

She Be  
Damned

A Heloise Chancey Mystery



M.J.TJIA

 PanteraPress  
great storytelling

*For Mum, who introduced me to Christie,  
Marsh, Allingham and Sayers*

“A superb Nemesis in crinoline,  
bent on deeds of darkness and horror”

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Eleanor's Victory*

# Prologue

Pain bursts through Nell's abdomen, so intense it wrenches her awake. But she can't seem to open her eyes, her eyelids are too heavy.

He's muttering to himself. There's a jangle of metal.

The stench of vomit is strong, and the back of her thighs are wet.

She watches his shadow through her eyelashes as he moves around the room. She wants to struggle, get away from this awful pain but her wrists are tied to the arms of a chair. Her feet are bound, wide apart, in stirrups, and a terrible lethargy weighs upon her body.

He positions himself between her legs.

The piercing agony starts up again.

She wants to scream to him to stop, but she's too weak. And in any case, there's something crammed into her mouth, something metallic. Sharp.

He murmurs soft words to her. He tells her he'll be merciful. That the opiates he'd injected into her arm are strong. Presses a wad of cloth, bathed in something sweet, something acerbic, to her nose, her mouth. As she drifts off she thinks of how kind he is. She is thankful.

# Chapter One

The bedroom door closes softly behind him. I then hear the front door close.

Thank Christ. I sit up in bed and rub at the crick in my neck. I've been lying in the same decorous pose for some time, pretending to be asleep, conscious of his admiring gaze. Two hours ago, while it was still dark and he'd snored and farted on his own side of the bed, I'd taken a pee and chewed on mint washed down with water so my breath was fresh when he woke. I'd reclined, eyes closed, amongst my silk pillows, one arm flung above my head, mouth gently clamped shut. I lay slightly to the side, so that the fullness of my cleavage was accentuated. My sheer night dress fell away to reveal one rosy nipple, which tautened in the crisp morning air and I'd wondered if he would take it into his warm mouth, willed him to, almost squirmed with the anticipation of it, a giggle spiralling up my chest. But I hadn't initiated anything. I was the sleeping kitten, the sleeping beauty, after all.

My night dress slips to the floor as I step out of bed and I look at my reflection in the dresser's mirror, tilting my head from one side to the other. I pull my tousled dark hair forward, so that only the lower curve of my breasts are visible. Running my

fingers over the small triangle of hair between my legs, I wish it was a shade lighter, so that I could colour it yellow or blue. That would amuse my lovers. I pose for a moment, a cross between the Greek nude I'd sneaked in to see at the Exhibition of '51, and the girls ironically named Chastity and Faith in the photographs I keep in the bottom drawer of the nightstand. I pivot to see the reflection of my pale bottom. I hate it, I'm embarrassed by it. It's small and firm. I will never be a *Grande Odalisque*. I want it to be rounded and heavy like the base of a vase. I want his fingers to be able to knead it like it's biscuit dough.

Taking a step closer to the mirror I scrutinise my face. I'm vain, and I am not vain. I know I'm beautiful, but I know my beauty is to be utilised, tended. The winged eyebrows, the high cheek bones, and the full bottom lip that I pout as I gaze at myself. The colour of my eyes are changeable, depending upon my mood, or maybe even upon how much wine I'd enjoyed the night before; sometimes they're as smooth as a hazelnut, other times flecked with gold. They are perfectly set off by my heart-shaped face, so I'm told. 'Shimmering pools of melancholy, making thy heart ache'. Isn't that how that ridiculous poet had described my eyes? More like 'shimmering pools of colic, making thy middles ache'. I grin, a deep dimple puckering my left cheek. I own my face, but so do others. I'm almost famous, infamous. When I think of this I feel a flutter of excitement in the pit of my stomach, but I also feel a little sick. I've worked towards this for a long time, even before I knew what could be achieved. And of course, now I have other strengths to work with besides this beauty. I have more to trade than just my body.

I hurry into my dressing room and tug on the bell pull. Wrenching open the door I call for Amah to come and help me dress. We will have company soon.

I'm already tying the ribbon on my silk underwear when Amah Li Leen enters. She's a plump, middle-aged woman from the East. She's wearing a plain, white blouse and black skirt, and her shiny black hair is coiled into a low bun. I never cease to be irritated by how she dresses. We've often argued about it. I want her to dress in colourful sarongs from Malaya or those heavy Chinese smocks with the mandarin collars. I want her to fit in with the Oriental décor of my house. Furniture and art from the Orient are very much in style at the moment, and many men, especially those in shipping and diplomatic work, admire how I've decorated my rooms. So she could at least look the part if my guests are to catch a glimpse of her. But she won't. She says she doesn't want to stand out, although it's almost as if her sober apparel accentuates her almond-shaped eyes, her bronzed skin colour.

"What is Sir Thomas visiting for, Heloise?" she asks as she helps me shrug into a sheer chemise. The faint cadence of a Liverpool accent is discernible in her speech.

"His missive just said something about a number of suspicious deaths in the Waterloo area."

"Why does he think this would be of interest to you?"

I gasp as she tightens my corset. "I am hoping he wants me to investigate."

"Ridiculous," she mutters, helping me step into a voluminous, crinoline hoop. "Nearly as ridiculous as this contraption."

Amah's skirt is far narrower than what's fashionable. "I would be mortified to be seen in your skirt, Amah."

"Well, I'm used to it, aren't I?"

I laugh. "That's a lie. If it were not so cold here, you would wear much less." I look for an answering smile from her but, not receiving one, I sit down at my dressing table. Tears smart in

my eyes as Amah Li Leen brushes and pulls my hair into loops, tutting that there is no time to curl the ends.

“What will you wear today?” she asks, as she moves to the dressing room that houses my vast collection of gowns.

Gone are the days of wearing the same gown until it’s stiff with grime and drudgery – that one I had of grey batiste, bought for a song from the Belgian girl grown too large in the belly, that hid stains yet showed sweat under the arms or, later, the blue silk, which was more expensive but acquired the shine of poverty and overuse. I don’t even want to think of the creased, brown sheathes of leather I wore as shoes. The sour reek that wafted from my feet, embarrassing, distracting, as I grimaced with feigned pleasure pressed against a brick wall.

“How about the new lilac one with the orange-blossom trim?”

“I think maybe the dove-grey would be better for a meeting with Sir Thomas,” says Amah. She comes back to the dressing table carrying the heavy gown across both her forearms and deposits it onto a plush armchair.

I frown slightly. “I suppose you’re right. But I will wear the crimson petticoat beneath it.”

She pulls the petticoat, then the dress, over my body. Although it does not reveal my shoulders, it is gathered at the waist and cut low over my breasts. I dab perfumed powder across my neck and bosom.

“Maybe just a little lace at the front,” I say, smiling. “I don’t need to show so much flesh for the work Sir Thomas offers me.”

I go to add something gay to my apparel, a flower or a feather, but there’s a hard rap on the door knocker and I can hear Bundle, my butler, on his way to answer it.

I’m clasping down the sides of my gown to fit through the doorway when I notice the stiff expression on Amah’s face. I

squeeze her arm and lean down to kiss her on the cheek. “One day we’ll be back in the sunlight.”



I’m surprised to find two men in my drawing room. Sir Thomas Avery I know well. He is a man of maybe forty-five years, a little shorter than me, with thick, frizzled mutton chop sideburns. He steps forward and takes my hand in greeting. He then introduces the stranger standing by one of the windows which overlooks the street below.

“This is Mr Priestly,” he says.

The other man doesn’t approach me but bows his head. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs Chancey,” he says.

His lips widen a little, but he makes no real effort to smile. A thin frame and large ears preclude Mr Priestly from being a handsome man, but he is well, if soberly, dressed and gentlemanly. His eyes flick over my figure and then, with more leisure, he looks around my drawing room.

His gaze follows the pattern of the Oriental rug, the scrollwork on the mahogany side board and the richly damasked sofas with intricately worked legs. He takes in the assortment of Chinese blue and white vases in the dark cabinets and the jade figurines on the mantelpiece. Finally his gaze rests on the large mural that adorns the furthest wall. A painting of a peacock, sat on a sparse tree branch, fills the space. The peacock, a fusion of azure, green and gold leaf with a regal crown of feathers, displays its resplendent train so that the golden eyes of its plumage can be admired. It might be a trick of the light and artistry, but the peacock’s tail feathers seem to quiver.

“How very... exotic,” he says.

He moves towards the fireplace and studies the painting in the gilded frame above it. The portrait is of a young woman dressed in Javanese costume. Her hair is pulled into a low bun, silver earrings decorate her lobes, and she holds a white flower behind her back. Richly decorated batik is wrapped around her breasts, and a tight sarong swathes her lower body.

“Is that you?” he asks me, surprise in his voice.

“Yes.” I stand by him and look up at the portrait. “My friend Charles Cunningham lent me the fabric for the sitting. His father brought the lengths of silk and batik back from Java, after one of his assignments with Raffles. Such beautiful, earthy colours, aren’t they?”

Mr Priestly steps a few feet away from me. “I’m afraid I don’t follow this fashion for aping savages.”

I feel a prick of resentment at the insult to my drawing room and portrait – the insult to me. But I learnt long ago to hold my temper in check, I have learnt to behave with decorum, for I no longer work in a Liverpool back-alley. Smiling sweetly as I lower myself and my wide skirts carefully onto the sofa, I say, “Oh, don’t feel bad. Not everyone can be *a la mode*, can they?”

Sir Thomas clears his throat loudly. “Maybe we should discuss the purpose of our visit, Mrs Chancey.”

“Yes, let’s,” I answer, patting the sofa cushion next to mine. “Please have a seat.”

Sir Thomas sits down and looks at Mr Priestly expectantly. However, rather than speak himself, Mr Priestly gestures for Sir Thomas to proceed.

“Well, Mrs Chancey,” says Sir Thomas. “I have come to ask you to do a spot of work for us again.”

“Wonderful. Who will I need to be this time?”

Sir Thomas smiles. “Certainly your prior experience as a stage actress has benefitted us, Mrs Chancey. And it is true. We do need you to do some covert investigating for us.”

One of Sir Thomas’ many businesses includes a private detective agency. Although he has a surfeit of male detectives, he has found it very difficult to find females willing or able to sleuth. Having both the willingness and ability, I’ve worked on and off for Sir Thomas over the last eighteen months. I’ve posed as a sewing woman to gain access to a noble house, I’ve rouged and revealed myself as a street prostitute in order to spy on a group of young men and I have even performed as a harem dancer in order to reconnoitre at a foreign embassy.

Sir Thomas clears his throat again. “Yes. Well, maybe the task we ask of you this time will not be so enjoyable, I’m afraid.”

He glances at Mr Priestly, who nods him on.

“As you know, we are investigating the deaths of several women in the Waterloo area.”

“How did they die?” I ask.

Sir Thomas waves his hand. He won’t go on.

Mr Priestly stares hard at me for a few moments. “Sir Thomas assures me I can broach any subject with you, Mrs Chancey.”

“Of course,” I smile. He means because I’m a whore, of course, but I won’t let him think his sting has broken skin.

He turns and gazes out the window as he speaks. “It seems that each of these women – well, really, they were prostitutes – had terminated a pregnancy and died soon after from blood loss and infection.”

“Well, unfortunately that happens far too frequently.”

“That is so, but luckily the body of the last prostitute who died in this manner was taken to the hospital to be used as a

specimen, and they found that..." He glances over at me, his eyes appraising.

"What?" I ask.

"They found parts of her body missing."

"What parts?"

"Her uterus was gone, but so were her other... feminine parts."

Revulsion curls through my body and I feel the pulse of an old wound between my legs. I glance at Sir Thomas whose eyes fall away from mine.

"What makes you think her death is connected to the other deaths in Waterloo?"

"It was the fourth body they had received in this condition in the last seven weeks."

"What? And was it not reported to the police?" My voice rises in disbelief.

Mr Priestly shrugs. "Well, they were only prostitutes, after all. At first the hospital staff thought they were the victims of amateur hysterectomies, but when they found that each of the women was also missing..."

"Missing...?" I shake my head a little, hoping I'm not about to hear what I think is coming, although a part of me, tucked away beneath the horror, wonders how he'll describe it.

Mr Priestly straightens his collar. "Apparently all their sexual organs were missing. Inside and out. I am positive you know to what I am referring, Mrs Chancey."

I can't help but press my knees together. I nod.

"Accordingly, it became apparent that there was a pattern to these deaths," he continues.

"And what do the police think now?"

"Obviously someone in the area is butchering these unfortunate women, whether accidentally or in spite is uncertain."

However – and it’s not surprising – the police don’t want to waste too much time investigating the deaths of prostitutes when the rights of decent, law-abiding Londoners need to be protected.”

Indignation sharpens my thoughts, but I command my body to relax. After all, what else is to be expected? If I’m to mix in polite society I need to mimic their ways. I force a languid smile to my face, eyes narrowed, as I watch Mr Priestly. “So, what on earth do you want to look into these deaths for? If the police are not interested, why should we be?”

“A friend of mine heard of these cases and has become immensely interested. It is on behalf of my friend that I have engaged Sir Thomas’ services.”

“And why has your friend become so interested?”

Mr Priestly takes his time seating himself in an armchair, crossing one leg over the other. He scrutinises my face for a few moments before answering. “My friend has a special concern. It is for this reason we ask for your assistance.”

“What is this special concern?”

“My friend is a respectable gentleman, well known to his peers. A short time ago he found out that his daughter was in an unhappy condition. She is not married.” Mr Priestly pauses to let the awful truth of his statement sink in.

“Ah, I see. And what did he do?” I ask.

Mr Priestly frowns. “Naturally he disowned her. He allowed her to pack some of her belongings and had her taken to a convent near Shropshire.”

“Naturally,” I repeat, my voice dry.

“Yes, but she did not make it to Shropshire. She bribed the coachman to take her to a hotel in Charing Cross, and from there she has disappeared.”

“Do you know why she wanted to be left at that hotel?”

“Apparently her... the other party... was staying there. He is a Frenchman.” He nods, as if this fact alone throws light on the cause of her predicament.

“But nobody knows where she is now?”

Sir Thomas takes up the thread of the story. “At first Mr Priestly required my men to look into her activities at the hotel, but upon questioning Monsieur Baudin, we learnt she had left his care most swiftly.”

“I suppose he did not want her now she was in trouble?”

“Something like that, it would seem. Since then he seems to have flown the coop,” says Sir Thomas. “My detectives have since found out that the young lady took a cab to Waterloo where she spent a little over three weeks in a boarding house before moving into another well-known establishment nearby.”

“What establishment?”

Mr Priestly purses his lips for a moment. “A house of ill-repute, it would seem. She moved to an abode owned by one Madame Silvestre.”

“Ah yes, I’m aware of her services,” I reply, thinking of how it’s been many years since I have had the pleasure of the old cat’s acquaintance. “Do you need me to fetch her?”

“If only it were that easy. It seems she has since disappeared. Nobody knows where she has gone.”

The sudden realisation dawns on me. “Are you concerned that she too has been mutilated?”

“We are not sure what has become of her,” says Sir Thomas. “Madame Silvestre might just be hiding her, or maybe the young lady has moved on to another place.”

“Or maybe she is one of the butcher’s victims,” says Mr Priestly. He withdraws a card case from his pocket and carefully takes out a small photograph. He hands this to me. “Eleanor Carter.”

The likeness is of a very fair, young woman. Her face is small and serious and the bodice of her gown is buttoned tightly to the base of her throat.

“How old is she?” I ask.

“She is only seventeen. She is quite small and pretty – this photograph does not do her justice,” says Mr Priestly. “My friend is worried for her safety.”

“He might have thought of that before he threw her out onto the street,” I say, before I can help myself.

Mr Priestly’s brow lifts as he looks across at me coldly. “Although it is out of the question for her to return to her familial home, naturally my friend is troubled. He would like to see her ensconced safely at the nunnery.”

I glance from Sir Thomas to Mr Priestly. “You want me to find her?”

Sir Thomas sits back into the sofa and extends his legs out before himself. He studies his shoes as he says, “Well, as you now know, I have already had my detectives scouting for information on Miss Carter, but they have failed to find her.”

“And you think my womanly touch might avail?” I ask, amused.

Sir Thomas resettles himself again. “As simple questioning has not sufficed, we wondered if you could possibly discover Miss Carter’s movements with more covert methods.”

“Such as...?”

Mr Priestly makes an impatient motion with his hand. “You seemed interested in picking up the mantle of another character again, Mrs Chancey, and that is what we are asking of you. I believe it won’t be too much of a stretch for you, for we would like you to pose as a...” he glances at Sir Thomas, “a ‘gay girl’, I think they’re called.”

I stop breathing for a moment as annoyance flushes through my body. It's true that I posed as a street prostitute for Sir Thomas, but that was just a lark, and it's also true that in the dim past I'd worked in many places, both good and bad, but I choose not to think of that now. So, for this absolute pig of a man to refer to me as a mere gay girl makes me angry. I'm no longer a lowly *grisette*, willing to flatter or implore my way to a few more pennies or ribbons while I try to hide my desperation.

I lift my chin. "You want me to pose as a prostitute?"

"Precisely."

"At Madame Silvestre's?"

"If they would have you, certainly," says Mr Priestly, his voice even. "What better place for you to be situated in order to find out where Miss Carter is?"

I heave myself up from the sofa and stride to the bay window. My skirt bumps a side-table causing a figurine of a Chinese goddess to totter. Go back to work in a brothel, for the sake of a little detection? I'm not so sure.

Sir Thomas puts his hands out entreatingly. "Mrs Chancey, not only can you investigate the disappearance of Miss Carter, you can also look into the other deaths. You can try to find more information about the monster who is harming these women."

"Who knows?" interrupts Mr Priestly. "You could even pretend to be pregnant and see where that takes you."

"Be your bait, you mean?" I ask, my voice flippant.

"Whatever it takes, Mrs Chancey, whatever it takes." Mr Priestly slips his fingers into his gloves. "You may put it about that Miss Carter is a young relative of your own, but in no way must her name be connected back to my friend. Sir Thomas will take care of the case from now on. I am sure you will be remunerated..." he glances around my sumptuous drawing room, "as grandly as possible."

I turn from the window, the smile on my face fixed. “I don’t work for Sir Thomas for the money, Mr Priestly. I have my own independent means. I follow inquiries for Sir Thomas purely for the pleasure of it, and in this I would find no pleasure. I’m afraid I will need to decline your kind offer.”

He stops pulling on his remaining glove and eyes me for a few, long moments. “I must assure you that I do not request you to take this case – I insist you take this case.”

“Insist? You cannot make me take this case, Mr Priestly.”

“Mrs Chancey, I know the local magistrate, Sir Herbert Brimm. I know for a fact that he and others are interested in your mysterious activities in the Limehouse area. One word from me and you will be examined by the local police and the doctor in their employ.”

I can feel anger drain the colour from my cheeks and my fingers quiver with adrenalin. I’ve heard of this movement to examine prostitutes for contagious diseases. He would menace me with this detestable law that terrorises prostitutes and offends even righteous women? He would dare threaten me with a disgusting doctor probing my body for sickness?

“That will never eventuate, Mr Priestly. I know far more important and powerful people than you.”

“Ah, you must mean your protector,” replies Mr Priestly. “Tell me, how would he like an examination of your private life smeared in the newspapers for his wife and esteemed friends to see? Think of his poor children. Be sure, Mrs Chancey, the damage can be done before he is able to assist you.”

I grip my waist, my fingertips digging into the unyielding corset. My popularity with patrons is closely tied to my discretion. It has always been so. But in this trembling moment of rage I have nothing to lose. “Do it then, sir. Do your worst,” I say, struggling to keep my voice low.

Sir Thomas steps between us, his hands raised. "Please, Mr Priestly, there's no need for these threats." He turns to me. "Mrs Chancey, surely we can come to an agreement on how you can investigate this in a manner with which you are comfortable. We really do need your assistance."

I look into Sir Thomas' flushed, kind face and then shrug one shoulder. "Allow me to think it over. And if I do decide to proceed," I glare at Mr Priestly, "I will only deal with Sir Thomas."

"That suits me perfectly," says Mr Priestly. He leaves the room without bidding farewell.

Sir Thomas thanks me profusely and presses my hand goodbye between his clammy ones. "I will be in touch." He follows Mr Priestly to the front door as swiftly as his short legs will take him.

From the window I watch the men descend the few front steps down. I make sure to stand a little behind the silk drapes so that they can't see me. Stopping on the last step Mr Priestly turns to Sir Thomas and says, "What on earth do you think a little dollymop like her can achieve?"

"She's done some very good work for us..." Sir Thomas protests. The rest of the conversation is drowned out by the arrival of their carriage.

I stand very still for a few minutes, watching the carriage pull away, until I sense someone behind me.

"What are you thinking?" asks Amah. "Are you wondering how you will investigate this dreadful affair?"

I turn my head slightly, and meet her eye. "No. I am considering in what way I will repay the precious Mr Priestly for his insults."

## Li Leen

*I watched her through the peacock's tail again today. She really is beautiful. She stands so tall, so straight and her nose is little, not flat like mine. I used to be beautiful when I was young and lived by the sea in Makassar. Because we were richer than most I had gold bangles that jangled on my wrists and gold rings in my ears. My hair was black then, only black, without the stripes of white that line my hair now. I never pulled my hair back, I allowed it to drape over my left shoulder and rest on my breast as I counted out buttons or weighed the fruit for customers in our produce store. Oh yes, I was beautiful. The men of Makassar admired me, as did the Dutch men, but no one ever asked for my hand.*

*She would find it hard to believe that I once was beautiful too. She only sees me as I am now. People notice her when she walks past. They even follow her sometimes. I am anonymous. Nobody watches me. So I watch her.*

*Sir Thomas admires her; why else does he continue to employ her in this manner, so that she needs to use the skills she has learnt outside the bed? He is twice her age, yet he blushes when he speaks to her. But that Mr Priestly, the one with the big ears, I did not like how he looked at her when she was not noticing. He looked at her long and hard, but like he hated her. And when she turned to him again he smiled that sour smile of his. I am not quite sure what he said that made her so angry, but I hope she is careful. He is dangerous, that man.*