



# A Pearl Pleasured (5 Pearls for the Earl #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** A talented harpist, an aspiring composer, and a burning passion.

At seventeen, talented harpist Sophia Hawksworth believed being sold into marriage to a Seven Dials vicar was her salvation. However, the only fists harder and more cruel than her drunkard fathers were those of her self-righteous reforming husband. She has no choice but to escape or die. Taken in by Captain El Goodrum, she earns her keep entertaining the pirate queens guests at Goodrums House of Pleasure as the Masked Muse. Until five years pass and one of those guests shows up searching for the vicars runaway bride. Being taken on as the Earl of Framlingwoods mistress provides her with a home, anonymity, and a kind, undemanding lover. She is safe at last. Or is she?

What else does an opera need, save a dark secret and the threat of murder?

Being the second son of a wealthy, landed family is all well and good until one declines an impressive cavalry officers commission and decides to become an opera composer instead. Joshua Norcross is no coward. Opening his own opera house takes courage. Unfortunately doing so also takes money. Teaching an earls pampered mistress to read and write music seems an easy way to earn a great deal of money in a short time. Especially if he can determine if she is a murderess or not and collect the prize money the earl is offering for that information. With his talent for seducing women the task should be simple.

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St. James Square, London

The last time Joshua Norcross had entered the home of Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby, his late grandmother's dearest friend, he was twenty-two years old, more than half seas over, pockets-to-let, and essentially homeless. He was also sporting a black eye and a bloody lip from his final fight with his brother. At least this time, as he followed her tall, arrogant, poker-stiff butler up the stairs, he was sober and in possession of rented rooms at Albany. And he had not been involved in a bout of fisticuffs for at least six months.

Then, the grande dame of St, James Square had summoned him to offer him a place to live and lick his wounds after the death of his father and his elder brother disowning him. Now, at thirty, Joshua made a modest, very modest, living teaching music lessons and composing for the various opera houses in Town. He had great ambitions for the future and could not for the life of him decide why Lady Camilla had sent for him. One did not, however, ignore a summons from this particular lady. Ever.

One thing he knew for certain. If she intended to broker some sort of reconciliation between him and his family, her efforts were destined for failure. They'd never forgiven him for refusing the role in life they'd chosen for him. He'd never forgiven them for separating him from his mother until all he could do was mourn her. One thing was for certain. Lady Camilla did not issue an invitation to anyone without

some scheme in mind. Which frightened the hell out of him.

The butler stopped before the double doors into Lady Camilla's private parlor. He knocked once, opened one of the doors, and indicated Joshua should enter.

"Thank you, Raines," Joshua said as he stepped past him. "I think." He heard the man cough, to cover a laugh no doubt. "Good morning, Lady Camilla. You are looking glorious as always." He crossed the room to press a kiss to the be-ringed hand she extended whilst seated on her pink and gold striped chaise—her throne as they were all wont to call it out of her hearing. She had redecorated. Again. The last time he'd visited, this room was done in blues and greens.

"And you are still the same flatterer you were as a boy," Lady Camilla replied. "I have missed you." She patted the spot next to her on the chaise.

"I have been remiss in not visiting you sooner, my lady. I have been much occupied with my music and such. Carrington-Bowles, good to see you." He shook the hand of the man who had risen from one of the comfortable overstuffed chairs that matched the chaise. Lionel Carrington-Bowles was Lady Camilla's notoriously handsome, golden-haired favorite nephew.

"Good to see you too, Norcross." He turned to the gentleman who had risen from the other matched chair. "Allow me to make known to you—"

"Nathaniel Charpentier," Joshua said as he shook the dark-haired man's hand. "I am more than pleased to finally meet you. I saw you at the opera ball benefit a few weeks ago. You catered the event. You, sir, are a genius." He finally sat down next to Lady Camilla.

"You're right, Lionel," the famous chef said. "I like him."

Lady Camilla rolled her eyes. “Flatterer,” she said. “I warned you.”

Charpentier returned to his chair, but Carrington-Bowles elected to sit on the arm of that chair rather than return to his own. Joshua had known him since they were both young men away at school. He’d heard through his opera connections of the nature of the friendship between these two men. He was happy for his old friend. Lionel Carrington-Bowles had been the one to bring Joshua’s banishment from his family home to Lady Camilla’s attention. He owed him.

“Joshua, I have a favor to ask of you. More like a proposition in truth.”

“Now the niceties have been observed,” Carrington-Bowles said with a grin.”

“Hush.” His aunt shot him a censuring glare. “The proposition is simple. The Earl of Framlingwood wishes to engage you as music master for his mistress, a Mrs. Sophia Hawksworth. She is a talented harpist.”

Immediately the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He made part of his living as music master to the daughters of the ton, wealthy widows, and even some children. Not once had those who hired him done so through someone as highly placed in society as Lady Camilla. An earl would set his man of business this task. One glance at Carrington-Bowles’s face and Joshua’s suspicions were confirmed. There was more to this than meets the eye, and then some.

“Is there a reason the earl is not requesting my services himself, my lady?”

Carrington-Bowles coughed, which earned him another glare.

“It is a delicate situation, and he has asked for my assistance. He will pay you handsomely, and there is a large sum that may be awarded you once your tutoring of this lady is done.”

What the devil? Lady Camilla was known for two things—her network of spies all over London and her ability to scheme better than any politician or military man under the king’s command. “Very well,” Joshua said. “I’ll bite. What is this offered situation truly about?”

‘Really, Joshua.’ Lady Camilla sniffed. “What makes you think I would offer you some sort of specious position?”

“He did live here for quite some time, Aunt. In the interest of efficiency would you allow me to explain?”

She signed dramatically and waved her hand at her nephew. “Very well. If you must.”

“Are you acquainted with the earl?” Carrington-Bowles asked.

“I have heard the name, but we’ve never met. He has that rather large Palladian home on Grosvenor Square, if memory serves.”

“That’s him. His mistress lives on Grosvenor Street. She is a talented musician, but she never learned to read or write music. She would like to acquire the skill, according to Framlingham’s housekeeper. But you would not be there strictly as a music master. This particular position requires a few extra duties. You would also be serving as the lady’s bodyguard. Apparently one of Framlingham’s mistresses is a murderess and he is being blackmailed on her behalf. Their lives have been threatened if he does not pay and—”

“Wait. Wait. Wait.” Joshua waved his hands a moment and then pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He ran his old friend’s words through his mind again. The vein at his temple began to pulse. Never a good sign. “Go back to the part about mistresses and murder.”

“You should have let me explain,” Lady Camilla said, her lips pursed in a pout.

“If you explain his head will explode, dearest.”

“Too late,” Joshua muttered. He raised his head and lifted one finger to stop Carrington-Bowles from continuing, but kept his eyes closed. Not that it helped. “How many mistresses does this earl have?”

“Five,” Carrington-Bowles and Charpentier said together.

Joshua nodded mutely. He took a breath. “And the one I am to teach lives on Grosvenor Street.”

“They all live on Grosvenor Street. In townhouses. Next to each other,” Charpentier explained in a tone that sounded very close to laughter.

His eyes popped open so quickly his vision blurred. He shook his head. “And one of them is a murderess. Which one?”

“That is part of those extra duties of which Aunt Camilla spoke,” CB said. “During your time as her music master and bodyguard, should you be able to befriend this woman to the point she tells you of her past—Wait, where are you going?”

“Going?” Joshua had leapt to his feet. He bowed to Lady Camilla. “Mad, if I stay here one more minute. I thank you for the kind offer, but I have yet to witness a farce in Covent Garden as ridiculous as this.”

“I told you,” Charpentier said as he held his palm out to Lady Camilla. “You owe me ten pounds, my lady.”

Joshua snatched open the door only to nearly run over the butler, Raines, followed by

a footman bearing a large tea tray.

“The prize for discovering which lady is the murderess is ten thousand pounds.” Joshua slammed the door in the butler’s face and spun on his heel to face his friend. “In addition to what he is willing to pay you for the lessons and keeping the lady safe. Are you still interested in opening your own opera house?” CB fixed him with a steady, expectant stare.

Charpentier had left his chair and gone to the ornate cherrywood sideboard between the two floor-to-ceiling windows. He came to Joshua and handed him a leaded crystal glass of brandy.

Joshua stared into the glass. “Isn’t it a bit early...” He looked up and found Charpentier and Carrington-Bowles shaking their heads at him. He downed the glass in one long draught. The door opened behind him and Raines strode past giving him a disdainful snort as he did. Lady Camilla beckoned Joshua to her, and he walked slowly back to sit on the chaise.

The word mistake kept running through his mind. Followed closely by the word run. But over everything he heard ten thousand pounds. All the years of working in every opera house in London and teaching the talentless widows and daughters of the ton’s aristocrats had not brought him anywhere near as close to opening his own house. Was he desperate enough to enter into this lunacy that started with working for a man mad enough to keep five mistresses?

Once the footman and butler had arranged the contents of the tray on the table in front of the chaise, they quit the room. Lady Camilla set about preparing and pouring the tea for them. Joshua stared at the various enticing tidbits on silver salvers. He recognized some from the opera ball. Charpentier obviously did not confine his cooking to his catering business or the erotic dining club he was rumored to have made so famous one had to have an invitation to visit.

Joshua filled a small Sevres china plate with the delicacies. His mind had gone blank. Apparently he'd gone deaf as well. No one was saying a word. He looked up from his study of the food on his plate and found them all staring at him.

"Talk," he said as he picked up a dainty little crab cake. "God help me, I'm listening."

An hour later Joshua was unable to decide which he regretted more—the rich food and brandy he'd stuffed himself with while listening to the entire scheme or actually listening to the scheme in the first place. The rocking of Lady Camilla's well-sprung carriage as they traveled from St. James Square to the Earl of Framlingwood's home in Grosvenor Square did not help at all. Between Carrington-Bowles, Charpentier, and Lady Camilla, the situation and his place in it had been explained very carefully. The only problem? His head still spun as if he'd spent the last two days drinking blue ruin like a sailor home from the sea.

"Framlingwood actually believes these five women don't know about each other?" he asked for the third time.

"According to Forsythe and Colwyn, he does. Since this entire blackmail episode started he has assured all of us these women are completely unaware of their neighbors and their neighbors' connection to their mutual protector."

"Is he mad or simply suicidal?"

The two men laughed. "A bit of both I should think," Charpentier said. "Best not to mention it or ask him. He is, from my understanding, the managing sort and does not like to be questioned."

"He keeps five women and does not like to be questioned?" They all three exchanged a glance before a bout of hearty laughter ensued. "He did not think this through, did



he?"

"Decidedly not," Carrington-Bowles agreed. "Apparently, his housekeeper on Grosvenor Street keeps everything in order. You will meet her today as well."

"So long as I don't meet the blackmailer or the murderess today. I'm not certain my constitution could forebear much more without a good night's rest. Or perhaps a month's repairing lease in the country." He scrubbed his hands over his face, still amazed he'd agreed to even entertain this position.

"Col is on this, Norcross. He'll have the blackmailer tracked down in no time. Sythe is working on the mystery as well."

Joshua remembered Archer Colwyn and Stephen Forsythe well. They were both capable and blessed with dogged determination, or at least they had been through their years at school. Their inclusion in this adventure gave him some assurance of success or that he'd at least escape with his life.

"There are plenty of music masters in London. One can scarce throw a stone in Covent Garden without hitting one. What made Lady Camilla think I would do as both music master and bodyguard for this woman? I'm rather fond of my teeth where they are and all of my limbs in working order. I'm a man of music, not a man of violence."

Carrington-Bowles snorted. "Would you like for me to list the gentlemen whose corks you have drawn since I have known you?"

"List?" Charpentier said with overdramatic interest.

"Oh yes. Your former employer and now business partner." Carrington-Bowles raised a finger as if to begin a count, the fiend.

“You fought with the Earl of Livingston?” Charpentier looked Joshua up and down with an expression of respect.

“Twice,” Carrington-Bowles said before he continued. “The Earl of Creighton, the Marquess of Sythe, Devlin St. George, Viscount Turville-before he went off to war and lost his leg, and an entire contingent of His Majesty’s Royal Navy from the Speedwell. Shall I go on?”

“Stubble it, CB. Those days are over. I don’t do that sort of thing anymore.”

“You punched Viscount Ravenwood in the nose six months ago, or so I was told.” Carrington-Bowles and Charpentier gazed at him expectantly.

“He was manhandling one of the opera dancers at the Theatre Royal.” The carriage drew to a halt. Joshua reached for the door handle.

“You’ll do fine, Norcross. Stop worrying.” Carrington-Bowles looked entirely too smug for Joshua’s comfort.

“Good luck,” Charpentier called as Joshua left the carriage and went to the door of the Earl of Framlingwood’s home. By the time he knocked and the door opened, Lady Camilla’s carriage had rounded the corner out of sight.

“Mr. Norcross?” an impeccably dressed butler inquired as he took Joshua’s hat and gloves.

“Yes. I believe his lordship is—”

“Expecting you? Yes. Please follow me.” The servant led him up the stairs and down a labyrinth of corridors carpeted in pristine Persian carpets and lined with priceless works of art. If his home was any indication, the Earl of Framlingwood was rich as

Croesus. Good. All Joshua had to do was keep his mind on the money he would be paid and the possibility of the ten- thousand-pound prize. There were peers of the land who had an income less than that each year. All he had to do was participate in the most ludicrous employment he'd ever encountered, and the money to open his own opera house might soon be his. If he survived.

The butler stopped before a large six-panel oak door, knocked, and pushed open the door to allow Joshua entrance.

"Mr. Norcross." A tall, lanky gentleman turned out in Weston's finest rose from behind a large mahogany desk and extended his hand. "I'm Framlingwood," he said, and shook Joshua's hand. "Please sit down." He indicated one of the two chairs in front of the desk. In the other chair a strikingly handsome woman, rather modestly dressed, sat with her hands folded in her lap. "Allow me to make known to you Mrs. Cassandra Collins. You will be in her charge for the most part, as I am certain Lady Camilla told you. Mrs. Collins, this is Mr. Norcross."

"Really, my lord," the lady protested. "Mr. Norcross is a gentleman. He can hardly be under my command. He works for you, just as I do." She gave the earl a reproving sort of look, like a governess. The earl actually grinned until he saw Joshua's raised eyebrows.

"Mrs. Collins." Joshua gave her a bow before he took his seat. "From what Lady Camilla tells me you are indeed in charge of everything and everyone when it comes to his lordship's Grosvenor Street...arrangements. I assure you I have no qualms about taking my orders from you."

He turned his attention to the earl only to find the man's face stony and most definitely unamused. He glanced at Mrs. Collins who regarded her employer with a measured, unconcerned expression. Something vibrated in the room and Joshua decided to tuck that bit of information away for future study.

“Now, my lord,” he said decidedly as he met the earl’s gaze directly. “Lady Camilla and Carrington-Bowles have explained the situation and what my duties are. Perhaps you would like to enlighten me as to what you expect and what is truly afoot here.”

“You’re direct. Good. That will make things easier.” Framlingwood leaned back in his chair with his elbows propped on the arms and his fingers steepled in front of his chest. “A number of weeks ago I received a note from someone declaring one of the ladies under my protection is a murderess. I was ordered to pay him a certain sum to keep this information out of the gossip rags. However, thanks to the work of Mr. Stephen Forsythe and Mr. Archer Colwyn, with whom I believe you are acquainted, I have come to realize the man is also working to discover the woman’s identity in the hope of collecting some sort of reward for her capture. One of the ladies was kidnapped.”

“Good God.” Joshua rubbed his hand across his mouth.

“She is safe. The bodyguard we put in her house helped us to save her. She is recently wed and now safely out of danger.”

“And she is not the murderess?”

“No, she is not.” The earl leaned forward. “Each of my mistresses has her secrets. I have no wish to know them. I have learned my lesson when it comes to prying into a woman’s past. You will teach Sophia whatever she wishes to learn about the composition of music. And if, in the course of those lessons, you discover she has done something...desperate... you will let me know, and I will do all I can to protect her.”

“You do not care if she is a murderess?” Joshua endeavored to decide what sort of man he was dealing with, but the earl did not make the task an easy one.

“So long as she doesn’t murder me, no. Not at all.”

“You’re keeping five, now four, mistresses in houses on the same street and hope they don’t find out about each other? Pardon my saying so, but with what I know of women, murder is a distinct possibility.”

“Perhaps. But I have discovered with any woman that is always a possibility.”

Mrs. Collins cleared her throat, and when they both looked at the housekeeper she rolled her eyes and muttered something that sounded very like “men.”

“No offence, Mrs. Collins,” the earl offered.

“Hmmm,” was all she said in return.

“Do you have any questions for me, Norcross?” He opened a desk drawer and drew out a leather pouch which clinked noisily when he tossed it onto the desk.

“None that make any sense.” Joshua decided his head would likely spin until this little assignment was done, one way or another. He might as well enjoy the ride.

“Good man.” The earl tossed the leather pouch to him. “A small payment in advance.” He stood and Joshua rose as well. “You understand the need for secrecy in all of this, don’t you, Norcross? These goings on do not need to appear in the gossip sheets, and I do not want the ladies upset either. So far as Sophia is concerned, you are there to teach her music, nothing more.”

“Of course. You can rely on me.” He shook the earl’s hand and turned to leave.

“Mrs. Collins and you will take my carriage to Grosvenor Street. She will introduce you to Sophia, and then you can take up your residence there this afternoon.”

“Residence? I’m going to live with your mistress?”

“You are going to live in her house. Not her bedchamber. Mrs. Collins will explain, won’t you, Mrs. Collins?”

“Apparently,” the housekeeper muttered as she stood and beckoned for Joshua to follow.

The earl dragged a stack of papers across his desk and began to go through them. They had been dismissed. Mrs. Collins was quite strong for so slight a woman. She had taken the arm he offered her and maneuvered him through the corridors and down the stairs into the foyer before he knew what happened.

“Is the carriage ready, Brighton?” she asked the butler when he handed Joshua his hat and gloves.

“Yes, Mrs. Collins. Good day.”

Joshua helped the housekeeper into the carriage and glanced back at the house. His entire morning had become the sort of play one expected to see at Drury Lane. Whether it would be a comedy or tragedy remained to be seen.

“Are things always so havey-cavey in Framlingwood’s household? Households?” he asked, as he climbed into the carriage and took the seat behind the horses.

“Oh yes,” she said cheerfully. “But you will become accustomed to it.”

“I will?” The roil in his stomach kicked up again with a vengeance.

“Yes, or you’ll end up in Bedlam. Either is a possibility. Now, what reason do you plan to give our Sophie for you having to live in her house?”

## Page 2

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There are times in a woman's life when she reaches the place of being perfectly content. Though she never imagined such a place for herself, Sophia gazed around her small drawing room and decided she had come as close to that place as she would ever be allowed. She and three of her fellow mistresses had just enjoyed a light but tasty luncheon. A fire burned in the hearth against the October chill. Each of them had taken up residence on a different settee or chaise and now discussed, punctuated with frequent sighs, the wedding of the fifth of their number to her childhood love.

Yes, Sophia was content, and after the early trials of her life, contentment was enough.

"When shall Adrienne and Obadiah return from their wedding trip, do you think?" Lily asked as she plucked the last lemon tart from the tray Sophia's underbutler, Short Rutherford, had brought in earlier.

"Judging from the way the carriage was rocking when they left their wedding breakfast not anytime soon." Margot Fauchette, the newest of their number said with a naughty grin. This elicited squeals of laughter from the group.

"Oh!" Sophia pushed to her feet and padded barefoot to the escritoire before the drawing room window. She'd situated the piece there to take advantage of the light but also to enjoy the view of her back garden afforded her when she sat and wrote in her journal. She fetched a stack of brand-new leather-bound volumes from where Short Rutherford had placed them yesterday when they were delivered. "Lady Daedalus had these sent over from Forbidden Pleasures. The latest by An Insatiable

Lady.”

“Ooh, yes please!” Saida wiggled both hands greedily until Sophia placed a book in them. She distributed the others and placed Adrienne’s copy on the mantel for Young Rutherford to fetch back to her and Obadiah’s house, the house Lord Framlingwood had given them as a wedding gift, only a few doors down.

“The duchess’s brother-in-law and sister-in-law are such dears to us.” Lily petted the cover of the book and hugged the tome to her chest. Sophia smiled softly in spite of the little pang in her chest. Lily, a former actress, loved books and enjoyed their weekly literary salons, but she could neither read nor write. They each took turns reading to her, and Lily did her best to follow along. Sophia understood better than anyone the shame and sense of longing Lily felt when it came to reading.

“If this one is as good as her last one, we’re in for a wicked, wicked treat.” Margot reached for the teapot.

Crash!

And nearly dropped Sophia’s beautiful Wedgewood keepsake when Short Rutherford burst into the room, panting and out of breath. “Mrs. Collins has returned in his lordship’s carriage and there is a gentleman with her. John Coachman tipped me off, she and the gentleman are coming here!”

“Bloody hell,” Sophia muttered. “Hurry ladies. Out! Now! Rutherford, the tea things.”

“Why is she bringing a man here?” Saida asked as she gathered the book, her blue silk shawl and her slippers in one hand and headed for the inset door at the far end of Sophia’s sitting room.



“Hurry,” Lily cried as she shoved Saida forward into the hidden passageway behind that door. “Margot do stop dawdling. For God’s sake, Rutherford, give her the whole plate. Are you ever not hungry, girl?” She pushed Margot with her plate of lemon biscuits and her book ahead of her and paused to shake a finger at Sophia. “We expect a full report.”

“Go!” Sophia mouthed as Short Rutherford shoved the remnants of the luncheon into the Chippendale sideboard and collapsed against it to catch his breath.

“Do you know who this man is?” she asked the underbutler.

“No, miss, but I haven’t had the chance to speak with any of my brothers.”

“Do so at your earliest convenience, please.” Sophia took her seat on her green lavender and yellow brocade settee. “Meet Mrs. Collins at the door so she knows all is well.”

“Will do, miss.” He executed a brief bow and hurried out of the room.

So much for contentment. There had been odd goings on throughout the earl’s little kingdom for the last month. Adrienne had been assaulted and then kidnapped. Thank goodness Obadiah had been sent to look after her by the duchess, or at least they all assumed he had been sent by the new Duchess of Chelmsford. The earl was a bit too possessive of them all to have done so, though perhaps he might if he were concerned for their safety.

She dared not ask what next. The last time she did so her husband had beaten her nearly to death, and she’d fled. Even now, the memory made her shiver. Upon hearing voices in the corridor, one of them a rich cultured baritone, she picked up a book of music and pretended to study the symbols dotted across the page.

“Mrs. Hawksworth,” Mrs. Collins said as she marched into the room. “His lordship has arranged a gift for you.”

Sophia hardly saw or heard the housekeeper. The moment she glanced up from her music her eyes locked with the whisky-colored gaze of a tall, broad-shouldered man with the most handsome face she’d ever seen. His sharp cheekbones, blade of a nose, and full lips were framed by dark honey-colored hair that glinted in the light from the window like dew-touched stalks of wheat. As she slowly got to her feet, the gentleman smiled and she decided her heart had stopped beating.

She wanted to step closer, however her feet refused to move. Which was likely a good thing as she was better able to peruse his form at her leisure from where she stood. Muscled thighs rose from highly polished boots and led to a narrow waist and what appeared to be a nicely flat belly. His face flushed. Poor man knew exactly what she was thinking. Sophia sank her teeth into her lower lip to keep from offering him a distinctly unladylike pursing of her lips.

“His lordship is always a generous and thoughtful gift giver,” she said. “But he has rather outdone himself this time. No one has ever given me a whole man before.”

“Does that mean someone has given you parts of a man?” the gentleman asked.

She looked him up and down. Slowly. “Alas, never the parts of any use to me.” Her heart did a little flip in her chest.

The gentleman chuckled. Mrs. Collins cleared her throat and gave Sophia a stern glare.

“Allow me to make known to you Mr. Joshua Norcross, your music master.” If her tone was any sign, Mrs. Collins was not amused, but Sophia had few memories over the three years she’d known the woman of her ever truly being amused. “Mr.

Norcross, this is Mrs. Sophia Hawksworth, for whom you have been engaged by his lordship to teach whatever she wishes to learn of music. And only music.” She looked from this Mr. Norcross to Sophia and back again.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Hawksworth.” The gentleman bowed and schooled his features though he still did not look like any idea Sophia had ever had of a music master.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Norcross. It is very kind of his lordship to engage your...services. Music is my passion.”

“As it is mine. I understand you are a talented harpist.”

“I do well enough, but I should like to learn more.”

“She is a prodigy,” Mrs. Collins said. “I will leave you to it as I have things to attend to this afternoon. Perhaps you should show the gentleman your music room?” The housekeeper inclined her head and left the sitting room, closing the door behind her.

“Well,” Sophia said, her voice somewhat bereft of breath.

“Indeed.” He stood a few feet away from her, hands clasped behind his back and rocked on his heels. For a few minutes he studied the room, anything save look at her directly. He spotted the music book on the settee. “May I?”

“Of course.” She returned to her seat and held the book out for him. He hesitated but then joined her on the settee and took the book from her.

He studied the page and instantly an expression came over his face. She recognized the expression at once. Anytime she heard a familiar piece of music, a piece that spoke to her, Sophia’s face looked very much as his did now.

“A favorite?” he asked.

“I...that is...” She twisted her hands in her lap. When she lifted her head to look into his eyes once more she sensed at once she might never be able to lie to this man. A thought which both thrilled and frightened her. “Mr. Norcross, you may wish to reconsider this position. The earl does not know this, but I can neither read nor write music. Not even a little. I learn a piece by listening to it repeatedly. For some reason after only a few hearings I can remember every note and play the piece back exactly. I am sorry.” She bowed her head once more, unable to watch his admiration for her talent fade at her ignorance.

Lightly, so lightly she scarce felt his touch, he used two finger to raise her chin. “I think that is most admirable, Mrs. Hawksworth. Would you like to learn to read and write music?”

She swallowed. “Very much.”

“Good.” He stood and offered her his hand. “Show me your music room.” His palm was rough and warm and his fingers surprisingly gentle as they engulfed hers. This was a hand that had the physical strength to crush hers, to deliver the sort of blows that left a woman gasping as if for her dying breath. As he pulled her to her feet, her momentary lapse into panic flowed into something else, something hot and stirring and alive.

“This way,” she said as she led him out to the staircase to the first floor.

“Tell me again why you put him in the bedchamber next to your music room?” Margot had a way of making the simplest of statements into a Spanish inquisition. Even when she spoke in a loud whisper so as not to reveal their presence in the music room in question.

“He is between accommodations at the moment,” Sophia all but hissed. She leaned against the wall between the music room and the bedchamber she had insisted Mr Norcross take. Meanwhile Margot, Saida, and Lily each took a turn peering through the strategically carved viewing hole in the Greek myth themed mural that covered the aforementioned wall. The hole was at eye level and covered by an oblong medallion. Which at the moment was not nearly as important as the placement of the viewing window on the bedchamber side. The window blended into the décor and incorporated with beveled glass on that side gave the earl’s mistresses a perfect view of Mr. Norcross in his bath.

“Typical musician,” Lily said with a snort. “Constantly changing residences as they are ever pockets to let.”

“And actors are not?” Margot smiled sweetly. To which Lily stuck out her tongue.

“Mrs. Collins wanted to put him in the servants’ quarters in the attic.” Sophia shook her head as Margot pushed Saida out of the way in order to check the view into the bedchamber. “But I thought since this bedchamber is next to the music room and is more befitting a man of his station, she agreed to let him move in there. Why are you three here? If Mr. Norcross catches you, he will surely tell the earl. Especially dressed as we are.” She smoothed down the front of her thin wine-colored silk dressing gown. Which was more than the others were wearing if one didn’t count that she was naked underneath the belted garment. Lily, Saida, and Margot wore muslin and lace nightclothes so sheer nothing was left to the imagination.

“Pffft.” Saida waved her hand and all three women surrounded Sophia to continue their whispered conversation. “What I want to know is why you did not offer that magnificent man a chamber on the second floor.”

“Next to your bedchamber,” Lily added.

“You know perfectly well why.” Sophia folded her arms across her chest. “He is here to teach me music, nothing more. And I would rather his lordship not shoot my music master for teaching me anything else.” She allowed herself a brief study of the medallions that hid the view into the other room. “He’s too pretty to shoot.”

“Aha!” Margot covered her mouth immediately whilst Saida and Lily giggled. “So, you have noticed the gentleman’s...finer points.” She thrust her hips in a suggestive manner.

“And please,” Lily said. “Adrienne was fucking Obadiah for weeks before she was kidnapped and ended up married to him. The earl never suspected a thing.”

“All the same.” Saida took a step toward the doors into the music room. “Short Rutherford is keeping watch for Mrs. Collins or, God forbid, the earl.”

“Of course he is.” Sophia rolled her eyes. “That man will do anything for an extra quid. Or extra beer with his meals.”

“Or an extra fifteen minutes in the pantry with that maid, Molly Black.” They all smothered laughter at Margot’s all too true statement.

“Very well,” Sophia said. “You’ve had a look at him.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Back to your houses before Mrs. Collins storms past Rutherford and delivers one of her scolds.”

“But I wanted to see him come out of his bath.” Saida fixed her mouth in a perfect pout.

Sophia rolled her eyes. “You all three watched him undress and step into the bath. I assure you he hasn’t grown anything new soaking in all of that water the Rutherfords fetched up the stairs for him.” She didn’t dare mention to the girls that Mr. Norcross

had tipped each of the footmen half a crown for their troubles. For a man who could not afford to rent rooms, he was more than generous with his money.

“She’s right,” Lily said and grabbed Saida and Margot each by one arm. “Come along. We should leave our dear Sophie to watch him leave his bath. His is, after all, her gift from the earl.” Lily didn’t answer as the three women crept cautiously out of the music room and scampered down the corridor to the servants’ stairs that led to the passageway that stretched across all five of their Grosvenor Street townhouses. She listened intently to the underbutler, Short Rutherford’s, footsteps as he came back up the corridor, passed the music room and jogged down the stairs to the first floor and then finally to the foyer.

She relaxed against the muraled wall and allowed the various raised medallions and carvings guide her. Slipping her hand into the pocket of her dressing gown, she closed her fingers around the thick ivory carved lady’s comfort the women at Goodrum’s House of Pleasure had given her as a parting gift when she’d left three years ago to become the earl’s mistress. The detailed resemblance to a man’s cock and a brief explanation as to its use had elicited a brilliant red blush from her and a great deal of laughter from the women who had undertaken her instruction in the art of being a mistress.

With no idea why, she had slipped it into her pocket before she joined the other mistresses in spying on Mr. Norcross. Liar! To be honest she knew why she’d retrieved the ivory piece from the drawer of her bedside table. She slid along the wall until she reached the spot where the medallion covered the little window. Mrs. Collins had assured them she had never discovered why it was there nor what its purpose might be. To which Margot’s later response was Bollocks! if memory served.

She drew the lady’s comfort from her pocket and studied the intricately detailed length of ivory. The damned thing was even fitted with a sort of hand grip for easier usage. Sophia had far less acquaintance with the various forms a man’s cock might

take than any of the other women she knew. Her husband's had been far shorter and softer than this one. It had never afforded her pleasure or any other feeling save perhaps pain...humiliation...shame.

Not that she'd ever made the comparison, but the earl's cock was very much like the one she now clutched in her hand. And whilst his had afforded her pleasure she'd always felt there was something more she was missing. Or perhaps she was simply a foolish, greedy girl who was not satisfied with a life many women would envy.

"Just a quick look," she muttered as she turned and pushed the oblong piece up and locked it into the open position. She perused the room as much as the little window allowed. The bath was empty. Damnation! Her contemplation and hesitation had cost her the chance to see—

"Oh! My!" Sophia clapped her free hand over her mouth. She turned away, but only for a moment. The only thing more beautiful than Mr. Norcross in his perfectly fitted gentleman's attire had to be Mr. Norcross completely out of that attire. He lay stretched out atop the crimson counterpane, his skin still glistening from the drops of bathwater he'd not bothered to towel dry. His head was propped up on the pillows and he had the back of one hand throw across his eyes. He'd raised the leg farthest from her which left his groin in full view. Now there was a cock worthy of being sculpted in ivory. She bit back a snort.

Sophia's attention was drawn to his face by some very familiar sounds. His head thrown back against the pillows, her new music master gasped and groaned in his dark, feral voice. She glanced quickly to his cock, now enclosed in his fist as he pumped up and down, the foot of the raised leg pushed into the counterpane for balance. Her heart raced. Her breasts pushed against the silk of her dressing gown, aching and full. Without thinking she untied the belt and shrugged until the garment slid to her feet.



Naked, Sophia pushed her breasts into the textured surface of the mural, rubbing her nipples against the raised medallions. She fixed her eyes on the man in the bed. Her breath came in short pants as she watched him stroke himself and pump his thick cock into his fist. She flattened one palm against the wall and with the other drew the ivory cock in her hand back and forth between her already wet nether lips. She braced her feet apart and after several strokes across the spot at the top of her cunny she pushed the ivory cock inside her with a long hiss of pleasure.

Her teeth firmly pressed into her top lip she smothered the moans and cries she could not stop as she matched the thrusting of her hand with the strokes of Mr. Norcross as he quickened his pace and gasped in sharp, short ahs! at each stroke. His arse rose and fell as he rocked the bed with blind fervor. The creaks of the bed and the slap of his fist against his groin excited her and increased the speed with which she rode the ivory cock in her hand.

“Fuck!” Mr. Norcross roared as his cock erupted and covered his hand and belly with his seed. He arched off the bed in one erotic pose, held for just a moment and then collapsed onto the counterpane, breathing like a horse ridden long and hard.

Sophia reached up to squeeze her scarred breast as she used the raised carvings in the ivory phallus to slide against the seat of her pleasure as she pumped it into her cunny until her orgasm swept through her like an inferno. She slid down the wall in a heap and tried to gasp for air as quietly as she could. With her legs splayed wide she sat and waited for her body to cool and her heart to calm its frantic beating. She drew the lady’s comfort from her body and shuddered as tiny tremors went through her, echoes of the ecstasy she’d experienced.

In a few moments or a few hours, she had no idea which, Sophia felt around for her dressing gown. She pulled it on and slid the wet ivory piece back into the pocket. She’d wash the garment by hand herself. No need for the servants to know she’d fucked herself whilst watching the man now living in her house do the same to

himself. Very slowly she climbed to her feet and belted the dressing gown tightly about her. Finally, her willpower returned, and she did not look through the viewing window again no matter how badly she wished to do so.

Mistake! She repeated the word over and over in her mind as she returned on shaky legs to her bedchamber on the second floor. Mistake! Mistake! Mistake!

Joshua made his way downstairs and marveled at how invigorated he was despite his labors yesterday and his lack of sleep last night. Playing the part of the impoverished music master meant that he was solely responsible for packing up most of his worldly goods and transporting them from Albany to Grosvenor Street. Not that he'd given up his rooms at the gentlemen's establishment. After all, he'd have to have somewhere to go once this singular employment ended.

After he'd wrestled everything into a hackney and then carried the various boxes, trunks, bags, and cases into Mrs. Hawksworth's establishment, he'd finally had the assistance of a couple of footmen and an arrogant butler who smelled distinctly of port. By the time he'd settled his belongings in the music room and the rather elegant bedchamber next to it, he'd foregone supper in favor of a long, hot bath and an early retirement to his bed. A bed so comfortable he should have slept through the night. He would have too, if dreams of a very naked Sophia Hawksworth beneath him, on top of him, and in several other imaginative positions had not kept him tossing and turning until a few hours before dawn.

"This way, sir," the young underbutler instructed as he led Joshua down the short corridor that ran from the drawing room where he'd met his new student to the breakfast parlor where he was to dine with her this morning to arrange for her lessons. The footman, no underbutler, Short Rutherford as he was called, opened the door, and motioned for Joshua to enter.

"Good morning, Mr. Norcross. Do help yourself." Mrs. Hawksworth sat at one end of a small but elegant dining table, a news sheet in one hand and a teacup in the other.

Joshua filled his plate from the sideboard set with an enticing variety of dishes and sat at the place set for him, opposite that of Mrs. Hawksworth.

“I trust you slept well,” she said as she sipped her tea and devoted most of her attention to her news sheet. “Is your chamber comfortable enough?”

“Yes to both. It is very kind of you to allow me the use of a bedchamber on the first floor. Had I been required to move my belongings onto the third floor I might still be abed.”

“That would have been a pity. The chamber next to the music room is never in use, and it seemed a shame to put your constitution to the test of all those stairs every day.” She put down the news sheet and busied herself buttering a toast point.

“I assure you my constitution is quite hardy, but I do appreciate the consideration.” When she glanced up quickly, he continued, “I trust you slept well, Mrs. Hawksworth?”

His question produced a vigorous attempt to cover the toast point with jam from the crystal jam pot next to her plate. “Yes. Thank you.” She gave the toast a vicious bite and picked up the news sheet once more.

“I understand you played for the guests at Goodrum’s for several years,” he said in a purposefully amiable tone. “What led you to such an interesting place?”

She snorted. “Interesting. Is that what we’re calling a notorious pleasure club these days?”

“I did not wish to appear...indelicate.” He forked a section of sausage and bit into it. This conversation was not going as he’d planned.

“Mr. Norcross.” She dropped the news sheet and placed her fork across the top of her plate. “I am an earl’s paid mistress. My last position was as entertainment in a place where men and women of the ton go to indulge their carnal appetites with each other or with the men and women who work there. I am many things. Delicate is not one of them. You obviously want to know something about me. We will discuss your reasons later. Please ask me directly what you wish to know, and I may or may not answer you. I am a woman after all and that is my prerogative.”

Joshua coughed and worked to chew and swallow the sausage. He washed the food down with a long draught of the coffee he’d poured himself from the sideboard. “Are you always this direct?”

“Not always, but I save time in many circumstances by being so.” Her expression was serene, but he noticed her tapping the handle of the knife next to her plate. The pulse at the base of her throat fluttered like a moth trapped under a glass. Sophia Hawksworth did an excellent job of playing the no-nonsense mistress inured to the niceties of life. But there was something above all of that in her, something of a lady caught in the role of someone who had been born into a hard life by some dark mistake.

“Very well.” He pressed the embossed silk serviette to his lips for a moment. “Mrs. Hawksworth. Does that mean you are a widow?”

She blinked, then cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“My condolences.”

She inclined her head but said not a word.

“How long ago?”

“Nearly seven years.”

“Seven years? You must have been a child when you married.”

“Is that your gallant way of telling me I have a youthful appearance?”

“Apparently not, if that is your reaction.” She did give him a little smile at that.

She dotted her mouth with her own serviette and stood. Joshua was on his feet at once. “I am twenty-five years old, Mr. Norcross. I was married for a year and he died. I went to work at Goodrum’s because I had nowhere else to go. A few years ago I grew tired of the noise and crowds of the club. Here, I sell my body for privacy and peace and quiet. The earl is more than kind, and I suspect he hired you because he has not been able to visit me as often as he did when I first came to live here.”

“Excuse me?” For a heartbeat Joshua wondered if she knew why he was really there. Then his all too male mind began to entertain ideas he had no idea considering At least not yet. Some of his confusion likely appeared on his face as Mrs. Hawksworth blanched and then bit her lip.

“I simply meant his lordship knows of my desire to improve on my musical skills, and he hopes these lessons will occupy my time so I don’t become bored or feel unappreciated. What did you think I meant?” She narrowed her eyes in a suspiciously provocative way, rather like a cat studying a fat mouse.

“Exactly that.” He pushed his chair in and winged his arm at her. “Shall we adjourn to the music room and discuss a plan for your lessons?” She slipped her hand through his arm and placed her palm lightly on his wrist. A little sizzle shot through him at the touch of her bare flesh on his. He managed not to stumble as they went up the curved staircase to the first floor.

They did not speak, at least not with words. However, the brush of her hip against his thigh certainly spoke to some part of his body. He had to admit she was far more beautiful than he'd imagined her to be. She smelled of lilies and lemons. Her hair, pinned in an intricate arrangement of braids atop her head was the color of new gold. Surprisingly, her eyes were a dark amber color. Her face was exquisite and reminded him of the great master's paintings of Aphrodite he'd seen on his Grand Tour.

"Mr. Norcross?"

"Hmm?" He looked around. Somehow they had arrived in the music room. He needed to pay closer attention or he'd end up doing something foolish where Mrs. Hawksworth was concerned. Or he'd walk into a door. He suspected both would be painful.

"I said, what would you like for me to do now?" She let go of his arm and settled onto the lavender velvet tufted chair at the small Broadwood grand piano. Her simple green dress, silk the color of summer leaves with some sort of sheer dotted fabric over it, accented her diminutive height and goddess-like shape. Wonderful. Now he was randy as a schoolboy and had to play the dedicated music master.

"Do you play the piano as well as the harp?" He indicated the instrument behind her.

"Not very well and the only piano pieces I know are hymns." She gazed at him expectantly.

Mrs. Hawksworth made him think of music, but definitely not hymns. Hell and damnation, yes. Church? He shook his head. "Perhaps something on the harp, so I might attest your skill and your musical taste?"

"Very well." She rubbed her hands down her skirts and went to sit at the Cambrian pedal harp, a handsome instrument, though he noticed she also had an Erard Grecian

harp as well as several other types of harps in her collection. She pulled the harp onto her shoulder and ran her hands over the double strings, making a few adjustments as she went. “What shall I play?”

“Whatever you like.” He sat on the tufted chair she had vacated. “Play something you enjoy playing.” He leaned back against the piano, prepared to hear one of the many folk songs, mostly Irish, young ladies were taught when taking up the harp to impress prospective suitors.

She sat very still, her palms pressed to the strings of her instrument and her eyes closed. Then she began to play. Slowly, Joshua sat up and shifted forward on the piano chair. He was struck dumb. Her fingers flew over the strings in a blur. She’d chosen to play a selection by Handel, the last movement of his Air and variations, Suite No. 5 in E major. The piece was also known as The Harmonious Blacksmith. Originally written for harpsichord, the suite was challenging enough for a trained musician. She, who by her own confession did not read a note of music, played every note exactly as written, no not exactly as written as she added embellishments even old George Frederic might have envied.

He watched mesmerized not simply by her talent and skill, but by the way she became one with the harp and poured the music onto those strings with the very force of her being. He had thought her beautiful from the moment he met her. Now she was glorious. And he was in a very great deal of trouble. He shook his head and adjusted his seat on the dainty chair. In addition to the assault on his musician’s soul Sophia Hawksworth at the harp was producing a powerful and primal reaction in more carnal parts of his anatomy. Not. Here. For. That. That wasn’t precisely true, but he needed to focus on the two tasks that would help him to obtain his dream.

Teach the lady music.

Discover if the lady is a murderess.



She finished the Handel with an amazing ornamental flourish and sat, her breasts rising and falling rapidly against the low scoop of the dress's bodice. Instinctually Joshua leapt to his feet and applauded. Mrs. Hawksworth blushed the loveliest shade of pink, stood and gave a short curtsy before she dropped back onto her seat once more. She waved at him dismissively.

"Do sit down, Mr. Norcross. You look ridiculous."

"Sincere appreciation of art in any form is never ridiculous." He retook his seat to mollify her embarrassment. "Mrs. Collins is right. You are a prodigy."

"She said that?" The harpist fluffed her skirts around her and folded her hands in her lap.

"She did."

"She's very kind."

Joshua snorted. "She's not being kind. You should be playing for kings or at least for Convent Garden or Vauxhall audiences paying you a fortune." Her expression quickly changed and he swore his words frightened her in some way.

"I am more than happy playing for the earl and the other g—servants."

"Servants? You are content to play for servants?"

"I was born and raised in Seven Dials, Mr. Norcross. I came from nothing, from less than most servants I know." He liked her better like this, chin up and eyes alight with indignation.

"My apologies, Mrs. Hawksworth. I meant no disrespect. You've done what many

could never do. You have used your talent and beauty to greatly improve your circumstances.” He waved a hand around the opulent music room filled with expensive instruments and music books.

“An earl’s mistress? Really, Mr. Norcross?”

“There are few opportunities afforded women in this world, more’s the pity. Even those born into monied and titled families. You could have done...far worse.”

She tilted her head and studied him in that way she had, a way he’d already learned to fear if only a little. “I’ve never thought of my life like that.” She stood and went to the shelves where music books and lined copy books stood in neat stacks. “But as for talent and beauty? I suppose my talent is a gift. But beauty? Beauty is often nothing more than a curse for a woman.”

“A woman’s beauty is only a curse if there is no one in her life to appreciate it.”

“Appreciate? In my experience appreciation takes many forms and some of those forms...do not bear contemplation.” She spun in a graceful circle and indicated all of the instruments and music “You are correct, however. I am surrounded by everything my heart has ever desired thanks to the earl. I have the very best instruments on which to play and compose.” She sat down in a lavender and gold striped armchair, an open music book in her hand. “And music I can neither read nor write. Cruelly ironic even for a girl from Seven Dials.”

She laughed, the brittle sort of laugh he’d heard from his friends who had taken their families’ offered commissions and gone off to war only to return forever broken by what they had seen. Sophia Hawksworth had experienced those same horrors in some form. He’d wager his own Broadwood grand on that.

“Life is unkind to all of us in one way or another,” he said.

“Very true. Even the poor old king and queen had to live with his madness for all those years.”

Yes, and they left the rest of us to deal with Prinny once they were gone. Ironic cruelty at its finest.”

She laughed. “You are wicked. Very well. Life is unkind to us all. What are we to do?”

“I am going to teach you how to read and write music. Which will make both of us happy.” He pushed to his feet and retrieved the large leather case he’d left next to the piano yesterday afternoon. “Yes?”

“Yes, please.” Her response sent an erotic shiver down his spine. He’d love to hear those words from her lips with such enthusiasm in different circumstances. Naked circumstances. Damn! The earl had better be prepared to pay a great deal for agony Joshua was suffering in this endeavor. He doubted the man would consider a constantly stiff cock as suffering. How was it possible the earl had need of four other women when Sophia Hawksworth was his for the taking?

“Mr. Norcross, are you well?” She had crossed the room and placed a dainty hand on his arm. Concentrate, man. Concentrate!

He shuffled his hand around in the portfolio and drew out two books. “Perfectly well. We will start with these.” He handed her his copy of *A Musical Grammar in Four Parts* and a copy of *Explanations of the notes, marks, words & c, used in music both by the renowned musician and teacher J.W. Calcott*. “I began my study of music with these very books.”

She sat down on the piano chair and ran her hand across the worn covers of each book. Her touch was reverent, and when she looked up and smiled at him, he found

he could not breathe. She opened the cover of the first book and saw his name scrawled in a childish hand beneath a dated inscription in a hand he knew by heart.

“These are your books. Gifts from your mother?”

“Indeed.” He swallowed to steady his voice. “My first music teacher. She was a very talented pianist and an excellent teacher.”

“Was? She is...gone?”

He nodded. “She died when I was twelve. Consumption. I was sent away to school when I was ten. I was not told she was ill until it was too late. I was not allowed home for her funeral.” Joshua ran his hand back and forth on the raised top of the piano to avoid meeting her gaze.

“Life being unkind again?”

He did look at her then, and the sympathy and understanding in her expression settled over him like a balm. “Most definitely. Now.” He pulled a padded bench over to the piano and sat down. “Let us begin.” He opened Calcott’s book on notation and pulled a random piece of sheet music from the stack on the music rack.

Joshua glanced at the gold lyre-shaped ormolu mantel clock. He and Mrs. Hawksworth had been working diligently for two hours now. Which shocked him as the time had not seemed even half that long. The earl’s talented harpist proved herself a quick study. She struggled some. So had he when first learning musical notation and harmonics. He centered their study on the piano and its notation as it was a medium with which they were both familiar. He would need to find some treatises on the harp and consult the harpist he knew from the opera houses at some point to expand on her basic lessons.

He studied her with open attention as she carefully copied the exercise he'd written out for her. The sunlight from the tall window at the end of the room bathed her hair in a shimmering halo. Her tongue peeked out of the corner of her mouth in an almost childlike attitude of concentration. Her use of the quill was deliberate, almost artistic. And she was thoughtful, took her time with each note and rest and clef she put down on the blank lined paper the earl had provided her at no small expense. She'd learned the piece she'd played for him without reading a single note of music. Sophia Hawksworth was a marvel.

"Where did you learn the Handel piece?" he asked.

She raised her head slowly, as if breaking a trance. Joshua understood that sensation well as he often found himself waking from the spell music wove through him. After a few blinks she returned the quill to the ink tray Short Rutherford had fetched from her drawing room when she'd summoned him with a brief tug at the bell pull next to the fireplace.

"Vauxhall," she said, her lips tilted in a sad trace of a smile. "When I was a girl, before I m-married there was an old street musician, Blind Jim. He played in some of the taverns and on street corners for money for food and gin." She stood and went to a chinoiserie cabinet where she picked up a small very old lap harp. "He gave me this and taught me to play." She sat back down on the piano chair, absently stroking the worn wood of the instrument. "I kept this hidden from my father for years so he wouldn't sell it for rent money. The only thing I own that is truly mine."

"This man, Blind Jim, he took you to Vauxhall?" Joshua could not keep his eyes off her long slender fingers as she caressed her treasured possession.

"Not exactly." She laughed and he met her gaze. Laughter gave her the appearance of a young girl, bright and happy and absent of cares. "In addition to teaching me the harp, he taught me how to sneak into Vauxhall. I went many times, and they played

the Handel piece often. After a few hearings..." She shrugged. "You must admit the song is memorable. I memorized the tune and taught myself to play it."

"Memorable," he mused as he perused the exercise she had written. "You truly have no idea how singular you are, do you?" He placed the sheet back onto the music rack. "I have worked with hundreds of musicians. Not one in a hundred can hear a piece and reproduce that piece the way you have. Not one in a thousand have the talent you have and can do so."

"That is the silliest thing I have ever heard," she said though her expression lit up with what had to be delight. She hurried back to the cabinet and placed the old harp back inside with care.

"Would you like to hear something even sillier?" he asked as he picked up her completed exercise and made his way to her. "You completed this exercise perfectly. You will be a trained musician in no time at this rate."

She took the sheet from him and stared at the carefully copied musical notations. Her hand trembled. For a moment he believed her to be upset for some reason. "I did it?" She gazed up at him and threw her arms around his neck. "I did it!"

"You did and very well too." He lifted her off her feet and swung her around. As he slowly lowered her to the floor the entire room shrank to where they stood. The music sheet fluttered to the floor. Her breasts rested against his chest. Her quick breaths created a pulse of heat between them. He pressed his palms into her back. Her palms slid up his chest, against his throat, and around to the back of his neck. He lowered his head. She pushed up on her toes and brushed her body against his hard cock. Her eyes widened, her lips parted and with a tiny gasp she kissed him.

At first she was tentative. Joshua's very being burned to consume her, but he did not want to frighten her, He let her explore and reined himself in as tightly as possible,

though he shook with the effort. Her lips were soft and sweet, but her kiss was hot and wanting. When she slanted her mouth and pressed more fervently, he opened his mouth and sucked her probing tongue inside. She moaned and tangled her tongue with his thrusting and teasing. At that point Joshua loosed all his good intentions and met her kiss for kiss barely pausing to breathe.

A door slammed down the corridor and she drew back for a moment. “What are we doing?” she gasped.

“I was hoping you knew,” he replied his chest heaving. He touched her forehead to hers.

“Well,” she said as she stepped back and patted his chest. “Until we know, we had best stop, don’t you think?”

“I will admit I am incapable of coherent thought at the moment.”

She did not smile at his intended jest. She merely shook her head. “Then I will have to think for the both of us.” With that Mrs. Hawksworth walked calmly out of the room.

“What just happened?” Joshua staggered back to the striped chair and collapsed. “I am so buggered,” he muttered as he rested his head in his hands. He glanced down at the considerable bulge in his buckskins. “Oh, stubble it!”

“We’re buggered, guv’.” Dickie Jones burst into Derek’s study with his usual aplomb and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Bow Street runner Archer Colwyn and barrister Stephen Forsythe seated in the chairs before the massive mahogany desk. Fast on the boy’s heels, Derek’s butler, Brighton, raced into the room, breathless.

“I do apologize, my lord. The little vermin slipped past me before I could throw him out.”

“He were taking too long to let me see you.” Dickie strolled to the window and dropped onto the cushioned seat. “Who you calling vermin, you palsied old fool?”

“What would Carrington-Bowles say if he heard you speaking like that?” Forsythe asked. At the mention of his adoptive father the boy stilled, but only for a heartbeat.

“You tell him and I’ll tell your wife who et the last of her marzipan last week.”

“Jesus,” Forsythe muttered. “CB has got to move this child out of Lady Camilla’s house. He’s worse than she is.” Their Bow Street runner friend chuckled.

“That will be all, Brighton. Thank you.” Derek gave the butler a commiserative smile.

“Very good, my lord.” The man could not resist one last glare in Dickie’s direction. To which Dickie replied with a rude hand gesture.



“To what do I owe this unexpected visit, Mr. Jones?”

“Bit of information about a certain vicar that could be trouble,” the boy replied with a quick meaningful glance at the other two gentlemen.

“When?”

“Last night. At the Lamb and Flag.” Dickie continued to study Col and Sythe.

“What the hell were you doing in Covent Garden last night?” Col asked. “And don’t tell me CB and Nathaniel allow you to run tame all over London now that they have taken on the raising of you, you little miscreant.”

“That would be my business, now wouldn’t it, Bow Streeter?” Dickie said as he strolled across the thick Aubusson to peer at a piece of parchment on Derek’s desk. “Bloody hell. Another one? I thought you paid the blackguard that took Obadiah’s lady.” He picked up the note and perused it with care before he dropped it back onto the desk and gave a long low whistle. “He’s got some brass ones, ain’t he?”

The barrister laughed, but raised his hands in surrender when Col and Derek stared at him in disbelief. “The lad’s assessment is as fair as any. We nearly caught the man, and he has the bluster to ask for five thousand pounds this time?”

One down. Four to go. Time is growing short. I want the name of your murderess or I will extract the information myself. I was kind with Miss Godet. I won’t be as kind with the next. The price of my silence is now five thousand pounds. Leave the bank draft in a sealed envelope with a serving wench named Betty at the Prospect of Whitby by Thursday next. I suggest you leave the name of your murderess with the money.

Dick Turpin

“Prospect of Whitby,” Dickie said softly. He and Derek exchanged a look. Which, of course, Archer Colwyn caught.

“You two want to let us in on what brought Lady Camilla’s favorite source of information running to you this morning, Framlingwood?”

“It very likely has nothing to do with—”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Col had his full Bow Street runner tone and face on at this point. “You involved us in this blackmail scheme. You have asked for our help.”

“Not to mention your involving Lady Camilla and our wives whom neither of us dares disappoint.” Forsythe and Colwyn both leaned forward in their chairs. Derek tapped his forefinger on the note and stared at the words, written in a different hand this time, no doubt to confuse anyone trying to discover the blackmailer’s identity. He traced his finger under the name of the tavern and raised his head just enough to allow his eyes to meet Dickie’s. Then he shook his head. Dickie nodded in understanding.

“Well?” Col finally urged when no one spoke.

“Someone was at the Lamb and Flag last night asking after the vicar’s wife,” Dickie said carefully. He brushed his hand across his worn woolen trousers, the ones he wore when he wanted to blend into his old life before Lionel Carrington-Bowles and Nathaniel Charpentier took him in and made him their son. “No one knew anything, but I heard this man already asked at the church and even showed up at Mr. Lionel’s charity clinic a few days ago.”

“What does any of this have to do with—”

“The vicar’s wife is one of my mistresses,” Derek said. “Sophia Hawksworth. He was

a monster, and she left him. She found work at the Duchess of Chelmsford's club and became my mistress three years ago. Hawksworth is not her real name, but I expect you to keep that knowledge in this room."

"Of course."

"Naturally."

"Do you think this may have something to do with our blackmailer?" Col asked.  
"Was the man asking after her the vicar?"

"No," Derek and Dickie answered at once.

"How do you know?" Sythe asked.

Derek took a deep breath. "The vicar is dead." Dickie flinched. "That information also does not leave this room. Not even Sophia knows that. Nor does the duchess."

"Are you certain Mrs. Hawksworth doesn't know? Perhaps she is your murderess. She wouldn't be the first wife to kill a husband who deserved it. What?" Forsythe looked at Derek and Col askance. "I'm a barrister, not a saint."

A log shifted in the fireplace. The clock on the mantel struck the hour. Derek began to realize exactly how delicate the web of lies his life had become was. He'd done all he could to keep the Grosvenor Street ladies safe. He'd done so alone for many reasons. Asking for help was not something he did easily. Especially when he would have to share secrets that were not his own to share.

"Is there a reason the lady does not know her husband is dead, if indeed she does not know?"

“There are reasons, but they have nothing to do with our blackmailer. He was...He died a few years after she left. She had already changed her name and gone into hiding so no one came looking to tell her of his demise. I’d like to keep it that way.” Sweat trickled down the back of Derek’s neck. The fire was not that high nor was the hearth close to his desk. His jacket was hung over the back of his chair, but his neckcloth and vest began to smother him.

“Until now,” Col said.

“Until now?”

“Framlingwood,” the Bow Street man chided. “No one has come looking for her until now. Surely you don’t at least want to entertain the idea this may have something to do with your blackmailer. The man has used minions before and quite successfully. Perhaps this man making inquiries is trying to track Mrs. Hawksworth down to deliver her to your blackmailer.”

“Or he may be using these inquiries to draw our attention from one of the other ladies,” Sythe added. “Whatever the situation, we need to have all of the information, and we need to act quickly before he does something more dire to one of them this time.”

“I’ll kill the blackguard.” Derek’s entire being went cold. “I will never allow that to happen to another woman in my care again.”

Dickie cleared his throat. Sythe looked at Col, his eyes full of questions. Col shook his head.

“How and when did the vicar die?” Col asked.

“Don’t know,” Dickie said, hands in his pockets as he shrugged and spotted the tea

tray on the table next to the high-backed leather fireside chair.

“They fished him out of the Thames,” Derek said, his gaze steadily on Dickie. “Help yourself. The tea is still hot.” The boy shuffled across the Aubusson and settled into the leather chair before he attacked the tea and plate of blackberry tarts.

Derek suddenly realized Col had been scribbling furiously with a stub of a pencil in the little notebook he always had with him. The Bow Street man tended to write everything down. Whereas Forsythe tended to keep his thoughts locked firmly in his head until he needed them. At least that had been Derek’s experience since they’d started trying to unravel the mystery of the blackmailer together.

“Can you find this man before next Thursday?” Derek asked. “Do you have any idea who he is?”

“I don’t know,” Col said. “But I am beginning to have some ideas about what sort of man he might be. I need to discover if there is any connection between this man looking for the vicar’s wife and our blackmailer.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Derek shifted in his chair. The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“With young Mr. Jones’s help, of course.” They all three turned toward Dickie who nearly choked on a bite of blackberry tart. He gulped down some tea and dragged his sleeve across his mouth.

“Not for nufin’ you won’t. I don’t work for Bow Street. You want my help it’ll cost yer.”

“Of course it will,” Sythe said. “And the earl will happily pay you for your efforts.” The barrister turned a smug smile on Derek.

“I don’t know about happily,” Derek muttered.

“Then I’m at yer service, guv’, so long as his lordship’s paying.” Dickie gave Derek a meaningful nod of his head. Derek’s shoulders loosened. His secrets were safe with Lady Camilla’s protégé. God help him if the lady ever discovered what he’d involved the boy in a few years ago. Had Dickie really only been a child of seven? Then again, Dickie Jones had been on the streets from the age of five. He had experienced things in his ten years that some men of thirty would never know.

Col picked up the blackmailer’s note and tucked it into his waist coat pocket. “I will do my best to track this villain down, but I would prepare the bank draft just in case of I were you. And I will make arrangements for me to make the delivery at the Prospect of Whitby. I’ll brook no arguments from you, Framlingwood,” he put in when Derek opened his mouth to object. “I am the trained investigator. I am the one who will notice anything pertinent. The details are what will reveal his identity. He’s clever and if my suspicions are confirmed, he’ll be a formidable opponent to find.”

“Suspensions? What suspicions? If you think you know who he is, why would you keep it a secret from me?” Derek demanded.

Forsythe cleared his throat.

“Turn about is fair play, Framlingwood. You are keeping secrets. From us. From the ladies. From the Duchess of Chelmsford, which I thought to be nigh on impossible. You are even paying a blackmailer to keep some of those secrets. You would not be paying if each of those ladies did not have secrets of her own. Secrets you know and secrets you dare not ask.”

“Their secrets are not mine to tell. And the last time I asked a lady about her secrets Col found her murdered body in the Thames.” Derek turned away from them to stare out the window. “I won’t do that again.”

They sat in silence for a while. Though Derek sensed Col and Sythe's eyes on him. Searching for what to say next, no doubt. He wished them luck in the endeavor. There was nothing to say about Celeste's death. Not anymore. There was nothing he could do for her. But he could take care of the four women still under his care. He'd keep secrets, pay money, and do whatever was necessary.

"At some point you will have to tell Mrs. Hawksworth her husband is dead." Sythe's voice, solemn and still, cut like the sharpest of blades. "I will let you choose when. Perhaps when this is all over. But you cannot keep that news from her, whether she be glad or not to hear it. You will have to tell her all of it, every part." Derek snapped his head around to find Col and Sythe standing, Sythe with his leather satchel and Col with his little book. "I, on the other hand, do not need to hear it all. Neither does Col." He paused a moment and then quit the room as quietly as a ghost.

"You'll send for me if you receive another note?" Col asked.

"Of course. You'll tell me if you discover anything? Anything at all?"

"Yes. And let me know if Joshua Norcross has anything to report. He is settled in Mrs. Hawksworth's establishment?"

"He is. I will confess it, though if you tell him, I will deny it. I am glad he is there. Musician he may be, but we both know he's a brawler of some mettle."

"Trounced Lord Livingston's arse more than once," Dickie announced as he came to flounce into one of the chairs in front of the desk. "Makes him good enough for me."

"Do I want to know the source of your animus toward Lord Livingston?" Derek asked as he and Col shared a grin.

"If yer mean why I wouldn't piss on him if he were on fire, he named me for a thief

and tried to come between Mr. Lionel and Mr. Nathaniel. Call me a thief I can forgive. Hurt those two gentlemen? Never if I live to be a hundred and three.” He scrubbed his hands over his face, though Derek and likely Col did not miss the glint of tears in the boy’s eyes.

“You’ll come to see me at Bow Street when you’re finished here?” Col asked Dickie. “I want to see what we can discover about this man asking after the vicar’s wife.”

“I’ll be by, Bow Streeter. Long as you promise none of your sort will lock me up.”

“I make no promises,” Col said as he saluted the boy and left.

Once the door closed Derek slumped into his chair and fixed Dickie with a narrow gaze. “Tell me everything about the man looking for the vicar’s wife.”

“Send for some real food, guv’. To my way of thinking, this could be bad.”

“Bad?” Derek ran his hands through his hair. “Dickie, I have five mistresses.”

“Four.” The impudent master spy held up four fingers.

“Very well, four mistresses. One of whom may be a murderess. I am being blackmailed. And most aspects of my life, I am uncertain as to which, are being managed by a Bow Street Runner, a barrister, the Duchess of Chelmsford who is formerly a notorious pirate, and Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby. The way my life has unfolded these last several weeks, anything less than a complete disaster would be a relief. Now. What do you know of the man inquiring after my Sophia?”



Sophia ran her hand over the midnight blue satin gown spangled with thousands of tiny winking stars and sighed. She had no intention of wearing the luxurious garment, but she did indulge in a moment or two of wishful thinking. The last five days of her life had been a revelation. She'd begun to believe in herself as a musician. She'd learned so much of the mysteries of notes and rests and rhythms written on the pages of the dozens upon dozens of music books the earl had gifted her. Most of all, she'd spent hours of every day with a man who saw her as an equal.

Joshua Norcross treated her as a fellow musician. A musician in training, but a musician. He pushed her to write down the songs she'd made up herself. He grew exasperated when she made silly mistakes in the exercises he gave her. He tested her with questions and pieces written for the harp. In the music room he was a tyrant. Outside of the music room? He was a flatterer. An accomplished flirt. And a sensual presence to which she was drawn like a new piece of music she wanted to explore and play and fill her senses with.

His very touch made her shiver. His voice provoked sensations she'd never experienced in her life, not even with the earl. Sensations that had her shifting in her chair, squeezing her legs together, covering her bodice with a shawl. His scent, an intoxicating mix of ambergris, ink, and male. She suspected the ink came from the hours he spent in the music room late at night composing. Not that she'd sneaked down the stairs to stand in the dark corridor and listen to him at the piano. At least not every night.

Her bedchamber door burst open and the other three mistresses tumbled in like a litter

of scantily dressed puppies.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” Lily asked as she dragged her to stand in front of the long stand mirror. She began to unpin and unlace the day gown Sophia had put on that morning. “Short Rutherford has shaved Mr. Norcross and is helping him dress as we speak.”

“She thinks she isn’t going,” Margot called from the dressing room and from the sound of it was ransacking the room like a herd of hungry goats. “Where are your black slippers? Aha! Found them!”

Margot’s maid, Gabrielle, took the gown, stays and chemise Lily had stripped her of and handed Lily the midnight blue gown. The actress threw it over Sophia’s head and was cinching her into the frothy, decadent concoction before she knew it.

“Margot, what are you doing here? It is your night with the earl. And why am I getting dressed? I am not going anywhere. Saida, what are you looking for in that drawer?”

“Derek sent the most beautiful box of glacé fruits and his apologies. You are getting dressed so that your music master can take you to the charity concert at Vauxhall. Not those, Saida, the black ones.”

“The black what? Will you stop turning me about like a clockwork doll? Ooof!” Lily had finished squeezing her into the dress and shoved her into the chair at her dressing table.

“Stockings,” Saida said as she held the black stockings up like a country fair prize. “Here Margot. Gabrielle, can you do something with her hair? Who brought the mask?”

“Mask?” Sophia began to believe she’d fallen asleep and awakened in Bedlam. Margot knelt at her feet tossed up the skirt of the spangled gown and began to draw the black silk stockings up Sophia’s legs. She tied them with silver garters Sophia had never seen before tonight. Then she shoved Sophia’s feet into a pair of black slippers and tied the ribbons tightly around her calves.

“I thought you had it,” Lily said as she started toward the bedchamber door which they’d left slightly ajar.

“I have it.” Mrs. Collins slipped in through the open door and closed it behind her. “You must hurry. Mr. Norcross is pacing the foyer.” She handed Saida a delicate silver mask.

“You know I cannot go,” Sophia said even as a funny pang enveloped her heart. She’d told Mr. Norcross she could not possibly go when he’d first introduced the idea of her attending the special charity concert being given at Vauxhall to raise funds for the Countess of Livingston’s school for orphans. Vauxhall was usually closed by the end of September at the latest. The pleasure garden was being opened especially for this invitation only concert.

“You all know why I cannot go.” Sophia looked wistfully at each of them in turn.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Collins said in that brisk commanding tone of hers. “The invitations to this event sent out to a very select group of people. No one from your old life will be there. You can wear the mask all night which will make doubly certain no one will recognize you.”

“The earl—a”

“Is spending the evening with some old school friends...discussing a venture they are undertaking together. He never goes to these sorts of events. He simply sends his

money.” The ladies all looked at each other knowingly. Not to actually work in his home, Mrs. Collins knew a great deal about the Earl of Framlingwood. She pulled Sophia to her feet. “Short Rutherford has your cape downstairs.”

Sophia stood in the middle of her bedchamber and glanced at her reflection in the long stand mirror. Gabrielle had dressed her hair with jeweled pins that winked in the lamplight. At some point the maid had added the diamond and sapphire earrings and necklace the earl had given Sophia for her birthday to the ensemble.

“Go,” Saida urged as she pushed her toward the door. “The sooner you go the sooner you can come back and tell us all about the concert.”

“And any other entertainments you might enjoy,” Margot said with a knowing grin.

“Young Rutherford and Tall Rutherford are going with you as well as John Coachman.” Mrs. Collins led her into the corridor and to the top of the stairs. The others followed closely, but the housekeeper waved them back when she and Sophia peered over the balustrade and saw Mr. Norcross waiting in the foyer below. “You’ll be perfectly safe. Shall we?”

Sophia descended the stairs to the second floor and then the first floor. She hesitated before heading down to the foyer. A quick glance up and she saw four lady-shaped shadows at the third-floor balustrade. With a deep breath she took the final stairs. Mr. Norcross turned and for a moment she wondered if something was badly wrong with her appearance. Then he smiled and that smile shot through her body in a wave of heat and light.

“My dear Mrs. Hawsworth,” he said, as he bowed over her hand. “You are a work of art come to life.” He brushed his lips across her ungloved fingers. When he straightened he stared up at the third-floor balustrade, in shadows now because apparently someone up there had doused all the lamps. Sophia heard scuffling feet

and muttered curses as the shadows faded back into the corridor. She tapped Mr. Norcross on the chest and he turned back to her.

“And you sir, are a consummate rake and scoundrel,” Sophia replied as she dipped a short curtsy. “But I thank you. Though I am still uncertain as to whether I should attend this concert.”

“Which is our cue,” Mrs. Collins said as she draped a long deep blue velvet cape around Sophia’s shoulders. “Rutherford.” She nodded at Short Rutherford who immediately opened the front door. Mr. Norcross drew Sophia’s arm through his and led her out to the small but elegant carriage waiting in front of the house. Young Rutherford and Tall Rutherford, dressed in simple black and gold livery sat on the bench mounted to the back of the carriage. Young Rutherford hopped down to open the door and lower the steps.

“You look beautiful, ma’am,” he said quietly as he helped her into the carriage.

“Thank you, Rutherford,” she said as she leaned close to him. “So do you.” The footman laughed and blushed as he returned to his position at the back of the carriage. Sophia settled into the comfortable squabs of the front facing seat and arranged her skirts as John Coachman whistled the horses into motion. When she looked up, Mr. Norcross was watching her, a little smile playing about his firm lush lips.

“Do you call your underbutler and all the footmen Rutherford because it is easier or—”

“They are brothers, Five of them actually. They are actually all underbutlers, as they are quick to tell the other servants, and their father is our butler. But they do serve as footmen when we need them.

“We?”

Damn! She wanted to kick herself. Joshua Norcross took her guard down in more ways than one, and that was a dangerous state of affairs. “We. The household. Mrs. Collins, and Cook, and the other servants. We. And I believe they serve as underbutlers to some of the neighbors. Mrs. Collins knows more about that.”

“I see. I’ve only encountered the butler once, and briefly at that, which is rather unusual, don’t you think?”

She snorted. “You should count yourself fortunate. He is an arrogant, strict, hard sort of man, who drinks if you must know. We all call him Toplofty Rutherford.”

The music master laughed. “Toplofty, eh? I shall keep an eye out for him. And the others? Do they have names as well?”

“Indeed. Short Rutherford is the one with whom you are most familiar. The two accompanying us are Young Rutherford and Tall Rutherford. The other two are Quick Rutherford and Slow Rutherford.”

“You have a very colorful and unusual household.”

“I am an earl’s mistress. Is that not unusual enough?”

“You are an earl’s mistress who is hiding from someone or something.”

Sophia swallowed and pushed her toes to the end of her slippers to steady herself against the carriage floor. “What could I possibly be hiding from?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? You were born and raised in Seven Dials or so you said. And these Rutherford fellows are well-spoken and well-dressed enough, but I have encountered them playing cards in the kitchens late at night and I suspect their upbringing was much the same as yours.”

“And? What does that signify?”

“Nothing unless you count your multiple refusals to attend this concert. Until you came down those stairs, I was certain you would not attend. I am not so foolish as to believe the lure of an evening in my company changed your mind. I suspect it was the mysterious Mrs. Collins or perhaps the presence of your Rutherford guards.” He crossed his arms and propped one booted foot on his knee. “Not that I care. I am simply happy you came.”

“Well,” she said, and fiddled with her skirts. “You did say there would be food. And fireworks. And that they would play Handel.” She gazed at him from under lashes and prayed her flirting would divert him from the idea she had something to hide. Or someone to hide from.

“So I have found something to appeal to at least some of your appetites.” The rich timbre of his voice lent a sensual air to the word appetites and from his expression that was his intention.

“Some,” she agreed. Sophia peeped out the drawn curtains of the carriage window. “I need to put this on,” she said as she held up the mask. “Before we arrive at Vauxhall.”

“Of course.” He moved across to sit beside her and took the mask. With great care he fitted the silver piece to her face and tied the ribbons securely without mussing her hair. “You will have all of Vauxhall curious about the beauty in the guise of the night sky.”

“I hope not,” she said softly. He brushed his fingers across her collarbone, exposed by the cut of the dress. The bodice cradled her breasts and raised them in such a way that the very tops were visible but nothing more. The modiste the earl had sent to the house was very kind, very sympathetic, and very skilled. Sophia had not worn the

gown before tonight. Why would she? She could count on one hand the number of times she'd left her Grosvenor Street refuge in the three years she'd lived there. None of those excursions required such an elegant dress.

"We have arrived." The carriage had barely stopped moving before Tall Rutherford had the door open and the steps down. Mr. Norcross was out in a thrice and handed her down. Sophia gave the two footmen and John Coachman one last look at their posts by the carriage before she allowed her music master to lead her onto the Grand Walk lit by colorful lanterns. She took every bit of the splendor in with her eyes, her ears, and even her nose as the scents of flowers, lamp oil, and people filled the air.

Fortunately, Mr. Norcross must have sensed her wonder as he slowed his pace and allowed her to look her fill. "So very different," she said. "It is all very different from when I was last here."

"I would imagine so," he replied. "You were a child, were you not?"

"Of course." As they drew closer to the orchestra and the private boxes around the pavilion the crowd around them grew larger. Richly dressed men and women brushed past her, most without glancing her way, thank goodness. They arrive at one of the more expensive private boxes directly across from the orchestra.

"Here we are, milady." Mr. Norcross indicated she should sit on one of the cushioned seats. He took her cape from around her shoulders and hung it on a hook on the wall of the box. Once he sat across from her, a footman arrived almost immediately, and the music master ordered food and drink for them. "I have a surprise for you, Mrs. Hawksworth."

"I think it is time you called me Sophia," she said as she eagerly studied the music program on the table.



“Only if you call me Joshua.” He was studying the orchestra as the musicians gathered in the pavilion and prepared to play. A tall, young gentleman took a seat at the harp and waved at Mr. Norcross...Joshua.

“Very well, Joshua.” She paused as the footman returned with a loaded tray and began to place the contents on their table. There was a plate of ham slices, beef slices, bread, butter, several kinds of cake, olives and champagne. “I have two questions.” She selected several items and put them on the empty plate the footman had placed before her. “How were you able to afford this box and this feast?” She began to eat. The ham was thin, but quite good. She kept her eyes on his face as he pondered her question and offered her a glass of champagne.

“I have a generous friend, Captain Atherton or rather his wife, Lady Honoria Atherton. They had tickets to this concert as they are both patrons of the countess’s orphanage. They decided not to attend as Lady Honoria is with child and not feeling well of late. All of this,” he waved his hand over the table and out to the gardens. “Is a gift from him. We went to school together. And your second question?”

“Who is the handsome young harpist?” She nodded in the direction of the orchestra whilst she bit into one of the little cakes. The cream filling coated her lips and dripped down her chin. Joshua reached across the table and wiped the cream up with his forefinger. Then he placed that finger on her lips, offering her the cream. She drew in a breath and sucked his finger into her mouth, drawing the cream from it before she released it with one last lick. His eyes flashed in the dim lamplight. Sophia was playing with fire, but she could not stop.

From the moment he walked into her life, Joshua Norcross evoked feelings, sensations, and yes, dreams in her she’d never experienced in her life. She’d never been courted. She’d never been seduced. Her relationship with the earl was singular and she did not look on it as anything other than an arrangement between...friends. Not master and servant as he never treated her as such. But no one had ever treated

her the way Joshua did, a way that both thrilled and confused her. She'd been her father's daughter. She'd been Elias's wife. She'd been the Masked Harpist. She was the earl's mistress. Who was she with this man who taught her the wonders of music and made her long for the wonders of pleasure?

"The harpist's name is Elias Alvars. He is only eighteen, but he has tremendous talent and great potential. Like someone else I know." Joshua gazed at her meaningfully. Fortunately, the orchestra began to play and Sophia used that as an excuse to look away from his searing eyes and tempting mouth.

The concert opened with Handel's Water Music Suite Number One in F Major. Sophia sat on the edge of her seat to watch each part of the orchestra as they brought the beautiful music to life. What Joshua had taught her so far about notation and composition opened an entirely new avenue for her to enjoy and decipher the piece. The orchestra played all three of the suites and during the last one fireworks burst over the pleasure gardens. She could not hide her delight and Joshua was equally unable to hide his pleasure in watching her as she enjoyed the entertainment. To her chagrin she managed to eat nearly as much as Joshua did. Of course, she'd been unable to eat all day so worried was she about actually leaving the house. With him.

The orchestra played a variety of popular tunes and pieces from operas and oratorios as well as the Handel selections. Toward the end of the program Sophia noticed a song for harp solo listed—An Appreciation of Beauty by Anonymous. The young harpist, Elias Alvars, moved from the Erard harp he had played all evening to a simpler pedal harp. As he began to play Sophia gasped. She looked at Joshua who inclined his head in unspoken answer to her question.

A thousand emotions beset her. She could not believe her ears. The shock was so complete she missed the first several bars and immediately wanted to ask the harpist to begin again. She peeked quickly at the reactions of those in the boxes next to theirs. Then she quickly perused the crowds milling about the orchestra. As Alvars

played the people grew gradually silent under the spell of the young man's performance. Her eyes stung. She found breathing difficult. Joshua covered her hand with his. She wrapped her fingers around his and held on tightly. The notes she'd written, copied laboriously onto the page seemed to float from the orchestra and wrap around her.

The piece ended. People applauded. She could not believe her eyes. They were applauding for a piece she had written. The young man stood and bowed to acknowledge the applause and then he looked directly at the box where she and Joshua were seated and inclined his head.

They listened to the last few pieces in silence, though Joshua never let go of her hand. She drank more of the champagne, a little too much as she felt somewhat lightheaded. When the concert ended most of the ton attendees remained in their boxes, talking and watching each other. The rest of the crowd dispersed to view the various other entertainments or to stroll the gardens. Because this was a private event only the best and most tasteful performers had been hired. Sophia, however, could hardly sit still. Her entire being hummed with warmth and excitement. Joshua no doubt sensed her restlessness. He stood and offered her his arm. She retrieved her cloak and they began to stroll down the tree-lined walks beneath the soft glow of the hanging lanterns.

She'd seen Young Rutherford and Tall Rutherford strolling amongst the crowd around the orchestra. Now they followed her and Joshua, though at a discreet distance.

"Why did you do that?" she finally asked as they strolled down the Dark Walk and turned onto one of the many hedge-lined alcoves. The Rutherfords took up posts at the entrance to the alcove. The noise of the crowds and entertainments faded to a low buzz. The few lanterns in this part of the walk provided enough light to see his face, but not enough to allow anyone else to see them. Though from the sound of the wind and the silence on the walk they were completely alone and far enough from the

Rutherfords to not be heard. “Why did you give that young man my piece to play?”

“Did it make you happy? Were you proud when you heard the people applaud something you created?” He directed her to a stone bench tucked under a bower of white hydrangeas. She sat and he sat next to her, still holding her hand.

“Yes, it made me happy. It also surprised the devil out of me. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have said yes?”

She studied his face and shook her head. “I barely decided to come with you this evening. Do you really think I would have allowed you to share something I wrote with half of London? The wealthy aristocratic half?”

“You have answered your own question. I did it to make you happy. I didn’t ask because I knew you would say no. It was worth risking your wrath to see the look on your face and to see how excited you are now. There is nothing like sharing something you have written with strangers and have them appreciate the gift of your music. I wanted you to experience that.”

“You are a wicked scoundrel, Joshua Norcross.” She pulled her hand free. “You have no right to confuse me like this.” She fisted her hands in the spangled skirts of her gown.

“Confuse you? What have I done that is so confusing?” He furrowed his brow.

Sophia drew in a breath, redolent with the perfume of hydrangeas and the brisk October air. She touched her palm to the side of Joshua’s neck. His pulse beat furiously against her hand. “This,” she said as she drew his head down and took his mouth in a languid exploration of a kiss.

She tasted of cream cakes and champagne. Joshua's fevered brain allowed him that thought before all intelligent communication left him utterly. Her lips were more than he remembered. More soft. More plump. More warm. More demanding. When she traced her tongue across the bottom of his upper lip he opened to her and swore the fireworks explosions in the sky had to be his body flying apart.

He wrapped his tongue around hers drawing on the sweet, sizzling taste of her. She ran her fingers in the hair at the back of his head and held him in place whilst she plundered his mouth like a pirate boarding a captured vessel. And, God help him, he surrendered. She took charge of the kiss and sucked his tongue back into her mouth. She slanted her lips first one way and then another as if she could not get enough of him.

Joshua grasped her arse in his hands and turned her around until they were face to face. He lifted her leg and raised it over the bench and his lap until she was straddling him. Then he pulled her close and lifted her so her lower body rested flush against his aching cock. She ended the kiss with a deep sigh, slowly drawing back until she rested her forehead against his heaving chest. She stroked his face with her fingertips. Each touch produced a hot shiver he could not suppress. He turned his head to kiss her palms as she caressed him.

Her ivory flesh glowed in the light of moon and the few lanterns about them. He placed his hands beneath her breasts and ran his thumbs back and forth across the satiny fabric that covered her nipples. She moaned and tilted her head back which allowed him to run his teeth down one side of her neck and kiss his way from one

collarbone to the other. He pressed long, wet kisses across every inch of her chest revealed by the cut of her bodice. With care he cupped and squeezed her breasts so he could run his tongue between the narrow cleft her dress created.

Joshua longed to strip the dress from her and see her naked in the moonlight. What little bit of sense he retained stopped him. She began to rub against his belly, breathing in soft little gasps at every stroke. Her cape had fallen to the grass beside the bench. He rolled the soft velvet garment up and placed it at the end of the bench. When he leaned against her and placed his hands against her back she lay down instinctively, one arm across her eyes. Her chest rose and fell quickly as he ran his hands beneath her skirts and caressed her silk clad thighs. He rolled up the satin and spangled material until she lay bare from the waist down.

He smiled. Even in this dark light he saw the glistening of her arousal on the soft curls of her cunny. With his forefinger he drew a line from her belly down between her damp nether lips. She dropped her arm to the side of the bench and tried to sit up.

“Shhh.” His voice was a dark whisper. “You kissed me. Now I want to kiss you.” He slid his hands behind her buttocks, shifted back on the bench and bent his head to run his tongue up the path his finger had taken. Sophia buck violently against him. He held her fast and feasted on her wet, swollen flesh. He teased her with flicks of his tongue before plunging it inside her as he squeezed her buttocks. She loosed a strained squeal and then covered her mouth with her hand.

Joshua sucked and licked. He brought her to the edge over and over. She pulsed her hips against his marauding mouth in search of relief, each time harder and faster. Her muffled cries and dark moans vibrated against his lips. When her entire body began to shake in his hands he seized the point of her pleasure and drew hard in one long, unrelenting pull. He heard the hoarse cry deep in her throat. She thrust her hips so hard he feared she might black his eye. Not that he cared.

No, when he finally released her and raised his head, all he cared for was the expression of bliss and wonder on her face in the moonlight. He lowered her skirts and drew her into his lap. She sank her teeth into the spot just above where the side of his neck was covered by his neckcloth. Her breath was hot and quick against his skin. She whispered something softly.

“What, love? What do you want?” He could hardly speak. His throat was raw and dry.

“More.”

She did not have to say another word. He helped her to stand and wrapped her cloak around her, pulling up the hood to cover her face. She scooped up her mask, but did not don the silvery shield. They walked hand in hand back up the Dark Walk, followed closely by the Rutherfords, and directly out through the proprietor’s house to where the carriage waited.

Joshua beckoned to the coachman to lean down from his box. “Go through Hyde Park.” The man looked to Sophia who smiled and nodded. The two underbutlers had just enough time to jump onto their seat at the back of the carriage. Sophia and he were in the carriage with the door closed in a trice. The carriage lurched into motion and Joshua practically fell into the front-facing seat.

“Oofff.” He opened his arms just in time to catch Sophia as she pushed back the hood, straddled his lap, and kissed him fiercely. Then her hands were at the buttons of his falls. Her nimble harpist’s fingers made quick work of them, and his freed cock sprang into her hands. He helped her push her skirts up and back. She rose on her knees and with his help placed the head of his cock at her entrance. With a harsh cry she lowered herself onto him until he was fully seated inside her wet, pulsing cunny.

Joshua threw back his head and groaned at the powerful shock of fiery sensation that

vibrated from his bollocks up his body into his chest. Sophia braced her hands on his shoulders and began a slow rise and fall up and down his cock. She shifted and angled her body until the still swollen spot at the top of her sex brushed against him. Her sharp cry set him in motion. He gripped her hips and helped her to ride him fast and hard. Their cries mingled in a rhythm that matched the tight strokes of her body around his cock. Completion came quickly for both of them and he held her hips fast as he pumped the last strokes into her eager flesh.

“Damn,” he gasped as she collapsed against him. “I think you’ve killed me.”

She laughed against his lips. “I hope not.” She knocked the roof of the carriage and he felt the coachman turn them toward Grosvenor Street. “We still have to leave this carriage and look as if we’ve engaged in nothing but intellectual conversation.” She slowly slid off him and retreated to the rear-facing seat. He used his handkerchief to clean himself then handed the silk square to her.

By the time he buttoned his falls and righted his neckcloth and hair as best he could, she had straightened her gown and patted her hair back into place. She handed him his handkerchief which he tucked into his jacket pocket. He’d not be allowing any of the maids in Sophia’s home to do his laundry tomorrow. When he looked up at her, Sophia was studying him with an expression he could not for the life of him define.

As the carriage turned onto Grosvenor Street, she reached for his hand.

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we?” he finally asked.

“I fear we are, Joshua. I fear we truly are.”

Joshua stepped out of the King’s Opera House and glanced back at the impressive edifice. He’d just dropped off his orchestrations for Weber’s opera Oberon and collected his fee. He’d managed to dodge most of the questions of his friends and



fellow musicians about where he'd been and what he was doing. Those in the opera community in London were a gossip-prone crowd, but they also respected each other's privacy in many things. Every musician in London had secrets they wished to keep to themselves and things they did for money alone simply to survive.

"Ready, Mr. Norcross?" Lady Camilla's coachman asked from the box of the carriage drawn up in front of the opera house. A fine icy drizzle of rain had begun to fall, washing the cobbled streets and ensuring Joshua was fully awake in spite of his lack of sleep.

"Is any man ever ready for an audience with Lady Camilla?" he asked as he opened the carriage door.

"I'll not answer that question for all the blunt in Rothschild's Bank, sir." The coachman tapped his hat with a grin.

"Wise man. Let's be about it then." Joshua climbed into the carriage and closed the door as the vehicle pulled away from the opera house and headed toward St. James Square. The past few days had been nothing less than a ride on a runaway horse into a burning stable. He knew no other way to describe his and Sophia's time together since their night at Vauxhall.

There were moments they spent as any other music master and student. Sophia was a quick study, but a demanding one. With every little thing she mastered, she demanded to know more. In those moments his behavior was professional and he earnestly wished to teach her every last mystery of the reading and writing of music. Then came the split seconds when they could not resist the sensual lure between them and ended up in each other's arms. Their kisses were fevered, frantic, and the threat of being caught only added to the thrill. Until suddenly Sophia would seem to awaken as if from a spell. She'd ease out of his arms, declaring how dangerous their passion was for both of them.

She was right, of course. They were playing with fire in more ways than one. He'd intended to befriend her, seduce her only if necessary, but he'd never dreamed things would go as far as they had. She was another man's mistress. She was a woman with secrets. And he was the scoundrel who was supposed to discover those secrets in the hope of buying his dreams with the price of his betrayal. Which had sounded like the perfect plan, until he met Sophia Hawksworth, talked with her, laughed with her, made music with her, and shared his body with her in a way that had left him shaken to his very core.

He wanted more. He wanted to share her bed and have her share his dreams of establishing his own opera house. He wanted to write music with her and simply spend time with her, which was the most frightening thought of all. Every time she withdrew from him it hurt, physically hurt, dammit. Which was never part of his plan. Neither was lying awake every night listening in vain for Sophia to steal down from her third-floor bedchamber until he was either exhausted or forced to take matters into his hand, so to speak.

"You simply must retain control of yourself," he muttered as he scrubbed his hands over his face and violently shook his head. The last thing he needed was for Lady Camilla, or God forbid, the Earl of Framlingwood to know precisely how deeply he was involved with the woman he was supposed to be investigating. He'd been summoned by Lady Camilla to a meeting with Archer Colwyn and Stephen Forsythe. They'd apparently discovered some information they felt he needed to know. Or at least that was what Lady Camilla's cryptic note had said. He assumed she and the earl would be in attendance as well.

Suddenly, he didn't want to know. He felt wrong, dirty even, for prying into Sophia's private life like this. She had no idea there were several people digging into her past to discover if she was a murderess of all things. All they had to do was ask him. He knew in his soul she had never murdered anyone. Did she have secrets, dark ones? Yes, but murder was not one of them.

“Good morning, Mr. Norcross,” Raines said as he opened Lady Camilla’s front door and ushered him into the foyer. Once he’d handed off his hat and gloves, he followed the butler upstairs to Lady Camilla’s private parlor. Or as he and the other young men she’d given refuge over the years called the room, The Inquisition. Once inside, however, he was surprised to find the Earl of Framlingwood, his employer, was not there.

“Come in, Norcross,” Lady Camilla said. “Do sit down. Tea?” She indicated the chair next to her chaise. “To warm you. Rather cold and damp out there today.”

“Yes, please.” He settled into the chair and took the cup of tea she handed him. Col and Sythe sat in chairs opposite him and Lady Camilla. They were eerily quiet, which unnerved him a bit. He took two sips of his tea and placed the cup on the marquetry table next to him. “Will the earl be joining us?” Might as well start out as he meant to go on.

“No,” Col said. “There are things we need to discuss which he need not be privy to, at least not until necessary.”

“What does that mean?” Joshua had the distinct sensation the Bow Street runner was trying to make a point. One he was not going to like.

“Framlingwood has shown himself to be a somewhat impatient man. Especially where his mistress is concerned. He tends to go off half-cock, and that is not helpful given the current state of things with Mrs. Hawksworth.”

“What state of things? Is Sophia in danger?”

“Sophia?” Col gave him an arch look. “Possibly. Which is why we are informing you of what we have learned.”

“Which is what? And how long have you—”

“I told you two,” Lady Camilla said with a sigh. “You should let me explain so he doesn’t become upset.” She took up her teacup and peered at all three of them over the rim as she sipped.

Joshua took a deep breath. “I am not upset. I assumed as her bodyguard in addition to being her music master I might be informed if the lady is in danger.” He leaned back in his chair and propped one foot on his knee.

“That was very good,” the Bow Street runner said. “I almost believed you.”

Joshua bit back a nasty curse.

Sythe drew several opened letters from the portfolio at his feet. “This letter was sent to the current vicar at St. Giles in the Fields. The sender is a solicitor for the estate of the late Mrs. Lewis Green in Kent.”

Joshua took the letter and quickly read the contents. “He is inquiring after a Mrs. Edward Green. Who is she? Who is Edward Green?” His stomach began to tighten in smaller and smaller knots.

“He was the vicar at St. Giles until 1823 when his badly beaten body was fished out of the Thames.” Col handed him some papers bearing the official Bow Street seal.

“He was also the late Mrs. Green’s heir.” Sythe took the letter back. “After his death, her will stipulates that the inheritance pass to his widow, one Sophie Richards Green. According to the present vicar,” he continued as he presented Joshua with another letter. “The Reverend Green misplaced his wife sometime in 1819, a year after he married her.”

“Misplaced? What the hell does that mean? Pardon, Lady Camilla.” In spite of the roaring fire Lady Camilla always kept in her parlor his blood ran cold in his veins and he nearly shivered as the chill invaded his body.

She rolled her eyes and added more sugar to her tea.

“The earl’s mistress left her husband after a year of marriage, went to work at Goodrum’s, and four years later suddenly became the Earl of Framlingwood’s mistress approximately six weeks before her husband’s unfortunate demise.” Col took the Bow Street papers back from Joshua’s shaking hand.

“You’re saying Sophia Hawksworth is this Sophie Green?” Joshua knew how desperate his question sounded. He was being asked to take in too many ideas at once. He didn’t want to hear any of them, let alone entertain the suspicions they were so obviously airing.

“She is Sophie Green, Norcross. Do try to keep up.” Sythe handed him another letter. He glared at the barrister before he tried to concentrate on the scrawled lines on the parchment. The letter was dated a few weeks past. Yet another inquiry as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Edward Green. But this missive was signed by one Martin Green of Chiddingstone in Kent. Joshua read the words once more. Martin Green was brother to Edward. He looked to Col and Sythe as he handed the latter back.

“How did you discover this information? I doubt either the St. Giles vicar or this Edward Green’s brother simply came to you in search of Sophia. What is the point of all of this, gentlemen?”

“Martin Green is here in London. He has begun making inquiries in some of the lowest dens of thieves and murderers in Seven Dials. And he began making inquiries almost at the moment Framlingwood received the latest blackmail note.”

“Are the two working together? Is this a simple coincidence?” Joshua pushed out of the chair and began to pace the room. “Dammit, you two, what does this have to do with Sophia?” He ran a hand through his hair and turned to find Lady Camilla’s sympathetic gaze trained on him.

“They don’t know, Joshua,” she said softly. “We simply thought you should be informed. Come and sit down.”

“Informed as to what? That there may be two men seeking her, that mean her harm, working separately or together?” He waved a hand at Sythe and Col. “That these two believe she may have murdered her husband? This is a nightmare?”

“I suspect it is a nightmare Mrs. Hawksworth has lived her entire life,” Lady Camilla continued. “If you wish to leave your position in her house say so now. This nightmare is only going to get worse long before it grows better. Do sit down. You are wearing my carpets.”

Joshua dropped back into his chair. “Of course I don’t want to leave. I will not desert her, especially not now that you’ve told me she is in even more danger.”

“I suspected as much,” Sythe said with an oddly smug expression on his face.

“What do you mean by that?” Joshua had grown tired of the barrister’s hints and innuendos. They acted as if they were keeping him informed when he believed they were trying to draw him out and were keeping most of the information they had to themselves.

“Did Mrs. Hawksworth enjoy Vauxhall?” Col asked.

“How did you—Atherton, of course.” Joshua refrained from taking a breath. He stilled and thought long and hard before he responded. Lady Camilla’s spies were

everywhere. He should have known. “She enjoyed the music very much. She was cloaked and wore a mask the entire time. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Col answered. “Save you might want to limit her excursions until we discover more about the blackmailer.”

“And more about her brother-in-law’s intentions,” Sythe added. “What has she told you about her life, Norcross? About her marriage?”

He hadn’t thought of that. In this entire conversation he had not thought to what Sophia had told him about her marriage, her husband, and how it all ended. “She...told me he died seven years ago. They were married for a year and he died. That was the reason she went to work at Goodrum’s.”

“Nothing more?” Col prompted.

“No. Nothing.” She’d lied to him, about when her husband died at least. Why?

“Framlingwood is under the impression she does not know her husband is dead. She told him she ran away and is in hiding from her husband.” Sythe exchanged a look with Col.

He had to leave. There was nothing more he cared to hear, not about Sophia. Not about any of this. He needed time to think.

“Is that all?” he said as he got to his feet. “I have some appointments to keep.”

“Norcross, we need to discuss this. She lied to Framlingwood. She lied to you. We have one, perhaps two men who may or may not wish her harm. We have a blackmailer in play who nearly murdered Adrienne Godot.”

“You’re the Bow Street man, Colwyn. You and our barrister here are more than capable of solving this mystery without me. It is my job to keep the lady safe. That is what I intend to do. I’ve told you everything I’ve learned from her. If I learn more I’ll send you a note. If you learn more I trust you’ll do the same.” He executed a short bow to Lady Camilla. “Thank you, milady. Good day.” He marched out of the room, but not before he took in their stunned expressions.

Good. He bloody well didn’t want to be the only one whose head was spinning like a child’s top. He needed information, and he was damned well going to get it from the source. He’d start in Seven Dials.



Sophia threw back the counterpane and sat up on the side of her bed. She'd have to speak to the maid again about making up the fire for the night. Even if it was nearly late October. Apparently the girl feared she might freeze to death as she created and banked a fire so large Sophia's bedchamber was sweltering even long past midnight. She'd taken to sleeping in her thinnest muslin nightgown most nights. Tonight, she'd tossed and turned to the point she'd nearly fallen out of bed.

Of course, the source of her discomfort was not due entirely to the heat. The last two days had been the strangest since Joshua had taken up residence in her house. He'd been gone all day yesterday and had, on his return, taken his supper in his chamber. Today he'd filled her lesson time with a stack of exercises and very little instruction. Once she'd finished the exercises, and he had looked them over, complimenting her on her progress, he'd excused himself to run errands. They had taken supper together, but the conversation had been stilted, and he'd retired almost immediately.

She slipped off her bed and went to the window seat that looked out over her back garden. Even the carpets were warm as she crossed the room. Only when she touched her hand to the window pane did the truth of the night chill reach her. She'd spent many hours gazing out at her pretty little garden in the moonlight. The fault was hers, of course. Joshua's distance was a result of her changeable response to the passion between them. So long as she acted on her feelings alone being in his arms was the most right thing she'd ever experienced in her life.

Then thoughts of where they were, of her obligation to the earl, and her fear of Joshua ever learning everything about her intruded, and she pushed him away. No man

would last against the whims of a woman who lured him into desire and turned cold. Her greatest fear now was of when he would grow so tired he would leave. And take her heart with him. She'd had too little experience of love in her life to know if what she felt for Joshua was real. She needed to discuss this with the other mistresses. They would know, at least she hoped they would. Tonight was Tuesday, Margot's night with the earl. He'd sent a lovely bouquet of hothouse flowers and a pair of pearl and ruby earrings with his regrets, according to Short Rutherford. The hour was late, but the other ladies seldom retired until well after midnight.

She left the window seat and retrieved her quilted satin robe from the foot of the bed. The rest of the house was not as toasty as her chambers. Once she'd shrugged into it and drawn it tight before tying the belt, she slipped her feet into some wool-lined mules and fetched a lit candlestick from the mantel. The passageway across the back of all of their houses was accessed more easily from the second floor. She padded down the stairs and started along the corridor to the far wall where she could access the door inset into the blue silk wall covering..

She cocked her head. A haunting melody drifted down the corridor from the music room. Someone was playing the piano. Someone? She crept quietly to the door and leaned against the smooth, cool six-paneled oak. The music stopped for a moment. Had he heard her? The melody started once more, this time cushioned on rich full chords reminiscent of the orchestra she'd heard at Vauxhall.

He was composing. She knew he'd been working on something the entire time he'd lived in her house. She'd heard him at the piano when he wasn't teaching her—early in the morning or very late at night. Though she had never actually gone into the music room to listen, the piano could be heard clearly on the second floor. She'd caught the servants pausing in their work to listen. Tonight was different. The melody was filled with longing, a longing so poignant, a pang lodged behind her ribs, next to her heart. The accompaniment was lush and only added to the passionate cry of the tune.

She placed her hand on the door and closed her eyes. This was why she wanted to learn to read and write music. To be able to record the songs only she could hear and to put them down so she might never forget even a single note was a gift. Joshua was giving her that gift. He'd given her many gifts in their brief time together. Gifts more dear to her than any the earl had given her.

The music stopped again and resumed after several minutes. Sophia raised the handle as quietly as possible and opened the door just enough to slip inside. There was a lamp on the piano and another on the bookcase next to the piano. Joshua sat in his banyan his eyes closed as he played. She managed to sidle into the room and sit in the low armchair some several feet behind him. He started the piece over again and played the aria from beginning to end. When he finished he sat staring at the newly inked sheets of music on the piano rack.

"That was beautiful," she said softly. "Is it for your opera?"

He started and turned slowly around on the bench. "Did I wake you? I tried not to play too loudly."

"Not at all. I came down to...sneak into the kitchens for some of Cook's cream cakes. Don't tell her."

He smiled. "So you're the one. She accused the Rutherford boys of filching them just last night."

"Oh dear." She covered her mouth with her hand, but her laugh still escaped.

"Don't feel too badly. They took me for nearly five pounds at cards."

"I should have warned you. Never play cards with them. Captain Sharps one and all. I only know one person who can best them, and he's a lad of ten."

“I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.” He glanced back at the music he’d written. “Yes, this is the soprano’s aria from my opera.”

“I love it, though the melody makes me sad.”

“Good. I mean...that is what the piece is supposed to do.”

“Is your opera complete? When will it be performed?” She needed to keep talking to him. The air in the room had grown redolent with the pure sensual desire between them. The heaviness of her breasts, the sensitive brush of her robe against her skin, the damp ache between her legs. She had but to look in his eyes to see he suffered a similar pull between them.

“Nearly finished. When will it be performed? That is the question, isn’t it?” He laughed, a painful rusty sound, and shook his head.

“When did you first know you loved opera? I mean, loved opera enough to have to create one of your own?” She tucked her feet beneath her in the chair.

“My mother took me to the opera every season when we came to Town. My father and brothers and no interest, and she and I shared a love of music from the time I first heard her play the piano. I was four when she started teaching me to play. I was five when I heard my first opera, *Die Zauberflöte* by Mozart. I became obsessed, frankly. I realize now that was a mistake.”

“A mistake? How could a love of something so wonderful be a mistake?”

“The more I studied music, the angrier my father became. That was the reason he sent me away to school, to keep me from my mother’s influence and to end my obsession with music. It cost me the last two years of my mother’s life and the privilege of holding her hand when she left this world.” The drawn lines of his face hurt her like a

physical blow. She imagined the young boy separated from the one parent with whom he shared everything.

“I’m so sorry, Joshua.” She sat up in her chair and reached across the space between them. He took her hand and rubbed his thumb across her fingers. “You got your own back at him, your father, I mean. You became a professional musician which must have made him very angry.”

He lips curved in a somewhat bemused smile. “You have no idea. When I finished school, I intended to go to Italy to study music. My mother had written to the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and secured me a place there before she died. My father, however, had bought me a commission in the cavalry and tried to ship me off to war. When I refused the commission, he disowned me and cut me off completely. As did my brothers, which is why I came to London. I ran away like a coward and dreamed of opening my own opera house.” He shrugged.

“You’re no coward, Joshua. You didn’t run away. I know all about running away.” She stood and let go of his hand. She strolled around her music room, touching the various instruments the earl had gifted her over the years. “You ran to something. To your music. To teaching others and sharing your gift for music. You didn’t run away out of fear or go into hiding. You have a dream and you are pursuing that dream. There is nothing cowardly about that.”

Almost instantly she realized she’d said too much. Perhaps it was the late hour or the dimly lit room. Or perhaps the pulsing need she felt for him had run roughshod over her need to keep her secrets. He was suddenly behind her, his hand on her shoulder.

“You were a woman whose husband was gone and did what you had to do to survive. That isn’t the act of a coward either. And if you are hiding I am certain you have good reason to do so. You are not the sort of woman who does anything without good reason.” She turned slowly to meet his gaze. Something in his expression sent a

shiver of confusion down her spine. She could not put her finger on it, but he was asking her a question. Though what that question might be was a mystery.

“If you are hiding from someone I will keep you safe, Sophia. I will never allow anyone to do you harm. You must know that.” The music room was cold. He had not lit the fire arranged in the hearth by one of the dutiful servants.

“Why?” she asked softly. “Why would you think to keep me safe?”

“Do you need to be kept safe? Is there someone you fear? Name him, and I will make certain he never touches you.” His face was hard and fierce in the flickering lamplight. A primitive thrill went through her at the thought. She’d never been one to expect a man to help her, let alone keep her safe. Why would she? Her father had sold her in marriage to a fiend. And that fiend had nearly ended her life. The earl had been more than kind, but he’d never had cause to protect her from danger, not really.

“Why?” A sort of madness had seized her. She wanted to know how he saw her, what he felt for her, if anything. Nothing could come of their feelings, but she wanted to know so she could store those words away as a treasure to comfort her in her old age, when her time as a mistress was done and she would be alone. “Why do you want to know? Why should my fears matter to you?”

“Dammit Sophia.” He grasped her shoulders and pulled her against him. “I don’t know. I only know you have grown to mean far more to me than I ever intended. You speak to me, not in words. Your beauty, your courage, your determination. The joy you take in music. Your talent. Every moment I spend with you gives me comfort. Every moment away I cannot wait to return to this house, to you. Even if I do not see you, knowing you are here, and I can find you if I...need you, gives me a peace I thought never to feel again. I would do anything for you.” He lowered his head to breathe across her lips. “Anything. And that scares the very life out of me.”

He locked his arms around her in crushing embrace as his lips crashed down on hers. She reached around him and clutched the fabric of his silk robe in her fists as she answered his kiss with one of her own. His words fired her soul and broke her heart. He trusted her, with his dreams and his feelings, and he did not know her at all. She gasped and pushed out of his embrace.

“Sophia?” He gasped for breath, but the hurt on his face struck her like a blow. “What is it, love? What is wrong?” He reached for her again, but dropped his hands when she stepped back. “I understand,” he said quietly. “Your heart belongs to the earl and...perhaps he should find another...music master for you. I know several I can recommend, and I—”

“Stop,” she nearly sobbed. “Stop, Joshua. I don’t want another music master. My heart...I have ignored my heart for so long it is a withered, pitiful thing.”

He dropped onto the piano chair again, his hands splayed in a gesture of complete bewilderment. Suddenly, Sophia could fight no longer. She did not want to fight, not where Joshua was concerned. She untied her robe and allowed the garment to slide to the floor.

“You speak of my beauty? I thought my beauty to be my escape from life with my father who was a drunken brute prone to use his fists rather than his words. I have no memory of my mother. Others have told me she fell to his fists, and I have no reason to doubt that. When the new vicar at St. Giles saw me and heard me play at an evening service he inquired after me, and for a little money and some wine my father came home one morning and told me I was to be wed.”

“Sophia, you don’t have to—” He seemed nearly frantic to stop her confession.

“I do, Joshua.” She was beyond stopping now. “For you, I must.” She untied the ribbon at the top of her nightgown. In the lamplight, the outline of her body no doubt

was clear under the thin muslin. The way his eyes widened told her she was right. In the cold air her nipples tightened and her breasts pushed against the sheer garment. “My father was a brute. But my husband is a monster and with him my beauty was a curse.” She drew her nightgown over her head and dropped it at her feet. His expression of horror shook her to her core, but she refused to cower now.

“Sophia.” Her name came out a dark moan from his lips.

“My beauty incited him to lust. He fought against it, but when he succumbed to that lust and took me to bed he saw that lust as sin. I was a sinful, wanton woman to lure him to fornication. So he did this.” She spread her arms and turned slowly in a circle. The marks of the riding crop crossed her back and her buttocks, her stomach and her breasts, until she appeared to wear a garment of knotted, quilted flesh.

“Fortunately, he managed to resist my temptations for weeks at the time. But then he beat me all the more when he succumbed. And if someone in the parish complimented the vicar’s pretty wife, I received a beating for that as well.”

“Dear God.” He ran his hand across his mouth. His chest heaved as if he had run a great race. “Was there no one to help you? No one you might appeal to? Why didn’t you—”

“I left him. I ran. After the last beating I knew if I did not I would die.” She began to tremble now, not from the cold but from the memory of all she’d told him. And perhaps a little in fear of his reaction. “I lied to you, Joshua. My husband is not dead. I live in fear of him finding me. Everything you’ve said to me fills me with such joy, such hope.” Her voice broke. “But my dream can never be and yours can. I am another man’s mistress, another man’s wife, and I will never be free.” So many emotions flitted across his face as she spoke. She’d expected most of them—sorrow, horror, pain, confusion. The one she did not see, anger at her lies did not appear.



“And if you were free?” He stood and came to grasp her elbows. His silk banyan brushed against her naked breasts. “What then, love? If you were free to choose your life from now on?” The harsh lines and angles of his face softened. His expression sent a shaft of light and hope into her heart. Then she saw her reflection in the small pier glass illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the windows. She stepped back, one step and then another.

“You deserve better than a scarred woman who has only ever been used by other men. You deserve a beautiful, soft woman who has never known how ugly the world can be. A woman who knows her heart, who has more than half a heart to give you.” She ran her hands down her body. “Not this broken ugly coward who—Joshua, what are you...Joshua!” She hissed his name as he scooped her up and strode out of the room. He gave a quick glance up and down the corridor and padded quietly into his bedchamber next to the music room.

He stood her in the middle of the room and went about turning up every lamp, lighting others, and bringing every candlestick and candelabra to the fire to light the candles. He dragged the wide full-length mirror in front of her. He turned her to face the mirror and stood behind her. She tried to cover herself, but he took her hands and lowered them to her sides.

“Do not move unless I tell you. Look in the mirror and don’t look away. Promise?”

“I don’t under...ohhh.” She could only moan as he caressed and squeezed her buttocks. He traced the scars with his fingertips and then brought his hands around in a rapid sweep to cup her breasts and brush his thumbs across her nipples. She bit her lip and gasped. Slowly her eyes closed at the sensations he created molding and squeezing and teasing her breast.

“Don’t close your eyes, Sophia. Watch. Watch me love you, my beautiful siren.” He bent to whisper in her ear. “Your breasts are beautiful, plump and full. Look how they

fill my hands. I cannot wait to fill my mouth with them.” He slid a hand down her belly, stroking and caressing every whip line. Her body quaked in waves of shivers. She saw her face as she’d never seen it before, and his face as he watched them in the mirror was desperate with hunger...for her.

He pushed his hand further down her belly and found the spot sat the top of her cunny. She bucked against him and felt his hard cock against her back through his banyan. Suddenly his fingers were inside her, thrusting and pumping. Her body responded of its own will, riding his seeking fingers. “Watch, Sophia. Watch me fuck you my sweet, wanton angel. Watch.”

She forced her eyes open and fixed her gaze on the vision of her body in writhing ecstasy and the fiery passion with which he looked at her as she reached for completion. He squeezed her breast in time with her rhythm and she cried out his name and shuddered over and over in his arms he bit down on a spot on the side of her neck that only sent her faster and higher into oblivion.

He hooked his foot around a chair and pulled it so he could sit in it, his profile to the mirror. His banyan slid to the floor and his hard cock jutted out toward her. He pulled her to stand between his legs and cupped her bottom to hold her up. “Don’t look away, love. There’s more.” She screamed as he took her sensitive breast into his mouth and suckled as he dragged his hand back and forth between her legs. He began to lick her scars one at the time until he reached the other breast and took it into his mouth.

She wanted to look in the mirror now. To see her hair, loosed from its braid, falling around them. His mouth on her breast and his face intent and hungry as if he could not get enough of her. And when he held his cock in one hand and her bottom in the other and positioned her to take him inside her, she could not take her eyes off him. She threw her head back with a low groan, her face determined and in the throes of some primitive urge whilst she slid down until they were joined completely.

“Now,” he growled. “I will watch whilst you take your pleasure. Use me, Sophia. Fuck me. Yes. Like that. Oh. God. Yes!” She dug her fingers into his shoulders and fixed her eyes on his face, turned up to hers, wild and ravenous as she rode his cock faster and harder until she feared the chair might break. “More,” he begged in that low dark voice of his. “More. Fuck!”

She did not know who started the bone-shaking shudders that swept through them. They gasped and cried out in tandem, creating a music all their own until she collapsed onto him and felt the warm flash inside her that told her they’d reached the heights together. They sat in the chair, panting for breath. He kissed her scars over and over again. She swept her hair back as he stood shakily, and still joined to her, walked to the bed. He drew back the counterpane and crawled onto the mattress, her legs locked about him.

“Your beauty can never be a curse, nor can your scars, Sophia. They are the mark of who you are and where you have been. How could any part of that be ugly?” He kissed her forehead. “Rest now. I am not finished with you yet.” He pulled the counterpane over them and wrapped his arms about her.

“I’m not finished with you yet.”

But he will be, she thought as she lay in his embrace. He will be.

Joshua had not spent so much time in taverns and the dark alleys of London since he first arrived as an ambitious musician at the age of eighteen. Then again, he'd never allowed himself to be dragged from one low, disgusting place to another by a ten-year-old boy either. Not that he hadn't seen the inside of some of these places before tonight. He'd boxed for money at the Lamb and Flag, often called the Bucket of Blood, more than once as a student home from school and as a penniless composer too. Home being Lady Camilla's St. James Square townhouse. Once his father disowned him he'd never returned to the family estate in Hampshire again.

None of that mattered now. All that mattered was Sophia and her safety. Yes, she'd lied to him, but she'd confessed. Her husband's cruelty incensed him, and he deeply regretted the man was dead. Not that he'd told her that bit of news. One of his many sins of omission against her. The idea of lying to her, of his real reason for moving into her home and her life, gnawed at him like a hungry terrier. He'd see her safe first and then tell her the truth. She deserved that much.

He loved her. He knew that now. She cared for him and even if she could never love him, that would be enough for him. It would have to be. He'd awakened to an empty bed after their tryst in the music room, but things had been wonderful between them—stolen kisses, composing together, meals with long talks about music and his ambitions for his opera house. And torrid nights in his bed where he did his best to show her how beautiful she was in every way that he could. He sensed he was standing ever closer to a precipice and that the fall would destroy him. He didn't care.

“Are we going to stand out here in the rain, guv’ or are we going inside before we

drown?” The night had turned frigid and the rain fairly sluiced down from the starless sky.

“Drowning might be safer,” Joshua replied as he and the lad, Dickie Jones, made their way to the back entrance of the Prospect of Whitby. Even in the dark, the sound and smell of the Thames told him they were well and truly heading into one of the more dangerous taverns in London.

“Yer right about that. ’Specially when the Runner and the earl find out I brung you here.”

“Tell them I bribed you.”

He snorted. “They know that without me telling ’em. I don’t do nufink for nobody without my palm gets crossed.”

“You helped Mrs. Hawksworth for nothing,” Joshua reminded him as they squeezed their way through the crowd at the back of the tavern. The stench of stale beer and stale bodies came at him in waves.

Dickie turned and glared at him, his expression half anger and half surprise. “That were different. I wouldn’t have come back here for anyone else.”

Come back here? Dickie’s ominous, almost fearful tone gave Joshua pause. Lads like Dickie Jones weren’t afraid of much at all, but he was now. Afraid of this place.

“The Rutherfords told me, in case you’re wondering,” Joshua told the boy as he perused the tavern. “How do you think I tracked you down at CB’s dispensary this afternoon?” He sidled into a chair behind a table and Dickie dropped into the chair next to him. The battered walls and scarred floors closed in around him. How the devil would he find Sophia’s brother-in-law in this sea of the dregs of humanity?

“I’ll be having words with those light-fingered rattlepates.”

“I think they told me out of revenge for you taking all their blunt at cards.” Joshua leaned against the wall and pulled his worn woolen cap down to hide his face.

“Bugger the whole crew. If the earl and his two errand boys see us we’ll be in the soup right and proper.”

“Two ales, please.” Joshua gave the serving wench a guinea and his most seductive smile. “You wouldn’t know if Martin Green has been by, would you?” Dickie broke into a coughing fit.

“Don’t know no Martin Green.” She offered a gap-toothed grin and adjusted her considerable bosom. “Can I do something else for you?”

“Perhaps later. For now, just the ales, please.”

“What are you doing?” Dickie asked once she’d gone on her way. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Do you have another way to find this man?” Joshua continually studied the people coming in and out of the tavern. Dickie had told him Col was supposed to pay the blackmailer tonight. He was not nearly as interested in the blackmailer anymore as he was in the vicar’s brother. “Colwyn and Forsythe will be happy to hear themselves called errand boys.”

“I’ve called them worse,” Dickie said. “Stop asking about Martin Green. I know what he looks like. I’ll let you know if he shows up.” Now it was Joshua’s turn to start coughing.

“You didn’t tell me you’d seen this man.”

“You didn’t ask,” the cheeky miscreant replied. The buxom wench plonked their ales on the table and went toward the front of the tavern, hips swaying like an East India cutter. “Saw him this afternoon at the dispensary. Some of the regulars said he were in asking about Mrs. Hawksworth.”

“He asked CB and no one thought to tell me?”

“Course not. Don’t think this cove’s the type to speak to someone of quality. He were asking the people who come for help. I watched him leave and followed him, but he went into a rooming house on Rose Street and didn’t come out so I went back to see what he were asking.”

“You didn’t tell CB.” Joshua slumped down in his chair as he saw a familiar trio of men enter the tavern and spread out amongst the crowd.

“He don’t need to be in this. He’s busy with his dispensary. And he and Mr. Charpentier bring leftover food from that fancy cunny warren of a club to St. Giles to feed those what need it.” Dickie shifted in his seat. The men at the next table began to argue. One of them knocked into Dickie’s chair. A tavern wench on her way by steadied the chair and patted Dickie on the head.

“Careful, lad,” she said. Dickie scowled at her.

Joshua choked on his ale. “You don’t want them to get hurt,” he said once he’d recovered as he kept his eye on Framlingwood, Col, and Sythe dressed like dock workers. “That’s why you didn’t tell them.”

“We’re the ones about to be hurt, guv’.” Dickie nodded to where Archer Colwyn was edging his way through the crowd of sailors at the bar. He did not appear happy to see them.

“Evening gents,” Col said as he pulled a chair over to their table, ducking under a tavern wench’s tray full of ales as he did. “I’ll have one of those, Betty,” he said as he lifted one of the tankards from the tray. She was a dark-haired, big-breasted beauty who gave Col a serious assessment. God help her if she ever met the man’s wife. The infamous chess mistress was one formidable woman.

“Gone on with yerself.” The wench bumped her hip into Col’s shoulder and leaned down until Joshua thought her breasts might fall out of her bodice onto the table. “Do ye have summat for me, sirrah.”

“I might,” he replied. “Come back in a bit.” She narrowed her eyes and gave him a knowing look. Once she’d returned to the bar, Col turned on Joshua, his smile fixed, but his eyes blazing. “What the devil are you doing here?” He turned on Dickie. “Is this your doing? Stop ogling the wench’s diddies. What the hell possessed you to bring him here, tonight of all nights?”

“Guineas, Bow Streeter. Several of ’em. Nufink else would make me come back here. Not with the earl in the offing.” He nodded to where Framlingwood stood leaning against the bar and staring daggers at them. Forsythe had stationed himself at a table next to the street entrance to the tavern. The one Dickie had been nearly frantic to enter before Joshua dragged him around to the river entrance.

“You knew we were paying the blackmailer tonight. You knew we hoped to catch him. This is a disaster.” He sipped his ale and made a face.

“I know you’re after the blackmailer,” Joshua said out of the side of his mouth. “I ‘m after Sophia’s brother-in-law. He’s been all over Seven Dials looking for her. He’s even been to CB’s dispensary. That’s too fucking close, Col. That smacks of desperation, and I want to know why before he finds her. We’ve been to the Lamb and Flag tonight, and someone overheard Martin Green say he was meeting a man here to talk about their deal.”



“You didn’t think to tell me all this, you duplicitous figger?” Col kicked at Dickie’s chair.

“He’s looking out for Mrs. Hawksworth. Yer looking out for the earl’s blunt. I sent a note to yer office. Fair gave me the heaves to get that close to Bow Street again.” He sat up and stared toward the front of the tavern.

“You’re going to get a lot closer if you don’t come to me first with this information. I’m trying to...What is it?” Col sat up as well. Joshua followed their intent gazes. A wiry man in the garb of a country gent down on his luck with greasy silver and black hair and a bulbous nose stood just inside the doorway, looking for someone. A man dressed entirely in black, with the collar of his greatcoat turned up to obscure his face came out of nowhere to grab the greasy-haired gentleman’s arm and drag him through the crowded tavern almost straight for the table where Joshua, Col, and Dickie sat.

There was a commotion at the bar. The comely wench who had spoken to Col had bumped into Framlingwood and doused him with ale. She dragged a large handkerchief out of her bodice and began to wipe him down. For a split second she glanced at the man in black and the fellow who had caught Dickie’s attention.

“Shite!” The lad leaned across to Col. “Tell me his nibs didn’t bring the blunt with him.”

“Didn’t bring...” Col kept staring at the man in black as he swept past their table with the country bumpkin in tow. They were headed toward the back entrance of the Prospect of Whitby that opened onto stairs to the Thames.

“The bloody earl,” Dickie said as he watched the bumpkin go past and then turned his attention to Framlingwood who had been joined by Forsythe. The tavern wench was nowhere in sight. “Did he bring the blackmail money with him?”

“Yes. He has the bank draft safe in his inside jacket pocket. Why?”

Col might not understand, but Joshua damned well did. He pushed to his feet.

“That bitch with the diddies is a rum diver, and she just made off with the blunt,” Dickie all but shouted. “And the man in black just made off with the vicar’s brother.” He pointed toward the back of the tavern.

The argument at the next table erupted in a spray of chairs and tankards. Framlingwood and Sythe struggled to move around the combatants. Joshua turned toward the fleeing Martin Green only to be met by a wall of wide, thick-necked lumpers.

“Fuck!” Joshua growled as he dodged a meaty fist.

“Shite!” Col jumped onto the table and kicked one of the lumpers in the face before he dove onto the next one.

“Get Dickie out of here,” Framlingwood shouted as he reached them. He picked the kicking swearing boy up and threw him at Sythe.

“Go!” Sythe shoved the boy toward the back door.

“No!” The lad’s high pitch cry was hysterical. He continued to kick and struggle in Sythe’s arms. “Not that way!”

“The front,” Framlingwood said as his head snapped back as he took a punch from one of the lumpers. “Out the front, Sythe.”

The barrister spun around and dropped the boy onto the bar. “Go! Dammit, who hit me?” He turned back to the fray swinging.

Joshua tasted blood as head snapped to the side. He lashed out with a sharp uppercut to the next man's nose. A spray of blood joined the ale and spit filling the air around them. He continued to jab and pinch as he tried to get past the wall of thugs. "Sythe. Ooh! Nice one!"

"They're trying to keep us from following the vicar's brother and his friend. Push forward." Col cracked a tankard over one man's head and slashed the next man across the chest with the broken shard attached to the handle. "Where's Framlingwood?"

"Buggered if I know." Joshua let loose a flurry of punches into a broad no-necked behemoth who smelled of rotten meat. He'd had enough. The man who might hurt Sophia was getting away. He beat no-neck into the floor and kicked him for good measure. He clasped a burly Chinese sailor's head in his hands and brought his knee up to break the man's nose and knock out his teeth. He heard Col, Sythe, and Framlingwood behind him swearing like dock workers. Men who grasped at the back of his jacket were dragged away and from the sound of it bludgeoned out of commission.

Joshua punched and jabbed to the point his knuckles were split and bloody. His lip was split and one eye was swelling shut. He took a punch to the head from his blind side and saw stars. When he turned to retaliate he watched the very proper Earl of Framlingwood pick the cull up and toss him onto a table that collapsed beneath the weight of the now insensible attacker. He glanced back and saw the entire tavern had exploded into a noisy, violent fray.

He clutched the back of the earl's jacket and steered him toward the rear of the tavern. "Martin Green fled this way. Come on. Sythe! Col! This way." The other two men wrestled free of the continuing melee and followed as they burst out the back door and down the rickety steps to the river. Col and Sythe took off to the right. Joshua and Framlingwood went to the left. But as the planned diversion was

intended, they found no sign of anyone, neither up and down the river or around the sides of the tavern.

“Nothing,” Joshua growled as they met on the street at the front of the Prospect of Whitby.

“We lost them.” Framlingwood bent over and braced his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. “The damned scoundrel hired those men to keep us from pursuing them.”

“That’s not all we lost,” Joshua said. He took the handkerchief Syth handed him and wiped the blood and sweat from his face before handing it back. “Check your pocket.”

Framlingwood looked up at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t beg,” Col said as he pulled the earl upright and began rifling through his jacket. “Where’s the bank draft?” Framlingwood did a frantic check of all his pockets, turning them out and shaking them.

“What the devil?”

“The wench who ran into you. Betty. She lifted it whilst she was cleaning you up. Then she disappeared, likely to meet our blackmailer,” Col said.

“Bugger me,” Sythe muttered.

“Not even CB will bugger you, Sythe. We had to pay your wife to take you on. So what have we learned?” Sythe shrugged Col’s punch to his arm and turned to walk up Wapping High Street. “Where’d we leave the carriage, Framlingwood?”

“You milksops came in a carriage?” Joshua asked as he fell into step with them.

“We weren’t chasing shadows all over Seven Dials, Norcross. Wait.” Col stopped and looked up and down the street. “Where’s Dickie? If we’ve lost that boy CB will flay us alive and then turn us over to Lady Camilla.” They fanned out across the street and looked into the alleys along the way. A little ways up from the Prospect of Whitby Joshua saw a diminutive shadow standing halfway down an alley, standing eerily still.

“Dickie?” he called. The others came to join him. They traversed the alley slowly, taking care to keep their footsteps quiet. Framlingwood fetched a torch burning in a rusted metal holder on the front of the building next to the alley. When he reached the boy’s side Joshua put his hand on the lad’s narrow back. Dickie was twisting his cap in his hands. Once the earl shone stepped beside the boy with the torch they all saw what had his stupefied attention.

Lying sprawled on the cobblestones were the dark-haired wench and the country dressed gent. They lay in reflective pools of black, blood under the light of the feeble moon. Their throats had been slit wide open. The woman’s expression was one of repose. The man’s face was fixed in an attitude of horror. He’d seen the knife coming.

“Is it him, Dickie?” Joshua asked gently. “Is it Martin Green?”

“Aye, guv’. That’s the cove what was asking after Mrs. Hawksworth.”

“How do you—”

Col put his hand on the earl’s arm. “We’ll explain later.” He knelt and rummaged through the wench’s clothing and then the man’s. “The bank draft is gone.”

“I think it is safe to say the man in black is your blackmailer, and he did these two when they were no longer useful to him,” Joshua said. “What do we do now?”

“We leave this mess for the watch,” Framlingwood said. “Won’t be the first bodies they’ve found in this part of London.” Dickie glanced up at the earl who reached over and squeezed his shoulder. Some communication passed between them, and Joshua decided these two had a secret worth knowing.

“You three leave and take the boy,” Col said. “I can’t. I must report this.” He fixed Framlingwood with a steely gaze. “This is serious now. We know this man will kill to get what he wants. And he has the ability to use others and hire anyone he needs to succeed.”

“I know.” Framlingwood’s voice was hollow and cold. “We have to stop him, Colwyn. We must.”

“We will. Go now. Lady Camilla will kill us all when she discovers what we’ve been about with her favorite spy.” He gave Dickie an awkward pat. “Go along, lad.”

Dickie swiped his sleeve across his eyes. “Green has a room on Rose Street. In Mrs. Ray’s rooming house. Might something there if you manage to get in before she hears he’s dead and tries to sell his goods for rent.” Col nodded and waved them away.

Joshua, Sythe, Dickie, and Framlingwood walked in silence to the street where the earl’s carriage waited. The coachman looked them over whilst the footman hopped down to open the door and lower the steps. Joshua had to admit they were likely a sight—beaten, bloody, disheveled.

“Did you give as good as you got?” the cheeky footman asked.

“They did,” Dickie said. He nodded at the earl. “His nibs here is a dab hand with his fives.” The coachman chuckled. Joshua and Sythe settled in the rear facing seat whilst Dickie and earl took the front facing.

“Footman a Rutherford?” Joshua asked as he rested his shoulder against the plush squabs.

“Their cousin.” The earl grinned. An icy ball of shame lodged in Joshua’s stomach. He liked the Earl of Framlingwood. He was a decent man doing his best to take care of the women in his employ. And Joshua was ready to go to war with him to keep Sophia for himself.

“Drop me off at Grosvenor Street, then you two can take Dickie home.”

“Coward,” Sythe said. “You should be the one to deliver Dickie and explain what you and he have been about this evening to CB, Nathaniel, and Lady Camilla.”

“Let Framlingwood do it,” Joshua suggested. “This is his carriage.”

“I’d rather face the mob back at the tavern,” Framlingwood said as he closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of his seat. “Better chance of survival.”

“You’ve got the right of it there, guv’. And I’m blaming all of this on you three coves.”

His tone was cheeky, but Joshua suspected the boy was not as sanguine as he appeared in spite of his hazardous upbringing. Perhaps Dickie knew like he did that this was not over. Not over at all. And the worst was likely yet to come.

Sophia peered over her copy of *An Insatiable Lady's* latest book and pretended not to have heard Margot's pointed question. Not that ignoring Margot ever did any good. It was well after midnight and the other mistresses had joined her in her drawing room to discuss the book and to gossip as was their wont anytime they were allowed to be together without interruption.

Thursday was Lily's night with the earl, but he had sent her a lovely leather-bound volume of Shakespeare's plays and his regrets. Joshua had left to spend the evening in rehearsals at the King's Theatre and told Sophia not to wait up for him. She had a strange feeling about the coincidence of it all, but discounted her worries as her sensitivity about what was to happen between her and Joshua. Speaking of which...

"I will not dignify that question with an answer, Margot. He is my music master. I am the earl's mistress." She picked up her teacup and sipped, but the tea had gone cold. They'd rung for Short Rutherford quite some time ago. Where was he? How long did it take for him to leave his post at the front door and fetch a tea tray? He was supposed to be keeping watch in case the earl or Joshua should appear.

She put down her cup and turned to find four sets of very amused eyes on her. Margot, Lily, Saida, and Margot's maid, Gabrielle, sat sprawled in their nightgowns and night rails on the various settees, chairs, and chaises before the fireplace. The night was damp and cold and the fire had been built up quite high in the hearth.

"She's tupp'd him," Lily said with a lurid grin. "More than once, I'd say."



“I do believe you are right,” Margot fairly crowed as she closed her book. “Look at her face.”

Sophia touched her palm to her cheek where the heat of her blush radiated. She placed her book on the table and went to the bell pull by the doors. Once she had given the embroidered rope a tug she listened to the laughter behind her and sighed. The minute she turned around they went silent, but stared at her expectantly.

“Well?” Saida urged. “Does the man know what he is about?”

Sophia frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” Gabrielle threw up her hands. “Does the man know how to fuck or was it terrible?”

“Ohh.” Sophia covered her mouth with her hands, but she had little luck hiding her smile from them. They howled with delight. Margot jumped up and clasped her hand to drag her back to her place on the settee.

“As good as the earl? Or better? Do speak up girl. We simply must know.”

Sophia could scarcely countenance she was about to discuss something so personal, but these ladies were like sisters to her. Sisters who shared the same lover in the form of the earl. Good. Lord!

“We will all concede the earl is an accomplished and generous lover,” Lily said. “How does your Joshua compare? We haven’t heard any tales of bed-play since Adrienne and Obadiah left on their wedding trip.”

“Now that man was an accomplished lover. Mrs. Collins was afraid he and Adrienne would break the bed.” This elicited a delighted squeal from the group.

“Well, we haven’t broken the bed yet.” Sophia thought she might burst into flames from embarrassment. “But we’ve tugged in other places so I’m not certain if we are in danger of breaking the bed.”

“Oh, do tell. You can’t stop there,” Saida said.

“Vauxhall,” she said. “And in the carriage. And in the music room. And—”

“What was it like?” Gabrielle asked. “We need details.”

“I don’t know how to explain it.” Sophia brought visions of them together in the throes of passion into her mind. “It was like...music. Not like the music that makes you tap your foot and want to dance. Like the music that fills your soul and makes every fiber of your being long for something you never thought you’d find.”

“You’re in love with him,” Lily said softly, a sense of wonder in her voice. “You’ve fallen in love.”

“Have I?” Sophia touched her face. Had something changed about her, her face, her appearance? Did love do that to a woman? “I’ve never known love of any kind so how will I know?”

“Oh, sweeting,” Margot said and gave Sophia a hug. “Of course you’ve known love. We all love you. I suspect the earl loves you in his own way. Though God only knows with that man.”

“Mrs. Collins knows,” Saida said with a sly smile. “Or she soon will.”

“The Rutherfords adore you, Sophia,” Lily added. “And I suspect Mrs. Collins may even love us. We are a great deal of trouble, and yet she stays.”

“It isn’t the same though, is it, Sophia?” Gabrielle reached for Margot’s hand. “You must trust our judgment in this.” She indicated all of the ladies in the room. “You are in love with Joshua Norcross.” Her words provoked a soaring thrill and a frightening twist in Sophia’s belly.

Could it be true?

“The vital question now,” Lily said thoughtfully. “Is Joshua Norcross in love with you?”

Sophia remembered his words from the night he tried to show her how beautiful he thought her in spite of her scars. “Well, I think—”

CRASH! The sound of breaking crockery and something heavy falling down into the foyer startled them all.

“What the devil?” Saida leapt to her feet and ran to throw open one of the drawing room doors. “Rutherford!” The other women joined her. Margot threw open the other door. Sophia’s underbutler lay at the bottom of the stairs a bloody wound to his head. He was surrounded by broken china, squashed macarons, and spilled tea. Saida rushed to check his injuries. Simultaneously heavy footsteps and angry voices sounded from the first floor and back toward the kitchens. The voices were not those of the Rutherford men. They were the rough, coarse voices from Sophia’s childhood—Seven Dials brutes and thieves.

“Here.” Margot shoved a fire poker into her hand.

Two dirty rough-dressed men appeared on the first-floor landing. A third one burst into the corridor that led to the kitchens followed by Slow Rutherford who grabbed him and slammed him into the wall, dislodging several paintings.

“There’s another one in the kitchens,” Slow Rutherford shouted. “He’s locked my brother in the pantry with Molly Black. Come here, you fucking cracksman.” He spun the man around and punched him in the face.

The two on the landing aimed their attention at Sophia. “That’s the one,” the short plump one cried. “Fetch her.” He shoved his muscled young compatriot toward the stairs. They both came running down into the foyer. Lily scurried out to help Saida drag an unconscious Short Rutherford into the drawing room. Margot and Gabrielle, each brandishing a jeweled stiletto, pushed Sophia behind them.

“Where did you get those?” Sophia moved around them and strode to meet the first man who reached the foyer. He lunged for her, and she brought the fire poker down on his head. He staggered back, and Gabrielle stepped behind him and stabbed him in the back of the thigh. She wrenched the stiletto across and he went down screaming. Sophia bashed him in the head again for good measure.

“Captain El,” Margot gasped, as she brandished her knife at the second man on the staircase. The muscled younger one fainted in one direction and reached for the stiletto with the other. Margot stabbed him in the hand, and he backhanded her so hard she fell on her arse and her stiletto slid across the marble floor. Lily and Saida came back into the foyer, each with a long silver candlestick in her hand.

Suddenly the younger ruffian wrapped his arm around Sophia and started to drag her toward the back of the house. She swung wildly behind her with the fire poker. She saw the man Gabrielle had stabbed crawling away from her. She was holding the side of her face. Lily and Saida went to her aid. The man Rutherford had been wrestling in the corridor broke free and ran into the foyer with the underbutler right behind him. A cold breeze blew into the foyer as the front door was slammed open.

“What the bloody—Shite!” A familiar voice cried out as Sophia felt her flailing fire poker connect with someone behind her. Suddenly she was free of the miscreant’s

grasp so quickly she fell to her knees. Margot grabbed her and they scooted across the floor toward the stairs. The man from the corridor had Slow Rutherford up against the wall, choking him. Lily and Saida flew to his defense, beating the man with the candlesticks and screaming vile obscenities the entire time. Gabrielle pulled herself up on the banister and held her stiletto at the ready.

When Sophia looked toward the door, she saw Joshua beating the man who'd grabbed her mercilessly. He rained blows on the man with his fists so quickly his hands appeared a blur. The man's face looked like raw meat. "Bugger me," Margot said as she and Sophia watched from their spots on the floor. "Your Mr. Norcross is a right bruiser." From the corner of her eye Sophia saw the portly housebreaker stagger to his feet with Margot's stiletto in his hand. He lumbered toward Joshua.

"Joshua, behind you!" She lurched to her feet. Joshua turned and the man stabbed the blade into his shoulder. He released the man he'd been beating, who crumpled senseless to the floor. The stiletto-wielding man stabbed Joshua again. He raised his hand for a third blow when the entire foyer echoed with a deafening roar. Smoke filled the air. Sophia ran to Joshua. His assailant staggered back and slid down the open front door. With Slow Rutherford's help Lily and Saida had his assailant trussed up like a Christmas goose with what looked like silk night rail sashes.

"Are you injured?" Joshua ran his bloodied hands over her body. "Did he hurt you?" His face was pale and he swayed on his feet. He glanced up at the first-floor balustrade. "You're a bloody good shot, Mrs. Collins."

"And you're bleeding all over Mrs. Hawksworth's floor." The ever-serene housekeeper came down the stairs her pistol aimed at the groaning man by the door. "The fourth man has fled, Rutherford. Let your brother out of the pantry and send him to Lady Camilla's to fetch Mr. Carrington-Bowles for our music master."

"Yes, Mrs. Collins." The poor man tried to put his livery to rights with little success.

“Then go next door, break up the card game in the still room and send Tall Rutherford to fetch the watch and Quick Rutherford to find Mr. Archer Colwyn, he’ll be at home or at Bow Street.” The underbutler limped toward the kitchens to do her bidding.

“He’s in an alley at the Prospect of Whitby,” Joshua said weakly. Sophia put her arm around his waist. He hissed in pain but leaned into her embrace. Mrs. Collins handed Lily the pistol and began to peel Joshua’s jacket off. She gave him an inquiring look. “It’s a long story,” he offered.

Sophia had so many questions, she had no idea what to ask first. However, she decided the questions could wait because all she could see was the knife going into Joshua’s body over and over. She reached up to touch his face, battered and bruised and now the most beloved face she’d ever known. She loved him, deeply, and with no end in sight.

Joshua perused the foyer and turned his gaze back to Sophia. “Framlingwood’s other mistresses?” he ventured with a ghost of a grin.

“You did not see them, Mr. Norcross,” Mrs. Collins said sternly. “They were never here. Ladies, I suggest you adjourn next door, and Mrs. Hawksworth and I will come up with a plausible explanation for all for all of this.” She glanced about the foyer and sighed. “And do take those pig stickers with you. Leave the pistol in my sitting room, Lily.” Margot retrieved the two stilettos, bobbed Joshua a cheeky curtsy and went to help Gabrielle into the drawing room. Lily and Saida gave the bound man a last kick each, curtsied to Joshua and followed the other two ladies into the drawing room where they could access the staircase and passageway to Lily’s house.

“Framlingwood really doesn’t know they know?” he asked, whilst Sophia and Mrs. Collins helped him up the stairs.

“He does not,” Mrs. Collins said. “And he will not. Nor will any of your cronies from university. I have more than one pistol.”

“No one will hear it from me,” he said with a groan as they reached his bedchamber door. “I’m very tired. Its quite dark in this corridor. Someone needs to light a lamp. I’m thirsty. Sophia? Did they hurt you, Sophia? I’ll kill them if they hurt you. He’s dead, you know. They don’t want you to...” He sagged into Sophia and Mrs. Collin’s arms. They half carried him to his bed between them. Mrs. Collins stripped back the counterpane and sheets. She went to his washstand and tossed a few thick pieces of toweling to Sophia.

“Put those under him once you get him out of those clothes,” she ordered. She poured water from the pitcher into the bowl and dropped some linen cloths into the water. “Sophia, you do not have time to be afraid. Do as I say.”

Sophia shook herself. The sight of Joshua so pale and still and covered in blood brought back so many different memories. She pulled off his boots and stripped off his clothes as quickly as she could. He groaned several times as she shifted him back and forth on the bed, but neither spoke nor opened his eyes. And she wanted to see his eyes. She wanted to gaze into them and tell him she loved him. She stroked his hair back from his face and fought the sting of tears behind her eyes.

Mrs. Collins bustled about the bed wiping the blood from his body and tucking the folded towel beneath his shoulder and his hip where he’d been stabbed. The wounds were clean, but deep. Trust the mistress of Goodrum's to provide her girls with sharp, well-made knives. The housekeeper gripped her elbow and shook her.

“You’ve seen this sort of thing before, Sophia. I know you love him, but you must steel yourself and help me.” She handed her the basin of bloody water. Throw that out the window and bring me more clean water.”

Sophia stared at her, dumbfounded as she gripped the basin tightly. “You know?” She strode to the window and raised the sash enough to pour the water into the garden below.

“I make it my business to know,” she said as she pressed clean linen cloths to the wounds to stop the blood. “How else do you think I manage this Drury Lane farce?”

The door burst open, and Young Rutherford stumbled in followed by a tall blond god of a man carrying a leather portmanteau. “Mr. Carrington-Bowles, Mrs. Collins.”

“She knows who I am,” the distinguished, exquisitely dressed gentleman said. “Run down and fetch the things I asked for.”

“Yes, sir.” The underbutler dashed out the door to do the gentleman’s bidding.

“Carrington-Bowles, Mrs. Hawksworth.” The gentleman offered her a bow before he went to Joshua’s bedside. “At your service. I understand you have had a rather exciting evening.”

“You could say that,” Sophia said, as she sat at the foot of the bed and rested her hand on Joshua’s foot. “You are a friend of Lord Framlingwood?”

“I am.” He pulled a silver tray from his bag and placed it on the bedside table. He placed a number of items on the tray and moved a lit candle closer. “I am also well-acquainted with your music master.” He ran a length of thread through the flame of the candle and then threaded a curved needle. With the warmest most comforting smile she’d ever see, he met Sophia’s gaze. “This is not the first time I have had to patch together the damage he’s done to his body.”

“Oh, dear,” she said quietly.



“Quite.” He began to sew Joshua’s side together with neat precise stitches. Rutherford came in with strips of muslin over his arm and a bottle in each hand. One of the bottles contained vinegar, the other Scots whisky. He handed the items to Mrs. Collins.

“Go down and help with the cleaning,” she told him. “Where are the three ruffians who instigated this misadventure?”

“The watch has them in the back of a cart. Taking them to Bow Street for Mr. Colwyn to see to I should think. The one you shot is going on like a bawling calf, but Molly Black took a look and she says he’ll live.”

She dismissed him with a nod. He walked, dragging his feet to the door. “I’m sorry I let them lock me in, Mrs. Hawksworth. I’m glad you and...I’m glad you weren’t hurt. Mrs. Collins, if you want to turn me away, I’d—”

“Do stubble it, lad,” she said as she began tearing the muslin into smaller strips. “I suspect your brothers will make you pay for your sins far better than I can.”

“Too bloody right,” Young Rutherford muttered as he closed the door behind him.

“How many brothers does he have in your employ?” the capable physician asked as he started to stitch Joshua’s shoulder. Sophia winced at each tug of the thread through Joshua’s flesh. He was still so wan and still. She reached up to touch his belly. His flesh was warm but not hot. No fever. Yet.

“He has four brothers and his father in the earl’s employ,” Mrs. Collins said. “The ruffians locked him in the pantry with one of the maids. I will allow you to decide what he and the maid were doing.”

Mr. Carrington-Bowles laughed. “Oh, he’s in for it for certain.” He glanced to where

Sophia's hand rested. "Too early to tell if he'll turn feverish. I have a few tricks to make that less likely. He's going to live, Mrs. Hawksworth. I promise you. His injuries are not nearly as bad as they look."

Tears began to roll down her cheeks. The gentleman pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She blotted her face and allowed a few hiccuping sobs. Mrs. Collins patted her back "You've had a fright, Sophia. You'll be fine and so will he."

Everything came rushing back to her at once. Her home had been broken into and not for the theft of goods or money. They'd come for her. Why? And what had Joshua meant?

"He said he's dead," she said out loud. Both the housekeeper and the physician froze. They gave each other a brief glance before they turned to Sophia.

"Who did, dear?" Mrs. Collins asked casually.

"Joshua. Mr. Norcross. He said he's dead you know. They don't want you to....to what? What did he mean by that?"

Mrs. Collins fixed her lips in a tight line. She didn't say a word.

"He was likely delirious," Mr. Carrington-Bowles said. "However, I would suggest you ask him when he awakens." His gaze lingered for a moment, then he set to wrapping the items from the silver tray in muslin and placed them in his bag. He and Mrs. Collins began to bandage Joshua's side.

I suggest you ask him.

An icy wind blew in from the open window. Sophia had experienced this sensation

only once before, the night she'd heard Edward was looking for her at Goodrum's. Her entire life had changed. And suddenly, she wasn't certain she wanted to know what Joshua meant.

Joshua had been awake for an hour at least. He'd pushed himself up against the pillows, biting back curses the entire time, and settled in to watch Sophia sleep. Her scent had reached him first. He'd thought himself dreaming when he inhaled the intoxicating mix of lilies and lemons she always wore. The minute his body decided to remind him of how he'd spent last night, he assumed he was not dreaming.

The various aches and pains faded once he opened his eyes and saw her golden hair a glorious mess on a small pillow resting on the mattress next to his hip. She had fallen asleep in the blue upholstered chair next to his bed, her head resting half on the pillow and half on her folded arms. He studied her face for any sign of injuries and heaved a sigh of relief when he saw none. However, he knew the terror she'd experienced at the men breaking into her home, her sanctuary she'd considered safe. The scars of that memory most likely would take a long time to heal.

The morning breeze wafted in from the open window and caressed his naked skin. The sheets had been drawn up to his waist and they clung to his flesh where he'd sweated through the night. The coolness of the air from outside felt good. If the light from the window was any indication, it was mid-morning. Grosvenor Street had always been fairly quiet, but he could hear a maid call to a footman and the rumble of a coal cart delivering coal to the houses across the street.

When he could resist no longer, he reached out and caressed Sophia's hair. She twitched and then jerked awake. "Joshua!" She threw herself onto his chest and kissed him. He savored her kiss and speared his aching hands through her hair. Suddenly she sat up and began patting his shoulder and side. "Did I hurt you? Let me

see if I started the bleeding again.”

“I’m perfectly fine. Oomf! Well, perhaps a little sore there. Ouch! And there,” he added as she slowly moved off his chest to sit at his side.

“Does it hurt here?” She touched his uninjured shoulder.

“No? Why? What the devil!” She’d punched him on that shoulder. Hard for such a slight woman.

“You could have been killed last night. What were you up to before you came home to rescue me?”

“Rescue you? I think you and those Amazon mistresses of Framlingwood’s were doing a damned good job of rescuing yourselves.”

“You’re not going to tell him, are you?” She appeared genuinely frightened and he hated that more than anything.

“I promised Mrs. Collins I would not tell a soul. I never break promises to women who threaten me with a pistol.” He entwined his fingers with hers. The soft press of her palm and the callouses of her harpist’s fingertips had imprinted themselves on him in such a way he would know her touch in the darkest night.

She brushed the fingers of her free hand across his bruised and broken knuckles and his swollen eye. “You didn’t do this downstairs last night. Where were you? The earl and two other gentlemen are in my drawing room waiting to come up and speak with you. One of those men is a Bow Street runner. “Oddly enough,” she continued. “They look almost as bad as you do.”

“It is a very long story, my love.” Her tone and the sharp focus of her gaze told him

she knew far more than she was saying.

“I am an excellent listener.” She tightened her grip on his hand. “Last night you said he’s dead you know. Who is dead?”

Joshua went as still as a statue. He did all he could to keep his face impassive. “I don’t know.” His heart squeezed tightly. He needed to tell her the truth, but if he did he’d have to tell her everything, dammit. She would despise him for it. “I don’t think I was in my right mind by the time I—”

A sharp rap at the door startled them both. Sophia dropped his hand and bent to give his nipple a quick kiss before she dropped into the chair and folded her hands in her lap.

“Vixen,” he growled. He pulled the counterpane to his waist. “What am I supposed to do with this?” He nodded at his hard cock poking up against the covers.

“Come in,” she said sweetly as she tossed her small pillow onto his lap.

Mrs. Collins stuck her head in the door. “You are awake, Mr. Norcross, and looking much better than you did last night. She step aside and allowed Framlingwood, Col, and Sythe into the room.

“I would not go that far, Mrs. Collins. He looks the same to me,” Col said, as he strode across the carpets. “Archer Colwyn, Mrs. Hawksworth.” He inclined his head.

“You would know best, Mr. Colwyn,” Mrs. Collins said grimly. “Sophia, let us leave the gentlemen to it.” The housekeeper all but lifted Sophia from the chair and steered her to the door.

“But, I...I suspect this conversation involves the events of last night.” Sophia stopped

in her tracks, hands on her hips. “What could you possibly say that I need not hear about three ruffians breaking into my house?”

“Stephen Forsythe, Mrs. Hawksworth.” Sythe offered her a bow. “Unfortunately, we need to discuss some delicate legal matters with Mr. Norcross. Once we have finished I am certain he will be able to explain the events of last night to you.”

She pursed her lips and glared at him in that stubborn way she had, and Joshua fought not to laugh. The barrister was no match for his Sophia. Framlingwood sidled next to her and put his arm around her. Joshua wanted to leap from the bed and plant the man a facer or two.

“Sophia, dear, we won’t be long. Perhaps you can go next door and practice whilst we sort this out.” His tone indicated he was not making a request which enraged Joshua all the more. He fisted the quilted silk counterpane so tightly, he felt the fabric shred.

“As you wish, my lord.” Sophia dipped a curtsy and followed Mrs. Collins out of the room.

“I assume you three are here to tell me how much more I have to lie to that woman to keep her and the rest of your mistresses safe.” Joshua crossed his arms and shifted on the bed to alleviate the ache in his side. “Who the devil hired those men to break in here last night? What did you find out about—”

“Do calm yourself, Norcross,” Sythe said, as he took the chair Sophia had vacated. He retrieved a sheaf of papers from his ever-present leather portfolio. “We are here to tell you everything we have learned about what occurred last night both here and in Seven Dials.”

Framlingwood pulled the wooden desk chair from the desk in the corner and sat down

on the other side of the bed. “We’re also here to tell you what you can and cannot tell Sophia about all of this.” Harp music began to drift in from the room next door. Another of Sophia’s compositions.

“The men who came here were hired by Martin Green,” Col said, as he sat on the blanket chest at the foot of the bed. “At least he paid them. But they were recommended to him by the man we are fairly certain is Framlingwood’s blackmailer. They’ve done work for this man before, though they don’t know his name or who he is.”

“The man in black,” Joshua murmured.

“The very same,” Sythe said. “He’s known to hire the worst thugs in Seven Dials, and he contacts them through Betty, the tavern wench, or at least he did before he murdered her and Martin Green last night.”

“You are certain then?”

“Dickie Jones saw him run to a hackney from that alley.”

“He didn’t see Dickie, did he?” Joshua had dragged the boy into the situation. He didn’t want him to be in danger.

“A question Lady Camilla, CB, and Nathaniel Charpentier asked me so many times I will hear them in my sleep if I am ever allowed back in my wife’s bed after showing up this morning looking as if I have been in a dockside melee in a tavern.” Sythe nodded toward Col.

The runner shook his head. “Dickie has sworn to all of us., including Lady Camilla, he was not seen.”



“You do look like you’ve been in a battle royal,” Framlingwood said. “Not as bad as Norcross here, but bad enough. Young Dickie will never admit it, but he was frightened out of his wits by what he saw. Even now he is tucked up in one of Lady Camilla’s opulent bedchambers being waited upon hand and foot.”

“Poor lad,” Norcross said with a grin. Then he sobered. “Why would the blackmailer murder a bumpkin like Green or someone like Betty? What harm could they do?”

“Any number of reasons,” Col said. “Most likely because his bringing Green into the mix almost got him caught. You put Dickie’s information to good use, Norcross. We got too close last night. The blackmailer cut his losses. And the thugs don’t know enough to hurt him. They were told to kill Sophia and bring her body to St. Giles in the Fields. Green had a vested interest in her being found and identified.” He cocked his head toward the music room. “She’s quite good, isn’t she?”

“What interest?” Joshua demanded. “What could be worth murdering an innocent woman and doing business with a man that ended up slitting his throat?” The wind picked up outside and rattled the window as it blew into the room. Joshua wanted to stand at the window and draw that cold air into his lungs because the more they talked, the more horrific the lies made him feel.

“A small estate in Kent and a large fortune in Drummond’s Bank.” Sythe plucked a few pages from the stack of papers he’d removed from his portfolio. “The will of one Hortense Green, widow of Lewis Green and aunt to Edward and Martin Green. The property was to go to Edward, and in the event of his death, to his widow, Mrs. Sophie Green.” He gathered a large handful of opened letters and tossed them on top of the will. “These are letters from the solicitor who was made executor of the will. Apparently, the late Martin Green did everything he could to persuade the man to allow him to inherit without proof that Edward’s wife was dead.”

Joshua scanned a few of the letters from the solicitor to Sophie’s brother-in-law.

“And when he refused, Martin decided to take care of matters himself. How did he find your blackmailer?”

“From what Colwyn can tell, the blackmailer found him.” Framlingwood ran his hands through his hair. “This man is more clever than I believed. I don’t know about these two.” He waved at Col and Sythe. “Apparently, he has people of every kind listening for mentions of one of my mistresses. When Martin Green asked about Sophia at St. Giles, someone carried the word to this blackmailer, and he ingratiated himself with this fool Green. This could have cost Sophia her life, Norcross. If you had not arrived when you did and dispatched the three men sitting in the Bow Street gaol...” He shook his head. “I can never repay you.”

Joshua swallowed hard and chose his next words carefully. “I had help from the Rutherfords and Mrs. Collins. I would advise you not to make her angry, Framlingwood. She’s a damned good shot.” They all laughed quietly at that.

“You hired me to discover if Sophia...Mrs. Hawksworth...is a murderess. Are you satisfied she did not murder her husband?”

“I never thought she did,” the earl said. “I know she didn’t.”

“Neither Col nor I need to hear this conversation.” Sythe packed up the solicitor’s letters, but left the will in Joshua’s lap. “She really is talented. That’s a lovely piece she is playing.”

“Her own composition,” Joshua said with pride.

Forsythe listened for a few more bars. “I think it’s time she’s told she’s an heiress. Come along, Col. My wife isn’t the only one liable to pitch a perfume bottle at us for being out all night. You live with the mysterious, dare I say dangerous, chess mistress of the infamous Goodrum’s.”

Col shook his head ruefully. “She throws chess pieces. Marble ones with sharp edges,” Col added, as he followed Sythe to the door. “You two have some decisions to make. But I would advise you not to tell Mrs. Hawksworth about the blackmail. Anyone who has knowledge of the situation could be in danger. The fewer people who know, the more likely we are to catch this fiend before he strikes again.”

Joshua and Framlingwood studied each other carefully in complete silence. The coal laden air of London began to invade the room. The clock on the mantel chimed the hour.

“Marriage sounds like a dangerous proposition,” Framlingwood finally said.

“For some, perhaps. If you did not suspect her of murdering her husband, whom did you suspect her of murdering?”

Framlingwood stood and strolled to the window. He glanced out and then turned back to Joshua. “I don’t know what she has told you of her life. She was raised in Seven Dials by a cruel father and married off to a monster of a husband. I’m not certain how she escaped or what she did whilst working at Goodrum’s.” He shrugged. “A woman in desperate straits will do desperate things. Whichever of my mistresses, if any of them, turns out to be a murderess she’ll have had her reasons, and I will do whatever I must to keep her safe.”

“You’re a decent man, Framlingwood.” Joshua meant every word. He was a singular sort, even for a man with a title, but he did the best he could.

“So are you. Will you tell her everything?” The earl fixed Joshua with a steady gaze, and he realized at once the man knew. He knew Joshua was in love with Sophia.

“Yes. She deserves to know everything. I won’t lie to her anymore.”

“She may hate you for it. And with her inheritance, she doesn’t need either of us. She’ll run. To Kent or further with the kind of money she has now.”

“I don’t want her to need me. I want her to want me. At least this time when she runs she’ll be running to something, not away from something.”

“And that will make her running palatable to you?” The earl made his way to the door.

“Absolutely not. It will likely break me. Framlingwood?”

“Yes?”

“How do you know she didn’t kill her husband?”

His face turned stony. His mouth twisted into a grim smile. “Last night wasn’t the first time Dickie Jones and I walked away from a body at the back of the Prospect of Whitby.”

Joshua was stunned for a moment, but only for a moment. “You killed him.”

The earl simply gave a regal nod.

“Good.” Joshua took a deep breath. “Can you stop by the music room and send Sophia to me?”

“Certainly.” He opened the door, but did not look back. “Good luck, Norcross.”

Joshua dropped his head back against the pillows. He was going to need more than luck. He was going to need a damned miracle.

11

I trusted you.

The words screamed through her mind though Sophia did not utter a word. She'd known the moment she walked back into Joshua's bedchamber that her world had changed. His grim expression and the dead tone of his voice were all the warning she needed. Or so she thought. He'd asked her to listen and she could scarcely believe all he'd said. Through it all, however, one truth rang like a death knell moving from church to church.

Joshua had lied to her.

The earl had lied to her.

Her brother-in-law had sent men to kill her over an inheritance she would have gladly given him.

Edward was dead, and the two men she'd believed in the most had suspected her of killing him.

"Sophia, please say something." Joshua reached for her hand resting on the counterpane. She snatched her hand back and cradled it to her chest as if burned. His pained expression at her rejection should have moved her. It did not. She wondered if anything might move her ever again.

"What would you have me say? You invaded my home, invaded my...life to discover

my secrets by any means necessary so that the earl might discover if I murdered my husband. What am I to say to that, Joshua?" She clasped her hands together in her lap so tightly she shook.

"We never believed you to be a murderess, Sophia. Neither of us." He spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "Someone was threatening you. The earl...we wanted to find out why and who. I was here to protect you in case the worst happened, and it almost did."

"Well, thank goodness your plan was successful." She did not even try to keep the bitter bite from her words. "You knew I lived in fear of Edward finding me, and you knew all along he was dead. Neither of you thought to tell me because you thought I already knew, didn't you?"

"Dammit, Sophia, I knew the moment I met you, the moment I heard you play you could never take anyone's life. I should have told you the minute you told me the truth about leaving him. And Framlingwood has made it clear he has always known you did not kill the vicar."

"How? How has he always known? My father beat my mother to death. My husband whipped me to the point I could not move. Why wouldn't I become a murderer?"

"Because I love you, Sophia!" he shouted. "I love you, and I know your heart better than I know my own. That is how I know."

She stood so abruptly, the chair tilted and nearly fell over. "How can you say you love me when every word out of your mouth since you came into this house is a lie?" She stormed to the door and then back again. "Why, Joshua?" Her voice broke. "Why did you deceive me? You were the one man I thought would never betray me, and you have. For money."

“There will be no money, Sophia. I will take nothing from the earl. I’ve already told him so.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You earned your wages. Take them.”

He hung his head. “I cannot. Money makes people do desperate things, but the price of earning the earl’s money was too high.”

She strode to the bedside table and picked up the papers he’d handed her when he explained her inheritance. Right before he told her the brother-in-law who tried to have her killed was also dead. “Perhaps you believe I killed Edward’s brother for this. Money makes people do desperate things.”

“You had nothing to do with Martin Green’s death, and you know it. We both know it. I told you what happened, exactly as it happened. I can summon Archer Colwyn to vouch for my account if you like.” She could not breathe. In spite of the open window and the low fire in the hearth. Her skin burned hot against her clothes but inside she was cold, colder than she’d ever been in her life.

“That won’t be necessary. And neither will this inheritance. I don’t want anything to do with Edward Green or his family.” She dropped the papers back on the table and struggled not to run but walk toward the door. She could not stay in the room with him and watch the sorrow and anguish on his face. If she did, she’d forgive him, and she was done with forgiving men for treating her like a helpless fool. She wasn’t helpless. She and the other ladies had fended off men intent on her murder. They’d all survived things that would have killed most women and some men.

“It is necessary. This inheritance gives you a choice.”

She stopped in her tracks. “What choice?”

“You need be no man’s mistress, Sophia. No man’s...wife. You’re free.”

She turned to look at him, taking in every sharp line of his face, every emotion that crossed his features.

“I understand your anger with me. I deserve every bit of your rage and more. But don’t let your anger cloud your vision of what this money means for you. You can do anything you want now, my love. Anything. You’d need never depend on a man again.”

“Is that what you want me to do?” She held her breath. What did she want him to say? What was she afraid he might say?

“I want you to do what will make you happy. I have wanted that from the first time you kissed me.” He gave her a sad half smile.

Her heart sank, and she didn’t know why. “I thought I finally knew what would make me happy. I don’t any longer.” Their eyes met and held for an eternity. She blinked back tears.

“I’m so sorry, Sophia. I was supposed to protect you.”

“I know. The pity is...you couldn’t protect me from yourself.” She returned to his bedside and swept the papers from the table. “Mr. Carrington-Bowles says you should be well n a few days. I expect you to find other lodgings by the end of the week. Goodbye, Mr. Norcross.”

She left the room uninterested in what he tried to say as she left. With the papers from the solicitor clutched to her chest, she walked past a maid at her work, past Short Rutherford who opened his mouth to speak and then backed away with a bow. Her expression was of no concern to her now. She was done with putting on the pleasant,



happy expression of a well-kept woman. She was done with lies. And she was done with ever hoping her heart might come to life again.

Once in her chambers she settled into her window seat and rested her head against the cool glass. The garden was sleeping now. She tried to read the papers from the solicitor, but the words all ran together. The pages slipped from her fingers onto the floor, and the tears she'd been holding back slipped down her face in a steady flow as painful sobs wracked her body.

What a fool she'd been to ever think herself worthy of grand passion and quiet happiness.

Early November

Grosvenor Street – London

Sophia wondered if the others truly believed she could not hear them whispering, or if their intention was for her to hear every word. Lily, the former actress, was incapable of anything lower than a stage whisper. Which meant even Rutherford at his post out in the foyer likely heard her. She tried to return to her book, but as they were discussing her, Sophia thought it only polite to add to the conversation.

“I never leave the house,” she said with a feigned ease. “The fact I have not gone out in the last few days, therefore, is insignificant.” She did not look up from her book. There was no need. Lily, Margot, Saida, and Gabrielle rose from their seats and descended upon her like a flock of colorful silk-and-lace-clad birds. They settled onto ottomans and chaises around her and stared at her as if she were about to say something of vital importance.

“You haven't left the house in two weeks,” Margot said. “Not since the day you stood in the street and watched Mr. Norcross's belongings being carted off to his new

address.”

“I did not stand in the street. Mrs. Collins would have apoplexy if I did something so foolish.” She closed her book and studied the faces of her friends. “I merely stood in the door and made certain everything was loaded onto the cart correctly. Shall I have Short Rutherford build up the fire and bring some tea?” She got up and went to tug the bell pull. The cold bothered her more these days. It was November, true, but she’d discovered a bed without Joshua in it, a house without him in it, was as cold as a one-room hovel in Seven Dials, if not colder.

“So long as he brings some of those macarons,” Gabrielle said from her place on the ottoman at Margot’s feet.

“And the seed cakes Cook made yesterday,” Saida added.

“Some of those blackberry tarts would not go amiss,” Lily said as she leaned over to study the word Saida pointed out in her book.

Rutherford opened one of the doors and leaned into the room. “Yes, Mrs. Hawksworth?”

“Could you have Cook prepare a tea tray for us. Tell her to put every sweet in the pantry on it.” Sophia smiled as a couple of the ladies stuck their tongues out at her. “And when you bring the tray could you build up the fire?”

“Still cold?” His question was sincere, but his tone was sympathetic and kind.

“Very much,” she said so only he might hear. He nodded and went to do as she’d asked.

“Have you decided, Sophie, dear?” Lily asked.

“Decided?” Sophia returned to her seat and wrapped the large woolen shawl around her shoulders.

“About your inheritance? What will you do? Will you leave us for your country estate? Stay here as the earl’s mistress? Go after that handsome music master before you pine away?”

“I am not...” Her voice caught. “I am not pining away. He lied to me. About everything. And contrary to what you might believe, a man who loves a woman would never lie to her.”

They burst into gales of laughter. Now it was her turn to stick out her tongue.

“Says the woman who knows nothing of love and even less of men,” Gabrielle said with a grin.

“I know enough about love.” Sophia’s bitterness had grown every day over the last two weeks. “I know I want nothing to do with it. Passion gives men an excuse to be cruel, and love gives them free reign to lie and betray a woman’s trust.”

“Did he offer an apology?” Saida asked. “For the lies and deception, did he offer an apology?”

“Of course he did,” Lily said. “They always do.” She rolled her eyes.

“Yes, but sometimes...they truly mean it. And sometimes that is all it takes for them to learn never to lie to you again.” They all turned to stare at their Moroccan friend. Rutherford chose that moment to back into the room bearing a large, heavily laden tray. Mrs. Collins followed him with a sealed packet in hand. The underbutler settled the tray on the low table in their midst and then set about building up the fire.

“Lord Framlingwood sent this over by footman.” She handed the packet to Sophia who took it and turned it over and over in her hand.

“What is it?” she asked as she looked up at the housekeeper.

“I would not presume to guess, Mrs. Hawksworth. Perhaps you should open it?”

Sophia continued to stare at the thick sealed missive. She wanted there to be some word of Joshua under that seal. She’d barely had a moment in the last two weeks when she did not ache for even the briefest word. The house was empty without him. She’d not touched her harp since she’d strolled into the music room after all of his belongings had been packed up and taken away. All save the two books his mother had given him. He’d left them on her seat at the Erard harp with a torn piece of lined music paper. For my beautiful muse. These belong with you.

“Oh, for pity’s sake!” Lily snatched the packet from Sophia’s hand and broke the seal.

“Lily, really.” Margot tried to snatch the opened letter away only to spill out several documents onto the carpets. Gabrielle scooped up the papers. Margot handed the letter to Sophia.

My dear Sophia,

Coward that I am I allowed Norcross to take the brunt of your anger for lies, deceptions, and manipulations that were in no small part my own. There is no excuse I can give worthy of righting the wrong I have done you. My sole aim was, as it has always been, to keep you safe. I made a muddle of the methods, but I hope you will forgive me and in that forgiveness, find it in your heart to forgive Norcross as well. You two are more alike than you know. You have both borne wounds you never earned, you have both continued to cling to hope, something which I have yet to

master. And you both have dreams so worthy of pursuit you have sometimes done things you regret to achieve them—you, your freedom and he, his opera house. He refuses to allow me to help him with his dream, but I can help you to achieve yours. Our contract is ended, but the house on Grosvenor Street and the contents are yours to live in or dispose of as you wish. A poor apology for my duplicity, but I hope you will accept it nonetheless.

Yours if ever you should have need of me,

D

She stared at the letter in disbelief. Margot handed her the other papers. One was the contract she had signed with the earl. The other was the deed to her Grosvenor Street house. She was well and truly free.

“He has given her the house,” Margot said quietly. “And her congé.”

They all sat in stunned silence. Mrs. Collins moved to the table and poured cups of tea which they handed around. Lily filched a macaron and bit into the confection with a loud crunch. They all laughed, save Mrs. Collins who looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Hawksworth,” the housekeeper said. “I am very happy for you, that is, if this makes you happy.”

“I don’t know what makes me happy, Mrs. Collins. I don’t know if I ever will.” She could not catch her breath. Sobs built up in her chest, but she refused to let them out.

“Of course you will, my dear. You think on it. I’m certain it will come to you.” She drew a folded program from her pinafore pocket and handed it to Sophia. “Man your post, Rutherford. We don’t want anymore unwanted visitors.” She turned and walked

toward the doors into the foyer. If I show the earl another bill to replace dented silver candlesticks and a broken fire poker we shall all be turned off without a character.”

“What is it?” Saida asked as the other ladies crowded around her.

“A program from the Vauxhall benefit concert.” Sophia’s finger shook as she traced down the list of musical selections. An Appreciation of Beauty by Anonymous. “I wrote this piece,” she told them. “He arranged for a famous harpist to play this at the concert. A piece I wrote. Because he thought it would make me happy.”

“You must forgive him, Sophie. You must.” Margot squeezed her hand. The others nodded in agreement.

“What if I can’t?” Sophia swallowed hard and crumpled the program to her chest. “What then?” she asked, her words an agonized whisper.

“Then you must resign yourself to a life alone in two houses—one in London and one in Kent. Because no man will ever measure up to this.” She tapped the crumpled program.

Every moment, every lie, every betrayal, and every secret desire flashed into Sophia’s mind. She’d lived in fear so long she had no idea how not to be afraid, not to be ashamed. The problem with praying for things was when all of her prayers were answered what could she possibly dare to pray for next?

“That is not helpful, Margot,” Lily said with a dramatic sigh.

“Who said I was trying to be fucking helpful? Well, Sophia? What is a lady to do when the world finally allows her to do anything she desires?”

“This won’t do. Won’t do at all, Norcross.”

Joshua glanced up from his seat at the piano and dropped his quill on the quill rest. “What now, Maestro? Are you ever going to allow me to finish transcribing these parts?” He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the dim light peeking through the dirty window of the King’s Theatre room where he’d been toiling for weeks to make money to pay his rent and a few of his creditors.

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“Bollocks.” Joshua sat up and glared at the man. “I’ve done the work and I need the money.”

“Of course you need the money. We all need the money. And frankly, most of those swells and pretentious grande dames of society who attend the opera will never know the difference, but I will. And so will you. If you ever hope to open your own house you must—”

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“You send your laundry to a brothel?”

“That brothel is run by the current Duchess of Chelmsford, as well you know. Woman frightens the wits out of me, but the club is the furthest thing from a brothel.”



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“Actually, you have a bath to take. I’ve had one drawn for you in one of the dressing rooms. If you tell the diva occupying that room I will deny it and let her devour you with a bottle of wine and some syllabub.” He took Joshua’s arm and dragged him to his feet.

“A bath? Are you mad?” He stumbled along in the conductor’s wake.

“No, I am offended by your smell. As are a number of the musicians, several of the maids and at least one high-in-the-instep tenor.” He stopped at one of the dressing rooms and pushed at the worn green door. “I am also having some food brought up to you. Eat it. Lie down for a bit and then send for me. We will talk.”

“Talk?” Joshua stood in the middle of the room and eyed the large copper bath set up before a small fireplace. Steam rose off the filled tub. A cake of soap, a flannel and a bath sheet were sitting on a stool next to the bath. “About what?”

“How and where you surrendered your bollocks and how you might go about retrieving them. Try fishing about in the bath. Perhaps you’ll find them. Bath. Now.” The cheeky bastard waved as he went out and slammed the door behind himself.

Joshua stripped off his boots and clothes and simply let them fall to the floor. He stepped into the bath and slowly sat down, allowing the steamy water to sink into his bones. Something about the sensation was familiar and then he remembered. Sophia had watched him step out of his bath the first night he spent in her house. She’d watched him do other things as well. Lying in his arms one night, with a great deal of laughter she’d explained the viewing window between the music room and his bedchamber. After her description of her use of the ivory phallus he’d rolled her beneath him and fucked her until they were both exhausted.

Not a good memory for a man who had walked away from what was most likely his only chance at happiness. Chance. He'd had so many chances to tell her the truth, but he'd failed. Why? Pride? Arrogance? Fear. Not of much use when he'd lost her anyway. Her face when he'd told her the truth, leaving out the part about the blackmailer, was forever in his mind. He saw that face on waking and before finally dozing off to sleep. The face of a woman who might have loved him, but now never would.

The problem was not with his bollocks. The problem was with the other part of his anatomy he'd left with her—his heart. And with his heart his joy in composing and creating music. He'd poked great fun at poets who spoke of their muse leaving them. A ridiculous notion. Creating was about skill, practice, and talent. Nothing more. Or so he'd always believed. How had Sophia held onto her music when her father punched her and deprived her of food? How had she held on when her husband had beaten her for being so beautiful? She was stronger than he was, that much was certain.

He climbed out of the bath and used the bath sheet to vigorously scrub the water from his body. Somehow the simple act of bathing had revived him. He sniffed. And had rendered him less offensive to be sure. When the food arrived, he sat on the diva's leather chaise wrapped in the bath sheet and ate every bite. He conceded he would likely survive without Sophia. He might even reclaim his music at some point. But the rest? The passion, the joy, the laughter, and the appreciation of life Sophia brought him? Those were gone forever, and he'd have to grow accustomed to that.

"Fuck." He dropped the fork onto the plate and held his head in his hands.

"Not interested," Raleigh said. When had he come into the room? "Thanks all the same. Now. Who is this woman who has custody of your bollocks, and how might we bring her back into your life?" The conductor stood over him arms folded across his chest.

“She is the woman for whom I gave up the money for my opera house and any hope of ever obtaining the money. The woman who will never have anything to do with me ever again. Satisfied? And if she has my bollocks they are either roasting over a fire or beaten flat with a fire poker. She’s the very devil with a fire poker.”

Raleigh tossed clean breeches and a clean linen shirt at him. “You buggered it up good and proper, didn’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

“You might very well be surprised on that count, Norcross.” Raleigh’s quiet pointed tone had Joshua looking up at him in surprise.

“We have to learn to live with our mistakes, even if we don’t enjoy living the way we once did. Go home. Get some sleep. Come back tomorrow.”

“Are you going to tell me I will feel better in time, better after losing a woman like Sophia?” Joshua drew the shirt over his head and stepped into the breeches.

“Not a bloody chance in hell of that, my friend. Not for men who love like we do. We simply grow better at lying to ourselves.”

“Lying to her is what got me into this.” He buttoned up his falls and pulled on his boots.

“Then you’re well on your way, aren’t you?”

Joshua was awakened by a fierce pounding on the door of his rooms at Albany. Once he decided the noise was not from a throbbing head, he rolled out of bed and vowed to murder the man who had awakened him from his dream of loving Sophia. He stumbled in the dark until he found a lamp and managed to light it from a candle

shoved into the simmering coals in his hearth. What time was it? He'd come home from King's Theatre at midday. Apparently he'd slept the entire afternoon and into the evening.

"What?" he roared as he flung the door open. The majordomo of Albany stood with his fist poised to knock again. In his other fist he held fast to the jacket collar of a twisting, kicking, swearing creature Joshua recognized all too well.

"This person says he was sent to deliver a message to you and he refuses to put it into my hand."

"Buggering shite don't understand plain English. I was told to deliver this to Mr. Norcross and no one else." He squirmed out of his jacket and danced into the room just out of the servant's reach.

"I've got him, Bates. Thank you." The majordomo sniffed and dropped the jacket into Joshua's outstretched hand as if it were a dead rat.

"Nice to see you, Dickie. Who is this message from and what does it involve this time? Being beaten by a mob at the Lamb and Flag or having my throat cut in a Seven Dials alley?"

"Could go either way, guv'. Lady Camilla's carriage is downstairs waiting for us. Best tidy yourself up a bit." He waved at Joshua's untucked shirt and bare feet.

"Where are we going or do I want to know?" He walked into his bedroom and sat down to put on his boots. He tucked in his shirt and picked up his last clean jacket from the hook behind the door.

"Likely not. Move yer arse. I don't have all night." They trotted down the stairs side by side. Joshua saluted the coachman and ducked into the carriage. The coachman

whistled the horses into motion before he and Dickie even had a chance to drop onto the front-facing seat.

“Are we going to Seven Dials?” he asked as he felt the carriage turn toward Covent Garden. The streets were a bit crowded with carriages. People going to the theatres and various other entertainments that drew the rich and titled from their homes on the west side of London. His brother was likely among them. As grandsons of a marquess they were moderately qualified to rub elbows with members of the ton.

“Dickie if we’re going to Seven Dials I’m going to stop by St. Giles and see if the Lord God will accompany us. I’m convinced we may need his help after what happened last time.”

Dickie snorted. “God never ventures this far out of St. Giles, guv’. Trust me. Not unless he wants some buzman to pick his pockets.”

“Lovely.” The carriage turned down a quieter street. Joshua tried to get his bearings. “Have you heard anything of Mrs. Hawksworth?” He tried for an uninterested tone, with only a modicum of success.

“Some. She’s set to go to Kent to see the place wot she inherited in a few weeks’ time. And that earl, Framlingwood, he gave her the house on Grosvenor Street too. She’s a grand lady now.”

“That’s good.” Joshua’s heart stuttered and then dropped somewhere around his feet. “I’m happy for her.”

“You don’t sound happy.” Dickie looked him up and down suspiciously.

“Well I am.” Joshua shifted on his seat and pushed the curtain aside. “Where the hell are we—” The carriage lurched to a halt. Joshua flung the door open and jumped out

without the steps. “Where am I supposed to...go?” He recognized this place. Just off Maiden Lane and near the Adelphi stood the building he’d hoped to purchase for his opera house.

“In there guv’. She’s waiting for you. Try not to bugger this up.” Dickie closed the door, slumped against the seat, and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

She?

For some reason Joshua could not make his feet move faster. He walked down the side street. Torches flickered in iron sconces on either side of the entrance. With a turn of the handle the doors opened into the dusty entrance hall. Once he stepped inside, he heard harp music. His heart beat to the point he felt it might burst from his chest. He climbed the elegant steps to the first floor and entered the theatre. The stage was fully lit, and seated on one side was his beautiful Sophia in the gown she’d worn to Vauxhall. She was playing the piece she’d written, the one Elias Alvars had played on that incredible night. Joshua managed to make his way to a seat on the front row, just behind the pit.

She played as she always did, eyes closed, body moving with the music. Her fingers flitted, stroked, and plucked with speed and grace. She’d had her Erard brought here to play for him. At least he hoped she played for him. Perhaps he’d gotten ahead of himself. He forced his mind to clear. When she finished the piece, he stood and applauded. She rose like a swan leaving the water and slid into a deep, graceful curtsy.

“Ah, Mr. Norcross,” she said, as she beckoned him onto the stage. “I have a proposition for you.”

He climbed the steps and kept his hands at his sides. She sat back down and gazed up at him, her face utterly unreadable. “I am at your disposal, Mrs. Hawksworth.”

“Excellent.” She rested one hand flat against the strings of her harp. “As you know I have recently come into a great deal of money and some property.”

He nodded, afraid to speak.

“I have quite recently purchased this little theatre.”

His jaw dropped. He made a few sounds, but no words came out of his mouth.

“No need to speak. Just listen very carefully.” Her face was solemn, but her eyes sparked. She was enjoying this. Very much. “I am in search of a composer in residence to compose operas suitable to be performed in a theatre this size. You come highly recommended, Mr. Norcross. Are you interested?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Hawksworth. I would be honored. I...I don’t know what to say.” His knees went wobbly. He could not fall down. If he did, he’d never rise again. He’d lay there at her feet.

“Perfect.” She retrieved a set of papers from the floor on the other side of her chair. “Here is the contract between us.”

He took the papers and began to read. The contract was a partnership, a partnership between Joshua Norcross and Sophia Hallensby, her true name before her marriage. There was a great deal of legal language, not that it mattered. He’d sign anything that allowed him to see her, even if only every now and then. He turned to the last page, but there was another piece of parchment behind that. He stared at the words, blinked, and read them again.

“This is a special license.” His legs did give way then. He dropped onto the stage, holding the special license tightly in his hand. She left her chair to kneel beside him in a pool of spangled and satin skirts. She should be laughing at his idiocy, but her

face was deeply in earnest.

“Our contract as business partners has a great many stipulations. Our marriage will have but one. Never lie to me again, Joshua. Never. I trust you in every other thing our marriage might bring along, but you have damaged my trust, and I could not bear for you to do so again. Can you promise me you will never lie to me again? Can you love me as much as I love you?”

“Framlingwood killed your husband. Dickie was somehow involved. I am glad he did it, and I will never tell another soul. And now I can promise never to lie to you again. He went up on his knees and took her hands in his. Though I cannot promise to love you as much as you love me. I can only promise to love you more.”

She clutched his hands and shook her head. “The earl killed...Edward?”

“Not long after you became his mistress. I know no more than that. He made me promise not to tell you, but I will tell you anything it is in my power to tell you if you will marry me.”

She nodded at the special license on the floor next to them. “I believe I asked you first?”

He laughed. “Why? Why do you want to marry me after all I have done?”

“Will it make you happy?”

“More than anything this world or the next has to offer.” He could not breathe, but he didn’t care.

“I have become a lady of means, and as that I can do anything I desire. I am free. And I desire you and to be happy all the days of our lives.”



“An uncanny coincidence, my love, that is all I have ever desired since the moment I met you.” Joshua pulled her into his arms and covered her lips in a tender kiss. He brushed his mouth across hers over and over. She flicked her tongue against his top lip, and he sank his tongue into her mouth. He caressed her back and cupped her head in his hands. He didn’t know what he’d ever done to deserve her. He’d spend his life thinking of ways. He’d—

“Oy, bleeding hell, guv’. You don’t tup a lady like Mrs. Hawksworth on a hard stage, at least not with an audience and someone paying plenty of blunt. Yer take her home to bed.”

Joshua and Sophia ended their kiss in a bout of laughter, joyous and unbridled. He jumped to his feet and pulled her into his arms. “Home to bed sounds like a very good idea,” he said. “What say you, my love?”

“Take me home, Joshua. Take me home.”

“Come fetch these papers, Dickie. We’ll need them as soon as possible.”

“Not for nufink I won’t,’ he grumbled, and stomped past them. “Lady asks me to drag some cove down here for her to propose and now I’ve got to fetch and carry like some bloody footman. Yer a lucky feller, Mr. Norcross. I had money on her not every speaking to you again.”

“You lost your money, Dickie,” Joshua said as he placed Sophia into the carriage. “And I found my fortune, all the fortune I’ll ever need. Hurry up, lad. The lady and I are ready to go home.”

- THE END -

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“How and where you surrendered your bollocks and how you might go about retrieving them. Try fishing about in the bath. Perhaps you’ll find them. Bath. Now.” The cheeky bastard waved as he went out and slammed the door behind himself.

Joshua stripped off his boots and clothes and simply let them fall to the floor. He stepped into the bath and slowly sat down, allowing the steamy water to sink into his bones. Something about the sensation was familiar and then he remembered. Sophia had watched him step out of his bath the first night he spent in her house. She’d watched him do other things as well. Lying in his arms one night, with a great deal of laughter she’d explained the viewing window between the music room and his bedchamber. After her description of her use of the ivory phallus he’d rolled her beneath him and fucked her until they were both exhausted.

Not a good memory for a man who had walked away from what was most likely his only chance at happiness. Chance. He'd had so many chances to tell her the truth, but he'd failed. Why? Pride? Arrogance? Fear. Not of much use when he'd lost her anyway. Her face when he'd told her the truth, leaving out the part about the blackmailer, was forever in his mind. He saw that face on waking and before finally dozing off to sleep. The face of a woman who might have loved him, but now never would.

The problem was not with his bollocks. The problem was with the other part of his anatomy he'd left with her—his heart. And with his heart his joy in composing and creating music. He'd poked great fun at poets who spoke of their muse leaving them. A ridiculous notion. Creating was about skill, practice, and talent. Nothing more. Or so he'd always believed. How had Sophia held onto her music when her father punched her and deprived her of food? How had she held on when her husband had beaten her for being so beautiful? She was stronger than he was, that much was certain.

He climbed out of the bath and used the bath sheet to vigorously scrub the water from his body. Somehow the simple act of bathing had revived him. He sniffed. And had rendered him less offensive to be sure. When the food arrived, he sat on the diva's leather chaise wrapped in the bath sheet and ate every bite. He conceded he would likely survive without Sophia. He might even reclaim his music at some point. But the rest? The passion, the joy, the laughter, and the appreciation of life Sophia brought him? Those were gone forever, and he'd have to grow accustomed to that.

"Fuck." He dropped the fork onto the plate and held his head in his hands.

"Not interested," Raleigh said. When had he come into the room? "Thanks all the same. Now. Who is this woman who has custody of your bollocks, and how might we bring her back into your life?" The conductor stood over him arms folded across his chest.

“She is the woman for whom I gave up the money for my opera house and any hope of ever obtaining the money. The woman who will never have anything to do with me ever again. Satisfied? And if she has my bollocks they are either roasting over a fire or beaten flat with a fire poker. She’s the very devil with a fire poker.”

Raleigh tossed clean breeches and a clean linen shirt at him. “You buggered it up good and proper, didn’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

“You might very well be surprised on that count, Norcross.” Raleigh’s quiet pointed tone had Joshua looking up at him in surprise.

“We have to learn to live with our mistakes, even if we don’t enjoy living the way we once did. Go home. Get some sleep. Come back tomorrow.”

“Are you going to tell me I will feel better in time, better after losing a woman like Sophia?” Joshua drew the shirt over his head and stepped into the breeches.

“Not a bloody chance in hell of that, my friend. Not for men who love like we do. We simply grow better at lying to ourselves.”

“Lying to her is what got me into this.” He buttoned up his falls and pulled on his boots.

“Then you’re well on your way, aren’t you?”

Joshua was awakened by a fierce pounding on the door of his rooms at Albany. Once he decided the noise was not from a throbbing head, he rolled out of bed and vowed to murder the man who had awakened him from his dream of loving Sophia. He stumbled in the dark until he found a lamp and managed to light it from a candle

shoved into the simmering coals in his hearth. What time was it? He'd come home from King's Theatre at midday. Apparently he'd slept the entire afternoon and into the evening.

"What?" he roared as he flung the door open. The majordomo of Albany stood with his fist poised to knock again. In his other fist he held fast to the jacket collar of a twisting, kicking, swearing creature Joshua recognized all too well.

"This person says he was sent to deliver a message to you and he refuses to put it into my hand."

"Buggering shite don't understand plain English. I was told to deliver this to Mr. Norcross and no one else." He squirmed out of his jacket and danced into the room just out of the servant's reach.

"I've got him, Bates. Thank you." The majordomo sniffed and dropped the jacket into Joshua's outstretched hand as if it were a dead rat.

"Nice to see you, Dickie. Who is this message from and what does it involve this time? Being beaten by a mob at the Lamb and Flag or having my throat cut in a Seven Dials alley?"

"Could go either way, guv'. Lady Camilla's carriage is downstairs waiting for us. Best tidy yourself up a bit." He waved at Joshua's untucked shirt and bare feet.

"Where are we going or do I want to know?" He walked into his bedroom and sat down to put on his boots. He tucked in his shirt and picked up his last clean jacket from the hook behind the door.

"Likely not. Move yer arse. I don't have all night." They trotted down the stairs side by side. Joshua saluted the coachman and ducked into the carriage. The coachman

whistled the horses into motion before he and Dickie even had a chance to drop onto the front-facing seat.

“Are we going to Seven Dials?” he asked as he felt the carriage turn toward Covent Garden. The streets were a bit crowded with carriages. People going to the theatres and various other entertainments that drew the rich and titled from their homes on the west side of London. His brother was likely among them. As grandsons of a marquess they were moderately qualified to rub elbows with members of the ton.

“Dickie if we’re going to Seven Dials I’m going to stop by St. Giles and see if the Lord God will accompany us. I’m convinced we may need his help after what happened last time.”

Dickie snorted. “God never ventures this far out of St. Giles, guv’. Trust me. Not unless he wants some buzman to pick his pockets.”

“Lovely.” The carriage turned down a quieter street. Joshua tried to get his bearings. “Have you heard anything of Mrs. Hawksworth?” He tried for an uninterested tone, with only a modicum of success.

“Some. She’s set to go to Kent to see the place wot she inherited in a few weeks’ time. And that earl, Framlingwood, he gave her the house on Grosvenor Street too. She’s a grand lady now.”

“That’s good.” Joshua’s heart stuttered and then dropped somewhere around his feet. “I’m happy for her.”

“You don’t sound happy.” Dickie looked him up and down suspiciously.

“Well I am.” Joshua shifted on his seat and pushed the curtain aside. “Where the hell are we—” The carriage lurched to a halt. Joshua flung the door open and jumped out



without the steps. “Where am I supposed to...go?” He recognized this place. Just off Maiden Lane and near the Adelphi stood the building he’d hoped to purchase for his opera house.

“In there guv’. She’s waiting for you. Try not to bugger this up.” Dickie closed the door, slumped against the seat, and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

She?

For some reason Joshua could not make his feet move faster. He walked down the side street. Torches flickered in iron sconces on either side of the entrance. With a turn of the handle the doors opened into the dusty entrance hall. Once he stepped inside, he heard harp music. His heart beat to the point he felt it might burst from his chest. He climbed the elegant steps to the first floor and entered the theatre. The stage was fully lit, and seated on one side was his beautiful Sophia in the gown she’d worn to Vauxhall. She was playing the piece she’d written, the one Elias Alvars had played on that incredible night. Joshua managed to make his way to a seat on the front row, just behind the pit.

She played as she always did, eyes closed, body moving with the music. Her fingers flitted, stroked, and plucked with speed and grace. She’d had her Erard brought here to play for him. At least he hoped she played for him. Perhaps he’d gotten ahead of himself. He forced his mind to clear. When she finished the piece, he stood and applauded. She rose like a swan leaving the water and slid into a deep, graceful curtsy.

“Ah, Mr. Norcross,” she said, as she beckoned him onto the stage. “I have a proposition for you.”

He climbed the steps and kept his hands at his sides. She sat back down and gazed up at him, her face utterly unreadable. “I am at your disposal, Mrs. Hawksworth.”

“Excellent.” She rested one hand flat against the strings of her harp. “As you know I have recently come into a great deal of money and some property.”

He nodded, afraid to speak.

“I have quite recently purchased this little theatre.”

His jaw dropped. He made a few sounds, but no words came out of his mouth.

“No need to speak. Just listen very carefully.” Her face was solemn, but her eyes sparked. She was enjoying this. Very much. “I am in search of a composer in residence to compose operas suitable to be performed in a theatre this size. You come highly recommended, Mr. Norcross. Are you interested?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Hawksworth. I would be honored. I...I don’t know what to say.” His knees went wobbly. He could not fall down. If he did, he’d never rise again. He’d lay there at her feet.

“Perfect.” She retrieved a set of papers from the floor on the other side of her chair. “Here is the contract between us.”

He took the papers and began to read. The contract was a partnership, a partnership between Joshua Norcross and Sophia Hallensby, her true name before her marriage. There was a great deal of legal language, not that it mattered. He’d sign anything that allowed him to see her, even if only every now and then. He turned to the last page, but there was another piece of parchment behind that. He stared at the words, blinked, and read them again.

“This is a special license.” His legs did give way then. He dropped onto the stage, holding the special license tightly in his hand. She left her chair to kneel beside him in a pool of spangled and satin skirts. She should be laughing at his idiocy, but her

face was deeply in earnest.

“Our contract as business partners has a great many stipulations. Our marriage will have but one. Never lie to me again, Joshua. Never. I trust you in every other thing our marriage might bring along, but you have damaged my trust, and I could not bear for you to do so again. Can you promise me you will never lie to me again? Can you love me as much as I love you?”

“Framlingwood killed your husband. Dickie was somehow involved. I am glad he did it, and I will never tell another soul. And now I can promise never to lie to you again. He went up on his knees and took her hands in his. Though I cannot promise to love you as much as you love me. I can only promise to love you more.”

She clutched his hands and shook her head. “The earl killed...Edward?”

“Not long after you became his mistress. I know no more than that. He made me promise not to tell you, but I will tell you anything it is in my power to tell you if you will marry me.”

She nodded at the special license on the floor next to them. “I believe I asked you first?”

He laughed. “Why? Why do you want to marry me after all I have done?”

“Will it make you happy?”

“More than anything this world or the next has to offer.” He could not breathe, but he didn’t care.

“I have become a lady of means, and as that I can do anything I desire. I am free. And I desire you and to be happy all the days of our lives.”

“An uncanny coincidence, my love, that is all I have ever desired since the moment I met you.” Joshua pulled her into his arms and covered her lips in a tender kiss. He brushed his mouth across hers over and over. She flicked her tongue against his top lip, and he sank his tongue into her mouth. He caressed her back and cupped her head in his hands. He didn’t know what he’d ever done to deserve her. He’d spend his life thinking of ways. He’d—

“Oy, bleeding hell, guv’. You don’t tup a lady like Mrs. Hawksworth on a hard stage, at least not with an audience and someone paying plenty of blunt. Yer take her home to bed.”

Joshua and Sophia ended their kiss in a bout of laughter, joyous and unbridled. He jumped to his feet and pulled her into his arms. “Home to bed sounds like a very good idea,” he said. “What say you, my love?”

“Take me home, Joshua. Take me home.”

“Come fetch these papers, Dickie. We’ll need them as soon as possible.”

“Not for nufink I won’t,’ he grumbled, and stomped past them. “Lady asks me to drag some cove down here for her to propose and now I’ve got to fetch and carry like some bloody footman. Yer a lucky feller, Mr. Norcross. I had money on her not every speaking to you again.”

“You lost your money, Dickie,” Joshua said as he placed Sophia into the carriage. “And I found my fortune, all the fortune I’ll ever need. Hurry up, lad. The lady and I are ready to go home.”

- THE END -

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Giving away his mistresses had become a habit for the Earl of Framlingwood. Though Sophia would never tell him so. This time was special as Lady Camilla had arranged a smaller ceremony so that the earl might walk Sophia down the aisle.

He had asked her for the privilege and she could not deny him after what he'd done to take Edward Green out of her life forever, even if the earl never knew that was the reason. She'd discussed her husband's death at length with Joshua in the last few days whilst they'd allowed Lady Camilla to arrange a small wedding ceremony for them. Joshua had no qualms about what Lord Framlingwood had done. Sophia still didn't know how to feel. Perhaps she never would, but she vowed one day to ask the earl why he had ended a man's life for her.

"You look lovely," the Duchess of Chelmsford said, as she straightened the gown she'd had made especially for Sophia's wedding. Sophia shuddered to think what the former Captain El, the powerful duke's new duchess, had paid to have the dress made up so quickly. She'd tried to thank them both when they entered Sophia's music room for the wedding, but the duke had only smiled and said, "Nothing is too good for one of my wife's friends."

The dress was exquisite, a sort of copy of her Vauxhall dress done in a heavenly shade of light blue with pearls instead of sparkles on the overskirt. The earl had gifted her a delicate tiara to wear in her hair. Nathaniel Charpentier had catered a divine breakfast for those in attendance to join before the actual ceremony. He and Mr. Carrington-Bowles had teased Joshua mercilessly about wanting the guests out of the house as soon as the register was signed and the vicar was paid.

She wanted to be a good hostess but was glad of the guests' hasty leave-taking as

well. Joshua had supervised the renovation of the largest bedchamber on the third floor as a surprise for her. He and the servants had been ruthless in their efforts to keep her away. No amount of bribery or cajoling would sway any of them.

Thank goodness the music room was rather large. Once they moved all of the instruments save the Grecian harp into another room, there was space for chairs for their guests and even an aisle for her to walk on the earl's arm. Joshua had situated everything so that the other mistresses, including Adrienne and her husband could view the ceremony through the viewing window in Joshua's bedchamber. His former bedchamber as his belongings had already been moved into the chamber he was renovating.

"She is indeed lovely, Your Grace." Mrs. Collins adjusted Sophia's tiara. "You've done so well for yourself, my dear. He adores you. He will likely be an idiot again, but always remember he loves you." She and Sophia glanced at the front of the room where Mr. Carrington-Bowles stood with Joshua and the vicar.

"You look very pretty as well, Mrs. Collins." Sophia twitched a fold in the housekeeper's new dress. Lady Camilla had sent over a rich, dark blue silk gown for Mrs. Collins to wear as she was to stand up with Sophia.

"Are we ready, my dear?" Lady Camilla walked up on Mr. Charpentier's arm. "I think everyone is here. Nathaniel...if Dickie tugs on that neckcloth one more time, I shall be forced to throttle him."

"I think if we sit on either side of him, the problem will be solved." He winked at Sophia and carefully led the great lady to her seat. The immaculately turned out Dickie did indeed sit up straight and cease tugging his neckcloth.

The duke and duchess took their seats beside Lord Daedalus and Lady Daedalus. In front of them were the barrister, Mr. Forsythe, and his exquisite wife as well as Archer Colwyn and the chess mistress he was to marry. The Rutherfords, even Top-

Lofty, stood across the back of the room, grinning like fools. How she wished the other mistresses were in the room with her, but she sensed their presence behind the wall where Mrs. Collins had arranged an arch of flowers fresh from the hothouse, at the earl's expense, of course.

Speaking of whom, the Earl of Framlingwood, dressed in his usual splendor, stood next to her and offered her his arm. She happened to glance back and saw the harpist, Elias Avars, enter the room and sit at her harp. He smiled and nodded and began to play *An Appreciation of Beauty*.

"I believe that is our cue," the earl murmured, and drew her arm through his. "As they say in the world of the opera."

She smiled, though her eyes were bright with tears. "I can never repay you for all you've given me...Derek. For all you have done to keep me safe."

"You are repaying me, Sophia." He hesitated for a step but then continued their trip down the aisle. "You are happy, and you are loved. That is payment enough." He turned to kiss her on the forehead and placed her hand in Joshua's. "Don't fail me, Norcross," he said quietly.

"Never," Joshua replied. The earl took his seat on the other side of Lady Camilla. Sophia and Joshua turned to face the vicar who was busy readying his book.

"Are they in there?" she leaned up to whisper in Joshua's ear. She inclined her head every so slightly toward the spot where the viewing window into his chamber stood. They had reversed the glass so the mistresses could see.

He leaned down to touch his lips to her ear. "They are. They insisted on helping me dress. I cannot tell you how many times my arse was pinched. I lost count."

Sophia covered her mouth but a squeak of laughter escaped. The vicar gave them a

stern glare. “Dearly beloved,” he intoned. Sophia listened intently to every word, but she marveled at the wonder of it all. She’d never had a family, not one she would ever claim. The family behind her and Joshua, hidden behind that silly viewing window, had made her life better. They’d made her better. They’d each sacrificed or provided help or looked after her in some way or another and expected nothing in return.

And the man beside her had taught her to love, not just him, but herself. She’d done as Margot had said. She’d gone after what she desired most because she deserved that. With Joshua she always would. She gazed up at him and spoke her vows in a clear, strong voice and hoped he knew just how much she loved him.

The house was finally empty and quiet. The guests were gone. The Rutherfords and other servants were downstairs with Saida, Lily, Margot and Gabrielle making quick work of the delicious food left over from Mr. Charpentier’s divine breakfast.

Sophia was already in discussions with the chef to provide food for the opera house once she and Joshua opened their theatre on Maiden Lane.

Now, however, Sophia was blindfolded, naked, and being guided down the third-floor corridor to her new bedchamber. “This is silly, Joshua. What if one of the servants sees us prancing about the house naked?”

“They won’t. I told Mrs. Collins to shoot them if they leave the kitchens in the next hour. Careful, love. Wait a moment.” She heard him open a door. Warm air flowed out of the room where someone had obviously built a nice fire in the hearth. He steered her across thick, soft carpets and positioned her very carefully. He moved behind her and wrapped his arms around her. Slowly, he dragged his hands up her belly, across her ribs, and stopped just beneath her breasts.

“Joshua,” she moaned. “Please.”



“Take off the blindfold,” he whispered in her ear whilst he covered her breasts and squeezed gently.

She gasped at his erotic touch, then blinked and looked around her. The entire room was mirrored. The walls were mirrored. She looked up. The ceiling was mirrored. Everywhere she looked she saw herself in his arms, his face hungry for her. His hands loving her scarred body. He turned her slowly in his arms and bent to touch his forehead to hers.

“What have you done?” she asked in awe.

“I’ve made a place where I can feast on your beauty in every way. Where you will never doubt how gorgeous you are and will always be in my eyes. I love every part of you, Sophia, inside and out, and no matter how long we live, you will always be my beautiful, tempting, magnificent Sophia.

He knelt at her feet and pressed his mouth to her cunny. He loved her with his lips and tongue slowly as if she were a dish to be savored. She stroked his hair and threw back her head, unable to look away from the image of the two of them in the grip of pleasure that roared through her like a storm. She cried out his name. He stood and lifted her into his arms. When he placed her on the dark blue counterpane she saw the canopy of the bed was mirrored as well.

She gave a long, loud sigh as he slid his cock inside her. “How on earth did you do this?” she gasped as she wrapped her legs around him.

“The duchess,” he panted. “She found my request amusing, but she helped me order everything I needed.”

They came together slowly as if they had all the time in the world and their love would never end. As Sophia arched her body to meet his, she realized with a man like Joshua, love never would.

If you loved this tale of another mistress of Grosvenor Street getting her HEA, don't miss the next thrilling installment in the series, "5 Pearls for the Earl" - Book 3: A Pearl Desired

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