



"Tasha Alexander's Emily Ashton is a heroine for the ages: her own and ours."

—Jon Clinch,
author of *Finn*

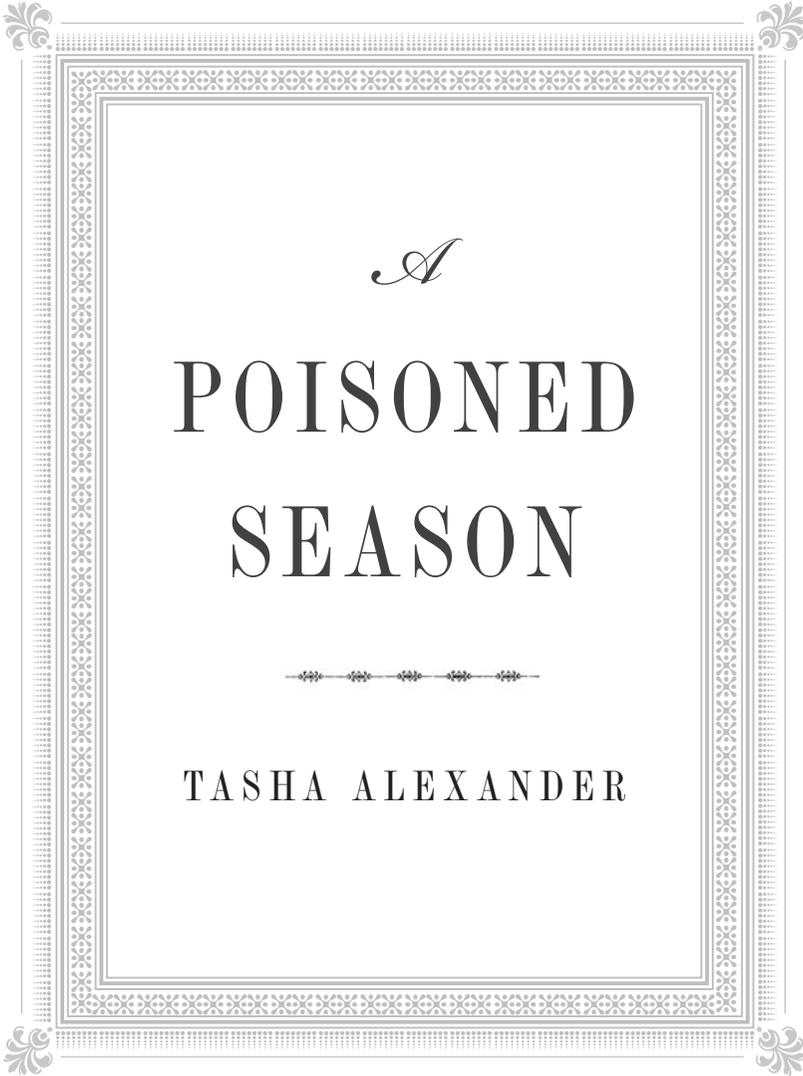
A POISONED SEASON

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

TASHA ALEXANDER

Author of *And Only to Deceive*





A

POISONED
SEASON



TASHA ALEXANDER

*For Xander, who prefers
his books read aloud*

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AT LAST THE SECRET IS OUT

At last the secret is out, as it always must come
in the end,

The delicious story is ripe to tell to the intimate friend;
Over the tea-cups and in the square the tongue has its
desire;

Still waters run deep, my dear, there's never smoke
without fire.

Behind the corpse in the reservoir, behind the ghost on
the links,

Behind the lady who dances and the man who madly
drinks,

Under the look of fatigue, the attack of migraine and the
sigh

There is always another story, there is more than meets
the eye.

For the clear voice suddenly singing, high up in the
convent wall,

The scent of elder bushes, the sporting prints in the hall,

The croquet matches in summer, the handshake, the
cough, the kiss,

There is always a wicked secret, a private reason for this.

— *W. H. Auden*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

LADY EMILY ASHTON (“KALLISTA”)—Daughter of Earl Bromley, widow of the Viscount Ashton (Philip), and a scholar of Greek language and art

COLIN HARGREAVES—A gentleman of independent means who is frequently called upon by Buckingham Palace to investigate matters requiring discretion

CÉCILE DU LAC—A French woman of a certain age, an iconoclast and patron of the arts

IVY BRANDON—Emily’s childhood friend, a perfect English rose

ROBERT BRANDON—Ivy’s husband, an up-and-coming politician and very traditional gentleman

MARGARET SEWARD—Daughter of an American railroad tycoon, a Bryn Mawr-educated Latinist with little tolerance for society’s rules

LADY CATHERINE BROMLEY—Emily’s mother, wife of Earl Bromley, former lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria

CHARLES BERRY—A gentleman newly arrived in London who claims to be a direct descendant of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI

JEREMY SHEFFIELD, DUKE OF BAINBRIDGE—Childhood friend of Emily’s whose twin goals are to avoid marriage and to be the most useless man in England

DAVID FRANCIS—A gentleman and patron of the arts

BEATRICE FRANCIS—David Francis's wife

LADY FRIDESWIDE—A terrifying society matron bent on seeing her daughter married to the Duke of Bainbridge

LETTICE FRIDESWIDE—Lady Frideswide's daughter, who is not in the least interested in marrying the Duke of Bainbridge

LORD BASIL FORTESCUE—Queen Victoria's most trusted political adviser, widely considered the most powerful man in the Empire

MRS. REYNOLD-PLYMPTON—A lady who takes great interest in politics

LADY ELINOR ROUTLEDGE—Longtime friend of Emily's family, widow of the Chancellor of the Exchequer

ISABELLE ROUTLEDGE—Lady Elinor's extremely romantic daughter

LORD THOMAS PEMBROKE ("TOMMY")—the Viscount Langley, eldest son of the Earl of Westbrook

LADY ELLIOTT—A devoted friend of Lady Bromley's and one of London's most fiercely judgmental society ladies

MICHAEL BARBER—A sculptor

JANE STILLEMAN—Beatrice Francis's maid

MOLLY, BRIDGET, AND GABBY—Maids at the Savoy hotel

MEG—Emily's maid

DAVIS—Emily's incomparable butler



THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS ONE CAN DEPEND UPON DURING THE London Season: an overwhelming barrage of invitations, friends whose loyalties turn suspect, and at least one overzealous suitor. This year was to prove no exception.

Having recently come out of mourning for my late husband, Philip, the Viscount Ashton, I was determined to adopt a hedonistic approach to society, something that I imagined would involve refusing all but the most enticing invitations and being forced to cull disloyal acquaintances. This would allow me to enjoy the summer months instead of trudging from party to party, feeling like one of the exhausted dead, finding myself the subject of the gossip that fuels young barbarians at play.

However, it became clear almost immediately that my theory was flawed. Declining to attend parties proved not to have the desired effect. Instead of dropping me from their guest lists, people assumed I was in such demand that I was choosing to attend events even more exclusive than their own, and there are few better ways to increase one's volume of invitations than by the appearance of popularity. So for a short while—a very short while—my peers held me in high esteem.



It was during this time that I found myself at the home of Lady Elinor Routledge, one of the finest hostesses in England and a long-standing friend of my mother's. By definition, therefore, she was more concerned with a person's societal standing than with anything else. Despite this, I had decided to attend her garden party for two reasons. First, I wanted to see her roses, whose equal, according to rumor, could not be found in all of England. Second, I hoped to meet Mr. Charles Berry, a young man whose presence in town had caused a stir amongst all the aristocracy. The roses surpassed all of my expectations; unfortunately, the gentleman did not.

When stepping into the garden at Meadowdown, one was transported from the gritty heat of London's streets to a sumptuous oasis. For the party, lovely peaked tents were scattered between hedgerows, trees, and beds of flowers, ensuring that guests would never be more than a few paces from refreshment, and the sounds of a small orchestra wafted through the grounds. Young ladies flitted about, their brightly colored dresses competing with the flowers for attention and rarely losing the battle. The gentlemen, turned out in dark frock coats, were elegant, too, keeping their companions well supplied with ices, strawberries, or whatever delicacies might catch their fancy. *Et in Arcadia ego*. It would take little effort for one to imagine in this scene an eligible prince, all courtesy and ease, graciously bestowing his favor on those around him. But there was no such gentleman at Lady Elinor's that day. The only prince present—if he could be called that—was a grave disappointment.

The romantic ideals swirling around the heir to a throne are seldom capable of surviving close scrutiny. In the case of Charles Berry, these ideals hardly stood observation from afar. His appearance was not unpleasant, but his manners were dreadful, and to say that he was prone to drink more than he ought would be a very diplomatic statement indeed. The young ladies who followed his every move with admiration happily ignored all of this; they were captivated by the notion of

marrying into a royal family. The situation was rendered all the more ridiculous when one considered the fact that the throne to which Mr. Berry aspired no longer existed.

“I hoped he would be more handsome.” Cécile du Lac formed opinions of people quickly and rarely changed them. We had known each other for less than a year, but she had become one of my closest confidantes almost from the moment I’d met her, despite the fact that she was nearer in age to my mother than to me. She watched him as she continued. “And he lacks completely the generous spirit one likes to find in a monarch. If he could not claim a direct relation to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, society would hold him in much less regard.”

Almost from the moment Louis XVI’s son and heir had died in a French prison during the revolution, rumors that the boy had escaped began to circulate. Now, nearly a century later, gentlemen were still coming forward, insisting that they were descended from Louis Charles. Charles Berry was the most recent to make the claim, and his story was filled with enough details to convince the surviving members of the Bourbon family to accept him as the dauphin’s great-grandson.

“Don’t judge him too harshly,” Lady Elinor said, moving her hands gracefully in a gesture designed not to emphasize her words, but to show off the spectacular ruby ring on her right hand. “He’s led a difficult life.”

“Do you know him well?” I asked her.

“He was at Oxford with my son, George, although they didn’t move in the same crowd. George has always been very serious. He takes after his father.” Lady Elinor’s husband, Mr. John Routledge, had been a steady if somewhat humorless man, who served in the government as chancellor of the exchequer until his death some years ago. George, who was much older than his sister, had taken a position in the diplomatic corps and had been stationed in India for so long

that I could hardly recall what he looked like. "Let me introduce you. I think you'll find Mr. Berry most charming."

The gentleman in question stood not far from us, surrounded by several very eligible heiresses whose mothers watched, hawklike, from a safe distance, eagerly trying to gauge which girl garnered the most attention from the purported heir to the House of Bourbon. I wondered if any of them gave even momentary consideration to what it might be like to actually be the wife of such a man. None of the mothers tried to hide her irritation when Lady Elinor pulled him away.

"How do you find London?" I asked after the introductions had been made.

"A wonderful city. But I must admit that I long for Paris. I have great hopes, you know, that my throne will be restored."

"Really, Monsieur Berry?" Cécile asked, incredulous. "I had no idea the Third Republic was in danger of being replaced by a monarchy."

"France would be lucky to have you," Lady Elinor said.

"It is not impossible. I, of course, would never presume to seek such a thing, but if it proves to be the will of the people . . ." He let his voice trail off and looked at me as if appraising my value. "You, Lady Ashton, would be an ornament in any court."

"You flatter me." I saw a look of dissatisfaction pass quickly across Lady Elinor's face and realized that she, too, had fallen victim to wanting a royal husband for her daughter. Isabelle was a sweet girl, out for her second season. She was not pretty, not in the classical way, but possessed bright eyes and an eager smile that more than made up for any imperfections in her features. I confess to being surprised by how much she had matured in the past year; gone completely was the child I remembered following me around after my own debut, begging for stories of balls and parties. If she still harbored any of the romantic ideas she'd had as a girl, she was headed for disappointment unless she could convince her mother that Mr. Berry was not a desirable suitor. I

decided to direct the subject away from the gentleman altogether and turned to my hostess. “Have you seen Mr. Bingham this afternoon?”

“He arrived not half an hour ago,” Lady Elinor replied. “Though I must warn you that he’s not one for genteel conversation.”

“I know it all too well. He owns a silver libation bowl—the sort the ancient Greeks used to hold offerings to the gods. The decoration on it is exquisite—Athena, Hermes, Dionysus, and Ares riding in chariots driven by winged Nikes.”

“What is a Nike?” Lady Elinor asked.

“Victory. Perhaps you’ve seen the Nike Samothrace in the Louvre?”

“Ah, yes. How . . . interesting that you know about such things.”

“I’ve been trying to convince Mr. Bingham to sell me the piece for the past three months and have barely had a civil word from him.”

“Are you a collector?” Mr. Berry asked.

“My late husband was, but he also made many donations to the British Museum. I’ve continued this practice, though I admit it’s not always easy for me to part with what I’ve acquired. But in this case, I want the *phiale* for the museum. It’s too significant to be left languishing in a private home. I had hoped I could persuade Mr. Bingham to donate it himself, but he will not be convinced.”

“Aren’t you clever!” Lady Elinor said, then turned to Mr. Berry. “Lady Ashton is quite a scholar.”

“Surely you’ve put aside all thoughts of studying during the Season?” he asked.

“Studying Greek, Mr. Berry, is what will get me through the Season.” He made a dissatisfied-sounding grunt, and Lady Elinor smiled, confident that branding me a scholar would be enough to keep the gentleman from growing *too* interested in me. I hoped she was correct.

“You speak almost like an Englishman, Monsieur Berry,” Cécile said. “I expected to find you more French.”

“I spent much of my youth in the United States. We did not speak French, even at home. My father sent me to Oxford for university, and I’ve lived in England ever since. He was a very private man, never wanted the public to know his true identity. I respected this position while he was alive, but now that he is dead, I believe it is time to reclaim my heritage.” He stepped close to Cécile and continued in a low voice. “I am moved more than you can imagine by the sight of your earrings. I understand that they belonged to my twice *arrière-grand-mère*.”

“They did, monsieur, and I thought it appropriate to wear them when I met the pretender to the Bourbon throne. Marie Antoinette had them on when she was arrested during the revolution.”

“How I wish I could touch them.” He moved even closer to her, and for a moment I thought he would reach out for them.

Isabelle, who had been summoned to her mother’s side, frowned. “She was arrested wearing them?” she asked. “Aren’t you afraid they’ll bring you bad luck?”

“Not at all,” Cécile replied.

“They’re just the sort of thing that would carry a curse, the tragic fate of a previous owner haunting everyone else who possesses them,” Isabelle said with a dramatic flair.

“I assure you, mademoiselle, that I am not concerned in the least,” Cécile said, shrugging.

“Where did you get them, Cécile?” I asked.

“My brother purchased them for his fiancée. Unfortunately, she died before they were married, and he gave them to me.”

“Died before they were married?” I asked. “Clearly the poor woman was cursed.”

“Not in the least. Claudette had a sickly constitution long before Paul gave her the earrings.”

Although I counted Cécile among my dearest friends, this story of her brother, along with vague rumors that her ancestors had been

sympathetic to the monarchy during the revolution, was nearly all the information I'd heard about her family. Like me, she was a widow, though her husband had died almost thirty years ago. It was this that first drew us together—not simply that we had lost husbands, but that we had lost husbands we did not mourn.

“I would hesitate to wear them,” Isabelle said. “You’re very brave.”

“It would take more than a curse to stop Madame du Lac,” Colin Hargreaves said, striding confidently towards us, a broad smile on his face. “Do my eyes deceive me? Or is it true that the delights of the Season are enough to entice Lady Ashton to abandon the pleasures of Greece?”

“Colin!” I cried, feeling an unmistakable rush of pleasure as he brushed his lips over my gloved hand, the color rising in my cheeks as our eyes met. “Your letter said you would be in Berlin until next week.”

“My business finished more quickly than expected. I called on you at Berkeley Square not an hour ago, and your butler told me I could find you here. Lady Elinor was kind enough to allow me in without an invitation.” His face was already tanned from riding in the summer sun.

“You are always welcome in my home, Mr. Hargreaves,” our hostess said, clearly relieved to find a gentleman other than Mr. Berry paying attention to me. “Have you met Mr. Berry?”

“Yes, we spent some time together on the Continent this spring.” This surprised me. In all the letters he'd sent to me in the past months, Colin had never once mentioned Mr. Berry, and Mr. Berry did not strike me as the sort of man with whom Colin would have much interest in spending time.

“Lady Elinor, would you show me where to find your claret cup?” Cécile asked, a sly smile forming on her lips.

“May I get some for you, Madame du Lac?” Colin asked.

“*Non, merci*, Monsieur Hargreaves. That would defeat my purpose

entirely.” She tapped his arm with her fan as she spoke before turning to Mr. Berry. “And you, sir, come with us. I’d like to hear more about your plans for France.” Isabelle hung back for a moment, but a sharp glance from her mother spurred her to follow the group.

“I shall never be able to adequately thank Cécile for her continuing interest in leaving me alone with you,” Colin said, kissing my hand again as soon as they had left us, “although I’d prefer a more private setting altogether. I should like nothing better than to take you in my arms.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I replied, half wishing that he would, my hand still warm where his lips had lingered. “But I suppose it’s best not to cause a scandal this early in the Season. Are you free for dinner this evening?”

“Unfortunately not. I’ve a prior engagement.”

“A prior engagement?”

“I am a very eligible bachelor, Emily. You must expect that my calendar will be very full in the coming months.”

“Well, before you begin proposing to any of the debutantes who are sure to throw themselves at your feet, I do hope you’ll consider my feelings. I’d be quite lost if you refused to help me with my Greek.”

“How kind of you to find some use for me.” He squeezed my hand. “It’s work, actually, that will keep me from you tonight.”

“Anything that might interest me?” I asked. Colin was frequently called upon by Buckingham Palace to assist in matters that, as he explained it, required more than a modicum of discretion.

“Definitely not.” Without another word, he led me, rather forcefully, to a quiet corner of the garden, where, though we did not have the privacy my library would have afforded, we were able to greet each other in a much more satisfactory manner.

