



# A Pearl Enraptured (5 Pearls for the Earl #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Infamous courtesan Margot Fauchette adores her secret amor Gabrielle, heart and soul, but she prays none of her protectors discover her lady's maid is also her true love. When a possible answer to their dilemma arrives, they face a far greater peril. In the absence of societal censure, will they find the courage to finally commit to the passion they've found in each other's arms?

Lord Framlingwood's fifth mistress, Margot Fauchette, has a secret. She and her lady's maid, Gabrielle Tamaryn, have lived the good life for several years, moving amongst the wealthy, sensuous men and women of the ton, flitting from one benefactor to the next. Their light-hearted lifestyle crashes back to reality when Gabrielle's dour brother, Captain Jameson Tamaryn, returns to London after a long voyage for the East India Company.

He's incensed to find Gabrielle has disappeared from their family home in Surrey and that she's apparently run off with her unconventional lover, Margot. He's determined to end their "unnatural" alliance and see his sister safely married. In the absence of her compliance, he has no alternative but to hire a thief-taker to seize her and ensure she fulfills her responsibility. Otherwise, he'll have her committed to an institution.

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## PROLOGUE

## PROLOGUE

June 16, 1822

No. 24, Circus Rd., St. John's Wood

Margot Fauchette continued to maintain her look of bored insouciance despite the lewd request Alex du Morant had just rasped into her ear, along with a quantity of spittle he'd drooled on her in his absinthe-induced fog.

She was between protectors at the moment and had drifted aimlessly for a few months, living off the proceeds of the sale of the jewelry her former wealthy patron had thrown at her whilst storming out of her small cottage at the less-than-respectable end of Grove End Road.

An off-hand invitation to one of Ponsley-Wells's extravagant parties had piqued her interest, since she was in search of support once again. She didn't think she could wait until the next Cyprians' Ball where wealthy patrons swirled among the choice courtesans of London's most elite demi-monde.

She'd already had to forego her daily delivery to her door of fresh flowers and expensive fruits and vegetables. She couldn't wait any longer to find her next protector.

Just when she'd nearly given up attracting the regard of one of the young lords living

an extravagant town life on their family's generous allowance, the din of the crush of revelers around her was cleaved by an ear-searing scream. When everyone rushed toward the sound, she followed.

A young woman lay unconscious atop a swirl of expensive silks and brocades on a large bed in a private room off the main ballroom where P-W invariably lured naive young women, or men. The only sign she lived was the subtle rise and fall of her barely covered breasts. She was dressed in the costume of the dance of the veils. The diaphanous scarves hid little of the woman's luscious curves.

Margot clenched her thighs together at a sudden wave of desire. She glanced around furtively, fearing she might actually have moaned aloud and alerted one of the guests to her preference in partners. She gave a quiet snort that no one would have heard anyway in the massive crowd.

No one cared about what women wanted. Women were nothing more than objects of lust to these partygoers. The idea that they might have dark desires of their own was routinely treated as unthinkable. Which made the world Margot moved in a fairly safe place...as long as she acted the part that was expected of her.

She was a popular, well-known courtesan, a beautiful object of pleasure available to the highest bidder. She saved every penny she could hoard from whatever largess her latest lover chose to bestow.

However, she was now between amors. She owed no man her allegiance at the moment. Her previous mission was eclipsed by the defenseless young woman at the center of the crowd's lurid interest. Margot was certain she was probably the only guest who would go to the cyprian's defense. She didn't hesitate.

"I know this woman," she abruptly declared, and moved toward the barely breathing figure. When she leaned over to help her up, she saw the youthful man lying lifeless

next to her. Lord Winton-Bowles . Apparently, the dissolute young buck had finally done himself in. His habit of drinking barely diluted absinthe before indulging in opium had finally caught up with him.

At that moment, a tall man in a bowler hat shoved his way roughly through the crowd of bystanders and pushed Margot aside. “Don’t touch anything,” he commanded, and rudely pulled the young woman from the bed before handing her off to a quiet, heavy-set man next to him. His rugged cohort threw her over his shoulder and moved briskly out toward the front entrance of the mansion. He parted the crowd with a glare as he went.

Margot followed at a discreet distance, formulating a wild, danger-fraught plan as she shadowed him. She couldn’t let the nameless young woman disappear into a magistrate’s court, or, God forbid, Old Bailey. She refused to let her vanish into the brutal London court system before Margot learned how she tasted, how she’d feel when she came apart in her arms.

P-W’s fine-looking, but short, footman followed Margot into a darkened study on the second floor after she’d offered to make him forget his duties for a few fleeting minutes. When she heard him close the door behind them, she turned and immediately dropped to her knees. Whilst he was engaged in hurriedly unbuttoning his falls, she pulled a poker from the nearby fireplace and gave him a swift, hard rap against the back of his knees. When he thudded to the floor like a sack of onions, she made short work of keeping him down with another smack on the back of his head.

With Margot’s fairly tall, slender body, she fit handily into his uniform. After rolling the still inert servant behind a settee by the fireplace and throwing her own clothing out a window, she managed to slip into the hall and down to the front entrance. The other guests’ raucous leave-taking in the wake of all the excitement of the Bow Street Runners arriving handily covered her leave-taking. No one noticed an odd footman wandering away from P-W’s small mansion in a copse of dark woods off the park.

She waited until the crowd had cleared a bit before circling back to the waiting carriages. It was ridiculously easy to convince the heavy-set Runner he was desperately needed back inside by his commanding officer. After that, she half-dragged, half-walked the now slightly rallying woman prisoner from the hack the Runners had rented and deposited her in Margot's own carriage waiting on the other side of the park. Her driver, Germaine, barely flicked her a sideways look when she appeared dressed in a footman's livery and assisting a limping woman into the carriage. Once they were inside, she rapped on the roof, and they were off.

Margot drew the scent of the half-asleep woman deeply into her nostrils and grinned. The stupidity of men never ceased to amaze her. Once the horses lurched forward, she pulled the exotic, golden young woman to lie against her shoulder.

When she sat up suddenly and mumbled, "Whersh this?" Margot ran her hands through the glowing golden hair she'd been craving to touch ever since she'd first spied the mysterious, child-like siren.

"Shhhhh," Margot soothed, and her companion slumped companionably back against her.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:37 pm*

### GOODRUM'S HOUSE OF PLEASURE

N o.9 Duke St., London

Margot paced the floor of Captain Eleanor Goodrum's office, flailing her hands about, while she proposed one frantic idea after another on how they could save the young, unknown woman she'd snatched from under the noses of two tough Bow Street Runners the night before.

Her dark, curly hair frizzed out in clouds around her face from having constantly run her fingers through the carefully dressed coif Germaine had helped her assemble that morning.

Her latest idea - to send the young woman into hiding on a long voyage aboard one of Captain El's ships - caused her friend and mentor to stand and walk around the front of her desk. She gently grasped Margot's hands in her own and spoke soothingly.

"You don't even know the identity of this young, drugged woman." She drew Margot toward two comfortable chairs by the fire and urged her to sit in one before easing herself into the other. "That should be our first concern. Perhaps she's an innocent who ran away to London and was pulled into P-W's party against her will. For all we know, her family is searching for her."

Captain El paused for a long moment before leaning forward and pressing a hand atop Margot's silk-clad knee. "And then there's the possibility she may belong to one of the lewd brothel-keepers in Seven Dials. And that would be a pot of broth even I couldn't fix."

They were silent for long moments, staring into the crackling flames, before Margot suddenly snapped her fingers. “Why not find the body of a young woman with long blonde hair somewhere in Seven Dials, or along the docks? And then one of your dock boys could slip her in east of London the next time the tide’s coming in, and...”

“Stop and think, Margot,” her friend interrupted. “There’s a better, more sane way to accomplish what needs to be done.”

When Margot gave her a questioning, wild-eyed look, she replied, “That young lord probably got the absinthe at the party, but someone else supplied him with the opium.”

“But we don’t know who that was.”

“There’s a specific gang at the dock that moves the lion’s share of opium into the city, and their leader owes me a favor.” The captain stood, signaling the meeting was over. “My guess is Winston-Bowles’s family will be just as happy to see the supplier in gaol as a missing cyprian.”

Germaine scratched softly on her door at Goodrum’s where Margot had returned with the mysterious young woman and her servant for the sake of their safety. She and Germaine had originally met at Goodrum’s after Captain El had rescued Margot from a street corner near Covent Garden. She couldn’t remember anymore what the hell she’d thought she’d do once she got to London after escaping from her wealthy family’s home in Surrey.

After her father had precipitously informed her she was to marry their sheep-farmer neighbor in a few weeks as soon as the banns were read at their small chapel on their sprawling farm, she’d stood mute in his study, imploring him with her eyes for an explanation. The sheep farmer, if her estimation was right, had to be at least in his sixties. Margot had been fourteen at the time.

Her father had answered her look with a tone to his words that suggested she was a dolt. He'd patiently explained the sheep farmer owned forty acres he'd wanted to add to his holdings for years, but the man would never sell. The last time he'd made an offer, the elderly farmer had made a counter offer: Margot in exchange for the land her father had long coveted. Her father hadn't hesitated to agree to the deal. The thought that he might consult his fourteen-year-old daughter first had never occurred to him.

Margot had never considered marriage, or leaving home. Her mother had encouraged her affinity for reading, and she'd been given free rein of her father's library at an early age. But then her mother had died in childbirth a year before the previous spring.

Her father had been courting a widow in the village, but Margot hadn't given his plans a second thought, which accounted for her shock at learning she was to be married off like one of his prize cows. Their dairy was huge, and they sold milks and cheeses as far away as London.

She'd bribed one of the drovers who hauled their milk products to market, borrowed a work dress from her lady's maid, and blithely set off for London, her legs dangling from the back of a cart full of sloshing crocks of milk.

She swore she could not to this day recall what the hell she'd thought she'd do to keep from starving once she reached London. Which was why Captain El had stopped her lumbering, gilded carriage that fateful night on a dark corner near Covent Garden.

Her benefactor had had her tiger open one of the doors before shaking her head sadly at the silly girl woman pretending to be a whore, with tears streaming down her face, and motioned for her to get in.



After a few years of entertaining Goodrum's wealthy members, she'd found a protector and had left with Germaine to set up as a privileged courtesan.

The few months she'd spent on the streets before her momentous rescue had taught Margot all she needed to know about men. She didn't like them. She didn't like the way their wandering, pinching hands made her sore before they finally poked inside her without any preliminaries to at least get her juices flowing.

The only saving grace was that most of her customers spent within a minute or two and softened so quickly she could push them away and run back to the bare room with nothing but a bed and a chamber pot in the corner she shared with four other girls. They'd taught her the rules of surviving sex on the streets.

She'd also managed to make a bit of money on the side by selling her customers French letters to catch the disgusting discharge from their furtive couplings. They were apparently as terrified of the pox as she was. A thorough cleansing of her nether regions with vinegar after coupling was another survival trick her friends had taught her.

One night, she'd returned to the tiny room at the same time as one of the older girls with whom she'd shared the space. She'd shown Margot the kind of love she'd crave from then on. She'd touched her in places and in ways she could never have imagined would make what came later not only more pleasant, but an addictive form of pleasure.

When Gabrielle looked up at her apparent savior, she saw something in the other woman's eyes she couldn't comprehend.

"Are you feeling better now?" The woman leaned over her and brushed the back of her hand across Gabrielle's brow. "You're not as feverish as you were when we fled P-W's party."

Gabrielle thought she detected a flash of guilt when she stared into the strange woman's eyes, but she couldn't be sure. This woman had saved her life, but the only emotion she felt at the moment was an overwhelming urge to run away. Although she knew she had nowhere to go, unless she seriously considered the offer from the artist who wanted her to model for him exclusively. But that meant there was an off chance her interfering brother, or one of his East India Company friends, might someday see a likeness of her nude body hanging in an art gallery.

"Do you remember your name?"

Of course she remembered her name. The question was whether she wanted to share it with this strange woman who seemed a little too interested in things Gabriele wasn't ready to reveal.

She envied the other woman's courage in saying exactly what she meant. Gabrielle had spent a lifetime hiding her true feelings, and her gut was telling her this was not the time to start spilling confidences. Although the other woman's kind, liquid brown eyes made her want to confess all.

"Anne...my name is Anne."

A smile quirked at the other woman's lips. "And I'm Margot Fauchette."

"Why?" Gabrielle suddenly blurted out. "Why did you come to my rescue at the party?"

"Because nobody else did, and I couldn't let the Runners have you thrown in Old Bailey."

"Why?"

“Because you were a defenseless, beautiful young woman who was in no shape to protect herself, and I owe a great debt to my own benefactress for having rescued me from the streets of Covent Garden when I was only fourteen.” She paused and favored Gabrielle with a sad look. “It was my small way of re-paying her kindness.”

“Thank you.” Her own voice came out in a barely audible, embarrassing squeak.

Margot pressed ahead. “So are we to understand you are ‘just Anne,’ or is there a family surname we might attach?”

“Er, Smythe. Yes, my last name is Smythe. My family is in Clerkenwell.”

“And do you suppose they’re not concerned as to where you’ve been these past three days?”

“Um, probably not.”

“Because...?”

“They think I’ve gone to visit my aunt.”

“Who lives where?”

“In London.”

Germaine, Margot’s servant had re-entered the room and was hovering nearby. “You’re not expected back in Clerkenwell, Anne Smythe.”

“How are you so sure of that?” Gabrielle demanded in the most indignant tone she could muster.

“Because someone who turns up unconscious from too much opium at a party at P-W’s, dressed in nothing but transparent veils, has been gone considerably longer than three days from Clerkenwell.”

With that, Germaine deposited a service of tea and biscuits for two on the table in Margot’s room before turning and silently moving her rounded, motherly figure back through the door leading down to Goodrum’s kitchens.

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JUNE 18, 1822

### GOODRUM'S HOUSE OF PLEASURE

N o.9 Duke St., London

Margot and Gabrielle turned their heads as one to watch Germaine leave the room before Margot observed, “She likes to get to the point, although I must apologize for her blunt language.”

“She’s right, you know.” Gabrielle hung her head. “I’m here because I wanted more of life. I was tired of being a prisoner in my brother’s musty mansion in Surrey.” She raised her head and leveled a clear blue gaze at Margot. “He’s away on a long trading voyage for the East India Company. He treats me like one of his precious blue and white vases he collects from China.”

After a long silence, Margot picked up the silver teapot and poured two cups. She handed one to Gabrielle and took a sip from her own before giving Gabrielle an expectant look.

Finally, she exhaled a huge sigh. “I’m Gabrielle Tamaryn...and no one will know I’m gone for another four years, when my brother returns from his latest trip.”

“How is that possible?”

“I told the servants I was going to meet my brother at the docks and accompany him on this trip. They had no reason to disbelieve me. Jameson arranges in advance of his trips for all of the house accounts and servants to be paid whilst he’s gone.

“I’d saved all my pin money for the last two years to secure rooms in Mayfair where I’ve been living on whatever lies I could fabricate to convince the people I’ve met that I’m an independent widow.”

“And the disaster at P-W’s party?”

“I began posing for artists, and then the invitations started to arrive...all sorts of parties. I, um, sort of lost my way.”

Margot placed one of her hands lightly over Gabrielle’s. “You’re safe here, Gabrielle. My name is Margot Fauchette. I used to work for Goodrum’s House of Pleasure. Captain Eleanor Goodrum, the proprietor, is an old friend. We can trust her with our lives, but I’m afraid your days of accepting party invitations may be over for awhile. We can’t be certain the Runners won’t still be looking for you even if Captain El can find the opium procurer.

“You and I are going to have to live quietly, and safely, out of the public eye indefinitely.”

Margot took Gabrielle to Captain El’s office to meet her mentor properly, whilst the young woman was not under the influence of opium.

Today, Captain Eleanor Goodrum sat with her booted feet propped up on her desk, a rich plum-colored wool redingote cascading over her knee-high boots. Margot got the impression Captain El was ready to depart on another journey aboard her ship, the Lady Muirgen .

When she sneaked a look out the side windows, she saw the large carriage with Captain El's right-hand man, Obadiah, on the coachman's seat. Instead of a coat of arms, the doors of the carriage bore the same image engraved on the elegant business cards of Goodrum's House of Pleasure. The skull and crossbones were cleverly worked into an elaborate gilded, hand-painted illustration including all the treasures of the sea: intricate nautilus shells, conch shells, seahorses, fronds of seaweed, and rolling waves topped by bubbling froth.

After Margot made her introductions, Captain El came to the point. She banged her feet back to the floor and leaned forward. Whilst pointing an elegant finger at Gabrielle, she gave a raw warning that frankly unsettled even Margot.

"Miss Tamaryn, I have intervened on your behalf with my, um, connections within the Bow Street Runners. The gentleman who has been supplying the opium which you and the unfortunate young lord apparently consumed at the Ponsley-Wells party has been offered up in your place as the guilty party." She paused for several long minutes during which she never wavered in her intense regard toward Gabrielle. "If you are ever involved in such excesses again in public, I will personally see to it you are turned over to the Runners myself." She paused again. "Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes." Gabrielle's voice wavered.

"I don't think I heard you..."

"Yes," she repeated, in clear tones. "Am I free to leave now?"

Captain El's gaze barely flickered. "Of course you're free to leave." She settled back into her chair and gave Gabrielle a speculative gaze. "But I think you should know the man who's being prosecuted in your place has friends in very low places amongst the gangs along the Thames. They would of course see you as responsible for their

leader landing in gaol.”

She rose and picked up a large portmanteau behind her desk, signaling the interview was over. “You are free to do whatever you like with your life. I wish you well. However, there’s a young woman who works here for me as our chess mistress. She’s extremely lonely and hates going home to her empty house in St. John’s Wood. I’d highly recommend the two of you stay there with her for a while until this whole episode has blown over. My accountant will give you directions.”

And with that she exited the door toward the steps leading down to her awaiting carriage in the mews, her boots echoing on the winding stone steps.

Gabrielle turned to Margot, a mix of fear and defiance on her face. “Did she mean what she said?”

Margot shook her head sadly. “Captain El always means what she says. Very few people in London would cross her. I certainly wouldn’t, but of course, the choice is still yours.”

Tuesday, November 7, 1826

No.5 Grosvenor St., London

Margot dribbled expensive claret wine across Gabrielle’s shoulder, licking each drop away as soon as it rolled down onto one of her perfect breasts, darkening the already rosy, aroused nipples. She licked the wine away before any drops could reach the fine linen sheets Germaine kept as blindingly white as the day they’d come to live in the elegant townhouse. The Earl of Framlingwood had gifted Margot the Grosvenor Street abode when she’d become his fifth mistress the previous June.

Gabrielle had moved in with her under the title of lady’s maid, even though she was



the poorest excuse for a servant Margot had ever endured. The faithful Germaine had come along to serve as house maid and a sometime coachman when they wanted to keep their adventures a secret from the ever-vigilant Rutherfords.

Young Rutherford did double duty as butler and footman, interspersed with his endless supply of brothers. Margot supposed he'd been assigned to her because Mrs. Collins suspected she was the only mistress who would not be susceptible to the young man's charms. Young Rutherford was a walking, talking tower of desire without seeming to realize he was an unsafe magnet for unsuspecting females.

She often worried about poor Molly, their traveling house maid who variously served all five of the mistresses' households. The young woman seemed to have an endless appetite for the Rutherfords, and as far as Margot could see, didn't have a favorite amongst them, including the head of the gang, their father, Toplofty. Honestly, Margot wondered at how she had time to clean and freshen their fireplaces in the midst of her multiple trysts throughout the week. She hoped the poor thing rested on her half day.

Gabrielle looked up at her from beneath thick golden lashes and propped herself up on her elbows. "Did I give you permission to lick my claret?"

Margot felt a flush moving from her bared neck all the way down to her quim. "I'm so sorry," she finally apologized in a breathy rush.

"I suppose I'll have to punish you now." Gabrielle slung a long, lithe leg over Margot and mounted her in one smooth motion.

Margot's breath stuck in her throat, and she nearly stopped breathing when Gabrielle's probing fingers moved stealthily toward her throbbing quim.

Just as Margot squirmed in a pleading move, Gabrielle moved barely to the edge of

pressure on her mound that always drove her crazy. Gabrielle thrust two fingers and then three into her slit before curving her fingers back in a thrusting motion that never failed to make Margot fall apart in waves of heated pleasure.

After the first wave subsided, Margot sucked in a breath and spread apart Gabrielle's pink folds before circling her thumb round and round the pearl-like nubbin, a move calculated to bring her lover to completion after a long love-making session.

Gabrielle suddenly rose to her knees and wrapped Margot's legs around her shoulders. From there she knelt and licked her opening. Margo moaned and bucked against her mouth. Her release, when it came, elicited a long scream.

They both lay panting in the midst of the ravaged sheets when there was wild pounding at the door to the bed chamber.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Young Rutherford. When Margot rose as if to go reassure him no one was being murdered, Gabrielle leapt from the bed ahead of her with a sheet wrapped around her and danced toward the door.

Margot grabbed her dressing gown and tried to head her off, but too late. Their randy under-butler stood toe-to-toe with Gabrielle, peering around her shoulder to make sure all was well.

The look on his face was all business for a change. He didn't even have the good grace to blush. "Just checking to make sure no one's been murdered in their bed, Miss Fauchette."

He turned to leave, but then came back. "You do remember what day it is...right?"

"Yes," Margot assured him. "But he'll be having tea with Mrs. Collins for hours yet. We have plenty of time."

Gabrielle leaned closer to him, as if she weren't in total deshabelle. "What do you think, Young R?"

"About what, Miss?"

"You know..." She made a rude gesture of ramming her forefinger into the circle made of her opposite finger and thumb. "Are they or aren't they?" Of course, she ignored the problem of hanging onto the sheet, causing it to pool around her feet.

"I wouldn't know, Miss," he shot right back, deliberately averting his gaze. He turned toward Margot. "Anything else you require before His Mightiness makes his appearance tonight? Supper maybe? Wine?"

"Nothing, Rutherford," Margot intoned firmly, and shut the door hard in his face. "Overweening bastard," she muttered under her breath.

"But he does have a fine bum and probably a fancy tool to go with it." Gabrielle's tone intimated she was trying to push Margot into a jealous quarrel. She refused to take the bait.

"Do you want me to call him back? I'm sure he'd be happy to take care of your needs whilst I'm with the earl tonight."

Gabrielle took on a mulish look and threw a pillow at Margot. They fell back into bed for another hour.

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1826

CHEAPSIDE, LONDON

Lady Camilla hadn't been to Cheapside for so long, she was amazed at how the area had changed. She hadn't had to shop on her own amongst drapers' shops and warehouses since she was, um, between husbands and in a bit of a minor financial kerfuffle.

She hadn't done any shopping beyond Bond Street in at least twenty years. More recently, she was likely to send a footman to an establishment with a note requesting service at her home on St. James Square.

"Over there, I think." She poked CB in the side while pointing out the window of her elaborate carriage.

Barrister Stephen Forsythe, who was sitting next to CB on the opposite seat, craned his neck to see where they were going.

"When did the 'privilege' of being your nephew turn into torturous journeys outside Mayfair in search of God knows what?" Although he affected the tone of a put-upon poor relative, there was still a touch of good-natured humor in his voice. He rapped obediently on the roof of the carriage, and John Coachman brought her precious set of grays up to a rolling stop.

Once the massive conveyance had lumbered and creaked to a halt, he turned sideways, a question on his handsome face. “Why are we in Cheapside, and who could you possibly know here?”

“Come to that, why did you require my presence as well? I hope this doesn’t take too long.” The barrister’s voice actually took on the tone of a whining toddler.

She turned an icy look on both men and cryptically explained, “Friends of the Duchess of Chelmsford.”

CB shook his head slowly and climbed down once Dickie Jones nipped off the high bench at the rear of the carriage, opened the door, and pulled down the steps. He frowned and gave the young man a searing look. “Why are you here? Did I not tell you to desist bobbing and intriguing about the worst parts of town?”

“Cor...her ladyship asked especially for me.”

CB turned to his aunt, who gave him an innocent look. “We’re here for an audience with a pair of men of business with whom we might have, um, mutual interests.”

“Please tell me this is not another favor for the Earl of Framlingwood. That damnable man is on my last nerve. Why can’t he keep his intrigues from constantly spilling over into our household?”

“He doesn’t know anything about these men...yet.” She carefully avoided giving him, or Sythe, a direct look but grudgingly gave them a bit more of an explanation. “We have one mistress left who needs a bodyguard, and these two are very busy men. I thought it made more sense to present ourselves at their place of business.”

“Why does the last mistress need two bodyguards?” The barrister’s tone was cautiously curious.

Camilla turned her best fluttering eyelash look on her beloved nephew and his old school chum. “It’s complicated.”

“Why have you dragged Sythe and me along on this expedition? You usually keep us all in the dark until the last minute in these calamitous episodes concerning Framlingwood’s households.”

“Because I trust your judgment, and I need someone like you to give me a good character read on these fellows.”

“Someone like me? Why not Col, or one of his Bow Street cohorts? It’s their business to read character.” He paused and gave her a calculating look. “This sounds ominous. Why are we really here?” His aunt shot him a coy smile.

Once he’d helped her down to the wide pavement skirting the front of a huge building housing a draper’s storefront and warehouse, she pulled a scented handkerchief from her reticule and delicately held it to her nose. “If anyone asks why we’re here, we’re re-decorating.”

CB threw his hands wide in a gesture of surrender. “Lead on.” Sythe shook his head but fell in behind them.

Tuesday, November 7, 1826

Housekeeper’s Parlour, Grosvenor St.

Under the pretext of a sick headache, Derek had been resting his head on a dainty, ruffled pillow which in turn rested on the warm, luscious lap of the ever-so-solicitous housekeeper of his Grosvenor Street abodes.

He was running out of excuses for seeking her counsel over endless cups of tea, in the

course of countless months, but he was damned if he could make himself stop. He knew in his heart that no other titled gentleman would spend that much time in the company of his housekeeper. But she was the only one who really understood him. The only one who could soothe him when his frustrations over the mysterious blackmailer boiled over.

He was grateful for the homey quilt she gave him to cover himself whilst he napped away his cares on her well-worn sofa. Did she suspect his true feelings? Had he managed to hide the evidence of the effect she had on him beneath the quilt all these months?

He heard a distant call bell clang in the adjoining kitchen and was acutely aware that the woman at the other end of the bell might possibly be in danger. It would be his fault because he still hadn't been able to ferret out the blackmailer responsible for all the threats and attacks in the unknown man's search for a murderess.

He knew all of his mistresses, past and present...intimately. None of them was remotely capable of taking another person's life. Between the investigator and Bow Street Runner, Archer Colwyn, and Barrister Stephen Forsythe, surely one of them would have discovered something in the women's backgrounds by now that would have revealed if one of them was guilty of murder.

He was so deep in thought with his eyes closed that he was taken by surprise when Cassandra, er Mrs. Collins, tried to ease from beneath where his head rested. He made a quick move to jerk back onto the sofa before falling to the floor and instead took both of them down.

“Lord Framlingwood...I'm so sorry...”

He'd fallen flat on his back, and she'd tumbled atop him. He sucked in a sharp breath. He'd never realized before that moment how well their bodies fit together. Nor had

he been this acutely aware of the tantalizing scent of her hair - lavender soap and lemon. Suddenly, the lie he'd been telling himself for months came crashing down on him.

He'd told himself he needed someone with whom he could share his deepest fears, he'd told himself Mrs. Collins was merely a neutral listening post. Reality pushed in so hard from all sides, he feared he might suffocate.

He'd been taking advantage of a servant in his employ, something his father had done on a regular basis before the accident. Something he'd hated his father for even before he was old enough to fully understand the implications for the man's helpless victims.



4

Tuesday, November 7, 1826

Kenton & Bullock Drapers

Cheapside, London

John Kenton, one-half of Kenton and Bullock Drapers, looked up in annoyance. A group of three obviously self-important customers had marched through the front door, and the men were clearing a path through the day's crowd of purchasers eager to get early access to their recent shipment of hand-painted linens from India.

And then he saw the tiny woman with the bulldog-like attitude they shielded between them. Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby . Jupiter, James, and Joseph! That woman could make or break their business amongst the ton's highest echelons. Not to mention the patronage of the newly rich merchant families who loved to ape the aristocracy.

As they neared the front counter, he was struck by something else: My God, an Adonis of a man was guiding her carefully by her upper arm . The gorgeous man glared at him, as if daring him to complain, but with a touch of apology in the glint of his eyes. Lionel Carrington-Bowles, the grand lady's beloved nephew. Had to be him. The man's physical beauty was legend throughout London.

At that moment, his rugged partner, Will, chose to appear at his side, and with his usual Irish brashness demanded of the newcomers, "Who in Hades do you think you

might be, scattering aside our customers like that?”

John cringed internally, but was grateful Will allowed him to be the manager who smoothed the way whilst his wild, untamed partner could be the one to demand answers.

The man to the other side of Lady Camilla reminded him of a whippet in his intensity. “Whom do you think you’re addressing with such callow remarks, sir?”

John chose that moment to place a gentle hand on Will’s arm. “Do you suppose you could find James and get him to bring us some tea to the blue room?”

Will’s bright blue eyes snapped fire, but he sensed John knew more about the interlopers than he did. He nodded curtly and turned on his heel to make arrangements for refreshments.

John addressed the customers still straining to be waited on. Some had uttered angry growls at the current interlopers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please accept our deepest apology at the interruption of regular business hours. An emergency has occurred that requires we close down our showrooms until tomorrow morning. Our man at the door will provide tokens for a substantial discount if you overlook our rudeness and choose to return with your kind patronage tomorrow morning.”

With that, a small army of employees appeared to help herd the substantial crowd back out into the London late-day gloom. There were still grumblings, but he suspected the offer of tokens would more than make up for their being barred temporarily from the Kenton and Bullock showrooms.

After he’d seen to the mollifying of his other customers, he returned his entire

attention to the tiny woman with silvering blonde hair who ruled the small, but wealthy world of Mayfair from her St. James Square drawing room.

The soft rose silk redingote she wore belied the will of steel that dwelt beneath. Not only did she personally re-decorate her mansion at least once a year, but an on dit about their firm could be the making of all of them. One false step and the opportunity would slip through their fingers forever. He had to tread lightly.

Her nephew, Carrington-Bowles, smoothly intervened. “Mister Kenton, I presume?”

“Yes.” John extended his hand for a firm handshake.

Carrington-Bowles turned toward the woman who fairly vibrated with impatience. “May I present my aunt, Lady Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby?”

“My establishment is entirely at your disposal, milady.” John bent low over the hand she extended.

She abruptly interrupted the polite discourse. “Is there somewhere we might have a private interview with you and your partner? I have a proposition to discuss.”

John straightened and stiffened. For a split second, he considered what in the hell she was up to before remembering all the ways this tiny woman could make or break them. “My partner is waiting in the Blue Room with a tea service and some of Nathaniel Charpentier’s famous raspberry macarons.”

“How did you manage to come by Nathaniel’s macarons? Carrington Bowles’s voice was sharp. “He doesn’t engage in public trade off the street.”

A thump somewhere between an “aha” and sheer terror resounded in John’s chest where his heart should have been. He merely smiled and regained his equilibrium.

“My partner Will was an assistant chef once under Mr. Charpentier. They became close friends, and he still supplies him with his favorite macarons for old time’s sake.” John smiled again at Carrington-Bowles. “I prevailed upon Will to share with our esteemed guests.”

Carrington-Bowles said nothing, but something sounding like an ominous rumble emanated the depths of from his chest.

Lady Camilla, apparently sensing the miniscule slice of tension between the two men, said, “Tea with Nathaniel Charpentier’s macarons would be wonderful. Did you know he occasionally supplies his macarons to Prinny?”

“I’m not surprised,” was his only comment as John led the way through the doors to the Blue Room and experienced a momentary bit of pride mixed with jealousy at the sharp intake of breath from Carrington-Bowles when Will turned from the table he’d been helping arrange with their butler, James. They kept a full staff to ensure wealthy patrons who wanted to see the latest furniture designs from the Continent were well taken care of during their visits.

Will was a passionate force of nature who drew people to him with barely any effort on his part. He was a beautiful, giving man who forged through life, attracting the attention of both men and women.

John noted with approval that Will had returned to their office to retrieve his fine blue woolen coat that emphasized the depths of his dark blue eyes. He’d also donned a fresh, snowy white shirt before welcoming them to the Blue Room. When he wasn’t quite so harried from managing their huge warehouse or keeping customers happy, he could be a very charming man.

When they’d first met as lads on the docks of London, each of them had been escaping the East India guards who prowled the perimeters of their vast warehouses.

One of the many river lightermen had spread a rumor in several riverfront taverns that a portion of a load from a certain merchantman recently returned from the Far East would be for sale to the highest bidders amongst the riverfront gangs that night.

Unfortunately, the East India Company spies had overheard the rumors as well. Which ended with young John Kenton running for his life and flinging himself off the land edge of the London bridge near Pepper Alley. He'd landed hard in one of the many river skiffs tied at the water's edge for hire. He'd knocked himself out, and in the guards' frantic chase after his fellow thieves, they'd left him for dead. John thought he was dead as well until a string of Gaelic curses hurled directly into his ear.

He'd fallen on fellow thief and adventurer, Will Bullock. The sound of "Heave yer bony arse off me neck, ye miserable, unbaptized excuse for a thief," woke him, emanating from beneath a heavy piece of canvas in the bottom of the boat.

After a gruff introduction, the other boy had led John through a series of "safe" taverns and houses until they were out of the path of the East India army of guards.

John had been about ten and Will, only eight, but from that day forward, they'd moved through the stews surrounding the riverfront like brothers. They'd shared whatever food or goods they could cadge during the day. By night, they'd hidden in an ancient rooftop coop of pigeons used by the priests of St. Mary's. They'd both laughed at how the birds were fed much better than the children in the massive church's orphanage.

They could never figure out whether Father Morgan, who faithfully cared for the pigeons, knew they were there. He seemed almost as ancient as the pigeon coops, and the boys surmised his hearing was probably inadequate.

But they did wonder at the way sometimes he'd absentmindedly leave a bag of stale bread outside the coop instead of returning it to the kitchens below. They didn't know

whether his carelessness was deliberate or not. On days when they couldn't afford the pennies to buy bread from a street vendor, they'd gratefully wolfed down the hard, stale chunks.

Camilla looked up into the humor-filled blue eyes of the younger of the two partners and had a hard time masking her excitement. These two were perfect for what she had in mind for Mistress Number Five, the stubborn Margot, and her free-spirited lover, Gabrielle. Camilla had nearly attained her secret goal for Derek.

Next to her, Barrister Stephen Forsythe added entirely too many sugars to his cup of tea and took a bracing sip before coming bluntly to the point without any preliminary explanation. "We have a situation which requires the presence of both of you for a week or two at the residence of one of the mistresses of the Earl of Framlingwood."

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1826

SERVANTS' QUARTERS

Grosvenor Street

Cassandra knew she should protest and scramble to her feet, but she couldn't. The earl's, er Derek's, body was warm and welcoming, and now that her face was but inches from his, she could smell the bergamot of his shaving soap and the minted scent of his breath, which, in fairness, was coming in rapid huffs.

She knew she should end their inadvertent tumble to the well-worn Turkey carpet in her small parlor. However, her choice was currently rendered nearly impossible because apparently, the aristocrat beneath her was equally loathe to end their predicament.

She quit avoiding staring directly at him and instead looked closely into the blue depths of his eyes. His pupils were wide, and the rapid thuds of his heart beat a mesmerizing tattoo against her breasts. Their lips were so close, it was only a matter of crossing a chasm of inches to finally discover what the man tasted like.

The minute his lips brushed against hers, his tongue seeking a tender invasion, it was if he'd been waiting for permission. Her body responded to the kiss which he seemed intent on prolonging as long as possible.

Thankfully, her sense of self-preservation overruled her emotions in time. She leapt to her feet like a scalded cat, trying to avoid eye contact as she went.

The earl immediately scrambled to his feet as well and joined her. “I am so sorry, Cassandra...I didn’t mean...” He abruptly stopped the awkward explanations and simply stared at her like a small boy outside a candy shop, his face ruddy with embarrassment.

“I’m the one who’s sorry, milord, if I’ve ever given you a false impression...”

He put two fingers against her lips. “I’m ashamed of myself. I’ve imposed on your hospitality all these years. The truth is, I’ve come to rely on your understanding and advice. I’ve put unfair burdens on you. Not only have I expected you to manage this huge household and all of my mistresses’ affairs, but I’ve imposed my own worries on you as well.”

“It’s not your fault. You’re under a lot of pressure with the threats from the blackmailer. You’ve bent over backwards to see all of the women in your care to safety.”

“That still does not excuse taking liberties with your person.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “My father...um...took advantage of our women servants when I was a boy. He made everyone’s lives miserable, including my mother’s. I promised myself I’d never betray a trust like that when I became the earl.”

He acted as if his heart was breaking, and it took all of Cassandra’s considerable will to keep from smoothing his hair back from where it had fallen over one of his eyes. She longed to tell him everything would be fine, and she of all people would never judge him.

At that moment, multiple kitchen bells began to ring, and Derek’s eyes flew to her



mussed hair from their tumble to the floor. He quickly gathered her fallen hairpins and helped put her severe coif back to rights.

Neither said a word until he snatched her back into his arms and stole another kiss. This time she immediately pushed him away, exasperated. “Why, Derek?”

His only answer was to place a finger against his own lips and give her a wicked, mischievous smile. “I lied. I’m not sorry.” And then he was gone.

Tuesday, November 7, 1826

Kenton & Bullock Drapers

Cheapside, London

For a moment, there was a deep well of silence. No one uttered a word, not even the outspoken Barrister Stephen Forsythe.

Will stole a glance at John whose face gave nothing away. His partner was very good at stoicism. Will, though, not so much. He waded into the fray.

“What makes the lot of you think we’re at yer disposal to walk away from our enterprise here for weeks on end?”

The barrister extended his hands in a sign of peace. “I’m sorry for being so abrupt, but we have no time to lose.”

“What is so important that you can’t hire someone else to attend to the needs of the earl’s mistress?” John leaned back in his chair and crossed his booted feet at the ankles, belying the tension Will was certain raced through him.

“Right,” Will added. “We could give you the names of half a dozen men who would be much better than the two of us at playing nursemaid to this spoiled woman.”

Lady Camilla huffed out a deep sigh. “I didn’t want to stoop to vulgarity and, um, spell out the earl’s true difficulty.”

“And why not?” Will leaned forward, ignoring the danger signs flashing from his partner’s eyes.

“Because the earl is a personal friend of mine. He’s being blackmailed, and his five mistresses have been threatened. He needs my help.”

“But you still haven’t explained why this help should require both of us.”

Carrington-Bowles interrupted. “Because...we assumed you would be eager to be the recipients of my aunt’s patronage, not to mention that of her many friends and acquaintances amongst the ton.”

Another prolonged silence hung over the Blue Room like coal-smoke-laden fog.

Will felt as if he might explode, but kept his silence. They could not afford to pass up this opportunity, which was why John was staring so intently toward him above his tented fingers.

John finally broke the silence. “We’ll do it.”

Lady Camilla held a dainty finger in the air. “But there is one thing you should know. The young woman and her lady’s maid cannot know the real reason you’re there.”

“And we should tell them...what?” John let his hands rest at his side.

“Why, you’ll tell them you’re there to totally re-decorate their townhouse.”

“All right...and then what?”

“You’ll keep your eyes and ears open and be ready for anything,” Forsythe said, before adding, “and one more thing.”

“Which is?” Will rolled his eyes.

“You have to find out whether Miss Fauchette or her lady’s maid are murderesses.”

“Done,” John said, in a forceful tone that brooked no more nonsense.

Lady Camilla rose, signaling the interview was over, and when Will bowed low over her hand, she added one last parting gift. “Oh, and it’s high time we did a total renovation of my St. James Square mansion. I’ll expect the two of you to bring samples to me when you’ve finished your time with the Misses Fauchette and Tamaryn.”

John gave Will a long look over a generous tumbler of brandy and let out a huge sigh. “What in the hell do you think that was all about?”

“I don’t think they told us everything.” Will took a long sip of his preferred calming influence, rich Irish whiskey.

John sighed again. “Does it really matter? The business she’s promised to send our way could make us very rich men.”

“If we’re to live under the same roof with two women we’ve never met, who may or may not be murderesses, we could end up very dead men.” Will saluted his partner with his tumbler and poured the final dregs of the fiery whiskey down his throat.

Tuesday, November 7, 1826

Theatre Royal

Covent Garden, London

Margot leaned over the rail at the front of the earl's box at the Theatre Royal and swept a leisurely look at the raucous crowd below. She took in the lower-tiered courtesans who prowled the streets of Covent Garden. They were all dressed in gay, gaudy colors with bits and baubles twinkling from their hair and dangling from their ears. But for the grace of God (and the earl), she and Gabrielle might be down there with them instead of in the elegant box where Young Rutherford served everyone glasses of fine sparkling wine.

Gabrielle probably needed to slow down her intake, but Margot hated to bring up even the suggestion of cutting back. Anything she sensed was a judgment of her behavior set the younger woman off into spasms of resentment and mistrust for days.

Margot's nerves jangled more than usual, because she was suspicious of why the earl had suddenly sent a note that afternoon proposing a night at the theater instead of their usual Tuesday night at home. Was he tiring of her? Did he resent her capricious lady's maid? No one with a farthing of sense would ever mistake Gabrielle for a servant. She was sure he suspected they were lovers, but she would never bring up the subject.

Her attention wandered once again to the crowd below since Sheridan's *The Duenna* was a light holiday entertainment that was of little interest to her. She'd nearly fallen asleep during the pantomime portion.

And then she heard something behind her...whispers and laughing. She was terrified to look, because what if the one thing she'd long feared was actually happening?

What if the earl transferred his affections to Gabrielle? What if he not only let Margot go, but kept her lover with him? She'd been uneasy all evening ever since he'd had arrived for his night with Margot and had declared he was treating both her and her lady's maid to a night at the theater.

She couldn't help herself and looked. Young Rutherford had opened a bottle of Champagne, the fizzy wine the earl was so fond of that he imported the bottles by the case. The expensive wine had foamed over, soaking their under butler's shirt and trousers. Gabrielle was trying to blot him dry with her handkerchief, and the earl was laughing at their efforts.

Margot bit back tears. Why couldn't she stop mistrusting Gabrielle? She had to accept that the woman she'd loved since that fateful night loved her in return. Otherwise, the bitterness would destroy both of them.

Midnight, November 7, 1826

Number 5, Grosvenor Street

Gabrielle still hummed a tune the theatre orchestra had played and carried a half-empty bottle of Champagne as she carefully negotiated the icy steps up to the entry to the townhouse. She hadn't been out to the theatre in so long, she'd missed the gaiety of the crowd, the antics of the less fortunate theatre-goers below the earl's ostentatious box. She had to admit she'd also relished the admiring glances from the inhabitants of all the other boxes.

She knew the effect she and Margot had on wealthy, important men of the ton when they went out together. Sometimes the power they held in the demi-monde made her a bit giddy. If only Margot weren't so serious all the time. She wished she could convince her to loosen up and enjoy what they had while they could still maintain their positions.

The Earl of Framlingwood was a handsome, virile man, and she knew he cared for Margot, but even she could feel the distance in his gaze and manners that night. His heart and soul were definitely somewhere else.

"A ruby for your musings, Miss Tamaryn." The subject of her musings followed them into the entryway of Number Five Grosvenor Street.

"Don't tell her that, milord. She'll hold you to your word." Margot frowned.

“I know he’s only teasing. No one would ever waste a ruby on me.” She bit back tears and raced back toward the servants’ quarters, nearly running over Young Rutherford in the process.

“Oy—.” Their under butler brushed the dusting of snow off his jacket and gave her a look of umbrage. “Ye nearly knocked me flat.”

Gabrielle kept running and raced down the steps to the lower level until she reached the kitchen where she discarded her warm cape and rubbed her cold feet by the fire.

No one was about at that hour except Toplofty, head butler over all of the townhouses. He’d just finished building up the fire and gave her an odd look. “A hard night at the theatre?” he asked, and roared in laughter at his own joke.

She looked up at him through her tears and complained, “No one understands me.”

“Me neither, but that ain’t stopped me yet.”

They both looked up at the loud jangle of a bell in Margot’s drawing room.

“St. Matilda’s crotch...that’s not a good sign at this hour,” he grumbled, and headed out to set up a tea service before heading toward the upper-level front rooms of her lover’s townhouse.

Margot glanced up as Toplofty scratched at the door before gliding in, balancing a tray full of a hot tea service. “Where’s Young R?”

He gave her a startled look as if he’d forgotten the name of his youngest son. “He’s, ah, a bit under the weather tonight.”

“He seemed fine earlier at the theatre,” Lord Framlingwood insisted, suspicion

creeping into his tone.

“Oh, the ague came on real sudden-like just now. He’s back in his quarters, flat on his back. I’ll be taking some hot tea to him later.”

Margot gave the man a silent, but meaningful, look, letting him know with her eyes that she did not for a minute believe his Banbury tale. Young Rutherford was not only fully hale of health but he was also no doubt working some sort of event at a wealthy lord’s home, romancing jewels off the very throats and ears of the man’s even wealthier guests.

“That will be all Mr. Rutherford, Lord Framlingwood said easily. “But before you go, could you pour each of us a brandy from the tantalus?”

Margot’s eyes flew to Derek, and her blood ran cold. Was he about to give her her conge’? His tone was deadly serious, and she doubted he had any intention of joining her above stairs that night either.

As soon as Toplofty snicked the door shut and padded down the hallway back toward the steps to the kitchen, she turned toward Derek and in a stricken voice asked, “What’s wrong?”

He set down his tumbler of brandy on a side table and leaned forward on the settee where he and Margot sat. “I’ve engaged two drapers to do a complete renovation of your townhouse over the next two weeks.” He took another long sip before continuing. “Since the changes will be so extensive, they’ll be staying in the two bedchambers on the first floor.”

“Why?” she demanded, trying to keep her voice calm but firm. “I haven’t been here that long, and everything was newly done when I moved in last summer.”



“Because you deserve the best of everything.” Derek took another quick sip of the brandy, obviously trying to forestall any further questions.

“Why?” she repeated. Margot knew she should let it go, but she couldn’t. “Who are these men?”

Derek mumbled something low, and Margot leapt to her feet to begin pacing. “If you’re going to endanger our lives, the least you could do is stop lying to us.” She ceased pacing and whirled on him. “These men aren’t really drapers...they’re bodyguards. Aren’t they?” Her voice had turned shrill now, but she didn’t care. She wanted answers. If she didn’t protect herself and Gabrielle, no one else would.

He stood and joined her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t afford to let anything happen to the two of you. These men come highly recommended by Lady Camilla, the Barrister Forsythe, and Col, the Bow Street Runner who’s investigating the threats to your lives.”

“So you’re finally admitting we’re in danger.” She shouted out the last word in a high octave she never used in conversation, surprising even herself.

“Yes,” he said simply, and hung his head.

“Details,” she said. “I require details.”

“These two drapers have worked with Captain El for many years, and now they have their own thriving business in Cheapside. They apparently were so good at representing her with other drapers selling her goods that she set them up in their own business.”

“But they’re drapers, for God’s sakes. How are they going to protect us?”

“According to the captain, they’re extremely handy with knives and their fists. They apparently began their careers as riverfront gang members who, ah, assisted her in her many, um, business ventures.”

He walked closer to Margot and drew her into his arms. He put his mouth near her ear and whispered low. “You have no idea how precious you and Gabrielle are to me. If you wish, I could set the two of you up in Paris for awhile until we run this monster to ground.”

Margot pulled away and gave him a fond look. “I’m not going to abandon you, Derek, in your time of need. What kind of frivolous courtesan do you believe me to be?” She gave him her widest, bravest smile and assured him. “You do know I’m very good with knives as well? Whoever this bastard is, he doesn’t know with whom he’s dealing.”

“So you’ll welcome the drapers in for renovations?” Derek’s voice had turned a bit shaky by then.

“Of course we will. How long will whatever it is they do take to complete?”

“Let’s just worry about one thing at a time,” he said, and placed a fingertip to the end of her nose before going to the wall to ring for Toplofty. When the man appeared quickly as if he’d been leaning outside the door to the drawing room, the earl directed him to have his coach brought around.

Derek was leaving. What the hell was on his mind now?

November 8, 1826

Kenton & Bullock Drapers, Cheapside

John Kenton read through the latest letter from the former Captain Eleanor Goodrum, now the Duchess of Chelmsford. He shook his head at the thought of her most recent near impossible feat. She'd gracefully combined her high seas smuggling persona, her highly profitable club, Goodrum's, and the role of duchess with nary a bead of sweat or misstep.

He and Will had both heard the gossip about the epic kitchen battle after which the high-in-the-Instep Duke of Chelmsford had somehow convinced the indestructible and untamed queen of London vice to marry him. In fact, he and Will were the first friends she'd contacted after the nuptials...to renovate the duke's totally destroyed kitchen.

When he and his partner had originally viewed the wreckage, they'd been tempted to simply have workmen level that part of the duke's town mansion...after all the wicked-looking knives had been removed from the walls and furniture. However, they'd managed without a word of the conditions they'd found in the kitchen leaking to the nosy gossip sheets.

They enjoyed the patronage of the infamous duchess and they meant to keep it that way. Which was why he was reading her latest instructions on how they were to proceed with the job they'd been commissioned to complete by none other than Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby. Captain El of course was pulling the strings from the background and wanted to be sure they understood the degree of danger in the situation at the Grosvenor Street dwellings of the mistresses of the Earl of Framlingwood.

He hated to fill in Will on the extent of the danger, because he knew his volatile partner would be sure to tell him he'd warned him this job was a bad idea. However, it had been years since they'd been in a shindy of a battle royal. Maybe it was time for the two of them to shake things up, get out of their plodding, mercantile existence for a night or two.

And then there was the offer she'd saved for the last paragraph of her letter. She guaranteed at least two of the earl's ships would be at their disposal for direct trade if they could manage a good outcome protecting one mistress and her lady's maid.

He leaned back in his desk chair and stared out the side street window, mulling over the latest twist to the affair. What in the name of Hades was so special about these women that the earl was willing to go to such lengths to see them safe?

7

NOVEMBER 9, 1826

NUMBER 5, GROSVENOR STREET

Will had to stifle a chuckle. He'd never seen a woman who could unsettle his partner like Miss Margot Fauchette. She and John were like two fencers...thrust, parry, neither giving an inch in their verbal battle. And then there was her lady's maid. If you asked him, she'd never done a day's work in her life, except perhaps to flirt.

She was now eyeing him speculatively from beneath lush, golden lashes whilst sitting demurely in a cozy chintz chair in the corner of the formal drawing room with her bare feet tucked beneath her. Never in his recollection had he ever seen a lady's maid who had the liberty to laze in a chair whilst her employer was engaged in verbal jousting with a visitor.

He returned a fake smoldering look whilst holding back laughter. He was just as sure of her sexual preference as he was of his own. She and Margot were lovers, or his name wasn't Will Bullock. He wondered how far she'd take her little charade if he led her on.

But then he realized he'd rather go on wondering, because the days of quiet, accusing glares from John would make the cost of the joke an unbearable burden for him. He honestly could see the games Margot and Gabrielle played for what they were. He and John had struggled with the very same things when their adult relationship was still in the formative stages.

Love without trust on one side and respect on the other wasn't really love. The two of them had learned that lesson the hard way.

Will's easygoing ways of working with customers, both men and women, had sometimes given a false impression to all involved, including John. John's aloof attitude and handsome exterior led many women to assume his bachelorhood was ripe for challenge.

Both of them despised the double lives that were necessary to protect their very existence, but the love they'd forged together was worth the price. John had captured Will's very heart whilst they were still lads, and the intensity had never lessened.

They lived in separate abodes. Will kept rooms at Albany, and John had invested in a terrace house on Soho Square. However, their deepest secret was a hidden room within their warehouse in Cheapside. No one could ever know the true nature of their partnership.

Mrs. Collins had no more than introduced the two drapers who would be staying with them for weeks than Margot pushed out her chin and demanded, "Could one of you show me exactly where the decorating in this townhouse is deficient?"

The taller of the two men, who'd been introduced as John Kenton, made a deep bow and responded. "Only the finest setting should surround exquisite jewels such as yourselves."

She nodded, impressed, and mentally ceded the opening points to him. Whirling on his partner, Will Bullock, she threw down another challenge. "Could you, sir, give me an estimate of what all these unnecessary household fripperies will cost?"

"Cost is a relative term," he said, his dark blue eyes twinkling. "We like to think of quality and value being more meaningful ways to look at expenditures made in the

pursuit of perfection.”

“You’re an Irishman, aren’t you?” she stated flatly.

Mr. Bullock exhibited mock surprise. “What gave me away?”

“Only your countrymen are capable of this level of pure blather.” And then she laughed, easing the coolness and tension in the room.

“My partner, Mr. Bullock, takes care of all the detail work. I’m the one who sells the tickets and directs the show.”

Margot licked her lips in anticipation of waging a war of words with the so-called draper bodyguards. She was sure she’d bested men of greater intelligence than John Kenton, but she was hard put to remember who or when.

“We don’t need your services.” She swept an arm around the interior of their elaborate second-floor drawing room. “How can you possibly improve on this?”

Mr. Kenton snapped his fingers, and the two assistants the men had brought along hastened out of the room and back down the elaborate main staircase. They’d been using lengthy rolls of measuring tapes to measure everything from windows to chairs and settees.

“Where are they going?” Margot turned her head, suspicious when she heard the sounds of the entryway door opening and closing...many times.

Within minutes, an entire line of young workmen raced up the stairs and in and out of the drawing room bearing bolts of luxurious fabrics and boxes overflowing with trim.

Gabrielle dropped the bored look from her face and abandoned her perch on the

corner chair. She dropped to her knees in the midst of the piles of rolls of fabrics and trims and began pulling out lengths to view in the light pouring in through the ceiling-to-floor windows.

Margot poked a finger into Mr. Kenton's chest. "How much is all of this going to cost? I expect a full accounting for the earl. We can't possibly afford all of this extravagance to decorate an already perfectly turned out drawing room."

She glared over at Gabrielle. "Put down those boxes of trims. We haven't decided anything yet." Gabrielle, of course, ignored her, instead demanding of Mr. Bullock, "Does this brocade come in an embossed gold?"

Kenton, the tall, tawny-haired draper gave Margot a wide smile. "Miss Fauchette, you're a never-ending wonder. I've never known a woman given free rein to re-decorate to balk at the cost."

Mr. Bullock walked over, a long bolt of gold-embroidered brocade balanced on one of his broad shoulders. He bent down to where Gabrielle was pawing through a box of trims like a small girl in a toy shop and deposited the fabric atop a settee for her inspection.

When she squealed in delight and gave him a sunny smile, Margot's heart dropped. Even she was impressed with their unwanted bodyguards. The two men were nothing but charming, polite, and helpful. However, both of them radiated masculinity and sensuality, traits she feared would turn Gabrielle's head. Hell, they damned near turned Margot on, which made her want to poke out their eyes.

She did have to admit that her beloved seemed much more interested in the fabrics they'd brought and the catalogue of furnishings they'd casually laid on a side table than the two frighteningly handsome, so-called draper bodyguards.



The younger one had the physique of a prize fighter, and even she couldn't help but take notice of how he prowled across a room with commanding animal-like grace, his midnight-dark hair falling across one eye. Good God, what had the earl gotten them into now?

"She looks like she has a knack for color, texture and form," Mr. Kenton said, whilst the two of them observed Gabrielle become totally absorbed in choosing fabrics for new curtains and furniture upholstery.

He waved over his partner. "Will, please make sure Miss Tamaryn has everything she needs to make decisions about color and design for the renovations."

Will raised an eyebrow in question.

John gave him a slow wink and explained, Miss Fauchette and I will supervise the budget." He turned back to Margot. "Would that arrangement suit your needs and concerns?"

She relaxed and nearly chuckled at how confident and comfortable the two drapers seemed to be. Each anticipated the other's needs and questions.

A dawning knowledge clicked into place in the back of her mind. These two men were together, birds of a feather. And it appeared they'd been together for a long time. She nearly smacked her forehead. How had she not seen this sooner? What were Mrs. Collins and the earl really plotting?

Mrs. Collins discreetly cleared her throat from her perch on a settee in the middle of the room. "Is anyone ready for bracing, hot tea?"

"That would be wonderful," Margot conceded.

When their housekeeper moved to ring for Young Rutherford, Margot intercepted her. “I’ll go find him and make sure we have something special to offer our guests with their tea.”

When Mrs. Collins gave her a puzzled look, Margot explained. “It’s been such a cold day, and what with their helpers going in and out of the house to bring in all their supplies, we could use a bit of that cherry-flavored cordial we’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

The housekeeper nodded her head, but gave Margot a look that said she knew the real reason she was seeking out Young Rutherford.

Margot meant to extract every bit of information the Rutherfords had about the unlikely draper-bodyguards. And if they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, satisfy her curiosity, she knew someone who damned well would. If she had to, she’d hunt down Captain El, Duchess of Chelmsford, in her lair and demand an explanation.

8

NOVEMBER 9, 1826

### ALLEYWAY CUT ON BOW STREET

A rcher Colwyn, Col to his friends, rubbed his cold hands down the grubby trousers that were a staple of his undercover work for the Bow Street Runners. He'd been standing for more than an hour in the raw November wind that blew down Bow Street like a pack of runaway horses.

He'd give anything to be able to amble into the Brown Bear to savor a tankard of ale at a table close by the fire. Unfortunately, the criminal he was waiting to follow through the icy streets was a fellow Runner.

He had to stay in the shadows long enough to hear a voice that would match the one he'd heard Saida's exotic parrot mimic. He knew the voice was familiar but couldn't yet connect the voice with a name. An intruder had yelled warnings at Saida's talkative pet during a break-in of her townhouse on Grosvenor Street. He'd apparently believed the bird was a person lying in wait in the darkened house.

Col could sit in the Bear for a few hours and wait in the warmth for a group of Runners, but he'd be recognized immediately, even in his undercover costume. A slouchy hat covered his eyes, he'd darkened his face and hands with dirt, and he'd affected a limp, all to throw off any possible suspicions from other Runners.

It wasn't enough to merely identify the runner who'd been dogging the Earl of

Framlingham's steps and taking his money. Col had to follow the bastard to see who he was working for; otherwise, the whole lot would slip through their hands, and Derek and his mistresses would never be safe.

And then he got a break. Three Runners sauntered up the street, one of them telling a ribald story, and the others laughing. Their voices carried well across the crisp air.

Suddenly, one of the men caught sight of the ragged beggar trying to hide at the alleyway. "You...who goes there?" he shouted, when Col circled rapidly away from his watching post. And then the identity of the name connected with the voice that had been plaguing him clicked into place. Elias Shell . He had the bastard.

But now Col had two other problems. First, he had to get the hell away from the trio, and second, he had to figure out how to trap the man into giving himself away as the blackmailer.

Instead of running away from his pursuers, he headed straight toward the group, slamming into the one walking at the street side. When they followed in heated pursuit, Col swerved into the street and gave out an ear-splitting whistle. A door swung open from a dark, unmarked hack moving slowly in his direction. Once he'd pulled himself inside, the driver whipped hard at the team of grays that were far too expensive and fast for a cheap taxi hack.

"About time you hauled your bony arse in here. I thought we were all goners."

Col tipped his grimy hat at Carrington-Bowles. "You gave me some heart palpitations before that door opened. I thought you might have forgotten about me."

CB pointed to his young partner-in-crime seated beside him. "Dickie knew exactly when you were about to make your move and raced over to Russell Street to warn us."

“Cor...thought you’d never find the mark.”

Dickie’s disguise, as usual, was far more inventive than Col’s. He’d worn a dress and a wig, and had been carrying a basket, making him look for all the world like a young house servant running errands for her mistress. Col realized, with a touch of envy, that Dickie would someday be either a master criminal or a celebrated detective.

CB knocked on the roof before sliding the cover off the opening between them and Mean Meg. “Like the wind, my girl. Like the wind.”

They slewed toward Covent Garden and into the crowd of carriages amongst the market crowd there. The three passengers left the conveyance one by one and disappeared into the crowds of shoppers.

CB’s coach driving wizard expertly wound through the mass of carriages and produce carts before vanishing into the maze of mews surrounding the market.

November 9, 1826

Number 5, Grosvenor Street

Margot found Young Rutherford in the butler’s pantry, pretending to polish the silver. More likely, he was assessing the number of knives, forks and spoons, to gauge whether or not a piece or two would be missed.

Worrying about the Rutherfords’ thieving ways was not her problem. The earl and Captain El apparently had a good reason for employing the larcenous family as servants. She came straight to the point. “Who are those two drapers? Really?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because Gabrielle and I aren’t debutantes recently out of the nursery and dressed in white. We’re not going to change our feelings for each other, fall madly in love with these two impossibly handsome men, and live happily ever after.”

To her extreme annoyance, a tear leaked out the side of one of her eyes and rolled down her cheek. “If that’s what the earl has planned for us, he doesn’t know us at all. We care for each other, and we’re certainly not going to live apart, pretending to be someone’s wife.”

“Maybe he thinks marriage might be good for you.” Young Rutherford had to duck fast to avoid being bashed in the head by a flying silver platter.

“Might build character for you two to practice being submissive for awhile to your husbands,” he shouted, whilst dashing back toward the stairs to the lower-level kitchen. Margot followed, throwing a handful of sharp-pronged forks, with deadly accurate aim.

At the sound of crashing cutlery and possible impending doom, Toplofty scrambled out of his cozy parlor in the servants’ quarters to intervene and caught the tail end of his youngest son’s taunts.

“Oy—. Why in the name of St. Barnaby are you telling this poor woman such a Banbury tale?”

By that time, his youngest son was doubled over in laughter.

Just as the elderly Rutherford drew back a fist, poised to teach his youngest a lesson, Slow Rutherford ambled past balancing a tray with a tea service for Number Four. “Not the face, Da. Not our moneymaker,” he warned.

“Is this some horrid joke you’re all enjoying at our expense?” Margot had rubbed

away the tears and her face was now red and blotchy with anger.

Mrs. Collins joined them and put an arm around Margot, guiding her back to her parlor. Margot's body was stiff, and she'd stuck out her chin in defiance. "Who do you all think we are?"

Once they were in her private parlor, Mrs. Collins shut the door and turned to face the mistress from Number Five. "This experiment is not working the way the earl thought it would."

"What made him think whatever this is with the drapers would work? And...what? We're an experiment?"

Mrs. Collins laid her hand lightly over Margot's. "He's a man...and sometimes men, in their never-ending quest to keep their own lives simple, end up complicating the lives of others."

Margot left Cassandra's parlour a little later, a little wiser. In a way, the earl's crazed efforts to protect them all from the blackmailer kind of made sense...kind of.

After being filled in by the housekeeper, however, she'd determined it was time to take control of the farce under way at Number Five Grosvenor Street. She wouldn't wait for the sword of destiny to fall from the sky and destroy her and Gabrielle. She'd go straight to the dragon's lair and demand some answers.

When she slipped back into her own drawing room where she'd left Gabrielle engrossed in all the gorgeous samples the drapers had brought, the cavernous room was empty with only one candle lantern throwing low light across the room. The fire in the fireplace had been banked for the night.

Soft sounds of laughter drifted up the hallway from the two bedchambers at the rear

of the first floor where the drapers were going to stay whilst finishing the renovations.

Margot's heart sank. No matter how long she lived, she'd recognize the sound of the tinkle of Gabrielle's giggles. Her lover must have gotten bored waiting for her to return. And now she was...Margot couldn't bear to consider where she was or what she might be doing.



9

NOVEMBER 10, 1826

GREAT QUEEN STREET ROOMS

Col finished reading a second story to his daughter. He raced through the paragraphs to the final happy ending, tucked her stuffed velvet rabbit in the crook of her arm and kissed her on the forehead. “That’s enough Poppet. It’s time to sleep.”

“You’re going to work.” Her tone was accusatory and not a question.

“We all have duties, Dee. You know that.”

She plucked at his sleeve. “But we don’t want you to go to work. We want you to stay here with us.”

“But you have George.” He pointed to his valet who was just walking in with her nightly cup of warm milk. “And Charlotte will be here with you too.”

“Charlotte doesn’t want you to go either,” she said with a sniff and turned her face to the wall next to the bed.

Charlotte glided in for her nightly kiss from Dee just as he was leaving.

“Don’t let her tell you she hasn’t had her story. I read two for her.”

His wife grinned and shook her head. “She’s flammng all of us. George and I each read her a story as well.”

“Sneaky little minx.” He leaned down and kissed Charlotte soundly before heading toward the door.

Since he was already dressed in his wretched disguise, she asked, “How long this time?”

“I’ll be back by morning. I’ll bring you breakfast in bed.”

“Now who’s flammng? I don’t care how long it takes, just come home to me.”

November 10, 1826

Number 5 Grosvenor Street

Margot knew better than to sneak up on Gabrielle and Mr. Bullock, but she couldn’t help herself. She had to know.

She’d heard their chatter and her lover’s laughter all the way down the first floor hallway leading toward their spare bedchamber which currently housed draper number one, Will Bullock.

No sound emanated from the second spare chamber where draper number two, John Kenton had taken up temporary residence.

She was tempted to hide her eyes before peering through the open doorway. Wait a minute. Why on earth would the two of them get up to sexual hi-jinks with the door open?

She stood hesitantly, afraid to stick her head all the way inside, just in case...

“Margot—.” Gabrielle squealed a welcome. “Where have you been? Come see what Mr. Bullock’s designed for us.”

She stepped all the way in and felt her body flush with heat all the way from the roots of her hair down to the top of her bosom above the low line of her décolletage. Gabrielle leaned over Mr. Bullock’s shoulder. He’d brought a specially designed table with him which swiveled to a slant where he was busy working with a bit of charcoal, sketching out changes for her drawing room.

“See...I can think of something we want to do, and poof...just like magic, he brings my ideas to life with his drawings.” Gabrielle danced a little happy jig around the room before returning to point out the changes. “He’s going to use watercolors tomorrow to add color to his sketches.” Margot’s lover turned a luminous smile on her, the likes of which she hadn’t seen in awhile.

“Isn’t he wonderful?” Her tone edged on begging for Margot’s approval.

“I think he’s wonderful too,” Margot admitted haltingly.

Behind her she heard, “That makes three of us who agree on something. Certainly a great way to start a friendship.”

When she turned, John Kenton was close behind her, his tawny hair and gold-green eyes glittering in the glow from the room’s gas lantern.

November 10, 1826

Covent Garden, London

Col's long wait a city street away from the Brown Bear finally paid off. The ex-Bow Street runner, whose voice closely matched the mimicked sounds repeated by Saida's cockatoo, cautiously left the tavern whilst eyeing both sides of the street as well as the roof-tops before heading south toward the river.

Now where was this sneaksby headed? Col was not ready for another long haul toward, or under, the river. Please, Zeus, not tonight .

In spite of Col's aversion, Elias Shell kept moving steadily toward the riverfront. In spite of the nearness to the abandoned tunnel beneath the Thames where Col had uncovered an ungodly cabal of chess-playing blood drinkers, the runner instead dropped down to the water's edge where a riverman waited with a small skiff. He no sooner jumped aboard than the skiff shot off into the darkness and was lost in the fog.

Although Col was tempted to find another riverman to continue the pursuit, he instead considered the direction into which the blackmailer had disappeared. Where was he going and what was his next step? Col decided to stop chasing the bastard and start thinking like a criminal, anticipating his next move.

If Col wanted to perpetrate the perfect blackmail on a peer of the realm, where would he go? Where would he hide out to evade capture? More importantly, what would be his next move?

Since Derek Framlingwood hadn't notified Col of receiving any more demands for payment, it was probably time for Shell to make another move. All Col had to do was station Sally Big-Un's near the pick-up location and get her sworn testimony that this was the same man who'd paid her to be a distraction during the most recent drop-off.

However, all of that effort would be for naught if Col couldn't figure out where he kept his bolthole hideaway.

What did Col know about that key bit of information? He knew which way he'd fled on the riverman's skiff. That was a start. What kinds of boltholes were along the riverfront east of Covent Garden? Boarding houses and rooms above taverns were out of the question, because hostlers were notoriously bribable. What did that leave? Friends, acquaintances, family? Now that he knew the identity of the blackmailer, perhaps he could dig up a bit more facts.

And then there was the other important fact he knew. He was an informer for one or more of the current runners at Bow Street. Sooner or later he'd have to return to the Brown Bear to keep his other source of funds viable.

November 10, 1826

Number Five Grosvenor Street

John lay staring into the darkness of the earl's opulent bedchamber whilst he wondered. He wondered what the Earl of Framlingwood and Lady Camilla really wanted from them. Surely one re-decorating job was not enough to warrant all the perquisites they'd been promised.

Now that he'd met Gabrielle and Margot, he was more than certain neither one of them was capable of murder. Although one could never tell what lay in the heart of a stranger. And they were all still essentially strangers. A polite afternoon spent in desultory discussion of fabrics and furniture didn't exactly constitute a full investigation of what might be going on with the two women.

His musings were interrupted by a soft, feathering touch on his ankle. Will's tongue . He sucked in a breath and smiled into the darkness. When the whisper-light touch moved on up his calf toward his thighs, John unbelted his banyan, exposing his twitching cock to his lover's ministrations.

The way Will would gently lick the head of John's cock before taking full charge with his mouth never failed to drive him mad.

This gentle, tentative dance of love-making had begun when they'd clung together through bitter winters spent tucked amongst the pigeon coops beneath the eaves of the roof at St. Mary's. They'd crawled under whatever tattered blankets they'd been able to scavenge and shared bodily warmth.

Within a few years, they'd begun to experiment, as the young are wont to do, and in the process discovered a love so deep, so vast, they were still together decades later.

Will's deep breaths tickled against John's belly which coaxed a simmering fire into a conflagration raging through his body. A whirlwind of desire set off by the steady sucking and pull of his lover's mouth drove every rational thought from his mind.

The hardest part of making love in someone else's home was the need to keep their usual utterances quiet. He longed to hear Will demand, "Is this how you want me to fuck you? Tell me how you want to come...don't hold anything back. I want you bare, all of you...now."

At that point, he lost his train of thought and could do nothing but arch his back as spasms of pleasure washed over him, and he spent into the linen cloth Will had brought with him. Will always thought of everything. John bit hard against the back of his hand to silence the scream of pleasure he'd normally indulge in if they were safely ensconced in their padded hideaway behind a false wall within their vast warehouse.

They rolled into a panting heap and clung to each other as if nothing else existed outside the walls of the earl's spare bedchamber in Margot and Gabrielle's townhouse.

After their breathing returned to normal, Will produced a small bottle of scented oil which he gave to John before rolling over and opening his body to the next level of pleasure.

Will relaxed and bent his knees just so to present himself to John's thrusts. He buried his nose in the lavender-scented, plump pillows and listened. He loved the sounds his well-oiled bottom and John's cock made when they slammed together in a rhythm as old as history itself.

Sometimes he fantasized about all the ways the Sacred Band of Thebes, an elite fighting unit made up of male lovers, had pleased each other before their massive battles in ancient times.

10

NOVEMBER 11, 1826

GOODRUM'S HOUSE OF PLEASURE

Edge of Mayfair

Captain Eleanor Whitcombe, Duchess of Chelmsford, had a delicate problem which needed to be handled with the utmost diplomacy. She tossed the letter she'd just received from Col and tossed it into the flames of the crackling fire warming her office at Goodrum's House of Pleasure

Now that the Earl of Framlingwood's blackmailer had been identified and was on the run, desperate, and dangerous, she had to find a safe hiding place for Sally Big'Uns who'd been working for her in the laundry at Goodrum's. The infernal woman was the only living person who had witnessed the blackmailer in action. Now that he knew Col was on to him, he'd have to eliminate Sally if he were to have any chance of escaping the hangman's noose.

Sally had been paid half of a goodly sum up front by the blackmailer during his last pick-up of the earl's money. All she had to do was use her ample bosom (hence her faux surname, Big'Uns) as a distraction at the tavern where the transfer of money was to take place so that he could escape unscathed with his ill-gotten gains. The only reason the former serving wench was still alive was that she was smart enough not to show up for the second half of her payment. Two other barmaids who'd helped the man in the past had had their throats slit for their troubles.



Now that the blackmailer was desperate, he'd have to cover his trail, and Sally's life would not be worth the hot soapy water she hauled each day in her work at Goodrum's. El trusted her employees implicitly, but too many vendors of goods and workmen came and went at her infamous place of business. She had to find a safer position for Sally until the bastard was caught.

Whilst she ravaged her brain for anyone she could trust enough not only to keep quiet, but defend Sally if necessary, there was a soft scratch at her door.

"Enter."

Her husband Percy opened the door, slipped in quietly, and walked to her side for a long kiss. They both sank into the kiss, and his hands wandered to caress her bottom. "I missed you," he finally said, after surfacing for a deep breath.

"I missed you too." She gave a low purr and asked, "How much do you love me?"

Percy straightened his neckcloth, tilted his head, and asked, "What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want something?"

"Because we've been married long enough that I know the signs."

When she made a slight moue, he quickly added, "Whatever it is, I'm your man."

"Good. There's someone I'd like you to meet and take to your country estate for protection whilst we take down the man who wants to kill her."

"Is that all? It's not even going to cost me money?"

A few minutes later when she took him to the club laundry and he viewed Sally

Big'Uns in all her glory, courtesy of a damp bodice from her morning's work, all the Duke of Chelmsford managed to choke out was, "Good Lord."

"Miss Big'Uns, allow me to present my husband, His Grace, Duke of Chelmsford."

Sally did her version of an awkward curtsy and then kept her head down.

"Sally, please raise your head," El snapped. "He's not a god, I can assure you. He's my husband."

"Is his lordship going to send me to magistrate," she mumbled, her head still bowed.

Percy choked as if he had a fish bone stuck in his throat before saying, "Marley's bones, no."

"Not him, ta other, the one whose gold I made em lose..."

El was confused for short moments before she realized the poor woman was talking about Derek. "Oh, you mean the Earl of Framlingwood? That lord is not going to cause trouble for anyone. He has much bigger problems of his own to untangle."

With that, Percy gave El a heated look full of unspoken meaning. Meaning she would have to pay dearly for this farce much later. El mentally calculated what a new set of sheets for the ducal bed would cost and decided a night of unbridled lust with the duke would not be too high a price to pay.

Percy moved to Sally's side and bent low to reassure her. "I will guard you with my own life if necessary until that blackguard is brought to justice."

El rang a call bell behind her desk, and within seconds, three of Goodrum's beefy guards appeared at her door. "Wendell, you're in charge. His Grace requires outriders

to accompany him.”

“Where are we going, Mum?”

“With the duke and Miss Big’Uns. That’s all you need to know. Once they’re in the ducal carriage, His Grace will give you the destination. It’s up to you to take the most circuitous route.”

“Yes, Mum. For how long?”

“As long as it takes.” She paused in thought for a few moments. “And, Wendell...” she paused to give her head guard an intense look. “Keep a sharp eye to see if you’re being followed. If you are followed, I expect all of you to be ready and armed as if you’re going to war.”

November 11, 1826

Burlington Arcade, London

Gabrielle clapped her hands and laughed at the pleasure Margot took from trying on extravagant hats in Madame Roux-Cher’s specialty shop in Burlington’s mall.

They’d decided to leave for the morning to allow the drapers’ workmen room to begin the renovations. John had accompanied them as a handsome, unobtrusive guard whilst Will remained at Number Five Grosvenor Street to supervise the workers.

“That color brings out the roses in your cheeks,” John pronounced.

The dark green, straw beauty was strewn with artfully placed silk flowers in all the hues of a French landscape. A wide, dark burgundy ribbon tied beneath her chin with the hat at a jaunty angle completed the picture.

Margot slowly turned in front of a floor-length mirror provided by Madame Roux-Cher. “Do you really think so?”

John’s face took on a look of both concern and sincerity. “Riches fade, but a beautiful woman? She’s a joy forever.”

Gabrielle touched a gentle finger to the place where a bow held the confection in place beneath Margot’s chin. “What’s wrong with buying yourself something spectacular? The earl is always urging you to treat yourself to the finest baubles his money can buy.”

“Shall we put that on the earl’s account, and have the hat boxed and delivered?” The shopkeeper tilted her head and quirked a warm smile.

“Of course.” Margot came back to reality with a thud. She’d just bought a frivolous hat that made one yearn for a warm spring day, not the dreary spitting snow outside that was the reality of December in London. She decided that Gabrielle and John were a dangerous combination to accompany her on a shopping expedition.

She was relieved to feel the cold wind blowing down Bond Street. She locked arms with Gabrielle for warmth, and they moved slowly amongst the throng of shoppers. She should have been looking for Boxing Day gifts for everyone, not spending a ridiculous sum on herself.

And then she caught sight of the excited look on Gabrielle’s face. “What are you so happy about? You didn’t even buy something for you.”

“Mr. Kenton promised he’d take us to Hatchard’s on Piccadilly. He and Will gave me a list of titles on interior architectural design to put on their account.” She fairly bounced with excitement.

Margot hadn't seen her this happy and absorbed in something for a long time. When she hazarded a look at Mr. Kenton, he laughed. "I've never seen anyone so keen to learn our business. She has an eye for design and color. We're happy to provide her with the books for reference."

"Mr. Kenton, you don't have to do that. I can pay for her books."

He covered her gloved hand with one of his. "It's my pleasure. Let me do this for her."

"Please call me John and I'm sure Will has no idea who you're talking to when you address him as Mr. Bullock. There's no reason for all of us to remain formal with each other since we appear to be together in whatever this dangerous situation with the blackmailer."

He didn't give her a chance to argue, but instead stepped into the street, raised a hand, and gave out an ear-splitting whistle. The earl's carriage was headed toward them to take them on to Hatchard's.

Once they were safely inside, he peered out the window back the way they came. "Someone has been dogging our footsteps all morning," he warned. "He's followed us from shop to shop."

Margot sucked in a sharp breath whilst Gabrielle leaned far over John to gaze back at the man who still stood staring after them.

"Do you think he's the blackmailer?" Margot demanded.

Before he could answer, Gabrielle gave both of them a sober look. "I know that man cannot be the blackmailer."

They both stared at her, confused.

“How can you be sure?” John craned his neck around as well to take another look.

A tear slid down her cheek as she revealed, “That’s my brother, Captain Alton Tamaryn. His ship must have returned from China.”

11

NOVEMBER 11, 1826

NUMBER FIVE GROSVENOR STREET

M argot and Gabrielle had been curled up in each other's arms on Margot's huge bed for hours. Neither one wanted to let go. Both knew the next day would probably bring Gabrielle's brother to their doorstep. Sleep was out of the question for either one of them.

Gabrielle kissed Margot fervently over and over again as if she were imprinting forever the memory of her lover's lips, as if this might be the last night they'd ever have together.

Each time Margot tried to bring up another wild idea of how they could still escape to the Continent and outrun Gabrielle's duty to her brother, her lover would gently push a finger to her lips, stopping yet another rush of frantic imaginings of how their lives might turn out differently. How they could stay together.

"Why do we have to care about society's expectations? Why not break free and carve out a life for us alone?"

"Because...my brother has very powerful friends in the East India Company." She paused, lost in thought for a long moment. "Because there's nowhere we could run that he wouldn't have access to their agents who would find us and force me to return to him."

When they finally wore each other out with worry and what-if's, Gabrielle crawled behind Margot and pressed their bodies together from crown to toes. Margot was perhaps a bit taller than her, but spooned together this way, they fit snugly like a sculptor had designed them to curl as one into a long, soft arc.

She moved her hands to Margot's scalp and rubbed soothingly before combing out her long, lush curling hair with her fingers. When Margot moaned softly, she moved on down to cup the warmth of her breasts and roll her tightened nipples beneath her thumbs and forefingers.

She lovingly circled Margot's softly rounded belly before moving on down to her mound. Her partner rolled to face her and straddled her hips with her legs, starting another round of deep kisses.

"No matter what happens tomorrow, we'll have had this, all of this for four years," Gabrielle whispered.

When Margot widened her legs, Gabrielle accepted the invitation by plunging two of her fingers deep within her quim. They'd been touching and kissing each other for so long, that Gabrielle's thrusting brought Margot to a peak of pleasure within minutes.

When Margot re-positioned herself so that she could dip her tongue deep into Gabrielle's pussy, she reciprocated with probing licks of her own tongue across Margot's slit. A few hours later when the chiming hall clock sounded twelve times, they decided they might as well visit the kitchen for cocoa, since neither of them could will themselves to sleep.

November 12, 1826

A Minute After Midnight



## Number Five Grosvenor Street

John and Will had problems sleeping as well. They'd worried for hours about what to do about Gabrielle's brother, and so far, neither one had come up with a solution.

Women had no rights of their own. They were more or less the property of their families, to dispose of them as they wished. The two drapers, of course, sympathized with Margot and Gabrielle's woes, but they didn't think they could interfere in her brother's right to take her home.

She'd apparently been only sixteen when she'd run away, but now she was twenty. However, she still didn't have any rights to go against her brother's wishes.

"We have to come up with some explanation when the man shows up." John took a sip of the tea he'd brewed for both of them.

"What can we say? This isn't even our house. What can we tell him? That we're the owners of a large drapers establishment who, by the way, also hire out as bodyguards? Oh, and your sister is in danger from a murderous blackmailer." Will ran a hand through his hair whilst pouring a healthy dram of Irish whiskey into his tea.

At a soft sound from the hallway, they both looked up. Margot and Gabrielle stared at them as though they were ghosts from a cheap gothic novel.

John leapt to his feet first. Christ...what a tub of subs they'd fallen into.

Will rose and spoke first. "I'm so sorry, Gabrielle. What can we do to help?"

"We couldn't sleep, either. Could you make us some cocoa?" She put an arm around Margot and pulled her close. "Neither one of us is any good in the kitchen."

John moved to find a block of chocolate from the pantry whilst Will fetched a kettle to fill with water and put on to boil.

When Will returned, Margot pled her cause. “We can’t let him take her. We have to figure out a way to hide her.”

Gabrielle laid a soft hand on her arm. “My welfare isn’t your responsibility. I know my brother. He won’t give up until I’m back in our house in Surrey. He’ll make all of your lives miserable, which he’s more than capable of, considering all of his powerful friends at the East India Company.”

“Don’t let him destroy your lives too.” She gave a wry grin. “He wouldn’t think twice.”

John interrupted. “Why don’t we have the earl meet with him? At least that might make the situation seem a bit more respectable.”

“You mean the Earl of Framlingham could explain the part about my being the lady’s maid to one of his five mistresses?”

At that they broke out into uncontrollable laughter. Will laughed till tears rolled down his cheeks. “And then John and I can tell him about how we’re two drapers here to protect you from a maniacal blackmailer.”

As it turned out, none of the wild scenarios Margot had feared in the early hours materialized as the day unfolded. At nine o’clock sharp Young Rutherford brought the card of Captain Jameson Tamaryn perched on a silver tray and handed it to her, since she was the official owner of the townhouse.

“Where is he?”

“Waiting in the anti-room.” Young Rutherford left and quickly disappeared back toward the stairs down to the kitchen.

The Coward . He must be on his way to meet Molly in the pantry. She took the card and held it between her thumb and forefinger for a moment, looking at the expensive vellum with precise, no-nonsense printing and the seal of the East India Company.

Her eyes blurred as she studied the card intently. It was if she was seeking some clue that would help her secure Gabrielle’s freedom. The image depicted the company's arms, which included three merchantmen ships under full sail, two sea lions as supporters, and a sphere with the Zodiac and the words DEVS INDICAT. What a cabal of pompous men.

Finally, she decided she’d face the man and somehow make him see his sister was an adult who deserved to choose her own life . As she headed down to the ground floor entry, she heard the sound of the entryway door slamming like the crack of a cannon.

She was just in time to observe Gabrielle running up the stairs toward her and then racing past in a blur. Her lover, who not twenty minutes ago pretended to be too ill to get out of bed, had somehow put on a demure morning dress and sneaked down to face her brother alone.

At that moment, a wild pounding commenced with the knocker on the door to Number Five Grosvenor Street. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

The pounding was so loud that Toplofty strode out of his lair in the kitchen which he rarely left and headed up the stairway, finally joining Margot at the door.

He motioned for her to take refuge in the ground floor parlour whilst he dealt with the fractious Captain Tamaryn. She cracked the door to the parlour open a bit so she could hear what transpired.

Toplofty used his most disdainful imitation of a butler to warn the captain that no one was at home to receive him.

At one point, the man, who was tall and well built, tried to force his way past Lofty, which did not end well. Lofty was stronger than he looked, and ended up tossing the man out into the street.

Margot hid behind the door, wondering whether she should run to find Gabrielle, or join Lofty in the shindy in their entryway.

At a tap at the parlour door, she peered out at Lofty, who looked no worse for the wear. “Do you think he’ll be back?”

“I don’t think we’ll be rid of that milling cove that easily. You’d better find somewhere for your friend to hide out for awhile.”

12

November 12, 1826

Number Five Grosvenor Street

Will raised his voice, which he rarely did, but the stubborn woman he was supposed to be protecting was refusing to see reason. “If we take you to El’s protection at Goodrum’s in our carriage, your brother will never know you’re in there with us. That’s the only idea that makes sense.”

Gabrielle’s brother had returned three more times that day demanding they turn over his sister. Each time he appeared, he had more dubious and dangerous-looking men with him. Frankly, it looked as though he’d emptied out a riverfront tavern.

Toplofty had wanted to take a pistol to the man, but they’d all shouted “no” to that cork-brained idea. Will had taken turns with John ejecting Captain Tamaryn and his entourage, but each time he’d returned with additional ruffians.

When Will had suggested sending for the earl, both Gabrielle and Margot had become hysterical. They didn’t want to add to the man’s already overwhelming burden of trying to pacify a blackmailer.

“I can’t let anyone else be hurt by my brother’s rage.” Gabrielle clenched her fists and argued her point. “Look at how he tried to push Toplofty around.”

“I’m pretty sure your brother and his minions are no match for the Rutherfords. We

should let them handle this.” John put forth that suggestion.

Margot refused that idea out of hand. “We don’t want to have to explain bodies floating in the river, especially bodies connected to the East India Company.

“Why won’t you let Captain El hide you at Goodrum’s?” Margot’s voice took on a desperate, pleading tone.

“Then I’ll never be able to leave. I might as well be a prisoner in my brother’s home as being shut away at Goodrum’s. And what if my brother finds out I’m there? He’d try to ruin Captain El.”

Will exchanged a look with John. They knew it would take a lot more than an East India Company captain to pull down the duchess’s empire, but they were not in a mood to argue the point with Gabrielle and Margot.

There was a scratch at the door to the parlour where they were debating what to do. When Margot said, “Enter,” Mrs. Collins appeared in the doorway.

“What’s wrong? I just got back from my day off, and I could hear shouting all the way back in my room.” She was tying on her apron and narrowed her eyes at the complete silence that greeted her question.

Gabrielle’s brother picked that moment to return for a fourth battering at the door to the townhouse.

November 12, 1826

Covent Garden

Col’s suspicion that ex-runner Elias Shell would run out of money had paid off. He

watched him leave the Brown Bear counting his money from his payment from Col's fellow runners who used him for information on London gangs.

He sucked in a sigh of relief when the man headed off at a fast clip toward the river. There was still a bit of lingering daylight. The bastard wouldn't slip through his fingers this time.

Col nearly trotted past him when Shell veered into The Globe tavern. What in the name of St. Joseph's ankle bone was he going to do in there? Col ducked into the shadows close to the end of the building and watched as he came back out with four other men to whom he handed over some of the money he'd gotten at the Brown Bear.

Col's stomach plummeted. Something big was about to go down, and here he was, far away from any help. Instead of heading on down to the river, the four men hailed a hack carriage. On a whim, Col whistled, a long, shrill whistle. Like magic, Dickie appeared. He swore that boy was like a wraith, and he'd followed Col undercover more times than was safe.

"Where we goin', Guv?"

"You're going to go find CB and tell him all hell is about to break loose. He needs to gather the troops and get to the townhouses on Grosvenor Street."

"Wot about you?"

"I'm going hunting." With that, Col turned, gave another loud whistle and hailed a hack.

November 12, 1826

## Number Five Grosvenor Street

The hardest thing Gabrielle had ever done in her albeit short, twenty-year life was to walk away from the woman she loved and climb into her brother's carriage. She knew her brother would be relentless and never give up until he'd ruined all of her friends who'd protected her. And so she'd given up her chance for happiness in Margot's arms.

The final blow had been when he'd shoved Mrs. Collins to the ground when she'd tried to order him away from Number Five. Gabrielle had stoically reached out to her brother for a brief embrace before walking away, taking nothing with her, and refusing to look back at Margot whose muffled sobs had gutted her.

The four ruffians he'd brought along with him to Margot's townhouse left the inside of the carriage and joined her brother's coachman outside. Two of them climbed into the boot whilst the other two sat next to John Coachman.

Once she faced her brother alone, she felt overcome by an odd strength she hadn't known she possessed. In the four years he'd been gone, she'd remembered him as a large, menacing figure from her childhood. Now that she'd grown to be nearly as tall as her sibling, he seemed normal-sized and pathetic, even though he'd retained his youthful looks. His ice blue eyes in his tanned face and his shock of nearly white-blond hair made him look like an avenging Viking.

"Gabrielle, what were you thinking? Where have you been all these years?"

"How did you find me?" she asked suddenly, ignoring his questions.

He clucked his tongue and shook his head. "The East India Company has eyes and ears everywhere. I've been getting reports of your being seen in so many places where no innocent young woman should ever be seen. You were even arrested at a



vulgar party before you disappeared with that...that woman. And then, of course, you haven't answered any of my letters.

"You've ruined yourself for any decent marriage to a man of substance in London, so I've come to a decision."

"A decision about what?"

"I have a colleague who manages a tea plantation in the Jiangnan region in China. He needs a wife, and I think the two of you would suit."

"Don't I have any say in my future?"

"No. You've shown a decided lack of intelligence in the choices you've made over the last four years, so it's my turn to make choices for you."

He leaned back into the squabs of his luxurious carriage and crossed his arms, signaling the conversation was over. That physical show of the end of discussion she remembered about her brother all too well.

"I'll take you out with me on my next trip back to China."

"How soon would that be?"

"In April, if the weather in the Channel stays fit."

Even though she hadn't laid eyes on the man in four years, she did remember one salient detail. No amount of argument would change her brother's mind once he'd come to a decision.

Col could not for the life of him figure out where Shell and his men were headed.

He'd followed them in his hack along Piccadilly as far as the west edge of London where the road turned into Knightsbridge after the Hyde Park Turnpike. When they kept on going, he was stumped. What in the hell was in Surrey? Was he leading him on a wild goose chase?

Just when he was considering having the driver turn the hack around back toward London, the carriage ahead of him speeded up, pulled next to another carriage, and forced the conveyance off the road.

The events that followed were incomprehensible until Col had his driver pull off to the side of the road so that he could get out and edge closer to the accident. Pistol shots ensued, and when the smoke cleared, most of the men on the outside of the private carriage were either dead or wounded.

And then he saw the reason for the dramatic attack. Shell reached inside the private coach and dragged out a woman, Gabrielle Tamaryn. When the man inside leapt to the ground behind her to try to protect her, he too was shot.

What Col had been fearing all along became clear. Shell had become so desperate, he'd decided to grab one of the women and pass her off as the murderess to whoever had hired him. He may have started out as an investigator for hire, but then the temptation must have become too great to blackmail the earl as well.

Col had his service pistol but that was it. There was only him against the dangerous lot Shell had paid to help him overtake Gabrielle's carriage. What Col couldn't figure out was who in the hell the man was who'd come to Gabrielle's aid. And where in the name of St. Bridget were the drapers who were supposed to protect the earl's women?

He had only seconds to come to a decision. He was definitely out-manned, none of his comrades in arms would ever guess he'd headed to Surrey.

Shell and his paid choir birds pushed Gabrielle into their hack and piled in behind her. That left only one man serving as coachman after he'd tossed the hired hack driver to the ground.

The man wasted precious minutes settling in and taking control of the pair of roans. In that small space of time, Col calculated the odds, whispered a hoarse "Oh, hell" to himself, and raced to grab onto the curved luggage bar at the boot end of the hack just as they rolled back onto the dirt road, but now headed back toward London.

### Covent Garden

Dickie stood, shifting from one foot to the other to stay warm in the freezing morning fog whilst waiting near Covent Garden for the hack cabbie he knew had taken Col wherever he'd gone. The cabbie had been a special "friend" of Dickie's for a number of years in his escapades throughout the stews of London.

He'd already raced to his father, Lionel's, clinic to deliver Col's dire message to "rally the troops."

When his foster father surgeon had grabbed his long winter coat and hat from a hook near the door to the clinic, he'd ordered, "You're with me, Dickie. We're off to Framlingwood's dratted Grosvenor Street row of townhouses where we're all going to meet at Number Five. These are dangerous men that are no match for a child, even one as clever as you. I've just sent a message to Her Grace, er, Captain El, as well as the rest of the lads."

In the seconds it took for his father's well-meaning speech, Dickie had raced around his long legs and out into the streets of Seven Dials. He couldn't leave Col to face his fate alone.

Time was not on the Bow Street runner's side. He had to find that hackney cab driver and find out where he'd left Col, who was Dickie's secret hero. As for his father's inference, Dickie knew better than most that his twelve years in the stews of London had aged him far beyond the number that labeled him a "child."

Dickie huffed out a cloud of steamy breath in the cold before jumping in excitement

and waving both hands. His friend's hackney cab had finally rolled into sight.

As soon as the conveyance slewed to a stop, Dickie scrambled up next to the driver.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

Dickie gave him an impatient look. "Col...that's who. You picked him up late last night to follow another hack...wot happened? Where is he now?"

November 13, 1826

Number Five, Grosvenor Street

Derek, Earl of Framlingwood, should count himself among the heady group of the most powerful peers in the kingdom. However, at the moment, he felt utterly helpless and at the mercy of unknown, evil forces.

He'd spent several days forcing himself to stay away from his housekeeper, Cassandra, considering the unwise kiss he'd stolen. However, when he'd received the message from CB that Col was in peril, Gabrielle had been taken, and Number Five Grosvenor Street was in complete upheaval, he'd pushed all other concerns from his mind.

He'd had his groom saddle the fastest of his riding cattle, Goldie, and had hied himself to Number Five Grosvenor Street which apparently had been chosen as a war room.

Cassandra met him in the entryway when he arrived. After she'd passed off his hat and riding jacket to Young Rutherford, she spoke low. "Just so you don't have to walk in there and feel a complete fool, let me enlighten you as to a number of

developments over the last two days.”

When she’d explained how Gabrielle’s brother had forced his way into the house repeatedly to snatch her away, Derek feared his roar of anger could probably be heard several rooms away.

“Great St. Alban’s horn...how did all this transpire under my roof without someone alerting me to the danger?”

“It was my day off. I’d gone to visit, um, a friend, and by the time I’d returned, Gabrielle had made up her mind to go with her brother to keep all of us safe.”

“I could have kept everyone safe if only I’d known. I could have called on Prinny to send over a contingent of Marines.”

She lowered her eyes. “Gabrielle’s brother is a captain with the East India Company,” she muttered, almost under her breath.

“Oh—.” That news seemed to deflate his ire somewhat. “Prinny loves money, and I’m sure they keep him well supplied.”

A small army of drapers’ workmen were busily tearing apart the formal drawing room, so all of the troops had to crowd into the smaller parlour on the ground floor.

Derek spun around the entryway, observing the buckets of paint, workmen balancing long pieces of wood on their shoulders, and the two drapers directing traffic. “Who, in the name of all that’s holy, approved this mess in midst of everything else we’re dealing with?”

“You did.” Drapers John Kenton, Will Bullock, and Cassandra spoke nearly in unison.

“Now, follow me.” Cassandra beckoned him toward the parlour. “You wanted to make sure all of your mistresses, present and former, were properly introduced. They all await you in the parlour. We were going to have a tea party, but considering the dangers we’re all facing, we may have to combine tea party introductions with the ‘war room’ of your school chums as well.”

Cassandra held her breath and prayed she could get through facing all of the mistresses again in one place. She was painfully aware of their suspicions about her and Derek, and truthfully, she deserved the gossip. She should have stopped him using her as his listening post long ago.

She should have. Cassandra feared the brief kiss they’d shared had ended any notion she might have had of keeping the earl at arm’s length.

Young Rutherford, armed as if he were expecting a ship full of corsairs, opened the parlour door for them with a flourish.

Inside, the rise and fall of at least four different conversations were abruptly silenced. All eyes turned toward the two people in the entryway.

Any hope she might have had of entering as though nothing had changed was dashed the minute she felt a hot flush spreading from her face to her bosom. Next to her, Derek was similarly afflicted.

Lily was the first mistress to break the silence. “What have I been telling all of you?” She swung her gaze around the room, and most of the mistresses, as well as their husbands, were nodding as if to say, “Didn’t everyone know?”

In spite of her better instincts, Cassandra could not help mouthing a short denial. “I have no idea to what you’re referring.”

That brought a hearty round of laughter, quickly silenced at the the thunderous look from the earl.

Slow Rutherford broke up the silence by scratching on the door before wheeling in a huge tea cart full of hearty sandwiches, sweets, and two large silver urns full of steaming water. Pistols protruded from each side of the waistband of his trousers and bumped out the tails of his under-butler's jacket.

Lady Camilla beckoned him over from her place of distinction in the center of the room. Bring that cart to me. I'll manage the tea box and you can pour from those beastly heavy urns.

CB leaned forward. "Aunt, you don't need to tend to the tea. Nathaniel or I can help."

The look she sent him would melt cold butter. "I'm on to you, Lionel. You want first choice of Nathaniel's raspberry macarons." She shook her finger back and forth. "None for any of you until I get mine."



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:37 pm*

### NUMBER FIVE GROSVENOR STREET

Of all of the Grosvenor Street regulars, Margot volunteered to explain the happenings of the last day and a half, which she admitted made little sense to her, considering no one had realized what a dangerous man Gabrielle's brother could be. They hadn't realized he'd returned from China or that he was watching the house and following them around Mayfair.

Barrister Forsythe interrupted. "Beg pardon, Miss Fauchette, but is it possible Miss Tamaryn's brother could have any connection to the blackmailer?"

She turned her tear-reddened eyes toward him. "How could he? He's been out of the country for the last four years."

The earl nearly talked over her in his anger. "Why did none of you send for me? This is my house. I'm responsible for all of you."

"Gabrielle felt guilty for turning him and his ruffians on us. She felt he had a right to demand her return. She was also worried he might cause problems for you or Captain El when we suggested sending for her." She nodded toward the pirate duchess who urged her to continue with her story.

The earl expressed disbelief by extending his hands, palms up. "Who is he that he could be capable of causing problems for me?"

"He has powerful friends within the East India Company. Gabrielle's brother is one of their most successful captains."

“Oh.” Derek stopped talking and motioned for Margot to continue.

Suddenly, there was a great noise coming from the entryway. All the men leapt to their feet as one with Captain El in the lead and headed out the parlour door to investigate who dared breach the small army of guards they’d put in place.

Soon, they all returned with CB and Dr. Douglas supporting Gabrielle between them. Although her face was covered with bruises, her dress was torn in several places, and her hands were filthy and full of wood splinters, she wore a broad smile.

Hamish brought up the rear with Col next to him, followed closely by Dickie.

Margot gave out a heart-felt cry and raced to Gabrielle. Hamish made room for her to crush her friend to her side whilst he dropped back to see to Col’s minor wounds.

Once Col and Gabrielle were ensconced on a comfortably upholstered settee, everyone tried to talk at once.

Barrister Forsythe stood and gave out a loud whistle to silence the questions. “One at a time, if you please. And I’m going to go first.”

“Col—how did your search for the blackmailer lead you to Miss Tamaryn’s rescue?”

Col leaned forward with his hands on his knees. “It turns out the blackmailer has gotten so desperate to collect his money for finding a murderess, he’s decided any mistress will do. And Elias Shell is an ex-Bow Street runner, who incidentally happened to be the arresting officer four years ago when Gabrielle was found unconscious next to a dead lord at a Cyprians’ party in St. John’s Wood.”

Gabrielle took up the story whilst Margot gently untangled her disheveled hair. “They were watching our townhouse and observed my brother...her voice broke for a

moment. He was shot trying to save me when they ran our carriage off the road. I don't know whether he's dead or alive."

Col patted her on the hand and took up the tale from there. "Shell took her to a rented house on Berkley Square where he tried to convince a mysterious older woman that Gabrielle is the murderess. Gabrielle said the woman asked her how old she was and if she'd ever been to Jamaica. She apparently didn't like the answers. She told them to take the girl out and kill her because she now knew too much."

"I was outside the window listening, and when the choir boy they chose to kill her brought her out to the garden, I clubbed him. But Gabrielle finished him off with a tree branch."

She motioned with her head down toward where CB was bandaging her wounds.

Forsythe interrupted again. "Point of order. How the hell did you happen to be there at the right time? I know you're a lot of things, but not a magician."

Col gave him an impish smile. "Maybe I am." He continued in a more serious tone. "I'd followed Shell from the Brown Bear until he side-tracked into The Globe to pay his choir boys. I was afraid they'd head over here to cause mayhem, so I flagged Dickie's favorite hack coachmen to follow them.

"After that they raced all the way from Covent Garden out to Knightsbridge Road. Even though I'm a magician, I'm not a mind reader, so I was fairly in the dark as where they were headed. You could have knocked me over with a feather when they ran that coach off the road. We pulled the hack over to the side of the road, and I walked up to investigate. I was going to come back to pull all of you together to help me, but then I saw them drag Gabrielle out of the carriage and shoot her brother."

"You had to be vastly outnumbered...what the hell did you do?" Adrienne kicked

Obadiah in the shin for cursing in front of all her friends.

“I thought about the danger and how stupid that would be. Fortunately, the one ruffian they sent outside to be their coachman fumbled with the reins and the horses a bit too long, so I sent the hack cabbie back and had about ten seconds to decide whether or not to jump up onto the luggage bar at the rear of their carriage...and then I did.”

Col’s wife, Charlotte, who sat to the other side of him, smacked him in his shin with her walking boot.

Cassandra Collins, after listening to the wild tale, wanted to smack the earl in one of his shins as well, but refrained because she thought she should let gossiping dogs lie.

Instead, she asked, “Are you happy now that your mistresses have not only been introduced, but have been the best of friends for years?”

He didn’t answer but instead lowered his head down into his hands.

Later that night, on his way back to his mansion on Grosvenor Square, the Earl of Framlingwood leaned over his beloved Goldie’s neck to nuzzle and pat her for having gotten him safely to the meeting and back. He could see his groom waiting at the entrance to his mews.

And then it felt as though a vicious bee had stung him on his ear. When sat straight up in the saddle and felt for the sting, his hand came away covered with blood, and then he fell out of the saddle.

When he woke to sunlight streaming through his bedchamber window the following morning, he could remember nothing of the night before. Dr. Douglas sat next to his bed, along with Cassandra. He didn’t think he could ever think of her as Mrs. Collins

again.

The taciturn Scot who'd protected and then married Saida was a brilliant physician, but a man of very few words. "You were shot," he intoned, when Derek asked him what had happened.

"Shot?" His mouth dropped open. "I thought it was just a bee sting."

Saida, who was applying a poultice to his left ear, gave him an odd look. "The bees have better things to do in November in London, like hibernate."

Saida was the one to explain. "Barrister Forsythe is on the way over. He's bringing Col, and the Duke of Chelmsford is retrieving Sally Big'Uns from one of his country estates where she's been hiding. Col thinks it's high time to use the evidence we have and take Shell before the Bow Street magistrates."

"Humpf," her husband uttered. "You'll have to catch the bastard first."

"Does everyone think this Shell fellow shot me? Why?"

"He's a desperate man," Saida explained with such force that Derek decided to leave it at that. And then there was the laudanum...that was his last thought before passing out again.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:37 pm*

### NUMBER FIVE GROSVENOR STREET

Gabrielle woke suddenly from a nightmare that seemed so real, she sat straight up in bed. Next to her, Margot stirred and reached up to soothe her. Her linen chemise was so sweat-soaked, she padded over to her armoire to fetch a dry, clean one.

Margot stood behind and wrapped her arms tightly around her. “How about some cocoa to scare away the night frights?”

Fortified with warm robes and slippers, they tried to slip down to the kitchen level as quietly as possible. Toplofty heard them and immediately came out of his bedchamber to check on them. Gabrielle could swear the man was part cat.

“What’s wrong,” he demanded, his voice gruff with sleep.

“Go back to bed,” Margot said. “We need to make some cocoa so that Gabrielle can go back to sleep. It’s the night frights again.”

He looked at them askance. “Neither one of you can boil water. Fortunately, Mr. Will and Mr. John K are prowling around the kitchen as well. Get them to make you cocoa so you two don’t burn down the house.” With that he waved them toward the general area of the main cookstove and trotted back toward his own bed.

Gabrielle walked slowly toward the stove with Margot, hoping the drapers would still be awake enough to help them fix a hot drink.

Will turned and saw them first. “John, re-fill the kettle. We have company.” He

crossed to the pantry and brought out the luxurious block of chocolate Mrs. Collins always kept in stock.

Once the kettle was on to boil and Will had shaved a good-sized pile of chocolate curls, the two men sat down at the long wooden work table with Gabrielle and Margot.

Will spoke first. "Guess you two can't sleep either."

Margot nodded toward Gabrielle. "Night frights."

"Those are bad," John agreed. "When Will and I moved into our first rooms, he had them for weeks. We'd been sleeping out on the roof coops at St. Mary's for so long, the closeness of being behind walls with a roof over his head made him uneasy."

Gabrielle suddenly asked a question of the two men that surprised even herself. "How do you do it?" she asked, leaning her chin into her hands, elbows on the table like a little girl.

Will, of course, was the first to respond. "How do we do what?"

"You know..." She paused to gather courage. "How do you love the same person for so many years?"

Will and John turned to stare at each other at the same time.

She could stop one she'd started. Margot was deathly quiet at her side.

"How did you know John was the one? Didn't you ever wonder about all the beautiful people in the world who tell you they want you? Maybe one of them is the one you can love forever..." She stopped suddenly, realizing she was the only one in

the room still comfortable with the conversation. “I’m so sorry...that was a highly improper question.” She waved a hand frantically. “Forget I ever brought up the subject.”

“No,” Will said, covering her hand with his own. “Those are perfectly reasonable questions.”

John weighed in. “How long have the two of you been together?”

“Four years,” Margot revealed.

“Off and on,” Gabrielle admitted.

“Well, there was that one time...” Margot blushed.

“But the point is you’re still together.” Will tilted his head as if willing them to get what he was trying to explain. “There’s a reason you’ve stayed together so long. The important thing to remember is if you find someone you can be with for that long, you’d be an idiot to walk away just because you’re afraid to commit to loving only one person.

Margot interrupted. “But you don’t know how hard it is...she is such a flirt. You’ve seen her flash those eyes at you.” She stopped and leaned back with her arms folded across her chest.

John summarized. “Will is a very open, lovable man, and I’ve suffered hurt and doubt over the years myself, but you know what I’ve learned?”

Gabrielle answered. “No. What is that?”

“We all want love in our lives, but we can’t receive love without being willing to give



trust in return.”

At that point the kettle began to squeal, and the two drapers set to making perfect cups of cocoa for Margot and Gabrielle.

When they returned with the cups, Margot had a question. Now that the blackmailer has been found guilty of murder and he’s going to hang for his crimes, how long will the two of you be staying with us.

Will walked over behind Gabrielle’s chair and leaned down to embrace her with a friendly hug. “As long as the renovations take, or as long as you want to keep us around.”

He and John exchanged a look. “We have a proposal for the two of you.”

Margot threw them a skeptical look. “What do you want?”

“I think we want pretty much the same things the two of you want,” John said, and proceeded to outline a business and personal joining that would give all of them the freedom to live freely as whomever they chose to be for the rest of their lives.

He praised Margot’s talent for numbers and Gabrielle’s design sense.

John asked Margot for her hand in marriage, and Will begged Gabrielle for hers.

“But how will this work?” Gabrielle asked, petulance in her voice.

“However we want our partnerships to work.” Will summed up the essence of how they’d move forward in life, choosing their own roles, not conforming to what society expected of them.

Both Gabrielle and Margot agreed, making John and Will very happy men.

### NUMBER FIVE GROSVENOR STREET

#### Double Wedding Day

Cassandra Collins had arranged a great many meals in her years overseeing the Grosvenor Street households of the Earl of Framlingwood's mistresses. However, nothing could have prepared her for the grand wedding breakfast currently in full swing in the formal dining room at Number Five. Thank God for the pocket doors between this room and the drawing room next door or she never would have been able to accommodate the crush of people enjoying Nathaniel Charpentier's lush buffet of masterful culinary offerings. Then again, it was not every day an earl's former mistress and her lady's maid married two gentlemen drapers in a double wedding.

The ceremony had taken place not two hours past in the downstairs parlor by special license, actually two special licenses. The wedding had been brief and to the point, with only the two happy couples, the vicar, and a few witnesses in attendance. The earl had given Margot away, and, in a surprising turn of events, Gabrielle's brother had given her away. She suspected the earl's visit to said brother had something to do with that particular detail. However, with the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford as witnesses there could be no complaint as to the propriety of the marriages. Cassandra and Lady Camilla had attended as well.

"My dear Mrs. Collins, do take a moment to sit down and eat something," Lady Camilla said as she sidled next to Cassandra. "You have done a magnificent job on short notice, and if you do not eat something poor Nathaniel shall be heartbroken." She handed her a Wedgewood china plate with a selection of delicacies from the

buffet and a silk serviette.

“We can’t have that,” Cassandra murmured as she and Lady Camilla settled into the comfortable chintz armchairs before the crackling fire. “Are these his famous lobster patties?” She bit into one of the dainties in question and closed her eyes as the delicious combination of lobster, herbs, and garlic butter melted in her mouth.

“The very same,” Lady Camilla replied. “The very ones responsible for me having to summon my modiste to let out every gown I own.”

“I should be as big as a house if I had Mr. Charpentier living with me.” Cassandra gazed across the room where Gabrielle and Will were conversing with Margot and John and Derek...his lordship.

“I am well on my way.” Lady Camilla waved across the room at her nephew, Lionel, and Nathaniel, the chef in question. They stood laughing and joking with Mister Forsythe and his wife, Lady Jane, and Archer Colwyn and his wife, Charlotte.

Cassandra assumed they were all smiles because Mister Colwyn, one of Bow Street’s finest, had finely run the Earl of Framlingwood’s blackmailer to ground and arrested him. She quickly perused the room to see Adrienne and her husband, Obadiah with Lily and Ari, her husband, and Saida and Hamish, her husband. Sophia and her husband, Joshua, had wandered over to join the two newly married couples. All of the earl’s mistresses were safe now from the blackmailer’s threats. They were happy and married. And the secret of their close friendships with each other all of these years was finally out. She was glad of it for the thing she had hated most was lying to the earl for so long. He’d taken the revelation with good grace, as was his wont. He and the other men in this room were some of the few truly good and kind gentlemen she’d ever met in her life.

“I still cannot believe Framlingwood refused to agree to my hosting this breakfast or to at least having it in his residence on St. James Square.” Lady Camilla patted

Cassandra's knee in that comforting way she had. "You have done an admirable job here, but I cannot begin to imagine the work you have had to do these few days to prepare."

"I suspect he worried that having one of his mistresses and her lady's maid marry in his home might be too scandalous an affair even for him," Cassandra said.

"The cove 'ad five mistresses living next to each other for years. He's been seen in brawls in two Seven Dials taverns, found the bodies of two dead wenches, and has kept company with Sally Big'Uns. 'ow scandalous could a bloody double wedding be?" Dickie Jones, dressed in the wedding finery he hated, sat on the arm of Lady Camilla's chair and filched a raspberry tart from her plate.

"The lad has a point," the Duke of Chelmsford said, as he subsided onto the chaise across from them. "Sit down, Mrs. Collins. You know far too much about my private life to have to pop out of your chair every time I come near." He looked around the room. "You've done an admirable job here. This is quite one of the more enjoyable wedding breakfasts I've ever attended."

"I 'spect the company 'ere has summat to do with it, Yer Grace. This lot may be ladies and gentleman with some lightskirts in the mix, but they don't put on airs and prance about like they're too good to congregate with us common folk. These coves," he said as he gestured with the half-eaten tart. "Knows 'ows to have a bit of fun."

They all smiled at that. Dickie Jones seldom got things wrong when it came to calling people as he saw them.

"I don't see Captain Atherton and Lady Honoria," the duke mused as he gazed about the room once more. "I thought surely they would attend."

"Baby's colicky," Dickie said. "No sleep in going on three nights." Cassandra caught most of what he said as his mouth was full of the remainder of the raspberry tart.

Lady Camilla handed him her serviette and reproving look for good measure.

The duke shuddered. "Poor Atherton. I don't think I could manage that on my best day."

Dickie waved in the direction of Will and Gabrielle and Margot and John who were crossing the room in the direction of the fireplace. "Those four won't 'ave to worry about that now, will they? No babies coming from those pairings." He reached for one of Cassandra's lobster patties, and she slapped his hand away. The duke offered up his plate. "Ta, Yer Grace." He helped himself and then stuck his tongue out at Cassandra who laughed out loud.

"Dickie," Lady Camilla warned.

"Everyone knows who'll be sleeping in whose bed with those four," Dickie said. "Shame they 'ave to 'ide it's all I'm saying. Not fair."

"Unfortunately, life is frequently unfair, Mister Jones," Chelmsford said. "Pain in the arse, isn't it?"

"Not when you have a duke in your corner," Will said as he and Gabrielle made their bows to Captain El's husband. "We cannot begin to thank you for your gift, Your Grace."

"Indeed, Your Grace," John said. "Your generosity has overwhelmed us."

"Nonsense," the duke replied. "You are doing me a favor. The estate was just sitting there and has been sorely in need of someone to restore and care for it. Everyone needs a retreat of their own where they might withdraw and be themselves, yes?" For a few moments no one said a word. Cassandra had been amazed when she heard His Grace had gifted the two couples with one of his unentailed estates as a wedding gift, a place where they might go and be the loving couples they were born to be rather

than the couples society expected them to be.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Margot said. “But not everyone in London is as understanding and generous as you are.” She bent down and kissed his cheek. “We shall be forever in your debt.”

The duke blushed bright red. “Good. When my wife decides to redecorate one of our houses, I expect a good price for all of the work she shall have you do.”

“Done and done,” Gabrielle said with one of her bright smiles.

Dickie stood abruptly, his attention drawn to someone at the doors to the dining room, a young boy in dirty clothes with a thin and anxious face. He whispered something to Lady Camilla and strode casually across the room.

“Do we want to know what that was about?” Margot asked.

“Likely not,” the duke and Will and John said at the same time.

The conversation turned to the estate and the plans the two couples had for it. Thank heavens Mister Forsythe had drawn up paperwork to ensure the girls’ dowries were their own to do with as they pleased. He had also drawn up documents to solidify Will and John’s business partnership that included their new wives so that no matter what happened the drapery and decorating business would remain in all of their hands should something happen to one of them. Gabrielle and Margot were looking forward to working with their new husbands in the business, and Cassandra knew they would do well.

Gabrielle’s brother, a rather fierce Nordic-warrior-looking man, stood talking to Adrienne and Obadiah. She was glad of it for he had looked most uncomfortable during the wedding ceremony. The brother’s involvement with the East India Company was no doubt the topic of conversation as Obadiah had served as Captain

El's sailing master for many years.

Speaking of Captain El, Cassandra noticed her in deep conversation with Dickie Jones who clutched what appeared to be a letter in his hand. Cassandra swiped at the hair on the back of her neck which stood on end. She looked immediately to Derek, still laughing and joking with Forsythe, Colwyn, and their wives. She walked in measured steps across the Aubusson to join them.

"What I want to know," Lady Jane said. "Is what on earth made you think five women living next to each other would not gossip about their situations and discover they were all mistress to the same man?"

"Hubris, my dear Mrs. Forsythe. Unchecked male hubris. Right, Mrs. Collins?" Derek turned to her and smiled, that secret knowing smile they shared when he knew she had bested him.

"I would not presume to address the quality of your hubris, my lord," she said and inclined her head. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Captain El and Dickie approaching.

"Well played," Colwyn's wife, Charlotte, the brilliant chess mistress, said.

"What I want to know is how you managed to persuade Miss Gabrielle's brother to reconcile with her marrying our friend Will and to give her away this morning," Colwyn said.

"I merely mentioned I have friends in the East India Company too," Derek replied. "He discovered my friends quite trumped his." He shrugged as they all laughed. "Gabrielle wanted him there, and I felt it was the least I could do."

"Besides giving Margot this house as a wedding present?" Saida's husband Hamish said as he and Saida joined them. "Just as you gave my wife the house next door.



Thank you again, by the way, your lordship.”

A flash of pink colored Derek’s cheeks. He had given each of the mistresses their houses as wedding gifts. Still taking care of them to the end. Cassandra hoped he would finally realize his duty was done and he could get on with his life. His ladies were all safely married to men who would protect them with their very lives.

Get on with his life. Even if that meant he would one day marry and never be hers, Cassandra wished that for him. He deserved some happiness after all he had been through in his life, especially this last year with the blackmailer’s cruelty and threats.

“Rutherford,” Derek called to the young footman filling glasses of champagne at one of the sideboards. “I think we are almost ready for a last toast to the happy couples can be on their way. See that everyone has a glass, will you?”

“Right away, my lord,” Young Rutherford replied as he and two of his brothers set to passing amongst the guests with trays of glasses of Derek’s favorite beverage.

“This just came,” Dickie announced as he and Captain El joined them. The noise of the other guests in conversation continued, but where Cassandra and Derek stood silence fell like a curtain at the end of a play. He handed the earl a sealed letter. Not a crumpled note, but a sealed letter on expensive paper addressed in a precise and educated hand.

The Earl of Framlingwood

For your immediate attention

He opened the letter. Read it quickly. His face paled ever so slightly, so slightly, Cassandra was likely the only one who noticed. He handed the letter to Mister Colwyn.

“Fuck,” the Runner muttered. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Captain El snatched the letter. Mister Forsythe read over her shoulder. The duchess let the letter slip from her fingers. Cassandra stopped to retrieve the single page of highest quality paper.

You are harboring a murderess.

One of the women in your Grosvenor Street harem is a proven murderess.

You will deliver her to me by Christmas Eve or they will all die, as whores like them should.

You shall receive further instructions from me, no more incompetent hirelings.

Derek stepped away to watch the room of happy wedding guests. Cassandra slipped her arm through his. He covered her hand on his arm and squeezed. Save for their small group, everyone had gathered around Lady Camilla and the duke as they held court from their seats before the fire. Each of them had a glass of champagne in hand. They were all smiling at Gabrielle and Will and Margot and John, dressed in their finest and looking so free and so happy. Their arrangement was not perfect, but their lives would be safe and happy and what they all wanted for the most part.

Saida and Jane had snatched the letter up. They came to Derek with the rest of the small group.

“This letter bears the scent of some unusual spices, my lord,” Saida said.

“She’s right,” Jane agreed. “We think we can discover their origins. The West Indies, perhaps.”

“Will that help?” Derek said, his voice suddenly so weary and tired Cassandra wanted

to weep.

“It’s a start,” Colwyn said. “I found her minion. I’ll find her.”

“Her?” Cassandra could not quite take everything in and her blood began to run cold.

“This is a woman’s hand,” Colwyn said. “I knew his employer was a woman. I never dreamed that—”

“She would keep coming after Shell was arrested?” Captain El asked. “How long have you known me, Colwyn? Never underestimate a woman’s desire for revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” Forsythe asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Derek said. He drew himself up and waved Rutherford over with his tray of champagne. “Ladies, set yourselves to discovering where these spices came from. Col, find this woman.” He took a glass of champagne in each hand and downed one of them in a single draught.

“Derek?” Cassandra clutched his arm. “What are you going to do?”

“We,” Mister Forsythe said. “What are we going to do?”

“Today, we are going to toast Margot and Gabrielle and their husbands. We are going to see them off to the estate Captain El’s husband has given them. And tomorrow, we are going to make certain my ladies are all safe until this is over.” He gazed down at Cassandra and then at the others gathered around them. “Agreed?” Without waiting for them to answer, he removed her arm from his and strode into the middle of the room, his glass held high.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Margot and John and Gabrielle and Will. May your unions be long and happy ones. And may the family we have created with the

people in this room ever protect and defend each other. Come what may.”

Glasses clinked. The two couples smiled and gazed at each other, their bonds not as people would have them, but strong and built on love. Cassandra exchanged a glance with Captain El. Never had she ever seen the infamous Pirate Queen so uncertain, but so determined. When Derek met her gaze once more, his eyes blazed with the unholy light that reminded her of an avenging angel. Whom he loved he loved fiercely, but he loved his sense of duty to those he loved even more.

“Come what may,” she murmured as she touched her glass to his.

“Come what may,” he replied.

An hour later, the two couples stood in the foyer of Number Five whilst the duke’s large travel carriage and the earl’s equally commodious travel carriage were loaded down with trunks and portmanteaus. Gabrielle and Margot hugged and kissed Derek.

“Are you well, my lord?” Margot asked.

“Of course I am,” he replied. “Be happy together, yes?”

“We will,” Gabrielle replied.

“Take care of them,” Cassandra said as she adjusted the wool scarf around Will’s neck and then the one around John’s. “And take care of each other, please.”

John nodded toward Derek who was still talking to the girls. “Take care of him, Mrs. Collins. He strikes me as someone who needs some care.”

In a thrice each couple was in a carriage and waving madly as the coachmen urged the horses into motion.

“Be happy,” Cassandra called after them as she waved.

“Will they be?” Derek asked as he escorted her back inside Number Five.

“Yes,” she replied. “They will be. They have each other and you will discover, my lord, sometimes that is all a person needs.”

- THE END -