AN EXCERPT FROM

Conspiring with a Rogue

JULIE JOHNSTONE

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Lady Whitney Rutherford had expected to encounter a great deal of surprising things when she’d been forced to pretend to be a man, but the possibility that another woman would try to seduce her had never entered her mind.

How ridiculously naïve of her. She could not afford naivety, nor could she afford for her true identity to be uncovered by the overeager tart standing in front of her. “Lady Audrey—” Whitney began but cut her sentence short to duck under her assailant’s arm. *The nerve of the vixen.* Didn’t she recognize an uninterested man, albeit in this case a woman, when she saw one? Surely she had never been this purposely blind when she had been a debutante in the *ton.* Of course, she did remember one afternoon when she had peeled off her stockings to get the attention of the man who her sister had wanted to marry, but that was different. *That* was to save her sister from marrying a man she didn’t love. At the time, there was no way she could have known she would actually fall in love with her sister’s intended target. That had not been a blind act. Premeditated? Yes.

Speaking of premeditation, Lady Audrey was clearly still mediating on seducing her. Whitney eyed the furniture in her office and scrambled behind the safety of her desk. Enough was enough. She slapped her palms against the wood, pleased to see Lady Audrey blink in surprise. Now she had the woman’s attention. And now Whitney would set the lady straight. “I’m afraid you force me to speak bluntly.”

“Please do,” Lady Audrey purred, peeling off her white silken gloves and slinging them at Whitney with a giggle. One smacked Whitney in the face. She threw the glove to the floor and glowered at
the woman she had just rescued from social ruin. “Lady Audrey, I’m flattered, but I am simply not interested.”

“I think you’re lying,” Lady Audrey retorted while settling into the damask chair in a puddle of French lace, a mutinous pout spreading across her face.

Women who were used to getting what they wanted were nothing but trouble. Whitney knew this first hand since she used to be one of them. She drummed her fingers on the desk. Best to be firm but not mean spirited. “I assure you I do not lie.”

“All men lie,” Lady Audrey retorted.

“Not all,” Whitney replied, thinking of Drake. He’d never lied to her. She had lied to him.

“Well, let’s see if you are telling the truth.” The brazen chit ran a finger along the neckline of her muslin gown, touching the white, frothy fichu she’d placed about her neck and cleavage for modesty’s sake. She then proceeded to pull the lace away from her dress and expose the upper portion of flesh of her heaving bosom, her dark gaze settling on Whitney. “You’re staring,” she purred at Whitney.

Whitney blinked in shock. She was staring, but not because she was interested in the lady. She just simply could not believe this was happening to her. “Lady Audrey, if you don’t take care your breasts will spill out soon, and you’re going to have a devil of a time relacing your own corset.”

“You won’t help me?” Lady Audrey snapped a fan open in front of her face, but not before Whitney saw the lady’s coy smile.

How aggravating to be forced to play this silly game. She should have decided when she ran away from home to disguise herself as a baker instead of a private investigator. Probably no brazen chits tried to seduce bakers. She pulled on the cravat that was tied near to choking around her neck. It was really too bad she did not know the first thing about baking. Of course, she had known next to nothing about searching for missing people, but the job had fallen in her lap and she had been desperate. And it did, if she was going to be truthful, speak to her on a level she didn’t care to analyze at this particular moment.

“Are you contemplating the merits of helping me redress?” Lady Audrey asked while fanning herself.
“No,” Whitney snapped, fumbling for the fob watch in her pocket. Surely, the lady’s father would be here soon. Whitney had sent him an urgent message this morning when she had found Lady Audrey at the Bright Star Inn. The man had to be close.

Struggling to control her annoyance, Whitney nodded and set herself to the task of adjusting the fold of her uncomfortable cravat. Next she tugged her waistcoat and checked the time on her fob watch before returning her gaze to Lady Audrey. Until he arrived, keeping Lady Audrey at bay was of the utmost importance. Whitney put the watch back in her pocket and glanced at Lady Audrey. Maybe a refreshment would distract her. Anything to keep the woman’s hands busy. “Would you like a glass of lemonade?”

“I’m not thirsty,” Lady Audrey replied, the movement of her rapidly fluttering fan slowing until it stopped altogether. Whitney focused on the intricate rose pattern instead of the inviting smile Lady Audrey was directing at her. Something about the fan was very familiar. She knew that rose pattern. It was exactly like the one Sally had given her for her twentieth birthday—one of only two, Sally had told her. She had to get a closer look. Whitney moved from behind her desk and sat in the chair opposite Lady Audrey, ignoring the lady’s pleased smile.

A slow burn of anger boiled through Whitney, along with a healthy dose of suspicion. Lady Audrey languidly fanned herself, unaware she held a clue to a puzzle Whitney could not believe she had failed to piece together. She could not give herself away, but she simply had to know if she was right. “Are your parents, by chance, associated with the Duchess of Primwitty?”

“How did you know?” Lady Audrey asked excitedly, the corners of her mouth lifting into a surprisingly genuine smile. Before Whitney could answer the question, the girl gave a dainty shrug. “I suppose being a private investigator here in London you know so many things. I’m fascinated.” Lady Audrey patted the cushion beside her. “Come, sit by me.”

Whitney ignored the invitation. She was infinitely safer in her own chair. “How do you know Her Grace?”

Lady Audrey fluttered her fan again. “This past season Mama, became friends with the duchess. Actually, it was Sally—I mean, Her
Grace—who convinced me to follow my heart and run off with Mr. McClurry.”

Whitney sank against the cushion of her chair. She would ring Sally’s neck, if she ever saw her again, the little meddling Duchess of Do-Good. She should have known something was suspicious when Lady Audrey’s father, a prominent lord, had sought her out to help him find his missing daughter. Whitney, or rather her alternate male persona, Mr. Wentworth, was an unknown investigator.

She’d not even questioned why he had employed her help. Stupid and foolish. Pride commeth before a great fall. She smiled grimly to herself. She’d bested Sally. The duchess was probably steaming over the fact that her ploy to get Whitney back to Yorkshire had not worked. Sally had probably never expected Mr. Wentworth, a working cit, to refuse his client’s request to bring his daughter, once found, directly to Yorkshire.

Sally had obviously quite forgotten that though Whitney pretended to be a common man she was a woman with her own mind until the bitter, probably dreary end. “I should have known,” Whitney muttered.

“Known what?” Lady Audrey asked with a frown.

Dear God—had she muttered those words out loud? This day was not going her way. Not at all. She cleared her throat. “That a woman as lovely as yourself would be friends with a duchess renowned for her beauty. Beautiful women always seem to be fast friends.” Whitney’s lips twitched with the falsehood.

Lady Audrey settled a questioning gaze on Whitney. “Have you ever met Her Grace?”

“We’re acquaintances,” Whitney lied, disregarding the fact that she had been dear friends with Sally since childhood.

“Do you think she’s prettier than me?”

Oh, good God! Taking this job had been a mistake. She wished she had for once simply said “no” to the plea for help. But she had a soft spot for desperate people, currently being a desperate person herself. And Lady Audrey’s crying mother and beleaguered father had been more than desperate to find their missing daughter.

Whitney gritted her teeth. If this opportunity hadn’t appeared and she hadn’t gotten the harebrained notion to spare other people the
torture of being separated from the person they loved—a wretched pain all too familiar to her—she was positive she could have learned to bake bread anonymously somewhere obscure.

She could practically feel the dough between her fingers. She’d kneaded dough once with Cook before Father had discovered her in the kitchen and forbade her to ever go back into the realm of the help. Sally would have no clue where to find her if she was a baker. Of course, since she adored sweet treats, she would probably end up fat, but that could only help with her disguise of being a man.

Lady Audrey snapped her fingers in front of Whitney’s face. “Mr. Wentworth, you’ve not answered my question.”

That’s because she was dreaming of minced pies. She stifled the nervous laughter that wanted to escape. “You’re lovelier,” Whitney managed to say in a calm, believable tone.

“How you compliment me, Mr. Wentworth.” Lady Audrey reached out and smacked Whitney on the arm with her fan. “I feel I may blush soon, a rather rare thing, I assure you.”

Whitney rubbed at her aching neck and wished the day were over. Unless she convinced Lady Audrey to abandon her ridiculous lies and tell her father the truth about trying to run off to Gretna Greene, Whitney had no doubt she would be a front row observer to a spectacular row between Lady Audrey and her father when he finally arrived to fetch her.

The last thing Whitney wanted to do was lecture someone else upon the use of the truth. After all, since she’d fled York six months ago, she’d been lying from sunrise to sundown every day. But her lies were absolutely necessary.

Drake’s flashing, coffee-colored gaze flared in her mind. Every time she recalled his features, down to the golden flecks in his eyes, it was painfully bittersweet. She did not want to forget him, yet she desperately wanted just that. Going back to him was out of the question, unless she didn’t mind seeing the man she loved destroyed—his dreams ripped from him. She minded a great deal—more than she minded being alone and miserable. Her nails dug reflexively into her palms. Perhaps in another year the pain of loss would lessen. It simply had to.

Regardless of her sorrow, she had to concentrate on the present,
not the past. She focused on Lady Audrey. “Lady Audrey, I would like to give you some advice.”

“I suppose since you won’t give me anything else at the moment, I’ll settle for your advice.”

“I suggest when your father arrives you tell him you’d like a voice in whom you marry. Your father seems a reasonable man to me.”

“Reasonable?” Lady Audrey’s eyebrows arched high. “Gads. You obviously don’t know my father. I should have held out for something other than your poor advice.”

Whitney ignored the pointed barb. “You’re right,” she said, frowning with a thought. Could she be sending Lady Audrey back to a fate worse than the one she had willingly chosen with the Scot? Whitney refused to condemn anyone to a loveless marriage after seeing her parents’ ill-fated union.

At this moment, she wished she truly was a man. She doubted a man would let emotions rule their decisions, but she was a woman and her emotions were involved. She rose from her chair and walked to the dark-paneled study door where she withdrew a bag of gold coins from her coat and held them toward Lady Audrey. “If you leave now, you can take the seven o’clock coach to Scotland and find your Mr. McClurry.”

Lady Audrey flew across the room and threw her arms around Whitney, knocking the breath out of her with the force of the impact.

“You’re divine.” The woman’s arms circled Whitney’s waist like an unwelcome vise.

“I’m what?” Whitney pulled back, trying to release Lady Audrey’s grip.

“Divine. You know? Like a god.”

A hot flush covered Whitney’s face. This was what she got for allowing her heart to rule her head. “I am not divine. I’m a rake of the first degree.”

“That’s all right.” Lady Audrey patted Whitney’s back. “Better to marry a rake and burn with desire than wither away with the weasel my father was trying to force upon me.”

“What about Mr. McClurry?” Whitney sputtered, twisting back and forth to no avail.

“What about him?” Lady Audrey waived a hand flippantly in the
“I don’t love him, and I rather hated the idea of living in Scotland and so far away from society. But you…” Her gaze fastened hungrily on Whitney’s mouth. “I like where you live. I adore London and could see myself here with you.”

“I’ve mistresses,” Whitney blurted, hoping to shock the woman to her senses. “Lots of them. Three. No, four;” she amended. “I’ve so many I can’t always remember them all.”

Lady Audrey grinned wickedly, palms inching up Whitney’s back. “I promise once we’re wed, you won’t need those other women anymore.”

“Wed?” Whitney stammered. “We cannot be wed.” She could just see their wedding night. Lady Audrey picking the lock on the door that Whitney had secured to keep her out. The shock on Lady Audrey’s face when she realized her rake of a husband was actually a woman pretending to be a man was too absurd to consider.

Whitney jerked free, but Lady Audrey grabbed her by the shoulders and planted a kiss on her lips.

Disgusted, Whitney swiped a hand over her mouth. “Do not ever do that again.”

Lady Audrey frowned. “Something’s very strange about you. Men always want me.”

“Perhaps not all of us.”

Lady Audrey shook her head. “Hmm. Very strange.” She reached toward Whitney and ran a hand through the wig on her head.

“Please, don’t do that.” Whitney swatted Lady Audrey’s hand away. This woman was a menace. The heavy weight of Whitney’s wig hung too far to the left side of her head. She prayed her real hair did not show. Drake had loved her hair, and now her hair could doom her.

At the gleam that filled Lady Audrey’s eyes, Whitney instinctively scuttled back a step, her elbow bumping into the bookcase against the wall. Left with no room for further retreat, she held up her hand as the woman advanced. “Now listen, Lady Audrey.”

Lady Audrey reached out and grabbed Whitney’s hand. She rubbed her fingers over Whitney’s skin and dropped her hand, frowning. “You’re soft, like a woman.” Puzzlement filled her voice.

Whitney’s skin tingled with fright. “I always wear gloves.”

Lady Audrey shook her head. “That’s not it.” In a flash, she
snatched Whitney’s wig away with one hand and planted the other firmly on her chest. She squeezed the soft flesh of Whitney’s breast, a loud gasp filling the room. “Gads! You are a woman. I knew there was something strange about you.”

With her heart thumping wildly, Whitney pushed Lady Audrey’s hands away and grabbed the wig. Turning her back to Lady Audrey, she struggled against her own trembling to shove the wig back on her head. Behind her, Lady Audrey’s skirts swished, then a creak filled the room. Whitney frowned and tried to picture where Lady Audrey was. Perhaps the girl had settled herself on the old leather chair.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Wentworth.” Her voice held a singsong quality of satisfaction that made Whitney want to scream.

_This could not be happening._ She stared at her desk, unsure what to do or say. She had not fled Drake to protect him from Mrs. Blightson’s threats to destroy him only to be brought low by this woman. She straightened her spine and turned to face Lady Audrey. She’d bribe her for silence if she had to. Of course, since she was practically penniless, she would have to borrow the money from Sally. That would make never speaking to the duchess again rather difficult, but some sacrifices were worth it.

“I’ll pay you for your silence.”

Lady Audrey smiled sweetly. “This day is turning out to be much more interesting than I had anticipated.”

“You wretched, spoiled woman,” Whitney snapped, losing the cool she had worked so hard to come by in the last six months. Wheels turning on the pea-gravel drive interrupted any further tirade she had been about to succumb to. Dismissing a pouting Lady Audrey for the moment, Whitney raced to the pane and peered into the moonlit night. If that was Lady Audrey’s father, Whitney would simply lose her mind.

As the carriage rounded the bend and passed near a blazing gaslight, the outline of a golden lion—the Marquess of Bridgeport’s crest—became visible. She let out a hiss of breath, swinging toward Lady Audrey. Losing her mind didn’t seem like a bad notion at the moment. She’d then be spared this torture. Lady Audrey smirked at her knowingly.

“Let me explain,” Whitney rushed out, her voice breaking with
anxiety.

“In due time, my little sweetikins.” Lady Audrey glided across the room to stand in front of Whitney, lips lifted in a terrible smile. “Your offer to pay me was tempting, but I want something infinitely more precious to me.”

Whitney had a beastly suspicion that she had grossly underestimated Lady Audrey Cringlewood’s cunning. “What is it you want?”

“Well, Mr. Wentworth—or is it Miss Wentworth?” Lady Audrey giggled at her own question as she slipped her arm through Whitney’s. “Whatever you’re about, consider me part of your game. I am underage for another year, so your money does me no good. You don’t have enough to support me for life, do you?”

Whitney shook her head.

“I didn’t think so. You are going to save me from a marriage that would have bored me to death.”

Shoes clopped against the hardwood floors, louder and closer with each second.

“How?”

“By letting me work with you.”

“Absolutely not.” Whitney shook her head. “I work alone. Your father would never allow it. You’re of the ton.”

Flashing green eyes settled on Whitney, making the hairs on her arms stand on end. “You’d be surprised what I can manage when I set my mind to it.”

Whitney knew that look. She’d seen that gleam of determination reflected in her own looking glass the night she had decided to flee her home to save Drake. Her heart beat heavily as she tried to think how to get out of this mess.

The doorknob to the study clicked, and Lord Bridgeport stalked into the room, sweeping impatiently past Whitney’s red-faced butler.

“Papa,” Lady Audrey called, rushing to her father’s side. The deep scowl he served his daughter chilled Whitney. He seemed less than happy to see her. Lady Audrey swirled toward Whitney and raised a challenging eyebrow. “I have so much to tell you, Papa. You’ll never believe what I’ve learned about Mr. Wentworth.”

“No, you never will,” Whitney interjected, pressing her cold hands together to stop her angry trembling. She could only think of
one way out of this mess. Since it was utterly and completely illegal, she sent a quick prayer to God that her solution did not land her in Newgate Prison.

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For more information: juliejohnstoneauthor@gmail.com
www.juliejohnstoneauthor.com