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NOVEL

THE
CLOVERTON
CHARADE

SARAH E. LADD

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subtitle here

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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Cloverton Charade

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This novel is dedicated RG—with friendship and gratitude.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Prologue

LONDON, ENGLAND, 1810

FLANNER AUCTION HOUSE

“DO NOT GO to the dock alone. It’s dangerous.”

Olivia’s father’s warning rang in her mind. He was right, of course. Violence ran rampant along this bustling stretch of the Thames River. More than one tale circulated of an unsuspecting soul disappearing from this dock, never to be heard from again. But the sun had not yet set.

Surely a closer look wouldn’t hurt.

Fourteen-year-old Olivia Brannon exited the rear entrance of the Flanner Auction House onto the hectic landing and into a vibrant world that she knew all too well. Sailors and merchants milled about, no doubt eager to make use of the day’s fading light, and the noisy white seabirds dipped low and wove among the masts of the tall ships. Curious scents of fish and cumin, of wood and tobacco perfumed the dank, hazy air, and the revived excitement of things new and unexplored enveloped her.

She wanted to see everything. Know everything. And not just

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about the treasures brought in on the East Indiaman ships. She wanted to know the stories about the exotic lands from which they came and the people who made them.

She lifted to the tips of her toes and pressed her hand against her forehead to shade her eyes against the golden setting sun as it reflected off the choppy water. Through the throng of sailors, discarded nets, and coiled ropes, she spotted it.

A large wooden crate stamped with the words *live animal*.

“Olivia.”

The tenor of the familiar masculine voice squelched her anticipation, and annoyance crept in. She glanced over her shoulder.

Lucas Avery, tall, gangly, and three years her senior, stood just behind her with a bulky leather satchel slung over his wiry shoulder. The riverside wind tousled his tawny hair, which appeared to have lightened by time spent in the sun, and his usually ruddy complexion was far tanner than she recalled.

“It’ll be dark soon.” He nodded toward the Thames. “It’s not safe here after the sun sets.”

His warning was valid, but she’d not give him the satisfaction of thinking he’d told her something she wasn’t already aware of. “I know.”

“What are you doing out here anyway?” He fell into step with her as she walked along the wooden planks.

“If you must know, a tiger came in on the *Belletroue* yesterday. It’s bound for the Royal Menagerie at the Tower of London. I was hoping to see it,” she stated, proud to share new information and determined to gain control of the conversation. “What are you doing here? I thought you were in the Orient.”

"I was." He paused to allow two men carrying a large trunk to pass between them. "We returned only yesterday."

She bit her lower lip and looked out at the masts and rigging. Oh, how she envied him.

Timothy Avery, Lucas's father, was a purveyor of antiquities, just like her father. Lucas traveled extensively with him in pursuit of rarities—to India, Egypt, Italy. Her father traveled as well, but she was never permitted to join him. Ever since her mother had contracted diphtheria and died on a sea voyage to Italy, her father deemed both his daughters too delicate to travel—a sentiment Olivia ardently challenged, but to no avail.

An arresting roar, unlike anything she'd ever heard before, reverberated near the bolts of stored sailcloth and brick buildings lining the docks. Shouts and shuffling erupted. She whirled to see two sailors securing a gray canvas tarp over the crate. Other sailors joined them to push the crate away from the landing's edge and toward the buildings.

Crestfallen, her shoulders drooped. "I'm too late."

"Perhaps the tiger will still be here tomorrow," Lucas offered.

He was trying to be kind, she knew. Still, it irritated her. Lucas Avery had always been kind—it had been his most admirable trait when they were playmates as children. But now it hardly seemed warranted—or even appropriate. How could he talk to her so casually as if their fathers were not enemies? As if his father had not betrayed hers?

"Maybe." She turned back toward the auction house's dock entrance.

"I'll escort you back inside."

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“That’s not necessary.” Her words were sharper than she intended.

“I know. I’ll join you just the same.”

When they reached the entrance to the auction hall, Lucas opened the door for her. Oppressive heat pressed against her as she entered the hall, and the overwhelming odor of too many bodies in a stuffy space burned her nose. She slowed her steps just long enough for her eyes to adjust to the dim light before she turned back to Lucas. “As you can see, I’m inside now and quite safe, so I’ll bid you good day.”

But he ignored her dismissal and leaned closer to be heard over the chatter. “Is that the Cavesee Vase?”

Olivia followed his gaze to where she’d left her father earlier. Edward Brannon and his brother, Thomas, were unpacking the imposing blue-and-white porcelain Chinese vase—a celebrated relic from the Ming dynasty—from the straw of its shipping crate.

Relief rushed her. It had arrived. Her father had endeavored for years to secure its purchase, and they’d waited for more than fifteen long months for the piece to arrive on England’s shore. As with any such critical transaction, fear that it would be damaged or lost at sea in transit had hovered.

But here it was: large, intact, and stunning.

She lifted her chin and seized the opportunity to gain an upper hand over the Averys. “Yes, my father acquired it on behalf of Mr. Francis Milton’s chinoiserie collection at Cloverton Hall.”

She knew the effect that name would have on Lucas, and she paused dramatically to let it penetrate and have its full effect. “I must be going. My father will require my assistance.”

Not waiting for a response, she curtsied and wound her way through the onlookers to where her father and uncle were uncrating the massive *tianqiuping* vase, which was nearly two feet in height and required both men to safely lift it.

Perhaps it had been an exaggeration. Her father did not *need* her help. But how else was she to learn everything there was to know about evaluating antiquities if she did not participate as much as possible?

As she drew closer, the details became more obvious: the unmistakable cobalt blue hue on the bright white background. The fierce, five-toed dragon circling the globular base—a symbol of the emperor. Lotus flowers embellished the columnar neck, and *lishui* waves circled the base and upper rim.

Overwhelming pride engulfed her, and a grin quirked her lips. Brannon Antiquities had done something Avery & Sons would never be able to do: supply priceless pieces to the famed Milton chinoiserie collection. The Averys might have bested them on other fronts, but renewed determination fired through her. This would be the first of many instances in which the Brannons would prevail. It might be wicked to hold bitterness toward the other family, but surely there was nothing wrong in celebrating this hard-won victory.

Chapter 1

LONDON, ENGLAND, LATE AUGUST 1818
BRANNON ANTIQUITIES & COMPANY

OLIVIA COULD HARDLY believe the proposition that had just been presented to her. This was the opportunity she'd imagined only in daydreams.

Giddy anticipation mingled with intoxicating disbelief, and for a brief moment, a dazzling glimpse into an entirely new existence glistened—one where she was independent. Self-sufficient. Needed. Valued.

She looked to the elegantly clad woman in front of her: Mrs. Agnes Milton, the widow of her father's most influential client. "You'd like for *me* to come to Cloverton Hall to evaluate your collection?"

Mrs. Milton shifted the fluffy Pomeranian in her arms before nonchalantly adjusting the jade kid-leather glove on her hand. "Yes. My husband told me of you—a young woman who assisted with her father's appraisals and knew more about antiquities than any purveyor he knew. Now, I find myself in a peculiar situation

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and require assistance from one knowledgeable on such matters.”

Summoning fortitude, Olivia glanced at her uncle Thomas, who was, at present, the only other person in the receiving room of the Brannon Antiquities warehouse. Thomas Brannon had assumed full ownership of their business after her father’s death four years prior. Never would he openly display disapproval in front of a client, but his hooded left eye twitched, and his lips had flattened to a thin line.

Olivia returned her eager attention to the petite, plump woman in front of her. “And your collection—are these chinoiserie pieces?”

“There are a few, but mostly it consists of jewelry, shells, and gems. I inherited them directly from my grandfather, an East Indiaman captain. All the items are separate from the Cloverton estate holdings. I would require you to catalog the pieces and estimate their value and, if all goes according to plan, discreetly identify buyers.”

Olivia gripped her hands behind her to contain her mounting enthusiasm. Was her dream about to be realized? Was she being sought out for her professional reputation?

Dozens of questions rattled in her mind, but her uncle’s sharp stare reinforced her place. Since her father’s death, she’d been reduced to little more than an assistant at Brannon Antiquities & Company, and he was keen that she should not forget it.

“Perhaps my uncle should join us,” she suggested reluctantly. “He’s well-versed in the—”

“That will not do,” Mrs. Milton snapped, her sky blue eyes sharp and direct. “My nephew, the new master of Cloverton Hall,

has recently taken up residence there, and he must know nothing of this. I've no doubt he'd attempt to challenge my claim to my collection and acquire it as his own. If your uncle, a known antiques purveyor, were to arrive at my invitation, tongues would wag, whereas no one would question your presence."

Fearing the offer might vanish straightaway, Olivia blurted, "I'd be honored to join you at Cloverton Hall at such a time that is agreeable to you, Mrs. Milton. I know you would not be disappointed with my work."

Mrs. Milton pursed her narrow lips and stroked the little dog's fur with her free hand, as if completely accustomed to others acquiescing to her will. "I'm glad to hear it. My nephew's to host a house party to introduce his companions to Cloverton Hall, and he has requested that I act as his hostess. Normally I'd refuse such a ridiculous display, but I see it as an opportunity. You shall attend as my guest."

Olivia had heard about these gatherings—where wealthy members of society descended upon a grand country house and indulged in lavish entertainment for a fortnight or so. Never in her wildest imaginings did she think she'd ever be invited to one.

"We shall depart next Wednesday. While there, you'll participate in the entertainment and activities to avoid raising any speculation, but you can conduct your evaluations during the morning hours and as time permits."

A dozen concerns bombarded Olivia. She did not possess the proper attire. How was one to behave in such a setting? But those issues could all be addressed. She owed it not only to herself but to her younger sister, Laura, to seize every opportunity to advance

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herself.

“As for a fee,” Mrs. Milton continued, “I assume it will be as any other such transaction—you’ll receive a percentage of the purchase price once it is sold. In the meantime, I’ll provide your board and proper attire for your trouble.”

Olivia ignored the stab at the simple charcoal gray printed muslin gown that currently adorned her frame, for it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered more to her than securing this opportunity. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. My maid will contact you with other pertinent details and make arrangements for my modiste to visit you. I’ll apprise her of the clothing you’ll require. Remember above all, this must be done with absolute discretion. To everyone else present, you will simply be my guest.”

Mrs. Milton bid them a staunch farewell, exited their modest shop, and accepted the help of her liveried footman to reenter her carriage. Only after the ornate vehicle lurched into motion and plumed a trail of dust into the thick afternoon air did Olivia dare to move a muscle.

The sense that her life was about to change flared within—and she was eager to begin.

Chapter 2

OLIVIA HAD OVERSTEPPED a boundary. A significant one.

The herbaceous scent of Mrs. Milton's lily of the valley perfume lingered even after her departure. The mantel clock's steady rhythm seemed unusually sharp in the otherwise still silence, as if it, too, was anticipating her uncle's censure.

"So, you've made a decision, have you?" Thomas Brannon grunted at last, his baritone voice uncustomarily tight and gritty. "Without consulting me?"

The question was a legitimate one, but how long had she waited for something—anything—that would offer any sort of autonomy? She turned to face the man who, in appearance only, was so like her father. "I assumed you'd be pleased that such an esteemed member of society would trust us with such an assignment."

"Pleased?" He scoffed and propped his thick fists akimbo. "As I've told you countless times, you are not an agent of this company, Olivia."

His argument stung. In truth, she was little more than the daughter of a once well-respected purveyor, and she should be eager to make an advantageous marriage instead of pursuing

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professional recognition. Yet she'd spent most of her life in this shop at her father's side, learning the nuances of antiquities and other such artifacts. It was a significant aspect of who she was and how she lived her life.

Unwilling to let the topic drop, she trailed Uncle Thomas as he stormed from the receiving room into the warehouse. The familiar scent of dust and disuse tickled her nose as they entered the humid, dimly lit space. "No, I'm not an agent, but I know just as much, if not more, than most. And this is a good opportunity."

"Opportunity for what?" Thomas stopped at the desk where one of their agents, Russell Crane, was seated and lifted a stack of unopened letters. "I've never heard of her *collection*. I doubt anyone has. This scheme is likely a desperate attempt to claim whatever money she can, now that Francis Milton is dead. It's probably not even worth the trip, but instead of consulting me, you reacted based on emotion."

Olivia clamped her teeth over her lower lip and resisted releasing the sarcastic retort simmering on the tip of her tongue. She despised this feeling—of her knowledge and experience being devalued . . . of not being considered a significant contributor simply because she was not the son that could ensure the business's future. She might be a woman of two and twenty, but she was still at her uncle's mercy in many ways. After all, he was the *de facto* owner of their business, and as such, he provided the roof over not only her head but her younger sister Laura's as well.

"Need I remind you that when Edward died, he asked me to care for you until the day you meet a man I feel is worthy enough to be your husband."

An uncomfortable tightness pinched in the pit of her stomach as she recalled the conversation at her father's bedside, hours before his death. "I remember it."

"Your father thought me the best person to help guide you, which I've attempted to do. Now you've committed yourself to traveling hundreds of miles to a home where you know no one to evaluate a supposed collection. And what do you know of Mrs. Milton's nephew? Anything?"

Olivia remained silent.

"I will enlighten you, then. The ears of every purveyor, seller, and collector perked when word of Francis Milton's death became public. By all accounts young George Wainbridge is a wild young man with a dubious reputation. Who knows what manner of person will be present at this so-called house party?"

Olivia's defenses—and confidence—faltered. She suddenly felt quite small, like a child reprimanded for impulsive behavior. "Mrs. Milton will be there, and surely—"

"We've worked with Mr. Milton, not Mrs. Milton," he countered. "And now that her husband is dead, who is she?"

The holes he was attempting to poke through her plan were widening. Perhaps her excitement had trumped her sense of reason, but she could not back down. Not now. Her pride would not permit it.

She forced aplomb to her tone and straightened her shoulders. "It's widely known that Mrs. Milton is one of the most prominent women in polite society. You've said yourself that such clients are the exact foothold we need. What's more, she'll be my chaperone. Honestly, I don't see what harm could be done in such

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a short time.”

“You don’t see what harm could be done in a country house?” Thomas jeered. “That’s the precise reason I should forbid it.”

“I’m a grown woman, Uncle, and I’m not a fool. I know exactly what sort of people could be in attendance. But it is for a fortnight at most. The assessment aside, I have spent my entire life within London’s city limits, and I might very well spend the rest of my life here without seeing any other part of the world. You know full well that Father always promised that when I came of age, he’d take me traveling. He’s gone, but he always made his intentions clear. Give me credit, at least, for having a sensible head on my shoulders.”

At this, Thomas fell silent.

Her words had landed with some effect. Maybe it was the reference to his late brother. Maybe it was the fact that he himself had a role in her isolation.

Thomas folded his arms across his barrel chest and stared at her for several seconds. He narrowed his deep-set, coffee-hued eyes, and his tone grew curt. “Very well. Do as you wish, then. You are, as you have said, a grown woman. But by doing so, you accept responsibility for the possible ramifications. I’ll have no part of it.”

He tucked the stack of letters beneath his arm, snapped up a small crate from Russell’s desk, jerked around, and stomped back into the warehouse.

Olivia inhaled a shaky breath.

She had not won that argument. Nor had she lost it.

Russell’s weighted gaze bore into her. Undoubtedly he’d side with her uncle.

The lanky man had begun working for her father eleven years prior. At thirty-two he was a full decade her senior. His mild manners and straightforward disposition made him easy to interact with, but in moments like this, when professional and family matters intertwined, their unique relationship could be difficult to navigate.

“Go on,” she said at last, reaching for the linen work apron she had slung over the chair when Mrs. Milton arrived. “I know you’re champing at the bit to share your opinion.”

He let out his typical good-natured chuckle, abandoned his chair, and stepped around the desk. He wore no coat, a bottle green corduroy waistcoat hugged his lean torso, and his blousy linen shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows. He leaned back against the edge of the desk and crossed one booted foot over the other. “He’s right, you know.”

She turned to face him. His curly, straw-blond hair seemed to always be in need of a trim. “I thought you’d say that.”

“I’m serious. I’ve heard the stories about George Wainbridge. A wealthy heir with too much time and money on his hands. Do I think you’ll be safe with Mrs. Milton as your chaperone? Yes. Do I think it a good idea to get involved with fops like George Wainbridge? Probably not.”

Olivia shrugged the apron over her shoulders, annoyed that his assessment of the situation did not match her own. “It’s a good thing I’m going for Mrs. Milton then and not Mr. Wainbridge.”

“Oh, come now, Olivia, don’t get testy. I’m only looking out for you, ’tis all. I’d hate to see you get yourself into a difficult situation.”

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She hastily secured the apron strings behind her back and avoided looking in Russell's direction. An odd dynamic had existed between them ever since her father died. It had been borne out of the need for them to work together to keep the business strong, but beyond that, she did consider him a friend, and as such, he knew far more about her personal life than he should.

"But," he lowered his voice as if taking her into his confidence, "to ease your mind a bit, I know of that collection."

She jerked her head up. "You do? Mrs. Milton's collection?"

He nodded. "Do you recall when your father and I escorted the Cavese Vase to Cloverton Hall after its arrival? We spent two nights there before returning to London. I didn't actually see her collection, mind you, but old man Milton told us that his wife had an astute penchant for oddities and antiquities, even superior to his own. He said it consisted of a great deal of items in their natural form—shells and gems and the sort."

"Well, that's encouraging, I suppose." She sank into the chair next to his desk, rested her elbows on the desk's edge, and cradled her chin in her hand. "Regardless, I've committed myself. I couldn't go back on my word now. I only hope the collection's value is enough to justify the journey. I hate to give my uncle the satisfaction of being right."

"You mean *you* don't want to be *wrong*, more like." Russell smirked before fixing his bright blue eyes on her. "I know you're frustrated with the state of things, but I do wonder if traipsing all the way to Yorkshire is the best way to go about proving your point."

"If I don't pursue it, another opportunity will not come. You

know that.”

He shook his head and straightened to his full height. “I’m not entirely sure what it is you’re chasing, but I wish you could accept things for how they are. I really do.”

Olivia longed for contentment too. But how could peace be found here? Now that her parents were dead, she was subject to her uncle’s whims. What was more, her uncle was turning her father’s dream into something unrecognizable. She hated it. She wanted freedom to continue her father’s work and passion on her own terms, but her options and resources were sorely limited. Any opportunity, no matter how small or unlikely, needed to be explored.

“I’ll support whatever you want to do.” Russell rounded the desk and sat down at his ledger. “If you want to go to Yorkshire, then go to Yorkshire. But be careful. People who go to those parties are different than the people we associate with.”

Russell’s warning echoed as she stood to collect the paperwork she’d been reviewing upon Mrs. Milton’s arrival. Olivia did believe that Russell had her best interests at heart, and yet he could never truly understand her reasonings. Time would tell if she was on a fool’s errand, but this was something she had to do—if only to prove it to herself.

Chapter 3

BROOKS'S GENTLEMEN'S CLUB. It did not matter how many times Lucas Avery stepped through these doors, he was in awe.

Candles were suspended from the ceiling and hung in wall sconces to illuminate the space, and once inside his eyes quickly adjusted to the smoky haze and flickering light. The low, energetic hum of male voices, broken by the occasional bout of spirited laughter, met his ears. Men from the highest echelons of society were gathered here for an evening's entertainment and camaraderie, but he was not here for such pursuits. Indeed, his goal for the night was infinitely more significant. In fact, this might be his last opportunity to salvage what was left of Avery & Sons.

Lucas accepted a small glass of port from a footman's tray and began his search for William Tate, his friend and his business's only remaining investor. He found the sandy-haired dandy quickly, seated at a gaming table engaged in a rousing round of faro. Card after card signaled Tate's impending fate, and once the game ended in his defeat, Tate muttered undecipherably, slapped his cards down, and shoved his chair away from the table.

It was then he took notice of Lucas. "Not my night, I'm afraid." He stood, pulled his gilded box of snuff from his pocket, popped it open, and extended it toward Lucas. "Took you long enough to get here."

Lucas raised a hand in refusal. "Sorry. Didn't get your message until quite late. What did I miss?"

Tate snorted. "Only my complete degradation at the card tables, and the billiards table before that. If I'd not been so bored waiting for you to arrive, I might have avoided that nasty business altogether. In all reality, my loss is on your shoulders." Tate pinched the black powder between his thumb and forefinger, quickly inhaled it, and returned the shiny box to his pocket.

"That's an interesting assessment," bantered Lucas. "I suppose you could have been doing something productive and followed up with Mr. Chalton over there to gauge his interest in selling me that German silver wine cistern he's been hinting he might want to part with. Don't you?"

Tate grimaced, then scoffed dismissively. "You know me better than that, old friend. Come on. Wainbridge is still here, but we must hurry. This might be your only chance to meet with him. He's quitting London on the morrow."

Lucas scanned the crowded chamber. Over the last few months he'd heard the name George Wainbridge more times than he could count, but he'd yet to meet the fellow. Fortunately for Lucas, Tate and Wainbridge had a longstanding friendship from their time at Cambridge.

As they wove their way through the throng of formally clad men toward the billiards room, Lucas nodded to those members

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who were familiar, but as he did, he was equally aware of the stares pointed in his direction. Several of the men had, at one point or another, been a client of his father's—which meant they also knew of the scandal that emerged just days before his death.

Lucas had perfected the mask of holding his head high and returning every glare with a smile and a nod. He'd give no indication of discomfort or, worse, embarrassment. If he wanted to reestablish the name Avery as the most important name in antiquities, he needed to make good on his goal for the evening: establish a relationship with the new master of Cloverton Hall in order to gain access to the famed chinoiserie items housed within its walls.

"I spoke with Wainbridge just yesterday," Tate explained as they traversed the lush Persian rug beneath them. "He's ready to sell the bulk of the collection, but he's been inundated with brokers and buyers vying for his attention. He came to me, of course, knowing that I dabble in such things, and after discussing it, he's agreed to meet with you. A word of caution, though. Wainbridge is a proud man, and I'm told Milton left the estate's finances in a bad way. He obviously wants that kept quiet."

This Lucas could understand. He'd been in the antiquities business long enough to know that if a man wanted to sell an item of high value, it was usually because he needed the money. Public knowledge that an item was for sale would create every manner of speculation—speculation, Lucas could only assume, that would interfere with Wainbridge's efforts to establish himself as an influential member of society.

"There he is," Tate pointed out, "in the green coat."

Wainbridge was standing in the corner next to a mantelpiece,

engaged in a lively conversation with an older gentleman. His intricately tied cravat and expertly fitted velvet tailcoat was a testament to his valet's skills, and the jewel-encrusted watch fob dangling from beneath his waistcoat glittered in the dancing fire's light.

Wainbridge took notice of them as they entered the billiards room, excused himself from his conversation, and approached them. At first glance the man appeared in his prime, but as he drew nearer, Lucas could see dark circles shadowed beneath his eyes, and in spite of the man's broad, easy grin, a tightness firmed his jaw.

"Tate! There you are." Wainbridge flashed his white smile in the low light. "I was beginning to think you forgot our meeting."

"No, no. Nothing like that. This is Lucas Avery, the man I told you about."

Lucas gave a slight bow.

"Good to know you, Avery. Come, let's sit." Wainbridge motioned to a footman for drinks and then led the way to an empty table in the corner. Once they were settled, he leaned back in his chair and fixed his unusually dark eyes on Lucas. "Your reputation precedes you, Avery."

Lucas quirked an eyebrow. "Does it?"

"You're the expert of all things antiquated and valuable, as I understand it," Wainbridge declared, a hint of amusement brightening his tone.

Lucas ignored the subtle air of condescension and chuckled. It was hardly the first time he'd encountered it, and yet, somehow, the simple fact that he knew this man needed his expertise overshadowed any offense. "Expert? Yes, I like to think so."

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Wainbridge laughed good-naturedly and leaned back to allow the footman to place three full glasses on the table and then sobered again as the footman departed. "I don't mind saying it, Avery. I don't like this situation I'm in."

Lucas matched Wainbridge's casual posture and leaned back. "And what situation is that?"

"Not being the expert." Wainbridge simpered smugly and draped his arm over the back of his chair. "It guts me, but I'm not too proud to admit that I'm up against my match. Tate swears you'll know what to do with this whole messy business. Tell me, did you know my uncle?"

Lucas nodded and wrapped his fingers loosely around the glass in front of him. "I met him when I was a boy. He traveled with my father on a explorative expedition to Cairo."

Wainbridge raised his dark brows. "Cairo?"

"Hmm. But that was nearly two decades ago. He was well-known in certain circles for his vigor in amassing the odd and the unusual, especially in the area of chinoiserie porcelain."

"Chinoiserie?"

"Decorative items that depict Chinese and Japanese motifs," Lucas explained.

"Ah, well." Wainbridge indulged in a drink. "There is plenty of that at Cloverton. At least I think that's what it is. Have you been there? To Cloverton Hall?"

"No."

"It's brimming with every sort of trinket one can envisage. Large and small. Beautiful and gaudy. One cannot turn a corner or enter a chamber without being stared at by this statue or tripping

over some useless table. It's quite vexatious."

Lucas could only imagine what sort of artifacts were tucked away within Cloverton's walls, but he also knew how overwhelming such things could be to those who weren't familiar with them. "So clearly you have no affection for your uncle's collections."

"Affection?" Wainbridge snorted. "On the contrary! I never want to see or hear the words *antiquity* or *porcelain* ever again. I desire nothing more than to have every single piece banished from Cloverton. I'm told some of them are quite valuable, but to me one bauble is just like the other."

"You're hardly the first man to inherit a collection and have no idea what to do with it. One man's passion can quickly become another man's burden."

"Exactly!" Wainbridge threw his hands up, as if relieved to finally be understood. "You see my quandary then. When I think about the fortune he wrapped up in those useless things, it sickens me. For all of my uncle's grandiose reputation, he was flat broke. In debt up to his gills. Does that surprise you?"

Lucas shrugged. "Not in the least. I'm aware of numerous investors and enthusiasts who allowed their passions to destroy them. Much like men with an affinity for gambling, amassing the rare and unique can be just as addictive." Lucas saw his opening to recommend himself. And he was going to take it. "Tell me. What is it I can do for you?"

"I want to sell the blasted things. Every single one of them. And I want to make as much money as I possibly can. But to do that I need someone I can trust. Tate says you're the best."

Lucas took a swig of port to hide any trace of the optimism

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budding within him. This was exactly what he wanted—needed—to hear. “If I may be so bold, you need to identify a buyer who is willing to pay a premium for such pieces. Fortunately, that is my specialty.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’ve spent my entire life studying every sort of antiquity, and items from the Far East are my prime interest. I maintain integral relationships with several collectors whose tastes are comparable to your uncle’s. It’s a matter of matching the piece with the buyer. It’s as simple as that.”

Wainbridge’s affable smile had faded, and now his long fingers tapped rapidly against the table. “I see. How long would all this take?”

Lucas intentionally kept his voice low. Calm. Trustworthy. “Well, that all depends on how quickly you need the money and how much you’re willing to accept. You could sell them tomorrow, I’ve no doubt, but it would be at a loss against their value. If you want to make the most money, your best bet is to look overseas.”

“Overseas? Where?”

“America,” Lucas clarified. “People there are eager to display wealth, and at this point in time, they’re willing to pay for the privilege.”

Wainbridge forced fingers through his thick ebony hair. “How does this begin?”

“A full assessment of your uncle’s possessions would be necessary to determine values, and once you and I agree on what items are to be sold, then I begin my work.”

“For a fee, of course.”

Lucas smirked, folding his hands before him. "Of course. But the more profit we realize, the more that lines both our pockets. And don't forget Tate. As one of my investors he'll profit as well."

Tate's chortle rent the somber tone that had enveloped the conversation. "It's a beautiful arrangement really."

"But those are all details to be sorted later," added Lucas. "Do you know if Milton had a collection log anywhere? Insurance policies? Anything of the sort?"

Wainbridge shook his head. "My uncle was not an organized man. Papers and portfolios are strewn all over the library and in his study. There's little rhyme or reason to it."

"I can review them if you'd like," Lucas offered.

"I'll take you up on that, and I have just the idea for it." Wainbridge shifted eagerly in his chair. "I'm hosting a house party at Cloverton in a little over a week to introduce a small group of friends to my new home. That would be an ideal time for you to visit. The both of you."

"Am I to understand that you've planned a house party and I'm not already on the list of guests?" Tate gaped, aghast. "Why was I not invited?"

Lucas ignored Tate's complaint to focus on the task at hand. "Normally for a project of this magnitude, I'd require the assistance of at least one of my agents and days, if not weeks, of dedicated work."

"No, no," protested Wainbridge. "This must be done surreptitiously, for I have yet to share with you my biggest hindrance yet—my uncle's widow."

Lucas drew a deep breath in response.

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“Aha!” Wainbridge’s vibrancy reappeared, and he pointed a finger in Lucas’s direction. “I see your expression. So you know her reputation then, do you?”

Just as Mr. Milton had notoriety, so did Mrs. Agnes Milton. But hers was one of a very different nature.

Wainbridge leaned forward and lowered his voice. “When my uncle died, I not only inherited Cloverton Hall and its properties, but a small estate farther north—Windhurst Manor. He included the smaller property in the will under the condition that I provide for his widow and permit her to live out her days on Cloverton property. As a self-made man, he had the authority to leave any stipulation in his will he chose, and I’m forced to abide by it. If I fail to uphold this condition, Windhurst Manor will pass to another cousin. The issue therein is that Cloverton Hall, what appears to be the jewel in the Milton crown, is in deep debt, and the smaller estate is the only one earning an income.”

“Enlighten me,” encouraged Lucas. “Surely any rights to the Cloverton collection were solely in her husband’s name. What does Mrs. Milton have to do with her late husband’s collection?”

“She’s mad!” Wainbridge cried out. “She knows full well that I must allow her residence at Cloverton, and she spends her days lordling over all as if she is still the mistress of the house. She refuses to allow anyone to touch a single thing that belonged to her husband. I’ve tried to be patient, but this cannot continue. Our best bet is to make sure she knows nothing of these plans until we are ready to act.”

Lucas exchanged glances with Tate again. This opportunity was unlike any other he’d encountered. It seemed almost too

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fortuitous. Just a few pieces from the famed Milton collection would not only save his business financially, but also firmly reestablish him as one of the premier antiquarians in London.

“Well, then,” Tate exclaimed as he lifted his glass in a toast. “To a great party, the old man, and to making lots of money.”



About the Author



Photo by Emilie Haney
of EAH Creative

SARAH E. LADD is an award-winning, bestselling author who has always loved the Regency period—the clothes, the music, the literature, and the art. A col-

lege trip to England and Scotland confirmed her interest in the time period, and she began seriously writing in 2010. Since then, she has released several novels set during the Regency era. Sarah is a graduate of Ball State University and holds degrees in public relations and marketing. She lives in Indiana with her family.

Visit Sarah online at SarahLadd.com

Instagram: [@sarahladdauthor](https://www.instagram.com/sarahladdauthor)

Facebook: [@SarahLaddAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/SarahLaddAuthor)

Twitter: [@SarahLaddAuthor](https://twitter.com/SarahLaddAuthor)

Pinterest: [@SarahLaddAuthor](https://www.pinterest.com/SarahLaddAuthor)