



One Illicit Night (Wellinghams Book 3)

By Sophia James

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On his return to London's high society, Lord Cristo Wellingham looks different from the man she knew so briefly in Paris, but he is still as magnetic....

In his cold amber eyes Eleanor detects something she has seen mirrored in her own—*longing*. His touch invites passion, but this is a man who could destroy her good name with just one glance....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Georgette Heyer novels formed Sophia James's reading tastes as a teenager. But her writing life only started when she was given a pile of Mills & Boons to read after she had had her wisdom teeth extracted! Filled with strong painkillers she imagined that she could pen one, too. Many drafts later Sophia thinks she has the perfect job writing for Harlequin Historical as well as taking art tours to Europe with her husband, who is a painter.

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Chateau Giraudon, Montmarte, Paris—early November 1825

Lady Eleanor Jane Bracewell-Lowen could not quite focus on the form of the man who carried her, could not through the dizzy grey fog of lethargy see the expressions on his face or hear the cadence of his words. With a growing dread she tried to shift her weight so that he might let her down, let her escape, but even that was impossible. Nothing on her body worked and the tight mesh of the heavy wig she wore brought a strange dislocation.

She was naked! She knew that, for she had felt his hands on the curve of her breasts and in the warmth beneath her legs. Rough. Lewd. She could not even turn away in protection. Nay, sheer apathy held her caught against breath that smelt of hard liquor and bad teeth.

'You're too beautiful for *une pute*. When you finish here we'll treat you well below.'

Une pute? A whore? Two words that did make sense. Eleanor closed her eyes against the horror of truth, this small movement all she could muster as shock made the hairs on her arms stand out straight against the chill of the night.

'I...am...not a... whore.' The sounds came out as only nonsense, no meaning in them as she failed to form the letters on her lips, just gibberish, fear making her feel sick.

A door opened and warmth beckoned. Beyond the darkness in a circle of light, a solitary figure sat at his desk writing.

'Monsieur Beraud sends you a gift, Comte de Caviglione.'

She stiffened. The man she had come to see! Perhaps he would help her. If only she could speak clearly.

Silence was the only response.

'He said that she was new to the game.'

At this the man in the shadows stood. Tall and blond, the expression on his face matched exactly the wariness of his words. His eyes were the deepest of brown.

'Did you search her for weapons?'

'I did much more than that, *oui*.'

In one movement the blanket was gone and Eleanor was set down on to a bed.

'*Merde!*' The tall man's curse was rough. 'You stripped her?'

'In readiness, you understand. It's rumoured to have been a while since you last had a woman and it's my master's view that the bile of celibacy can make any man cantankerous.'

Dark eyes wandered across her own and Eleanor failed to summon the energy to protest.

'A whore who even now readies herself for your use, *mon Comte*, though if you do not want the gift, I could take her below.'

'No, leave her.' The blond man raised his hand, a flash of heavy gold rings caught in the light, the expression on his face guarded.

She tried to blink, tried to warn him, tried in the singular and only way that she could to alert him to the wrongness in all of this, but the second was gone as he looked away, his hair falling across his face as he turned.

Beautiful. At least he was that. Closing her eyes, she was lost into the ether of nothingness.

Cristo Wellingham waited until the minion of Beraud had gone before crossing the room to slide the heavy slats of oak into place.

He had never trusted locks, for a soul well versed in the art of picking them could take but a moment to force his way through any door. Neither did he trust the fact that Etienne Beraud had sent this whore to him as a gift. The man was a scoundrel and a cheat working for the French police in a way that was blatantly illicit and this 'offering' was undoubtedly another of his attempts to gain favour and benefit from the world surrounding the Chateau Giraudon.

Looking down at the girl, Cristo doubted that she was as inexperienced as Beraud claimed her to be, with her plumped-up lips and overdone face powders. She smelt of cheap drink and old perfume, the sort that was sold in the markets on a Monday where the Boulevard de Clichy crossed into the Place de Blanche.

Still to give Beraud some due, she was indeed striking, though he doubted the overlong blonde curls to be her own, wound as they were around her hips and catching the firelight in a way that seemed patently false.

Tweaking a single lock, he let it fall across her ample breasts with their pale pink nipples and a smattering of freckles.

Freckles. God. Swiping his hair, Cristo moved back, afraid suddenly of the immensity of desire that ran through him. Beraud had his reasons in trying to sweeten a deal between them, he supposed, for the wide and varied circle of acquaintances flowing through the chateau represented a great cross section of Paris society, making any gathering of information infinitely easier.

The girl moved, her hair falling from the line of her breast, and his body tightened unbidden. He loosened the folds of fabric around himself. Already the small whistles of slumber came from her breathing, the sleep he had seen in her blue eyes taken with all the speed of one who was not quite cognisant.

Drugs? Or wine? With the telltale odour of alcohol on her breath he determined it to be the latter. Brandy, probably, and a dosage that was far too high for a woman so slight. If she died here.?

His fingers closed around one shapely calf and he shook her awake, pleased when her eyes opened again.

'What's your name?' He didn't particularly want to know it, but if he kept her talking she might give him some clue as to Beraud's intentions, and with the way Fouche's forays into politics were shaping up that could be more than useful.

The candlelight reflected in her pale eyes and she remained silent.

Sensual. Worldly. A voluptuous and erotic token from a man used to blackmailing and bribing his way into power. Why here and now? His mind ticked over the timing as he tried to determine what Beraud might gain tonight in his desire to have her in this room with him. The codes he had been working on were close to being finished. Had the French police some word of that? Even a glance from a practised eye might unearth secrets that would be better hidden and Cristo was well experienced in the fact that spies were most efficient when their form was unexpected.

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour of eleven and downstairs in the salons another bout of debauchery was in full flight. There were sounds of women laughing, a bottle being de-corked and the louder chants of men made loose with sex and spirits.

Once he would have been amongst them, taking his chances with courtesans who welcomed his attentions. But he hadn't for an age now, the ease of orgasm no longer an opiate for what his life had become.

The girl before him moved suddenly, her scent potent, and his fingers dropped away. She was young to be so very badly used and Beraud's taste in the intimate arts had never been simple. Two marks on her left thigh caught his attention, the burn of raised blisters sitting strangely against alabaster skin. When he leant forwards to touch the wounds she did not flinch, but watched him under languidly hooded lids.

Combien as tu bu, mon amour?

How much did you drink, my love?

A murmur he could not fathom was her only answer as she turned to him, a come-hither look in the way her limbs fell loose accompanied by the heavy smell of her perfume. The powder she wore smeared beige across the white of his clean linen sheets. He hated the way his hand would not obey his mind and pull away, the heat of her quiet seduction a narcotic without rival, the contrived 'little girl' look a decided bonus in her line of work.

Lord. If he could have imagined a woman to ignite his fancy she would indeed have been the one lying naked and available on the bed before him.

He should leave her, should walk away and order her removed, but he found that he could not. It was the feel of her skin that pulled him closer and the shape of her hips tapering down to long and damned fine legs.

Tight bound in a growing need, one finger nudged all that was hidden and he smiled as her head arched back against the pillow. A courtesan of some skill, he determined, as her muscles coiled, tighter than a whore should ever be and her breath no longer steady. With a care that surprised him he began to stroke, wanting her pleasure to match his and their coupling to resemble something far from the quick and lurid encounter that Beraud probably had in mind. As he closed his eyes against the cosmetic accoutrements of her trade and the falseness of the wig, it was easy to imagine other things—things that were true and right and good, the world that had been his once, before his sins had changed it.

Shaking his head, he came back into the moment, years of living in Paris concentrated in his hands, fondling with pressure and rhythm, asking for response, his breath blowing cold across heat, tightening her womanhood and raising her hips.

Something was happening to her, some dreadful, exquisite, carnal thing. No longer could she lie there wooden and tense when every fibre in her body ached with a feeling of thick want.

Wrong. It was all wrong, but a stronger force now propelled her.

Farther. She wanted him to move in her farther and she could not stop the groan that left her lips or the throb-beat of her skin around the gentle warmth of his fingers. A maestro. Playing her. Taking the rigidity of fear and replacing it with a loose and easy longing. Everything. Nothing held back. Hard against soft. Surrender.

'Shh.' He tried to hold her still, but she would not be calmed, his fingers lending panic to the edge of her need.

Don't stop.

Don't leave.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the feeling that had scattered all other thoughts aside, reaching for the craving that bore her down hard against the mattress even as his clever hands squeezed the very life from honour.

He felt her come, felt the muscles close against him rigid, thick in ecstasy, her sigh all that remained of breath. Spent and replete!

His whore now. God, Beraud had the measure of him after all, Cristo thought, as he unlaced his breeches and readied himself to mount her. Her wetness beckoned, the solace of women inciting a particular appetite in him that could no longer be denied. Straddling her open thighs, he positioned himself above, parting the soft lips of her core and fitting them around his heavy thicknes...

Users Review

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