

Chapter One

IN THE BACK CORNER of the tavern, he sat there and scrutinized as his fellow man, made fools of themselves in their drunken debauchery. He never quite understood how as an ordinary person you wanted to lower yourself to this behavior. As he waited patiently for news of any kind, he observed as the men drank themselves into imbeciles.

Lifting the mug to his mouth he took a long swallow of the disgusting ale. It tasted like soap water. Drinking it quickly, he swiped his lips on the sleeve of his coat. He wanted to spit the brew onto the floor, but he resisted as the barkeep scrutinized him with suspicion. Banging the mug on the table he nodded at him for a refill.

The barkeep kept an eye on him as he spoke to a man at the bar. They exchanged words as the stranger glanced over his shoulder, looking him over. After they spoke a few more words, the man made his way out the tavern door. The barkeep shouted for the serving girl to bring him his refill.

Charles propped back in his chair, rocking it on its back two legs. When the tavern girl approached him, he landed the stool on all fours. She leaned over placing his ale before him, lowering her bosom in his face. When she rose, he was able to catch an eyeful of her breasts filling out of her tight dress. Her corset pushed her breasts up tight and high while her dress laid low right above her nipples. One quick tug and they would fall out into his hands; if he so desired.

She tipped his hat back, so she could look into his eyes and smile. "Is there anything else I can get for you sir?"

Charles pulled her hand away from his face tightening his grip. When she gasped in pain, he realized he needed to play his part better. To distract her, he drew her in his lap, nuzzling her neck. When she purred and went soft against him, he sensed she had forgotten the pain he inflicted on her a few seconds ago. To continue his seduction, he traced his fingers across the neckline of her dress, his finger dipping inside to trace along her nipples.

"What is your name darling?"

"Bessie."

"There is a lot you can do for me Bessie, maybe later after your shift is done?" He raised his eyebrow in question.

"I get off in a few hours, I have a room above we can use." She told him as her hand wandered down to his lap.

"Well Bessie that does sound promising. In the meantime, do you think you can help me with some information?"

He continued to caress her as he saw her look back and forth between the barkeep and him. As a stranger in town; he was under suspicion. If questions were asked to too many people, it could draw unwanted attention upon himself. He nodded his head to the barkeep and smiled as if he enjoyed what

was being offered in his tavern. That appeared to pacify the man he was a stranger passing through the village wanting a night's enjoyment before he left.

"Bessie?"

When she noticed she was not being watched any more, she shook her head yes.

"Now Bessie, I do not want to get you in any trouble with your boss. So, when I ask you a question, just play along with me, okay, honey?"

Bessie looked back to the bar again and realized that Ray was no longer in sight. She couldn't afford to lose her job at the tavern, but she was so lonely for a man. It had been ages since a fine-looking bloke like this one, has paid any attention to her. The sea captain who was in last week scared her and she escaped his clutches by faking an illness, but next time she would not be so lucky. He was due back in port any day now and Ray had promised her to the captain.

"Have you seen any other strangers in town, besides myself?" he whispered in her ear.

She would not admit to him about the sea captain. Her life depended on it. The owner of the bar was involved in illegal activities with him and she had overheard their plans. She shook her head no while looking over her shoulder again.

Charles felt her grow tense in his embrace. Her body shook from the fear of something or someone and he had a sense on who that was. He pulled her back into his arms more and nuzzled at her neck, feeling her relax again.

"I can protect you Bessie, you need not tell me a single word. If the question I ask you is correct, stroke your hand along my arm. Do you agree?"

Bessie raised her head to stare into the stranger's eyes, he did not seem as dangerous as the other men coming into the tavern. More of a charmer than anything. She decided to trust him, he might be able to help her escape before it was too late. Slowly she lifted her hand and let it glide down his arm.

Smiling at her he lowered his head again, pretending to kiss her. "Has there been any unusual activity in town within the last few weeks?"

Her hand caressed his bicep, shaping it to her palm.

"Have there been other strangers in the village?" he questioned her again.

Moving down his arm she wrapped her fingers around his wrist.

"Anyone by the name of Shears?"

Her fingers tightened on his wrist as her body grew tense in his arms again. She raised frightened eyes to his as she slid off his lap.

"I need to get back to work sir," she explained as she let go of his arm.

His arm snaked out quick, grabbing her by her wrist.

"A few hours you say?"

She nodded her head at him as she picked up his empty glass. He dropped her wrist and swatted her on her backside playfully.

“Well Miss Bessie, I will wait here for you; then we can use that room of yours for more fun later,” he winked at her.

Bessie smiled at him, forgetting he frightened her with his questions. His smile held many promises she wanted to enjoy. She wandered back to the bar with the empty glass, smiling over her shoulder at him.

Charles raised his glass at her when she looked back at him. He continued to smile, looking her body up and down in appreciation. When he noticed her blush, he knew he had her convinced that he only wanted a good time. He would wait around here until he could go to her room, then he would get the answers he desired. She knew a lot more than she was letting on, but something had frightened her. Not something but someone. He was close. If he was near, then so was she.

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She watched him from the stairs. Her heart had not stopped beating fast since she seen him walk into the tavern. He was in danger and she had no way to warn him. If she did it would blow the cover she had worked so hard on, she was not going to lose what ground she had gained; just because her heart wanted to betray her. Why was he here? Didn't he know Shears wanted him dead? Why was he so bent on trailing him? Was he looking for her too? That was only wishful thinking on her part, the kind of thinking that could only get her into trouble. He would want nothing to do with her, not after he knew her whole part in kidnapping him. Which he probably knows by now. After all she was captured by his soon to be brother-in-law.

Thornhill would have told him how she was behind the plot to kidnap him and how closely involved she was with Shears to bring the terror to England. It did not matter that she had instead nursed him back to health and tried to thwart Shears's terror plans.

He looked healthy as if he had made a complete recovery. The bruises had disappeared from his face. He was even more handsome than she could imagine.

As he leaned back in his chair, she watched as he smiled at Bessie. Her breath caught as she saw the charm that overflowed from his smile. When his smile reached his eyes, they lighted up in enjoyment. She never got to enjoy his smile, he was always in too much pain. Even when his pain receded, they were always in too grave of danger to have a reason to smile.

Another emotion began to take place as she saw him flirt with Bessie. When he pulled Bessie onto his lap, nuzzling at her neck; she felt angry. Not just angry but betrayed. How could he pull another woman into his embrace and share intimacy with her? Did the words and kisses they share not mean anything to him? Obviously not.

She watched as Bessie stroked his arm and listened as he told Bessie he would join her in her room later. Well we will see about that, won't we, Mr. Charmer? She planned to wait for him there.