

'Smart, sexy
and sincere; an
alter-Regency romance
with fantastical magic
and very real teeth'
ALIX E. HARROW

The

MIDNIGHT
BARGAIN

World Fantasy
Award-winning author

C. L. POLK

CHAPTER I



The carriage drew closer to Booksellers' Row, and Beatrice Clayborn drew in a hopeful breath before she cast her spell. Head high, spine straight, she hid her hands in her pockets and curled her fingers into mystic signs as the fiacre jostled over green cobblestones. She had been in Bendleton three days, and while its elegant buildings and clean streets were the prettiest trap anyone could step into, Beatrice would have given anything to be somewhere else—anywhere but here, at the beginning of bargaining season.

She breathed out the seeking tendrils of her spell, touching each of the shop fronts. If a miracle rushed over her skin and prickled at her ears—

But there was nothing. Not a glimmer; not even an itch. They passed The Rook's Tower Books, P. T. Williams and Sons, and the celebrated House of Verdeu, which filled a full third of a block with all its volumes.

Beatrice let out a sigh. No miracle. No freedom. No hope. But when they rounded the corner from Booksellers' Row to a narrow gray lane with no name, Beatrice's spell bloomed in response. There. A grimoire! There was no way to know what it contained, but she smiled up at the sky as she pulled on the bell next to her seat.

"Driver, stop." She slid forward on the fiacre's padded seat, ready to jump into the street by herself. "Clara, can you complete the fitting for me?"

“Miss Beatrice, you mustn’t.” Clara clutched at Beatrice’s wrist. “It should be you.”

“You’re exactly my size. It won’t matter,” Beatrice said. “Besides, you’re better at the color and trimmings and such. I’ll just be a few minutes, I promise.”

Her maid-companion shook her head. “You mustn’t miss your appointment at the chapterhouse. I cannot stand in for you when you meet Danton Maisonette the way I can at the dressmakers.”

Beatrice was not going to let that book slip out of her grasp. She patted Clara’s hand and wriggled loose. “I’ll be there in time, Clara. I promise I won’t miss it. I just need to buy a book.”

Clara tilted her head. “Why this place?”

“I wrote to them,” Beatrice lied. “Finding it is a stroke of luck. I won’t be ten minutes.”

Clara sighed and loosed her grip on Beatrice’s wrist. “Very well.”

The driver moved to assist, but Beatrice vaulted to the street, tight-laced stays and all, and waved them off. “Thank you. Go!”

She pivoted on one delicate pillar-heeled shoe and regarded the storefront. Harriman’s was precisely the kind of bookstore Beatrice sought every time she was in a new town: the ones run by people who couldn’t bear to throw books away no matter what was inside the covers, so long as they could be stacked and shelved and housed. Beatrice peered through the windows, reveling at the pang within her senses that set her ears alert and tingling, her spell signaling that a grimoire awaited amid the clutter. She hadn’t found a new one in months.

The doorbell jingled as Beatrice crossed into the book-keeper’s domain. Harriman’s! O dust and ink and leather binding, O map-scrolls and star-prints and poetry chapbooks—

and the grimoire, somewhere within! She directed her smile at the clerk in shirtsleeves and weskit waiting at the front counter.

“Just having a browse,” she said, and moved past without inviting further conversation. Beatrice followed her prickling thumbs between stacks of books and laden shelves. She breathed in old paper and the thin rain-on-green-stones scent of magic, looking not for respectable novels or seemly poetry, but for the authors certain young women never even dared whisper to each other in the powder rooms and parlors of society—the writers of the secret grimoires.

It was here! But it wouldn't do to be too hasty, to follow the pull of her senses toward the stack where the volume rested, its spine bearing an author name like John Estlin Churchman, or J. C. Everworth, or perhaps E. James Curtfield. The authors always bore those initials on all of the books in her modest collection, stored away from curious eyes. The clerk might wonder at how she knew exactly where to find the book she wanted in all this jumble. She browsed through literature, in history, and even in the occult sections where other patrons would eye her with disapproval, because the realm of magic was not suitable territory for a woman of a certain youth.

Just thinking of her exclusion made Beatrice's scalp heat. For women, magic was the solitary pursuit of widows and crones, not for the woman whose most noble usefulness was still intact. The inner doors of the chapterhouse were barred to her, while a man with the right connections could elevate himself through admittance and education among his fellow magicians. Anyone with the talent could see the aura of sorcery shining from Beatrice's head, all the better to produce more magicians for the next generation.

Oh, how she hated it! To be reduced to such a common capability, her magic untrained until some year in her

twilight, finally allowed to pursue the only path she cared for? She would not! And so, she sought out the works of J. E. C., who was not a man at all, but a sorceress just like her, who had published a multitude of volumes critics dismissed as incomprehensible.

And they were, to anyone who didn't know the key. But Beatrice had it by heart. When she lifted a dusty edition of *Remembrance of the Jyish Coast of Llanandras* from the shelf, she opened the cover and whispered the spell that filtered away anything that wasn't the truth hidden amid the typesetting, and read:

*To Summon a Greater Spirit and Propose the Pact of the
Great Bargain*

She snapped the book shut and fought the joyful squeak that threatened to escape her. She stood very still and let her heart soar in silence with the book pressed to her chest, breathing in its ink and magic.

This was the grimoire she had needed, after years of searching and secret study. If she summoned the spirit and made an alliance, she would have done what every male initiate from the chapterhouses of sorcery aspired to do. She would be a fully initiated magician.

This was everything she needed. No man would have a woman with such an alliance. Her father would see the benefit of keeping her secret, to use her greater spirit to aid him in his business speculations. She would be free. A Mage. This was her miracle.

She'd never leave her family home, but that didn't matter. She could be the son Father never had, while her younger sister Harriet could have the bargaining season Beatrice didn't want. Harriet would have the husband she daydreamed about, while Beatrice would continue her studies uninterrupted by marriage.

She stepped back and pivoted away from the shelf, and nearly collided with another customer of Harriman's. They jumped back from each other, exclaiming in surprise, then stared at each other in consternation.

Beatrice beheld a Llanandari woman who stood tall and slim in a saffron satin-woven cotton mantua, the under-gown scattered all over with vibrant tropical flowers, the elbow-length sleeves erupting in delicate, hand-hooked lace. Hooked lace, on a day gown! She was beautiful, surpassing even the famous reputation of the women of Llanandras. She was blessed with wide brown eyes and deep brown skin, a cloud of tight black curls studded with golden beads, matching a fortune in gold piercing the young woman's ears and even the side of her nose. But what was she doing here? She couldn't be in this affluent seaside retreat away from the capital to hunt a husband just as Beatrice was supposed to be doing. Could she?

She stared at Beatrice with an ever-growing perplexity. Beatrice knew what the young lady found so arresting—the crown of sorcery around Beatrice's head, even brighter than the veil of shimmering light around the woman's. Another sorceress attracted to the call of the grimoire Beatrice clutched to her chest.

“Ysbeta? What has your back like a rod?”

He spoke Llanandari, of course, and Beatrice's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She knew the language, but she had never spoken it to an actual Llanandari. Her accent would be atrocious; her grammar, clumsy. But she plastered a smile on her face and turned to face the newcomer.

Beatrice beheld the same features as the lady, but in a man's face, and—oh, his eyes were so dark, his hair a tightly curled crown below the radiant aura of a sorcerer, his flawless skin darker than the girl's—Ysbeta, her name was Ysbeta. He was clad in the same gleaming saffron Llanandari

cotton, the needlework on his weskit a tribute to spring, a froth of matching lace at his throat. Now both these wealthy, glamorous Llanandari stared at her with the same puzzlement, until the young man's brow cleared and he slapped the woman on the back with a laugh like a chuckling stream.

"Relax, Ysy," he said. "She's in the ingenue's gallery at the chapterhouse. Miss . . ."

"Beatrice Clayborn. I am pleased to make your acquaintance," Beatrice said, and hardly stumbled at all. This young man, achingly beautiful as he was, had seen her portrait hanging in the ingenue's gallery at the Bendleton chapterhouse. Had studied it long enough to recognize her. He had looked at it long enough to know the angle of her nose, the shape and color of her eyes, the peculiar, perpetually autumn-red tint of her frowzy, unruly hair.

Ysbeta eyed the book in Beatrice's grip, her stare as intense as a shout. "I'm Ysbeta Lavan. This is my brother, Ianthe. I see you admire the travelogues of J. E. Churchman." She spoke carefully, a little slowly for the sake of Beatrice's home-taught Llanandari.

"His telling of faraway places enchants me," Beatrice said. "I am sorry for my Llanandari."

"You're doing fine. I'm homesick for Llanandras," Ysbeta said. "That's a rare account of Churchman's, talking about the magical coast where Ianthe and I spent a happy childhood. It would do my understanding of your language some good to read books in your tongue."

"You speak Chasand."

She tilted her head. "A little. You are better at my language than I am at yours."

Flattery, from a woman who knew exactly what Churchman's book was. Beatrice's middle trembled. Ysbeta and her brother walked in the highest circles in the world,

accustomed to wealth and power. And Ysbeta's simple statement betraying a feeling of loneliness or nostalgia confessed to an assumed peer were the opening steps of a courteous dance. The next step, the proper, graceful step would be for Beatrice to offer the book to soothe that longing.

Ysbeta expected Beatrice to hand over her salvation. The book carried her chance at freedom from the bargaining of fathers to bind her into matrimony and warding. To hand it over was giving her chance away. To keep it—

To keep it would be to cross one of the most powerful families in the trading world. If Beatrice's father did not have the acquaintance of the Lavans, he surely wanted it. If she made an enemy of a powerful daughter of Llanandras, it would reflect on every association and partnership the Clayborn fortunes relied on. Weigh on them. Sever them. And without the good opinion of the families that mattered, the Clayborn name would tumble to the earth.

Beatrice couldn't do that to her family. But the book! Her fingers squeezed down on the cover. She breathed its scent of good paper and old glue and the mossy stone note of magic hidden inside it. How could she just give it away?

"It hurts me to hear of your longing for your home. I have never seen the coast of Jy, but I have heard that it is a wonderful place. You are lucky to live in such a place as your childhood's world. I wish I knew more about it."

Her own desires presented as simple sentiment. A counterstep in the dance—proper, polite, passively resisting. She had found the book first. Let Ysbeta try to charm her way past that! Frustration shone in her rival's night-dark eyes, but whatever she would say in reply was cut off by the intrusion of a shop clerk.

He bowed to Ysbeta and Ianthe, touching his forehead as he cast his gaze down. "Welcome to Harriman's. May I be of

assistance?”

His Llanandari was very good, probably supported by reading untranslated novels. He smiled at the important couple gracing his shop, then flicked a glance at Beatrice, his lips thin and his nostrils flared.

“Yes,” Ysbeta said. “I would like—”

“Thank you for your offer,” Ianthe cut in, smiling at the clerk. “Everyone here is so helpful. We are browsing, for the moment.”

The clerk clasped his hands in front of him. “Harriman’s is committed to quality service, sir. We do not wish you to be troubled by this—person, if she is causing you any discomfort.”

“Thank you for your offer,” Ianthe said, a little more firmly. “We are quite well, and the lady is not disturbing us.”

Ysbeta scowled at Ianthe, but she kept her silence. The clerk gave Beatrice one more forbidding look before moving away.

“I’m sorry about that,” Ianthe said, and his smile should not make her heart stutter. “It’s clear you both want this book. I propose a solution.”

“There is only one copy.” Ysbeta raised her delicately pointed chin. “What solution could there be?”

“You could read it together,” Ianthe said, clapping his hands together. “Ysbeta can tell you all about the tea-gardens on the mountains and the pearl bay.”

Beatrice fought the relieved drop of her shoulders. People would notice Beatrice’s friendship with such a powerful family. And to make friends with another sorceress, another woman like her? Beatrice smiled, grateful for Ianthe’s suggestion. “I would love to hear about that. Is it true that Jy is home to some of the most beautiful animals in the world?”

“It is true. Have you been away from Chasland, Miss Clayborn?” Ysbeta asked. “Or do you simply dream of

travel?”

“I dream to—I dream of travel, but I haven’t left my country,” Beatrice said. “There are so many wonders—who would not long to float through the water city of Orbos for themselves, to stroll the ivory city of Masillia, or contemplate the garden city of An?”

“An is beautiful,” Ianthe said. “Sanchi is a long way from here. You must call on my sister. She was born in the middle of the sea. The horizon has captured her soul. You should be friends. Nothing else will do.”

On a ship, he meant, and that last bit made her blink before she realized it was poetic. Beatrice gazed at Ysbeta, who didn’t look like she wanted to be Beatrice’s friend. “I would like that.”

Ysbeta’s lips thinned, but her nod set her curls bouncing. “I would too.”

“Tomorrow!” Ianthe exclaimed. “Midday repast, and then an afternoon—it’s the ideal time for correspondence. Bring your copy book, Miss Clayborn, and we shall have the pleasure of your company.”

Access to the book. Friendship with the Lavans. All she had to do was extend her hands to let Ysbeta take the volume from her grasp and watch her grimoire walk away, tucked into the crook of a stranger’s elbow, taken from this unordered heap of insignificant novels, saccharine verse, and outdated texts.

She glanced from Ysbeta’s dark gaze to Ianthe’s merry-eyed humor—he meant for his compromise to be fulfilled. Beatrice sorted through a mental selection of her day gowns. Would they suffice for such company?

This was no time to worry about gowns. She had to tread this situation carefully. She offered the volume to Ysbeta. Once in her hands, Ysbeta offered her only smile, betraying slightly crooked lower front teeth.

“Thank you,” she said. “Excuse me for a moment.”

They left her standing in the stacks. Ianthe left for the carriage as Ysbeta signed a chit guaranteeing payment on billing, then marched straight for the exit. The bell rang behind her.

Ysbeta had no intention of giving Beatrice an invitation card.

Beatrice had been robbed.



Off in the distance a turquoise enameled landau turned a corner, and as it vanished from sight, the rippling sense of the grimoire faded.

Lost. Stolen! Oh, she would never trust the word of a gentleman again! She had found her chance to be free—drat politeness! She should have refused. She should have said no!

A pair of women stepped around her with clucking tongues. Beatrice hastily moved to the edge of the promenade. She couldn't have said no. That would have gone badly for her family. She was already planning to tarnish the respectable name of the Clayborns with her plans to remain unmarried. That was trouble enough. She couldn't bring more—there was Harriet to think of, after all.

Beatrice's younger sister drew pictures of herself in the green gowns of wedding ceremonies. She read all the novels of women navigating the bargaining season, set in a world that was positively overrun by ministers and earls who fell in love with merchants' daughters—Harriet wanted her fate. Beatrice couldn't destroy her sister's chances.

But the book! How would she find another?

She waited at a street corner for the signal-boy to stop carriage traffic and joined the throng of pedestrians crossing to Silk Row. Large shopwindows featured gowns mounted on dress dummies, wigs on painted wooden heads. Heeled

slippers suspended on wires mimicked dancing. She walked past displays and stopped at Tarden and Wallace Modiste.

Tarden and Wallace was the most fashionable modiste in Bendleton, led by its Llanandari proprietress. Its design magazines were printed, bound, and sold to young women who sighed over illustrations of gowns that maximized the beauty of the wearer, with nipped-in waists, low, curving necklines, and luxurious imported fabrics. This shop was the most expensive, and Father had paid for her wardrobe without a murmur.

Beatrice caught herself chewing on her lip. Father would have chosen another modiste if he couldn't pay for this one. He would have.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Everyone turned their attention to her entrance, took in her windblown hair, her dusty hems, and her gloveless hands. Two women, sisters by their identical floral-printed cotton gowns, glanced at each other and covered their mouths, giggling.

Beatrice's face went hot. She hadn't stayed in the carriage, and now she showed the signs of walking along the common promenades. The weight of *A Lady's Book of Manners and Style* balanced invisibly on her head, correcting her posture. She fought the urge to bat dust off her plain tea-dyed skirts.

Clara emerged from a dressing room and smiled. "You'll love everything, Miss Beatrice. Tonight's gown is ready, and I have ordered four more—"

An assistant followed Clara out of the dressing room, carrying a half-finished green gown in her arms, and Beatrice swallowed. That was meant to be her wedding dress. She was supposed to wear it to a temple and be bound in marriage to a moneyed young sorcerer, losing her magic for decades. She averted her gaze and caught Miss Tarden herself staring at

the same garment with a sour pinch to her full mouth.

“Miss Beatrice? Did you want to try on your gown?” Miss Tarden asked, her accent rich with cultured Llanandari.

Beatrice stared at the wedding gown with her heart in her throat. “I have another engagement, I’m afraid.”

Clara gestured toward the fitting room. “We’ll be cutting it close, but we can take a few minutes to—”

“No, that’s all right,” Beatrice said. “Tell me all about the new gowns on the way to the chapterhouse tearoom.”

The sisters glanced at each other in surprise. Beatrice ignored them.

Clara bobbed her knees, hoisting the case in one hand. “It wouldn’t do to be late.”

Beatrice led the way out of the shop. Clara swung the case as she boarded the fiacre Father had hired for Beatrice. “You didn’t buy any books.”

Beatrice watched a herd of gentlemen on leggy, long-maned horses ride past, laughing and shouting at one another. They wore embroidery and fine leather riding boots, but no aura shone from their heads. Just young men, then, and not magicians. “The volume I wished to purchase was taken by someone else.”

“Oh, Miss Beatrice. I am sorry. I know how you love old books,” Clara touched Beatrice’s arm, a delicate gesture of comfort. “It’ll turn up again. We can write to all the booksellers asking after it, if you like.”

Clara didn’t understand, of course. Beatrice couldn’t tell her maid the truth, no matter how much she liked the slightly older woman. She couldn’t tell anyone the truth. Drat Ysbeta Lavan! Couldn’t she have turned up just five minutes later?

She had to get that book back in her hands. She had to!

“But now you have tea with your father to look forward to,” Clara offered, “and meeting your first young man. Do

you suppose Danton Maisonette is handsome?”

Beatrice shrugged. “With a title and the controlling interest in Valserre’s biggest capital investment firm, he doesn’t have to be.”

“Oh, Miss Beatrice. I know you’re not concerned with the weight of his pockets! Leave that to Mr. Clayborn. It’s his worry, after all. Now, what do you hope? That he’s handsome? That he’s intelligent?”

“That he’s honest.”

Clara considered this with a thoughtful frown. “Sometimes honesty is a knife, Miss Beatrice. But here we are!”

Beatrice had been trying to ignore their approach to the chapterhouse. The carriage stopped in front of the building that dominated the south end of the square it presided over, its shadow cast over the street.

The Bendleton chapterhouse was the newest one built in Chasland, with a soaring bell tower and matching spires. Its face was polished gray stone. The windows sparkled with colored glass. Beatrice stood on the promenade, glaring at the building as if it were her nemesis.

She glared at the heart of social life and education for mages all over the world, the exclusive center of men’s power and men’s influence denied to women like her. Even when she was finally permitted to practice magic in her advanced years, the chapterhouse had no place for her. She was permitted—when escorted by a man who was a member—to enter the gallery and the teahouse, and no farther.

Boys aged ten to eighteen sheltered within, learning mathematics and history alongside ritual procedure and sorcerous technique. Full members shared trade secrets with their brothers, decided laws before they even reached the Ministry, and improved their lot through their magical skill and fraternal vows.

The chapterhouse held facilities for crafting and artificing, suitably appointed ritual rooms, even apartments where brothers of the chapter could claim hospitality. Thousands of books of magic rested in the scriptorium, written in Mizunh, the secret language of spirits. Centuries of tradition, of restriction, of exclusion were built into the very stones of this building—Beatrice stared at her nemesis, indeed.

“Don’t scowl so, Miss Beatrice. You can’t ruin this with every feeling that flits across your face,” Clara urged. “Smile.”

Beatrice stretched her lips and made her cheeks plump.

“With feeling. Think of something pleasant. Imagine doing something wonderful.”

Beatrice imagined that she had a right to every inch of the chapterhouse, that she and her greater spirit would be known scholars of the mysteries. That gentlemen smiled at her not because she was beautiful, but because she was respected, and girls hurried from one lecture hall to another, openly studying the art and science of high magic. She thought of the world she wanted and remembered her posture.

She smiled as if the chapterhouse were her friend.

“That’s much better!” Clara praised. “I’ll take these gowns home, as you will be returning with your father. Good luck!”

“Thank you,” Beatrice said, and set her path for the tall double doors.

Cool and dim, the arched ceiling of the grand foyer picked up her footsteps and flung the sound across the room purposed as the display of the ingenue’s gallery. Vases of costly flowers stood next to fourteen painted canvases, their scents mingling with the clean, cool stone of the hall. Beatrice walked toward the portrait of Ysbeta Lavan,

stunning and vibrant in a gown of deep turquoise, her hand outstretched to catch a topaz blue butterfly attracted to the lush, drooping blooms of the perfume tree in the background. A jeweled diadem held back her light-as-air crown of tightly curled hair. She dominated the room with her splendor and beauty; her portrait hung in the principal position in the center of the room. Empty spaces flanked her image as if nothing and no one could compare.

Beatrice's own painting was in a dim corner next to a couple of girls who were plain-faced, but still obviously wealthy. She had sat in velvet, and the painter had captured both the soft glow of the fabric and the unfashionable puffed sleeves on her gown. She held her violon across her lap.

She barely remembered the smell of linseed oil and the cursed dust in the air making her want to sneeze. Or the incredible boredom of having to sit very still with nothing to occupy her mind but the desperate desire to scratch an itch. But most of all Beatrice remembered the peculiar feeling of being so thoroughly examined while the truth of her remained invisible as the artist from Gravesford painted her.

It could have been interesting. He had been on fire to paint Beatrice with a rifle after he met her carrying one tucked in the crook of her elbow after a morning ride through the wood. Beatrice tried to explain she only had the rifle due to the dangers of encountering wild boar, forest manxes, and even the occasional bear, but the painter was too enamored with his vision. Father ended the painter's inspiration by threatening to send him home without pay.

If only he'd gotten his way. The canvas Beatrice was exactly what a viewer would expect. She ought to have carried a rifle under her arm—or a pistol, dangled from one hand while she slouched in her seat like a gentleman at ease. Something to show that she was a person, anything to show that she was something more than what people expected of a

woman: ornament, and trained silence.

“Starborn gods, what an aura. You must be Beatrice,” a voice in accented Llanandari said.

She turned and regarded a young man who must have been—“Danton Maisonette. Good afternoon. Have you seen the new chapterhouse?”

“They’re all new, in Chasland,” Danton said with a dismissive little sniff. “Valserre’s been part of the brotherhood for seven hundred years. Chasland is running itself to tatters, trying to keep up with the better nations.”

Beatrice pressed her lips together at the string of slights and insults. “It’s not to your standard, then?”

He glanced up to the stone, laid with all the skill of Chasland’s masons, and dismissed it with a shrug. “It’s the latest style. Chaslanders are all gold and no taste.”

Beatrice had to search for a hold on her temper and the right words. “Then what would you have done? Valserrans are known for their—knowledge of beauty.”

“Aesthetics,” Danton corrected. “Building in an earlier style would have been pretending to a legacy that doesn’t exist here, come to think of it. But chapterhouses ought to have gravity. They should be timeless, rather than fashionable.”

Beatrice searched for the right words, but Danton filled the silence for her. “Though the quality of the sound in the working rooms is startlingly good.”

“That would be thanks to the builders,” Beatrice said. “The designer was a Hadfield, the family who build holy sanctums for generations.”

“Built,” Danton corrected her Llanandari once more. “You all sing to the gods for worship. It must sound impressive at Long Night. Can you sing, then?”

“I have trained,” Beatrice began, “like any Chaslander lady.”

Danton’s mouth turned impatient. “But are you any

good?"

This rude . . . oaf! The arrogance! Beatrice lifted her chin. "Yes."

"You're rather sure of yourself." He contemplated her for a moment. "But I believe you."

He turned his head, taking in the sight of Ysbeta Lavan's portrait, then back to her.

Danton Maisonette was scarcely taller than her, but his brown coat and buff-colored weskit were satin-woven Llanandras cotton, well made and embroidered in tasteful geometric patterns. He was handsome enough, but his thin little mouth clamped up so tight Beatrice couldn't imagine a kind word escaping it. He stood with an upright, chest-forward posture, his bearing reminding Beatrice of a soldier—which made sense. As a Valserran heir to a marquessate, he was expected to take a high position in that nation's army. His hooded eyes were a watery blue, and he had a direct, pointed stare.

Or perhaps it was just that he was staring at her. He examined her so completely it made Beatrice's stomach shiver. When he turned his chin to compare what he'd seen to the portrait Beatrice on the wall, Beatrice seethed behind a smile that matched the demure curve depicted on the canvas.

"You really are pretty," he said. "Too many redheads look like they're made of spotty chalk."

"Thank you." That wasn't what she wanted to say at all, but she promised Father she'd be kind. If only someone had made Danton promise the same. Her wish for honesty had been answered. She hadn't expected to be treated like a clockwork figurine, incapable of being insulted by whatever thought flitted from Danton Maisonette's mind to his lips.

"This meeting's going to be boring talk. Trade and investment. Did you bring handwork to amuse yourself?"

If only she could widen her eyes. If only she could drop

her jaw. But she smiled, smiled, smiled at this rude, demanding man. "I'm afraid I don't have anything with me."

One side of his mouth turned down as he said, "I had an interest in joining the conversation."

Instead of the labor of keeping her amused, since she hadn't brought a lace hook. Beatrice kept her smile up and asked, "Have you seen the chapterhouse gallery?"

"The only thing that's new is the ingenues," he said, leaving the hint to escort her through the gallery gasping on the floor. "Only fourteen of you this year. Private negotiations are becoming too popular."

Beatrice blinked and cocked her head, and Danton knew an opportunity to explain when he saw one. "People are arranging marriages outside of bargaining season. Ha! Chasland's number one export, since you all have children by the bushel. Most of the best-bred ladies are already bound. Where are you from, that you don't know this?"

Ladies do not strike people. Even rude, insufferable churls. "Mayhurst."

His eyebrows went up. "The north country," he said in titillated horror. "That's practically the hinterlands. Have you ever been to Gravesford?"

No. Not this man. It didn't matter that he was heir to a marquis. She would not marry him and travel to distant Valserre, far from her family, to become his wife—indeed, she would not spend an unnecessary minute in his presence. "We traveled there before coming to Bendleton."

"For your wardrobe, I imagine." He took in her walking suit and shrugged. "I don't think you have much need for fine-woven Llanandras cotton when you're outrunning boars."

"Oh, we have rifles." Beatrice realized what she'd said, but too late.

He stared at her, aghast. "You shoot?"

"I am good at it," Beatrice said, and at last her smile had some real feeling in it.

"I see," Danton said. "How perfectly ferocious of you. We should have tea. Do you have tea, in the country?"

Beatrice coated her grin with sugar and arsenic. "When it comes to us. By dogsled, one hundred miles in the snow."

"Really?"

Beatrice's smile widened. "No. There's at least six ports up north."

Now he didn't like her at all. Perfect.

Beatrice glided beside him as he took her to the tearoom. She smiled prettily at the marquis and took her seat, ignoring the hired musician toiling over a piano sonata to pay attention to the talk of trade and investment Danton had promised would bore her. She asked questions and ruined her genteel display of curiosity with remarks of her own. Father bore it well, but he frowned at her once they bid the Marquis and his son farewell and boarded the landau hired to take them back to Triumph Street.

Father settled on the bench across from her and sighed. Beatrice's heart sank as Father, handsome in brown cotton, even if the jacket and weskit bore a minimum of adorning needlework, gave her a look that deepened the worry lines across his forehead, his mouth open as if he were about to say something. But he glanced away, shaking his head sadly.

"Father, I'm sorry."

Beatrice had a decent guess what she was supposed to be sorry for, but Father would fully inform her soon enough. She waited for the inevitable response, and Father gave it with a pained expression. "Beatrice, do you realize how important it is for you to be agreeable to the young men you meet while we're here?"

"Father, he was awful. Snobbish and arrogant. If I had to marry that man we'd square off from morning 'til night."

Father ran a hand over his sandy, silver-shot curls, and they tumbled back in place, framing his fine features, lined by experience and too many burdens, including her willful self. "That perfectly awful young man will be a marquis."

"Marquis de Awful, then. I couldn't be happy with him, not for a minute."

"I had hoped you would be less difficult," Father said. "This meeting was a special arrangement. And you told him you knew how to shoot? What possessed you?"

"It just slipped out. And I apologize. But he laughed at me for being from the country, and assumed me an ignorant fool, as if Chaslanders didn't have an education of any kind."

"I probably should have sent you to a ladies' academy abroad," Father sighed. "Too late now, though perhaps Harriet could enter a finishing school."

Paid for with the financial support of Beatrice's husband. "Harriet would adore that."

"If we can manage it, she will go. But there are only fourteen of you." He brightened at the notion of a brides' market, and the number of young men who would crowd around Beatrice simply because she was one of only a few ingenues left to woo. "But if you'd kept him on your string . . ."

"There are more young men where he came from," Beatrice said. With luck, she'd alienate them all. And then she needed more luck, to get the grimoire in her hands once more—

The thought clanged in her mind like a bell. She could get the book back. She knew exactly how. Excitement surged in her, filling her with the urge to leap from the landau and run faster than the showy black horses could trot. She clasped her hands and fought to appear attentive as Father chided her.

"It's not that I want you to marry a man you can't abide,

Beatrice. Just—try, will you? Try not to judge them hastily.”

Beatrice nodded, but her mind was already consumed by her plan. “Yes, Father. I will try harder next time.”

She watched the tree-lined streets of Bendleton, hazed green with new spring buds and heavy with sweet blooming flowers, and couldn’t wait to get home.