



HADLEY'S

**ROMANCE
BOOK.**

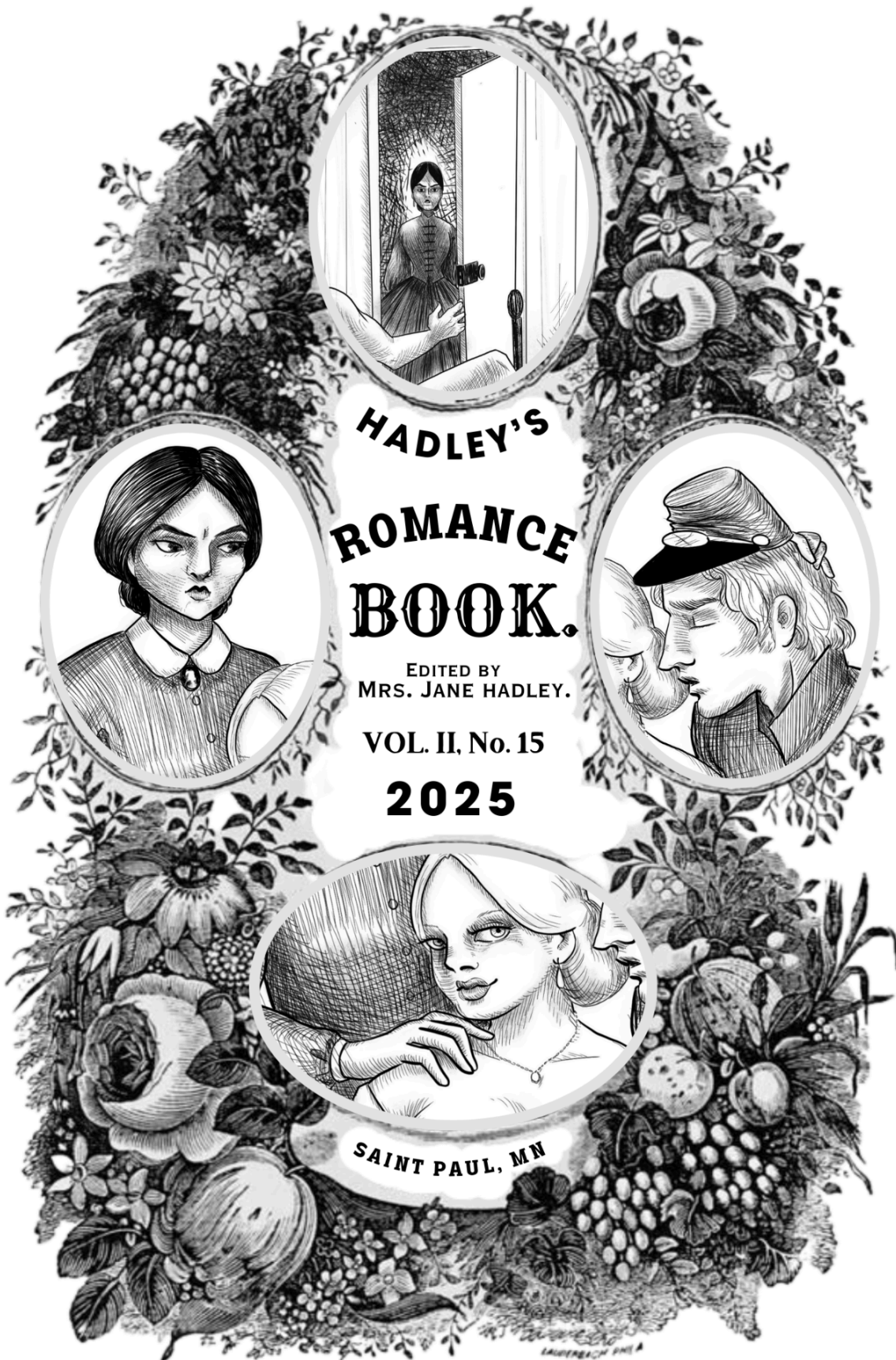
EDITED BY
MRS. JANE HADLEY.

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Edited, Authored, & Designed by Mrs. Jane Hadley.

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Content notices: light BDSM, menage, dubious consent, virgin hero, sort of not really pegging.

Original illustrations by Mrs. Jane Hadley. Be forewarned that this issue contains a NSFW illustration, in homage to the yellow jacket novels so many Civil War soldiers loved so well. Illustrations of Sylvester Graham and the Graham cracker used within the Public Domain.

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HADLEY'S Romance Book

A JOURNAL TO STIR THE MIGHTY PASSIONS

VOL. II, No. 15

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2025.

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA.

EDITORIAL NOTE—When embarking on writing her first historical romance novel, Mrs. Jane Hadley had been determined to make concerted use of historically correct undergarments, like split-crotch drawers. However, in the run of the *Secret Soldier* series, she found that none of her characters had any use for female period-typical garments. Understanding that she had made no headway in bringing split-crotch drawers into their much-deserved spotlight, Mrs. Hadley determined to write a short story to remedy the situation. What follows is that effort.

THE VENUS OF LEBANON OR THE RUIN OF ELIAS HOWER

BY JANE HADLEY.

Lebanon, Kentucky
December 25, 1861

Elias Hower was losing. Again.

Lucy Sterling, one of the three proprietesses of the Sterling Hotel, dealt another hand. The game was poker on Christmas evening, and Elias was too despondent to be responsible with his ante.

"My goodness, what a sour face, Corporal," Miss Lucy said in her lilting Southern accent. Last week, Elias had found it irrepressibly charming. Now, it sounded affected and cloying, a sticky pecan pie that soured the stomach.

"Not corporal anymore," Sam Corbett cackled, tossing chips to the center of the table. "He got demoted after we left here last week. It's Private Hower now."

Miss Lucy raised a burnished red brow at Elias. "Oh? Heavens me. What happened?"

Elias sent a withering look towards Sam, but the damn drunk either didn't notice or enjoyed the provocation.

"He got caught breaking curfew when we were here last week," Sam confided. He was seated next to Miss Lucy, while Elias was across. He didn't make any attempt to disguise the fact that he was looking down her décolletage. This seemed to bother Miss Lucy much less than the risk he might get a look

at her cards, which she concealed in her hand with an annoyed expression on her plump lips.

"Well, that is a mighty unjust punishment for an innocent lark," Miss Lucy frowned. "Surely there are rules amongst your officers to protect against such cruel and unusual punishment. Such a provision is in the Constitution you all protect."

Elias would have complimented her on her flawless Unionism, but he was too morose and too far in the hole to be gracious at present. When Sam had proposed slipping out for a Christmas tippie at the Sterling House after Taps, Elias had figured he didn't have anything left to lose. He had no money, no rank, no reputation. If he were caught breaking curfew again, what was a few guard-duties now that he'd lost everything else he'd worked so hard for? How he'd managed to get dealt into this poker game was beyond him. He was a fool when it came to Miss Lucy. All the red-haired vixen had to do to turn his pockets out was beckon him with that smile, and she had him wrapped around her little finger.

Elias gave a sigh, resigning both his cards and his longing in one long breath. "I fold."

Sam threw his cards down with triumph to show a pair of Kings and a pair of nines. Miss Lucy regarded Elias with a long

look before laying a lovely flush for the table to see. "House wins again, I'm afraid."

"Damn!" Sam swore good-naturedly. "You've cleaned me out. Looks like I've worn out my welcome."

Miss Lucy tipped her head at him sympathetically, but didn't argue. Sam dropped two quarters on the table to cash out.

"That's alright," Sam said, scooting his chair back and standing with a stretch. "It's late. We should be probably getting back to camp. Eh, Hower?"

Elias stayed in his chair and nodded at the green baize table. "You go on. I'll catch up with you outside."

Sam gave him a suspicious look but blessedly, did not argue. "Sure," he shrugged and headed toward the door.

Elias looked up at the ticking grandfather clock in the entry hall, visible through the large cased opening Sam had just retreated through. It *was* late. He needed to go. It was way past taps.

"I do apologize," Miss Lucy said in a low voice.

Elias' eyes flicked up. "For what?"

"For my part in your trouble last week. I certainly had no intention of seeing anyone stripped of their rank."

"I made the choice to sneak out of camp," Elias forced himself to say, his eyes following her tapered fingers trailing through the poker chips scattered across the baize. "I got caught. It was my own fault." Had he known the only way to her favors was through a discreet and sizeable payment to the doorman, he'd not bothered with the game tables and perhaps spent significantly less time out after hours. But she'd beguiled him. He'd believed her charms were genuine. He'd thought he was special.

"It's just business, ain't it?" Elias excused with a grumble. He gripped the arms of the wooden chair he sat in and cleared his throat. "And, speaking of, I regret to report that I haven't got the means to cash out."

Miss Lucy's cat-like eyes narrowed the slightest bit. She shifted back in her chair, reclining with one arm draped across the back. The pose pulled at the low-cut bodice of her evening gown—God, that should have been his first clue. A wooable woman did not parade around a gambling den with half her décolletage on display if she weren't a damned Cyprian. Elias was such a fool.

"That is quite the predicament," Miss Lucy said slowly. Her eyes glanced around the room, which was considerably sparser than when Elias had arrived. It was truly very late. She pinned him to the back of his chair with her gaze. "I think I may have an alternative for you."

"Oh?" Elias was pinned, but he wasn't stupid enough to let his guard down.

"Mmm." Miss Lucy used her fingertips to gather up her chips with the mindlessness of practice. "I'm not sure you'll be up for it, though."

A week ago, the soft, sultry tone of her voice would have excited him such that he would have agreed to anything. But Elias was cynical in his fall from grace. "Tell me what it is and I'll be the judge of that."

Miss Lucy drew in a hissing breath. "Trouble is, if I explain, you won't be able to do it anymore." She shook her head. "Suffice to say, when a man with a heart of gold is down on his luck, the Sterlings have ways to balance the books. It is Christmas, after all."

Elias furrowed his brow. "You mean, work off my debt?"

Miss Lucy's eyebrows flashed, and she gave a little thoughtful frown. "One could say that. Yes, just so." She rose from her chair and adjusted her voluminous skirts. Elias immediately got to his feet as well, lest he be so rude as to remain seated when a lady was standing. Slipping a poker chip from the stack she held in her hands, she reached across the table and handed it to Elias. He accepted it, the wood soft from frequent play, the red paint worn away at the edges.

"What is this?"

"Take that upstairs," Miss Lucy directed. "Knock on the first door to your left. My sister, Miss Laura, will be there. Give this to her, and she shall direct you with further instructions."

Elias blinked in confusion for a moment at Miss Lucy, then down at the chip. A week ago, he'd been ravenous for a way upstairs, especially if the fire-haired Miss Lucy were accompanying him. That did not seem like what was happening now, however. No Cyprian allowed a man to pay off his debts by indulging in the wares for free. That was nonsense. Surely a more menial task awaited him upstairs. Some heavy lifting or physical labor. He hoped it wouldn't take too long. It was so late already, and for as much as he didn't have much left to lose, he didn't want the grief that would come with being caught after curfew again.

"Very well," Elias said. Looking from the chip in his hand to the staircase in the entry, he began to make his way towards the cased opening.

"If Roberts gives you any trouble," Miss Lucy called after him, "just show him the chip."

Elias turned and nodded. Miss Lucy's mouth curled up in a sly way, rendering her face even more cat-like. Strange how he'd never managed to elicit such a response from her before.

Had he known all it took was to unman himself in debt, perhaps he'd have tried it earlier.

Roberts, the doorman, gave him no trouble as he gingerly mounted the staircase, half-certain the large doorman would toss him back. He must have seen the red poker chip in his hand. Elias' heart was beating a little fast. There were only three proprietesses at Sterling House, plus Roberts and a barmaid. Admittedly, he hadn't seen the other Sterling sisters in a while. The eldest, Miss Sterling, was clearly the mistress of the house, with a tight chignon and a hard mouth, because she conducted the press of patrons out at closing time each night with ruthless efficiency. The red-haired Miss Lucy was the middle, he supposed, because the blonde one, with the wide eyes and the bouncing pin-curls at her temples, exhibited the innocence of a heroine in a serial novel and was very frequently absent from the gambling den. He wasn't so thick-headed to believe these women were actually sisters; they looked nothing alike. Now that he knew they were Cyprians come up-river from Nashville, he was certain it was all an act for propriety. For what self-respecting small town in rural Kentucky would abide three single women owning a hotel and plying the oldest trade right under the parson's nose? No, a thinly-veiled cover was needed to maintain a veneer of respectability.

As he reached the top of the stairs, and his eyes alighted on the first door to the left, he felt anticipation seize his throat. Miss Laura was a lovely, sweet, blue-eyed confection, and he'd only seen her in the public rooms of Sterling House a couple of times. He could only conclude she must be quite popular. Given the late hour, he was very unsure what he might find on the opposite side of the door.

When he reached the door, he decided to knock first. He heard a rustle inside, a quiet gasp, and then a small voice, calling out, "Who is it?"

Elias hesitated and cleared his throat. "It is I, Elias Hower. Private Elias Hower. Uh, Union soldier." He winced as he threw out that last redundancy like it left a bad taste in his mouth. "I was sent by Miss Lucy to assist you."

There was a pause, then a wavery, "Oh?"

"Yes, uh," Elias looked down at the chip in his hand. "She gave me a red poker chip to give to you?" It sounded absurd, and he felt a fool. "She said you would give me further instructions."

"Oh!" The quavering voice took on a gay musicality. "In that case, please enter!"

Elias' shoulders lowered in relief and he turned the brass knob of the door, pushing it open to reveal a small room with a sturdy dresser upon the first wall. As Elias entered, he took in

the furnishings from left to right. The dresser, then on the far wall a full-length mirror that captured his own bewildered reflection lit by the glow of two gas lamps on the walls. There was a window next to the mirror, and a tousled bed, quilts strewn haphazardly as though there'd been a struggle there. Elias swallowed hard and supposed that was in all likelihood accurate. Thinking of people fornicating there made his loins stir in an unwelcome way. He aimed to maintain his dignity in this duty; he was already shamed enough by his inability to pay his debt.

"Shut the door," the soft voice said. Elias did so and behind it, he found another settee arranged between the bed and the wall. Perched upon it was Miss Laura Sterling. The door clicked shut, and Elias found he could not move. Just stare.

She wore a tiered evening gown, the wide skirts a layered confection of frothy pink silk. Her bodice emphasized her wasp waist and the bertha was an explosion of bows and ribbons and lace. It was the bertha that stunned him, however, because for all its sweet decoration, it was ... it was too low. It made no sense—ladies' evening gowns did not allow for such haphazard accidents, not when the popular dances of the day required so much hopping—but Miss Laura's dress was in *disarray*. Her bertha cut low, below her bust, and her sweet, round breasts spilled over top of it, pink-tipped and heaving in full view, impossibly smooth skin catching the lamp light.

"Private Hower," Miss Laura said with a gracious smile on her lips. Lips pink as the rosy buds that peaked over her bertha. Dear God. "How good of you to come visit me. Here, come, sit and bring me the token from my sister."

Elias was staring. It was indecent of him. He should tell her that her clothing was akimbo. He should *stop staring*.

"Private Hower? Is anything the matter?"

"Uh," Elias said. He delivered a prayer of gratitude to whomever designed the Union uniform, because it was ill-fitting enough to hide his plumping interest from view. "My apologies, Miss."

"Just Laura is fine," Miss Laura said sweetly and patted the scant space left on the settee that was not covered by her voluminous skirts. "I'm so glad you've come to keep me company. It's been such a long night of revelry, and I must admit, I'm quite in danger of becoming fatigued."

Sense had abandoned him, because Elias' feet were obeying her, even if he couldn't manage any words. He tried his damndest to keep his eyes on her face, all round sweetness, smiles, and geniality. Not on her décolletage. Which was completely on display. God, he should tell her. She wouldn't

want to be exposed so. But every time he opened his mouth to say something, nothing but incoherent sounds came out.

"My goodness, Private Hower, are you quite alright?" Miss Laura asked as he neared, reaching out and grasping his hand, guiding him to be seated by her side. "I thought I was fatigued, but you look positively wrung out."

"I, uh," Elias managed. Her clear, blue eyes regarded him with utter sincerity, even as her breasts heaved together between her arms. The pink ribbon of the bertha matched her flushed nipples perfectly. He forced his gaze resolutely on her face. "I suppose I am a bit fatigued as well."

"It's been a long night," Miss Laura agreed, keeping her hold on his hand. "It is Christmas, after all, and we must celebrate the birth of our lord and saviour."

Elias' mouth was so dry he thought he might choke. Sweet and pious. And decadent beyond description. "Amen."

"I admit, I get plaintive this time of year," Miss Laura confessed. "It's been three years since my sisters and I came here and I so dearly miss our gay Christmases when our family was all still together. My mother would bake a Christmas feast and my father would bring home oranges for us all. Our modest little home would smell of cinnamon and nutmeg and chestnuts—all the wonderful scents of the holiday. Oh, how I long for those days when things were simpler, before the war tore us all apart."

Elias blinked at her. All his blood had rushed to his lap, and he was operating on the shadow of propriety alone. "I'm terribly sorry."

"I'm sure you feel the pain of separation with your family as well," Miss Laura said. Her sweet, flushed buds had furled up, pointing towards him accusingly.

Elias shrugged helplessly. "I—It is wartime. We all carry its, uh, burdens."

Miss Laura leaned toward him, all earnestness. Elias flinched back, lest her chest brush against his. "I am so grateful for your service, sir. It has been so awful here in Kentucky, at the mercy of the Union and Confederate factions. My sisters and I fled the deep south for a better life, but alas, we did not go far enough North."

"It's hard." It was. And Miss Laura's increasing proximity was making it harder.

"I know you face so many burdens, being a soldier," Miss Laura looked down so her eyelashes dusted her cheeks. There, she had to see it now. Surely any moment now she would startle and clasp her hands over her exposed breasts. And yet, she didn't. It dawned on Elias, quite stupidly, that she must be entirely aware of her condition and singularly unconcerned

about it. "But I have my own burdens to bear here in this awful house."

"Awful?" Elias knew he should hand over the chip now, inquire as to his duties. He was here to pay off a debt after all. But Miss Laura was so mournful, so earnest in her woe, he felt it would be rude to interrupt.

"It's my sister, Elizabeth," she sighed. "She is so strict. She works me day and night, cleaning and laundering and scullery work. All day and night, she rides me. I have no succor. I am scarcely even allowed to enjoy the parties she throws at the hotel, she works me so hard. Yet, tonight, I was able to join the revelry. I had my evening gown and everything." She spread her arms to display her gown and glanced up at him, coyly. "You do like it, don't you, Private Hower?"

Elias' mouth hung open. "Uh, yes, of course. It's beautiful." It was beautiful. And the most audaciously obscene thing he'd ever seen. She knew. She knew what she was doing to him. She was enjoying it. But this game could not be what Miss Lucy sent him here for. Could it?

"Elizabeth forbade me to wear it. So I've come here to sulk, to dance on my own. Because she won't even let me into the company of our most gentlemanly Union soldiers, our brave boys in blue." She clutched both his hands now. If she brought them against her chest in her earnestness, surely that would mean he had permission to touch? Right? "But you'll dance with me, won't you, Private Hower?"

Elias blinked. He'd be a fool to pass up this opportunity, debt be damned. "Of course."

Miss Laura stared at him expectantly. Elias spent all of his energy maintaining that eye contact and not looking down at the exquisite expanse swelling for his touch. He'd bragged to the boys of his exploits, but he was all bluster. The girl he'd claimed to have known from Faribault was a character of his own invention, crafted from several choice yellow novels. He figured he'd read enough to know what he was talking about, but the fact was, he'd never seen a girl in any state of undress before. Now Miss Laura was here, staring at him, her tits displayed for his singular observation, and he had to improvise.

And he was clearly doing something wrong.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me? A lady never asks a gentleman to dance."

Elias snapped to attention. "Of course. My apologies. Miss Laura, would you do me the honor of this dance?"

He stood and held out his hand. Miss Laura set her porcelain doll hand in his palm and stood, smoothing her skirt

with her other hand in an act of modesty utterly at odds with her brazen exposure.

Elias paused and, emboldened, leaned down conspiratorially. "What dance do you wish to do?"

Miss Laura looked up at him coyly, her smile curling with just enough impishness for him to know this had to be a game she liked to play. "A waltz, please."

Elias hesitated. He didn't think she'd be able to feel how aroused he was on account of her crinoline, but it was a close dance and he couldn't be sure. He swallowed hard. "Very well."

He pulled her close, looked down to watch as her nipples brushed against the rough wool of his uniform, setting her shivering. She was not immune to the tender eroticism of the moment either. Whatever game this was, she was its mistress and she played to win. Question was, why invite a penniless soldier to play? Elias pressed his hand to the small of her back and banished that thought. He'd not question his good fortune. She gave a tiny whisper of a gasp and looked up at him, lips parted, eyes slightly glazed.

"1, 2, 3," she counted off, her soprano reedy as he stepped between her legs to begin the dance. He swept her in tight circles around the small room. Her crinoline brushed up against the settee, the bed post, his legs. He watched them in the mirror as they spun, a perfect picture of dignity and grace, except for the plump, round breasts pressed against his chest. He felt his confidence grow with each step, the whirling headiness of the dance fortifying him.

"Miss Laura, you're so beautiful," he murmured, ducking his head so his lips just ghosted her ear. Her breath caught, and she turned to look up at him, eyes entreating.

"No one has ever said that to me before," she whispered. If he didn't know better, if he didn't know Sterling House was a brothel, he would have believed her. Perhaps he did believe her in spite of that knowledge. Maybe she was the forlorn abused sister of an evil madam who set her to back-breaking work while she plotted auctioning off her virginity to the highest bidder. Elias had read that story more than once. He wanted to believe her. And what harm would it do to play along? This game Miss Laura had concocted was bold and audacious and utterly irresistible.

"Your hair is so lustrous," Elias said and he leaned in to nuzzle his cheek against it. "Your eyes are like two blue pools I could dive into."

"Yes," she murmured. Her chin was tipped into his neck, and he could feel her breath in his ear. It was his turn to shudder.

"Y-your lips are like the petals of a rose," he continued, trying to remember how things like this went in his favorite novels. How the doting lover saves the captive innocent from the evil, licentious villains who hold them against their will. "Your skin is so soft, like velvet."

"Oh," she whimpered. Her hand on his bicep squeezed, and her touch emboldened him to sweep his hand up her back and caress her bare shoulder. "*Oh*."

Her lips shuddered against his jaw, and he lost the steps. They shuffled a bit, then stilled. He drew back as he caressed both her shoulders with his palms. "And your décolletage ... I ... I haven't ever seen a prettier display in all my life."

"Oh?" She smiled at him so sweetly, so purely, he could almost believe she was a naive, sheltered young woman who really did not understand the purpose of a bertha for an evening gown. "Private Hower, are you sure this is ... decorous?"

Elias froze for a moment as his thumbs dipped in to the hollow between her collar bones. He stared at her. She held his gaze and for a split second, her eyebrows lifted expectantly. "I—of course. Of course it is. You are the sweetest, purest, dearest girl I've ever met." She smiled again, her breasts lifting with a breathless sigh. It was incredible to watch. "You've been such a perfect hostess," he breathed.

"Private Hower, you must forgive me if I speak out of turn, for I do not know much of social graces. But I must ask you to please kiss me."

Yes. He was panting for it now. "Yes, of course. Anything you desire."

He leaned down and pressed his lips gently to her bloom of a mouth. Her sweet breath filled his senses as her lips parted for him. He kissed her with fervor then, untethered, a hand round the back of her neck. Her tongue licked into his mouth. He thought distantly that he was nothing more than a toy in the hands of an expert and gave himself over to sensation.

"Oh, sir," she moaned against his mouth. His cock jumped to hear her. "I should stop, but your kisses are so sweet."

"Stop?" He kissed her ardently. "Why?"

"My sister will be so angry," she gasped, but she didn't stop kissing him. Her lips chased over his cheek and temple, to his forehead so that his chin ducked down to her neck, to her clavicle, to her sweet, straining breasts. "She has forbidden me to men, but I fear I have fallen in love with your kindness, your gentleness. So few men would afford such patience with my social ineptitude."

His hands were at her waist as his lips tasted the soft, creamy hills of her breasts. "You are the picture of propriety," he gasped as his hands moved up to meet his mouth, fingers catching on the bric-a-brac of her berth.

"Oh, your mouth is so wicked," she cried, and she shuddered so hard, she crumpled down onto the settee and dragged him down with her. Next thing Elias knew, Miss Laura was draped on the settee, and he was on his knees before her, her eager nipples tight and red, begging for him.

"Heaven help me, but ... I want more," she whimpered.

He was drunk on lust, but he knew permission when he heard it. She wasn't an actual innocent. This was a game, one he was damned lucky to have stumbled into. Elias lunged forward and pressed his lips to those tight, hard buds, each in turn. His palms pushed up, cupping her breasts, and he leaned forward, tasting one nipple with his tongue. Everything about her was sweet and soft, except the firm nub in his mouth, which he sucked and lathed quite desperately. He hardly knew what he was about, but he hoped his enthusiasm would compensate for any lack of skill. The way she moaned and writhed beneath him made him feel he was making a good show of things.

"Private Hower, please!" she cried, her fingers gripping his hair hard at the back of his head, pulling his nose into her breast. "I shouldn't allow you this. My sister would be furious. Dear God, please don't stop."

Elias stopped. He relinquished the nipple from his mouth and pulled back to admire it, glistening wet and crimson in the lamplight. He looked up at Miss Laura and grinned. Her blue eyes were glazed, and her lips panted. He'd done so well.

"My God, look at you," he said, looking down at what he'd made of her sweet pink rosebud. He gave it another flick with his tongue.

"Yes," she breathed. "More. Do it to the other one."

Elias Hower was nothing if not obliging. He sucked the other eager nub into his mouth with gusto and suckled on it until it was as red and everted as the first. Then, after admiring his handiwork, he pinched both with each hand at once and leaned up to capture Miss Laura's mouth as she cried out in surprise. He pressed his tongue into her mouth, pressed his body over hers as he continued to pinch and roll, and just as he was wondering whether she might let him hitch up her skirt and taste another part of her, the door banged open.

"Laura, what is all that racket?"

Elias leapt back, his mouth agape, and he looked over his shoulder to see Miss Sterling herself, tightly buttoned up to the neck, dark hair severely pulled back from her face. Her

steely eyes trained on him immediately as she slammed the door shut behind her. "What on God's green earth is going on here? Laura, who is this man? Do my eyes deceive me, or is he taking advantage of you?"

"Elizabeth, no!" Laura cried out. She pushed herself up off the settee and stood, her crinoline setting Elias off balance so that he lost his footing and cowered awkwardly on the floor. "Please, stop! It isn't what you think!"

"It's not what I think, is it?" Miss Sterling raged, her fists fitting to her hips. "I beg of you, please enlighten me, if this is not debauchery of the highest order—"

"—No! Private Hower has done nothing wrong!" Laura insisted. "He's been a perfect gentleman. Lucy sent him to check on me, because she knows I was so despondent to miss the revelries tonight."

"Lucy," Miss Sterling spat. "Between you and her, this whole household will float away on romantic notions. Really. He was just checking on you? With your titties in his mouth?"

Laura's breath seemed to knock out of her. Elias knew the feeling. She looked down at her shining breasts, wet from his attentions, then back up at her sister. Who wasn't her sister, Elias reminded himself. This was all a game. Wasn't it?

"And you, you reprobate," Miss Sterling turned to Elias. "Stand up. Account for yourself."

Elias obeyed, scrambling to his feet. Game or not, Miss Sterling certainly wasn't playful. "I apologize, madam. I certainly didn't mean any harm—"

"Don't play games with me, you libertine."

"I'm sorry, I thought—I was sent up here with a red chip, from Miss Lucy. She said there were ways a man might pay his debts—"

"Red chip? Show me."

Elias' hands scrabbled over his coat. "Oh, I just had it. I—I'm sorry, I must have—"

"Ah!" Laura cried in triumph. "Here it is!"

She pulled the wood coin from between the settee cushions and handed it eagerly to Miss Sterling, who regarded it for a long moment.

"This is just a poker chip. What kind of stunt do you think you're pulling here?"

Miss Sterling tossed the poker chip to the floor and turned on Elias. He took a step back and collided with the bed post. She advanced on him anyway, leering in close. She was a petite woman, a head shorter than him, but her eyes were dark and menacing, and he knew her word was backed up with the fists of Roberts downstairs. Her sharp eyes surveyed his uniform,



looking him up and down. Then her hand reached out and grabbed his throbbingly hard cock.

Elias couldn't help it. No one had ever touched him there before. He gasped and his hips surged towards her hand.

"Look at me," Miss Sterling hissed. "I said look at me, you rogue!"

Elias opened his eyes and obeyed. He felt like he was choking on his own breath.

"If you wish to stop, say so now," Miss Sterling whispered. "If you wish to continue, nod." The heel of her hand rubbed up the length of his cock, and Elias shuddered.

Dear God. It was a game. What kind of people played games like these? On Christmas, of all days? Miss Lucy might as well have wrapped Elias up with a big bow and put him under the Christmas tree. He scoffed at the thought, but then maybe it wasn't so ridiculous. Perhaps this was the kind of gift one Cyprian gave to another for the holiday. His mind was scattered and messy, and Miss Sterling's hand on his cock, rubbing slowly, was not helping. He was supposed to be giving her an answer. So it was a game. But was it a game he wanted to play?

He glanced up over Miss Sterling's shoulder and saw Laura. She watched them with her rosebud mouth parted, her wide eyes eager. When he looked at her, she smiled and nodded entreatingly. *Please*, she seemed to say, *Say yes*. Oh, he wanted to. If this was anything like the novels he read, there was nothing waiting for him but pleasure. Except, it wasn't a novel. It was real life and anything could happen. He wasn't particularly sure he was suited to surrender to a game he didn't know the rules to.

Oh, who was he kidding?

Elias nodded.

Laura's eyes lit up.

"Good boy," Miss Sterling said, still stern. In a lower voice, she added, "'No' and 'stop' are part of the game. If you say 'halt,' the game will pause." Then she squeezed him once more, tight enough to make him gasp, before she released him. In a clear voice, she said furiously, "The two of you will account for what you've done!"

"No, Elizabeth, please," Laura pleaded, leaping to her side in a rustle of silk and pulling at her shoulder. "Please, don't punish Private Hower. He hasn't done anything I didn't ask him to. Please, if you are going to punish anyone, punish me."

Elias watched as Miss Sterling slowly turned her head to look at the hand Laura had placed on her shoulder. Her lip curled in distaste, and she turned further to face the younger girl. Laura's lip trembled as she stood, exposed, frozen under

Miss Sterling's sharp gaze. Elias felt the strangest sense of foreboding, like the calm before a storm.

"Very well," Miss Sterling said. She turned away from Elias and stalked to Laura, using her body's proximity to intimidating effect. She looked Laura up and down as she had done to Elias, but as she surveyed Laura's shocking décolletage, she lifted a hand and casually flicked a nipple. Laura gasped but did not move. "Tell me, Laura, how deep has your fit of lust taken you this time?"

"We did nothing but kiss a little, Elizabeth, I swear—"

"—Shut up." Elizabeth shoved Laura so she bounced down onto the settee with a gasp and a jiggle. "Go on. If you're so innocent, show me."

Laura looked up at Miss Sterling, her shallow breath heaving her red-tipped breasts, and slowly, she pulled up the tiers of her skirt, the rungs of her crinoline, to expose her knees.

Elias reached behind him to grip the bedpost. Laura spread her legs as she bunched the skirt at her waist. Her stockings had slipped below her knees, and the expanse of her milky thighs made Elias' mouth water. She hadn't any drawers on. Miss Sterling narrowed her eyes, then knelt, her own voluminous skirt puffing around her. She placed her hands on Laura's knees and pushed them wider, so wide he thought he saw Laura wince.

"You're innocent, you say?" Miss Sterling confirmed.

Laura nodded. "I am. You can see. I'm untouched."

"Hm," Miss Sterling leaned in. "Perhaps, but look at you." She plunged her fingertips between Laura's legs, and Elias surprised himself by the noise he made as his cock throbbed so hard it hurt. Laura gasped too, and her eyes fluttered closed as her back arched, tits reaching for Miss Sterling.

Miss Sterling withdrew her fingers and pushed them into Laura's face. "Look at you! What is this?"

Laura whimpered.

"Answer me, girl, what is this?"

"I—I can explain!"

"Like hell you can. You're wet, Laura. If you're so innocent, if it was only kisses, how did you get so wet?"

Laura shuddered and looked desperately up at Elias.

"It was me," Elias blurted. He had no idea why he said it.

Miss Sterling's head snapped round to look at him. She was terrifying, her indignant rage channeling a thousand church sermons into one ruthless yoke of shame pointing at Elias' helpless arousal. "Explain."

"It was me," he repeated, and he wasn't sure what was more mortifying—the shame of his confession or the way it bloomed pleasure in his belly like a hand on his cock. "I kissed her. I ... I must have roused her with my kisses."

"Did you," Miss Sterling said flatly. She looked back at Laura. "I thought you said he didn't touch you there."

Laura and Elias both protested at once.

"I didn't!"

"He didn't!"

Laura's fingers trembled at her chin, elbows squeezing those incredible breasts together. Miss Sterling did not appear to be immune to the distraction either, though her glances were much more controlled than Elias' had been. "He kissed me, it's true, but not there. He only kissed my mouth and my neck and ..."

"And?"

"And my breast..."

"Your breast, hm? What, here?" Miss Sterling jabbed her two glistening fingers into Laura's sternum.

"No, um—"

"Here?" She slapped the curve of Laura's breast this time, her fingers smacking wetly, loud enough to hurt. Elias shuddered.

Laura gasped and whimpered, her back arching. "No, it was—"

"Here?" Miss Sterling lifted both hands this time and gave Laura's nipples a nasty tweak. Elias wondered, through a haze of red lust, whether he was in a little too deep for a first-timer. He'd thought this was all in good fun. He didn't want Laura, or anyone, to get hurt. Regardless, the word 'halt' sat dormant and unspoken at the back of his tongue.

"Ah! Yes, yes!" Laura babbled, arching farther into Miss Sterling's brutal touch.

"God, you're such a fucking wag-tail," Miss Sterling sneered. "What the hell am I to do with you?"

"Please, please," Laura pleaded, her eyes glazed, and her sweet mouth gasping. Miss Sterling released her as abruptly as she'd seized her, and watched for a moment as those snowy twin globes heaved. Laura's chest was flushed pink, along with her cheeks, and Elias noticed her hands gripping her thighs as though in restraint. "Please, Elizabeth. I'll do anything."

"I know you will," Miss Sterling said, rising to her feet. "That's the problem. Stand up."

"What?" Laura looked up at Miss Sterling with wide eyes.

"Stand. Up."

Laura dropped her skirt and got to her feet before Miss Sterling. They were of the same height, but their features were

like night and day. Laura was sloping and generous, luscious despite her short stature. Miss Sterling was hard, angled and severe, flat-chested. Elias thought they might have forgotten about him as they looked at each other heatedly.

"Go to the end of the bed," Miss Sterling directed. Laura looked down obsequiously and nodded, then walked around Elias to stand at the end of the bed. She looked up at him as she passed, and he could have sworn she winked. It settled his nerves, at least a little bit. If Laura enjoyed this harsh treatment, Elias didn't have to feel guilty for not intervening on her behalf. Though that sounded horrible. Surely no girl would want a man to stand idly by and watch her be disciplined. Would she? Miss Sterling followed Laura but did not pay Elias any mind, not even a second glance. "Take off your skirts, girl, and bend over."

Laura was standing right next to Elias now, and he watched her gasp as she heard the directive. She looked up at him and her hands trembled as she released the fastenings of the tiers and petticoats and crinoline. They fell in a frothy puff to the floor. Miss Sterling kicked them unceremoniously out of the way. Laura was left in her obscene ballgown bodice with only her chemise hiding her naked legs.

"Go on, pull it up."

Laura's tapered fingers gathered the lace-trimmed hem of her chemise and rucked it up to the small of her back. Her handsome thighs were in full view now, and Elias couldn't help but lean forward to get a better look at the curve of her smooth, pert buttocks as she bent at the waist and braced her elbows on the disheveled mattress.

Miss Sterling regarded the display with detached interest, like a botanist making a study of a blooming flower. She swept a hand over one buttock, gentle, then squeezed hard, maybe just to hear Laura gasp.

"What... What are you going to do?" Laura asked in a shaky whisper.

"I think you know." With that, Miss Sterling pulled her hand away and delivered a smack that cracked around the room, reverberating against all four walls. Laura rocked forward with the blow, gasping. Miss Sterling drew back and did it again, striking four or five times on the same buttock until Laura let out a keen. Elias' knuckles strained around his grip on the bedpost.

"There you are," Miss Sterling purred. "Now I have you, you little slut." She hit her again, this time on the opposite side. Laura tipped her head back, mouth gaping as she started rocking into the strikes. He should put a stop to this. He had the word that would stop this. And yet, he couldn't imagine

why Laura wouldn't have it either. She could stop this with a word as well. And she didn't. Laura seemed to enjoy this, and Elias wondered at how it left her gasping and moaning instead of scrambling to get away. It shamed Elias that he found the display mesmerizing. Her goddamned bodice set her bust off to mind-numbing effect. As her back arched, her tits pressed forward, bouncing as she rocked, sometimes brushing against the blankets when she began to sag between her elbows, making her gasp at the contact after her nipples had been so abused. Elias suspected she might be doing it on purpose the way she moved.

Miss Sterling's assault abated, and Elias remembered to breathe in what felt like the first time in five minutes. She stepped back and tilted her head, like a sculptor evaluating her progress. Elias leaned forward, taking in the red marks mottling Laura's once milky pale skin.

"Stop there, rogue," Miss Sterling snapped. Elias straightened against the bedpost once again, like he could somehow melt into it and become a part of the bed himself. "Look at you, all flushed. Did you enjoy seeing her punished so?"

"I, uh, can't say I did," Elias lied.

"Oh really?" Miss Sterling gave him her assessing glare again. "Then why is your cock making a tent of your trousers?"

Elias looked down and was unsurprised to see that even in spite of his baggy uniform, his erection was unmistakable. He glanced at Laura, then back to Miss Sterling. He couldn't very well say *Why yes, I have a raging, cunt-hungry horn. What of it?* If he was so provocative, he'd give Miss Sterling no choice but to punish him. If he denied it, though. If he denied it, he'd hand her the power to teach him a lesson. So, with considerable effort, he lied. Strategically. "It isn't."

Laura grinned.

Miss Sterling's eyes lit up in the gaslight, like shining black obsidian. In that moment, she was no longer stark and austere. She was beautiful. Beautiful and deadly.

"Prove it."

Elias tried not to smile as he clumsily worked free the buttons of his standard-issue trousers. It took considerable effort; his fingers were trembling so. Unlike Laura, he also had drawers beneath to contend with. Once all the necessary buttons were released, Elias took a deep breath and shoved his layers to his knees. His cock sprang free, jutting out from under his sack coat, this obscene exposure that would not have happened had he not been just as hard as he was accused. Laura whimpered. He was so hard the head of his cock had

emerged from his foreskin, dark and ruddy and shining wet. Miss Sterling licked her lips, the sharp angles of her mouth glistening, and Elias never felt so goddamned proud in his life. He'd rolled the dice. He'd gambled, and it appeared he'd won the hand.

"Well," Miss Sterling said, looking up at him. "What do you call that?"

Elias looked down at himself then up at her, flapping his mouth like he was surprised to find himself so aroused. "I, uh..."

"Oh, Elizabeth," Laura whined, wriggling. "I want to taste it. Can I? Please?"

"No, you harlot," Miss Sterling said as Elias' ears roared, smacking Laura hard again. She looked back up at Elias. "You put your country to shame, abusing her uniform with your rude little prick. Take the rest of it off."

"Little?" Laura scoffed.

"Shut up." Miss Sterling swatted her again. Laura sighed like it was a caress. "Well, Soldier?"

Elias took a deep breath and made quick work of the rest of his uniform. As he shrugged off his sack coat, Miss Sterling sneered. "Do your country justice, man, and fold that as befits your oath."

Elias obeyed blindly. He was shaming his uniform, his oath, his own damned dignity. But he was so lust-crazed, he could only exalt in the fact that his shame was being witnessed by these two experienced women, and that they found his offering tempting. He stripped to his shirt, then pulled that over his head too, folding it neatly with the rest of his uniform on the arm of the settee. He stepped out of his trousers just fine, now entirely exposed except for his boots and stockings. He must have looked absurd.

"Oh," Laura purred.

"Don't move," Miss Sterling said to her, then turned to Elias. "So, you want to fuck, huh, Private?"

Elias shivered. This felt like a trick question. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, what was that? I asked you a question. I said, do you want to fuck?"

"Yes," he said more resolutely this time. The word grated out of him, his throat was so tight. He could feel his pulse clearly in his cock, in his neck, everywhere. He didn't even know Miss Sterling, but he was desperate for her attention. Whether she approved of him or not, he wanted her eyes on him. Cool air pricked his exposed skin as she drew out a deadly silence, and he tremored with fear that, after his successful play to undress, he'd played a losing card by telling the truth now.

"My God, this country is going to the dogs, if this is the level of licentiousness its finest boys in blue have descended to." Miss Sterling's eyes wended over his bare skin, flaying him with their unflinching greed. He was ashamed to be observed thus. Ashamed and unspeakably aroused. "Fine. You think you want to fuck, do you? You want to act like a beast, I'll treat you like one."

She shoved his chest, and Elias tumbled back onto the settee. Miss Sterling advanced on him, and he was sure she was going to strike him across the cheek. He was so mad with desire he wasn't sure he'd even mind if she did, but instead she seized his hair and yanked his head back, exposing his neck.

"What do you think of your white knight, now, Laura?" Miss Sterling hissed. "Is he as enticing now that he's under my thumb?"

Laura squirmed in her position over the bed, but she didn't move. "What are you going to do to him?" she whispered. Her breath shook, with fear or with pleasure, Elias couldn't say.

Miss Sterling's dark eyes studied him with a furious clinical precision, scraping her fingernails down his neck and over his throat. Elias felt fear seize him. He swallowed, his Adam's apple lurching under her touch. He was alone with these strange women, playing a game he didn't know the rules to. The bottom of the pool was limitless, and his only weapon was a word he desperately didn't want to say. A man of greater experience would be more assertive in his desires, but Elias was all bluster and he knew it. He had no choice but to obey, so eager to please and so terrified of failing. He needed Miss Sterling to tell him what to do.

Alas for him, she was no sympathetic instructor. His collar of fear was replaced by her hand, pressed around his throat tight enough to feel, but not so tight as to restrict his breathing. A trio of terrified sounds escaped against his will, and he was harder than he could ever remember being.

"This isn't a white knight at all," Miss Sterling whispered, her eyes intent upon him. He was drowning in them. "He's a simpering sycophant. An obedient little dog. He won't save you from me, Laura. He's already mine."

Miss Sterling ran her thumb along the muscle that corded his neck as her other hand released his hair. He was well-trapped by her anyway. She lifted her skirts up, and she climbed to her knees above him, looking down, testing the pressure of her hand on his throat. Elias gasped. She wouldn't. Would she? Pleasure inoculated his fear, made it sing through his veins as he trembled. Her thigh, swathed in cotton, nudged

against the swollen head of his cock and for a horrible moment, he thought he'd unman himself.

"You're wound tighter than a clock, Private Hower. Fine. You wanna fuck? Let's fuck."

Her skirts shielded her activities from view, but he could feel her hand beneath them, seizing his shaft and pressing the head into impossibly slick, enveloping heat. Dear God, she'd guided him through the slit in her drawers. Her hips bore down upon him now, and there was a brief measure of resistance before his prick breached her and slid inside.

Elias made a strangled noise, made more strangled by her hand about his throat. It took all his effort to pull himself from the brink. He may not have ever done this with a woman before, but he had an illustrious history of holding himself back. Dozens of yellow novels, read again and again until the spines cracked, but he'd never touched himself, never wasted himself over them. He didn't want to go blind or mad. He was a master of his own body, well-practiced in the art of mind over matter. So when Miss Sterling enveloped him in the slick channel of her body, he *managed* himself.

"Look how hard he's working, Laura," Miss Sterling sneered. "He's so close."

"What's he feel like?" Laura whimpered. She sounded so despondent.

"Hard as a rod," Miss Sterling replied. "It's like I'm fucking the handle of your hairbrush."

"Does it hurt?" Laura asked, all wide eyes and innocence. "He looked so big."

"No, darling," Miss Sterling said, the edge of her voice softened. Her unexpected affection made Elias' chest constrict with longing. Oh, how he wanted to earn that. She moved now, pumping up and down with her thighs along his length. "He's stretching me, but he was leaking. He made me wet and eased the way."

That was a half-lie. She'd already been slick and ready. Elias tried not to think too hard about it, spending all his concentration observing the sensation at a measured distance. He wanted nothing more than to come; he wanted nothing more than for this to last forever.

"Please, Elizabeth, let me kiss him?"

Elias' eyes opened. He hadn't realized he'd closed them. He looked at Laura and then at Miss Sterling.

"Shall I let her?" Miss Sterling eyed him, her breath short and sharp now as she carried on above him. Her pace was measured, precise, relentless. Not slow, but certainly not fast. She raised herself high on each stroke, so that only the tip of him pricked her, then dropped herself deep, so he was buried

in her and her bottom pressed against his ballocks. God, it was ecstasy.

"Please," Elias managed hoarsely. He was only going to last maybe a minute more. He wanted everything he could wring out of this.

"Very well, Laura," Miss Sterling growled. "Take your favor."

Laura eagerly scrambled up the bed and leaned over the side where the settee butted up against the mattress. Her soft hand caressed Elias' cheek, even as Miss Sterling's palm pressed just so against his throat. He was panting with the effort of holding himself together, and his eyes drank her in as Laura leaned over him and delivered a chaste press of her cherub lips to his.

Miss Sterling changed something. Her pace, her angle, something. Perhaps it was a roll of her hips, but all of a sudden, she was squeezing him tighter, working him at a sharper pace.

"Tell me when you're close," she hissed as she seized one of his hands and pressed it under her skirts, to the place where her skin met his. He could feel the slick, smooth glide of his cock under his thumb, feel the soft edge of her stretched around him. He moaned deep into Laura's mouth. The impish girl took advantage and pressed her tongue inside, surging it against his own in a way that, together with Miss Sterling's hand collared at his neck, made him feel like he was choking.

"That's it," Miss Sterling huffed. "Come for me, you desperate whore."

Elias' fist clutched at the arm of the settee as he slipped wildly over his edge. "Now!" he choked out as a hoarse cry seized in his throat and pushed into Laura's mouth. He felt Miss Sterling pull off of him as he spent, hovering above him as he was wracked with wave after wave of shuddering pleasure. Laura kissed him through it, caressing his cheek as his neck strained against Miss Sterling's hand. And then it was over.

Elias had lied. He had never indulged himself while reading yellow novels, but he had on rare occasion given in to his urges, let his seed waste upon his baser imaginings. Several times, it had been unintentional, something surreptitious that had happened between sleeping and waking. Never, ever in his memory had it felt like this. He was deeply, deeply in over his head.

He panted, and Laura scattered kisses over his sweaty brow as Miss Sterling released her grip on his neck.

"Now what have you done?"

Elias opened his eyes to see Miss Sterling standing above him with her skirts gathered up in one hand. Her other hand spread her split-crotch drawers and displayed her mons, the whorl of dark hair laced with glistening white spend. It was a topography of clean white cotton surrounding an almost disembodied display of obscenity, and Elias' breath caught in his throat to look at it.

"Oh no," Laura intoned. "Elizabeth, you're a mess."

"Indeed," Miss Sterling said, her hard edge back as she glared down at Elias. "And who made me this way?"

Elias took a moment to find his voice. "Me, madam. It was me."

"Then you had better clean up your mess, Private," Miss Sterling sneered.

Elias shook off his disorientation and nodded. Miss Laura sat back as he reached over the arm of the chair to where his neatly folded uniform had fallen.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Elias froze at Miss Sterling's tone and looked up. "Getting my handkerchief. It's in my pocket—"

"No." Miss Sterling grabbed the back of his hair again and pulled him back upright. God, it hurt, but it still sang, the same sweet way a mournful song broke your heart. "You have a perfectly good mouth, boy. Use it."

Elias gaped up at her. He felt the word hovering on his lips. Lap up his own... ? No. *No*. "That ... that's *obscene*," he shuddered.

Miss Sterling did not bend. "A fitting punishment for a rutting beast like you."

This. This was how he was paying off his debt. This was what he got for being irresponsible and selfish and stupid. He glanced down at Miss Sterling's mons, still glistening and waiting for him. Her high cheekbones were flushed, and her dark eyes stared holes through his head as she poised like a wildcat on the prowl, waiting for him to reply. Waiting for him to say the word. Forcing him to choose—her way or no way at all.

He'd already come, perhaps he was done now. He could dress and depart and feel satisfied that his virginity had been so spectacularly relieved of him. Except he wasn't here because he'd paid for the pleasure. He was here to pay a debt. Much had surprised him. Things he'd never thought would arouse him, things he'd never considered but that drove him mad with ecstasy. Perhaps he could trust this hard-edged woman, who knew so much about the dark side of pleasure. Perhaps she knew something he didn't.

"As you wish," he heard himself say. He cast his eyes to the floor, ashamed of his lack of will. Her hand reached out and cupped his cheek. He dared to look up.

Miss Sterling's eyes glinted as her mouth curled up into a smile. She was still breathing harder, still aroused in her horrible, cruel way. Or this aroused her. His obsequience, his shame.

"Good boy."

Her voice was velvety and soft, like her hand at his cheek. Tender and almost affectionate, just for him. Elias stopped thinking. He reached out and grabbed her hips. He used his thumbs to pull the cotton fabric aside, to display her mons again through the open inseam of her drawers. He leaned forward and pressed his open mouth over the hair, let the strange tang of his own spend hit his tongue. It was anticlimactic. He'd expected to taste something disgusting, but it didn't taste of much at all. It was a bit astringent, but neither good nor bad. That fear assuaged, he moved down and applied himself to his task.

What he had not considered was that this punishment afforded him the opportunity to explore Miss Sterling in a way she would never have otherwise allowed. He had never seen more than a *carte de visite* image or two of a woman's sex, and the heat, the scents, the textures he was uncovering rendered him awestruck. Dear God, he could do this for the rest of his days and die a happy man. Miss Sterling spread her legs to accommodate him, setting one booted foot on the settee as he slid down its cushion to his knees below her.

"He likes the taste of you, Eliza," Laura whispered. "Look how he laps at you."

"Shut up," Miss Sterling snapped, her voice a little breathless as Elias dipped his tongue between the two plump lips, where he found her to be hot and swollen and pulsing. He licked down the slit and she spread her legs ever wider, opening the shell of her sex to him. He pulled back an inch or two, just to look. God, she had bloomed, all dusky and pink and flushed red. There was a swollen bud at the apex, two tender petals, then the glistening hole she'd taken him in, dripping with his spend and hers. He kissed her there, open-mouthed, swallowing down whatever he lapped up and shivering at the velvety, impossible softness of her.

Miss Sterling's grip in his hair tightened as he pushed his tongue inside of her.

Laura moaned. "What's it feel like, Eliza?"

"He's breached me with his tongue," Miss Sterling breathed. She pulled his head tight against her. "Yes, boy, like that. Fuck me with your tongue, you cowering whore."

Elias obliged. It felt so good to obey her, to hear her describe his obscene actions, to be called such filthy names. If he paid a debt with this, he was her whore, as surely as anything. He should have been shamed, but he wasn't. He was bolstered by her approval, conveyed by the force she used to hold his face so tight against her, his nose scarcely able to draw breath. It all felt right this way. The same way her hand round his neck had. Not suffocated, but securely restrained.

"Eliza, look."

"Oh, you like this, huh, Private? Look at you. Hardly recovered, still smeared with your own spend, and your prick's fattening up again. You fucking glutton."

The walls inside Miss Sterling flexed around his tongue, much as they had round his cock, and he found she was right. He thought about Laura's tongue, how it had filled his mouth, how his tongue filled Miss Sterling now, and his cock swelled with interest.

"You like how you taste on me?" Miss Sterling was panting now. Elias felt a burst of pride in his chest and licked round the edge of her, sucking on those petals and that plump nub. "Oh, good, good boy. Do that again."

Elias did. He suckled the nub the way he'd done to Laura's tits, flicking it with his tongue against the back of his teeth, and he felt Miss Sterling's thighs tremble and shake under his hands.

"Harder," she growled, and snatched his hand. "Two fingers, too. As deep as you can."

Elias obeyed with an enthusiastic moan. God, he loved this. He loved being directed, loved how his efforts were paying off, loved how good it felt when she finally praised him. He'd always thought a man was expected to know how to please a woman, to lead her. But Miss Sterling was no blushing bride. She was a master of lust, and he her humble student. He was going to earn her praise. He was sure by now he'd do anything for it. He swirled his fingertips in the wetness that was pooling despite the fact he'd only just drank down as much of it as he could, then pushed exactly two fingers inside her slick, grasping walls. Her cunt pulled them in like a knife through butter.

"God, you darling, obedient boy," she moaned. She pressed forward over him, so that he was draped back over the cushion of the settee and she was nearly sitting on his face.

"Oh, God, Eliza," Laura gasped. He could sense her next to him, perched on the arm of the settee, her milky thigh pressed against his cheek. "Please, I'm dying, please let me touch myself, please."

"No," Miss Sterling grunted. "Not until I've had my fill. I have plans for you."

"No," Laura cried.

Elias' heart ached for Laura, forced to watch for so long, held back while her madam unraveled him. He pressed his tongue harder against Miss Sterling's nub, sucked harder in a relentless rhythm in tandem with his fingers, a rhythm he'd learned from her.

"Ah, ah!" Miss Sterling gasped, thighs gripping his head as they shook. Elias pressed on, pushed harder, faster. "*Ah!*"

She seized like a vice around his fingers, her hips rolling into his face. He felt a trickle of hot liquid trace down his knuckles as she came around him. Elias exulted, took a gasping breath, then withdrew his fingers. He lapped every drop from her spasming hole. He'd done it. He'd been so good.

Her hips slowed over his face, but she didn't step back. He continued to lap at her, though his jaw was tired and his tongue ached. He might never get to taste her again. He would not stop until she made him.

"By God," Miss Sterling said, forcing her voice to steady. She pushed back onto her feet, and he chased after her for a moment. "Look at you, you greedy cunt-licker. Laura, have you ever seen a man so hungry for cunt?"

"No," Laura breathed. Elias tipped his head back on the settee cushion to look up at her. Her lip was trembling and her eyes were glazed and desperate. "My God, Liza, look at his face."

Miss Sterling was carefully arranging her skirts, smoothing them back into place.

Elias pushed himself up off the floor until he was seated on the settee and reached for Laura. Then he stopped, and froze, and looked to Miss Sterling.

"May I kiss her, madam?"

"Yes, please, Liza, let him. I want to taste you on him." Laura quivered.

Miss Sterling looked at the two of them consideringly. If Elias hadn't just felt her, tasted her climax, he would never have guessed she'd been so undone. Her eyes settled on Elias.

"You've been exceedingly pliant," she conceded. "You may have your kiss."

Elias grinned up at Laura and saw her smile answer him. She pressed her lips to his, licked around his mouth, inside it, and moaned deliciously.

Miss Sterling stepped in between Elias' legs and combed her fingers tenderly into Laura's hair. "You have also been very well-behaved. You waited, didn't touch yourself once."

Laura emerged from Elias' kiss with eyes wide and hopeful. "I didn't. I swear. I've been so, so good, Eliza."

"You have," Miss Sterling agreed, then seized her hair sharply. Laura's eyes fluttered shut as her neck arched into the pull. Elias allowed himself to admire the curve of her throat and the swell of her breasts, still puckered and desperate despite their neglect. "Mm, so eager," Miss Sterling murmured. "Whatever shall we do with you?"

"Please," Laura whispered, her eyes still closed. "Make me come. I need to come."

Elias felt a pulse pound through his engorged cock, and he caught a breath as he looked at Miss Sterling. "I could..." he murmured, one hand creeping to the edge of Laura's chemise. Miss Sterling's eyes narrowed, and she swatted his hand away.

"No, you cunt-hungry bastard. I have a much better idea." She looked at Laura. "Come here first. Take off that horrid bodice."

Laura grinned and hopped to her feet.

"You," Miss Sterling snapped at Elias. "Help her."

Elias scrambled to his feet, his cock bobbing absurdly between his legs. He fumbled with the delicate ribbon at the back of Laura's bodice for a moment before he took a deep, steadying breath. He unpicked the bow and pulled the ribbon out of each tiny, hand-stitched eyelet. For an obscene mockery of fashion, someone sure had spent a lot of time and care on this gown. He unclasped the bertha and helped Laura push the bodice off her shoulders.

"Very good," Miss Sterling said.

Laura had no corset beneath the bodice, which Elias supposed made sense because it would have obscured the whole display. Her chemise hung low from her shoulders, the drawstring neckline pulled as wide as it would go to leave her breasts completely bared. It took no more than a shrug for Laura to send it pooling to the floor.

"Get on the bed, Laura," Miss Sterling directed.

Laura turned and padded to the bed. All she had left were delicate, silken slippers and her sagging stockings. Her buttocks were still red and mottled from Miss Sterling's earlier abuse.

She sat on the bed and looked up at Miss Sterling.

"Lie back. Private, go to her and pull off those stockings."

Elias obeyed and went to stand at the foot of the bed. Laura laid out before him, all sloping curves and porcelain skin. Her hips were generous, her thighs thick and firm. Her golden hair pooled beneath her head like a halo, and she smiled up at him, warm and innocent. She brought her feet up to the edge of the bed, then set one slippered foot on each of his

shoulders. Her golden-haired mons spread as she did this, and Elias' breath shuddered to see how perfect dusky pink she was, supple and glistening wet from the apex all the way down her inner thighs. "My God," he whispered, "you're so beautiful."

Laura smiled coyly.

A hand cracked sharply on Elias' right buttock, singing the same way Miss Sterling's grip in his hair had. He gave a yelp of surprise.

"The stockings," Miss Sterling reminded him sharply.

Elias rolled the stockings down, letting his fingers cascade down Laura's finely-shaped calf as he did so. The stockings and slippers efficiently dealt with, he looked over his shoulder at Miss Sterling.

She was right there at his side, watching, eyes sharp and lusty. "Well, what are you waiting for? You're the libertine. Fuck her."

Elias's breath caught in his throat with that sweet permission, and he turned to look at Laura with renewed anticipation. Laura's eyes positively glowed with this news. His cock was throbbing, and she was ready. Elias reached down and took his prick in hand.

Laura scooted her buttocks down to the edge of the bed and gave out a soft moan as he pressed the leaking head of his cock to her slick entrance. He pressed and slid not in, but up through her slit, across her own plump bud of pleasure. Elias had not strictly intended this—she was tighter than he'd expected and slippery—but he was not disappointed at its effect. This nub seemed to unlock a whole lot of interesting sensations for Laura too, as she bucked and twisted beneath him, her voice a reedy crescendo. He pressed his head across that bud again to similar effect. He bit his lip, then with his opposite hand, reached down and rubbed the nub with this thumb.

"Oh, oh!" Laura exclaimed. "God, yes. I'm gonna come!"

Miss Sterling's hand cascaded down Elias' back, round the curve of his buttock. "My, but you're a good student. Do it, Private. Rub her harder. Make her come."

Elias obeyed. Laura writhed so much it was a little difficult to keep his thumb in the right spot, but he was earnest.

"Ah, ah—"

Miss Sterling snatched his hand away.

"No! No! Liza, please please please, no!"

"Fuck her," Miss Sterling commanded. "With your cock now. Quickly. Fuck her."

Elias nodded, sweat trickling down his brow. He notched the head of his cock against her again. He swirled it there, and

pressed, but she didn't yield to him. He looked up at Miss Sterling. "I'm afraid I'm going to hurt her."

"Good. She likes that."

Laura sobbed as her hips pulsed helplessly towards him. He seized her hip with his hand to hold her still. Then he pressed his tip against her, met resistance again, but pushed on. Slowly, he felt her swollen entrance yield, until finally, the crown of his cock popped in.

Laura cried out, with pleasure or pain he didn't know, but her face was slack and panting. Her chest arched up, her nipples begging for him, and Elias gathered himself. One thing at a time.

"Well done," Miss Sterling purred in his ear. Her hand swirled over his buttock again and his hip tipped toward her touch instinctually. "Now, work it in. Nice and slow. Make her feel every inch."

Elias pressed in, then withdrew, pumping himself in inch by careful inch while Laura quivered around him.

"Make her take it all."

Elias pushed further. He was slick now, her channel stretched tight around his girth, and Laura's hips hitched to meet him until his ballocks nestled up against her warm, wet skin.

"Good," Miss Sterling cooed. Her fingers traced the cleft of his buttocks and he shivered. "How do you like that, Laura? Does it feel as you thought it would?"

Laura responded with a collection of incoherent sounds. "Yes—it's everything. I'm so full I could die. Please, please. Give me your thumb, Elias. Make me come."

Elias looked to Miss Sterling, and her lips spread into a smile. "In your own time, Private."

He looked down and then adjusted Laura's legs wider. Her bud was stretched now, supple and throbbing as she writhed around him. God, he enjoyed seeing how his cock disappeared into her, how she stretched around him and left him shining wet as he withdrew an inch or two. He pressed his thumb there first, at the edge where their skin met. Felt his cock slide in and out of her a few times, got his thumb good and wet. Then he slipped the pad of his thumb up, over that nub, and pressed hard.

Laura cried out, voice thin and desperate. He rubbed her as he felt her walls clench around him, sucking him up into her or maybe resisting him, trying to push him out. He didn't know because ultimately, it was he who controlled how deep he went. He gave short, slow thrusts as he rubbed her, and Laura shuddered and screamed as she came and came and came.

"Very well done, indeed," Miss Sterling murmured into his shoulder. She was pressed against his back now, her fingers sliding up and down his cleft. It felt wonderful. He shifted his thighs a bit wider to accommodate her. "You are a very interesting man, Private. Now, let's see if you can make her come again."

Elias slowed his rhythm a bit. If he was going to make her come again, he needed to pace himself. Her legs flopped open as she panted and squirmed.

"Eliza, it's too much, I'm too sensitive now," Laura moaned. "It's too intense."

"Take it," Miss Sterling ordered. Her fingers swirled over Elias' puckered hole as she said this, and he hitched forward a bit with a lurching sound, somewhere between a breath and a groan. Oh. *Oh*. Oh *no*. Laura, feeling this only in the way he penetrated her deeper, yelped. She started to squirm away, pulling off Elias a bit.

"Oh, no you don't," Miss Sterling sneered. "Grab her, Private. Hold her still."

Elias gripped her hips and pulled Laura back into place. She keened and scrabbled at his hands, her cunt squeezing on his cock, slick and smooth as he slid back deep again. She struggled, but Elias barely held her. If she truly wished to get away, it would have been simple.

"Oh God," she cried. "Oh God, please!"

Miss Sterling's fingers were pressing against him as her other hand swept up his spine and over his shoulders. "Lean down. Suck her tits. Make her beg."

Lean down. Make himself open to her. Let her breach him with her fingers as surely as he'd done to both of them. Dear God. It was *anathema*, was what it was. The word hovered on his lips and he looked over his shoulder at Miss Sterling desperately. "No, please stop. I'll do what you ask, but please, not that."

Miss Sterling studied him very carefully. Her edge was slightly softened, her brow arched slightly, inquiringly. '*No*' and '*stop*' are part of the game. '*Halt*' will pause the game. She pulled her hand away and his heart fluttered with relief and disappointment. She pushed her index finger in between her lips, which curled into a predatory smile as she slowly withdrew it. Glistening wet, she pressed the tip of her finger back against him and he felt his muscle give way, felt her prick him just the barest inch.

"No, no, no," he said, desperate and foolish and knowing, *knowing*, he wasn't going to say the word. He would never say the word. Because he trusted Miss Sterling, more than an

officer or a teacher or a parson. She would take care of him, in her way, and bring him such bliss he'd never dreamed possible.

"I told you to lean down. I expect you to comply."

Elias obeyed. Even if it was wrong, even if the thought of it horrified him, he yielded. For her. He was nearly mindless now to her directives, anyway, a set of limbs and nerves for her use. His skin sang with the pleasure of Laura squeezing around him that he found it easy to ignore what he had complied to. The little pressure of a fingertip inside him, the caress of Miss Sterling's other hand over his flank, like she was soothing a spooked horse. He bent and took up Laura's pebble of a nipple in his mouth. As he did, he felt the tapered length of Miss Sterling's finger push in to the knuckle.

"Oh!" he startled, his noise of surprise muffled on Laura's fine skin. Her thighs were wrapped tight around his shoulders, and she was arching against him in a way that pushed his cock even deeper, so that the hair of her mons was scrubbing against his own. Miss Sterling pressed her advantage, and her finger matched the rhythm of his hips, dipping in and out, shallow at first but increasingly deeper. It felt so wrong, so very wrong. Intense and invasive and wrong and God, it made his cock twitch and quiver such that he had to command his mind to keep himself from coming.

"No, stop," he repeated. Words he knew were part of the game. Words that meant *yes* and *keep going*.

Laura's dazed eyes opened and she looked over his shoulder at Miss Sterling. "Dear God, Eliza, are you—" her voice cracked, "are you fucking him?"

"Why, do you think I should?" Miss Sterling inquired smoothly, just as her finger curled deep into Elias. Christ, that felt outrageous. Immense pressure, invasive and wrong, and sparking something new he'd never felt in his life that made a keening, animal sound jump out of his mouth. He couldn't do what he'd been directed to do with Laura's breasts. He could only pant on her soft skin and writhe between them, Laura's vice-like cunt in one direction and Miss Sterling's hard, unyielding fingers in the other.

"That's it," Miss Sterling whispered in his ear and Elias shuddered. She pulled her finger out with an embarrassing sound. "Look at me."

Elias looked over his shoulder to see her push two fingers into her mouth, her nostrils flaring like she were a boxer in his corner, awaiting his bell.

"No, no, God, no, madam, stop," Elias babbled, and Laura cried out too at the sight and added to the chorus, "No, Eliza, you can't!"

Miss Sterling pierced him with both fingers this time, and Elias grunted. It burned. The wrongness of it didn't subside at all, but the way that wrongness laced with pleasure grew. The stretch and burn of her knuckles working their way inside him made him quiver and shudder until he felt his eyes prick with tears, just from the intensity of it.

"There, now," Miss Sterling said, smoothing her palm over Elias' shoulder. "Look at how well you've done, my darling."

Oh, that tenderness. That sweet bliss of approval, just when he thought he'd break. It made him grapple himself back together with a great, deep breath, made him command himself to yield to her. He surprised himself as the burn faded, and he realized again that his fear had been overstated. This was no fate worse than death. This was ... exquisite.

"What's he feel like?" Laura's voice was small, almost tentative. Like she scarcely dared to ask. Like she feared she'd like the answer too much.

"So tight," Miss Sterling said. "So unspeakably tight. I can barely get two fingers in, and he's crushing them."

"How deep?" Laura was breathless, and her hips were surreptitiously bobbing over Elias' length.

"To my knuckles."

"Can you get in any farther?"

"I'm damn well going to try."

She pushed in again. Elias cried out as she pressed her fingers firmly against his internal wall and set off a spark that quickly multiplied into a burst of pleasure inside him so strong he looked down over his edge and barely managed to keep from falling. He didn't want to come yet. He didn't want this to end. Damn him to hell, but he didn't.

He was sweating all over Laura's chest, his face slick against her firm, accommodating breasts. He pushed himself up onto his elbow, looked down as he pressed himself back over Miss Sterling's fingers and drew his cock half out of Laura. Saw his slick length plunge back into her. Felt all of his muscles shake with effort as he fucked Laura, as Miss Sterling fucked him. He *was* a beast. He *was* cunt-hungry. A desperate whore. He was everything she'd called him, everything she'd made him.

"Come," Laura called to him. "Come on me. Come on my tits."

He shook. Imagined what his golden girl would look like laced with his spend.

"Do as she says," Miss Sterling growled in his ear. She jerked her fingers and made him see stars. Her other hand guided his hips, and he pulled out from Laura's sweet,

grasping cunt. Laura's small hands took him up immediately, pumping over his slick length as Miss Sterling's fingers rubbed him inside until he couldn't breathe, he couldn't see, he couldn't even hear, and his climax crescendoed.

"Open your eyes," Miss Sterling commanded. "Watch."

He obeyed. He obeyed even as he grunted painfully in his own throat, clenched tightly around her fingers. He saw his spend surge across Laura's stomach and breasts, spurt high enough to hit her in the chin. Her pink, pointed tongue darted out to catch his taste, and he died. He died *la petite mort*, the little death, in the hands of these two beauties. He collapsed over Laura, his face buried in her spend-slick breast.

"Oh, my darling," Miss Sterling cooed as she twisted her fingers out of him. His hole clenched and it felt empty, both a relief and a mourning. Miss Sterling ran both of her hands up his sweat-slick back, then he felt the mattress shift as she climbed up next to him. "You were so good, so so good."

Her fingers pushed through his hair and Elias sighed, his muscles settling into blissful languor. The game, it seemed, was over.

"See, Eliza?" Laura's voice was syrupy sweet. "I told you."

"I believe Lucy gets all the credit for this one," Miss Sterling replied. Her lips caressed him with kisses over his temple and earlobe and jaw. Elias' chest swelled with feeling. He pushed himself up and caught her lips with his. He kissed her ardently, with all his heart, and she didn't stop him. She indulged him, let him love on her like a queen might entertain the whims of her subjects. She deserved every drop of his fealty.

"Thank you," he murmured against her mouth, and he felt her carved lips curl up into a smile. "Thank you. I didn't know—I would have never thought—I am so glad I lost at cards."

It was so woefully inadequate, all three of them laughed.

Miss Laura was languorous too, laid out beneath him with satisfaction on her lips.

"You know," she said. "I could go again."

Miss Sterling laughed and pushed her shoulder. "Don't be greedy. Private Hower will need to get back to camp."

Elias groaned at the reminder. At present, he was quite certain he should defect and spend the rest of his days at the whims of Miss Sterling. Chopping wood for her, carrying water for her, letting her fuck him over the dresser.

"But, Eliza," Laura whined. She gave a little pout. "It's Christmas."

Miss Sterling gave her a stern look for a long moment. Then, she glanced at Elias.

"No," he said in earnest. "Stop."

A grin swept across her face, joyful and pure, and she shoved him off Laura to roll onto his back at her side.

"What a feast of delights," Miss Sterling said, rubbing her hands over Laura and Elias' parallel thighs. "Merry Christmas indeed."

NOVELTIES FOR DECEMBER

RIDDLE

15. When winter spreads his icy arms,
And shows his powerful sway,
My first, upon the roofs around,
Is seen on many a day;
And when the frost begins to break,
The sun begins to gleam,
My first my second soon becomes,
And flows into a stream.
My whole's a welcome, pretty flower,
That cheers the cold and wintry hour.

Answer to previous: 14. Weight

UPON THE SUBJECT OF BREAD MAKING

Many readers may remember the celebrated lecturer upon the human diet, Sylvester Graham. More than a generation before the U.S. Civil War, this gentleman lectured far and wide about the benefits of whole wheat bread on human health, especially in its ability to tame the primal urges. He insisted that diets centered around consuming meat would exacerbate these urges, and recommended most ardently that men and women alike adopt a vegetarian diet and consume a bread derived of whole wheat germ, named the Graham cracker, after its ardent inventor.

Mr. Graham caused quite a sensation in the 1830s, drawing large audiences to his lectures and made many converts to his peculiar doctrines. He belonged to that class of reformers who had strong friends and bitter enemies. Of note, he cut a striking figure, lecturing in a silk black gown, good-looking, eloquent, and fluent in his position. He authored works such as *A Young Man's Guide to Chastity* and *Discourses on a Sober and Temperate Life*. His frank discussion of the ill-effects of masturbation were shocking and led to no lack of fainted ladies in his promiscuous audiences. He asserted that the practice "inflames the brain more than natural arousal" and amounts to "self-abuse." He also

contributed to the (erroneous) belief that self-pleasure would lead to blindness.



Like many reformers of the era, he led a cohort of followers called Grahamites, who eschewed many pleasures of modern life, including soft beds, hot baths, alcohol, meat, and dairy. His *Treatise on Bread and Bread-Making* was radical enough to assert that bread must be made at home, inciting a riot among bakers in Boston in 1837. Butchers joined too, of course, as Graham recommended a vegetarian diet. Notable contemporaries of vegetarianism included Bronson Alcott, father to Louise May Alcott, who founded Fruitlands, a vegetarian Utopian community in the 1840s.

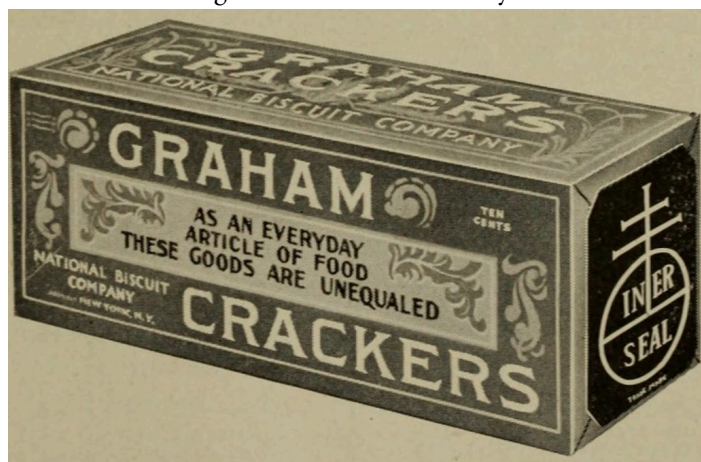
Suffice to say, dear Reader, there appears to be segments of each generation who find solace and purpose in the restriction of diet. As for claims that the Graham cracker would assist in quelling the primal urges, we can only offer the receipt and solicit readers in their own verdicts. (This issue's special short *The Venus of Lebanon* will provide plenty of fodder with which to tempt oneself.)

GRAHAM BREAD—Take then such a quantity of good new wheat, in a perfectly clean and sweet bread trough, as is necessary for the quantity of bread desired, and having made a hollow in the centre, turn in as much yeast as a judgment matured by sound experience shall deem requisite; then add such a quantity of water, milk and water, or clear milk, as is

necessary to form the meal into a dough of proper consistency...

Perhaps the very best and most wholesome bread is that which is mixed with pure soft water, when such bread is made perfect... Let it be borne in mind, then, that without a very thorough kneading of the dough, there can be no just ground of confidence that the bread will be good...

When the dough has been properly mixed and thoroughly kneaded, cover it over with a clean napkin or towel, and a light wollen blanket kept for the purpose, and place the bread trough where the temperature will be kept at about 60°F., or about summer heat, and there let it remain till the dough becomes light. But as it is impossible to regulate the quantity and quality of ... conditions and circumstances, so as to secure at all times precisely the same results in the same time, it is therefore necessary that careful attention should be given that the proper moment should be seized to work over and mould the dough into the loaf, and get it into the oven, just at the time when it is as light as it can be made. —Sylvester Graham



LITERARY NOTICES

SECOND CHANCE!
(FOR THE LOVERS. NOT THE BOAT.)

SHIP OF DREAMS
BY KELSEY PAINTER.

SYBIL Chambers wanted a settled life.

She had a steady income and a roof over her head working as a lady's maid for an earl's daughter. It was exactly what she sought, especially after the uncertainty she faced when her parents died. She earned this coveted position while processing her loss, and she loved the work. Even if it meant putting up with Lady Iris's cruel husband.

And she hasn't thought about her childhood best friend, Charles Percy, in years.

Charles Percy wanted freedom.

He got it at the age of sixteen through a sailing apprenticeship, when he was finally able to leave his family farm and all of Yorkshire behind. Unfortunately, that included Sybil. After spending their entire childhood together, he didn't want to leave her. But the pull of the sea was too strong.

After six years, he became an officer for White Star Line, sailing the greatest steam ships all over the world. Nothing could tie him down. He never expected over a decade to pass before he saw her—or his home.

When they finally see each other again, it's on the most famous ship in history, the RMS Titanic. Can they pick up where they left off all those years ago, before the ship meets its fate?

HIDDEN IDENTITY! SECRET RELATIONSHIP!

BUTCH/FEMME!

LAVENDER & GIN

BY ABIGAIL AARONSON.

AFTER a decade disguised as her missing twin brother, Kasia leads a gang running liquor for the most powerful mob in the city. The ruse gave her a foot in the door, but in order to keep her position—and more importantly, to keep money flowing in for her and her sick mother—she has to be willing to do whatever it takes. And what it takes is cold calculation and a ruthless hand. She needs both in spades when a new police chief is determined to eliminate Detroit's mafia, a threat to destroy everything she's built.

When Kasia learns Sophia—a glamorous flapper who owns an underground queer club—has an unusual hold on the supposedly-incorruptible chief, Kasia wants in on Sophia's secret. Blackmailing Chief Harding could protect her gang and give her a leg up in the mob's ranks. But her plan unravels when she falls for Sophia's fiery spirit and sophisticated charm. After years of avoiding relationships to protect her identity, her feelings for Sophia lead Kasia to take bigger risks than ever. Risks that endanger her gang, her secret, and her life.

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