
THE LURE OF FIRE

The Secret Code

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-358-8
Print ISBN: 978-1-63954-359-5

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design
This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

IN THEIR WORLD, violence had a means of luring the innocent to its web. They came to recognise it only when it caught them deep into its net. By then, it was too late.

"Good evening, Mr. Franks." The guest set a tray with the leftovers of a dinner on the counter.

"You shouldn't have troubled, sir. I was going to send someone to pick it up. Did you enjoy supper?"

"It was excellent, thank you!"

"Aubrey, my missus, cooked it for you. We don't do this often. It's only a small hotel, but we want our guests to be satisfied, so they can recommend us."

"Yes. Of course, we will. We were famished; your wife is a fantastic cook."

"Much obliged, sir. Are you enjoying your stay?"

"London is great. We are having a wonderful time."

"Glad to hear it."

"We need tea bags. My wife would like a cup of tea."

"I'll ask the night manager to bring some up for you in a few minutes," Mr. Franks replied.

"Thank you. Sleep well."

"And you, sir." He smiled, and the man made his way upstairs to his room.

Mr. Franks had been the proprietor of the modest hotel in Spring Street, in Paddington, for several years. Though, calling Lilian or Todd, the two youths working for him, night managers, was pushing it. He realised that. Both under twenty-four, they were clever and presentable, but novices on their first jobs. He couldn't afford more experienced staff.

It was Todd's day off.

Franks worried about when Lilian was alone during the night-shift, but such was life. It calmed him to know she had a panic button at her disposal in an emergency.

She was chatty with patrons. A pretty girl, a touch flirtatious with handsome clients in the city on business. It helped his trade.

She'll have a brilliant career, he thought, a natural, she'll go far.

He urged her to be alert, though, offering guidance and instructions to be cautious and observant about herself and the hotel.

He liked the youngster, that's assuming the girl would show up soon so he could go home.

"Marvellous weather! I love summer evenings." As if on cue, she walked in breezily for her night shift, a huge smile plastered on her lovely face.

"Hello, Lilian." He nodded to the lass.

She took her jacket off in the rear office. She placed it on the peg and returned to the reception area at the counter where he was standing. The rooms interconnected via a door behind the front desk.

"You are late."

"So sorry, Mr. Franks. There are delays on the Underground; the Central Line is at it again!"

"Okay, never mind. Here is the list for today. The new arrival, Miss Cummings, is fine, settled. She's early sixties,

polite, should be no trouble. Two check-outs for tomorrow morning, leaving early. You'll have to manage them." He showed her the book register, so she could then enter the information into the online system. He liked to keep the book registry, entering his guests' names by hand, an old habit, in case the online system went down.

"Got it," Lilian said and nodded.

"Ah, and number 6 needs tea bags. They've run out. Do it while I'm still here."

"Right away." She moved to the rear office and opened the door to the storeroom. She went in and collected the items.

"I'm running up now, Mr. Franks." She carried the tray.

"Hurry! I'll wait until you are back before I leave."

"Yes." She climbed the stairs to a room on the first floor and tapped on the door.

"Who is it?" said a voice from the inside.

"It's reception, with the tea bags." She waited. A man opened cautiously. "Hi, Mr. Coletti."

"Hello, Lilian."

"Your tea bags with some cookies, sir."

"Sure, come in." He grinned and stepped aside to let her in.

"How are you, Mrs. Coletti?" she fired over her shoulders at his wife, and the woman acknowledged her with a wave of the hand and a sweet smile. She was watching something on TV as Lilian went in. The girl did what she had to do, they said their goodnights and she ran downstairs.

Those two puzzled her.

The way they dressed and acted was too fancy for a modest hotel. They had money; it was written all over them. Lilian had cleaned their room yesterday morning, as the chambermaid was sick; the extra money came in handy for her.

She'd seen this couple's belongings. The expensive luggage, the designer clothes, the perfume bottle and the costly suits and shirts of the fellow; everything screamed money at her.

Mrs. Coletti has a Prada handbag, for goodness' sake! It was the one Lilian had liked so much in the fashion magazine. She couldn't afford it on her salary, *but maybe one day...*

She could tell by the tips they left her, too. No one tipped her as much cash as this couple did.

I got a tenner just for the teabags!

In her mind, these were people for the Ritz in Mayfair or the Dorchester in Park Lane, not this modest guest house. They had been here three days, and she wondered what their story was.

Perhaps Mrs. Coletti wasn't Mrs. Coletti at all, um... not his wife. Maybe they were lovers, having an illicit affair. *Oh, that sounds more like it. Or why would they be here, then?* She giggled to herself and clapped her thigh.

Of course, that's it! She must be his mistress, a secret rendezvous. They are in love. She could tell. *They are having a week of forbidden sex in a small guest house in London, away from prying eyes!*

She chuckled.

Lilian enjoyed making up stories about the guests she met at the hotel. It was a pastime to keep herself amused while stuck at the reception desk all night. Not so boring when Todd was there, but he was off today. The likelihood, *it'll be a long, tedious shift.*

Unless that yummy young fellow, Mr. Bloom, who had checked in late last night, was still there.

"There you are. All done?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Did you use one of the passkeys last night?"

"No, Mr. Franks. Why?"

"No matter, we seem to have misplaced one. See if you can find it tonight. If not, I'll get a new one made in the morning."

"Sure."

"Don't forget to lock the front door at ten pm. Be watchful. Good night, Lilian."

"Night, Mr. Franks. See you tomorrow."

"Do I have to?" She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. He caressed her hair and brushed her temple with his lips.

The pretty, plump, Junoesque brunette was the love of his life.

"Yes, you do, *amore!* Your mum will be happy to have you around for a while."

"No! I don't want to leave you. Not like this."

"Are you getting sappy on me, Mrs. Coletti?" he said to his wife in jest and kissed her. "You must go, my love. The flight is booked; it's at eight am tomorrow."

"But why? You are still not well."

"Please, don't argue with me."

"Oh, you are infuriating sometimes, Roberto. You are not telling me the truth! Are you in trouble? I'm worried about you."

"There is nothing to worry about, *amore.*" He caressed her hair, his eyes soft on her.

"Then why are you sending me home to Mother without you? Why are we in this place?" she pleaded, holding his hand, the anguish written all over her face.

"Don't you wish to see your mother? You haven't seen her for six months."

"Yes, of course, but—"

"There you are. Settled, then!"

"But for how long?"

"A short time, darling. Now drink your tea before it gets cold."

She glanced at her watch; it was about nine-thirty pm.

He's still here. Lilian smiled when she saw Mr. Bloom's name on the register. He would check out in the morning. *Pity!*

He had arrived late last night, past three am. An unusual check-in time, it had surprised her. That was while Todd had gone to an open-all-night burger bar nearby for his break. Then Bloom had showed up at the reception desk to have a drink with her a little later.

He had flirted with her, for sure. He had left her soon enough and gone back to his room before Todd returned.

It amazed her, but she had enjoyed Bloom's attention. He was charming.

The man was tall and handsome. His little sexy scar above his top lip was scrumptious. She wished she could touch it; it was cute to her. If she had met Bloom in a nightclub, she wouldn't have had any qualms about telling him she liked him. But he was a guest at the hotel, and she was a professional.

Lilian sighed.

She went about her duties. At ten o'clock, she locked the front doors and hurried back to her work. She had a lot to do, always busy when she was on a shift alone.

At around one am, she heard footsteps.

"Mr. Bloom! Good evening, sir. What are you doing up so late?"

"Hello, Lilian! Such a lovely pink blouse you have on

tonight. Care for a cup of tea with me? I can't sleep, and it's too boring upstairs."

"Well, there is so much to do, I-I..."

"It's fine. I'll keep you company for half an hour. A pretty face always helps."

"Oh, all right, then." She blushed. "I'll put the kettle on. Call me if someone comes." She stepped into the rear office to do his bidding.

Mr. Bloom peeked at the counter. He shifted the book registry to face him, so he could read it and perused through it until he found what he wanted. Then, he turned it 'round as it was.

She came back and smiled.

"The pot will be ready soon," she said. They had a chit chat and a few laughs until the kettle boiled. The man was fun. He was still flirting with her, she was sure.

"White, no sugar, correct?" she asked with a smile, remembering from the previous night.

"Aha! If you have some bread and jam, it would be great. I'm famished."

"Okay. I won't be long." She moved to the back office to finish the preparations.

Mr. Bloom waited until she was out of sight. Then, leaning over the reception desk, he grabbed a set of keys on a hook underneath. He ran to the front door and unlocked it.

He let the two men in. They were wearing gloves, despite the warm night.

"Six!" Mr. Bloom whispered to them, and he gave them the passkey he had stolen the night before. Tilting his head towards the stairs, he pointed with his index at the floor above.

The newcomers made their way up.

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry, Roberto. Did I wake you up?"

"Come back to bed, *amore*."

"I can't sleep, I'm making some tea. I'm worried."

"*Santo Dio*, Marisa! You keep bumping into the furniture. I told you, there is nothing to worry about." He turned on the lamp on the bedside table and got up. "Sit down, I'll make it for you." He smiled indulgently at her.

"Sorry, darling!" She came over to him and kissed him lightly on the lips.

He moved to the counter and busied himself with the kettle and the cups.

"Jesus, this kettle is so damn old and noisy, it'll wake up the entire hotel!" he snorted.

At the top of the stairs, the two men paused to find their bearings. Then they carried on stealthily to the room number they'd been told.

They heard voices; it declared the people inside were up. They put the passkey in the lock, trying not to make a sound. Within seconds, they were in.

It all happened too fast!

Marisa stood up abruptly.

"Roberto!" she shrieked and sought to reach her husband by the desk, but the first man's bullets struck her twice in the back as the shots rang, noiseless, in the air with the silencer on the handgun. The second man fired two silent shots at Mr. Coletti's head as he tried to reach his wife without success. They crashed into a lifeless heap on the floor.

The men fled the room and traced their steps back downstairs.

"What was that?" She stopped in her tracks under the doorframe of the rear office.

"What?"

"Did you hear it?" Lilian raised her index finger at the ceiling, as if to suggest *upstairs*. "Heavy thuds, what was that?"

"I heard nothing," Bloom replied, feigning ignorance.

"I did. That's Mr. Coletti's room, above us." She glanced at him, bewildered.

Then, out of the corner of her eyes, she saw movement. She turned, two fellows were running towards the front door. They launched the key at him.

As it flew into the air, Lilian recognised the passkey by the pink ribbon she had attached to it only three days ago. Bloom caught it and stuck it in his pocket with the rest of the keys he had taken from the hook below the counter.

The two men disappeared into the street.

Lilian's eyes darted from the front door to him in consternation.

"What the hell is this!" She blanched, fear taking hold of her.

He was over the counter before she could reach for the panic button under the desk. She tried to flee, but he grabbed her from behind. She yelped. He placed a hand over her mouth with a strong hold on her. In the other, a gun pointed at her temple. He forced her inside the rear office.

"Shut up! You'll be fine if you do as I say." He pushed her onwards. "Open that door. Now." He gripped her harder. Her back to him, she struggled to move, but he was too strong.

"Open it and be quiet. Don't be foolish!"

Lilian opened the door, and he thrust her into the store-

room, releasing her. She turned to him, her eyes frightened, large with bewilderment, her face pale.

Oh, dear God!

"We don't keep any money here! You are wasting your —" But before she could finish her sentence, he shot her with a noiseless bullet in her chest, straight to the heart. Her body slumped to the floor, dead.

Then he locked the front door. He put on gloves and wiped everything clean, the reception counter and doors, anything he had touched. He took the keys from his pocket and ran upstairs, cleaned all surfaces in his bedroom and collected his belongings. He did the same in Coletti's room, then back to the rear office. He locked the storeroom with Lilian's lifeless body in it and dispensed of the hotel's camera films, for the inside and outside, for the last three days.

He maneuvered everything swiftly. He had done that before. Then he absconded into the night, leaving no trace.

All Bloom left behind was three lifeless bodies.

By the time Mr. Franks returned to work the next morning, he was confronted with the horror that something terrible had struck his small hotel.