Grant?"

She smiled at him. "You could share yours with me."

He looked at it, as though surprised to see that it was in his hand. "That's hardly seemly."

Wrapping her fingers around his on the glass, she said, "I love being shocking." He released the glass willingly enough into her grasp and she sipped at the bracing liquor.

"Scotch. A fine choice."

He smiled at her. "A connoisseur of liquors, are you?"

“There are some things I insist on having the finest of. Liquor is one. Men are another.”

She basked in the desire she saw flare in his eyes. If she had just a trifle less decorum, and only a trifle, mind you, she would lead him off to a secluded room of the house so they could explore this attraction. Yes, cousin Violetta would be quite traumatized if it ever became known, but the heat radiating off his body told her that he would be worth the trouble. On the other hand, anticipation always made the reward even sweeter.

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He wanted her. He had told himself that he would wait at least until his contacts had provided a dossier on her, but he wanted her now. Which meant that she would be, if nothing else, a challenge to his control. And Robert loved challenges. He smiled down into her eyes and reclaimed his glass of Scotch. “You have a taste for fine things, do you? Perhaps I will have to test your palate.”

“I look forward to it.”

The stare she directed at him left little doubt that her thoughts ran along the same line as his. That what they wanted was to taste each other. During supper he tried to distract himself with food and drink, rather than spend too much of it staring at this bold, saucy American who had captured his interest.

## Chapter Three

Three days later, Imogen fanned herself distractedly while considering her options. At the moment she was standing at yet another entertainment. The Lovells? The Lowells? She couldn't quite remember their hosts' name. It was as though Violetta feared her own hostessing would be remiss if they didn't have scads of things to do every minute of every day. Not that her cousin wasn't sweet and charming and everything a good hostess should be, but the schedule was becoming a bit exhausting. Imogen actually preferred the quiet mornings when they played with the Chester's two small boys, or teas with Violetta's impetuous friend Elisa. If Violetta weren't so overwhelmingly *earnest* in her desire to show her American cousin a fabulous time in London, Imogen would have already put her foot down. Instead, here she was again, cooling her heels at the edge of a ballroom. Most men of the *ton* found her heritage off-putting, and those that didn't were rarely of the sort she wanted to spend time with, thus she made short work of their attention. At least now she had something to think about, and that brought her mind back to her options.

How best to seduce Robert Bittlesworth?

The direct approach had much to recommend it. Seeking him out in whatever lairs he might frequent. Luring him with a bold invitation. She wondered what it would take to make him lose some of that control he practiced. It would probably require a good deal more teasing, more time, to accomplish that. First she had to figure out how to put herself in his way in order to even begin. Although at the moment she would rather contemplate how it might end. What it might feel like to have his hands on her. Would he be a rough lover? Gentle? She grew warmer just thinking about it, and had to fan herself that much more diligently. Late summer in London could be simply sweltering.

"I was going to ask you to dance, but perhaps you would like some fresh air instead?"

Imogen was so surprised to hear his voice that she stopped her fan in mid-flutter. "Mr. Bittlesworth."

He sketched a bow. "At your service, Miss Grant."

Had she conjured him from her fervent imaginings? Her thoughts scrambled for purchase. Here he was and she hadn't considered how she would proceed in this situation. Which would be better? A turn out-of-doors where they might find some privacy in the gardens? Or the tension born of touching politely in a room of onlookers when all one really wanted was to be able to strip off one's partner's clothes? She reminded herself that she

didn't just want him, she wanted to break his control. Wanted to see what he was capable of. All that energy of his could, she thought, be put to good use.

She snapped her fan closed and gave him a winsome smile. "I would love to dance."

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Miss Grant's reaction to his greeting had been almost comical. Considering how composed she had been in their two previous encounters, including the one where he had nearly stumbled over her in the street, it had been intriguing to find her so flat-footed. By the time he led her out onto the dance floor it was clear that she had returned to her usual blasé demeanor. He hadn't questioned that jaded, seductive persona before, but seeing her taken unawares it had been clear that it was, indeed, a persona. In her surprise she had seemed softer. Vulnerable. Open. She had wet her pink lips while considering how to reply to him, and he had been tempted to kiss her there in the ballroom. He usually wasn't taken by the sweet and gentle, but it had just made her seem... naked. Delectably, sensually naked.

Now, thank God, she was dressed both literally and figuratively as they prepared to make their way through the intricate steps of a classic country-dance. It would never do to have his name in the scandal sheets for kissing an American girl on the dance floor of the Lyle Summer Ball. He would prefer, in fact, if his presence here weren't noted at all. He didn't care much for entertainments and didn't fancy having to refuse a flurry of invitations if hostesses thought he might be willing to attend theirs.

As the orchestra struck up the tune she asked him, "Would you like to play a game?"

He smiled at her. "Always. What are the rules?"

"Whoever makes the most correct guesses about the other wins."

On one level her proposal alarmed him. Nothing good could come of anyone attempting to dig into his history. However, Robert loved games and he especially loved games he knew he could win. He had received his first dossier of information about her this morning. She was younger than he thought, only twenty-two, and far richer than he could have imagined. "I find myself intrigued. Who goes first?"

"I will," she said smugly. "You were hurt very badly by someone you loved."

The dance separated them, but when they came back together he said, "Too vague. For instance, I think that you," he trailed off, narrowing his eyes as though looking deeply into her, "have traveled extensively."

She snorted. "Too vague."

He added, "With your mother's shipping company."

Her eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed in suspicion. When their dance brought them back together she scoffed, "Information you learned from my cousin does *not* count as guessing."

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Imogen thought that Mr. Bittlesworth appeared *far* too smug. It would do him good to be brought down a peg or two. She looked at him, *really* looked at him, as she didn't often with people. She usually didn't want to see too much. But this man, with his smirk and information he only could have received from Violetta during the supper, had pushed her too far. As they separated again during the dance she kept her eyes trained on him, endeavoring to *see* him, see *into* him. It had been so long since she had attempted to do such a thing she wasn't sure it would work. But it did. And what she saw made her falter and collide with another dancer.

Seeing her distress, Bittlesworth made straight for her and whisked her off the dance floor. She was torn between a desire to struggle away from him and console him. Death. So much death around him. She shouldn't have looked. She wrapped her arms around herself and focused on pulling in her perceptions.

"Give her air, please," Bittlesworth said, holding his hand up to some well-meaning guest that fluttered nearby. His tone was sharp, commanding. A man used to giving orders.

*No, no, no. Stop observing. Stop trying to read him.* She closed her eyes tightly and rocked from the waist, her arms a protective shield. The images had flit by so rapidly she hadn't been able to see a pattern, just blood. She had smelled offal and the sweat of desperation. The vision had been overwhelming, but underneath it she had sensed him. His grim determination. His stark sense of justice.

Now she heard his voice sharply in her ear. "Breathe."

His tone cut into her reverie. She took a deep breath and realized they were outside. Her eyes popped open in surprise. They were in the gardens. The scent of roses and gardenias laced the air. She didn't see any other guests around them, and suspected the foreboding glare Bittlesworth gave their surroundings was the cause of it.

"Were you a soldier?" she asked.

He turned his attention back to her and frowned. "No."

Her mouth was quite dry and her tongue felt thick. “Then why have you killed so many people?”

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