



A Pearl Desired (5 Pearls for the Earl #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: An accused poisoner plucked from the streets of a Moroccan port finds security as an earl's mistress

Saida Hossini is so grateful to have escaped the narrow streets of Ceuta with her life intact, she doesn't question the quiet existence offered by the woman who saved her life, Captain Eleanor Goodrum.

She'd had a choice. She could busy herself at one of her mentor's many estates, training other former fugitives like herself in the fine art of herbalism...or she could take on the life and anonymity of an earl's mistress. One day a week hes hers to please, to talk to...but sometimes, she wishes there were more. The kindly earl never shares anything of himself beyond the pleasure of his perfect body.

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PROLOGUE

MAY, 1823

3 5.8894°N, 5.3213°W

Port of Ceuta, North Africa

Saida Hossini ran blindly down the crooked, narrow, cobblestone alley behind the warehouses lining the path to the harbor front docks, her lungs burning from the effort. A dog in pursuit of a cat dangling a fish from its mouth suddenly shot out of a darkened side alley. All she managed to see before she sprawled headfirst into the dirt and pebbles was a flash of fur out of the corner of her eye.

She'd raced out the front door of her apothecary without a thought to where she'd find sanctuary, or a plan beyond escaping the mob that soon would be upon her. Sharp stones ground into the palms of her hands and shredded the tender skin. Her knees beneath her burkha probably looked the same. No time to worry about cleaning her wounds now.

She'd be stoned to death if the friends of Samir, the rug merchant, caught up with her before she managed to find passage away from Ceuta. She didn't care where she went. She'd left the door to the apothecary open, knowing she'd never be able to return, never be able to re-claim her birthright. Her shop full of the smell of herbs and healing plants would forever be lost to her, the shop her mother had owned, and her grandmother before her.

If only she could find a ship leaving immediately, or better yet, a fisherman rowing out to the sea. It was still early in the morning. The tide was probably still pulsing out to sea. Some of the fishing fleet surely would be cleaning and stowing their nets before setting out to bring in the day's catch of red mullet and prawns.

Her heart surged into a stuttering beat when the sounds of shouts and scuffles of rushing sandal-shod feet grew louder behind her. The vengeful mob couldn't be much more than several sets of harbor steps above her.

In that instant she spied a particularly broken-down warehouse which seemed empty and perhaps abandoned. She made an abrupt side step and shot inside. Once inside a tight courtyard, she ran up against a heavily fortified wooden gate. Apparently, the warehouse was occupied after all. She had no idea who dwelt within, but they could do no worse to her than the mob outside.

When she pounded desperately against the gate for several seconds without success, she looked for a toehold and began climbing to the top. She dropped down into a darkened space and tried for several seconds to adjust her vision to find a way through the cavernous interior. She'd no more than pushed her hands in front of her to find another wall or door when she was firmly grasped from behind by what felt like an immovable mountain.

A man's hand firmly closed over her mouth before she could scream, and dragged her deeper into the depths of the warehouse with him. She'd expected him to stink of garlic, onions, and the stench of a porter from the harbor, but instead, her nostrils were assailed by the scent of the finest bergamot and peppermint. Who in the name of Allah had her in his clutches?

Obadiah Lassen had been through tight situations all over the Mediterranean in his duties as Captain Eleanor Goodrum's number one man. He'd seen a lot of hellacious battles go down, but this one had him mystified. The slight girl he held confined in

his arms was so delicate, the wild beating of her heart made her seem like an exotic bird terrified of its bonds and ready to fly into hell itself to get away from whatever the mob passing by outside had in mind.

Just then the mysterious woman bit down hard on one of his wrists, and he had to revise his earlier musings. He swore a French oath, gave her a hard swat on her rump, and swung her over his shoulder, well out of the reach of any of his, um, vulnerable parts. This was no exotic bird. She was more of a hellcat. He'd turn this conundrum over to his boss and let her sort out the mystery, hellcat-to-hellcat.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:17 am

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MAY, 1823

35.8894°N, 5.3213°W

Port of Ceuta, North Africa

The woman behind the long desk surrounded by torchiere lamps looked up at the latest annoyance at her door. She had a lot of, um, partners who made her network of smuggling along the shores of the Mediterranean run smoothly. The way to keep them happy, and her empire a success, was a complicated monthly accounting which allotted each cog in her spiderweb of ventures a fair share of that month's receipts. The accounting took a devil of a long time, and the last thing she needed was Obadiah coming to her with a problem he couldn't solve on his own.

The minute he plopped down a young woman who began kicking and spitting whilst piling abusive Berber invectives on the poor man, El sensed a "situation." She stood, pressed her hands together, and kissed the feminine intruder on both cheeks whilst murmuring "Ahlan." After a moment, she asked, "Is there a reason you've invaded my home this morning without invitation and attacked my man of business?"

El tipped up the young woman's chin and gazed sympathetically into her eyes. She was beautiful, skin as smooth as silk with the green gaze frequently found amongst descendants of Berbers. Obviously, some distant ancestor must have been a Georgian slave brought to the market frequented by wealthy Arabs.

And then a stab of recognition hit. “You’re Saida Hossini, the apothecary. What has happened?”

The young woman hid her face in her hands and began sobbing. “The mob...Samir, the rug merchant, used my stomach remedy to poison his wife, and now they all blame me.” She raised her huge, tear-filled emerald eyes. “They accuse me of murder. They want to stone me.”

“I’ve used your stomach remedies...so has Obadiah. Nothing has ever happened to us.” El cocked her head and gave Saida a quizzical look.

Saida spread her hands wide. “He gave his wife an overdose, which can be deadly. He knew it could kill, because I warned him when he came back for a second packet.” She moaned and covered her face again. “I should have known he was up to something.”

El, who knew how unforgiving the culture of Arab countries could be, particularly in the case of disobedient women, made a quick decision. “Obadiah, ready the Lady Muirgen . We sail at the first turn of the tide in the morning.”

After the tall, dark-haired man left them, El motioned to Saida to follow her down a long, dilapidated hallway to a ramshackle door which opened miraculously onto a suite of open, airy rooms with a sunken bath embedded in the tile floor of one of the rooms. “You’ll be safe here until morning, but you cannot let anyone know you’re leaving. Your life, and quite possibly mine, depend on our getting you out of the country as soon as possible.” El gazed for a moment out an open window overlooking the rooftops of Ceuta. When she turned back to Saida, she added, “I hope there’s no one you care about you’ll have to leave behind, because from this day forward you’ll have to assume a new life.”

Later that night, just as El was about to snuff all the candles in her office torchieres, a

tentative tap sounded at her thick, wooden door followed by her second-in-command Obadiah poking his head around the edge, a question on his face.

“Come,” she said. “Let’s plan tomorrow morning’s escape for the little bird.”

Obadiah’s face took on a thoughtful look. “Shall we stash her inside our special vented cask stuffed with silken robes and scarves?”

“No.” She shook her head firmly. “The customs officers probably still remember the last time we used that trick to spirit away the bey’s favorite slave boy he’d whipped nearly to death.”

“You’re right. That was a near thing.”

El snapped her fingers. “I have an idea, but I need your help.” She gave him an unholy smile, like the priests managing the Inquisition must have given their victims. “They’ll never suspect a thing.”

Obadiah groaned. His boss saying she needed his help rarely ended well for his peace of mind. He knew the task probably didn’t require sheer brawn, because he’d never seen Captain Eleanor Goodrum helpless in any situation he could recall.

Saida had spent extra time that night kneeling at her prayers before crawling beneath the smooth linen sheets of the bed in her gaoler’s silken prison. When the woman captain had checked on her after she’d taken a long, restorative soak in the sunken tub of warm, oil-scented water, Saida had begged her to explain how she planned to whisk her away from the certain death that awaited her in the streets of Ceuta.

“You have to be brave. I’m going to walk you down to the berth where my ship awaits.”

“No—,” Saida cried. “When they see who I am, they’ll stone me. Everyone in Ceuta has heard by now. They think I’m a poisoner.”

“People see what they want to see, Saida. You have to trust me and do exactly as I say.”

“But what is it you’ll have me do?”

“It’s better if you put that worry aside, sleep well tonight, and let Obadiah and me sail you away to a safe place on the morning tide.”

After the tall, forbidding-looking captain left, Saida had lain awake, terror beating away in her chest like a wild bird trying to escape. She’d heard of the strong, powerful woman smuggler who sailed in and out of the Spanish-held harbor of Ceuta. Everyone in the small seaside town had heard of Captain El, many feared her. She had the face of an angel if you gazed at her from the right side. The left side of her face was another matter altogether. That side was scarred from what looked like the slash of a sword from the outer edge of her full, sensuous mouth to just below her left ear.

One of Saida’s argan seed suppliers at the apothecary claimed he’d sold the captain vials of the precious, aromatic oil for sale in Europe. He claimed to have asked her once how she came to be scarred and who the devil would have inflicted such a wound on a woman. She’d smiled at him and said, “It doesn’t matter. He’s dead.”

Finally, Saida coaxed sleep to come by remembering the scents and sights of her small apothecary off Ceuta’s main market square: clay pots of dried herbs, plus argan seeds and a few vials of the precious oil she made herself. Floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves that had been built by her mother and grandmother held rows and rows of containers labeled: star anise with its sweet, spicy, pungent woody scent; amber, warm, rich, resinous, and sensual; strong, pungent, and earthy ginseng; saffron with

its honey-like soft floral scent, sometimes more grassy, earthy, and musky; fresh, lemony verbenas of lemongrass; and sage-like salvia. And all the special teas for curing stomach ailments as well as aching joints and simple wounds. Karkade made from hibiscus plants and the mace flower. Most potent of all was the precious argan oil, ground and lovingly made by her own hands from the spicy, mustard-like seeds. Although the laborious method of extraction meant each vial was very expensive, she always sold as many as she could produce.

One of her most eagerly sought after best sellers was amber, for fortifying one's life force. She nearly laughed at that thought. After tomorrow, she probably wouldn't have to worry about her life force if whatever fantastical escape plan the mysterious sea captain and her first-in-command had in mind failed to work.

She almost wished she could sneak back to the comfort of her little shop to brew one of her favorite teas to guard against stress and bring on sleep. Somewhere in the midst of those thoughts, the scented oil Captain El's servant had slipped into her bath spirited her off to the land of forgetting.

Captain El rubbed her sweaty palms against the leather breeches she wore whenever she sensed a fight was brewing. She gave an involuntary wince as yet another of her expensive casks filled with rolls of luxurious silks was wantonly slashed through by one of the customs official's thugs armed with a wicked-sharp curved sword. She'd been right to suspect smuggling Saida onto the Lady Muirgen in one of her casks was a bad idea. She'd used that trick one too many times on the arrogant customs spy the Bey always hid in the crowd of onlookers who swirled around the docks in the mornings, looking for bits of gossip and intrigue.

The look of pure hatred the customs man turned on her made her stifle a smile. She hoped to all the gods on Olympus the subterfuge she and Obadiah had planned would be successful.

Just then there was a rising murmur amongst the townspeople crowding around the gangplank to see what the notorious woman captain was up to now. Obadiah stepped smoothly from the shadows of their warehouse, a simple, lovestruck smile on his face. His arm wound tightly around a woman clad in the sheerest of silks. On his opposite shoulder shrieked an annoying cockatoo, flapping its wings wildly and screeching French insults into his ear.

Several women in the crowd smiled knowingly to their husbands. They'd been convinced the tall mountain of a man who served as the she-captain's first mate and all-around first-in-command had a lover hidden somewhere in Ceuta. At first they'd assumed he shared the bed of the captain, but then, rumors surfaced which hinted that he perhaps indulged in more exotic sensual interests.

The men of the small harbor town who, truth to tell, were a bit intimidated by the man, were eager to believe he was, um, less than a man in that one area. However, their wives knowingly clucked at them, here she was in all her glory — his disgraceful mistress. El made it her business to know what was going on before the hearths of the simple residents of Ceuta as well as the gossip of the taverns.

Just then, as if to confirm their suspicions, the vain woman deliberately rubbed a soft hand over one of Obadiah's nipples on his bare chest, which swelled as if in obeisance to her command. To do so, she had to shift the dainty silk parasol she carried to protect her from the early morning sun. Long, elaborately coifed raven-black curls were piled atop her head as well as cascading down over her shoulders. Dark kohl outlined large eyes in her dainty face. Her eye color was masked a bit by unusually thick and lush eyelashes.

This time, as the sounds of the mob swelled, the pale, peach-colored bird sitting atop the tall man's shoulder began to swell its feathers and hurl shrieking insults at the woman. When she suddenly opened her delicate hand to reveal a mound of seeds, the bird ceased its loud protests and suddenly swooped from Obadiah's shoulder to that

of the slight woman at his side. When the cockatoo began stroking her cheek with its feathers and gently picking the seeds from her hand, the crowd cheered, which prompted further wild screeches from the creature.

El could almost sense the unspoken, and spoken questions surging through the crowd. Who was this woman? Where had he found her? Surely there was no one like her, even in the harbor front taverns of Ceuta. Ah...the giant Obadiah must have found her in some far-flung port and now she was his woman.

Once they'd disappeared into the bowels of the below-decks of the Lady Muirgen , El swung herself aboard, and her crew whipped the gangplank back onto the ship, just before the tide moved them smartly away from the docks, and the ship's sails snapped to fullness from the wind, like a protective creature baring her fangs.

Obadiah was already at the wheel. "Where to?"

El pointed west. "Back home..." At the teasing, questioning look in his eyes, she added, "...to England." And then she turned to go below to help Saida rid herself of all the ridiculous makeup she'd had to plaster on her face to create the illusion of being Obadiah's whore.

And then of course they'd have to decide what to do with the fractious bird El had inherited from her ancient Indonesian navigator from Java who'd died at the end of their last trip to Ceuta. He'd begged her to keep Aji after he was gone.

Aji Saka was one of a tribe of birds who lived as long as sixty or seventy years. He stood nearly as tall as the length of one of El's arms. The most El had hoped for was that the sight of the outrageously beautiful bird would distract the crowd. And although he'd seemed to grieve for months after the old man's death, he'd inexplicably perked up and joined in the charade with Obadiah and Saida whilst smuggling her past the townspeople. His ear-splitting performance might well have

saved all of their lives and allowed them to glide away from the suspicious mob.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:17 am

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MAY, 1823

51.766°N, 0.475°E

Hylands Estate, Essex

Derek Welkirk, the Earl of Framingwood, leaned against a pillar in the kitchen garden gazebo at Hylands, his Essex estate, and drew a deep puff on a cheroot. He rarely smoked, but the last twenty-four hours had been among the worst in his life.

His old childhood friend, Lizzie Miller, had nearly died in childbed labor that had gone on throughout the night before with her heart-rending moans and screams tearing him apart as if he were laboring along with her. In the early hours, he'd dismissed the virtually useless London physician he'd sent for two days earlier. When he'd sent a message to Captain Eleanor Goodrum to for God's sakes help him, she'd brought a quiet young woman from one of many her secret schools at her nearby estate, Totteridge Park.

Captain El had arrived soon after receiving his frantic message, bringing the mysterious, exotic-looking Saida Hossini with a truly terrifying bird riding on one of her shoulders. When he'd stepped close to the two women, the creature had spread its wings and feathers to its full height which was considerable. At a clicking of Saida's tongue, the bird subsided to a less threatening size, whilst continuing to level an evil look his way.

“He’s very jealous of Saida and doesn’t care for men,” El had shared in a cryptic aside. “But he goes everywhere with her.”

“What can I do?” Derek was exhausted from the harrowing hours he’d spent in terror that his cook’s daughter would die.

The women swept inside with El issuing directions over her shoulder as they quickly ascended the stairs, led by his housekeeper toward the third-floor bedchambers. “If I were you, Framlingwood, I’d go find all your best supplies of whisky.”

“Anything. Is that what the midwife will require?”

El threw him a wry smile once they’d gained the first landing of the elaborate staircase. “No. The whisky is for you, you dolt. Now go hole up in your study and leave us to our work.”

Derek couldn’t be sure, but he could have sworn the huge bird turned a mocking look on him as well.

Saida paid little attention to the haughty aristocrat whose servant was losing the battle for her life in a difficult labor. A passing thought flitted through her mind. She supposed the poor woman was laboring to bring forth the arrogant, privileged man’s bastard child.

She mused with some sadness that all women were at the mercy of privileged men, no matter their country.

When El opened the door to the bedchamber and Saida glimpsed the young woman writhing on the bed, her distended belly glistening with sweat. She could see the outline of the babe straining against its mother’s skin, and immediately knew what was wrong.

Saida turned to the young chambermaid and ordered in low tones - "Lots of clean linens, hot water, and soap." When she'd first discovered the primitive way birthing mothers were treated in this barbaric country, she'd been appalled. Her mother and grandmother before her had learned the art of keeping mothers alive at the feet of a Jewish surgeon. She'd need to call on all of those skills tonight.

El gently transferred Aji from Saida's shoulder to her own before heading down to the kitchens for treats to keep the beastly creature quiet until Saida had finished doing what she could to help the young woman. She'd seen the young Moroccan refugee from Ceuta work miracles with laboring mothers before. She hoped to the gods she could come up with one more tonight.

Derek was still pacing the gazebo when the angry, lusty cries of an infant shattered the stillness of the night. He sank to a cold stone bench and sucked in a deep breath of frigid night air. Lizzie was at least out of pain for now. At that moment, the young midwife walked out onto the terrace and sank to her knees in the thick grass at the center in a circular cut in the stone surface where the sundial stood. She bowed her head and clasped her hands together in prayer. After a short time, she stood and walked back into the family drawing room which faced the garden.

He sat transfixed for a long time. Derek had never seen a woman like her. She strode confidently, her feet shod in sensible half-boots. Her simple gray muslin dress clung to her where she'd obviously been sweating herself whilst in the midst of whatever herculean efforts she'd had to employ to save his friend's child. She'd swiped at her forehead before a footman had opened the garden-side door. And then she disappeared inside as if she'd never been there.

By the time he'd gathered his thoughts and returned to the house, the young woman, her extraordinary avian companion, and Captain El had disappeared back into the darkness of the Essex night. He'd heard El's shouts at his two grays she'd appropriated so as to give her cattle a rest as she sped back toward her own estate in

her personal curricule.

All he could think of in that moment was how in the hell did those two women manage to keep the huge bird affixed to the midwife's shoulder as they raced through the night...and how in the hell could he manage an introduction to the exotic young woman? Only in order to thank her for saving his friend, of course, he told himself.

Saida had felt the intent gaze of the spoiled aristocrat on her while she'd cooled off in the serenity of his garden, but she loathed the thought of how he'd probably impregnated a helpless woman in his employ. She absently rubbed at the feathers in Aji's ruff to keep him sanguine whilst they raced back to Totteridge Park in the thick darkness. Her employer's oil lanterns on either side of the curricule illuminated the homeward path in the starless night.

At about the halfway mark on the Essex toll road, Captain El suddenly pulled the horses over for a short rest. She turned to Saida. "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The expressions flitting across your face reveal everything in your heart. It's one of your most endearing qualities."

"That's just not so," Saida retorted. On her shoulder, Aji moved restlessly and gave El a warning squawk.

El spread her hands in surrender and slipped the bird a crumb of biscuit she'd stuffed in her reticule before they left. Whilst Aji wolfed down her offering, El explained. "Lizzie is one of the earl's oldest friends. He grew up on that huge estate as an orphan after both his parents died on a tour of the Continent. She and her mother, the cook, were his only refuge. He spent many hours at the kitchen hearth with the two of

them.” She paused to give Aji another morsel before adding, “The babe isn’t his, but if I know Derek, he will raise her as his own.”

3

NOVEMBER, 1826

BERKLEY SQUARE, LONDON

Georgina Throckmorton, ne' Wilsdam, smoothed her hands down her slim, lavender silk-covered hips and stared into the full-length mirror in her boudoir for the fourth time in the last fifteen minutes. The gilded Ormolu clock sitting atop her marble fireplace chimed the hour of one o'clock. One o'clock was the perfect time of the day. She'd just warmly bid good-bye to her tedious husband George, one of Prinny's closest financial advisers, not to mention one of his long-suffering bankers.

He wouldn't be back for at least six hours considering all the committee meetings he faced that afternoon at Westminster to be followed closely by supper at his club. After endless glasses of his favored brandy, John Coachman and one of their footmen would literally have to pour her inebriated husband into his bed sometime after midnight.

She carefully tied the ribbons closing the lace-trimmed robe that would cover her silken night rail, the better to allow the physician access to her body. She could almost feel his fingers fumbling with the slippery ribbons. She pinched color into her lips and considered her pale cheeks. Perhaps she'd pass on the pot of rouge. Wouldn't do to appear too healthy.

After she finally managed to seduce Dr. Douglas that afternoon, she'd have that luscious man give her an extra sleeping draught to get her through the night.

However, she mused that perhaps an afternoon in her bed in the arms of a muscular, sensual Scotsman might be more than sufficient to wear her out to her very bones...enough to sleep through the night in any event.

She had a hunch that the months of having him visit her each week for her non-existent “nervous condition” had led to an, um, mutual tendre . She couldn’t possibly be mistaken in the signals he’d been giving her. The warm sincerity of his voice, the gentle way he’d brushed against her perfectly formed breasts whilst listening to her heartbeat. Surely he’d noticed how his nearness precipitated wild pounding.

And then there was her obnoxious sister Caroline, Mrs. Edward Gloyne, who’d married a tin mine king from Cornwall. She lived in a townhouse on the opposite side of the square and rarely saw her husband and children who remained on a vast estate near Truro. She’d talked at length about their mutual physician, hinting at intimacies she’d shared with him.

The Wilsdam sisters, daughters of an earl, had debuted together ten seasons before, and both had been declared “diamonds.” However, all the excitement of being darlings of the ton soon died when they were picked off early by frighteningly wealthy men who were in search of titled wives as brood mares and entree’s to society.

She’d provided the requisite heir and spare, now nine and eight, who, thankfully, were still away at school until they descended back into the household for the term break. Her body had thoughtfully eschewed the production of daughters, so that Georgina could spend the rest of her life pursuing whatever sort of bliss she desired. Her husband was rarely sober enough to engage in sexual congress, so she no longer worried about that complication.

Her poor sister had produced two ghastly girls before managing an heir. Since she herself had been spared the pain of shepherding insipid young women into the world

of the ton, she supposed she'd have to give her sister a hand with the unpleasant business when the time came.

There was a light tap at her door, and her lady's maid entered with a conspiratorial smile. "He's here."

"Send him up."

Dr. Hamish Douglas took a deep breath before climbing the curving staircase of the elegant townhouse behind Mrs. Throckmorton's lady's maid. The long oval mirrors lining the entry hall had multiplied his reflection, seeming to mock his aimless existence. He hated what he'd become: the latest entertainment for the bored wives of Prinny's inner circle.

His own father, one of Prinny's long-suffering physicians, had pushed him into the practice of treating wealthy patients in their homes. That was in theory. In practice, he'd been relegated to visiting a handful of women in the wealthiest part of Mayfair, none of whom were actually ill in any sense of the word. However, they all cheerfully insisted on weekly visits because they were all convinced that something was terribly wrong with them, and only he was skilled enough to get to the bottom of the medical conundrum of their bored existences.

Mrs. Throckmorton's long supposed illness had led to entirely too many familiarities on her part. She'd always offer him an elaborate tea when he arrived and would feign extreme pain and discomfort if he tried to demur and move on to his next appointment. He steeled himself for what he had to do. He had to end the longest illness he'd ever encountered in any human being. He planned to give her the name of Dr. Blake Smythe, who specialized in "nervous conditions" in women. He didn't want to know what the man did to satisfy the endless stream of patients he attracted, but he suspected Mrs. Throckmorton might thrive under his care.

The minute her lady's maid tapped at the lady's bedchamber door, she raced off as if she'd spied a rat in the hallway. Hamish grimaced. He suddenly realized the house had become deadly quiet. She'd apparently dismissed all the servants for the afternoon. He sighed and strode through the open door.

He knew the moment he saw her languid pose in her bed clothes, he was in trouble. He skipped his carefully rehearsed speech and instead shoved his colleague's card into her hand before rushing from the room. Hamish re-traced his steps all the way down the staircase and retrieved his hat, gloves, and cane from the entryway table before plunging out the front door. He didn't stop until he was three streets away.

When he returned to his office on Finsbury Square, Barrister Stephen Forsythe was waiting for him. He sat on one of the uncomfortable wooden chairs in Hamish's waiting room, one booted foot tapping impatiently. "Good God, man. How long does it take to treat one demented wealthy woman for a non-existent disease?"

Hamish knew all about the famous barrister. Everyone did. However, he was still in a foul mood from his embarrassing denouement with Mrs. Throckmorton. "Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

Forsythe gave him an odd look before clapping him on the back and ushering him outside to an elegant carriage. Once they were inside, the barrister banged his walking cane against the roof and leaned back as if they'd known each other for years.

"Where the hell are we going?" Hamish was still peevish from his foul encounter that afternoon with his now former patient.

"Are you always this unpleasant?" Forsythe casually asked, as if he had no interest in the answer to the question. "You've been summoned."

“Summoned by whom? Why should I cooperate?”

“Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby requires your presence, and if you want to live out a decent life in London, you would be well advised to comply.”

Hamish went silent because he could not summon enough spit to form words. He knew Lady Camilla well. He also knew that running afoul of her could destroy his medical career in the British Isles...and no doubt beyond. He'd have to flee to Botany Bay if he ever wanted to practice medicine again.

4

NOVEMBER, 1826

ST. JAMES SQUARE, LONDON

Lady Camilla had overheard many tales whispered at the edges of St. James ballrooms about the gorgeous Scottish physician who was currently the darling of the ton's bored, wealthy wives, but the man who'd been commandeered to appear for tea in her drawing room surpassed any tittle-tattle gossip he might have generated.

Good God, Dr. Hamish Douglas was delectable, and how he filled out his sensible but expensively tailored Savile Row suit. From the cut and precision, probably Davies and Son. She could not in recent memory recall any man who'd unsettled her like this one. For a fleeting moment she almost forgot herself and plied him with her infamous blue-eyed gaze from beneath long lashes. And then Camilla came to her senses. Not only was she surely older than this man's mother, but probably his grandmother as well.

The barrister Forsythe gave her an odd look. "Did you hear what I said, milady?"

She started and nodded. "Yes, of course. So pleased to finally meet you, Dr Douglas." She coughed a bit to cover her lapse and extended her hand. "I've heard many good things about your, erm, medical skills."

After he bowed and took her hand, he looked directly into her eyes and said, "I must congratulate you on maintaining your beautiful, youthful skin, Lady Camilla."

Camilla nearly giggled at the jolt that went through her. She'd have to watch this one. What an unexpected pleasure. Was he flirting with her? She squelched the dizzying feelings he elicited that she hadn't felt in years and simply acknowledged his compliment with a nod and "Thank you."

Honoraria, Ath's wife, who was not visibly pregnant at the moment, had no qualms about giving the man an appreciative glance, making a show of smoothing her skirts and leaning expectantly toward the poor man.

Sythe took the cue and introduced him to Honoraria as well. After they'd exchanged pleasantries, they were interrupted by the deep voice of Lady Camilla's butler, Raines. "Tea, milady?" he intoned, even as he rolled the cart laden with a huge, steaming silver pot and delicate china cups and saucers as well as a towering, four-level assortment of small finger sandwiches, pots of heavy cream and jam, buttery pastries, and decadent cakes and candied fruits crowning the top level.

When Camilla pointed a commanding, be-ringed finger toward the settee next to her, Dr. Douglas dutifully took a seat.

She nodded to Honoraria to do the honor of serving, and as soon as everyone was settled with their tea, Sythe began his explanation of why they'd brought Dr. Douglas into their confidence.

"We have a very delicate matter." He raised a hand to tick off their requirements, finger by finger. We require someone with medical knowledge, diplomacy, and a willingness to protect a young woman whose life may be in peril." When Hamish tried to interrupt with a question, Sythe warned him to wait by extending his palm. "One small, further complication, however, is that she may or may not be a murderess, and your employer, who..."

Raines tapped at the drawing room door again before ushering in Derek Welkirk, Earl

of Framlingwood.

Sythe looked toward the door in annoyance. “Where have you been? We told you we’d be meeting at precisely two o’clock.”

“I’m sorry,” Framlingwood said, sweeping his gaze around the room at everyone assembled to help him hire the latest bodyguard for one of his mistresses. “I, um, had some business to attend to with Mrs. Collins.”

“Mrs. Collins? Your housekeeper?” Sythe delivered the questions with a mocking, incredulous look.

Framlingwood’s face flushed a scarlet hue followed by a collective eye-rolling amongst Lady Camilla and the rest of her guests.

Hamish hoped for nothing more than perhaps a hole to form beneath the expensive Turkey carpet beneath the settee and fling him down to Hades. He was torn between abject embarrassment, anger, and curiosity. He was, after all, a well-known London physician. What made this havey-cavey lot of connivers think he was available and eager for their odd employment? However, he had to admit he was intrigued by the thought of protecting a young woman who was either in fear of her life...or a murderess. But what the hell did being a physician have to do with this bizarre charade?

The barrister leaned forward, his hands on his knees, and stared rudely. “I know you’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

Hamish had barely opened his mouth to give all of them a piece of his mind when the earl suddenly spoke up. “Before you say anything, let me tell you how much I’m prepared to pay to keep my mistresses safe.”

“Mistresses? Multiple mistresses?” Hamish asked stupidly.

Honorina explained patiently, as if to a child. “He has five. He’s an idiot who can’t bear to dismiss any of them, once he brings on a new one.” She paused for a moment before continuing. “And he brings on a new mistress once a year. He keeps all of them in a huge edifice on Grosvenor Street he’s turned into side-by-side townhouses. They share an army of servants, one cook...” She faltered for a moment, stared toward one of Lady Camilla’s ceiling medallions, and then continued. “Oh, and one housekeeper, the aforementioned Mrs. Collins.”

Hamish closed his mouth, which he feared had fallen open while Honorina had explained the full extent of the earl’s mistress madness. “And how do you know these women are in danger?”

Framlingwood raised his head sheepishly. “I’m being blackmailed, and the rum cove is threatening to harm the women if I don’t keep paying him. He’s already made attempts on two of them.”

“Why blackmail you? Surely you’re not the only aristocrat in England with more than one mistress.” Hamish sat back and took a deep draught of his tea.

“He threatens to destroy all of them if I don’t give up the one who’s a murderess.” Framlingwood hung his head after that admission.

“So which one of them is the culprit?”

“We don’t know,” everyone said in unison.

“And you expect me to guard a woman who could be a murderess?”

“Saida is an apothecary, wrongly accused of poisoning the wife of one of her

customers.” Framlingwood smiled as he described her. “But I can’t believe she’d hurt anyone. She’s an extremely talented midwife and herbalist. You could move into her townhouse on the pretext of sharing some of what you know of formal medicine...”

Hamish gritted his teeth. “How in the name of Zeus do you expect me to take on a job like this?”

“For an obscene amount of money,” Framlingwood said, without pause and shrugged his shoulders.

Hamish settled back onto the settee, looked around the room and carefully finished his tea before setting down his cup. He leaned forward toward the earl. “I accept your offer, Framlingwood. I’m your man.”

Barrister Forsythe quietly moved to the tantalus in the corner of the drawing room. He poured a generous tot of whisky into an elegant crystal glass and walked the libation to Hamish. “You’re going to need this when we tell you the rest of the story.”

Hamish refused Barrister Forsythe’s offer of a carriage ride back to his office and residence. “I need to walk to clear my brain and somehow come to grips with what I’ve agreed to do for money.”

“There is no shame in succumbing to filthy lucre,” Forsythe assured him. “I myself serve some of the blackest hearted, most disgusting denizens of London, because, first of all, someone has to represent these poor, unredeemable wretches. Otherwise, how else would justice be served in our society? And then there’s the inescapable truth that I have to earn a living as much as the next man.”

At that, he’d tipped his hat toward Hamish, and his carriage had disappeared into the growing dusk of a late fall night in Mayfair.

When finally alone with his thoughts, Hamish started walking back toward his modest townhouse on Finsbury Square, far east of the wealthiest Mayfair neighborhoods. He knew he had to maintain a brisk pace for the at least hour-long slog ahead of him. But he was grateful for the time to think.

He couldn't help dwelling on what Framlingwood's generous infusion of cash would mean to further his dream to escape his father's clutches and move back to Inverness to serve the people of his mother's impoverished clan. He'd grown up in his father's household, the coddled brother of four loving sisters. He'd never known his natural mother until he'd left home to attend medical school in Edinburgh. His mother had somehow managed to travel all the way by public coach down to where he'd shared quarters with several other medical students.

When her note had arrived, explaining that she was his mother and begging to be allowed to meet with him just once, the initial shock was followed by disbelief. At the end of her carefully penned note, she'd promised she'd never bother him again if he'd grant her just one hour of his time. She'd described the birthmark inside one of his ankles that he'd carried all his life, a reddened skin irregularity that was shaped oddly, like a small star.

For a week, emotions ranging from anger to grief and finally curiosity had deviled him until he'd penned a response he'd had sent to her return address. From her crude penmanship, he'd expected an ignorant, stooped country woman. Instead, he found himself seated across from an obviously once-beautiful, surprisingly young woman staring back at him with his own dark eyes and deep ginger brows.

Her hair was a glorious auburn bound into a tight bun at the back of her neck. However, the severe hairdo failed to keep stray curls from springing out in the damp Edinburgh night. He realized with a leaden lump in his stomach that his father must have forced himself on a very young woman and then left her to fend for herself after taking away her child. She'd been quick to explain that she'd been in service in a

grand house when she'd met his father. She also assured him she'd willingly sent him with his father knowing she'd have no way of keeping him with her.

"Twas a bad thing I did, and I've missed my sweet babe every day. Can you ever forgive me?" Those sweet words had somehow broken the dam of anger he'd harbored ever since receiving her note. From that time on, he'd met her for supper each Sunday evening, courtesy of the generous allowance from his father. She'd found a position as a housemaid to a widow in Edinburgh so that they could spend her half day together.

Over a year of Sundays during his final studies at Edinburgh, she'd spooled out the story of her family, now his as well, and how they'd been reduced to subsistence living after the clearances near Inverness. With the enclosure, or privatization, of the land they'd farmed for generations, they now were reduced to mostly fishing and working at odd jobs at the periphery of Inverness. Hunting on the huge, now private estates was considered poaching and punishable by either death or transportation.

In the years since then, he'd felt like a fraud accepting the life his father had set up for him, but had kept the dream that one day he'd save enough to escape to the Highlands and help the side of his family he barely knew. Lately, at night, after several brandies to help him forget the futility of his aimless practice, he'd berated himself for settling into a complacent, comfortable, but meaningless existence.

Now, after all these years, his dream was nearly within reach. All he had to do was guard a woman who was either in danger...or a murdering poisoner. What could possibly go wrong?

5

NOVEMBER 1826

NO 3 GROSVENOR STREET, MAYFAIR

Hamish now realized what could go wrong, and there she stood, a dangerously beautiful, exotic beauty with an angry, vociferous bird guarding her from his perch on her shoulder and shouting profanities Hamish had rarely heard, even in the crudest of surgeries in Seven Dials where he volunteered his help a few hours each week.

“Cock bawd,” the creature screeched, closely followed by “hedge whore!” Miss Hossini tried valiantly to quiet him, offering a handful of seeds and dried bugs, which the cockatoo eschewed only to screech louder — “cock bawd, cock BAWD.” After his final shout had died out, she deftly produced a linen towel with which she gently covered his head whilst whisking him into a giant cage hanging in the middle of her first-floor parlor. She then covered the entire contraption with a huge sheet of some sort before dimming all the gas lights and putting a finger to her full lips as a warning to Hamish for quiet and pointing another finger toward the door to the hallway.

His boots crunched over copious seeds ground into the expensive Aubusson carpet covering the parlor floor as he followed the bewitching woman out of the room.

Mrs. Collins who had been introducing them when the bird began its uncontrollable screaming of epithets, waited for them outside the room where she still held her hands over her ears as protection against the raucous cursing.

Saida leaned against the wall next to the doorway and sighed. “I am so sorry, Dr. Douglas, Mrs. Collins. I’m still trying to wean Aji away from all the profanities he learnt around his former master, Captain El’s Indonesian navigator. I’m afraid the poor bird picked up a lot of naughty speech patterns from sailors in many ports.”

Mrs. Collins shook her head slowly and then laughed so hard, tears rolled down her cheeks. She bent over to regain control only to break out in laughter again. “Dr. Douglas, I wish you could see yourself. You look like a man who needs a bracing cup of tea, with maybe a splash of brandy. Why don’t we adjourn to the first-floor drawing room where we can have a quiet discussion without Aji taking offense?”

Hamish stood speechless in the dim light of the hallway sconces. He was trying to gather and manage all the thoughts whirling around his brain. He’d assumed all of Framlingwood’s mistresses would be attractive, but Saida Hossini had the glowing carnal look of a voluptuous Botticelli angel kissed and bronzed by the Mediterranean sun. He’d also become accustomed to polite ton society where nothing even remotely carnal or uncouth ever was spoken aloud. He’d never be able to un-hear what her unholy bird had virtually seared into his ears.

Miss Hossini interrupted his scattered thoughts as they climbed the staircase to the upper floor. “I must warn you if you decide to stay in my household, Aji is extremely jealous. He’s taken a dislike to all men since his master died and he became my pet.”

Hamish stared into the depths of her intriguing green eyes and wondered if she knew what an understatement her explanation was. However, that damned bird had no idea with whom he was dealing. A Highlander had more grit and resolve than any flighty, bright-plumaged bird from the tropics. And besides, the amount of money at stake made this particular Highlander’s resolve even mightier. He’d see the winged bastard the main course for Sunday supper before he’d give up now that he’d decided to become Saida’s bodyguard.

Zeus's balls. Had Framlingwood never been the brunt of the bird's ire? If he had, he might have had second thoughts about hiring a bodyguard. Saida probably didn't need Hamish as long as she had that vicious fowl on her shoulder.

Saida suddenly interrupted his foul, er fowl thoughts. "Dr. Douglas...what is the real reason you're here? And don't tell me you've been assigned as my tutor-bodyguard."

"Why not? That's the truth of the matter." He picked at an imaginary piece of lint on his waistcoat to avoid drowning in those all-seeing green eyes. And, if he were honest with himself, to avoid being exposed as a fraud.

Cassandra Collins gazed surreptitiously from Dr. Douglas to Saida and back again. There was some sort of current coursing between the two of them, but it certainly wasn't mutual regard and attraction.

She sensed Saida was suspicious of having a strange man being placed in her household, and she couldn't say she blamed her. They were seated across from each other in matching settees, a cozy fire crackling in the drawing room fireplace.

Saida had cautiously chosen to sit next to her whilst Dr. Douglas had chosen the opposite settee. Cassandra leaned forward to place her teacup back onto its saucer on the low table between them. "Why don't you tell us something about yourself, Dr. Douglas?"

"Hamish, please. I'm not here to treat an ailment." He flashed them a smile mean to charm and disarm. She had to admit it was working, at least on her. However, next to her, she could almost feel the tensing of Saida's body, even though they were barely touching.

Saida suddenly stood and pointed toward the window overlooking the park. "Look—there's someone throwing rocks at a poor woman in the park."

Hamish stood immediately and rushed to observe the scene outside with Cassandra close behind. When she craned her neck to see around the burly Scotsman, she realized Saida was still back on the settee.

He whipped around and accused Saida. “There’s no one out there. What did you really see?”

She gave him a smug smile. “I must have been mistaken.”

After that, the tension in the room nearly crackled with the intense dislike that seemed to emanate from the two of them.

Cassandra realized with a start they’d probably be better off without her interference. And besides, they had to learn to get along when she wasn’t around. She was merely following Derek’s orders. The next time he invaded her parlor, she’d give him a piece of her mind about trying to manipulate people’s lives...including hers.

She stood, excused herself, and returned to her own quarters, leaving Saida and Hamish exchanging angry looks.

Saida studied Hamish’s face intently, wondering how long it would take the herbs she’d put into his tea to take effect. The valerian would relax him enough to remove his layer of superiority and confidence, and then she’d serve him a decanter of wine with just enough of her nocturne tea mix to loosen his tongue. She’d get to the bottom of what was going on, or know the reason why.

He suddenly slumped back onto the settee, his long, muscular legs sliding out in front of him. Even in his dark woolen, conservative jacket and trousers, the man was magnificent. Her mouth began to water. She nearly slapped herself to banish the images invading her mind.

She stood and gathered a few pillows from her settee before putting them behind his back and neck to keep him comfortable.

“Why’d you do that?” he protested.

Good . She imagined rubbing her hands together in glee.

She patted his hand and retrieved the tray with the wine decanter she’d prepared earlier from a sideboard. She’d sweetened the concoction with honey so that none of the taste of the herbs would alarm him. He didn’t seem to notice her glass already contained a pour of wine.

After she poured the doctored drink into his glass, he leaned forward, sipped, and smiled broadly. “This is wonderful. How do you make it?”

“With lots of care and intention.”

“Thank you.” He saluted her with the glass, and she raised her own glass to her lips.

Her plan was proceeding so well she almost felt a twinge of guilt. Almost.

An hour later, the decanter was almost empty, and Hamish’s tongue had become looser than a pack of geese clacking their way toward a pond. He’d told her everything she’d asked and more, throwing in every boring detail of his childhood, how much his half-sisters doted on him, and on and on. She’d finally had to give a series of false yawns, hoping he’d get the hint.

And then he’d revealed his dream - to start a clinic in Inverness so that he could be nearer his natural mother and treat his poor clansmen who’d been displaced from their farms and livelihoods by the clearances. She’d nearly cried at that revelation and had felt a large surge of guilt at how she was using his trusting nature against him.

At last, she'd had to move to his settee and squat down to get one of his massive arms over her shoulder before half leading, half dragging him to his bedchamber which was on the same level as the drawing room, thank Hera. He'd collapsed onto the counterpane, fully clothed with a beatific smile on his face.

As she climbed to her second-floor aerie of a bedchamber, Saida mulled over what she'd learned from the drugged Highlander. The earl was being blackmailed, and the blackmailer was threatening to hurt one or all of the mistresses if the earl didn't reveal which one of them was a murderess. Saida knew all of the mistresses hid secrets that made them prefer the shadow lives they all shared. But to think one of them was actually a murderess...a curtain of cold enveloped her. Who was she?

6

NOVEMBER 1826

NO 3 GROSVENOR STREET, MAYFAIR

Since Saida was alone in the parlor finishing her breakfast, she relished the last bit of fresh butter and jam that had made its way to her fingers. She hadn't taken the sheet off Aji's cage yet. She liked to enjoy the morning quiet before the bird began his constant chattering, preening, and scattering of seed.

She'd just licked her last finger clean of Cook's luscious blackberry jam when pounding boot steps down the staircase preceded a roar emanating from the ground floor entry hall. The Scotsman. Definitely the sounds of an angry Scotsman...or a thundering herd of runaway cattle.

She stood, smoothed the skirts of her cheerful rose-colored morning dress, and moved to head him off before he frightened the servants. When she finally reached the hall, both Quick and Slow Rutherfords were straining to hold Dr. Douglas back from storming into the parlor.

Saida felt the color drain from her face. She'd known a lot of men, but she'd never seen such a magnificent specimen as this one in a high state of dudgeon. Apparently, she'd underestimated the man's capacity for mayhem.

"Let him go," she ordered the Rutherford under butlers. "I may have caused Dr. Douglas to feel some, um, anger toward me."

As soon as they loosened their hold on Hamish, he stormed toward her like an enraged bull. “You—,” he said. When he tried to speak again, all he could manage was another loud shout of “You.”

Saida leaned around him and motioned for the Rutherfords to leave. When they gave her an incredulous look, she straightened and said, “Please leave. Dr. Douglas will not harm me.”

After a dubious look, the two men backed out of the parlor, shutting the door behind them. She moved quickly to lock it from inside before turning back toward Hamish.

“How could you?” he shouted, jabbing a forefinger in her direction. “How could you betray my trust, not to mention my word to Lord Framlingwood?”

“You must understand. I had to know.”

“And so you drugged me...with God knows what.” He moved so quickly to her side, she marveled that such a huge man could move that fast. He was so close she could smell his peppermint breath, could feel his body heat and smell the sandalwood soap he’d used that morning. “Just what did you drug me with?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t matter?” He was back to roaring. “It doesn’t matter?” he repeated. “You could have killed me.”

“No. I wouldn’t have.” Saida engaged her best shouting voice. “I’m an expert apothecary. You were never in any danger.”

Hamish turned and ran his hands through his hair so violently, he looked like an ancient Viking berserker when he faced her again. “If you want to know something

about me, just ask me. I have nothing to hide.” After that shaking announcement, he did something so shattering, Saida nearly sank to her knees with need.

“Here I am,” he shouted, tearing his shirt from his chest, baring himself to her. “If you don’t trust me, why don’t you take a knife to me? Do it now. I don’t want to wait, wondering when or if you’re going to send me to Hades. Here, do it.” He snatched a letter opener from a nearby desk and held the point to where his heart thumped wildly beneath his chest.

Saida moved slowly toward him until there were just a few inches between them. She stood motionless for long minutes before ripping the letter opener from his hand and letting it clatter to the floor. After that, she stood on her tiptoes and languidly laved each nipple on his bared chest.

Hamish’s brain moved from blind rage to blind lust in a stuttering moment between heartbeats. Who was this woman who dared touch him like a lover after trying to kill him the night before?

The minute he grabbed both of her hands to push her searing lips away from his sensitive nipples, a loud warning squawk sounded from the covered cage in the corner. He sucked in a deep breath, readying for battle with the damned bird as well if he had to, but Aji apparently thought better of taking on Hamish whilst blinded by a sheet. He quieted down.

When Hamish looked back to the dangerous woman barely contained by his clenched fists, she was suckling one of his fingers. Christ .

Hamish glanced toward the breakfast table, complete with the remains of her toast and tea. In two long strides, her delicate wrists still clenched in his meaty paws, he managed to drag Saida to the edge of the table. When he ripped off the linen cloth covering, scattering crockery, her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. He

hoisted her to stand atop one of the chairs and rolled up her skirts. The ivory lace stockings held just above her knees with rose garters to match her skirts were the only coverings below her waist. The dark curls covering her nether region were as unfettered as he'd imagined them.

In one swoop of his arms he caught her unaware and hoisted her atop the now bare table. He gauged the look in her eyes. She met him heated stare for heated stare.

“Do you know what I do to naughty girls who touch me without my consent?”

Her gaze still steady, she said nothing but ran her tongue over her lips, pulled up her skirts, and spread her legs wide.

“I make them wish they'd never been so brash, I make them wish they'd never crossed me.”

“Why?” she ventured.

“Because when I'm done with you, Saida Hossini, you will never be able to forget what happened today in this room.”

She said nothing, but leaned back onto her elbows and spread her legs wider.

“Aji—.” Lily's tone was sharp with the spoiled cockatoo who strutted proudly amongst all of the remaining unmarried mistresses during their weekly tea on everyone's day off. She'd recently adopted a darling fluffy white kitten who'd been a biddable little ball of white fur until Aji had taken a perverse liking to the poor thing. Now, whenever the residents of the adjoining Grosvenor Street townhouses gathered together, her cockatoo stalked the poor thing mocking it with the sounds of its meows the silly bird had learned to mimic.

Saida felt sorry for the frightened feline, but she had to admit the show the two pets put on was entertaining.

All the other women gathered around the tea cart found the bird's act vastly entertaining. Lily, however, was tired of having to cosset her poor kitten for hours after every nerve-wracking encounter with Aji.

"Do you all have any idea how long it takes to calm down Titania after she's stalked by that bully of a bird?" Lily stood and walked to the fireplace, holding the kitten close. Aji had learned not to tread near the fireplace after he'd scorched a tail feather on one of their previous tea afternoons.

In a sudden change of direction in the conversation, Lily gave Saida a sly look and asked, "Where's the adorable Highlander today? Did you give him the day off?"

Saida paused in sipping daintily on a cup of steaming jasmine tea. "No, of course not. Derek would have a fit if he thought I was trying to thwart his bodyguard." Saida sprinkled herbs into her cup from a small pouch she wore tied to the sash on her morning dress.

"Is he still worried you'll poison him?" Margo asked, an innocent look on her face.

"Shall we assure him you murder only those who are truly evil when you bring him around to meet us?" Gabrielle pushed an errant gold curl behind one ear.

This brought forth a round of ribald laughter.

"He's either fearless or horribly in need of funds," Saida admitted. "I know they told him why I'm here." She sipped thoughtfully before adding, "It's been very entertaining to watch him toss away his tea and wine when I'm not looking." She laughed then, a full, throaty sound full of mischief. "The potted plants in the dining

room and parlor are dying from too much alcohol and tea thrown their way.

“He’s also taken to whispering in the pantry with Quick Rutherford. And you know what a beast of a tease that man can be. I’m sure he’s fed him tales of how I’m suspected of murdering lady’s maids I didn’t like.”

“Does he know about us?” Margo’s tone turned serious.

“Yes,” Saida admitted. “I explained to him that we all have a bit of harmless fun when the earl’s not around, and life is much easier when we’re not all jealous or suspicious of each other.”

“And how did he take that explanation?”

“He said it made sense, and he didn’t have any problem with keeping our secret, because he wants to fulfill his duties as bodyguard as quickly as possible so that he can sell his practice and move to Inverness to be with his mother’s family.”

“Why?” Margo asked, her tone sharp. “He has a very successful practice here in London with every wealthy bitch in the ton begging for his services.”

“He’s not like that,” Saida countered, and then regretted her quick retort.

“Ahhh.” Gabrielle wagged her brows. “Someone is falling a little bit in lust with the burly Scotsman, methinks.”

Saida flushed crimson from the tip of her nose down to swell of her breasts. “It’s not like that,” she insisted.

Gabrielle, who was now an accepted part of the enclave of mistresses, gave a loud, theatrical “tisk” and added with a sigh, “It never is.”

All of the women who lived side by side on Grosvenor Street had accepted in silent agreement that Margot and Gabrielle were a couple. The earl apparently enjoyed their joint favors from time to time.

Mrs. Collins had declared one evening when they'd all been drinking a claret punch instead of tea, that the two women's, um, irregular relationship had turned out to be good for the earl. How she knew that none of the mistresses had the nerve to ask. But they all had their suspicions.

"Are you sleeping with him?" Margot suddenly threw out the question Saida knew all the other mistresses were wondering about as well.

"Um, not exactly."

"What the hell does that mean?" Margot set down her tea cup with a clatter.

"There was an, erm, incident, yesterday morning."

A dead silence fell in the parlor. Even Aji remained quiet.

"And...?" Margot encouraged.

"I made him really angry and he 'punished' me in a most delightful way."

Lily leaned forward, an eager, questioning look on her face. "What did you do to bring on such 'punishment'?"

Saida gave them all a devilish grin. "I'm not sure, but whatever it was, I hope to Allah I do it again."

After loud laughter at that confession, the usual chatter and gossip continued until

suddenly, Lily voiced what they'd all been thinking privately. "Does anyone have any idea as to what all the bodyguards are about? I know there have been a few attacks, but they've all been addressed and explained. What does the earl know that he's not telling us? And why do we still need bodyguards?"

Margo weighed in. "I don't know about you all, but Gabrielle and I do not want a man living with us all the time."

Lily gave a little shiver. "Neither do I, but who knows what lurks outside these walls? Who the hell would want to hurt us?"

Saida had decided not to tell the remaining mistresses what she now knew about the blackmailer. There was no need to frighten them needlessly, since it appeared the blackguard had stopped his attacks for the time being.

She did, however, know someone else who still wanted her dead, because she was the only person who knew the truth about his wife's murder. She didn't think he'd pay an assassin to travel as far as England to silence her, but who knew? If his wife's family ever discovered the truth, they might have him thrown in prison...or worse. Saida feared the rug merchant couldn't afford the outside chance that she might one day let them know the truth.

7

NOVEMBER, 1826

GROSVENOR STREET – LONDON

Hamish brushed his best suit for the second time and wondered why he was spending so much time on his clothing. He tried, unsuccessfully, to banish the memories of how his mysterious housemate had tasted the previous morning when he'd punished her for drugging his wine.

He had no idea what the hell he'd been thinking, because instead of "punishing" her, he'd ended up suffering more than she had with a nearly perpetual cockstand whenever she was near. The mere scent of her could send him into a painful spiral of need.

She'd tasted like roses, and her screams when she'd fallen apart under the tutelage of his probing tongue had brought the Rutherfords back pounding on the parlor door. Hamish now regretted his anger and rare bout of lust for which he'd apologized to the poor woman many times since.

She'd never said anything in reply to his abject apologies, only favoring him with her enigmatic smiles. He feared he'd never know the woman well enough to understand her strange ways, but he'd made a point of not drinking anything she'd prepared for him since that night. The sooner he finished his bodyguard and tutoring duties, the sooner he could put as much distance as possible between him and the unpredictable, exotic Saida.

The spare bedchamber he'd been given at the rear of the first floor had cheery buttercup yellow walls and a window overlooking the mews so that he could enjoy the sun whenever it made an appearance. November in London was not the most light-filled of seasons.

As to why he was taking so much care with his wardrobe, he and Saida were going to venture out to the busy Bell Pharmacy on Oxford Street. He thought that would be a good introduction for her to the kinds of treatments dispensed in London. He'd arranged a tour of the back rooms where they compounded the medicines sold in the front of the shop.

Perhaps he could persuade her to relax and open up to him about the kinds of Berber folk medicine she'd practiced in her home country. It seemed that every time he broached the subject, she bristled as if he were a nosy intruder in her life.

So far, life at No. 3 Grosvenor Street had been extremely quiet. He'd almost abandoned his nightly rounds of the townhouse making sure all doors and windows were secured. Could it be that the earl had overestimated the threat to Miss Hossini? That, fortunately, was none of his concern.

Unfortunately, he had a more pressing need. He was going to do physical damage either to his cock, or his left hand in his nightly, multiple bouts of self-gratification if he didn't put distance between himself and Saida Hossini. Every night he vowed to simply go to bed, roll over, and get some rest. Every night his throbbing member had other ideas. How his cock somehow knew the dratted woman slept a mere floor above them was beyond him.

He'd been given a mission to accomplish. If he could educate the stubborn young woman in the ways of English physicians in the short time they'd have together, she could perhaps become an assistant at Lady Camilla's nephew C.B.'s clinic, or a nurse at one of the hospitals. She might also enhance her practice of midwifery. However,

if the earl's glowing recommendations were to be believed, she already excelled in those skills.

As to whether or not she was a murderess, he had no idea. She was certainly capable of murder, but he had no desire to ever find out if she'd actually killed someone. For the love of Zeus, the earl had a damned Bow Street runner in his pocket. Why did he need a physician of all people to do his dirty work?

Hamish had finally managed to organize the takeover of his practice by putting his patients into the care of a young physician who'd interned at St. George's under his tutelage. He'd found him a place at C.B.'s clinic in Seven Dials where Hamish still volunteered his time one day a week. They'd struck a bargain whereby the young man would send Hamish a small portion of his income each year until he'd paid for the practice.

Hamish had debated as to whether to resign from his volunteer work at the Seven Dials clinic, but helping the poor residents of London's worst neighborhoods was too important. He'd been pleasantly surprised when Lord Framlingwood had readily agreed to bringing two extra under butlers into Saida's household on Mondays when Hamish volunteered.

As for his own practice of bored, wealthy matrons, he suspected they'd be upset at first when they learned a younger man would be taking over. However, young Charles Goodenough was indeed as much as any, erm, female patient could hope for. He was tall, well made, and with the face of an angel. Hamish could not imagine any of his former patients turning the young man away. He'd already warned him about their predatory tendencies, but young Charles had merely leaned his lanky frame against a cabinet in C.B.'s surgery, folded his arms and given him a wicked smile.

Hamish walked down the stairs and retrieved his bowler hat and cane from the table in the hall whilst waiting for the lady to make her entrance. When he looked up after

listening to the patter of footsteps down from the top floor, she stood in the weak morning sun streaming through the fan of glass windows above the door. And she was wearing that damned rose silk dress.

Saida had deliberately chosen the same dress she wore on the day Hamish had “punished” her. She knew she was pushing the poor man, but she couldn’t refrain from trying to see what would happen. She was endlessly curious about the enigmatic Scotsman. The expression on his face told her all she needed to know. He was a prisoner of lust, much like herself.

As an additional tease, she lifted her skirts the tiniest bit so that he could spy the same creamy lace stockings she’d worn that day as well. She assumed the pretense that she needed to lift them out of the way to negotiate the last few steps after having practically skipped all the way down from the second floor would go unnoticed.

He showed little outer reaction, save a slight widening of his nostrils. That was enough for her. She was satisfied she was driving the man wild again. At some point that day, she was confident she’d find some way to re-ignite the lustful rage in him she craved.

He gestured toward the door with his walking cane. “Are you ready to learn about English medicine?”

“I’m ready to listen,” she said, refusing to admit he might have something to teach her that she didn’t already know.

He sighed and followed her out the door held open by Quick Rutherford. Her curricule awaited them with two of the earl’s high-spirited grays in the traces. Of course she’d chosen ostentation for their first foray together out in public. He cringed inwardly. He was afraid he was beginning to understand the devilish woman.

When she climbed to the driver's seat and he clambered up next to her, she nodded to the groom to loose the grays. They thundered off up Grosvenor Street with Hamish clinging desperately to the side of his seat and hanging on to his hat. Saida's stylish rose velvet hat with a dainty veil dotted with rosebuds remained perfectly still atop her infernal head.

He hoped to hell Young Rutherford clinging to the high outside rear seat was holding on tight. He wondered idly if the earl was aware that one of his mistresses willfully made a spectacle of herself on public streets. That thought dashed from his mind to be replaced by total concentration on self-preservation when they rounded the corner at Bond Street, practically on one wheel.

Saida stood in the middle of the back room of Bell's Pharmacy and turned slowly in a circle. Blackened pots and crucifers stretched from wall to wall. A series of pulleys delivered the raw materials, presumably. A small army of men worked at creating the compounds, and the smell...the smell. The smell was unbearably bitter and acrid. This was not the sort of healing apothecary she'd grown up knowing so well back in Ceuta.

Hamish was deep in conversation with the manager who kept stealing surreptitious looks her way. She realized Englishmen considered this the domain of men only, whereas in her country people had never questioned her abilities and gifts of healing.

The scents that assailed her customers were those of sweet, spicy pungent barks of trees of the Mediterranean, honey-like saffron, or lemony verbena. The bitterness here was frightening to all of her senses. How could all of these bitter compounds heal the sick, even though they were packaged in elaborate jars in the front of the pharmacy? She shook her head slowly and in her heart, pitied the ailing masses amongst the English.

After a long, sometimes heated discussion with the manager, Hamish re-joined her

and gave her a quick walk around the room, pointing out various compounding stations and what the products made at each would be used for as they went.

“You English physicians seem to use a lot of purgatives. Is that your treatment for most ailments?” She delivered her question in a deliberately challenging tone of voice.

Hamish quirked up one corner of his mouth and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “You’re trying to upset me, aren’t you?”

She gave him a sly smile. “Is it working?”

8

NOVEMBER, 1826

BELL'S PHARMACY, OXFORD STREET

N ovember, 1826

Bell's Pharmacy, Oxford Street

When Hamish returned Saida to the front of the pharmacy to explain all the items available for purchase, he nearly had a heart attack when he glanced out the front set of windows, Georgina Throckmorton stood outside, peering into the shop. The expression on her face was unpleasant. Hamish's mind raced.

He'd made her believe he wasn't interested in a relationship with a woman, and here he stood with the exotic Saida Hossini, mistress of an earl. On top of everything else, she oozed sensuality, and he was afraid Georgina would see the attraction sparking between them.

He decided to pretend he hadn't seen his former patient and instead turned to Saida, explaining what was contained each of the elaborate porcelain containers with Latin names lining the shelves. When he looked up again, Georgina was gone. Either he'd imagined she was there...or she'd given up waiting and didn't want to create a scene inside the pharmacy. He realized that was his own feeble hope, but as long as she'd moved on down the street, he had a chance of getting Saida back to Grosvenor Street before his former patient caused a problem.

He relaxed after a few more minutes and tried to answer all of Saida's pointed questions about English medicine.

Once they were back out on Oxford Street, Saida conferred with Young Rutherford who was acting as her tiger and staying with the carriage. She rejoined Hamish and gave him a mischievous smile. "Do you think you could put up with me for a few more minutes? I need a new pair of gloves, and there's a good milliner a few doors down."

Hamish swung his cane easily and walked companionably with her, surprised at how well they fit together in something so mundane as walking and shopping on Oxford Street. He gritted his teeth and banished the inane thoughts flitting through his sex-addled brain. He had a plan, and this woman was no more than the means to that end.

Just as they strolled past a fruit vendor, a small, filthy urchin of a boy sped past them, shoving aside Saida, after stealing a small apple. The vendor gave immediate hot pursuit, and when he caught up to the child, he grabbed him by the collar of his tattered shirt and began to shake him as if he were a small rat.

Saida suddenly shoved her reticule at Hamish and ran to the child's side. It was only then that Hamish noticed the boy had turned blue. Saida tore the child from the vendor's grasp and pulled the urchin into her arms. She held him chest-down on her left arm and poked beneath his chest hard with the fingers of her right hand and then rubbed his back in a circular motion. When the child seemed to remain unconscious, Hamish raced to intervene.

"Wait—," Saida shouted whilst repeating the thrusting of her fingers up into the area beneath the boy's sternum. At last, he jerked back to life and she turned him over quickly, returning him to his feet just before he retched onto Oxford Street, having coughed up the chunk of apple that must have lodged in his windpipe.

When he'd recovered a bit, he took off running again, tossing a rude taunt at the vendor. When the man acted as if he'd follow the boy, Hamish shook his head hard at the man and flipped him a coin to pay for the stolen apple.

When Saida calmly collected her reticule from Hamish and proceeded on toward the milliner's shop, he touched her arm to stop her forward motion. "Where did you learn how to do that? Who taught you?"

"The old Jewish surgeon in Ceuta who taught us midwifery."

He must have stood for some moments, still not believing what he'd just seen.

"What, Dr. Douglas? Do you find it hard to believe a foreigner from what Englishmen consider a backward country knows a little about how to save a life?"

"No," he answered carefully. "I suppose I really had no preconceived notion of the extent of your training. I just assumed..."

She cut off his rambling explanation with an outstretched hand. "Pah—."

When they turned in to the milliner's shop, he was dumbfounded at how huge the shop was inside. There must have been thirty or forty shoppers in the narrow, cavernous space. The floor-to-ceiling shelves displayed gloves and scarves for both men and women, and Hamish idly perused the selection whilst Saida made her choices.

He'd no more than found a pair of gloves he liked than a huge commotion broke out at the front of the store where the cashier was serving a line of women paying for their choices.

When he turned to see what was happening, he spied Georgina racing out the door,

and one of the clerks held Saida's arm in a painful-looking grip. Dread sank into his stomach like the greasy slop served at riverfront taverns. He strode back purposefully toward the center of the whirlwind with poor Saida at its center.

Saida held her head high and refused to cry, but she nearly broke when she saw Hamish pushing his way through the crowd, the look of an enraged Scot darkening his face. Someone had stuffed a pair of gloves into her reticule whilst she was perusing several colors of soft leather gloves displayed on the counter. She'd felt only a slight shove from behind when whoever was trying to destroy her slipped the gloves into her reticule. She'd left the top of the silken pouch open while she shopped, which she now realized had been a fatal mistake. But who wanted to destroy her? She could be hauled away to a magistrate, before anyone could help her.

"What is the meaning of this? Why are you detaining Miss Hossini?" Hamish had assumed a rigid, dignified look she hadn't seen before.

"The lady who was just here..." The clerk trailed off and swiveled a glance from side to side. "She must have left already. But she came to me and told me she'd seen this...this woman steal a pair of gloves and stuff them into her bag." He pointed to Saida who was being roughly detained by a second clerk. A crowd had gathered and was pushing forward to see the accused thief.

A shout erupted from the front entrance. "Excuse me, excuse me..." Everyone turned at the loud interruption, and the crowd parted. Young Rutherford was shoving his way rudely through the crush of shoppers and gawkers from the street outside.

Saida gave the young man a wide-eyed look of panic and waved her hands frantically, motioning for him to stay away and not get involved.

When Young Rutherford finally made his way to the counter, he locked gazes with the clerks detaining Saida. He extended a card to the one behind the counter, while at

the same time crushing a roll of one-pound notes into the man's hand. "I believe you know me through the owner of the establishment named on the card who is one of your wealthiest, erm, most generous patrons. This woman is under her protection, and I would hate to have to report back to the duchess that her ward has come to harm because of a simple mistake on your part."

"But..." the second clerk interrupted. "The lady who was here earlier said she saw her steal the gloves."

Young Rutherford took a long, studied look around the millinery, peering around the crowd which was gathering at the counter behind them. "Where is this supposed informer now?"

"Well, she...she probably didn't want to be involved..." The clerk stammered and flushed several shades of crimson.

Hamish stepped forward and leaned across the counter. "In that case, perhaps she wasn't so sure of what she saw, either." At the same time, he grasped the head clerk's forearm in an iron grip.

"Then why was a pair of our gloves found in her reticule?" The man behind the counter matched Hamish glare for glare and snatched away his forearm.

"Perhaps they fell from one of your counters. That would be an honest mistake...which might not reflect badly on your behavior in this matter once I have to report this unfortunate incident to Her Grace." Young Rutherford straightened his tall frame and clasped his hands behind his back in his best imitation of a proper Mayfair footman.

At that, the atmosphere in the store seemed to lighten and both clerks began assuring the other customers that nothing untoward had happened and that they would serve

the next person in line.

“But what about these gloves I’d like to purchase?” Saida insisted.

“Here, take them, with my compliments.” Both clerks quickly wrapped her choices and slipped them into an elegant box, which they handed off to her avenging rescuer footman.

Both Hamish and Young Rutherford flanked Saida and marched her out of the store without stopping until they reached the curricule.

Saida paused a moment before climbing back onto the driving seat. She turned, anger coloring her face, and demanded, “Who was that woman, Dr. Douglas?”

He put his hand over hers and said, “Merely someone I used to know.”

Young Rutherford helpfully filled in, “She’s Georgina Throckmorton, the wife of one of Prinny’s bankers.”

Hamish glared at Young Rutherford. “Why don’t you climb up onto your back perch and hope she doesn’t roll us all to perdition before we get back to Grosvenor Street?”

9

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 3 GROSVENOR STREET

Saida slid her rushing curricule to a dramatic flourish of a stop in front of No. 3 Grosvenor Street.

The grooms took control of the horses whilst Young Rutherford jumped down from his outside seat and hastened to be ready to help her and carry her packages into the townhouse.

Hamish slid to ground from the high seat with a deep sigh and stretched out his tall frame. “After this afternoon’s exertions, I believe I should attend a mass somewhere to give thanks for surviving an afternoon out with Miss Hossini.”

He pushed Young Rutherford aside and grasped her by her waist just as she was about to climb down on her own. His hands were warm against her stays beneath her stylish claret redingote. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed his touch. She’d almost decided to spend the rest of the day in a fit of pique in her bedchamber. She didn’t want to see anyone.

His hands felt so good as he lifted her to the walk in front of her townhouse that she decided her fit of pique could wait. She’d much rather spend the day punishing Hamish in her bedchamber. He’d been naughty for interfering in the colossal mess at the milliner’s shop. He could have been arrested along with her. His reputation as a

London physician would have been ruined. He needed to be punished. Her lips widened into a wicked smile when he placed her back onto her feet on the ground.

She turned just as Toplofty opened the door for them and bowed low. On her way up the steps, she extended a gloved hand behind her, and Hamish immediately grasped her hand. She was certain he knew what she was thinking, because the same carnal thoughts pulsing through her body were probably pulsing through his.

Once inside, she climbed the staircase, stopping only at the first floor to detour back to Hamish's bright yellow bedchamber. He must have been of a similar mind, because he never loosened his grip on her hand.

Once they were inside his room, she could hear the click of the door locking behind them. She tossed her tiny, perfect claret silk driving hat onto the bed before backing firmly into his arms.

Without a word, he turned her around and began patiently working at all the braided fasteners down the front of her dark claret carriage dress.

Only low murmurs could be heard, or the occasional whimper from her when he finally reached the layer of her matching embroidered muslin frock beneath the warm outer layer of the carriage dress.

He took his time with the tiny fabric-covered buttons fastened with equally tiny loops all the way down her back. When he finally reached her chemise beneath he blew lightly onto her skin, causing shivers to ripple down her spine. When he made as if he were going to pick her up and lay her on his bed, she gave him a wicked look and shook her head.

"No, not this time. It's my turn."

The two of them made short work of his somber suit and small clothes, finally falling back onto the bed together.

When they turned to face each other, Saida trembled with awareness. This man's body was like the map of a beloved country she'd visited before. A frisson like letting go and falling from a great height seized her in the pit of her stomach.

And then suddenly, she was embarrassed. Did he like what he saw? How did she compare to the pampered, wealthy society women who fought each other for the right to bed him?

He did a strange thing then. He gently tapped the end of her nose. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"I know what you're thinking."

"No, you don't."

"Of course I do. The pain and uncertainty are there in your eyes. You can't hide from me."

"Pah—."

"You, Saida Hossini, have nothing to be ashamed of. That horrible woman who tried to have you brought up on charges of theft today is nothing but a spoiled, bitter dilettante."

"Then what am I? A dispossessed apothecary who has forever lost her country? Her identity? Someone who has to be taught the 'correct,' English way to heal?"

“No, Saida,” he said, and in a swift movement sat up, taking her with him. He pulled her onto his lap and dragged a blanket over both of them. Tipping up her chin, he gazed directly into her eyes. “You are a healer, and a damned good one, if today’s events are any indicator. I never would have thought to do what you did in an instant to save that poor child caught stealing an apple.”

She didn’t reply, but simply smiled and turned to face him, straddling his lap between them. When she captured his lips with hers, his cock immediately came to attention. “Wrap your legs around me,” she whispered into his ear.

In a rapid movement designed to catch him off-guard, she bent low and popped the tip of his penis into her mouth. At his sharp intake of breath and an attempt to push her away, she pressed hard at the base of his big toe with the heel of her hand.

She quickly followed up with a long, slow, fierce rub along the top of his foot before proceeding to massage the inside of his leg with firm thrusts of the heel of her hand. He finally gave in to her expert ministrations, and his initial protests turned to a series of low moans.

When she got to his inner thigh, she slowed down and lightened her touch to feathering with her fingertips until she came to the sensitive globes at the base of his cock. When she traced around them lightly with her fingertips, he came uncontrollably with a shout and pulled her face up to meet his lips.

They lay there for a long time, tasting each other and exchanging deep kisses as if they were exploring a new shore neither one of them wanted to leave.

Finally, Saida raised her head and gave Hamish a long look. “Do you want me as much as I want you?”

“More, way more,” he intoned. “However, we have to remember where we are. You

belong to the kind man who owns this townhouse and paid me to watch over you.” He stopped for a long kiss before continuing. “What kind of bodyguard would I be to lose myself in your bewitching body and forget all about protecting you?”

“Protecting me from what?” she demanded, and pursed her lips into a pout.

He grazed her one breast with his teeth on his way to suckle the other before answering a long time later. “The problem is, we don’t know who means you harm.”

“If you don’t know, then what can you do if some stranger wants to hurt me?”

He sat up abruptly and gave her a sober look. “I’ll protect you with everything I have, with my body, heart, and soul. No one will harm you as long as I have breath left.”

She stood, walked to a sideboard where a decanter of wine sat, and poured two glasses. When she returned to the bed and offered him one, he gave her a knowing smile and demanded she give him the one she was going to drink. When she raised the glass as if in a toast, he waited until she’d had a few sips before he tried his own.

“You don’t trust me,” she accused, flashing him a small moue. However, inside, she nearly purred with satisfaction. This dull Scotsman might yet turn into a worthy opponent.

10

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 4 GROSVENOR ST., LONDON

N ovember, 1826

No. 4 Grosvenor St., London

Lily circled her parlor and approached Madame Clarot who was enjoying a pot of tea with some of Cook's biscuits. Bolts of fabric like precious jewels and gardens of exquisite flowers were piled behind her on Lily's sideboard which had been cleared of her collection of tiny cat porcelains.

Serving the mistresses discreetly at their establishments was a double win for Madame Clarot. That way, she didn't have to deal with the ruffled feathers of her high-in-the-instep clients when the eccentric earl's mistresses descended on her Albemarle Street shop to order their gowns. She also enjoyed the delicacies from the kitchen the Earl of Framlingwood provided all of his mistresses on Grosvenor Street. Cook's biscuits were so rich and buttery, they melted in one's mouth.

She was in Lily Venable's parlor enjoying several of said biscuits when the three remaining unwed mistresses joined her to peruse the fabrics she'd brought whilst she finished her tea. She'd recently been called in on an emergency basis to outfit two of the infamous earl's five mistresses with wedding trousseaus, paid for by the self-same earl.

Madame Clarot, ever careful and discreet, never questioned or commented on the oddness of his domestic arrangements. However, one could scarcely be blamed for occasionally let slip a cryptic on dit , which might eventually appear in one of the several gossip sheets circulated in London. But no one could ever say the story had slipped from her lips. It wasn't as if the whole of the ton didn't speculate on the eccentric earl's domestic situation.

Lily, Margot, and Saida sat across from her on one of the parlor's cozy settees. All of them sipped thoughtfully on their tea for a few minutes before setting down their cups nearly in unison.

Margot spoke first and took the lead of the questioning that followed. "So, tell us, Madame, do you have many customers on Berkley Square?"

Madame Clarot sniffed and set down her cup as well. "Of course. Some of the wealthiest wives in England have homes there. Their wardrobes must be updated constantly."

Lily eyed her above the steam rising from her cup. "What about Georgina Throckmorton?"

The seamstress gave a start, as if she'd swallowed something unpleasant. "Of course. Her husband is one of the Regent's bankers. She has to have a full set of new dresses each season. She's warned me she simply cannot be seen in the same design twice because of all the events she's expected to sponsor or attend. And woe be to any dressmaker who would dare give her a gown of a design similar to that of another woman of the ton."

Saida gave the seamstress a sly look. "Where does she like to go to, um, enjoy herself without her dull husband at her side?"

Madame Clarot's cheeks flushed crimson. "Why would you ask such a question?"

"Because we admire her beauty and sense of style so much, we'd like to follow whatever she does to maintain her youthful looks and remain desirable."

Saida leaned close to the seamstress and gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Does she have a younger lover?"

Madame pulled a delicate crystal bottle of smelling salts from her reticule, sniffed deeply, and leaned back against the generously tufted cushions of the other settee.

Lily rose and leaned against the fireplace mantel, surveying the room. "We know that with access to her husband's money and all the time she has on her own, she has to be doing something naughty...couldn't you give us a hint, just among us girls?"

"You do realize that I have a duty to protect the privacy of all my clients?"

"Of course," Lily assured their modiste. She swept her hands around the room. "We all appreciate your discretion in, um, all things."

All of the other women nodded in understanding.

"Which is why," Margot interrupted, "we will make sure we keep coming to you for all of our gowns as long as you continue to protect our interests."

The startled look in Madame Clarot's eyes said it all. She understood the barely veiled threat in Margot's comment. After faltering for a moment, her stern gaze cracked. "Well, there is that gorgeous Highlander physician everyone wants in their bed..."

When Saida choked on her last swallow of tea, Margo poked her in the ribs with her

elbow.

The elegant modiste cupped a gloved hand to the side of her mouth as if an outsider might hear what she had to say. “And of course, I do help her create the costumes she wears to the Cyprians’ masque balls.”

“She’s attended more than one?” Lily tried to contain her excitement and keep her tone neutral.

“Oh, yes, and she’s planning on attending the one at the Argyll rooms Monday next.”

After that revelation, it was all Lily could do to keep from making an excuse to shoo away Madame Clarot. However, from the look of avarice in the woman’s eyes, she read the woman’s unspoken demand.

Lily chose three new gowns from the latest Ackermann’s fashion book, Saida chose two, and Margot splurged on five. Each of the mistresses received a generous wardrobe allowance, but Lily feared even Derek would be appalled at the amount of the bill from the modiste for this day’s work.

Later, after the woman left, Lily sank back onto a chair close to the fire, pulled off her slippers and rested her feet on a low stool. She looked around at her two co-conspirators. “You know what this means.”

“No. What?” Saida had gone to the corner to pull the bell for Quick Rutherford to replenish their pot of tea.

“We’re all going to get tickets to the Cyprians’ Ball...and make our own costumes.”

“Why?” Margot was indignant.

“Because,” Lily explained carefully as if she were addressing toddlers, “if we engage Madame Clorot to make our costumes, she’s going to gossip about what we’re wearing to Georgina.”

“Humpf,” Margot grunted. “I suppose there’s no honor amongst those of the demi-monde. Can’t trust anyone anymore.”

“The last thing we want is for her to see us coming. She’ll never know what hit her.” Lily picked up her kitten and stroked the small fluffy creature’s head, whilst holding her away from Aji’s beak and giving the cockatoo an evil look.

He strutted out of her reach and burbled, “hedge whore.”

Saida sighed and retrieved the bird to its favorite perch on her shoulder. “Sometimes I think you say such awful things just to get my attention,” she scolded.

“Oh, Hamish,” the bird belted out in a louder, lilting voice, much like a lover.

Margot and Lily laughed at his sneaky tactic, but Saida shook her finger at him whilst heading back to No. 3 to tuck her naughty pet away in his cage. “I’ll be back” floated over her shoulder. Don’t plot anymore mayhem without me.”

The elderly woman’s long, silvery hair was neatly plaited into a braid and hung over one of her shoulders. One of the women C.B. employed to help with patients had cleaned her up and washed and braided her hair.

She stared vacantly out a window of a long, narrow room in C.B.’s clinic for the poor of Seven Dials. Hamish had found her lying in Neale’s Street Passage after he’d been alerted by Dickey Jones that one of the hundreds of poor women fruit vendors had collapsed.

She'd been shoved aside into an alley so as not to get in the way of the rest of the fruit-vendors. Life was for the living, and if the other denizens of that corner were going to stay that way, they had to keep purveying their fruits to passersby on their way to Covent Garden. A dead woman lying in the middle of the street was not good for business.

She was one of the many who was near the end of her life, a life accelerated toward death by the harshness of the streets, not to mention the ubiquitous cheap alcohol that destroyed a person from the inside out.

Hamish had revived the woman and then turned her over to one of the matrons to make her comfortable for however many days she had left. Considering the blood she'd been coughing up, he didn't hold out much hope for a good outcome.

She turned from staring out the window and gazed directly at him. Bright, inquisitive blue eyes were unexpected in her gaunt, pale face. "You're a good man, Dr. Douglas. You've done everything you can for me." She laid a hand over his and said, "You should be at home with your wife and children."

He patted her hand and admitted, "I have no one waiting for me."

She tilted her head just so in the waning light, giving him an assessing look, before laughing softly. "You will, and much sooner than you think. Now go home and forget about me."

Hamish paused a moment, taken aback. "I don't think I'm going to forget about you, Mrs. Walsh. You're a hard woman for a man to put out of his mind." He leaned low over the bed and put his ear close to her chest, listening for whether the congestion was clearing.

She smiled down at him. "It's easy. Plenty of men have forgotten me, but you're

different. Remember what I told you, though. I meant it. You have to let someone love you...and soon.”

With her last words, a spider-like sensation crawled up the middle of his back. He had no idea why, and he, of all people, was never given to silly flights of imagination. But he knew he had to get back to No. 3 Grosvenor Street. Immediately.

11

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 4 GROSVENOR STREET, MAYFAIR

Hamish slipped into the butler's pantry at No. 3 Grosvenor Street, assuming he'd go unnoticed, only to be nearly bowled over by Molly, the downstairs maid, racing past him and fumbling with her stays as she went. Toplofty followed close behind, similarly adjusting his deshabelle.

In the sternest voice he could muster, Hamish demanded, "What in blazes is going on here?"

All he received in answer to his self-righteous demand was a half-sneer from the havey-cavey household's over-butler.

The other man paused suddenly in his rush to return to his duties as if having second thoughts. "Wot's yer problem?" he demanded, taking the measure of the livid Scotsman towering over him. And then a light of recognition appeared in his eyes. "Wot's yer business in the butler's pantry?" His voice dripped with indignation.

Hamish matched the man's glare. "You're a right Knight of the Blade, considering you just tuppied poor Molly."

The bluster in the older man's demeanor evaporated. "Wot are ye up to? And what do I need to do to help ye so I can get on wit the work of the household?"

Hamish gazed heavenward as if seeking strength in dealing with the old whipster. “First of all, you can cease the churlish patter. I know you use the speech of an Eton graduate when it serves your purposes at one of the routs at Goodrum’s.

Even though Hamish knew the Rutherfords’ true calling was that of a rough-and-tumble gang of river pirates who now served only at the pleasure of Captain El, the Duchess of Chelmsford, he sometimes forgot their true callings.

She’d placed them in positions where they could lay low for a few years whilst they were criminals wanted not only by Bow Street, but a rival gang. Apparently, Young Rutherford had somehow compromised the wife of the gang’s leader.

Just when Hamish was about to congratulate himself on trouncing the annoying old man in a simple game of mental checkers, he suddenly had the odd sensation of flying through the air and landing hard in a corner of the butler’s pantry, shattering a few pieces of crockery off the shelf behind him. The old bastard had planted him a facer.

He gave his jaw a tentative rub and once his vision cleared, looked up to see Toplofty leaning over him. “I hope we understand each other sufficiently now, Dr. Douglas?” The veiled threat was delivered in perfect Etonian English.

When Hamish nodded groggily, he continued. “Now tell me exactly why you feel the need to sneak about the servants’ area, and maybe I can be of assistance.”

Saida had been put in charge of listing all the things they’d come up with for Mrs. Clarot to do to the gown she now was working on furiously for Georgina Throckmorton.

At first, she’d rejected their ideas out of hand. They’d never get their modiste to help unleash the devious wardrobe mayhem they proposed on such a wealthy woman.

Margot had pointed out that even though Mrs. Throckmorton spent a king's ransom on her clothes, all of the mistresses under the earl's protection added up to much more each year, if you considered all of their wardrobe allowances together.

In addition, they'd made a pact to pool their savings to come up with an additional cash bribe sufficient to make Mrs. Clarot go along with their ingenious plan. She would, of course, forever lose the woman's business, so the bribe had to be substantial.

Of course, they'd all have to attend the Cyprians' Ball as well, if for no other reason than to have a front-row seat to gloat.

When they'd finally listed all the devious things they were going to visit on the evil Mrs. Throckmorton, they stood in the center of Lily's parlor and piled their hands together to signify unity, and utmost secrecy, in their plan to visit the ultimate humiliation on the woman who'd tried to destroy Saida at the milliner's shop.

And then they danced around the room, cackling like elegant witches. All they needed, Saida thought with a smile, was a big cauldron bubbling in Lily's kitchen garden.

Hamish leaned against the wall in the servants' passageway next to Miss Venable's parlor and gave out a huge sigh. He was afraid he might be sick after what he'd just heard Lord Framlingwood's mistresses planning.

All he'd wanted to do was find Saida and tell her what was in his heart. Instead, he'd discovered the hard way what the remaining unmarried mistresses got up to in their Monday afternoon teas. He had no idea women could be so vicious in revenge. Georgina, of course, deserved everything they'd described, and more, but he worried about all of them. Especially Saida.

How in the name of Zeus could he protect her at such a raucous gathering as the Cyprian's Ball? He'd been called to the scene of one of those balls the year before. The physical damage some of the revelers were able to wreak on one another was truly unbelievable.

Anything went at the events, and excessive alcohol, not to mention lewd acts, were rampant. He'd need help to either nip this dangerous plan in the bud, or figure out a way to watch over the mistresses whilst they charged off on their attics-to-let mad plan.

Only these stubborn women would think attending a debauched masque ball was a good idea whilst a murderous madman was on the loose and stalking them.

He shook his head in the darkness, pushed away from the wall, and headed back toward the butler's pantry at No. 3. The last thing he wanted was to get in touch with the fierce Captain El or her minions, the Barrister Forsythe and the runner Colwyn. But now that he knew Framlingwood's wild mistresses' plan, he had no choice. He couldn't protect the women on his own.

Sythe leaned his office desk chair as far back as it would go and studied the ceiling as if the answer were written in the plaster. How in the hell had he allowed himself to get caught up in Framlingwood's never-ending multiple-mistress farce? Just when he thought he'd managed to control one small piece of the puzzle, a whole cascade of unintended challenges landed yet again in his lap.

He banged his feet back down onto the floor and pointed his letter opener at the physician who was supposed to have been the solution to all of their problems with one of the mistresses. Yet now, here the blasted man was, telling them a Banbury-like tale of how the Earl of Framlingwood's remaining three mistresses were hell-bent on a demented scheme to attend a depraved Cyprians' ball merely to wreak revenge on a supposed slight against one of them.

And the object of the women's dark revenge was none other than the vicious, tonnish wife of one of Prinny's bankers.

"You know this is all your fault." Sythe's tone was so half-hearted, they all realized he didn't really blame the physician. "I think it's only fair you explain their plan again. I'm afraid I had a hard time following your circuitous recounting the first time."

"Please, I think you'd better call me Hamish. I came in close to the end of their plotting, but it appears they're going to pay a modiste to do something to Mrs. Throckmorton's costume that will not only reveal her identity, but embarrass her in the process." Hamish steeped his hands together and looked as though he might be praying to be anywhere but Stephen's Lincoln's Inn office.

Col leaned forward, his shoulders tense. "With all the unsavory characters who show up at those balls, and all the gossiping amongst servants, I wouldn't be surprised but what our blackmailer might hear a rumor that Framlingwood's harem plans to attend."

Hamish interrupted. "I'm sorry, but that 'harem' you're referring to includes a woman for whom I'm responsible. I don't want anything to happen to any of them, especially Saida, no matter where they go."

Col's eyes widened. "Sorry, I forgot myself. I just can't help blaming Derek for this never-ending mess he's put all of us in the midst of."

"But you have to admit, we're all technically in his employ, so we've sort of put ourselves in the soap, if you know what I mean." Sythe flashed both of them a wry look. "However, I'm only a lowly barrister, not a criminal mind, nor even a privileged aristocrat. I'm completely out of my depth here. You two are going to have to help me out."

Col stared a moment at Sythe and then swung his gaze toward Hamish. “You know we’re all going to have to attend that damned ball, disguised as God knows what, to make sure nothing happens to them.”

Sythe gave out a long, hissing sigh. “I was afraid that’s what you’d say.”

Hamish raised his index finger as if he had a question on his mind. “What about Captain El?”

“What about her?” Sythe asked.

“Should we tell her what’s going on?”

Sythe and Col gave out a collective groan.

“I’m surprised you even asked that question,” Col said. “In fact, knowing the duchess and her vast network of informers, I wouldn’t be surprised but what she knows already.”

12

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 4, GROSVENOR STREET

S aida got up onto her knees and stretched her back from her place on Lily's carpet in the parlor at No. 4 where Margot and Gabrielle, Lily, all their lady's maids, and even Mrs. Collins were cutting out costumes for the four of them to wear to the Cyprians' ball.

They'd sworn their housekeeper to secrecy and hoped she'd be able to keep from spilling their secret to the earl. They were all certain he'd forbid them from engaging in something so venal and dangerous, and that would not do.

The others had convinced Saida that Mrs. Throckmorton needed to be punished not just for her sake, but for the honor of all of them.

Her knees ached from all the work of cutting out the various pieces of their costumes, but the pain was worth it.

When Mrs. Collins had discovered their plan, she'd tried to talk them out of it, but had finally pitched in to help finish their costumes in time for the fast-approaching ball. Since the ball fell on a Monday, they didn't think the earl would stop by and discover their duplicity. At least that was their hope. They all realized, though, that lately, Derek had been visiting Mrs. Collins much more than his actual mistresses. The chance of him stopping by on his day off to see one of them was remote.

They'd hit upon disguises guaranteed to evade detection—Cleopatra and her bearers. Even the Rutherfords had joined the project and had built an elaborate carrying chair for the Queen of the Nile to arrive in, surrounded of course by her maidservants and Nubian bearers.

Their river gang butlers and footmen were at that moment out in the carriage house next to the mews painting the wooden contraption with gilded paint and pasting on fake jewels. Lily, of course, was the logical choice for Cleopatra, since her theatrical training would work the best to fool anyone looking for them.

As an added plus, the lines of the diaphanous costumes were extremely forgiving and easy to construct. They were planning on wearing skin-toned bodysuits beneath the costumes, although no one would notice, or care, if they paraded through the Cyprians' Ball au naturel.

At the last minute, Toplofty himself had insisted that he and the boys attend the masquerade as well to keep the mistresses safe. When asked what they were going as, he'd replied, "River pirates, of course."

Hamish knew there was a plan in motion to protect Saida and the other mistresses, but he felt he should at least make an attempt to make her see reason. If anything happened to her, he didn't know what he'd do. He thought back to the words of the ethereal woman patient who had died the day after he'd brought her to C.B.'s clinic.

The idea of someone waiting for him at the end of the day, someone who would love him and perhaps give him children, had caught hold of his soul and now he couldn't get the woman's prediction out of his head: He would let someone love him, and soon. He was afraid to hope that woman might be Saida.

But no, the stern, judgmental voice in his head insisted. She was a courtesan. Loving was how she made her way in the world. The few times they'd been together, he

wondered if she was merely loving him in the rote way a woman of her ilk would pretend to love her protector. He squeezed his eyes shut against that thought, even while his mocking heart was telling him he was nothing to her but a moment's entertainment.

He trudged up the last few steps to the hallway leading to his bedchamber. His shoes squished over something soft beneath his feet, and he bent down to investigate. He put his physician's bag onto the floor and squatted to pick up some of what littered the carpet. Rose petals. Where had she found them at this time of the year? They only grew now in hothouses of the very wealthy. He stood and finished following the trail of petals. The trail stopped at the door to his room.

His heart pounding, he turned the knob slowly. When he entered his bedchamber, candles burned in holders on every surface. Saida's soft skin glowed in the candlelight. She lay face down on the counterpane, totally bare to him.

"You have too many clothes on," she said, turning to speak over her shoulder. "Take care of that and come to me. I ache from crawling all over Lily's parlor floor. I need your healing hands on my body."

Hamish's cock had begun to stiffen the minute he'd opened his door, and now he was so hard, his cockstand shoved at the inside of his heavy woolen trousers. He complied with his siren's command, peeling off his jacket, waistcoat and shirt before shucking off his boots, ripping at his falls and kicking off his trousers. His small clothes followed onto the heap already tossed onto the small settee in his room.

He carefully climbed atop her buttocks, trying to keep his full weight from crushing her. When his cock bobbed at her back entrance, she moaned a bit and guided his hand to a pot of warm oil on the small table next to the bed.

He covered his hands with the soothing, scented oil and began carefully massaging

each part of her strong back. He couldn't remember from the last time they'd been together whether he'd noticed how well formed and strong she was. Her muscles were those of an apothecary whose days were spent pounding and grinding herbs into healing compounds.

When he leaned low to rub against her with his chest, she giggled. "Why did I never notice what fine, wiry hair you have on your chest?" She squirmed luxuriously. "It's such a fine feeling against my back."

At that, she turned suddenly and flipped him over onto his back. He gazed into the green depths of her eyes, the color intensified from desire. "Are you going to rub oil all over me now?"

"Oh, no," she assured him and produced a silk cundum. He nearly died when she took his cock into her soft hands and proceeded to sheath him firmly inside the soft covering.

When she'd neatly finished off the ties, his cock was so hard and throbbing, he feared he'd come inside the small silk prison without pleasuring either one of them.

All he could manage to croak was, "What do you want from me?"

"You know..."

"No. I want you to say it."

"All right. Dr. Hamish Douglas, I want you inside me, right now."

When he tried to roll her back over, she waggled her finger at him. She pulled one of the soft pillows from the bed and propped it under his head. He closed his eyes and she kissed each one.

She rose up and lowered herself slowly onto his cock whilst keeping her hands and knees on either side of him.

Saida gave out a little whimper as his penis glided against every inch of her quim whilst she took her time rising up and gliding back down, leaning into his cock.

Hamish had no more than uttered his first guttural groan when she began a slow, controlled moving of her hips from side to side and rotating all around. At his next loud groan, she muffled his mouth with a lingering kiss that covered his lips and penetrated inside his mouth to capture and suckle his tongue.

He chose that moment to grasp her hips firmly and take over the business of thrusting his cock to completion.

As soon as he sighed and sank back onto the mattress, Saida clenched her sex tightly around his still partially hardened cock and rode him until she screamed out her pleasure.

Many minutes later, when his breathing had returned to normal, he rolled over to face her and smiled down at her sleepy eyes.

“Are you going to stay here with me all night, or do we need to pretend we didn’t just wake the dead whilst seeking our mutual pleasure?”

She didn’t answer him, but merely rolled to her side and backed her warm bottom against his thoroughly drained and subdued cock. She reached her hand gently behind her and carefully removed the full condom which she tossed to the chamber pot beneath the bed.

They were in the same cocooned position when the morning sun flooded his buttercup yellow bedchamber. Sometime during the night he’d wrapped his arms

protectively around her shoulders, and she hadn't moved away.

13

NOVEMBER, 1826

BERKLEY SQUARE CHELMSFORD MANSION

Mayfair, London

Dickie Jones helped himself to another rich, buttery biscuit after a prolonged gulp of honeyed tea to wash down the first two he'd practically inhaled whilst they'd been sitting across from each other.

Col had decided to meet his young spy in the massive, newly refurbished Berkley Square kitchen of their graces, the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford. Their conversation was too dangerous for the curious eyes and ears of a Mayfair tavern.

"Odds bodkin, boy...don't they ever feed you over on St. James Square?" Col had left a warm bed and his warmer woman on the lean side of town near Covent Garden. He'd hauled himself out at an ungodly hour for the sole purpose of hearing what Dickie had discovered in their mutual threads of inquiry into what Framlingwood's blackmailer was up to now.

Dickie, however, had become the ward of his old school chum, CB, or Lionel Carrington-Bowles, who was the sole heir of his elderly, wealthy aunt, Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby. The length of the lady's name and the depth of her power derived from the long line of wealthy, influential husbands she'd buried.

CB lived with his friend, the society chef, Nathaniel Charpentier, as well as a house full of children rescued from the rookeries of London. They all shared Lady Camilla's cavernous mansion on St. James Square. CB had also made use of his many years of medical studies to open a free clinic for the poor in Seven Dials.

"Cor—" the boy spat out in between bites.

Col extended a palm to forestall Dickie's usual stream of unintelligible talk picked up from the streets of Seven Dials. "We both know Lady Camilla's put you under the tutelage of a speech instructor, so please spare me the colorful meandering."

"Can't talk as fast that way, though." Crumbs spilled from the side of Dickie's mouth, along with indignation.

Col gave him a murderous look, but waved away his own earlier complaint. "Just spill it out. Tell me what you know."

"Madame Clarot, that tonnish seamstress lady over on Albemarle Street?"

"Yes? Go on." Col gestured with a sweep of his hand for Dickie to get to the point. He needed whatever the boy had been able to gather from his vast network of street urchins and other unsavory sources Col didn't want to know about.

"Seems she has this assistant, Marianne, who's working both ends...if you get my meaning?"

Col shook his head hard. "No, I don't follow."

"So, Madame Clarot pays her a bit more to keep her gob shut about what all the fine loydies, I mean ladies, will be wearing for the season. And then she gets more money from the gossip sheets to spill wot she knows." Dickie took a furtive look around the

bustling kitchen as if Lady Camilla might be lurking amongst the copper pans piled high in the center of the room's work table. "I mean what she knows."

"How did you find out about the modiste's assistant to begin with?"

Dickie gulped down a few more bites of biscuit, looking longingly at the remaining pyramid of pastries on the plate. "Are you going to eat any of those?"

"No. Eat them all, but for the love of Zeus, get on with the story."

"Well, Molly-that's the downstairs maid at No.3. The modiste's assistant started asking lots of questions about why the mistresses needed so many dresses. And Molly, she says to old Toplofty, 'That girl's turned into a regular snoop.'"

"And then Lofty sets his people to following her and where do you think she goes? To that tavern where we all got into a hooley of a fight that one time. She goes right up to the tavern wench and they start talking all cozy-like. And Lofty don't know for sure, but swore the two of them looked a lot alike."

"Sisters?"

"Well now, mebbe, mebbe not. That kind of information might cost you more."

Col was tempted to fling his head down onto the tiny tea table between them and sob. "For the love of all that's holy, what does that have to do with our investigation into the blackmailer?" In spite of the noise and bustle of the ducal kitchen, Col had leaned in and whispered low when he'd uttered the word, "blackmailer."

"Thought you'd never ask, guv." The superior smile the infernal boy turned on him made Col want to snatch one of the heavy pot lids and smack him.

A passing cloud filtered the sun streaming through the Duke of Chelmsford's elegant drawing room window. The mood inside the room shifted with the light, matching the scowl on the face of Her Grace, Duchess of Chelmsford. Today she seemed a combination of a Mayfair social terror of the ton as well as the actual terror of the Mediterranean where she regularly still smuggled under the aegis of her alter persona, Captain Eleanor Goodrum.

Even after her sudden marriage to Perseus Whitcombe, the Duke of Chelmsford, she still reigned over the infamous Goodrum's House of Pleasure. She was referred to as the terrifying "Captain El" by slavers, abusers of women, or anyone else whose extreme misfortune it was to run afoul of her.

Col had known and worked for the tall, elegant beauty long enough to know she deliberately nurtured her bloodthirsty reputation to keep her enemies and detractors at bay. However, he'd seen enough scofflaws laid low at a single word from her to harbor a healthy respect, if not fear of her power over the London underworld. She ruled with an iron fist wrapped in silk on the docks along the Thames.

The only people in the room, in addition to Her Grace, were Col, the Barrister Stephen Forsythe, and Hamish.

Once everyone was seated, she wasted no time on pleasantries. "What have you found out so far from your sources?" She gave Col a pointed look.

He rested one booted foot on his knee and leafed through the small journal he carried with him everywhere. He whetted the lead of a small pencil he'd extracted from behind one ear, and began to check off what he knew so far. "At first I thought the blackmailer had an informer amongst the servants, but recently I discovered that was false."

"Then how in blazes is he getting so much information on the movements of, erm,

Framlingwood's women?" Sythe knew better than to say anything derogatory about the mistresses, because Captain El considered them "her girls."

"It's their dressmaker's assistant. She's built quite the little business based on revealing all sorts of tidbits to the highest bidder." Col paused a few moments to give them time to digest the latest information.

"Who is she? Where is she?" The tone of El's staccato-like questions matched the look of fury on her face. "How is the blackmailer communicating with her?"

"She's been passing along what she knows through an intermediary. He's apparently taken on another tavern wench down by the docks as his go-between after he killed the last one."

"Why haven't you hauled her in today so we could force her to tell what she knows?" Hamish demanded.

Col pantomimed slowing down the heat of the conversation with his hands. "I felt much the same way until I realized, the mistresses given us the perfect way to draw the blackmailer out into the open."

Silence filled the room only to be broken abruptly by El. "You want to use my girls as bait?"

Since he knew there was no safe answer to that dangerous question, he remained silent long enough for the brilliant tactician side of his employer to come to the surface. He could almost hear the cogs turning over and over in her brain.

"They'll have every guard we can muster..."

"Done," Col answered. "The Rutherfords have already volunteered to accompany

them, disguised as river pirates.”

“We’ll bring out some of our guards from the warehouses as well that night.”

“I’ll see to it.”

“And you...” She pointed a long, slender finger at Hamish. A hulking Highlander like you should come in handy.”

“But, but...” he stammered. “I’ve never been to a masque ball before. I don’t have a costume.”

“Do you have a kilt?”

“Of course,” he assured her, but his face turned a dark shade of crimson.

“Just add a mask that covers your face, and the women at the ball won’t care who you are. Go as a berserker and scare people. Just be there.”

“But...” Hamish couldn’t help the doubts racing through his mind and hadn’t realized they were actually spilling out of his mouth.

Sythe raised a hand. “Haven’t you forgot one thing?”

The irritable look she turned on him would have stifled a lesser man. “What?” she spat out.

“Tickets to events at the Argyll Rooms are as scarce as ruined women at Almack’s. How the devil are you going to procure enough tickets to cover all the keepers you’ll be sending in to keep them safe?”

Col was surprised the haughty look she turned on Sythe didn't produce a block of ice in the center of her drawing room.

"Do you doubt my ability to get whatever I want in this town?"

Sythe was one of the few people Col knew who was brave enough to challenge El the way he did.

She gave him a warning smile and explained, "I'll have tickets for everyone by tomorrow, including you. So you'd better figure out what costume you're going to wear."

"Me?" Sythe used his most affronted tone.

"Yes. Be there. We need every hand we have to catch this bastard."

"And since you had the clever idea to put my girls in danger, Mr. Colwyn, I'll expect you to attend as well."

Col merely smiled. I wouldn't miss this party for the world.

"And I will be there as well," she warned all of them. "We cannot afford to have anything go wrong."

Hamish rose suddenly, bowed, and made to excuse himself.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" El demanded, her voice as cold as a winter night in the wilds of the Highlands.

"I...I need to get back to Saida. She's probably alone at No. 3 now."

“Saida has plenty of protection from the Rutherfords, and God knows, those women are all armed to the teeth and won’t hesitate to inflict bodily harm on anyone stupid enough to attack them at home. I know what’s going through your besotted mind right now, and I forbid you to tell Saida what we’re planning.”

“Why, I’m not...I mean, that is, I wouldn’t...”

“You cannot let any of what we discussed here today leave this room.”

“Why not? Shouldn’t they know they’re walking into a trap where they’re the bait?”

“Mice who know a cat is about to pounce are unlikely to act normally. We need the blackmailer to think he’s invisible, and we want him to go on believing we can’t see him coming.

“I want to be there when we throw the net over him and drag him back here for a good beating and questioning. It’s been a while since we’ve administered a decent beating. The boys are losing their touch.

“Since they haven’t engaged in thuggery in a while, Dr. Douglas, would you like them to practice pounding on you? Because if you whisper even the slightest whiff of what we’re planning to Saida, I’ll unleash the Rutherfords on you.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said, and made a nervous pull at his collar.

“I suggest you pray you don’t find out.” She walked close to him and poked a long fingernail into his chest. In a low voice, she revealed, “I heard you received a small taste of what the Rutherford boys are capable of. They’re scrappier than they look. Don’t. Press. Your luck.” With that warning, she dismissed him. “Go back, keep your gob shut, and take care of my girl.”

Col exhaled the breath he'd been holding in a rush. He'd have to get that uppity Highlander alone soon and explain the facts of life. As an employee of Captain El, one did not dictate what one would do on one's own. El was in charge. Always.

14

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 3 GROSVENOR STREET, MAYFAIR

N ovember, 1826

No.3 Grosvenor Street

Mayfair, London

The minute Hamish handed his hat and cane to Young Rutherford at the front door of No. 3 Grosvenor Street, Saida poked her head out of her little parlor and motioned for him to join her.

When he tentatively approached the door, she pulled him inside and shut the door behind him. “Where have you been all afternoon?” She stood on her tip-toes and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

“I, um...I had some business to attend to.”

“What kind of business?”

“Um...papers, that’s it. I had to sign some papers to turn over my practice to young Dr. Goodenough.” Hamish bit his tongue in frustration. He was terrible at dissembling, and he feared Saida would sense immediately something was amiss.

She gave him a knowing smile, and returned to a pile of sewing she'd been working on in front of a cheery coal fire. Pieces of bright blue silk lay everywhere, and she wielded a needle and thread as if she were going to attack someone with implements of war.

He squatted down to her level where she'd returned to her perch on an oversized pillow she'd been sitting on whilst sewing. "What are you making?"

"Oh, nothing special. I thought I might save the earl some money and make a few things on my own."

Hamish was fairly certain that was a lie, but who was he to judge? He had his own secrets to hide. Earlier, that day, before he'd been summoned to the meeting with Captain El, he'd been ready to bare his soul to Saida about how he felt about her, to ask her if she could come to love him too.

He knew they could build a life together back in Inverness once they survived the madness with the blackmailer that now seemed as if it would never end.

Just when he'd been about to work up his courage to tell her what was in his heart, her blasted cockatoo must have sensed he was in the room.

"Oh, Hamish," the bird sing-songed, mimicking Saida's voice. Saida rose from her cushion and walked over to the cage which still had a muslin covering hiding the raucous creature within.

"Why, Aji? Why must you taunt poor Hamish?" Suddenly the huge bird changed tactics. "Here, Kitty, here, Kitty," he burred in an exact imitation of Lily's voice. No wonder her fellow mistress's poor pet kitten was terrified of the cockatoo. She shook her head and took off his covering in spite of his naughty tricks.

Hamish could have sworn the bird gave him a mocking look, but that was surely impossible. He had to get hold of himself before Framlingwood's havey-cavey household got the best of him.

Col had no more than left Captain El's drawing room and was walking down the hallway toward the front entrance of the ducal mansion when he heard a loud whisper as he passed the library. He started out of his train of thought and backed up. Perseus Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford, was frantically beckoning him into the library.

Now what?

"Your Grace?"

"Get in here, Col. I need your help."

Percy looked in both directions outside the entrance before shutting the door as quietly as possible and returning to Col's side.

"Have a seat." He pointed to a comfortable, overstuffed chair by the fireplace and joined Col there after pouring each of them a tot of brandy.

"I heard about the Cyprians' Ball. You have to take me with you."

Col's eyes widened. "Why, Your Grace?"

"My wife is going to be there. I can't let her go alone. Haven't you ever heard the horrible stories about the Marquess of Wynchmas?"

"Wait...who?"

"The Marquess of Wynchmas. He's capable of some of the worst perversions ever

perpetrated at one of these events.

“What does he have to do with the Cyprians’ Ball?”

“He’s the one who rents the Argyll Rooms and sells the tickets for these lewd events. I can’t let Eleanor go there alone.”

“But, she’s going to be surrounded by nearly an army of guards. She’ll be fine. And then there’s the other thing.”

“What other thing?” His Grace demanded.

Col gulped. “Well...she’s Captain El, queen of the smugglers, you know...Your Grace.”

Percy lifted his chin and gave him a stubborn look. “That’s pure rubbish, and you know it. She needs her husband at her side.”

Just then El swung open the library door and gave her husband a murderous look. “Why don’t you invite Prinny while you’re at it?” she shouted.

The duke faced her nearly nose-to-nose and shouted right back, “He’s already got an invitation.”

“You don’t know that,” she accused.

He sniffed. “I have friends in high places.”

Col wanted to throw himself on the floor and throw a loud tantrum like his daughter sometimes did. What had he ever done to deserve getting involved with this attics-to-let family?

“Col—with me.” The duchess gave an angry snap of her fingers and headed toward the hallway.

When Col shot the duke an apologetic look over his shoulder, the man merely gave him his usual raised eyebrow look followed by a wicked smile.

Col’s ear nearly ached from the bruising conversation he’d had with the duchess when he was finally headed through the door held open by their butler who helpfully held out his hat and cane.

He set off on foot toward his rooms on Great Queen Street near Covent Garden and had gone no more than two or three streets away when he became aware of being followed. He side-stepped into an alley and carefully surveyed the street behind him.

Balls and goose feathers— . This case was now officially the worst he’d ever been paid to investigate. An impressive black coach with touches of gold paint sat patiently in the street behind him, waiting for him to reappear. Intricate gilded designs would make the elegant coach an easy target in the neighborhood where he was headed.

The worst part, however, was the coat of arms on the door, the coat of arms of the Duke of Chelmsford, who was waving a white glove and beckoning to Col to join him. He hesitated, but then realized he couldn’t escape the great looby if he tried. He stepped into the street and climbed up into the massive coach with Percy.

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NOVEMBER, 1826

GREAT QUEEN STREET, LONDON

Col finished explaining their dilemma to Charlotte, his fiancée. He and Percy, the stubborn duke, needed to put together costumes to disguise themselves so they'd blend in with the revelers at the Cyprians' Ball.

"Could you possibly help us out? Are there any spare costumes at Goodrum's we could, um, appropriate for the night?"

The duke sneered. "I don't need anything from Eleanor."

Charlotte gave him a scathing look. "Neither does your wife require anything from you, but she does love you for some reason."

Col intervened. "Your Grace, please. We need Charlotte's help, we don't have a lot of time, and we certainly don't want to go to a regular costumer's shop, because all of London would know our disguises before we got out the door."

Charlotte gave out a little gasp. "I know what we'll do."

Col and Percy both turned, expectant looks on their faces.

"We put on a little play at Goodrum's a few years ago with lots of fairytale

characters. We'll go over in your carriage, Your Grace, have your coachman let us out a few streets away and then I'll costume us in something no one will ever suspect is us.

"Us?" Col yelped. "I am not putting you in harm's way at the damned ball."

Charlotte put her hands on her hips and gave Col a cool stare. "If you two go to this masque on your own, there's no way you're going to be able to hide that one of you is a stiff-pumped duke and the other a ferocious Bow Street runner."

"Just how do you think your presence is going to help that problem?" Col gave her an incredulous look.

"That's simple. I'm going as a shepherdess, of which I'm sure there will be many at the ball."

"What about us?" Percy interrupted impatiently.

"You two are going to be my sheep."

Saida could tell by the look on Hamish's face that he was either hiding something...or he was afraid to tell her something. Unlike other men she'd known, he was no good at keeping his feelings a secret.

She walked to his side and took both of his large hands in hers. "What is it?" She whispered softly. "You can tell me anything."

Aji for once stayed quiet in his cage, suspending his usual mocking of the Highlander, which surprised Saida. She suspected he'd become a bit jealous of Hamish.

Hamish closed his eyes and gazed heavenward for a few moments before opening them suddenly and staring directly into hers. She felt as if he could see into her soul and seek out every lie she'd ever told.

“Saida, I know I have no right to expect any deep feelings in return, but I have to say this now. I feel as though we belong together. We share healing hearts.” His voice sank lower then. “We’ve shared our bodies.”

She put two fingers against his lips to stop his rush of words. “I’ve felt the same thing, but the time is not right now. You and I do have the same healing in our hands and fingers, and perhaps some day...” She trailed off and a tear slid down one cheek.

Hamish turned to leave but stopped at the last minute. “I know you and the other mistresses are going to the Cyprians’ Ball to take revenge on Mrs. Throckmorton. I am so sorry for how she treated you, but I want you to know...we never shared a bed.”

“You spied on our tea?”

“It was for your own good. Why didn’t you tell me what you were up to?”

“Why didn’t you trust me enough to stay the hell away from our tea?”

He didn’t answer, but simply turned and was gone. She swore she could hear the crackle of a little piece of her heart breaking along with the slam of her parlor door.

November 20, 1826

No. 3 Grosvenor Street, London

Derek Welkirk, the Earl of Framlingwood was feeling a little a lonely, and truth to

tell he a niggling sense that something was not quite right. He left his house on Grosvenor Square and headed his steps toward the place he always felt welcome, the row of townhouses on Grosvenor Street.

He'd brought a vase of fresh flowers as a gift. Perhaps he'd surprise one of the girls that night with an unexpected visit, but first he'd have to see his housekeeper, Mrs. Collins. That would only be proper, just to ensure he wasn't interrupting anything his mistresses might have planned for his day off.

When he entered through No. 3, he was surprised when his housekeeper herself was at the door to greet him instead of one of the Rutherfords.

"Is Saida at home?"

"No," she said abruptly.

"Maybe I'll go next door."

"No. They're all sick...bad mussels."

"Do I need to send for CB?"

"Already sent for him."

"Is there anything I can do? Perhaps hold someone's hand till she feels better?"

"Heavens, no." With that she gently pushed him back out the door.

On his way back to Grosvenor Square he mused that he'd never seen Mrs. Collins in such a state. She hadn't even invited him back to her office for a cup of tea. Something was not right. The niggings up and down his back intensified.

November 20, 1826

No. 4 Grosvenor Street, London

“Thank God. I finally got the man to go home.” Cassandra Collins rushed into Lily’s huge dining room on the first floor where the battle plans were under way for their assault of Georgina Throckmorton at the Cyprians’ Ball.

The Rutherfords had pushed the dining chairs and table back against one wall and were assembling the chair-type litter they’d built for the women’s costume tableau with Lily at the center as Cleopatra.

Mrs. Collins had persuaded Young Rutherford to be the Nubian slave holding Cleopatra’s train at the rear of the chair as they made their grand entrance to the ball.

Tall Rutherford leaned toward Toplofty, their father, and said, “Good place for him bringing up the rear. We don’t want that handsome face of his smashed in the melee.”

Quick Rutherford added, “Just look at all the piles of jewels we can help ourselves to tonight whilst romancing those rich society women undercover.”

A stern look from Mrs. Collins stopped further discussion of possible thievery. “What you boys don’t realize is that some courtesans have much finer jewelry than the wives of the men who keep them.”

Saida, Margot, and her lady’s maid Gabrielle were supposed to be handmaidens trailing along beside Cleopatra, but their sewing skills had been less than perfect, so Mrs. Collins was hand-sewing and pinning furiously so that they could load the whole assemblage into the mistresses’ carriage for the ride over to the Argyll Rooms.

Gabrielle was working on everyone’s makeup for the finishing touch to their

disguises.

After Mrs. Collins finalized all the costumes, Margot stepped in to make sure everyone was properly armed for the festivities to come. “You, Young Rutherford,” she barked out. “Come over here.”

“What do you want me to do?” He looked at her askance.

“First of all? Lower that loincloth so we can get a couple of knives and a pistol in there.” Fortunately, his face was already darkened, so no one could witness his embarrassment.

“Do I have to?”

Mrs. Collins answered him. “Yes, you owe us for not defending us in the last attack by those bastards whilst you were locked up ploughing Molly in butler’s pantry.”

“Aye, YR. And try not to shoot yer own jewels off,” his brother, Quick Rutherford, warned.

Since Lily had the most room on her chair beneath all the layers of veils, Margot put the claymore into her safe-keeping.

Saida, Margot, and Gabrielle layered on knives tied to their calves with decorative ribbons.

After their costumes were complete and comparatively stable, everyone helped stow their tableau of mayhem inside and out of the carriage back in the mews.

Just as everything was ready, Saida said she had something important to do and ran back to her townhouse to check on Aji.

Saida crept into the darkened parlor only to have someone rush at her from the shadows. Grabbing the knife at her ankle turned out to be as natural as breathing, and she managed to stick the man hard enough to elicit a loud cry as he ran out through the back of the house toward the mews.

Suddenly, she heard a strange new voice emanate from her cockatoo behind her in his cage. “Who’s there? Show yourself.” Her frantic bird screeched out the words over and over. All she had time to do was try to calm him and throw the linen sheet over his cage.

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ARGYLL ROOMS

November 20, 1826

Argyll Rooms,

Little Argyll Street, London

Saida could scarcely breathe, she was so terrified when their gaudy procession first entered the Argyll Rooms. Quick Rutherford had dressed in full footman's livery to accompany them and present their tickets.

She'd never seen anything like the crushing crowd of revelers. She'd been told the balls were held for the demi-monde, but she wasn't prepared for the masses of elegant gentlemen, some well known from the gossip sheets, and even a cluster of men in a corner in full military dress.

Statuary flanked pastel walls around the ballroom with tromp l'oeil pilasters and a ceiling with elaborate plaster carvings, casting shadows in the candlelight.

A tall, masked woman pirate across the room caught her eye. The woman carried a wicked cutlass blade. Captain El. Some of the fear she'd been feeling lifted. Nothing could go wrong now.

The rest of the Rutherfords spread out to all corners of the rooms like dangerous rodents dressed in dark clothing and masks, which honestly was probably part of their normal smuggling apparel.

At a hiss from above her shoulder, she looked up into Lily's eyes from her perch on Cleopatra's chair. "Pay attention to why we're here. We have to make sure that Throckmorton bitch gets her comeuppance."

Saida looked away and began peering through the crowd to the remote corners of the room where the blackmailer and his minions might be hiding. And then she saw the woman, resplendent in her costume, the top half of which she'd pulled down to her waist to allow the young man next to her to dribble wine between her breasts.

Her head was thrown back in an exaggerated act of ecstasy. Saida was glad she hadn't eaten anything before the ball, because the scene might have caused her to cast up her accounts.

"There she is," Saida said, and pointed to the Mrs. Throckmorton's wanton display.

A famous courtesan who appeared almost weekly in the gossip sheets' caricatures stood next to the orchestra playing at the far end of the room. She was holding court in the midst of at least a half-dozen men.

And then it was their turn to promenade for the assembly. They made a slow, complete turn of the ballroom to applause from the gathering. At one point Saida nearly drew her knife again when one drunken man tried to rip her costume from her.

She'd been warned that anything could happen at the Cyprians' Ball, and now she knew. She managed to salvage one layer of the veils they'd sewn together and of course they all had nude stockings and short chemises beneath their costumes. "The better to fight the bastards," as Margo had said.

At the end of the first promenade, they receive wildly enthusiastic applause and so they debated whether to make another round. Lily seemed to bask in the adulation, so they all agreed to one more turn.

Finally, the Rutherfords staked out a corner where Cleopatra and her slaves could hold court whilst the dancing began.

And just as they'd planned, Georgina pulled her young buck out onto the dance floor with her and began an energetic waltz. Quick Rutherford slipped up to a courtesan standing by herself and pulled her out to dance. He managed to whirl just close enough to Georgina to step on her flowing overskirt, which triggered the disaster the mistresses had paid dearly to watch.

The stitches were loosened in just that area so that when she whirled around in rage, a huge underskirt showed to all the other revelers. Embroidered in bright threads were: Hedge Whore Georgina Throckmorton.

Saida had to keep herself from jumping in excitement and pointing out the woman's humiliation to all. No one could prove who had planned her downfall, and their lives might depend on keeping the secret.

The dead silence the prank had provoked was broken by Prinny who stepped out of the shadows, clapping slowly. And then the huge room rocked with laughter. The last Saida saw Georgina, she was running toward the back of the ballroom.

Just as the mistresses were exchanging silent congratulations, the blackmailer struck. A harlequin clown came out of nowhere and grabbed Saida whilst holding a wicked-looking knife to her neck.

He held her arms so tightly, she couldn't get to her knife. Margot raced around Cleopatra's chair and came toward them, but the man was moving so quickly Saida could barely breathe, let alone fight back. Suddenly, Saida felt as though a mountain had slammed into them and the man loosened his grip, the knife clattering away from his grasp. Margot lunged and retrieved the knife.

By the time Saida turned around, a half-naked Highlander in a kilt with strange blue

and black markings painted on his face was beating the clown senseless.

The tall woman pirate loped across the room toward them, followed closely by a shepherdess and two sheep. Saida wondered if she'd been hit on the head as well. Was she seeing things?

One of the sheep walked over to the Highlander and carefully pulled him off the clown, which was no small feat, considering the Highlander appeared to be in full berserker mode. The second sheep took charge of the venal clown and dragged him out of the ballroom.

The most bizarre part of the minutes-long terror-filled episode was that the massive Cyprians' Ball continued on, as if a berserker Highlander, clowns, and sheep engaged in combat were part of the entertainment.

After the woman pirate took charge of the remaining sheep, Hamish stepped close to Saida and wrapped her tight to him with his plaid kilt. "Miss Hossini, will you come with me to Gretna Green tonight and be my wife?"

"Of course, my beautiful warrior, but aren't you forgetting something?"

"Aji," he said.

"I can't leave him."

"He's out in the carriage I rented to take us north to Scotland."

"How?" Her eyes widened. "How did you get him to come with you?"

"He likes me now, and I found out from Mrs. Collins what kind of treats he likes. Perhaps he's my bird now."

“Well, then, you two can’t leave me behind.”

One of the sheep awaited them outside, and when he pulled off his sweaty mask, turned out to be Col. “You’re not leaving without saying goodbye?”

“The coach is there.” Hamish pointed toward Little Argyll Street.

When Col leaned low to embrace Saida before she left, she snapped her fingers and said, “I forgot something in all the excitement. Someone broke into my parlor earlier and tried to take me then.” She pulled her knife from her ankle tie and showed it to Col. “I stuck him with this, and he ran off.”

“Did he take anything?”

“No, but he talked to Aji...and he’s been mimicking him ever since.”

When Col climbed up into the carriage with Aji, the usually pesky bird complied with “Who’s there? Show yourself.”

“And your bird mimics someone’s voice exactly?”

Saida nodded. “He has Lily’s kitten thinking he’s Lily, and making the poor little thing crazy.”

“Godspeed, you two. Take your healing powers to your family back in Inverness, Hamish. You have the perfect partner now.”

Just as Col stepped away from the coach, he looked back and said, “If your bird is mimicking who I think he is, we may have solved the mystery of who’s behind blackmailing the earl.”

“Who? Hamish demanded.

“Can’t say yet. Go, you two, and stay safe in Inverness. You’re marrying the best bodyguard money can buy, Saida.”

At that Col slammed the carriage door shut and motioned for the coachman to ride on. He watched them until they turned onto Regent Street and headed north.

Now he had to go back inside the Cyprians’ Ball to sort out the rest of his gang of players. And then there was a certain shepherdess he wanted to spend some time with.