

# THE PRETENDER

(BOOK ONE IN THE LIAR'S CLUB)

CELESTE BRADLEY



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Don't miss Celeste Bradley's other romance series

Praise

Copyright

To my sister Cindy, who is always there.

I must thank my husband, for being my best friend and foremost cheerleader and for putting up with being called “Fabio” at work.

I’d like to thank my daughters, for loving me even though I never remember to thaw out the good stuff for dinner.

Many wonderful women helped me with this book. Some writers, some patient readers. Darbi Gill, Robyn Holiday, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Cheryl Lewallen, Joanne Markis, Jennifer Smith, Alexis Tharp.

Everyone should have such friends.

## The Liar's Creed

In the guise of knaves we operate on the fringes of the night, forsaking home, hearth, and love for the protection of all.

We are the invisible ones.

## *Chapter One*

*London, 1813*

She had married Mortimer Applequist on April 7, 1813, in a moment of mingled exasperation and imagination. He wasn't much of a husband, being merely a name to offer up when people dived too deeply into her affairs. Still, in that he had suited Miss Agatha Cunnington very well indeed.

Until now.

On the outset of her journey, Agatha had been stalled and stymied more times than she could count. Every time it had been by some well-meaning soul trying to save her from herself.

As if a woman were incapable of purchasing a ticket and traveling from Lancashire to London without the supervision of a husband!

Upon announcing her "married" state, however, Agatha met with nothing but assistance and polite respect.

Truly, she should have made up a husband years ago.

Because she disliked leaving poor Mortimer as merely a name to spout when necessary, Agatha had spent many a pleasant moment on the journey visualizing him in precise detail. After all, he was her creation, was he not?

He would be tall but not bulky. Elegant but not foppish. Dark but not swarthy. If only she had been able to make his face come into focus in her imagination, she would have been entirely satisfied with her invented spouse.

Mortimer had become increasingly handy when she had arrived in town, allowing her to rent her little house—her very own!—on respectable Carriage Square and hire a few servants.

Most important, Mortimer had allowed her to fully pursue all venues in her search for her missing brother, James.

But all of that would end today if she could not come up with some sort of plan.

The hall clock chimed the hour, and desperation began rising within Agatha. She turned to pace back up the front hall of her lovely new house, ignoring the rose-covered wallpaper and gleaming dark woods that had lured her to select it. With her arms folded tight and head down, she was lost in her scurrying thoughts.

Why was it the men in Agatha Cunnington's life were never about when she needed them?

She could dress up Pearson—no, too old and too stout. She could pass Harry—no, too young, just a boy, really. She'd given Harry the footman position as a favor to Pearson, but the butler's nephew could scarcely see over his two enormous left feet.

She needed a man, and she needed him immediately!

\* \* \*

Simon Montague Raines, aka Simon Rain, paused outside the servants' entrance of the house on Carriage Square to check his disguise. His face and hands were blacked with soot, and the long brushes slung across one shoulder were believably well used. As well they should be, having been his bread and butter once upon a time.

His target's house seemed ordinary enough from the outside, with its tidy entry and scrubbed steps. It was amazing the corruption that could hide behind such a harmless facade. Vice, lies, even treason.

"Mrs. Mortimer Applequist," said the lease. Yet the rent was paid from a certain account that Simon had been watching for weeks. The account of a man who well knew the definition of treachery.

Simon should have sent one of his operatives in on this one and remained aloof and objective, as any good spymaster should.

But Simon had to admit to himself that this case had become personal. Someone was killing off his men. Men with identities so secret that they scarcely knew of one another's existence.

Only two men within the Liar's Club had the information necessarily to bring down its members one by one. Simon and one other. A man who hadn't reported in for several weeks. A man with a sudden increase in his account at the London Bank. A man who had, according to Simon's sources at the bank, paid well to rent and furnish the tidy little house before Simon.

With a grim smile, Simon hefted his brooms and prepared to play the hated role of chimneysweep one last time. All in defense of the Crown, of course.

\* \* \*

The situation was becoming most desperate. Agatha had been combing her fertile mind for a solution all morning and still nothing had occurred to her. The rug in the front hall might never recover from her frenzied pacing.

Agatha turned to pace again—and ran full force into an obstacle that had not been there a moment before. Stunned, she staggered but didn't fall.

"'Ere now, missus! You all right? Didn't see you coming."

Agatha blinked and focused her vision on the black expanse before her. Black coat, black vest, black hands on the sleeves of her dimity morning gown—

“My dress!”

She was set swiftly back on her feet.

“Oh, well, it were a close one. Had to decide if you’d rather dirty your sleeves or your bum when you hit the floor. Guess I called it wrong.”

Agatha was being teased and rather freshly, too. Ready to let the fellow have it, she looked up—

Into the bluest eyes she had ever seen, in a face as black as midnight. Or soot.

Soot! All over her dress, right when she was expecting Lady Winchell—

*Soot.*

*Chimneysweep.*

*Man.*

She looked up again. Tall, but as lean as a greyhound. Just like Mortimer. Even the soot couldn’t disguise his even features.

“Sorry I am, missus. It’s a pretty dress, or it were. I don’t suppose the soot’ll come out—”

He was perfect.

“Never mind the soot,” she interrupted. “Come with me.”

He only blinked at her, and she couldn’t help her sudden fascination with the sapphire brilliance of his eyes. Then she noticed he hadn’t moved yet.

“Well, come along then.”

With another blink, the chimneysweep shrugged and fell into step behind her. She led him up the curved stairs and down a short hall.

Before a paneled door, she turned and held up a hand. “Wait. Did anyone see you come in?”

A knowing gleam entered those lovely eyes.

“I come in through the kitchen, mum. Blokes like me knows better than to use the front door.”

Agatha shook her head. “No, I care nothing for the people on the street. Did any of the servants see you come in?”

“Well, Cook let me in, but she ’ardly looked at me. Up to her elbows in flour, she was.” He grinned at her. “If you’re after a bit o’ fun, Simon Rain’s your man. After a wash, o’ course.”

Agatha was barely listening. Was there enough time? “Yes, yes, I’ll get a bath for you.”

Agatha opened the door to the bedchamber she’d lovingly prepared for Jamie. She ignored the few of his possessions she had brought with her from home. There was no point in mooning over his books and his personal items. Sentiment would have to wait.

In an hour, three of the most influential women on the Chelsea Hospital Board of

Volunteers would be calling upon Agatha and her husband, Mortimer, of whom they had heard so much.

Oh, why hadn't she kept her mouth shut? She could have simply listened when the other women talked about their husbands. She could have answered vaguely when they had asked about hers.

Instead, she had carried on about "dear Mortie," enumerating all his attributes and virtues. He was a scholar, a musician, a man of enormous charm and appeal—

And he was at home.

Well, she'd had to say that.

Lady Winchell, with her smarmy smile and her gimlet eyes, had wondered if it was quite proper for such a young bride to be working amongst the men at the hospital all day while her husband traveled abroad.

Now, Lady Winchell and two other highly placed ladies were coming to meet Mortimer.

Agatha remembered Lady Winchell's suspicious manner and couldn't help a shiver. If she were found out, she would never be allowed to stay here in town alone. Her self-proclaimed guardian would fetch her home within days and she would never accomplish her mission.

Her choice seemed clear. She could admit to her situation and return to Appleby, and all that awaited her there.

Or she could lie. Again.

Well, in for a penny, in for a great many pounds. Putting one hand on the chimneysweep's back, she gave him a little push into the spacious bedchamber.

"Get undressed behind that screen. I'll have your bath brought up immediately." She had best not let the servants in on this little bit of playacting. Newly hired, they had certainly never seen Mortimer. She could always say that he'd been "called away" on another adventure by supper, and then things would go back to normal again.

After shutting the door on the bemused chimneysweep, Agatha pasted a happy smile on her face and hurried back down the stairs.

"Pearson," she called to her butler, "I've just had the most delightful surprise. Mr. Applequist has come home! He is terribly weary and wants his bath straightaway."

Coming from the parlor, where he'd been overseeing the preparations for her guests, Pearson raised a silvered brow and looked askance at the front door, which of course hadn't admitted a soul all morning.

"Yes, madam, happy news indeed. Shall I attend Mr. Applequist until a manservant can be engaged?"

Agatha folded her arms to disguise the black hand prints on her sleeves. "No, Pearson, that won't be necessary. I'll tend my husband myself. After all, we have so

much to ... talk about.”

Now why was he looking at her that way, with both eyebrows nearly to his hairline? Couldn't a woman talk to her own husband?

“As you wish, madam. Nellie will bring the water directly.”

“Thank you, Pearson. I shall be down in just a moment to greet the ladies.”

By the time Nellie went back downstairs with the last of the hot water pails, Agatha was freshly changed and her hair repaired. Quickly she slipped into the other bedchamber.

The room was the finest in the house, much better than her own. Green velvet draperies framed the bed, and the hearth was nearly the size of a kitchen fire. There was no one in sight and only the large steaming tub in evidence. Had he left?

“Hello? Mr. Chimneysweep? Are you here?”

“That you, missus? Crikey, a bloke's like to freeze his you-know-what off by the time he gets his bath round here.”

From behind the painted Oriental screen that stood in a corner of the room, she heard a rustle.

“Oh, no! *No*, don't come”—it was too late—“out.” From behind the screen had stepped a man who was quite very nearly naked.

She should turn away. Yes, definitely.

She couldn't turn away. She could only stand and stare, without blinking or even breathing.

With the majority of soot wiped from his hands and face, the man before her was as beautiful as a Greek statue. Lapis blue eyes shone in a poetically boned face, with a mussed shock of black hair and the body from her dreams, dreams she hadn't even known she'd had.

Whipcord muscle wrapped around his lean frame. Even his stomach rippled in a most diverting way. His shoulders weren't enormously broad, but they were square with strength, the muscle twining down his arms to wide hands that grasped the toweling at his narrow waist.

Agatha blinked at the size of those hands. Heavens. Were his feet as large? She let her gaze travel down. Oh my.

Jamie's boots would never fit him. “Blast!”

The fellow's grin disappeared and he looked down. “What's wrong w' me feet?”

“Let me see your boots.”

“Whafore?” His voice rose in indignation. “They're mine. I ain't stole nothing!”

“I need to examine your boots to see if they'll do.”

Still scowling suspiciously at her, he bent to retrieve his boots from behind the screen.

Agatha almost swallowed her tongue at the view.

“Let me see.” She held out a hand and he gave her the boots. She examined them closely, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“These are rather fine. Yes, I think they’ll do well enough. Let me have Pearson give them a cleaning while you are in your bath.”

She turned to go. “We’ll be expecting you downstairs in a quarter of an hour. Do be sure not to say a word, not to anyone.”

“But, missus, wha’ about”—the fellow gestured to the bed—“you know?”

Agatha looked at the bed, and then back at him.

“You may have a nap later if you like, although I shouldn’t think you’ll find any of this terribly exhausting.”

She smiled brightly at him.

“Yes, you’ll do nicely. Your new things are on the chair. Hurry now. And remember, *not one word.*”

Agatha shut the door on her beautiful chimneysweep and drew in a long breath. My, oh my. Did all men look like that underneath? Somehow she doubted it.

Then she shook off the spell of his masculine charms. She must focus on the problem at hand. Trotting downstairs to see to refreshments, she firmly denied herself the imagining of that perfect body in the bath.

Wet.

Covered in soap.

*Oh my.*

\* \* \*

Simon twisted his lips cynically as he squeezed the sponge over his already perfectly clean torso. Here he was, in Mr. Applequist’s house, in Mr. Applequist’s tub, with Mr. Applequist’s lady awaiting him downstairs.

If she was indeed Mrs. Applequist, for that was not the name on the account that had rented this house and hired these servants. That account belonged to none other than James Cunnington, Simon’s fellow spy, former best friend, and probable traitor.

At the thought of James, Simon’s fingers tightened on the sponge until it was wrung dry. Years of friendship and trust, sold out for a bag of gold or possibly no more than a woman’s favors.

For James was a man in love, or at least in lust. Simon had heard it from his protégé himself, when last he’d seen him. James had sat across from him in Simon’s private office, preoccupied with his latest mistress.

“She’s incredible, Simon. As limber as a snake, and as lusty as a mink. Like no woman I’ve ever known. The things she does! So much energy...” James had thrown

his head back on his chair and given a great sigh of weary satisfaction. "I'm exhausted, but I'm sure I'll recover before tonight. You should find yourself such a woman, old man."

Simon had only grunted, too engrossed in the recent reports from the front to take up the challenge.

"You don't have to marry a woman, Simon. You don't even have to love one. But you need a little fun, Simon. A bit of muslin to take your mind off work. Just the thing for you, to get you out of this dusty office. Get your juices flowing before you become as rigid as our dear founder, cold in his grave."

James had eyed the portrait of Daniel Defoe that hung behind Simon's head, squinting as if to make out something not usually seen. "Although I'll wager he was a juicy fellow in his day. A man of adventure. You'd never catch him moldering behind a mountain of paperwork."

Simon had finally looked up at that. "What do you call penning hundreds of novels and works of political satire, if not paperwork?"

James had only grinned affably, happy to have gotten a rise from his mentor and superior, even if it meant losing the point.

"I could find out if she has a sister. Or a friend."

"No thank you. James, I've been where you are, and I decided it was seldom worth it. It makes one too vulnerable. So I'll leave the womanizing to you."

James had dropped his clowning and leaned forward, his elbows dislodging a week's worth of counterintelligence reports.

"Seriously, Simon, you need to get about more. Get a bit of perspective. There is more to life than the Liar's Club. Hell, there's a whole world outside of Europe that doesn't give a damn about Napoleon, nor how many horse soldiers he has, nor how many spies in London!"

Simon had gazed at his young friend. There was so much that James didn't understand. He was a good operative, quick-witted and dedicated, but the only one James put at risk was himself. If he was caught, the only neck in Napoleon's noose would be his own. At least until he took over Simon's position as spymaster of the Liar's Club.

Simon couldn't afford mistakes. He held in his hands the lives of every one of his men and, in a grander scope, perhaps even the lives of everyone in England.

There was no time for play, with a burden such as that. Not a moment to lose, nor a fact to disregard.

He had to remain on top of the mounting pile of clues, in order that the next time he sent out one of his Liars, perhaps even James himself, the man would go with the best and newest information that Simon could give him.

So that when one of them died in the service of his country, Simon could try to ease his own pain with the knowledge that he had done his best. Perhaps someday it would work.

James apparently had no such concerns. Taking his new assignment in hand, James had given Simon a half-salute and a grin. He'd left, whistling, to cadge a last drink from Jackham behind the bar.

Simon had never heard from him again.

That alone would have only given rise to worry, not accusation. But it then became obvious that someone was supplying descriptions and identities of Simon's men to the opposition. One man after another turned up dead or injured.

Simon had entertained the possibility that the leak was someone higher in the chain of command than himself, so sure had he been of James's loyalty.

Then a large amount of money was suddenly deposited in James's account, so large that Simon had been forced to suspect that worst of all conclusions.

His spy was spying for the enemy. There was no way to know precisely how it had happened. So many things could turn a spy, from sedition to seduction.

He hadn't discovered the name of James's mistress, more's the pity, but he'd kept a watch on his protégé's bank account. Finally, a certain little Mrs. Applequist had made her appearance, freely using James's money to set herself up in style.

That's when Simon had made his move.

And only this morning he'd wondered how he could gain entry into the house in Carriage Square. The chimneysweep guise had worked well for him in his youth, but that had been before he'd reached his full height.

He'd planned everything carefully and had deliberately picked a moment when the cook was likely to be busy in which to knock on the back door. A quickly muttered, "Chimbley cleanin' for Missus Applequist," and he'd been inside.

Once he'd been admitted, he'd slipped through the house with an eye out for the butler. Fellows like the fine silver-haired houseman downstairs would look suspiciously indeed on the arrival of a chimneysweep when none such had been ordered.

He'd been hoping to make his later job easier with a quick casing of the layout and possibly the unlatching of a likely upper-story window. And to be honest, he'd been very curious about the lady of the house.

Then Simon had run smack into the comely Mrs. Applequist herself. Her curvaceous form had packed quite a wallop, and it had taken him a moment to get his breath back.

Luckily for him, the lady didn't seem too interested in his purpose. Nor did she seem to realize that most chimneysweeps were either boys or poorly grown men the

size of children. She obviously had something else on her mind.

What was her game?

Deciding that lingering in the bath wouldn't help him learn much, Simon stood and let the water stream from his body.

As he rubbed the toweling over his chest, his eyes narrowed at the memory of Mrs. Applequist's face when he had stepped out from behind the screen.

She hadn't missed a beat, but her eyes had gone wide with what Simon wasn't too modest to call appreciation. Well, it was mutual. She was a ripe little morsel herself.

Oh, her dress was perfectly demure and her house perfectly respectable. Nevertheless, a woman built on those generous terms was more likely to be at home in the bedroom than the ballroom. A lady of healthy appetite, she was.

And now it appeared she had an appetite for Simon. Not that he minded so much. He liked an armful as much as a handful, but he knew better than to get involved with the subject under investigation.

Unless it became absolutely necessary.

\* \* \*

Agatha's panic simmered as she waited impatiently in the parlor. Who could have known being married would be so complicated?

She tidied the tea tray for the fifth time and eyed the clock on the front parlor mantel. The ladies would be calling within half an hour and her chimneysweep had yet to come downstairs to hear his part in the charade.

Biting her lip, Agatha reminded herself that all this would surely be worth it if it meant finding Jamie.

James Cunnington was a soldier, away fighting Napoleon the last Agatha had heard from him. He had written her every week, and had for four years, until two months past.

Then there had been no word from him in any way. Despite all her inquiries to the army, she had received no answers, even after all this time.

Spurred by her need to find Jamie, a need that became more desperate by the hour, Agatha had packed a trunk and bought a ticket on the next coach, leaving her estate of Appleby for London. Her servants had aided her escape, and she knew they would keep her whereabouts hidden for as long as possible.

It wouldn't do for Repulsive Reggie to find her before she found her brother. She'd be forced back to Appleby and to the altar with all the speed of Reggie's thwarted ambitions.

"Marrying" Mortimer had simply made the journey easier. No one questioned a married woman's morality in traveling alone, not in wartime with so many husbands

gone.

When she had been inspired to investigate the Chelsea Hospital in London for news of dear Jamie, it had been her married status that had allowed her in and enabled her to volunteer to care for the wounded.

Still, creating an alias to travel under and presenting the world with an actual false husband were two entirely different kettles of flounder.

“Hello, love. Here I am.”

Pulled back to the present, Agatha looked up ... and up ... to see one of the handsomest men she had ever laid eyes on.

Jamie’s trousers fit the fellow a bit closely about the hips, although not excessively so for the current fashion. Rather too much for Agatha’s peace of mind, however.

She yanked her gaze from dangerous ground and followed the rest of the transformation upward.

Jamie’s snowy shirt and dark green waistcoat gave no reason for dismay, but the morning coat, oh my. While the cut across the shoulders was quite fine and the nipped waist fit perfectly, the cobalt color gave far too much emphasis to those twinkling blue eyes.

His cravat was only loosely tied round his collar, in a way rather more suited to a pirate than a gentleman, showing a bit too much of strong brown throat.

A lethal combination indeed. It was very odd how her imagination proceeded to remove every one of those articles of Jamie’s clothing from his frame, until in her mind’s eye he stood as nearly naked as before.

“What? Don’t it fit?” The chimneysweep flexed both shoulders and twisted at the waist to see behind him. “I thought it looked right nice, I did.”

“Oh, no, you look wond—adequate, perfectly adequate.” Agatha forced her wicked imagination to re-dress him. “Please, come in and sit. I have a boon to ask of you.”

The fellow smiled slightly at her, and Agatha had to fist her hands to keep from tracing the dimples indenting each side of his mouth.

She was attracted to him. How unthinkable inappropriate of her. Not to mention inconvenient. Really, was there no end to the obstacles in her path?

Agatha shot a look full of her irritation at the fellow before her and watched his beautiful smile fade. Good. If she could maintain her vexation for a while, the day would go easier for her. Yes indeed. A brisk, no-nonsense manner was called for.

Agatha indicated the seat opposite her. “Please sit, Mr.—?”

“Rain, Simon Rain.” He sat and continued to look at her expectantly.

The clock chimed three-quarters of the hour, and Agatha knew she didn’t have much time to explain.

“I have a need for a gentleman to attend me today. You need do nothing, really,

merely smile and greet my guests. I will do all the talking.” Agatha sat back and smiled. There. Rather succinct, if she did say so herself.

“Whafore?” Mr. Rain frowned. “I mean, I’d like to help you, mum, but I won’t do nothing what’s wrong. This here don’t sound much close to right, not a bit of it.”

“Oh, no. There’s nothing wrong here at all. I shall simply introduce you as my husband, you shall bow over the ladies’ hands, we shall all sit for the standard fifteen minutes and take tea. You shall never have to say a word.”

“Your *husband*?” Mr. Rain stood abruptly. “Here now, we ain’t married! What if your mister finds out? He’ll make a spot of trouble for me, he will. I would, if’n you was mine.”

“You would? I mean to say, of course you would. But there is no need to worry about Mr. Applequist. He—”

Sounds of arriving guests came through the closed door to the entrance hall. Agatha panicked. Oh, this was going very badly indeed!

“He doesn’t exist at all, Mr. Rain!” she hissed, even as Pearson opened the door to announce her guests. “I’m *not* married, there will be *no* trouble made for you, and you mustn’t utter *one single word!*”

## Chapter Two

Agatha's chest tightened with anxiety as she smiled fixedly at her guests. Or perhaps her corset was laced too snugly. Surely the cause could not be the strong thigh pressed to her own or the clean scent of freshly bathed male.

Whatever the reason, she felt quite breathless as she sat next to Mr. Rain, across from Lady Winchell and her two companions.

Despite the pains Agatha had taken to fill the parlor with colorful comfort, Lady Winchell remained perched on the edge of her brocade chair as if she feared soiling her dress.

The lady made a slight face at her tea and set the cup and saucer down. The movement only accentuated the elegant curve of her figure, clad in her signature shade of mint green, and made Agatha yearn for a little lithesome grace instead of her own dumpling shape.

"When dear Agatha told us about you, Mr. Applequist, I must confess I thought you too good to be true." She turned her piercing gaze on Agatha, then dropped her eyes to Agatha's gloveless hands. "I've noticed before that you don't wear your wedding ring, my dear. Have you lost it somehow?"

*The ring.* She'd forgotten the wedding ring entirely. "Ah—no, no indeed. But I've been leaving it off to work at the hospital. I feared to ruin it. It's—it's an Applequist family heirloom." For a moment Agatha could even picture the ring. Sapphire, she decided. Just like Mortimer's eyes—wait, those were Simon's.

*Blast.* The next thing she knew, she'd be believing her own deception.

"Hmm." The lady did not seem impressed. She turned to Simon. "You know she thinks you single-handedly hung the stars, don't you, sir?"

All eyes turned to "Mortimer" and Agatha began to panic once more.

"My Mortie did hang the stars! At least the ones in my eyes!" Agatha dug her nails into her companion's arm. He turned to her with that smile of his, and two of the three ladies sighed audibly. Lady Winchell only narrowed her eyes.

"Ah, you must tell us all about your travels, Mr. Applequist. Only then will we be able to understand how you could tear yourself away from such an adoring young bride."

Agatha watched in horror as her chimneysweep actually opened his mouth to speak. Grinding her heel into his instep, she rushed to answer for him.