

Sparks

By C.P. Mandara

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Sparks

“I am going to break you. That’s the whole purpose of this exercise. From the moment the door inside that room closes, I am not going to be Mr. Nice Guy. I am going to do everything in my power to hear you scream, and I won’t stop until I hear you beg for mercy. Do you wish to proceed on that basis?”

Today my name is Lois Reeves. I have an appointment with dominant “James Leverett” this morning, because my next assignment requires that I be a “submissive” and I have no idea what that entails. I’m about to find out... by jumping in at the deep end.

C.P. Mandara writes dark, fantasy BDSM and erotic thrillers. Inside these pages there may be spankings, medical play, menages, love triangles, drugs, violence and more. Just as James Bond is not real, neither are Christina's stories.

In real life, you should practice safe sex and use RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) principles. You should also use condoms!

For now, buckle up and enjoy the insanely fucked up ride because...

To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is
spelled out is a spark.

Victor Hugo

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One

“I am going to break you. That’s the whole purpose of this exercise. From the moment the door inside that room closes, I am not going to be Mr. Nice Guy. I am going to do everything in my power to hear you scream, and I won’t stop until I hear you beg for mercy. Do you wish to proceed on that basis?”

Then you’re going to have a very long day, I thought. Looking up from my hands, which I’d been obsessively staring at for the last five minutes, I finally risked another glance at his face. My heart slammed into my chest, my eyes went wide, and my throat closed around the sounds I wanted to make. Goddamn. Why did he have to be so damned beautiful? If it had been any other male in the universe, I wouldn’t have had a problem, but this one looked too much like him. It took nearly all of my willpower, and I had an impressive amount of the stuff, to answer him back. “Yes.” My eyes immediately returned to my hands, where they were safe.

He looked at me from above the glare of his computer screen and sighed. I knew what he was thinking. She’s a small, thin, frail-looking sparrow, and a good stiff wind would probably blow her over. She won’t last more than an hour. Thankfully, he kept his reservations to himself. Returning his gaze to the keypad in front of him, he then typed in my answer to the previous question. Three little taps. I heard every one. Those three letters could mean only one of two things: my death sentence or my salvation. At this moment in time, I barely cared which one was waiting for me. Tomorrow would give me those answers. I could wait until then.

The man then began to boldly assess me, his eyes rolling up and down my body, and it was easy enough to fill in the blanks. My hair was a scraggly mess, and the black sack that I currently wore was for comfort rather than style. There wasn’t a scrap of makeup upon my face, my body was an unpleasant pasty white courtesy of the English winter, and I hadn’t even considered things like perfume or heels. I was a mess. The recent weeks had played havoc with my self-esteem, and I had barely thought about my appearance this morning.

“You can pull out, Ms. Reeves. That option is still available to you.”

That annoyed me. He had my answer. Now I would have to look up at him again. Steeling my expression against the onslaught of his pretty face, I slowly raised my pale grey eyes towards him, and the look he received was devoid of emotion. “No, I can’t,” I said. “This is my last lifeline. I do this, or I do something stupid.”

He tilted his head, considering the matter, whilst he twirled a very expensive fountain pen around in his fingers. “Do you even like pain?” he asked.

I smiled weakly. "I'm not entirely sure. That's what I'm going to find out." I didn't care about the pain. I'd been through pain far more excruciating than anything his hands could deliver.

"Why don't you go for something a little tamer to begin with? Most girls opt for our 'introduction to spanking' package, or 'sensual BDSM' for their first encounter with us. Those packages are also much cheaper, by the way. You could then see what turned you on, before committing an awful lot of money for something you may not actually like."

My steely gaze became more determined as the man in front of me tried to thwart my carefully constructed plans. This was not about desire or arousal. This was about me, but obviously he didn't know that. All he needed to know was that I would not be taking any other package than the "Ultimate Guide to Pain." I had my reasons. If he knew them, he'd probably have me committed to the nearest mental institution, so it was just as well that he was a complete stranger who would be interested in nothing more than taking my money.

"Can I ask why you want that particular package?"

Mumbling underneath my breath, I cursed myself for speaking too soon. This was not how I had envisioned my simple booking session would go. It was supposed to be a "hand over your credit card and run" type thing. A few simple questions, and a time and place were all that were needed, surely? Why was he trying to complicate things? I didn't want to have to deal with this today. I just wanted to crawl back to my dark room and wait patiently for tomorrow to dawn. Unfortunately, I had to get through this first.

Looking him directly in the eye, trying to ignore the pale blue orbs of concern, my lips thinned. "Why do you care? Can you deliver it or not?"

"You need to answer the question. If you can't answer it, then this conversation is over, and I will escort you to the door." His mouth hardened.

I nearly gasped out loud. Who was this idiot? Did he try to psychoanalyse all his sexual conquests? What for? Kicks? "This is ridiculous. Get me the manager." My eyes darkened, and we stared each other down for the longest moment. Then, strangely, he smiled. As he crossed his arms in front of me, I watched that smile, and he took his own sweet time with it. My position of power from a moment ago had changed, and though my gaze did not waver, I knew instinctively that the shift was not in my favour. My intuition was rarely wrong, and this time was no exception.

"It just so happens, I am the boss." Oh shit.

"Great. Stop messing around and take my money." I was now furious. My eyes could not return to my hands because then he would have won, and I wasn't going to let him have that, though it cost me dearly. Instead, I stared right through his skull and headed straight for his cerebral cortex. The gloves were off.

"Why do you like meting out pain? Do you enjoy hurting women?"

If possible, his smile got wider. "Is that what you think we do here? Hurt women?" He paused, and I resisted the urge to squirm. "Are women all over the world," he leaned over the desk to give me the full weight of his stare, "crazy enough to pay for that kind of thing?" His pen tapped sharply on the desk, daring me to answer.

"All over the world?" The words didn't come out as I'd intended them to, ending up as more of a pathetic whisper. Backing up against my chair, his large frame making me rather uncomfortable in the fragile emotional state I was in, there were two seconds of silence as I deliberated my next move. Wanting desperately to get back to normal so I could return to work, I needed the release that I suspected only this kind of scenario could bring, without me being back in the field of course, which wasn't going to happen until I was cleared. I'd been off work for six months now, and the inactivity was killing me. For someone who lived their life on the edge, sitting down in front of the TV channel hopping every day was one of the worst punishments possible. The adrenaline junkie in me was clamouring for a high, and the most excitement I'd found in downtown London recently was a near mugging attempt. That put a smile on my face for an instant. I might look small and frail, but I'm five foot eight inches of solid muscle, sinew, and bone. I can do things with my hands and feet that are virtually impossible. The poor white trash guy, who foolishly tried to cut the handle of my bag off, never knew what hit him. Before you think I'm an animal, I'm not. I didn't put him in the hospital. I just made sure that he'd think twice before trying to take advantage of another lone female on her way home from work. My efforts left him with a set of matching cracked ribs, and I know from experience that you won't get up to any trouble with those for at least six weeks.

"Yes. We're the best there is. Women all over the world flock to our agency and trust us with their deepest, darkest fantasies and desires. We do our best to make those come true. We don't 'hurt' people unless it turns them on. We're not sadists. Well, most of aren't, anyway." There was a gleam in his eye that gave me chills for a moment, but it slipped away almost as fast as it had arrived, making me wonder if I'd imagined it. "So, I repeat, why do you want that particular package?"

His words snapped me firmly back to the present. As he returned to his seat, I was granted a little breathing space, but my relief was short-lived. Pushing the computer screen to the side of him, I now had an unencumbered view of his impressively bulky frame. My eyes began wandering, helpless to stop themselves. If I was a fly trapped in a spider's web, the guy in front of me was a fucking tarantula: venomous and deadly. Examining him more closely, I realised I had gravely underestimated him.

When I entered the offices of "Elite Encounters" I had expected to be interviewed by a nerd. One of those geeky types that couldn't get a woman in the normal way, so they had to resort to kink and fetish in order to live out their dreams. That would have suited me just fine. I had no need or desire to find the guy behind the desk attractive. It was actually going to make the whole process a lot more difficult, but there was little I could do about that. Finding myself waist deep in scalding hot water, I decided then and there that I was not going to run. The challenge of attaining my goal had notched up several levels, but I would see it through. The other options didn't bear thinking about.

The question. Focus on the question. Why did I want this particular package? What he actually meant was, why did I want pain? I wondered what the standard response to

that was. Because it turns me on, I guess, but I couldn't use that card. We'd been there. His ice-blue eyes were burning holes into the back of my retinas, so I had to think of something fast.

"Because I want the best. This agency had the most impressive recommendations of all the others I've researched, and this package is, by many accounts on your website, 'the best.' As money isn't an object, if I decide I can't handle it, I won't be demanding a refund if that's what concerns you." I smiled brightly and waited for his response. My eyes had adjusted their attention to the chiselled perfection of his jaw, which was freshly shaved. I found myself wondering, oddly, what it would be like to kiss him. As soon as the thought entered my head, I kicked it out. That was not something that would be in the cards. I needed to keep my distance from this man. He might get to use my body, but everything from the neck up was staying firmly under my control.

"It doesn't." He stood up and walked around the desk, settling himself on top of the lacquered black wood as he sucked in a long, slow breath and studied me. His hand reached forward, and he placed a single finger underneath my chin, bringing my face up so I'd have to meet his gaze. I flinched. It was instinctive, and I couldn't help it. Damn those haunting eyes and the effect they had on me.

"You don't like being touched." The statement begged to be contradicted, but I wasn't in the mood for explanations.

"If that's true, it's going to prove a problem for our little session tomorrow," I countered, and I couldn't stop a giggle escaping. A sex scene without being touched would probably be an interesting affair.

He scowled at me, and inwardly I smiled. I had piqued his curiosity. The session would be going ahead, for one reason or another. I breathed a little easier.

"Then why did you flinch?" he said.

"You surprised me, that's all," I replied, and my inner smile finally manifested itself on my face.

"You lie expertly and without a single tell, but you already know that." His words were succinct, and his eyes stayed on mine, giving them nowhere to hide.

My smile immediately faltered. How in the hell had he been able to read me so easily? The finger underneath my chin pulled upwards until my eyes were swimming in the pale blue of an Arctic dawn. The temperature had just dropped twenty degrees, and I had a hard job controlling the tremor that wanted to rip through me. He had me and he knew it.

"Go home." There was no arguing with that tone. His expression had gone flat and the corners of his mouth had turned down. The room plunged into total silence, and it felt like I was being sucked into a vortex with no end in sight.

His left arm indicated the door to my right, and he looked down at me in disdain. It was the final straw. I lunged for him.

Two

He was ready for me. Somehow, I managed to misjudge my attack, and instead of him landing flat on his desk, where I would have pinned him down effortlessly and given him a piece of my mind, the person being flattened was me. It happened so fast that it knocked all the air out of me. I lay there gasping for a few seconds, before his body pressed itself down over mine. Grasping both of my wrists, he held them over my head, and the look he wore was predatory. My synapses nearly exploded, but I held my instincts in check. He wasn't going to kill me. He would express his displeasure and then kick my ass out of the door, figuratively speaking with any luck. If he expected me to be cowed by his actions, the man was right out of luck. I grinned up at him.

"Nice moves," I said when I'd finally gotten my breath back. I hoped the damn asshole couldn't feel my heartbeat, which was nearly rocketing up to one hundred and forty beats per minute. I didn't run much faster than that without exploding.

"Should I call security? Do I need to escort you from the building?" He raised a single eyebrow at me, but the rest of his face was perfectly still. He obviously took his games of control seriously. I sighed.

Looking at him, with what I hoped was the most cajoling look I possessed, I opened my mouth and licked my lips. I didn't do it to tease or torment - it was more of a stalling tactic, but when I saw the spark of fire in his eyes, I realised that he thought I was playing with him. Not wanting to antagonise him further, I decided I'd better tell him a watered-down version of the truth and hope that he'd take pity on me.

"I need this. I can handle the pain, so that part of the arrangement isn't going to be a problem. The thing with me is that I need to be pushed to the absolute limit, and I need someone that won't stop until they get there." His lips were so close to mine that I could feel his warm breath on my mouth. The tingle it imparted feathered across my face and somehow reached my groin. I couldn't keep myself from clenching, and from his answering half-smile, I knew he'd felt it. The infernal man was nearly as observant as me, I realised, with a good degree of vexation.

The blue eyes ate me alive. They devoured every feature of my face, from the roots of my hair to the small cleft in my chin. It felt like I was being examined under a high-powered microscope, and by the time he'd finished, my ego was feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

"There's a little more honesty in that response than the one previous, but I have a feeling the story you're giving me is the abbreviated version. So, I'll make you a deal. You can meet me for dinner this evening. We'll chat. If I'm satisfied with your answers, we'll schedule your session for tomorrow afternoon."

I looked at him incredulously. Dinner? An hour or more of ridiculous pleasantries and small talk, while I had to sit opposite him, forcing myself to look at him? The idea was hideous, and I immediately dismissed it. “No,” I whispered.

“Then you will have to find yourself another agency and another dominant. Good day, Ms. Reeves.” He removed his considerable weight from my body and turned his back towards me as he straightened the cuffs of his blue shirt. For some ridiculous reason, I felt absurdly bereft. Recovering my composure, I flicked the long rope of my plaited hair behind me and stood up. My mind was whirling. There were other agencies, but I’d have to book an interview appointment in order to be seen. That meant I’d have to wait at least another two weeks before the session commenced, and it was time I couldn’t afford to waste. I was going crazy trapped between four walls, and I needed a fast-track package back to work. I could do this. That particular fact was still being debated as I walked over to the frosted glass door and grabbed the metal handle. Pulling it open, I didn’t manage to wrench it more than an inch wide before I paused.

“Just dinner?” I hated the element of weakness that made me ask the question. This was not me. I was all wrong. Watching his reflection in the glass, I saw him raise his head as he returned my refracted stare. His eyes were the only part of his face that gave anything away, and there was amusement there. Apparently, I was a great source of entertainment.

“Let’s get one thing straight. My body is not for sale, and we will not be having ‘sex.’ As to your session, if I decide to go ahead with it, I’m reasonably confident I can wait until tomorrow.”

I nodded, duly chastened. My ego shrank further still. With a small voice, I asked, “When and where do you want to meet?”

He chewed his lip as he considered my question, no doubt trying to figure out the option that would piss me off the most.

“The Barracuda. Meet me at eight o’clock sharp.”

My eyes closed in horror, and I counted to three under my breath. I absolutely loathed seafood in all of its various denominations. The man behind me must have been a mind reader. Not trusting my quavering voice to object, I opened the door in front of me and dashed through it. Had my level of restraint not been honed with years of perfection, I would happily have slammed the thing until there was nothing left but shards of broken glass.

Three

The evening loomed before me like a nine-headed Hydra. Alas, I was no Heracles, and the chances of me slaying even one of the dragon's evil heads was small. Should I quit now? The thought banged around in my brain for a bit as I tested its weight. Leaving him high and dry in a restaurant did put a small smile upon my face, but I wasn't a quitter. The challenge had been issued, and I would see it through. Having said that, seeing as how he'd decided to make life as difficult as possible for me, I guessed there could be no harm in trying to return the favour.

Taking a long, hot shower, I primped and preened to the best of my abilities. Perfumed shower gel and matching scented body lotion was liberally smeared all over my skin until I was so smooth, James Leverett would have needed a set of suction cups to get his hands on my body. James. It was a nice old-fashioned English name. It didn't suit him. I wondered what his real name was and if I'd ever find out. The odds were against it, I guessed. In any case, judging by the books I'd read on BDSM, I'd be calling him 'Sir' if he agreed to grant me a session tomorrow, and I was in no way convinced that he would.

He'd surprised me. The man had reflexes as good as, if not better than, mine. That was rare. He was also exceptionally intuitive. That should have scared me, but it didn't. If the meeting tonight was a success, I'd be baring a whole lot more than a few dark fantasies. I knew that I'd be naked in front of him, and I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that. That was a crazy enough thought in itself, because not only would I be naked, I'd probably be bound, too. The idea terrified and excited me in equal measure. In all the relationships I'd had so far, I'd either been in control or in an equal partnership. Giving up control was not something I was particularly comfortable with, but I couldn't deny that the thought lit up my prefrontal cortex like a Fourth of July party. It sent heat down my body to all the right places, and I had a sneaking suspicion that I was going to enjoy my little scenario more than I thought possible.

Pulling a sheer, black, lace-topped stocking slowly up my leg, I debated on my outfit for this evening's massacre. He wasn't going to be impressed by a short skirt. He'd probably seen hundreds of naked bodies in his line of work, so I decided I'd opt for the opposite and cover up as much of my flesh as I could. As he wouldn't get anywhere near the real deal until tomorrow, letting his imagination run wild might work in my favour. I smiled. It couldn't do any harm, could it?

Debating my choice of dress, I decided that the Barracuda was an upscale seafood joint, and I wouldn't look out of place in a floor-length number. It was all new-age sustainable wood, bamboo and flowing water features. Tables were arranged for a romantic tête-à-tête meal, and candles would be dotted about appropriately. Luckily, there was a black sheath by Valentino in my wardrobe. It had been a work-related present, and I had only worn it once, but it screamed "fuck me." Generally, that wasn't something I tried to

encourage, but in this case, I might make an exception. This session needed to go ahead tomorrow, and it couldn't hurt if I encouraged some sort of spark between us. I was all too aware that this was last chance Saloon Street.

It wasn't long before the mountain of black crepe de chine was tugged over my head and smoothed slowly down over my curves. I then had to perform ridiculous contortionist moves to fasten the waist to neck zipper, but the result was worth it. I would say it fit like a glove but believe me when I say that no glove fit quite this well. Looking at the front, I had a neatly cinched waist, a delicately outlined bust, and the effect was expertly finished with a black collar that reached around my neck. The back was a little more daring. Two panels of black parted to reveal a cream interior that gently swayed as I walked, and it had been cut out in a 'V' shape that revealed a generous expanse of flesh. Pairing it up with some black stilettos and a simple cream clutch purse, the finished deal was quite startling.

A spritz of Coco Chanel and full war paint completed the look, which included traffic-stopping scarlet lipstick. Taming my glossy chestnut curls into submission, I placed them into a French knot and used half a bottle of hairspray to glue them in place. I was in control at the moment, and that was the message I wanted to convey. I immediately laughed at myself. Who was I kidding? As soon as that beautiful face was before me, I would need tranquillizers to subdue my body's response. That would work in my favour behind closed doors, but it would be almost unbearable seated two feet away from the man. Briefly considering the idea of a stiff drink before my interrogation commenced, I dismissed the thought. Whilst it might dull the sight of blinding beauty before me, I needed all my senses on high alert. Undoubtedly we would spar at the dinner table, and I needed to keep my wits about me. Letting down my guard was something I had always been uncomfortable with. That's why I needed him in the first place.

Keeping an eye on the clock, it was slightly disconcerting to find I only had twenty minutes to spare. Be still, my pounding heart! Ignoring my nervous flap of either dread or anticipation, I occupied my time searching for a few finishing touches. Sitting down at my Victorian dressing table, I pulled out a pair of gold filigree earrings and slowly slid the posts through my ears. Rummaging around in my jewellery box again, I found a matching bracelet that would complete my look. I sensed I would have to work for my dinner, and if that was the case, I intended to enter the arena in full armour.

Four

“Fuck.” James shot to his feet as I approached.

He’d been there at the table, waiting for me as I was led across the restaurant. The whole place seemed to go silent as I glided past, and it was the first time in a long time that I enjoyed the power my body could hold over the opposite sex.

“Lovely to see you, too,” I replied, smiling softly as his ironclad composure from earlier slipped somewhat. It was nice to know he wasn’t entirely unaffected by my presence. It certainly wouldn’t do him any harm to have a taste of his own medicine. My heart rate was currently thumping out heavy metal beats, and my chest did not appreciate the exertion, especially as it was heavily confined in tight black silk.

“What happened to the shy and retiring little mouse that graced my office earlier?” He recovered quickly, to give him his dues, but I had prepared myself for a barrage of questions.

Sitting down as our waiter neatly placed my chair underneath me, I said, “You were worried she wouldn’t be able to stand up to your devious torments. I’m here to tell you she will.” I took the menu that was being hovered near my head and offered a cheerful, “Thank you.”

With a single finger, he pulled down the leather-bound menu that I was now hiding behind and waited for me to look up. When I reluctantly did, he shook his head. “That is not what I’m worried about. I think you will probably stand up to all I could dish out and more. Your ability to handle yourself during the session doesn’t concern me.” The piercing blue eyes searched my features as if trying to read my mind. One look at the determination in his expression and I was almost convinced that he would succeed.

“Then why am I here?” I pushed the menu back up so that my expression was once again covered. The man in front of me was far too perceptive, and I didn’t want to give him anything more than I had to.

“Because I’m hungry and I like seafood.”

The menu lowered again, because I couldn’t resist rolling my eyes at that comment. “And?” If he thought he was a master of interrogation, he hadn’t seen anything yet. I raised an eyebrow as he took his time answering my question.

“I also like pretty girls.”

I couldn’t help a snort at that one. “Oh, please. You can do better than that.” If there was a touch of sarcasm in my voice, it was too bad.

“I think you’re emotionally damaged.”

His comment stole my breath away. How on earth had he been able to detect that from a half hour meeting? Looking at him steadily, without giving a clue as to my thoughts, I merely replied, “Aren’t we all?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned. “What happened?”

The menu shot up again, and it gave me a few precious seconds in order to compose myself. We were not talking about this here. As words like ‘langoustines, oysters, lobster, and seafood bisque’ blurred in front of my eyes, I blinked away the tears and inhaled slowly.

“If you don’t tell me now, I’ll get it out of you in the scene, and that will be harder for you.”

I began to rise from my seat. “Are we having a scene, then? If so, I’ve had a lovely evening and I’ll see you...”

“Sit.”

James issued his commands with the kind of tone you did not ignore, and my body instantly obeyed, even though my mind rebelled. It was the story of my life.

“What happened?” His tone was softer now, as if coaxing me into thinking he wasn’t really a monster, but I already knew that for a lie. This man was my worst nightmare and ultimate fantasy, all combined into one.

I lowered my hands slowly towards the edge of the table and let my fingers grip it tightly. He had my full attention. The tears were thankfully gone, but they had now been replaced by outright fury. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” he said. “I’m curious, but you’re a stranger. You usually have to know someone in order to care.” He then closed his menu and placed it beside his wine glass. “I think I’ll have the king scallops with lime and coriander, followed by the lobster in garlic butter.”

“Thank goodness you don’t have sex on your mind, then,” I remarked, my eyes frantically scanning through the dishes for something that wouldn’t turn my stomach.

He laughed. “Garlic breath has never scared any of my dates away before. Would it scare you away, Lois?”

I didn’t want to go anywhere near that question. The man was already well aware of exactly how attractive he was. Getting women in his bed would require little more than a click of his fingers, and probably not even that.

Studying him openly, I considered the question. His chiselled jaw, high cheekbones, thick eyebrows, and a perfect Greek nose were all excellent features. A flock of dark, wavy hair, artfully flicked away from his face, curled gently at his neck, and if that didn’t

grab you, he now wore a day-old beard that screamed sex with around one hundred decibels of intent. When you paired all of that with the piercing ice-blue eyes, he was drop dead gorgeous, and I would have run at least fifty miles in the other direction in order to avoid him. Thankfully, I wasn't after date material. I just wanted an afternoon and a stranger. I could pretend he was ugly for a few hours. My body might not listen, but that was too bad.

Finally, I looked up and smiled at him. "I don't date men."

His eyes shrank to narrow slits, and he was clearly sceptical with regards to my latest statement. "You don't date men, as in you like women, or you don't date anyone?"

It amused me that he felt the need to clarify the point. A snort of laughter escaped my lips at the look on his face. "I am not a lesbian, no." I had probably just destroyed some of his wildest fantasies with that statement, but he waved his hand in the air, indicating I should continue. "I don't have the time or the inclination to date. There's nothing more to say." Zeroing in on the menu yet again, I decided on the miso soup to start, followed by the sea bream with lemon and chervil butter. My stomach would handle those without too much fuss.

"Do you like sex?" The expression upon his face was puzzled. He was thinking, here's a pretty girl who doesn't like men. Some jerk's done a number on her. Unfortunately for the male sex, it was usually the other way around, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"I like sex." Fortunately, our waiter chose that moment to break up our scintillating conversation, and he briefly took our orders. James also ordered a bottle of Sancerre to accompany our meal, and his cutlery was then reset, giving him all the necessary implements with which to destroy his crustacean. I was far happier with my simple knife and fork.

When we were alone again, James frowned upon my choice. "Don't like getting your fingers dirty?"

"Isn't that supposed to be your job?" I queried innocently. His eyes darkened, and he gave me a lazy smile in return.

"I haven't decided. I know what I should do, and that's tell you to go home and find someone else." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and sighed.

"You've gone to an awful lot of expense to do that," I replied, as my eyes sparkled with humour. I couldn't help it. What was he up to?

"You intrigue me," he replied, pursing his lips. "And I feel the need to unravel you. That doesn't mean I will, but you have my curiosity spiked."

Great. He had me down as a science project. I could feel the beginnings of a headache buzzing between my eyes and wondered if I'd remembered to put some aspirin in my bag.

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