



A Pearl Seduced (5 Pearls for the Earl #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: When a disgraced actress accepts the help of a broken barrister, the ensuing smoldering desire between them threatens their shattered dreams and unspoken secrets.

Never having learnt to read, at sixteen Lily Venable is an actress on the cusp of stardom when she steps in as understudy to the queen of the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh. When someone arranges for Lily to be caught with stolen pieces of the leading lady's jewelry and a nice sum of money from the company's cash box, her career is over. She flees to London, starving and without money. A young street urchin finds her weeping in an alley and takes her to Goodrum's House of Pleasure. After nine years working there as a seamstress, she volunteers to become mistress to a young earl. She is provided a home, anonymity, and a degree of independence for the price of sharing the earl's bed once a week. Many failed actresses have settled for less.

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NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 10, BEDFORD SQUARE

Aristotle Barker-Finch was not a sentimental man by any measure. Being the most successful barrister in Edinburgh, he'd had no need for sentimentality. All he'd needed was his keen intellect, his formidable knowledge of the law, and an attitude of invincibility before the various benches where justice was meted out.

Invincibility.

A cruel joke for any man to believe, but especially so for a man with the lives of others in his hands. Fortunately, he no longer had that burden to bear. No, as the rays of the noon day sun tried their best to light the dim shadows of his study, he held no lives in his hands. Just a beautifully carved wooden horse, polished over the last two years by hours spent gripped by his fingers as he contemplated throwing it into the fire. Each time, no matter how long he stood and tried to force himself to consign William's gift to the flames, he returned the horse to his desk atop the file of the last case he'd ever defended before the highest bench in Edinburgh.

The last case he'd defended. The first and only case he'd ever lost.

One foot propped on the brick hearth and his head rested against the coolness of the marble fireplace, Ari finally drew the horse away from the flames and placed the beautiful piece on the mantel. He continued to stare into the crackling blaze the

footman had built up sometime early that morning whilst Ari had slept stretched out on the long Chesterfield sofa at the far end of his study. He could not remember the last time he'd slept in the large, comfortable four-poster bed in his chambers upstairs. Not that it mattered where he slept. He had nowhere to go and nothing to do which required a good night's sleep.

Rap! Rap!

What the devil?

His servants never knocked on doors. They scratched or tapped lightly. They did not hammer with the sharp, imperious blows of a Bow Street runner about to take a man into custody. Which could mean only two things.

First, a visitor had managed to push their way past Fitz, his stickler of a butler. Something most Runners of his acquaintance would not dare attempt.

Second, Ari was about to be invaded by the one person who could run roughshod over Fitz.

"Come in, Mother," Ari said, with a heavy sigh as he returned the horse to his desk and made an attempt to tidy up his appearance. An attempt which he quickly abandoned. There was no hope for his shirt, wrinkled beyond redemption by several days of wear, and only God knew where his neckcloth might be. He suspected the Almighty didn't give a damn, so why should a broken-down barrister at the last tether of his patience for company?

"Aristotle, when are you going to take your servants in hand?" his mother asked, as she crossed the room and offered her cheek for his kiss. Which he forced himself to give. She glanced over her shoulder to glare at Fitz, poised at the open door to do whatever Ari asked up to and including throwing Lady Margaret Barker-Finch out on

her arse . The war between his mother and his butler had been going on for two years now with little sign of surrender on either party's part.

“What sort of butler refuses a gentleman's mother entrance to her son's home?” She began an inspection of Ari's clothes and person as if he were a maid she were about to dismiss.

“The sort who has been told to do so. Thank you, Fitz. That will be all.”

“No, it will not, Fitz.” She turned to give the butler the full volley of her meddlesome, condescending attention. “Run down to the kitchens and order a tray of food sent up for your master.” She sniffed and waved a magically retrieved lacy handkerchief under her nose. “From his appearance and his smell, the only sustenance he has taken in several days has been brandy. Send for some tea and sandwiches and perhaps a bowl of beef broth.” She continued to stare at the butler, who purposefully ignored her and looked to Ari for instruction.

“Never mind, Fitz. No need to trouble Cook. I'm not hungry.”

“Of course he is, Fitz. Do as you are told.” When the butler didn't budge, she turned her ire on Ari. “I insist you send for some food this instant. I will not leave until I see you eat something.”

Ari looked to the ceiling and then at his butler who simply shook his head. “If that is all it will take to send her on her way for God's sake, Fitz, send for a bloody banquet.”

“As you wish, sir.” Fitz executed a bow, directed only at Ari, and quit the room.

“I don't understand why you keep that upstart in your employ,” his mother said, as she dusted off one of the leather chairs in front of his cluttered desk and sat down.

Her posture ramrod straight, she perched on the edge of the chair as if to touch the rest might soil her clothes. He might appear a monument to dishevelment, but his servants kept his home spotless as much as he allowed.

“I keep him because he runs my household efficiently with little trouble to me and keeps my privacy and peace secure save for the occasional breach by invading relations.”

“I am your only living relation, Aristotle.”

“Precisely. What do you want, Mother? I’ve neither the time nor the patience for another lecture about my duty to the damned Barker-Finch name.” He made a great show of sitting in his desk chair and organizing the chaos his desk had become over the last two years. Anything to avoid her disapproving glare.

“Haven’t the time? It appears to me all you have is time. Time to wallow in self-pity and drink. Why your father—”

“Your assessment of how I spend my days is correct, so let me be about it, Mother. I have nothing else to do.” He despised losing his temper with her, but he despised the truth of her words even more. The last thing he wanted to hear from her was what his late father would think. The man had died and left them each a fortune. Which was the only kind thing he’d done for either of them. Those fortunes allowed her to live in the luxury and ease she’d enjoyed as a duke’s daughter before she married London’s leading barrister, the second son of another duke, and now allowed Ari to wallow in self-pity and drink .

“That is precisely why I am here. As you have nothing better to do, I have accepted a commission on your behalf for Lady Camilla. You are to attend her tomorrow at two in the afternoon.” She waved her handkerchief under her nose again and fixed him with her most commanding gaze.

Her tactic might work on a cowed coachman or a helpless lady's maid, but he was neither, and the last person he wanted to do business with of any sort was Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby, the one woman in London who made his mother look like a young miss right out of the schoolroom.

"I have no interest in entering the ranks at Lincolns Inn or anywhere else barristers are employed, and I certainly have no intention of placing my life in the hands of that old harridan. I'd sooner take a swim in the Thames."

"That is one possible choice, Aristotle. Though I doubt a swim in the Thames would make you smell worse than you do at present. The commission is not as a barrister. I am not certain what it is actually. She merely asked after you at the Cavendish's rout, and when I explained my concerns for your well-being, she suggested she might have the answer. Apparently, she is a patroness of Stephen Forsythe, your barrister friend."

Stephen Forsythe . There was a name he hadn't heard since he'd left London twelve years ago to practice law in Edinburgh, far away from his father and his censure. Ari had no intention of facing either Lady Camilla or his old friend. Not now. Not anymore.

"The answer is no." He shoved himself to his feet and braced his hands on his desk to keep from swaying. "Please give my regrets to Lady Camilla. Good afternoon, Mother."

"Aristotle—"

"Your repast, sir." Fitze burst into the room without knocking followed by Ned, the head footman, bearing a large tray loaded with a pot of tea, a plate of sandwiches, a bowl of some steaming broth, and various pieces of cutlery and a teacup. Fitz bustled past Ari's mother and directed the footman to arrange the tray on a tea table before the high-backed, black-and-gold silk upholstered chair before the hearth. The look he

exchanged with Ari allowed that Fitz had been listening at the door for the opportune moment to interrupt. The butler needed a rise in pay for that if for nothing more.

“Have you need of anything else, sir?” Fitz asked as the footman hurried out the door.

“He does not.” Ari’s mother managed to say though her teeth were fairly gritted in rage.

“No, thank you, Fitz. That will be all. Her ladyship will be leaving momentarily. Perhaps you would be so good as to have her things ready at the door and inform her coachman of her immediate need to depart?”

“Of course, sir.” His face was composed in an expression of deep butler-like solemnity though his eyes sparked with humor. He walked out of the room on silent feet but left the door open.

“Really? How dare you dismiss me as if I were some servant? And before your butler and footman no less.” She shot to her feet. “You will meet with Lady Camilla, my boy. I insist you at least try to enter good society again. Why, I —”

He silenced her with a raised hand as he took a large bite of one of Cook’s sandwiches made of fresh baked bread, a generous slice of ham, and a slice of soft Cheshire cheese. The bread had been buttered as only Cook could do. He chewed vigorously and tried not to show how good the fare actually tasted. He’d not realized how delicious a simple sandwich might be after not eating for a few days. Once he swallowed, he placed the sandwich back onto the plate.

“There. I have eaten something. Our business together is done. Goodbye, Mother.” He folded his arms and waited.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. He had no idea why as her

eyes were completely free of tears no matter how hard she attempted to make him believe she was weeping. “You have broken my heart, Aristotle Barker-Finch. How I gave birth to such an ungrateful son I will never know. But my heart is truly laid waste that you would treat me thus.”

“I would not worry overly if I were you, Mother.” He settled into the fireside chair and poured himself a cup of tea. “Surely there are enough pieces of coal and knots of wood about for you to find a reasonable replacement for your heart. Good day.” He added milk to his tea and took a long sip whilst the indignant huff and the rustle of skirts let him know she’d finally left him alone.

Ari concentrated on his food and tea in an effort to clear his mind of the last hour’s encounter with the woman who had given birth to him and then abandoned him to the care of nurses, nannies, and governesses before handing him over to his father’s machinations and demands at the tender age of nine. Had he not escaped to Cambridge from the ages of fifteen to nearly nineteen he might have run mad. Perhaps he should have run mad, especially given the state of his life at present.

Enough! Enough dwelling on things that cannot be changed.

He spied a small plate on the corner of the tray. Two perfect raspberry tarts sat waiting for him. Cook had raided the orangery at the back of his townhouse. She’d come with him from Edinburgh and knew how much he loved raspberries in any form. He bit into one of the tarts and closed his eyes to savor the taste.

A scratch at the door interrupted his reverie. “Come.” If his mother had returned, he would not be responsible for his actions. Especially if she saw him actually enjoying the food she’d ordered he eat.

“You have a visitor, sir.” Ari found his curiosity piqued by Fitz’s odd expression. “Are you at home to Mister Stephen Forsythe?”

“Prinny’s pizzle,” Ari groaned.

“Not exactly,” Forsythe said brightly as he strode into the room. “Though I have been called worse.”

“Why are you here?” Ari asked, though he suspected he knew the answer all too well.

2

NOVEMBER, 1826

NO. 4, GROSVENOR STREET

As an actress, Lily Venable had often had to juggle doing three things at once. However, she found ten years absence from the stage had left her juggling skills sorely lacking. She pretended to read from the exquisite leather-bound volume of Shakespeare, endeavored to turn the pages at the right moment, and tried to discern what incriminating object her kitten, Titania, had been batting at under one of the matching black-and-pink brocade chairs across from the settee. She debated which task to let fall in order to avoid a small disaster, which had the potential to become a quite large disaster.

It was all the earl's fault, damn him. He had not turned up at her townhouse on his regular Thursday evening in weeks. He'd sent lovely flowers or gifts and a note with his regrets so often lately Lily had begun to consider her Thursday nights her own. Tonight, he'd shown up well after nine and her underbutler, Slow Rutherford, had not been able to give her any warning at all. So far, Derek Welkirk, the Earl of Framlingwood, the man whose mistress she'd been for a little over two years, had only asked her to read to him. Something he often did as he loved the way she "read" Shakespeare aloud, changing her voice for each character. She had no idea what the remainder of the evening might bring.

"Lily, dear, is something amiss?" he asked from his position lying on the settee, his head propped on several decorative pillows. "You seem distracted. Are you not in the

mood for Antony and Cleopatra tonight?”

“What?” Did he know? Had he found out about the latest escapade his mistresses had been involved in at the Cyprian’s ball? Titania chose that moment to bat a large fake ruby and a gold and jeweled mask from beneath the chair across the carpet. The mask Lily had worn as Cleopatra when she and her fellow mistresses had humiliated the society matron who had insulted one of their number, Saida.

Derek sat up and wiggled his fingers to catch Titania’s attention. The kitten immediately abandoned her prize and gamboled across the carpet to attack his hand. He scooped her up and stroked her soft white fur as he gazed at Lily inquiringly. “Is something wrong?” He glanced at the mantel clock. “Or are you simply tired? You’ve been reading for three hours now.”

“Not at all, my lord.” She closed the book and strolled casually over to the hearth to place the volume on the mantel. With a discreet swipe of her foot, she slid the tell-tale jewel and mask back under the chair. “Would you like to go upstairs?” Derek was a skilled and generous lover. She’d never had a moment’s hesitation or regret sharing her bed with him. He was strikingly handsome with his gilded blond hair and dark blue eyes. His body was lithe and strong, and she’d explored every inch of that golden muscled flesh. She was attracted to him, fond of him, but in love with him? Unfortunately, or even better, fortunately for her, she was not.

“Not tonight, my dear.” He stood and crossed the room to deposit Titania into her arms. “I have a late-night appointment with some rather tiresome lords concerning a bill I am sponsoring in Parliament. I would much rather spend the evening here with you.” He kissed her on the forehead and then the lips. “Perhaps next week?” He cupped her cheek.

Lily leaned into his palm and studied him from beneath her lashes. There were lines in his face and shadows beneath his eyes. Weariness rolled off him in waves, as if he

carried a great weight. She'd never seen him so care-worn. He gave her a slight smile, brushed her hair behind her ear, and turned to leave.

"Derek?" She reached to touch his arm. "Are you well? Is there anything troubling you? Something you wish to discuss with me?"

He glanced over his shoulder and turned to cover her hand with his. "Troubling me? No, Lily. I am perfectly fine. Don't worry your head over me." He squeezed her hand. "Until next Thursday, then?"

"Of course. Good night, Derek."

"Good night, Lily."

She listened as he strode into the foyer and spoke with Slow Rutherford. Once she heard the front door close, she hurried to the windows of her drawing room, the ones that looked out onto Grosvenor Street. She watched as his carriage pulled up and his young tiger lowered the steps and opened the door. Derek gazed back at her townhouse for a moment, then climbed into his carriage. In moments his coachman set the horses in motion, and the Earl of Framlingwood disappeared into the London night.

She stroked Titania's head and wandered back to the chair before the fire. Once she sat down, the kitten leapt to the floor. However, Lily beat her to the mask and jewel the naughty feline was after. "You nearly landed us all in the soup, little girl." She put the mask in the chair next to her and tucked the false jewel into the pocket of her frilly dressing gown.

"He didn't see those, did he?"

Lily looked up to find Mrs. Collins, the mistresses' housekeeper, standing in the

drawing room doors with a small silver tray in one hand and a book in the other.

“No, but it was a near thing. Titania nearly undid us. Hot chocolate?” Lily nodded at the tray Mrs. Collins placed on the low table between Lily’s chair and the one the housekeeper settled into. “What a lovely idea.”

“I thought you might like a cup.” Mrs. Collins poured them both a cup from the silver chocolate pot. “I’ve brought your Mrs. Radcliffe novel back.” She placed the book on the table. “Thank you for the loan of it. I quite enjoyed the story.” For a few minutes the two of them sipped their chocolate in companionable silence.

“Mrs. Collins, is the earl...that is to say, is all well with him? He seems sad and even worried about something.”

“I’m certain I don’t know, Lily. He’s a very busy and important man. And you must admit things have been a bit changeable here on Grosvenor Street lately.” She smiled indulgently.

Lily laughed. “I would say so. It isn’t often a man has three of his mistresses married right out from under him, so to speak.”

“Indeed. Then again, how often does a man accumulate five mistresses?”

“Only our earl, Mrs. Collins. Only our earl would gather five mistresses and keep them in townhouses next door to each other.” Lily stretched her legs out before the fire. November had moved into London and settled over the city like a poor relation with no intention of leaving anytime soon. The days had been cold, windy, and rainy. When night fell, the chill settled into the bones. Thank goodness for Slow Rutherford and the various maids and footmen who took care of them all. The fires were always built up and cheery.

“Do you think he’s sad because Saida is gone?” Lily suddenly asked. Mrs. Collins, her tea cup poised halfway to her lips, looked taken aback.

“I should think no more so than when Adrienne and Sophia married. I suspect he has always known each of you might leave him one day. Especially when the chance to be a wife was in the offing.”

“Not me, thank you very much,” Lily said vehemently. “I’d rather a case of the plague than a husband.” She shuddered dramatically.

Mrs. Collins laughed. “I could not agree more. But I do think his lordship was happy for Saida. Dr. Douglas did send him a very eloquent note before he and Saida eloped. It was obvious the big Scot was besotted the moment he met her.”

“I suppose you are right. It is odd that the earl hired those men to be bodyguards, and they ended up making off with the women they were hired to guard.” Lily had begun to wonder about the strangeness of the earl’s arrangements after Sophia married the music master he’d hired for her.

Mrs. Collins shrugged. “I am quite certain he did not plan on his mistresses falling in love. But once they did, he was too much the gentleman to do anything but wish them happy. That is the sort of man he is.” The way she said those words, with such assurance and something more. Lily gazed at the drably dressed housekeeper and wondered. They’d all made great sport of the time the earl spent with Mrs. Collins. They’d spoken only half in jest of what went on between the earl and their housekeeper.

Still.

“However, the strange goings on here on Grosvenor Street and his lordship’s continuing concerns about all of our safety are the reason for my visit this evening.

While the earl is nearly certain there will be no more attacks on our households, he wants to be certain you are safe.”

“He hasn’t, has he? He hasn’t hired some prize fighter or high-in-the-istep gentleman to move into my house and disturb my peace? Mrs. Collins, you know how I feel about my privacy. Surely the Rutherfords have proven they can deal with any housebreaker or Seven Dials ruffian who dares to venture this far into Mayfair.”

Mrs. Collins raised a hand. “He has sent inquiries out to find a perfectly respectable gentleman to add to the security the Rutherfords afford us.”

“Perfectly respectable?” Lily pushed out of her chair and began to pace the room. She walked along the wall of floor-to-ceiling bookcases that held the many tomes the earl had gifted her over the past year or so. Books she loved. Books she held and petted as if they were kittens like Titania. Treasures that offered comfort even though she could not read a word on those beautiful pages. They were there to remind her perhaps one day she could. “Please don’t tell me he has hired some dancing master or some arrogant frog to teach me to speak French.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lily.” Mrs. Collins arranged the tray and picked it up to carry it to the door. “Lady Camilla has already found a very likely candidate, a barrister, I believe.”

Lily dropped the novel by Miss Austen she’d pulled from the shelf. Her blood ran cold. “Why would I need a barrister?” Thoughts raced through her mind so quickly she had no chance to grasp even one. They’d found her. They’d followed her to London after all this time. There could be no other reason for her to need—

“Of course you don’t need a barrister. The gentleman will be here to keep you safe and to teach you to read, my dear.”

“Teach me to...” Her heart sank and her face flushed bright red. “Who told him? Who told the earl I couldn’t read?” Tears burned her eyes and clogged the back of her throat. Having the other mistresses and Mrs. Collins know she was too bloody ignorant to read all of the books the earl had given her was one thing. If he knew and kept giving her books, he must think her the greatest fool he’d ever known. “Which one of you bitches told him?” She stamped her foot so hard that Titania scurried under the settee and hid.

Mrs. Collins opened the drawing room door and handed the tray to someone waiting in the foyer. She came and wrapped her arms around Lily. “Hush now,” she said and patted Lily on the back. “No one told him, Lily. He’s a very observant and discerning man. He has known since the first few weeks you came to live here.” She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and handed the sensible plain cotton square to Lily. “He admires your ability to memorize entire books greatly, you know. I think the earl is rather in awe of you.”

“B..bollocks.” Lily despised weeping, especially her own. “If he knows I can’t read, why has he given me all of these books?” She waved a hand around the room, the drawing room she had turned into a library with shelves and shelves of books lining every wall.

“Because you love them. They make you happy, and he wants very much for you to be happy.”

“That’s why he is sending this barrister to live here? To teach me to read so I will be happy?”

“Of course.” Mrs. Collins patted her shoulder and returned to the drawing room doors. “What other reason could there be?”

On the Way to St. James Square

Mayfair, London

Ari hesitated a moment and looked back at his townhouse. Only to find himself unceremoniously shoved into the carriage with barely enough time to right his descent before he landed on the floor between the seats.

“Bloody hell, Forsythe,” he said, as he managed to collapse onto the plush, forward-facing bench. “Was that really necessary?”

“None of this would be necessary if you had simply done as your mother asked and at least begun your ablutions in order to make yourself presentable to visit Lady Camilla.” The arse of a barrister settled onto the rear-facing seat, knocked on the roof of the carriage, and crossed his arms.

“You have met my mother, haven’t you? In all the years you and I have known each other, have you ever known me to do as she asked?” He ran his finger under the crisp, perfectly tied neckcloth that threatened to strangle him with his next deep breath. “And the word visit indicates a voluntary excursion. This is nothing less than a kidnapping.”

“Do stop carrying on like some maiden aunt, Barker-Finch. Be glad Lady Camilla only sent me to fetch you. Had she sent some of her other minions to bring you before her, you’d have been bundled into a sack of burlap and dumped in her drawing room

like a mongrel dog.”

“Perhaps then I might have been spared the forced bath and the hysterics and ministrations of my valet.”

“You reeked like the floor of a Seven Dials tavern.” Forsythe brushed a few specks from his black superfine morning jacket. “How long has it been since you availed yourself of your valet’s services? I thought he was going to expire from excitement when I asked him to shave and dress you. Poor man nearly had a seizure.”

“Davies has a flair for the dramatic. He was a dresser in a theatre in Edinburgh when I hired him. Lost his job when some marquess accused him of buggering the marquess’s son.”

“One of your cases? How’d you manage to save him from the noose?”

“Told the marquess I’d demand his son testify in court. No peer wants his heir branded a sodomite. He dropped the charges.” Ari shifted on the tufted velvet seat and tried to loosen his neckcloth once more. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, and his hands grew cold and clammy.

“Damn, man. No wonder you had such a reputation for ruthlessness. Not many men would threaten a marquess and win.” Forsythe gazed at him with open admiration.

“Yes, well I didn’t win every time, did I? You can only gamble with a man’s life so many times before your luck runs out.” He swallowed against the bitter acid of those words. “And when your luck runs out, so does your client’s.”

Having cast a sufficient pall over the conversation, Ari leaned back against the squabs and closed his eyes. He’d nearly settled into a reasonably false attitude of boredom when the carriage slowed and rocked to a halt.

“Shall I have Lady Camilla’s coachman take a turn around the park, or have you wallowed in guilt long enough to find a portion of your bollocks sufficient with which to face her ladyship?”

Ari opened one eye and stared at the door held open by a footman in livery. “Forsythe, you know damned well the Duke of Devonshire’s prized bull doesn’t have bollocks enough to face Lady Camilla.” He hefted himself out of the carriage and strode to the townhouse door, held open by a tall, spare silver-haired butler. Forsythe followed close on Ari’s heels. “But the sooner we have this over with, the sooner I can return home. Good afternoon, Raines. Do you ever age?”

“Only when forced, Mr. Barker-Finch.” How such a thin man produced such a deep voice Ari would never know. “Her ladyship is waiting for you, Mr. Forsythe.” The butler nodded to acknowledge Ari’s kidnapper, silently congratulating him on a job well done, no doubt.

“Parlor or drawing room?” Ari asked.

“Blue drawing room, sir. This way.” Raines started across the marble foyer floor.

“Blue drawing room?” Ari had not been in Lady Camilla’s home in twelve years at least.

“Used to be the green drawing room,” Forsythe said out of the corner of his mouth.

“Drawing room, not parlor. Means I’m in the soup from the start.”

“You’re in something,” Forsythe agreed. “I daresay it is not something as savory as the soup.”

“Me? What have I done?” Ari and Forsythe stopped at the drawing room doors while

Raines knocked.

“Nothing. That is precisely the problem.”

“Bugger you,” Ari muttered, as Raines opened the doors and led them into the drawing room.

“His wife wouldn’t like that,” a familiar voice said. “She’d relieve you of portions of your anatomy in ways not even I care to contemplate. Welcome, Barker-Finch. Good to see you.”

“Atherton.” Ari shook the man’s offered hand and studied his face. “Glad to see you returned from the wars unscathed.” He turned to the elegant, still handsome woman seated on the blue damask settee. “Lady Camilla.” He bowed over her outstretched hand and smiled before he kissed the cheek she offered. “You are in good looks as always.”

“As if you would know.” She patted the place beside her, and he sat as obediently as the two fat pugs at her feet. “You returned to London two years ago and have yet to favor me with a visit. I am terribly put out with you, young man.”

“My profound apologies, my lady. However, in my defense, I have not visited anyone since my return.” Seated in the chairs across from the settee, Forsythe and Atherton shook their heads and glanced at each other. Apparently his excuse was not a wise one.

“I am not just anyone, am I, Aristotle Barker-Finch? I should not have had to resort to dealing with your mother and sending Forsythe here to fetch you like some errant schoolboy, should I?”

“Of course not, my lady.” Ari hung his head, and a sense of genuine shame washed

over him. She'd been a staunch ally and her home a place of refuge during his holidays from Eton and Cambridge. He'd been spared a great deal of his father's wrath thanks to this St. James Square townhouse always being open to him and her nephew's other various friends.

"You may make it up to me by doing me a favor." Ari's blood ran cold. Lady Camilla's favors were never of the run-a-simple-errand sort. They were the commissions that involved gathering information at deadly dull ton events, trouncing someone who deserved said trouncing or performing deeds certain to leave seasoned soldiers shaking in their boots. He remembered that much from his years spent with her nephew, Lionel Carrington-Bowles, and the two grinning bedlamites seated across from him. Not to mention the fourth of the leaders of her pack of strays, Archer Colwyn, now a notable Bow Street Runner. He'd made good use of his training at Lady Camilla's knee, fortunate fellow.

"I am certain my mother has made you aware I no longer practice law," Ari said.

"At great length with enough sighs and false tears to bore even the silliest Drury Lane audience. I have not asked you to practice law. The task is nothing so odious as that. You are to serve as tutor and bodyguard to one of the Earl of Framlingwood's mistresses. That is all." She offered him one of her beatific smiles as if what she had said made perfect sense. He blinked and stared at her. In spite of the coffee Forsythe had poured down Ari's throat before ordering Davies, Ari's valet, to clean him up, Lady Camilla's request landed on his head like a punch from Gentleman Jackson.

"Shall I explain?" Atherton asked.

"Please do," Lady Camilla said, her voice laced with exasperation.

"I'll use small words. Barker-Finch's years in Edinburgh have obviously addled his wits."

“Actually, Ath, that would be the brandy he’s been imbibing since he left Edinburgh,” Forsythe offered.

“Don’t you two have new wives to entertain with what passes for wit on your parts? Rumor has it you have both married women far more beautiful than you deserve in these past several months.”

“I thought you told me he’s been a hopeless drunkard since he returned,” Lady Camilla said, turning an accusative glare on Forsythe.

“Shall we get on with this?” Atherton asked. “He’s supposed to be delivered to Grosvenor Street before dark, and Honoria is expecting me at home well before then. In her condition she tends to be somewhat...”

“Violent?” Forsythe suggested.

“A trifle irritable, no doubt.” Lady Camilla gave Forsythe another pointed glare.

“Demanding.” Atherton sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Very demanding. And dead accurate when she throws things.”

Ari had heard enough. He raised a finger and cleared his throat. “I may be a drunkard with addled wits, but my hearing is in perfect order. I distinctly heard Earl of Framlingwood, mistresses as in more than one, and that I am to be delivered somewhere on Grosvenor Street like a haunch of pork. Would one of you like to explain this madness? Not that it matters as I fully intend to remove myself from this charming reunion forthwith, either by the front door or by the first accommodating window I find.”

Lady Camilla threw up her hands. “Explain on the way, Atherton. Forsythe, you are with me. I expect Framlingwood and the Duchess of Chelmsford at any moment.

Young Dickie Jones has some information for them, and we may be in need of some legal advice. Run along, Barker-Finch.” She patted his shoulder and practically shoved him off the settee. Atherton clutched his arm and dragged him toward the drawing room doors.

“Aristotle?” Lady Camilla called to him in a quiet tone she seldom used if memory served. “You will be fine, dear boy. I feel certain you are the right person for this task if you but allow yourself to be. I’m counting on it.”

“Fuck,” Ari spat out, once the footman closed the doors behind them, and he and Atherton headed out the front door and into the waiting carriage. “I hate it when she says that. What the hell nightmare have you and Forsythe landed me in, dammit?”

“You remember Framlingwood, don’t you?” Atherton asked as the carriage rumbled into motion. “He was at school with us and—”

“Of course I do. The child earl. Carrington-Bowles watched out for him because some of the lads bullied him. He was another of Lady Camilla’s strays. Odd sort. Quiet.”

“He had good cause. His parents died when he was twelve. Left him to be raised by bloody trustees and solicitors.”

“A lonely life. I remember. What has this to do with him?”

“He isn’t lonely anymore,” Atherton said with a grin. “He managed to accumulate five mistresses and keep them in five townhouses side by side on Grosvenor Street. He thought they didn’t know about each other.”

“Five? Good God.” Ari considered the man had either prodigious carnal appetites or was attics to let, possibly both.

“Well, he is down to two at present.”

“If you and Framlingwood intend for me to help you hide a dead mistress’s body, let alone three dead mistresses, I will leap from this carriage right now, moving or not. With luck I’ll be dragged under the wheels.”

Atherton rolled his eyes. “Three of his mistresses have married.”

“Then why does one of them need a bodyguard? And I doubt there is anything I can teach a mistress that she doesn’t already know.” Ari’s head felt wrapped in cotton wool, wet cotton wool.

“Framlingwood is being blackmailed. Apparently, one of his mistresses is a murderess hiding under his protection. He has no idea which one, and he won’t ask. The blackmailer is threatening to make Framlingwood’s arrangements known to the scandal sheets, including the notion he is harboring a murderess. The blackmailer wants the murderess’s name. Framlingwood refuses and has been paying for the man’s silence. Unfortunately, the blackmailer has also been trying to discover the woman’s identity on his own, and some of the women have been attacked.”

“Hence the need for a bodyguard. Do I look like the sort of man one would hire to keep someone safe? This entire notion is ridiculous.”

“You won’t be there as a bodyguard alone. Framlingwood wants you to befriend Miss Venable and perhaps discover if she is the murderess. He intends to do all he can to protect her even if she is. You will be moving into her household in order to teach her to read.” Atherton sat back and studied Ari in a way that made him want to leap from the carriage in truth.

“Move into her household? Teach her to read? Possibly a murderess?” Ari wiped his hand across his face. He was sweating in spite of the chill of the November day. “Do

you hear yourself, Atherton? This entire scheme is utter madness, though not unexpected from a man who thought he could keep five mistresses on the same street without them discovering each other and flaying him alive.”

“He doesn’t know they know each other so don’t say anything when you run into him. The ladies prefer he not know. And don’t tell the ladies about the blackmailer. Framlingwood doesn’t want them to know. Here we are.” The carriage turned onto Grosvenor Street and rolled to a stop before Number Four. A rather rough looking young man in footman’s livery opened the door and let down the steps. Atherton stepped out of the carriage and turned to Ari expectantly.

“No one will find out a damned thing from me because I’m not having anything to do with this madcap scheme. Ask the coachman to take me home. Good to see you, Atherton. We must do this again sometime. Preferably after you’ve come to your senses.”

Atherton leaned into the carriage. “Either you disembark at once or that footman and his four brothers will drag you out. Framlingwood found them and their father, the head butler here, in the employ of Captain El Goodrum. Need I say more?” Ari’s old friend’s visage and voice had suddenly become those of the cavalry officer Atherton had likely been. The officer who had led men into battle across the Peninsula and survived Waterloo.

Ari swore and jumped out of the carriage, nearly knocking Atherton over. “How the devil did Framlingwood become entangled with the Pirate Queen? Is she the one hiding the bodies?”

“Don’t ask,” Atherton muttered as the footman hurried to open the front door and led them into the townhouse.

“Mrs. Collins and Miss Venable will see you in the downstairs drawing room,” the

footman said. Footman? He looked more like a Limehouse dock worker stuffed into footman's livery.

Ari bumped Atherton's shoulder as he leaned in to ask "Who is Mrs. Collins?"

"Framlingwood's housekeeper. She runs these five townhouses. She knows everything about everyone in this particular situation. I suspect she is the only one who does."

"I'm glad someone damned well does. With luck, she can explain this farce to me."

"Perhaps, but something of an enigma is Framlingwood's Mrs. Collins," Atherton said as they stopped before a set of doors, and the footman scratched on the wood before he opened both panels wide,

"In these circumstances?" Ari murmured. "What a surprise."

"Captain Atherton and Mister Barker-Finch to see you, ma'am." The footman announced them as if he were the majordomo at a grand ball.

A strikingly handsome, dark-haired woman dressed in the serviceable kerseymere dress of a housekeeper strode from a spot before the fireplace and offered Ari and Atherton a bobbed curtsy. "Gentlemen," she said. "I am Mrs. Collins. Allow me to make known to you Miss Lily Venable." She indicated a figure standing at the windows on the far side of the drawing room. "Lily, dear, Captain Atherton and Mister Barker-Finch have called."

The woman in the emerald green wool dress turned to face them and smiled. Ari had only a heartbeat to brace himself against the hammer-blow of recognition that struck him and set his ears to ringing. He knew that glorious red hair and those ethereal blue-green eyes. He especially knew that shape so lovingly drawn by the cut of her

expensively fitted dress. When she glided across the room toward him, three things rang through him like the darkest bell tolls of a London night.

The lady's name was not Lily Venable.

The girl actress he'd secretly fallen half in love with as he'd watched her perform on the Edinburgh stage was an even more alluring woman ten years after he'd last seen her.

And knowing she'd mysteriously fled Edinburgh all those years ago two steps ahead of the local constables meant he was about to play bodyguard and tutor to a very possible murderess.

Bloody buggering hell!

Lily called upon every bit of her skill as an actress as she crossed her drawing room and offered her hand to Captain Atherton. She'd met the handsome artist before in the company of his wife, Lady Honoria, whom she liked a great deal. Greeting him as he bowed over her hand was no trouble at all. The need for her thespian instincts arose when she clapped eyes on the man who was to be her reading tutor. Tutor? She barely suppressed the urge to snort in disbelief. She managed not to stare at him, but only just. Her palms had begun to sweat. Not a good sign.

She'd expected an older gentleman with silver in his hair and spectacles on his nose. Or perhaps a thick-necked pugilist sort in an ill-fitting suit with a tattered primer under his muscled arm, as she knew he was also intended to serve as her bodyguard against some unseen threat. Nothing in her wildest imaginings had prepared her for this Mister Barker-Finch.

He had a somewhat overwhelming presence about him. She noticed that presence in the same moment she was struck by his austere handsome face. Sharp cheekbones beneath mesmerizing eyes the color of the dark grey mists that enshrouded Edinburgh on a cold winter morning. His nose, an equally sharp blade, made his features almost hawk-like. His ebony hair fell in thick waves to touch his shoulders and caressed his now furrowed brow.

In polished Hessians, buckskin breeches, a black morning jacket and waistcoat, and blinding white shirt and neckcloth, Mister Barker-Finch filled every inch of his clothes with natural muscle, no padding needed. His shoulders were broad, and he stood taller than Captain Atherton or even the earl by an inch or two. Every feminine

instinct she possessed tremored with awareness that this was a specimen of the male animal who likely spelled chaos and ruin for every woman he encountered. Reading tutor? To quote her fellow mistress, Margot—"My arse!"

"Mister Barker-Finch," she said, and added a husky seductress's tone to her voice for good measure. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir." She studied him closely as he bowed over her hand. When he straightened, he was the one who studied her. His expression was mixed, part surprise and part...recognition? How could that be? She'd definitely remember such a man, even in her dotage.

"The pleasure is mine, Miss...Venable?"

"Do sit down, gentlemen." She indicated the grouping of pink and green brocade chairs and settee before the fireplace. Mrs. Collins settled into a chair next to the drawing room doors. "Warm yourselves. Tea?" Lily offered. She'd never had reason to play the ton hostess, but there were few roles she was incapable of portraying. Her ability to become whoever she must to survive had allowed her the upper hand in most situations. Most.

"No, thank you," Captain Atherton replied. "I must take my leave momentarily as I am expected at home." Mister Barker-Finch merely shook his head.

"How is Lady Honoria? You must give her my regards."

"She is well. Anxious for her confinement to come to an end. I will convey your regards to her. The clothes you and the other ladies have sent for the baby are exquisite. Thank you."

"You can go now, Atherton." Mister Barker-Finch's sudden interruption startled Lily and Captain Atherton both. Even Mrs. Collins looked up from her sewing. "I am certain Miss Venable and Mrs. Collins and I can discuss the arrangements without

your assistance.”

Captain Atherton glanced at Lily’s new tutor and then turned his attention to Lily. “Of course,” she murmured. She straightened her spine and added some steel to her voice. “I can take charge from here.”

The former cavalry officer stood and offered her a sharp bow. A slight smile creased his lips. “I’d wager you can at that, Miss Venable.” He moved behind Mister Barker-Finch’s chair and bent down to whisper something that sounded very like “If you leave, I’ll have your guts for garters.” The barrister now tutor’s expression never changed. Captain Atherton stopped to speak to Mrs. Collins and then he was gone. Mrs. Collins put aside her sewing and came to take the seat the captain had vacated. She had no sooner taken her seat than Mr. Barker-Finch turned to her and began to speak as if Lily were not in the room at all.

“Mrs. Collins, I have had perhaps the most singular morning of my life, which is saying a great deal.” His voice was rich and dark, but there was a brittleness to his tone that set Lily’s teeth on edge. She opened her mouth to speak, but Mrs. Collins made one of her infamous subtle hand gestures and Lily subsided into her chair and held her tongue.

“Indeed, Mister Barker-Finch?” Mrs. Collins said.

“Indeed. I was commanded to come here by one Lady Camilla with whom I am certain you are familiar. One does not naysay a command from that lady, if one is wise. However, I have yet to fully understand what is expected of me and why I must decamp from my own comfortable home and take up residence here. Perhaps you would like to—”

“Bollocks,” Lily announced as her blood flashed hot and then cold. “You know very well why you are here. Your tasks are simple, even for a man like you to understand.”

She stood, fists on her hips. “You are to teach me to read so I will no longer be an embarrassment to the earl and should there be trouble, you are to make certain some ruffian neither kidnaps nor kills me.”

“I assure you—”

“Miss Venable, dear, please—”

Lily stepped to the bell pull on the wall next to the pink marble mantelpiece and tugged twice. Hard. “Thank you for your kind visit, Mister Barker-Finch. Having had to take on positions for which I had no talent or interest myself, I would never allow you to make the sacrifice of taking on a task in which you have no interest and even less skill. I wish you a pleasant evening, sir. Run along home and have your valet dress you for what I am certain are at least half a dozen ton events in alt in anticipation of your arrival.”

Slow Rutherford chose that moment to enter the drawing room as summoned. He gave Lily a bow and an inquiring look.

“Mr. Barker-Finch is leaving, Rutherford,” she said. “Please show him out.”

To her astonishment, Mr. Barker-Finch rose from his chair and smiled in such a way she might never have expected given his previous sullen disposition. He came to take her hand and bowed over the fingers he held with the utmost decorum and solemnity. She sensed a tremor, first in him and then in herself. When he straightened, his face was unreadable. In the next instant he was smiling, but his smile did not reach his eyes. An icy pang crossed her heart. She dismissed the sensation at once.

“Thank you for your gracious company, Miss Venable, which has been nothing less than I expected. And for my congé, which I assure you is even more welcome.” He turned to Mrs. Collins. “Please convey my regrets to Framlingwood and Lady

Camilla, ma'am. I'm going to do as ordered, go home, and have my valet prepare me for an evening of mindless frivolity."

He was halfway to the drawing room doors when Mrs. Collins spoke. "That may prove difficult, Mister Barker-Finch. Your belongings arrived here but half an hour before you. Mr. Forsythe arranged for them to be packed and delivered."

The gentleman stopped mid-step, slowly turned and stared at Mrs. Collins in disbelief. Lily nearly burst out laughing at his expression, utter confusion mixed with a touch of terror. His smile gone, he glared at Lily. He opened his mouth to speak, apparently thought better of it, and turned back to address Mrs. Collins.

"My clothes are here?"

"Yes, sir."

"All of my clothes?"

"Yes, sir, as well as your books and the rest of your possessions. Mr. Forsythe wished for you to be comfortable. Your servants have closed up the house and will be conveyed to Lady Camilla's country estate to serve until you have need of them again. A very capable man, a Mister Fitz, took charge of everything."

"My valet, Davies?" Poor Mister Barker-Finch had gone a sickly shade of white. Lily glanced at Slow Rutherford and had to look away before they both started laughing.

"Sent on a repairing leave to Bath." Mrs. Collins, face unreadable, folded her hands at her waist in the pose of the obedient servant. Who had just turned a learned barrister arse over teakettle. "Mr. Forsythe suggested the poor man was at the end of his tether and needed to rest."

“You’ve robbed my house, stolen my servants, and kidnapped me, all to teach an actress to read?” He ran his hands through his hair, which left him looking like a man who had just climbed out of a woman’s bed after a night of debauched tugging. He’d delivered this oration as he crossed the Aubusson carpet to stand toe to toe with Lily. If he expected her to cower or back down, he was to be sadly disappointed. His valet wasn’t the only one at the end of his tether with the barrister Mister Barker-Finch.

“Not to worry, sir. I can solve at least one of these insults to your person immediately.” Lily pushed the barrister out of her way so hard he fell over an obliging tufted ottoman and landed flat on his back. She marched across the room and flung one of the drawing room doors open. “Which bedchamber, Rutherford?” She was halfway up the stairs from the foyer before the footman called after her.

“The earl’s chamber, across from your own, Miss Venable.” She’d climbed the stairs to the second floor by the time the scramble of multiple footsteps in the marble foyer informed her of someone mounting the stairs in pursuit.

She flung open the bedchamber door to find a series of trunks opened and waiting to be unpacked. Which Lily fully intended to do. She filled her arms with articles of clothing from one of the trunks and carried them out of the room to drop them over the second-floor balustrade into the foyer below.

“What the devil?” a deep male voice shouted from the foyer. “She’s mad. A madwoman from hell.”

“Don’t provoke her, Mr. Barker-Finch. Rutherford, hurry! For pity’s sake don’t let her take her knife to his clothes.”

“Knife?” an indignant voice shouted.

Lily gathered an armful of books from another trunk and dropped them down to join

the clothes. A few solid thunks and cries of pain informed her a few of the tomes had found their mark. She returned to the clothes trunks and dropped down a series of exquisite, expensive jackets, followed by two pair of very fine boots by Hoby, if she wasn't mistaken.

THUNK!

"Bloody hell, woman, are you trying to kill me? Those are my best boots."

Rutherford entered the bedchamber, hand pressed to his side, gasping and laughing all at once. "Is this...wise...Miss? The earl hired him...won't he be angry...if you send the man packing?"

"Do you want that pompous popinjay underfoot whilst we try to discover what has the earl so concerned?" Lily picked up an elaborate shaving case in one hand and some linen shirts in the other. She returned to the balustrade and looked down. Mr. Barker-Finch gazed up at her, devilish handsome and fully enraged.

"I, you vindictive hoyden. Do not drop that—Shite!" He raised his hands just in time to catch the shaving case only to be covered in white shirts like some child playing ghost the next moment. "Teach her to read? I'll have to teach her not to behave like a fishwife first." He started for the stairs. Mrs. Collins tried to stop him.

Lily let out a squeak of fear. The scramble of feet in the wall next to the balustrade signaled the other mistresses had been watching her entire performance. She ran down the corridor to the hidden inset door that led to the various tunnels throughout the five townhouses.

"Go," Slow Rutherford whispered as he strode across the landing to meet Mr. Barker-Finch at the head of the stairs. Lily had no sooner pushed on the panel than a hand reached out and dragged her into the narrow passageway.

“Come along,” Margot whispered. “My house. Hurry.”

Lily stumbled along in the dark and wished she could see the barrister’s face when she appeared to have disappeared in the blink of an eye. She did suffer some guilt about leaving Rutherford and even Mrs. Collins there to mollify the man. With luck he’d be so angry he’d pack his own trunks and quit the house before supper.

They traveled down one narrow set of worn wooden stairs and spilled into Margot’s second-floor parlor where they collapsed onto various settees, chaises, and chairs howling with laughter.

“I cannot believe you tossed his clothes at him, Lily.” Adrienne sat up and offered her a jaunty salute. “That was worth returning from my wedding trip to see. Wait until I tell Obadiah.”

“Don’t you dare,” Lily said, and squeezed Adrienne’s hand. “Though I am so glad you are returned and happy. We have missed you and Sophia desperately.” She nodded at Sophia Hawksworth, now Sophia Norcross, who had recently returned from a brief stay in Brighton and had moved her new husband into Number Two Grosvenor Street, just two doors down from Lily’s own home.

“I agree,” Margot said as she rose and pulled the bell pull to send for tea and refreshments, a necessity anytime the Earl of Framlingwood’s mistresses managed to gather for a good gossip. “It has been deadly dull here lately, especially with Saida off to the Highlands with her handsome Scot.”

“Speaking of handsome,” Margot’s maid and lover, Gabriella, said. “Your new tutor is wicked handsome, Lily. Are you certain you wish to dismiss him?”

“He isn’t my anything, Gabriella. I didn’t engage his services. The earl did.”

“She shied books, boots, and some very expensive Weston jackets at him from a great height,” Adrienne said, and rolled her eyes at Gabriella. “Do you really think she’s pining to keep him? I thought he was horribly arrogant when he spoke with you in the drawing room, Lily. Too fond of himself by half, if you ask me.”

“Good Lord,” Lily glanced at each of them in turn. “You were all spying on us in the drawing room as well?”

“What is the use of secret passageways and hidden staircases if one cannot use them to spy on one’s dearest friends?” Sophia asked. “Although Margot nearly knocked me down the stairs when we ran from behind the drawing room wall up to the peephole behind that hideous painting on the landing.”

Margot tossed a small embroidered pillow at Sophia. “Well, you nearly smothered me when we were watching dear Lily decorate her foyer with her tutor’s wardrobe.”

“Yes, because you were laughing so hard I was afraid you would give us away.” Sophia tossed the pillow back.

“Now, girls,” Adrienne said and gave them a reproving stare. “Shall I have Obadiah look into this man’s affairs?” she asked Lily. “Margot is right about one thing. He is entirely too high-in-the-instep to allow himself to be hired out as a mistress’s reading tutor.”

“Don’t trouble Obadiah,” Lily said. “I expect him to be gone by morning. He’s convinced I’m a madwoman. Though I would love to know what inducements Lady Camilla used for him to even consider such a position.”

A knock at the door silenced their conversation. Young Rutherford backed in carrying a large tray loaded with the tea service and various pastries and confections from the selection Cook kept to hand at all times. Once they’d all helped themselves

to their favorites and Adrienne had done the honors with the tea their conversation moved on to other things—wedding trips, their adventures at the Cyprian masquerade, speculation about the attacks they'd suffered and the earl's silence on why he insisted on hiring bodyguards.

Lily did her best to keep the discussion away from the arrival and hopefully speedy departure of Mister Barker-Finch. She didn't like the man at all nor did she like the way he kissed her hand. Or the way he gazed at her as if he knew her. She was still thinking of his unfathomable grey eyes when she and the other mistresses said their good nights and adjourned each to her own townhouse.

She awoke the next morning after a night of strange dreams of her past in Edinburgh, falling books and boots, and the way Mister Barker-Finch had glared up at her from the foyer with anger yes, but also something very like admiration. By the time her maid, Young Mary, had fetched hot water for Lily to wash and had helped her into a simple emerald green wool morning dress she was ready to face the day without giving the handsome barrister another thought. He'd likely left during the night or perhaps early this morning as his chamber door was slightly open and not a sound issued from within.

She made her way downstairs to the back of the ground floor where her private breakfast parlor looked out over her small but perfectly arranged back gardens. This was her favorite part of the day and the cozy parlor was one of her favorite rooms in the house. She smelled the enticing aromas of eggs, ham, and coffee before she even reached the door. Which probably accounted for her entering the room without noticing the scrape of a chair and the clearing of a distinctly masculine throat.

"Good morning, Miss Venable," Mister Barker-Finch said as he rose from his chair and bowed. "I hope you're ready for a good breakfast. You'll need sustenance for this morning's reading lesson."

Shite!

Ari might have left his profession behind him, but he had managed to retain some of the skills enabling him to become Edinburgh's most successful barrister. One of those skills was the use of the element of surprise. From the expression on her face, Ari would not even need a feather to knock Lily Venable over. In fact, she fairly dropped into the chair he held for her like a sack of stones, or perhaps like a pair of boots tossed over a balustrade. He returned to his seat and offered her his most amiable smile.

"You must try the eggs, Miss Venable. Your cook is exceptional. May I call for tea or do you prefer coffee?" He picked up the silver coffee pot and held the spout poised over her pretty pink and gold cup.

"May you call for—? Of course I'll have coffee. That is why it is on my breakfast table." She snatched a triangle of toast from the silver toast rack and began to slap butter on it with such force Ari expected it to either crumble or burst into flames. He filled her cup and went back to his own breakfast, head down but glancing up surreptitiously to observe her. She spooned some raspberry jam from the jam pot onto her toast and shoved half of the triangle into her mouth, where she tore it in half with a vicious bite.

Stay away from the lady's teeth.

Not to mention her knife.

"I trust you slept well?" he asked after several long minutes of silence. He had

certainly slept soundly. Once he had locked the bedchamber door and barred the way to his bed with his trunks.

She flashed him a quick hard glare and stuck the serving spoon into a serving dish to deliver a scoop of the fluffy eggs to her plate. He shrugged and set to cutting a thick juicy ham steak into bite-sized pieces. The only sound from the other end of the table was the deliberate clank of cutlery punctuated by the occasional indignant huff.

He did his best not to smile at her obvious pique. Her unwillingness to engage in conversation gave him the opportunity to truly study the woman she'd become. When he'd seen her on the stage in Edinburgh, she could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen years old. The last ten years had provided her the sort of siren's beauty he would not have expected in someone who had left the stage for the role of mistress.

In his experience, a woman who had to enter the hard life of selling her body to survive, even if she landed in the care of a benevolent keeper, showed the price—in her eyes, her face, even in her figure. Lily Venable, impossible as it seemed, had only grown more exquisitely beautiful and far more self-assured and intimidating than she was when he'd wandered into the green rooms backstage or joined the group of gentlemen vying for her attention at the back door of the theatre.

Whilst he'd conducted his observations of his supposed pupil, she'd finished her breakfast. She shot to her feet, kicked back her chair, dropped her serviette on the table, and left the room, slamming the door behind her. Ari crossed the room in three strides, flung open the door and caught up to her in the foyer. He wrapped his hand around her elbow and turned her to face him.

“Miss Venable, I know we—oompf!” Ari was bent double almost in the same instant he realized she'd balled up her hand and punched him in the stomach. She scampered up the stairs on light and graceful feet whilst he tried to draw air into his lungs. He heard a muffled cough behind him. Once he gathered his strength, he swiveled

around to see the footman, Rutherford, standing in the drawing room doors. Ari managed a few quick breaths and straightened, though he still held his hand pressed to his middle.

“How long has she been Framlingwood’s mistress?” he asked.

“Two years,” the footman replied.

“How the devil has he survived?” Ari rubbed his gut and gave his body a shake.

“By not telling Miss Venable what to do. Sir.” The young man stepped into the foyer. “Please don’t put your hands on her again.” He executed a curt bow and walked down the corridor toward the back of the house.

“Rutherford?” he called after the footman who turned and looked at him inquiringly.

“Duly noted. It won’t happen again. Do you have any idea where she might be?” A fuzzy white kitten sauntered toward the foyer, past the footman, and started up the stairs.”

“Upstairs drawing room. Miss Lily’s library. Follow Titania, she’ll show you the way.” He indicated the ball of fluff that stopped at the top of the stairs and blinked at Ari with bright green eyes.

Ari took the stairs two at the time and reached the landing in time to see the kitten pause before the white and gold gilded doors to the right. When he reached the kitten, he scooped her up and stepped into the room without knocking. He glanced about and took in the tasteful black and pink brocade furnishings complimented by rich rosewood tables, cabinets, and commodes. However, what stunned him were the walls of bookshelves filled with books, beautifully bound tomes as far as the eye could see.

“What are you doing with Titania? Give her to me.” Miss Venable appeared out of nowhere and came toward him hands outstretched. Ari held the kitten out as if to ward off an attack. Once the lady drew close enough, he pulled the soft purring creature close to his chest and took a step back.

“What are you doing?”

“This kitten is the only thing standing between me and further physical harm. I’ll not hand her over until I have your word you will not punch me, knife me, or throw anything at me.” He stroked the kitten who reached up with a tiny paw and batted gently at his nose.

“You are afraid of a mere woman,” Miss Venable declared, hands on hips. “And trust a kitten to keep you safe?”

“You are no mere woman. And the kitten has yet to shy any books at me or drop a shaving box on my head.”

“Very well.” She held out her hands once more.

“Say the words.” He forced himself to maintain a serious expression. Suddenly the idea of negotiating with an earl’s mistress for possession of a kitten struck him as the most ridiculous moment in his life.

“I give you my word I will not seek to harm you in any way,” she said. He handed her the kitten. “Today,” she added. Lily subsided into one of the chairs before a pink marble fireplace. The kitten settled onto her lap and promptly went to sleep. Ari wandered up and down the walls of books. For someone who supposedly had not learned to read she had amassed an impressive collection of novels, philosophy books, and volumes on every subject imaginable.

“Why are you still here, Mr. Barker-Finch?”

He stopped and turned to face her. “At present, I have nowhere else to go. Framlingwood and Lady Camilla have seen to that.”

“What would possess a man like you to even consider taking a position as tutor to an earl’s mistress? You are a barrister. As I understand it, a very good one.” She stroked the sleeping kitten and Ari found himself unable to take his eyes off her delicate hand moving over the kitten’s silky fur. He blinked a few times to rid himself of the erotic sensations that danced across his skin.

“I was a barrister. I am one no longer. I have not been since I returned from Edinburgh.” He strolled languidly across the plush Aubusson to sit in the chair opposite her.

“Edinburgh?” He caught the slight rise in her voice, the rapid flutter at the side of her elegant neck, and the subtle flush of color beneath the creamy tone of her skin. A twitch of discomfort flicked his shoulder. Ari had never found the study of a witness in the box distasteful, but to turn that sharp instrument on this woman did not sit well with him. He had no notion why.

“Yes.” He leaned back in the chair and adopted an attitude just shy of indifference. “I lived and practiced there for ten years. Have you ever been to Edinburgh, Miss Venable?”

“No. Why are you no longer a barrister? You are yet a young man.” Her precipitous change of subject answered one question and provoked several more.

“I was no longer effective in my position. Why do you wish to learn to read?”

“Why do I—You mean why would an earl’s mistress bother to acquire a skill for

which she has no use? After all, mistress to a titled gentleman is the height of her profession for a whore.” The kitten, as if sensing her mistress’s sudden change in mood, awoke and sat up to fix Ari with an unblinking stare.

“Few women resort to...selling their favors as a profession. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of employments a woman might take on when she needs must support herself. In our world where men determine what women are allowed to do in spite of what women can do, a position such as yours is not a choice, but the result of a lack of choices. Men do not suffer such limits. If they did perhaps more of us would sell our favors. Yes?” He wiggled his eyebrows and offered her a brief smile.

She laughed and the bright, bell-like tones sent little shafts of light into his heretofore heavy spirits. “I assure you, sirrah, many men do ‘sell their favors,’ as you so delicately state. There are a number of brothels here in London where men service both women and other men. Some are very highly paid indeed, whether they can read or not.”

“That is good to know. Should my performance as your tutor prove unsatisfactory, I pray you provide me with the addresses of these establishments so I might secure employment better suited to my talents.” He propped his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

She snorted and shook her head.

“Do you wish me to teach you to read, Miss Venable?” he asked in all solemn sincerity.

“Do you think you can?” Her quiet inquiry, wistful and replete with doubt, tugged at him as if from a cord drawn from his chest to her dainty fingers.

“If you have the will, I most certainly have the talent. Shall we make a start?” He

pushed out of the chair so abruptly the kitten arched her back and hissed at him.

“My apologies, Miss Titania,” he bowed. “A pox on me for daring to trespass on your delicate sensibilities.” He scooped up the nearly weightless sprite and strode to an ornately carved escritoire between two long windows overlooking some gardens and a mews next to a cobblestone lane behind the row of townhouses. He retrieved several pages of clean-cut parchment and a fully stocked quill and ink stand. With a fine bit of juggling, he made his way to a long library table at the other end of the room without dropping the writing accoutrements nor the kitten.

A somewhat bemused expression on her face, Miss Venable came to the table and sat in the chair he indicated. “Now what?” she asked.

“When one is about to begin a journey, one should first ascertain from whence one intends to start.” He arranged the writing tools in front of her and sat down in a leather library chair at the head of the library table. The kitten curled up in his lap, decidedly uninterested in the affairs of her human companions. “Do you know your letters?”

She hesitated so long before answering he feared his question had offended her. No matter Lady Camilla’s assertions he was the man to teach a grown woman to read, he truly hadn’t the faintest idea how to go about doing so. He’d fallen back on what he could remember of his own early education under the gentle tutelage of his nanny. Hence his stiff posture and pedantic speech. Two things which had nothing to do with his very real fight against the overpowering urge to touch her glorious hair or to draw his fingertips down her silken cheek.

“I think I do,” Miss Venable finally said.

“I would wager you know far more than you think you know. Write down everything you remember. We shall start from there.”

She took a deep breath, which drew his gaze to the generous swell of her breasts against the scoop of her bodice. He shifted in the chair and was rewarded with a disgruntled meow from Miss Titania. Miss Venable set to the task he'd given her with admirable determination. Her quill-strokes were slow and deliberate. Her concentration deep enough to produce tiny furrows in her brow. After several letters the tip of her tongue peeked from the corner of her mouth and stayed in that position as if in aid of the labors of the dainty fingers that clutched the quill with a fervor he seldom saw in even the most devoted law clerks.

After a quarter of an hour, she put down her quill and shoved the parchment at him. "That is all I can remember. I know there must be more, and I know my writing is worse than any child's, and I—"

Ari held up his hand to silence her. Her voice held an uncharacteristic wobble. The longer she spoke, the swifter and more breathless her words. And he could not bear the anxious, self-recriminating tone of her every word. "This is an excellent start, Miss Venable. I have read letters from belted earls far less clearly written than what you have done here." He perused the smudged piece of parchment. She'd managed to remember twenty of twenty-six letters. Her script was indeed unschooled, but she'd tried, and he made out each letter with little trouble.

"Lily."

He'd been studying the parchment so carefully she startled him when she spoke. He glanced up at her, and his heart began to bang against his ribs mercilessly.

"You must call me Lily." She folded her hands on the table and met his gaze with a steady, unwavering gaze of her own.

"Very well. Lily. You must call me Ari."

“Ari? What an odd name.” Her green eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Not nearly as odd as Aristotle, which is my full given name.”

“Oh dear.” She snorted and immediately pressed her hand to her lips.

“Do go ahead and laugh. But I beg you do not reveal that information to anyone. I can only provide entertainment to so many people at one time.”

“Aristotle,” she murmured and then let loose a completely unladylike burst of laughter.

“Very well. As you are so amused by my name. I demand you write my name five times on this piece of parchment as punishment.”

As if she were a candle suddenly snuffed out, she grew quiet and still. She picked up the quill and slowly dragged the piece of parchment from beneath his fingertips. A light sheen shone from her eyes.

Clumsy oaf!

He took the piece of parchment back, removed the quill from her shaky fingers and wrote his name in clear bold letters with a bit space between each letter on one side. On the other side he wrote her name in the same fashion.

“You can do this,” he said quietly as he passed the parchment and quill back to her. “And if you can write, I can teach you to read. You have my word.”

She gave him one last look of pointed skepticism and set to work. When he’d had enough of the sound of the quill scratching ever so slowly across the page, Ari stood and deposited the kitten on his chair. He strolled casually to one of the walls of

bookshelves and pretended to study the titles of the various volumes. When the scratching grew more steady, he took surreptitious glances at her, fiery head bent over the parchment hard at work.

What the devil was he about? He'd never wished for this task in the first place. He'd certainly never agreed to live in the same house as a woman who might be a murderess and was most definitely the target of some deranged person or persons unknown. After William's death he'd vowed never to have anyone's life in his hands again. His current dilemma wasn't quite the same, but was bloody damned close. Not to mention his forced proximity to a woman who had haunted his most fevered erotic dreams for ten years. A woman who was lying about her identity and had no notion that he knew who she was. He needed a brandy in the worst possible way.

"Queen Bess's bubbies," Lily muttered under her breath.

Make that, two brandies.

"Here," she said with a huff of exasperation as she pushed the parchment across the table toward him. "That's me finished. Your mother should be drawn and quartered for saddling you with such an impossible name." She folded her arms and slumped back into her chair.

"You will provoke no argument from me," He came to stand beside her chair and look over her work.

"What are your other names? You barristers are usually tonnish types and have names by the handful."

He gave a half-hearted laugh. "My full name is Aristotle Lycurgus Solon Barker-Finch the Third."

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” she blurted out and immediately covered his mouth with her hand.

“Any of those names would have been preferable to the ones I was given.” He pointed at the writing on the parchment. “By the time you wrote my name for the last time you very nearly matched what I wrote. Do you see that?” She leaned forward and studied where his finger rested.

“Really?” She looked up at him, so terribly pleased his chest hurt at her excitement. “I think you are crediting me with far more talent than I possess.” She pointed at her own name. “Though I will own to this part of your name looking particularly fine, if I do say so myself.”

“That,” he said, as he drew a line under her final version of her own name. “Is not part of my name. That is your name, L-i-l-y. Those four letters spell Lily.”

She ran her finger over the letters and brushed his fingers as she did. A shiver passed through him at her touch. But then she gazed up at him and her expression staggered his heartbeat and filled him with a sensation, half pain and half something warm and unfamiliar.

“I wrote my name,” she whispered.

“Yes, you did and very beauti—hmmm.”

She was in his arms and kissing him senseless before he knew it. But once he realized what was happening, he certainly did not waste any time thinking. He wrapped one arm around her to steady her as she’d nearly knocked him over when she leapt from her chair and threw her arms around his neck. At first her kiss was all enthusiasm and no finesse to speak of at all. He met the press of her lips with tender sips at her top lip before he drew her plump bottom lip between his teeth and sucked gently. When she

gasped, he darted his tongue inside her mouth. She sank into their kiss, meeting him stroke for stroke. Her hands stroked the back of his neck and she ran her fingers through the long hair that hung over his collar.

She was all searing heat and fierce passion, and he completely forgot where he was and why he was there. He slid his free hand up her arm, along the side of her neck and into the mass of satiny curls arranged at the back of her head. Which sent hairpins falling onto the table next to where they stood. The singular ping as each one fell startled them both. Lily pushed against his shoulders and took a step back out of his embrace. Her chest rose and fell as she tried to catch her breath. Ari failed to breathe at all.

“What...was that?” she touched two fingers to her lips and stared at him in disbelief.

“I...” Ari drew in a long breath. “You don’t know? You started it.” God, he sounded like a petulant schoolboy. “And if you have to ask, my chances of finding employment in one of those places you mentioned are decidedly unlikely.”

“The way you kiss,” she said hoarsely, as she picked up the piece of parchment in one hand, the kitten in the other, and backed away from Ari. “Only a fool would refuse to hire you, Mr. Barker-Finch.”

“Are you a fool?” he asked before he thought better of it.

“I...” She shook her head and fled the room.

Derek Welkirk, Earl of Framlingwood, was in desperate need of a good night's sleep. Make that a fortnight of good night's sleeps. If memory served, he had not managed several hours of rest together since September. Then again, having someone denounce one of your mistresses as a murderess and then blackmailing you to keep that information private tended to make sleep elusive at best and damned near impossible at worst. Not to mention that even with access to five mistresses he'd not engaged in a decent bout of bedsport in months. Making him bone-tired and irritable as the devil.

"Are you listening, Framlingwood?" Atherton asked from his spot sprawled in one of Lady Camilla's comfortable parlor chairs.

"To what?" Derek asked. "So far all you've done is complain about the weather. Forsythe and Colwyn appear to be conducting a secret conclave in the corner. And Dickie Jones and his young co-conspirator, George is it, seem to be bent on consuming every item on that tea table before anyone else has the chance. "Lady Camilla, does Carrington-Bowles not feed these children he and Charpentier have adopted?"

"Oy!" Dickie said loudly in spite of a mouth full of raspberry tart. "Leave off Mister Carrington-Bowles. He treats us like kings, he does." George nodded in agreement rather than speak. For which Derek was grateful as the lad had managed to stuff three lemon biscuits into his mouth at once.

"That's true," Forsythe said as he and Colwyn, their resident Bow Street runner,

joined Derek on the settee. “He feeds them as much food as Fat King George eats every day. No wonder Charpentier is still working at Livingston’s club. He has to in order to pay the food bills for these two. Not to mention the cost of cultivating raspberries all year round for the little urchins.” He waved a hand at Dickie and George which prompted Dickie to stick a raspberry stained tongue out at him.

“I cannot dun him for that,” Derek said. “I’m rather fond of the raspberries from Charpentier’s orangery. As are my mistresses.”

“Gentlemen, enough,” Lady Camilla said from the silk brocade chaise where she customarily held court. “We are not here for this.”

“Indeed.” Atherton sat up and straightened his disheveled attire. “We have much more important matters to discuss. Don’t we, Sythe?”

The barrister rolled his eyes. “Yes, we do. Matters like why you look as if you slept in those clothes and have apparently misplaced your valet and razor.”

“Slept in his dressing room last night,” Dickie offered with a grin. “And Lady Honoria ran him out of the house this morning because he didn’t apologize. Are you going to eat that biscuit, Georgie?”

“How the bloody hell do you know—”

“Language, Atherton,” Forsythe warned. “And how do you think he knows?” He and the other gentlemen looked at Lady Camilla, who made herself busy preparing a cup of tea.

“Did you apologize, Atherton?” she asked without looking up.

Derek turned his attention to the former cavalry officer, as did everyone else in the

room.

“Apologize for what?” Colwyn asked.

“Told her that her feet was cold when he climbed into bed with her.” Dickie smiled sweetly.

“Can we get on with the problem at hand?” Atherton asked. “Dear God, let this baby come soon,” he muttered under his breath. “Being next to her feet was like sleeping in a Highland loch.”

“What is the blackmailer’s latest demand?” Lady Camilla asked Derek.

“Another five thousand pounds.”

“Will you pay it?” Forsythe asked.

“Do I have a choice?” The money stung, but Derek’s main concern was the safety of the women still under his care—Lily and Margot. “Have you learned anything, Colwyn? Anything that might help us end this siege?”

“I recognized the blackmailer’s voice.”

Silence fell like an anvil into the room.

“You...what?” Derek rasped.

“The night of the masquerade debacle someone broke into Saida’s house,” Colwyn continued.

“What the devil? Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about the night you used

my ladies as bait and apparently nearly got one or more of them killed?” Derek started to stand. Lady Camilla waved him back into his seat.

“Do sit down and stop interrupting him,” she ordered. “We do not have all day to discuss this. It is over and done with, and all is well. That is sufficient for the moment. Mister Colwyn, dear, do continue.”

Derek crossed his arms and slouched into his chair.

“Hamish and Saida took care of the situation, but the man managed to escape. However, her cockatoo heard the entire thing, everything the blackmailer said. She had him repeat the man’s words to me before she and Hamish left for Scotland.”

Atherton waved his hands like a drowning man. “The cockatoo? Repeated what the man said? How does that help?”

“The cockatoo mimicked the man’s words in the man’s voice. Saida and Hamish assured me of the bird’s accuracy. The thing is, I recognized the voice, at least enough to know I have heard that voice before.”

“Where?” Derek demanded.

“Bow Street. I have heard that voice at Bow Street. More than once. All I have to do is hear it there again and the mystery will be solved.”

“And in the meantime, I continue to be blackmailed and Margot and Lily are still in danger. Not to mention the ladies who have married and moved their husbands into the houses I gifted them.” Derek knew his friends were trying, but the situation seemed no better now than it was at the beginning. And he had an increasing sense of foreboding that time was running out.

“I assure you the married ladies’ husbands are more than capable of protecting them. I am working on finding a bodyguard for Miss Margot,” Lady Camilla assured him. “And Barker-Finch is safely ensconced in Miss Lily’s so all is well, Framlingwood. You worry needlessly.”

“I don’t know how safe Barker-Finch is,” Derek said. “Apparently, Lily tossed his entire wardrobe and his shaving case at him the first night alone.”

A healthy burst of laughter traveled around the room. Derek’s heart lightened a bit at the vision of his sweet-natured Lily going after the poor barrister.

“Miss Venable threw a shaving case at Mister Barker-Finch?” Lady Camilla shook her head. “She is such sweet young woman. I can scarcely credit the tale.”

“I have the story from an unimpeachable source,” Derek said. “Mrs. Collins told me herself that very evening.”

“Told you,” Dickie said with an air of manufactured innocence. The other occupants of the room, save for young George who was busy slurping a cup of tea, gave each other knowing looks.

Derek had said too much. He wasn’t used to having friends living in his pockets. Friends . He allowed his gaze to wander the room slowly. He despised the situation that necessitated asking for help, but somehow the blackmailer had brought these people back into his life. And to his surprise, their presence and efforts on his behalf brought him...comfort. Only one other person on earth did that for him.

“How is the fair Mrs. Collins?” Atherton asked. The arse.

“She is well and perhaps the most competent housekeeper in London,” Derek replied as he forced himself not to grit his teeth.

“She would have to be handling you all these years.” Colwyn and Atherton exchanged a grin.

“I meant handling your mistress situation, of course,” the Bow Street man amended. “Is the next money delivery to be at the Prospect of Whitby again?”

Derek fished the latest blackmail missive from inside his waistcoat pocket. “No, it is to be—”

“The Bunch of Grapes,” Dickie announced, perched on the chaise longue next to Lady Camilla. “The man in black was there last night chatting up Maggie Turpin, one of the wenches who works there.”

“How the devil did he—”

“Don’t ask, Framlingwood,” Forsythe said. “You’re safer not knowing.”

Colwyn snatched the note from Derek and studied the message carefully. “I’ll deliver the money.”

“Not without me,” Derek said. “I’m weary of being the last to know what is afoot in this misadventure.”

“Best take him along, Bow Street. Word is your man has hired a few of the Narrow Street brawlers to take you down. Nasty cove, the man in black. He knows who you are and that the earl here is right handy with his fives.” Dickie gave Derek a nod of respect, which shouldn’t have pleased him, but damned if it didn’t do just that.

“Framlingwood? Handy with his fives?” Atherton looked Derek up and down. “Never would have pegged you as a boxer.”

“Needs must, Atherton,” Derek replied. “You missed a proper melee that night.”

“So it would seem. Which means count me in for the Grapes. But don’t tell my wife.” Atherton gave Lady Camilla a pointed look to which she raised her hands in surrender.

“Someone needs to let Barker-Finch know,” Forsythe suggested. “This blackmailer is too clever by half. He may have let it about that he intends to attack Framlingwood and then take the opportunity to stop by Miss Venable’s. The Rutherfords need to know as well.”

“Already done,” Dickie said as he stuffed a few macarons into his jacket pocket and picked up his cap. “Come on, Georgie. We’re for Mister Carrington-Bowles’s dispensary in the Dials this afternoon.” He and Georgie bowed to Lady Camilla as properly as any ton gentlemen and headed for the parlor doors.

“Home before dark,” Lady Camilla said.

“And stay away from the Grapes,” Atherton warned. “That’s an order.”

“Aye, your ladyship. As you say, Cap’n.”

Once the doors closed behind the boys Derek turned to Forsythe. “I want Dickie out of this. I won’t be responsible for the death of child. You have a house in the country, my lady. Send him there if you have tie him up in a sack to do so.”

“Dickie can take care of himself better than any of us,” Atherton said. “Don’t concern yourself with him.”

“Bollocks!” Derek pushed out of his chair and stepped toward the cavalry officer. Forsythe stood and held Derek in place by the arm.

“You’ve let the lad’s braggadocio and ability to gather information better than our Bow Stree friend her convince you he is immune to the evils in this world ready to make him pay for his survival thus far with his life. Unlike you, I am not fooled. He is a child. And the world in which we live lies in wait to dine on the bones of women and children.” Derek’s chest burned for lack of air. He wanted nothing more than to be anywhere else in this moment.

“I...” Atherton stared at him, his attitude one of abject helplessness.

Forsythe patted Derek’s shoulder, released his arm, and returned to his chair.

Under the sympathetic regard of everyone in the room, he bowed to Lady Camilla and prepared to take his leave. “The money is to be delivered in two days’ time. Make your arrangements and let me know the plan. I’ll bring the money.” He drew in a long, painful breath. “I knew a young woman who grew up in the Dials who could take care of herself. She ended up in the Thames with her throat slit. You made Dickie my concern when you dragged him into this. Put a stop to his participation, or I will go to Carrington-Bowles, who I daresay has no idea the extent of the boy’s involvement.”

As one, they avoided his gaze. He slammed out of the parlor and started down the stairs. By the time he reached the foyer, the front door was open and his carriage awaited him.

“No more,” he muttered, as his coachman ordered the horses to walk on. “Not one more.” His hands shook and his skin went cold. He wanted this over. He could not breathe, had not truly been able to breathe since the first attack on Adrienne in September. He needed...Derek tapped on the roof of the carriage.

“Grosvenor Street,” he ordered. “Deliver me to the mews.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Only one person could help him make sense of the tangle his mind had become.

What in the name of Hamlet's light-skirt mother was that damned man doing? Lily glanced at the old tambour mantel clock, one of the few possessions she'd brought with her from Edinburgh. Not quite two o'clock in the morning, and her supposed reading tutor had just moments ago passed by her bedchamber door on his way to the narrow stairs that led to the third-floor servants' chambers. For the third time since the entire household had retired for the night, Lily had been lying abed for hours listening to his booted footsteps as he prowled the house like some bedlamite member of the night watch.

Lily had managed to avoid Mister Barker-Finch, Ari, for the rest of the day after...after that kiss. Just the thought had her touching her fingers to her lips. Ridiculous. She'd been kissed more times than she cared to remember from her first one at the age of twelve backstage at the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh to her kisses from the earl who was quite skilled and always tasted of tooth powder. None of them compared to the raspberry jam and coffee taste of Aristotle Barker-Finch's searing sensuous lips as he'd kissed her senseless.

"You started it," he'd said which was all too true, but Queen Mab and all the fairies, he'd finished that kiss and damned near finished her. Which was why she had not ventured from her chambers the rest of the day, and she'd taken her supper on a tray in the sitting room next to her bedchamber. He'd made her a prisoner in her own home, damn him.

She wanted him. Badly. In a way she'd never wanted a man before, and staying out of his way was the only thing that would keep her safe. She was no sheltered miss.

She enjoyed every aspect of physical desire and refused to feel shame in answering the honest call of her body. This man, however, was different. She'd sensed the dangerous allure of him the moment she met him. Damn his eyes!

With a vile oath she flung back the sheets and counterpane and wiggled to the edge of her tester bed. The fire in the hearth provided light, but not nearly enough heat as it had died down considerably since Young Mary had added the evening's last scuttle of coal. She slid off the bed, shoved her feet into her wool mules, and slipped into her night rail. If she couldn't sleep, she could at least do something improving. With a branch of candles she lit from the fireplace, she made her way into her sitting room.

Her desk stood between two long windows and the light of the November moon bathed most of the room in a silvery light. She'd brought the pieces of parchment onto which she'd written her letters, her name, and her tutor's name upstairs with her. After a few hours practice this afternoon, her hand had grown steadier and she'd memorized the entire alphabet, writing the letters over and over again. She had to grudgingly admit the arrogant, handsome barrister had been right about one thing. Once she began to think on the letters, she knew more than she could credit.

Once she settled at her delicate rosewood desk, she pulled a clean piece of parchment from one of the pigeonholes across the back and took up her quill to write. A white streak raced from her bedchamber across the sitting room and out the door, which should have been closed. Lily dropped the quill and hurried out into the corridor. She heard footsteps overhead so Barker-Finch was still upstairs.

"Titania," she called softly. "Titania!" An icy breeze whisked up the corridor from the far end where the window looked out over the back gardens. By the time Lily reached the window, which should not have been open at all, Titania had slithered under the slightly raised casement and leapt into the nearby leafless ash tree. A piece of parchment fluttered on the window sill. Lily snatched the paper up and stuffed it into the pocket of her night rail.

She raised the window higher with surprising ease and leaned out toward the branch where her naughty kitten perched, blinking at her innocently. The November chill swept around her and took her breath away. She tried to draw her night rail more tightly around her, but the light fabric was of little help.

“Titania.” Lily’s teeth began to chatter. “Come back inside at once.” The kitten slid down the center trunk of the tree and sauntered out into the gardens, head and tail high. “I’m going to lock you in the butler’s pantry, you little fiend.” The footsteps overhead had stopped. She peered out the open window one more time and made her decision. With an exasperated sigh, she touched the inset door and took the servants’ stairs down to the back corridor of the ground floor. She’d left the branch of candles in her sitting room, of course. After a bit of searching, she found a lamp on the table by the door that led into the gardens. With a taper she lit from the stove she soon had her lamp ready and ventured out into the cold night in search of her ridiculous pet.

After she’d walked around the edges of the garden, lamp raised like some heroine from a gothic novel, she still could not find even a sign of Titania. The wind had picked up and the only part of her that was not frozen were her feet, safely ensconced in her heavy wool slippers. A sudden rustling in the hedges at the back of the garden drew her attention. She hurried down the graveled path, the stones biting into her feet in spite of the sturdy soles of her mules. Her night rail caught on some bare rose bushes. She stopped to try and pull the fabric free.

“Titania,” she muttered. “I have ruined a perfectly good night rail thanks to your nonsense. No cream for you for the rest of the—” She stopped speaking with an abrupt gasp. The lantern fell from her limp fingers and winked out as it rolled onto the grass. Two large shadows stepped out onto the path ahead of her. She opened her mouth to scream and began to back up, but bumped into something solid and warm that smelled of coffee and bergamot. An arm snaked around her waist and lifted her around to stand behind that solid figure.

Ari!

“Stay close,” the barrister ordered. Under the light of the moon, she saw he held a large cudgel which he tossed from hand to hand. “Well, lads, what’s it to be? A hasty retreat or cracked skulls? I know my preference.”

“Don’t know owt ’bout yer preference, m’lor’,” a third man announced as he joined the other two from the shadows. “Seeing as there’s three o’ us and only one of you.”

“You’d better hope you fight better than you count,” Ari said. “Have him in your sights, Rutherford?”

Lily had begun to look around for a weapon of some sort until she heard her footman’s voice from somewhere above her. When she looked up, she saw Slow Rutherford leaned into a crook of the ash tree, one foot braced on a branch with a pistol aimed at the trio of intruders.

“Yer man can’t see well enow to hit one of us, and he only has one shot.” The last man who’d made an appearance took a step back.

Ari lunged forward and struck the first two men in the head in quick succession. One of them managed to punch him in the jaw on the way down. Lily shrieked in spite of herself and backed toward the door into the house. Ari brought the cudgel down on the man who’d punched him one more time. A shot rang out, and the third man squealed and turned-tail, scurrying to the back gate that led to the mews. Titania chose that moment to scamper out from beneath a hawthorn bush.

“Titania!” Lily ran past Ari to scoop up her kitten.

“God’s teeth! Rutherford get down here.” Ari scooped Lily, kitten and all, up in his arms and backed towards the door. Some crashing followed by a stream of Seven

Dials's most creative curses announced Rutherford's precipitous arrival on the scene. The footman pulled a second pistol from the waistband of his breeches.

"You're lucky you didn't blow your bollocks off," Ari said as the footman walked past him to stand over the two unmoving villains.

"Too bloody right," Rutherford replied. "One of my brothers is on his way to the watch. Another's gone for the earl's Bow Street friend." He glanced back to meet Lily's gaze and then looked to Ari once more. "Take care of her, sir. I've got these two."

"Wait," Lily struggled to get down. "You can't leave Rutherford out here alone." Ari turned and walked into the house.

"He's not alone," the barrister said. "He's got the pistol."

"He's got the—" Lily used her free hand to punch his shoulder. "Put me down this instant."

"You promised not to hit me again." He strode into the foyer just as the front door burst open and Young Rutherford and Tall Rutherford, accompanied by a member of the watch, and a somberly dressed gentleman hurried inside. "In the garden," Ari said. "Do you have this in hand, Colwyn?"

"Always," the somberly dressed gentleman said. "Though you will have to beg my wife's pardon at some point."

"I look forward to it." Ari started up the stairs with as much ease as if Lily weighed nothing and had the ability to say even less.

"Take care of Miss Venable," the gentleman said. "We'll take care of this."

“You’ll take care of...Mister Barker-Finch, this is my house. You will not carry me about as if I am some invalid incapable of managing my own affairs.”

“Your own affairs? Madam, you cannot manage that piece of fluff you call a kitten. Not to mention your inability to manage staying indoors in the middle of the night when you know there might be some fiend lurking in the dark ready to do you harm.” He reached the second-floor landing, marched to her open sitting room door, and stepped inside before he kicked the door closed behind them.

“Put me down, you ridiculous man.” Lily punched his shoulder again as he crossed her bedchamber and reached her bed.

“With pleasure.” He dropped her unceremoniously onto the bed from such a height she nearly bounced off the thick feather mattress onto the floor. Titania squeaked indignantly and leapt from her arms to scamper across the bed to the large velvet cushion at the foot where she sometimes chose to sleep.

“Of all the—” Lily kicked at the barrister as he began to run his hands up and down her arms. “What are you about now?”

“Are you injured?” he asked as he moved to check her legs. He removed her mules and rubbed her feet.

“Of course I’m uninjured. You and Rutherford saw to that.”

“There’s blood,” he murmured as he continued to handle her suddenly very aware body.

“Blood? Where?” Lily shrugged out of her night rail and smoothed out her muslin nightgown. She glanced at him and saw he was in his shirtsleeves—no jacket, no waistcoat, no neckcloth. He nodded at his sleeve, marred by a bright red stain from

elbow to wrist.

“Blood. Where are you injured?”

Lily glanced up. His face was a mask of concern and some barely contained emotion that both thrilled and frightened her. His eyes still shone with the feral primitive light of a man fresh from battle. His scent of bergamot and coffee had been replaced with the smell of sweat, blood and fully aroused male. Her skin flushed hot and damp. Then she saw the source of the stain on his shirt. His bottom lip, swollen and trembling as his breath came in rough, loud pants, had been split and the blood beaded, welled, and dripped from the wound.

She rose onto her knees and reached out to touch her forefinger to his lips. Their eyes met and locked. Lily pulled the sleeve of her nightgown over her hand and blotted the blood with the fabric. She pressed gently and raised her other hand to push his disheveled hair away from his face. He covered her hand with his and pressed her palm to his cheek.

“I am not injured,” she said quietly. “All is well.” She drew her sleeve-covered hand back. The bleeding had stopped. Very slowly she leaned up and brushed her lips over his. When she tried to back away, he slid his free hand to her waist and then around her back to pull her against his chest.

“Lily.” He spoke her name in a dark, hoarse whisper.

She framed his face with her hands and flicked her tongue across the seam of his mouth. He wrapped his arms around her and seared his lips to hers. Their tongues met, undulating and thrusting against each other first in his mouth and then in hers. Lily sifted her fingers through his hair to clutch the back of his head and hold him in place. She plundered his mouth, sucking his tongue then pulling away to kiss the corners of his mouth, his chin, then back along his cheek to his temple.

Ari dragged his lips from her mouth down the middle of her throat to nip at the hollow there. He used his teeth to tug at the ribbon at the top of her nightgown. Once loosened, the ribbon slid away and the thin muslin slid down to catch on the curves of her shoulders. The heat of her body made the touch of the fabric irritating and confining. She shrugged until the top of her nightgown fell down to catch on her taut nipples. He pressed kisses from one of her collarbones to the other. She crossed her arms between them and tugged the annoying garment to her waist.

He raised his head. His eyes widened and he leaned back to gaze at her breasts. “Magnificent,” he murmured as he cupped them in his hands and ran his thumbs across the sensitive tips, grown impossibly tight and painful from the fire of his regard. He teased and gently squeezed molding her breasts together whilst he slipped his tongue over the tops and between them.

When she could bear no more, she guided his head down and he drew one nipple between his lips to suckle as he continued to massage the other. Lily threw back her head with a low moan and then gasped when he slowly drew down his teeth and bit lightly on her nipple. He tugged a few times, flicked his tongue over the very tip and then moved to the other breast ministering to that nipple and breast in the same fashion.

He suckled hard and she fell back onto the bed, holding his head to her breast and trying to kick her nightgown away from her body. Ari grasped her hips and pulled the nightgown down to drop onto the floor. He kissed his way down her body, his large warm hands still holding her in place at her hips. When he reached the curls at the apex of her thighs, she spread her legs wide and watched as he glanced up her body and gave her a wolfish grin.

He ran his tongue between her nether lips and her body bucked as she fisted the counterpane and arched her back. He teased and tempted, licked and suckled her cunny until she was ready to scream. He used his tongue and lips to bring her to the

very edge of ecstasy only to start all over again before turning his attention to the one spot she wished him to touch.

“Ari,” she begged in spite of herself. “Please. Oh! Oh! What—” She did scream as he pushed first one finger and then two into her cunny, slowly pumping them in and out across a place inside that sent shards of pleasure coursing through her. Faster and faster, he thrust. With his free hand he reached up to squeeze her breast and pinch her nipple. She raised and lowered her hips to match his rhythm in an effort to bring on the cataclysm she so desperately desired.

“That’s it, love,” he muttered. “Take it. Take your pleasure. That’s it. What do you want? What, Lily?”

She heard what he said but was in the throes of such an overwhelming desire all she could do was toss her head and gasp incoherently. He covered the top of her cunny with his lips and drew the spot she needed into his mouth to suckle hard as she braced her feet on the bed and rode his unrelenting fingers to a heart stopping explosion of pleasure so intense she feared she might never descend back to earth.

He continued to wring shudder after shudder from her until she finally had no more strength and subsided limp and weak onto the counterpane. His head rested on her thigh, his hot breath wafted across her still sensitive cunny. Her legs twitched. She reached down to stroke his hair. She had no notion how long they lay that way. Finally, he kissed his way up her body, hot open-mouthed touches of his lips to her damp flesh.

“I have to go,” he murmured against her ear and then nipped her earlobe.

“Go? Where? I’m not finished with you.” She could barely speak or keep her eyes open.

He laughed darkly. “That is good to hear. I’m not finished with you either, but I need to see to what has happened here tonight.” He kissed her soundly and crawled back off the bed. With a few twists and tucks he righted his appearance and headed for her chamber door.

“Ari,” she pushed herself up and stared at him in disbelief. “You cannot be leaving now. Not after...”

“Sleep,” he ordered. “I’ll see you in the morning. When I will teach you to spell and write anticipation.” He grinned and slipped out the door.

“Anticipation?” She screamed softly in frustration. “Anticipation my arse, you fiend.” She started to leave her bed in search of her night rail when she spied Titania before the fire batting at a scrap of parchment. “Give me that.” Lily jumped from the bed and padded across the carpet to snatch the parchment in one hand and the kitten in the other. She scooped up her night rail and returned to her bed. The parchment had writing on it in an untidy scrawl. The letters were easily made out, but she wasn’t certain what it said. Eleven letters.

A sudden chill swept over her and she held Titania close. Her life had been upended this night, and she had a sense not all of the events were for her good.

Cassandra Collins glanced across her dainty rosewood tea table at her employer, Derek Welkirk, Earl of Framlingwood, and a pang of concern settled into her heart as if coming home for the winter. This occurred more and more often these days where he was concerned. The earl sat sprawled on the settee in her private parlor at the back of Number Two Grosvenor Street, his head resting against the overstuffed wool fabric and his eyes closed in abject exhaustion. She had never seen him so weary nor heard him so tortured and confused. She poured him another cup of tea.

“I don’t think more tea is going to help,” he murmured as he tilted his head toward her and opened his eyes.

“I concur,” she replied as she pulled a silver flask from the pocket of her dark green merino wool gown. She unstopped the flask and poured a generous splash into the cup before offering it to him across the table. He sat up and took the cup, downing the contents in a few long draughts. He held the empty cup out and she filled the delicate blue Wedgewood piece from the flask.

“I should not have come,” he said. “You have burden enough managing all of this without my adding to your troubles.”

“Anything to do with the ladies is my burden, my lord. You made it so when you hired me. And I need to know any changes in their circumstances so I might help you to keep them safe.”

“It isn’t your duty to keep them safe.” He set the half empty cup onto the table so

forcefully it rattled. “The duty is mine, and I have already dragged too many good, innocent people into the fray. I should have taken care of this myself. I should have—”

“You should have done as you have always done? Alone? And what then? What if this blackmailer had met you all alone in the Prospect of Whitby and murdered you? What would have happened to the ladies then? To the Rutherfords and the other servants who serve these houses? To me?”

He ran his hands through his hair and fell back against the settee cushions. “I am not accustomed to asking for help. These men have wives, children, Lady Camilla is no longer young. Dickie Jones is too young. And they have all risked their lives and safety to...to...”

“To what, Derek?”

He raised his head and studied her, his expression unreadable to most, but she knew him too well. She’d been housekeeper to his mistresses for five years and had been his only confidante for nearly that long. He’d given her his leave to use his given name when they were in private long ago, but still appeared stunned when she did so. Or perhaps he experienced some other emotion when she did so. That much of him was a mystery to her.

“To what?” she asked again. “To come to the aid of a friend? They are your friends, Derek. Whether you want them to be or not. Whether you admit them to be or not. They are your friends, and they want this to end well for you and for the ladies. Let them help you. You cannot do this alone. Why ever would you want to if you do not have to do so?”

“Because if I do this alone no one else’s blood will be spilt on my account.” He held his head in his hands. “No one else will die for my arrogance and neglect.”

Unable to stay away, Cassandra rose and came to sit beside him. “Arrogance and neglect? Derek, for pity’s sake, no man could be a better protector to these ladies. You have cared for them, provided them with homes and safety. Good Lord, you have gifted three of them the very houses on this street. To live in with their new husbands. How many gentlemen would do the same for their mistresses? How many would even care enough to protect a mistress from a blackmailer knowing...knowing she may have k-killed someone.” After a few hesitant attempts she rested her hand on his shoulder.

She steadied herself with a deep breath. She always walked a razor’s edge with this man. She dared not show him the extent of her regard, but she so wanted him to know that she saw him for who he truly was, which was not true of even the friends who sought to help him in his current dilemma.

“How many gentlemen manage to accumulate five mistresses at one time and ask the most capable of housekeepers to keep his secrets and keep these five households from descending into chaos?” He leaned back once more and covered her hand with his own.

“My life is never dull, my lord.”

He snorted. “I daresay not.” He sighed and closed his eyes, curling his fingers around her hand on his shoulder. “Has Barker-Finch managed to make his peace with my Lily? Or is she still shying books and boots at him?”

“They have reached a tentative agreement. He has taught her to write her name. She is terribly proud of herself.”

“As she should be. m glad. Perhaps he may yet survive to teach her to read as well.”

“We live in hope,” she said softly. He had begun to relax, and if she did not disturb

him, he might actually succumb to sleep for a while. She glanced around and saw a heavy quilt draped over the back of her chair before the fire.

“What am I to do about Dickie Jones?” he asked, his voice heavy with the onset of sleep. “Must I go to the Duchess of Chelmsford and have her intervene?”

She drew her hand from under his and went to fetch the quilt. When she returned to the settee, she managed to move him around to lie down, though she had to raise his legs to drape them over the end of his makeshift bed. She tucked a large embroidered pillow beneath his head and covered him with the quilt.

“I suppose you could.” She brushed his hair away from his face. “However, I would suggest you go to Mister Carrington-Bowles first. He is a good and caring man, and he loves young Dickie like a son. Bringing Captain El into the fray may result in bloodshed.”

“Hmm.” He clutched her hand to his chest. “I should leave. Your reputation...”

“I am housekeeper to an earl’s mistresses, Derek. I have no reputation to harm. Sleep.”

“You’ll stay with me?”

“Of course.”

A quiet snore escaped him, and she smiled. However, as she began to go over all of the information he’d given her this night about the situation with the blackmailer, she realized she’d sleep very little this night. It was true she had no reputation to harm. Much like the five mistresses he accumulated over the last five years, she was an unknown woman in a sea of unknown women in London. Which was exactly what she preferred. For her there was no other way.

Cassandra had no idea how long she'd slept, slumped in the chair by her now cold hearth. She awoke to a quiet but steady knock at her parlor door. Her stiff body protested as she pushed out of her chair and paced stealthily to the settee where Derek still slept. The first rays of the weak November morning sun glimmered through the one window in her ground-floor quarters at Number Two.

Who the devil could be at her door at this hour of the morning?

"Cassandra?" The earl shifted on the settee, but did not awaken.

"I am here, Derek," she said softly before she tip-toed to the parlor door.

She lifted the latch and opened a crack just wide enough to peer around the jamb. "Mister Barker-Finch?" She stepped back and held the door for him to step inside the parlor. "Is there something amiss? Has something happened?" She was whispering in an effort not to wake the sleeping earl. She dreaded to think what the barrister was thinking as he caught sight of their mutual employer sprawled under a country quilt on her settee. Whatever his thoughts the man neither voiced them nor evinced them in his expression.

"We needs must wake him, Mrs. Collins. All is well, but something has happened."

Ari tried and failed not to stare at Lily's lips as she repeated the sounds of each of the letters to which he pointed with his finger. His every nerve fairly vibrated with arousal and caused him to shift every few minutes in the chair next to hers. Her scent of lemon and jasmine teased him every time he bent close to answer her questions. His cock was so hard he dared not pull his chair too close to the table for fear the damned thing would rise up and start knocking against the heavy oak.

By all rights, he should be dead tired and ready for sleep. He'd not returned to his chamber across from hers until an hour past sunrise. After the passionate interlude

he'd shared with Lily he'd barely managed to tear himself away to consult with the watch and Archer Colwyn. Then he'd gone to report the evening's events to Mrs. Collins only to find Framlingwood asleep on the housekeeper's settee. Once he'd dealt with the earl, he'd enjoyed only a few hours' sleep before one of the maids came in to build up the fire in his chamber.

He and Lily had breakfasted together, but their conversation had wavered between stilted and languid with an undercurrent of desire. And now? Now he was supposed to be teaching her how to pronounce the various sounds of the letters of the alphabet. Instead, as he watched her lips form each sound, he imagined how those lips might feel against his...or on various parts of his body. What the buggering hell had he been thinking last night?

That all those hours he'd spent frigging himself to a fantasy of this woman didn't hold a patch to the real thing?

"Ari?" Lily's voice dragged him back to the present. "Ari, are you certain you are quite recovered from last night's exertions?" She blinked and gazed at him with feigned innocence. In a matter of days, he'd come to recognize the wicked glint in her eyes.

"Exertions?" He raised an eyebrow "To what exertions do you refer, Miss Venable?"

She laughed. "Why to vanquishing those ruffians, of course. You do remember that, don't you? Skulls cracking? Gunfire? Footmen falling from trees?"

"According to the Rutherfords those sorts of exertions have become regular occurrences here on Grosvenor Street."

"Then I suppose I must concede your presence here is most fortunate." She pretended to turn her attention back to the various pages of parchment on the library table.

“I hope so, Lily. I truly do.” Now he was uncomfortable for a very different reason. He meant what he said. In only a few days he’d come to want to teach her to read, to keep her safe.

She glanced at him and reached over to squeeze his hand. “What sound does this make?” she asked. Her finger traced two letters she’d added to her alphabet—k and n.

“Ah. That is a strange one. Those two letters together are pronounced as the letter n.”

She mouthed the letter n and then added two letters after the kn she had written. “So, this is pronounced now?”

“Actually, it is not. That is pronounced like the word no, but it means to know something.” He bit back a laugh at her puzzled expression.

“Who the devil came up with these tricks? It truly is the outside of enough.” She tossed down her quill. “I will never learn all of this.” She slumped back into her chair and crossed her arms which pushed her breasts into a tantalizing display over the bodice of her simple day gown.

“You already know this, Lily. Mrs. Collins allows you have memorized every word Shakespeare ever wrote.”

“That was easy. I have been learning his plays since I was old enough to walk.”

“How? How did you learn if you cannot read?”

“My mother was a seamstress for a theatre company in...Manchester. I sat backstage with her through every production as she had to be there in case a costume needed repair. After hearing a play one or two times, I could repeat every line. I have done the same with the novels the...other people have read to me.”

“One or two times? Every word?”

She shrugged. “It is something I have always been able to do.”

“Good God, Lily that is a great gift. If you can do that, you can certainly learn to read.” He dragged the pages closer and pulled his chair closer to hers. “Come. Let us continue.”

She sighed. “Perhaps I simply need to go on as I always have. I can have people read to me and learn what I need to know. If you are in want of a position, perhaps I can persuade the earl to hire you as my reader.” She ran her finger across his cheek and down the side of his neck which produced a shiver throughout his body.

“You need to be able to read for yourself, Lily. There will come a time when your life may well depend upon it.” He said the words so vehemently he stunned himself. From her expression he’d shocked her as well. He cleared his throat. “I want you to learn to read. For both of our sakes. Yes?”

She studied him so carefully he nearly turned away. He didn’t want her to know. There was no reason for her to hear of his greatest failure, but he suddenly realized she might be the one to redeem him, at least as much as he could be redeemed. This had started out as an obligation, then became something of a lark. Teaching Lily to read was suddenly something more.

“Yes. Very well. I shall do my best to unravel the mystery that is reading the bloody King’s English.” She picked up her quill and wrote another word on the parchment. “What is this word?”

He leaned over to read what she had written. “That word is who. Even though the letters sound like wa-huh-o, when they are written together like this, they are who. What you have written with these two words is know who.”

Her quill tremored slightly in her hand. Several drops of ink stained the page. Suddenly, she pushed the page away and pulled a clean piece of parchment in front of her. “I tire of these ridiculous words. What about the word you promised to teach me last night?” In an instant she turned from startled maiden to flirtatious coquette. The smile she turned on him was a siren song, and his cock throbbed as if eager to hear more.

“Last night?” He licked his lips. “What word would that be, Miss Venable?”

She turned in her chair and drew so close to him, her breasts rested on his arm. “Anticipation,” she said slowly, lingering over every syllable.

“An-anticipation. I do recall something being said about the word. Yes.” He reached for a piece of parchment, took three attempts and finally managed to pull a sheet in front of him on the table. Lily picked up the quill and used the instrument as an excuse to lean even closer as she handed it to him.

His voice rough with desire, he said each letter as he wrote the word in bold script across the top of the page. She repeated the letters as he said them in that rich contralto of hers, her breath caressing his neck as she did.

“Anticipation,” she nearly purred. He had no notion what she was about, but he was powerless to ask her to stop. She ran her fingers down his chest and unbuttoned his jacket.

“Perhaps you should write the word several times to lodge it f-firmly—” He jumped involuntarily as her fingers reached the falls of his breeches. “In your mind.”

“The word has been fixed in my mind since you fled my chambers last night.” She unbuttoned one button of his breeches and then another. “I have been in anticipation all morning. You, sir, have been remiss in my instruction of the subject of

anticipation, and I demand reparations for that oversight forthwith.”

“Well, I...” He glanced at the parlor doors whilst she continued to unbutton his falls.

“Locked,” she said as his cock sprang into her soft, warm hand. “Whilst you were being the dutiful tutor and assembling my writing supplies.” She gave his cock one long, slow stroke.

He bit back a groan. “This is supposed to be a reading and writing lesson.” His wits had obviously left him as he was now babbling inanities whilst the most beautiful woman he had ever known was fondling his granite hard cock with a virtuoso’s touch.

She used her feet and free hand to shift his chair around to face her. “Of course.” She scooted her chair to face his. “I shall write anticipation and you can tell me if I have spelt the word correctly. With that, she bent over and touched the tip of her tongue to his pulsing cock. He nearly leapt from the chair. She tightened her hand around the base and began to trace her tongue up and down in slow, precise lines. After a few strokes his mind cleared enough for him to realize the minx was spelling anticipation with her tongue. On his cock.

Ari gripped the arms of the chair to the point his hands shook. His head lolled back as a low groan slowly made its way up from his chest. Once she finished each tongued letter she blew across the head of his cock and asked “Did I spell anticipation correctly?”

“Y-yes,” he gasped. “P-perfectly correct.”

“Then I deserve a reward.” She swirled her tongue around and then sucked his cock into her mouth with a devilish hmmm of appreciation. She continued to stroke with one hand and then cradled his bollocks in the other. Her mouth alternated between

gently caressing to drawing on his aching flesh to the point of pain. Behind his eyes, closed in ecstasy, flashes of light nearly blinded him. His hips pumped up and down in time with her talented mouth until he was panting like a horse at Newcastle. His throat was raw with the harsh passage of air in and out of his lungs.

“Lily,” he rasped. “Dear God, Lily. Yes. More!”

She braced her hands on his thighs and bent to take as much of him into her mouth as she could before she took one lingering pull up his cock and flicked her tongue across the tip. “Tell me,” she said, and licked the tip again. “How do you spell more?”

“Wha...I...” The errant thought that his eyes had crossed and he could not think passed through his mind.

Lily stood and unfastened the buttons at the front of her dress. She wore no chemise or stays and with a shrug her breasts spilled out against the dark wool fabric in all their porcelain glory. She pulled up her skirts and climbed onto the chair to straddle his lap. “Perhaps you need help with the word more?” She reached down to pull his cock away from his belly and lowered her wet cunny to take him inside her with delectable languor.

“Oh, yes-s-s,” she moaned once she was fully seated and his cock throbbed inside her greedy heat. She braced her hands on his shoulders and began to ride him, shifting her strokes until she found the one that elicited shivers with every stroke.

Ari gripped her hip with one hand and cupped her breast with the other. He brought that perfect beauty to his lips and drew her nipple into his mouth. Her fingertips dug into his flesh, and she threw her head back with a soft cry. The harder he suckled, the faster she roared. Before long, he was able to match her rhythm and pumped his hips against her thrusts. Soon they were racing together to the place where their bodies meeting would take them far from the world of ruffians, secrets, and lies. To the place

beyond all sense and reason.

“Ari,” she gasped. “So good. So...fucking good. Ari!” she cried and her entire body went taut, bowed back and locked in a pose of complete sensual response. He released her breast from his mouth and held her in place with both hands as he pumped several strokes to join her with a long chest-rattling groan. His head fell back and his entire body went limp. She collapsed against him, her sweet breath warming his throat.

They stayed that way, draped over each other in the exquisite stillness of lovers replete and still joined in all the ways that made life worthwhile. That thought settled into Ari’s mind, amorphous and not yet grasped. He pushed the idea away quickly. Lily laughed softly and the sound sent a tremor into his chest.

“You were right,” she said.

“I was?”

“I don’t think I shall ever forget how to spell anticipation.”

“Hmmm.”

The doors rattled. Lily jumped up so quickly Ari flinched in pain as her body released his. She scrambled to button up her bodice and shake out her skirts. Ari tucked his shirt in and made quick work of fastening his falls. She reached over to smooth his hair before she went to the doors and opened them wide.

“You have a message, Miss Venable,” Slow Rutherford said as he nodded at Lily meaningfully. “I thought you might want to send a reply as the message is from Mister Charpentier. The boy is waiting.” He eyed Ari suspiciously, but Ari refused to be cowed by a footman, even one as useful and capable, albeit dangerous, as a

Rutherford.

Her entire expression lit up, and Ari experienced the oddest sensation toward this Mister Charpentier. “Yes, of course. I’ll only be a moment.” She hurried from the room. Rutherford stared at him, his expression hard and decidedly unfriendly.

“Might want to learn how to button your own falls, seeing as your valet isn’t here to do it for you.”

Ari looked down. He’d made a right hash of his breeches in his haste to hide what he and Lily had been doing only moments before the footman tried to enter the drawing room. He quickly set himself to rights, but did not meet Rutherford’s still determined glower.

“Take care with her, barrister,” he finally said. “Mistress or not, Miss Venable is a lady.”

“She is at that, Rutherford,” Ari assured him. “More lady than most of the ones parading around Mayfair, make no mistake.”

The man’s face relaxed somewhat. He nodded and left. Ari stood and braced his hands on the library table. The long breath he let out stirred the various pieces of parchment there. The one where Lily had written various words for him to pronounce drew his eye. At the bottom of the various examples she’d written, she had put three words together in a way they had not spoken.

“I know who you are” was written several times in her careful, improving hand. He glanced at the closed drawing room doors and then back at the piece of parchment.

Lily nodded at the footman as he took her cloak and made her way to the lush but dainty chair strategically placed close enough to the front of the theatre box for her to see and hear but far enough in the shadows not to be seen. Not that being seen would prove to be an issue. Between her blonde wig and the delicate black and gold demi-mask and long black velvet hooded cloak she'd worn over her gown to traverse the foyer and stairs of the Theatre Royal, she suspected her own dearly departed Mama would be hard-pressed to recognize her.

She relaxed into her chair and opened her fan. Despite the chilly November evening the press of bodies and the heat of hundreds of candles warmed the theatre to the point where beads of sweat had popped out on her forehead and across the portion of her chest and shoulders bared by her gown. A vision of Ari, sprawled across her bed and snoring crossed her mind and she experienced a moment of regret. This evening at the theatre lacked only his presence to be complete.

Over the past few days, she'd contemplated more than once asking him to accompany her tonight. However, since he'd moved into her house, he'd denied her even a brief shopping trip to her modiste's. A request to enjoy an evening in London's most popular theatre would have no doubt resulted in her being confined to her chambers like some disobedient child. Not bloody likely. Not when Mister Charpentier had arranged for her to use Lady Camilla's private box and provided her with tickets to a play she'd wanted to see since before she'd fled Edinburgh. Wallack was performing in John Home's play *Douglas*, a play she'd witnessed once backstage many years ago. She hoped on a second hearing she might remember the lines enough to perhaps write them down once Ari had taught her to do so.

Ari.

He'd filled the past few days with learning and laughter and the past few nights with a passion and erotic fulfillment she'd never thought herself to ever know. They'd enjoyed an early supper tonight, accompanied by copious amounts of wine and vigorous bedsport before she'd sneaked into her dressing room, donned her gown and disguise, and crept out the doors into her garden to meet a hackney Mary had summoned to arrive at the back of the mews. Ari would sleep until nearly dawn, and by then, Lily would be back at home with him none the wiser. She wanted to congratulate herself on her cleverness, but somehow her enjoyment of spending time alone had been dimmed by Ari's constant presence.

A tap at the door drew her attention to the rear of the box. The orchestra struck up a melancholy tune, but the play would not start for a while yet. Nathaniel Charpentier stuck his head in the door and Lily waved him inside. He took her outstretched hands and kissed each one in turn.

"I do love your disguise," he said as he took the seat beside her. "You are quite fetching with blond hair."

"I agree," a deep and all too familiar voice said from the box doorway. "Mister Charpentier, I presume?" Ari stepped into the light provided by the lamps mounted on either side of Lady Camilla's box. Lily muttered a curse which had the famous chef smiling and shaking his head as he stood.

"Indeed," Nathaniel said. "And you are Mister Barker-Finch, I take it?" He extended a hand to Ari which the interfering barrister shook, staring at Lily the entire time.

"Will you be staying to enjoy the play with us?" Ari asked when he finally looked away from Lily and actually acknowledged Nathaniel.

“Alas, no. My assistant is overseeing preparations for a dinner I am catering for Mister Price, the new director of the theatre. That is how I was able to secure your ticket at such short notice. I must go and ensure all goes well. But I do hope you both enjoy the play. Wallack is supposed to be superb in the role of Norval. And in spite of being an American. Price has managed to lure a highly praised actress from Edinburgh to play the role of Lady Randolph, a Mrs. Easterling.”

Lily’s blood ran cold. She fluttered her fan rapidly across her face. Dear God, let Ari keep his attention on Nathaniel. The two men continued to converse, though their voices sounded very far away. She blinked hard and fought to stay upright in her chair. Ari having discovered she’d sneaked out to the theatre without him was nothing compared to this latest news. She forced herself to take slow even breaths. Mrs. Easterling. Fanny Easterling. A name she’d hoped never to hear again.

“Easterling,” Ari was saying. “I saw her perform in Edinburgh years ago. Quite talented.”

“So I have heard,” Nathaniel said. “I understand she has been traveling and performing in Europe these ten years. Some scandal to do with her husband discovering some girl stealing Mrs. Easterling’s jewelry and the girl murdering him to escape. Bad business, that.”

“Yes...I remember something about the case. They never found the girl, did they?” Something in the way he spoke made goose flesh pop up across the back of her neck. She dared not look at him and risk betraying herself.

“Speaking of bad business,” Ari continued and turned to Lily once more. “Was it necessary for you to resort to such underhanded methods to attend the theatre?”

“I wanted to see the play,” she managed to say, her throat raw with dread. “Douglas is one of the plays I want to...learn.” She swallowed. Her eyes blurred when he

nodded as if he knew what she meant. “You hardly allow me to leave the house. Mister Barker-Finch is my tutor and my gaoler, hired by the earl.”

“A necessary precaution from what I understand from CB,” Nathaniel replied. “Though I can assure you she is safe here, sir. I have footmen posted outside the door.”

“I saw them and I thank you,” Ari replied. He studied her face and Lily’s heart sank. Had he noticed her expression at the mention of Mrs. Easterling’s name? She struggled to find something to say to indicate there was nothing at all the matter with her. Sudden recognition crossed his features and he turned back to Nathaniel. “You are Carrington-Bowles...friend.”

Nathaniel nodded. “I am.” Lily saw the hesitation in his eyes, the moment of uncertainty.

“He is a good man,” Ari said. “You are most fortunate.”

“Very much so.”

“Though he may be more fortunate. Your reputation as a chef is unmatched. And a number of the sweets Miss Venable serves are due to your skill I understand.” He glanced at Lily. “I should take you over my knee and take you home at once.”

“Try it, sir, and I shall shy more than a book at you.” She crossed her arms and turned toward the stage with a huff. She heard Ari and Nathaniel move to the back of the box. They spoke quietly for a few moments and then she heard the door close. Ari came to the front of the box and sat beside her. The theatre was fairly full, especially down below in the pit. The noise of conversation had begun to rise which meant the play would soon begin.

“I would have brought you had you asked,” Ari said. He touched her mask, but did not remove the light gold fabric piece.

“No, you wouldn’t.” She still refused to look at him, half in pique at him following her to the theatre and half in fear of sitting through the entire play knowing Fanny Easterling was in the same building and, might, on the barest of chances, recognize her.

“Very well, I would not. I can keep you safe on Grosvenor Street. Lily, you have no idea the danger you are in, love.” He clasped her hand and used the fingers of his free hand to tilt her face toward him. “You know you can tell me anything. Anything at all. Yes?”

“I might say the same of you,” she replied. The intensity of his gaze and voice set her nerves on edge. “You speak of protecting me. From what? You speak of my learning to read as saving my life. How? I will tell you my secrets, Ari. If you will tell me yours.”

Yet another knock at the door and he leapt from the chair to hurry to the back of the box. When he returned to her side he handed her a thick bound sheaf of pages. He settled back into his chair as the orchestra struck up the entr’acte.

“What is this?” she asked as she leaned close enough not to shout above the music.

“The play.” He shrugged. “I asked your friend Charpentier to ask Mister Price for one.”

She stared at him, incredulous.

“We will watch the play, and then tomorrow we will begin to teach you to read John Home’s words. Come. The play is about to begin.” He moved his chair close to hers

and opened the bound pages. The light from the lamps in the box illuminated the printed words but also drew her attention to how handsome he was in his evening jacket and breeches.

His waistcoat had a pattern in red thread, and his shirt and neck cloth were snowy white. Slow Rutherford had likely tied his neck cloth and given him the clean shave that emphasized the sharpness of Ari's features. Traitorous footman. Under other circumstances she and Ari might have been any ton couple out for a night at the theatre. Save for the fact she was another man's mistress, and he was with her only until the unnamed danger passed.

She listened intently to the players and all the while watched as his finger moved beneath the words of the play. His breath teased the side of her neck where he'd pushed the wig's curls over her shoulder. Then she heard a familiar voice onstage and could not help but look. Even from the distance of Lady Camilla's box Lily recognized the actress who'd ruined her life out of jealousy and spite. The woman who had forced her to flee Edinburgh for London where she might have starved or worse if not for the intervention of a street urchin named Dickie Jones and a lady sea captain, now the Duchess of Chelmsford.

"Lily, are you well?" Ari touched his fingertips to her cheek. "Do you wish to leave?"

"No," she drew in a steadying breath and centered her thoughts as she had to play a role. "I want to see the play. Even if you decide to punish me for disobeying you about leaving the house." She offered him a saucy grin.

"Watch the play, madam." He nipped her earlobe. "We will speak of your form of punishment later." He smiled, but there was something in his smile that disturbed her. They sat through the rest of the play in relative silence. Each time she glanced at him he appeared far more intent on watching her than the players. She might have been flattered. His eyes had not failed to rouse her desire since that first night. Now,

however, his gaze did more. Something had shifted, changed, and she had to discover what before he became more important to her than he was in this moment.

Once the play was ended, Lily did her best to hasten their leaving the theatre without appearing to do so. She allowed her hands to stray to his body, to caress him as if her haste had to do with desire and not abject terror. There was little chance they would meet Fanny Easterling, but she dared not take the chance. She had not come by her own carriage, and neither had he. Ari, however, with his height and commanding presence summoned a hackney quite quickly, gave the coachman their direction, and soon had her safely ensconced on the rear facing seat with him next to her.

“Lily, I—” She cut him off with a searing kiss, hungry for the reassurance of his lips on hers. His powerful hands slid inside her cloak and pulled her against his hard, warm body. He thrust his tongue along hers and soon they were engaged in a tangle to imitate a far more intimate and powerful connection. They kissed and kissed, hungry and unwilling to release each other save for a brief breath only to meld their mouths together once more, as if their very lives depended on it. He moved one hand to the top of her bodice and slid two fingers inside to trap her nipple, to pluck and pinch. She shivered at the shards of pleasurable pain he drew from her sensitive flesh.

The hackney began to slow and bump along. The streets of Mayfair were never this rough and uneven. Several loud thumps sounded against the vehicle. Ari broke of their kiss, tucked her back into her gown, and lifted her to sit behind him on the seat. Lily reached under her petticoats and drew a long dagger from the sheath strapped to her thigh. The blade glinted as the moonlight slipped into the carriage. Ari looked back, saw the blade, and his mouth kicked up in a wicked grin. He shifted closer to the door and pulled a pistol from the pocket of the greatcoat he’d donned as they left the theatre.

Rough voices, three or four, moved toward the door as the hackney jerked to a stop. Lily heard the coachman jump down and the sound of swiftly retreating footsteps told

her the man had left them there, likely on purpose. She held her hand to her nose against the rancid smell of the river. Where were they? Nowhere near Grosvenor Street, that much was certain.

“Bugger this,” Ari muttered. “Stay here. Stab anyone who tries to take you.”

“Ari—.”

He kicked the hackney door open and leapt out into the night. The muffled sounds of fists hitting flesh, curses, a cry of pain, and finally a gunshot, all in the space of mere seconds, had Lily scrambling for the door, knife in hand. She leaned out to see Ari engaged in battling three large men. The voice of the largest man sounded vaguely familiar. She started to put one foot down onto the filthy cobblestones when someone appeared from the other side of the hackney.

“Hold, Miss Venable,” a cultured voice ordered. “Armed or not, you are a distraction. Damn!” The man stepped in front of her to meet one of the ruffians who had broken off from the fight. He kicked the attacker in the knee and planted him a facer so hard she heard bones crack. The villain went down screaming. When the man turned back, Lily saw his face and the glint of his guinea gold hair. Mister Carrington-Bowles . Dressed in a black cape and with all the appearance of an avenging angel.

“Good ’un, sir,” a thick voice croaked. Lily glanced over to see a large figure of a woman climb onto the coachman’s seat of the hackney. “Want I should shoot ’im?”

“Not necessary, Meg.” He gently pushed Lily back inside and closed the hackney door. “I believe Barker-Finch has this well in hand.”

“CB?” Ari gasped, as he pounded the second man against a nearby building. “What the bloody hell are you—Shite!”

“Ari!” Lily cried, as she leaned out the carriage window. The third man, the one whose voice she’d recognized raised his hand. A blade shone for a moment. Ari turned and grabbed the third man’s arm. The man he’d been punching slid down the brick face of the building and slumped over. The man with the knife gave a sharp, shrill whistle. Mister Carrington-Bowles opened the hackney door and tossed two bags on the rear-facing seat.

“Make haste, Barker-Finch. The murdering rogue just called in reinforcements. Into the carriage. Now!” He climbed in and held Lily back as she tried to see out the window. She heard one more hard blow of a fist onto flesh and suddenly Ari threw himself onto the seat beside her. He slammed the door closed and collapsed against the threadbare squabs.

“Go,” he rasped with a groan.

Mister Carrington-Bowles pounded against the wall behind the driver’s bench. “Mayfair, Meg. Quick as you may.”

“Aye, sir. Ye and the other quality best hold onta summat.” The woman shouted at the horses and the conveyance slid and skidded down the street at a terrifying pace.

“Where’d he nick you?” Mister Carrington-Bowles reached across to pull Ari’s greatcoat open.

“My back, dammit.” Ari shrugged out of his coat and flinched. Lily tugged at his sleeve and turned him gently toward her. “I am losing clothes at an alarming rate. This is my best coat.”

Lily gasped as she saw the long cut across the back of Ari’s evening jacket and shirt. Though the stain appeared black in the dim moonlight inside the carriage she realized his white shirt was stained red with blood. Her heart began to race. She glanced at

Carrington-Bowles, but he did not appear overly concerned. “Is it bad?” she asked softly. She blinked back tears and fought against the raw ached in her throat.

“He’s had worse,” the handsome blond god of a man said. “We went to school together. Barker-Finch is no stranger to mayhem.” He dragged one of the bags he’d brought with him closer and fished around until he pulled out a thick square of muslin and a bottle of clear liquid. He handed them to Lily. “Soak the cloth in this and press it to the wound firmly. Not deep enough for stitches this time. We were fortunate.” He used another cloth to wipe away the blood and Lily saw the wound was long but not deep. She sighed and her shoulders sagged in relief. Mr. Carrington-Bowles squeezed her hand and smiled.

“Bloody buggering hell,” Ari shouted when Lily pressed the soaked muslin to his shoulder and back. He nearly jumped off the seat.

“Y-yelper,” she said, and forced herself to adopt a put-upon expression. Her hand against his back was firm. She dropped her knife on the seat and tucked her other hand into her pocket so he would not see how badly she was trembling.

“Care to tell me what you were doing in Limehouse after dark?” Ari asked.

“Not particularly. I had some business to attend to at a certain tavern. I heard something about an attack on a certain red-haired lady under the protection of our mutual friend Framlingwood and followed those three. Simply a matter of right place, right time, so to speak.”

“Hmmm.”

Lily knew Ari’s voice well enough to know he didn’t believe his friend’s explanation. Not completely. Neither did she. The hackney slid to a stop.

“Grosvenor Street,” the woman called out from the coachman’s box. “Put yer friends down ’ere, yer nibs?”

“Yes, Meg. Try not to awaken the entire street.” Carrington-Bowles closed his bag and stepped out of the hackney. He let down the steps and helped Ari out onto the pavement. “Keep the bottle,” he told Lily when she tried to return it to him. “Clean the wound and use that several times a day. He should be fine. Send for me if he shows signs of fever.”

“Thank you.” Lily stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “For everything.”

“Of course.” He inclined his head.

“No matter your reasons for being there, I am grateful, CB,” Ari said.

“You’re not going to kiss me too, are you?”

“I suspect Charpentier would have my head if I did.”

Carrington-Bowles laughed. “He’d have your something. I will be telling Framlingwood about this. I suspect you’ll be hearing from him. Good night, Miss Venable.” He climbed into the hackney. “St James Square, Meg.”

Slow Rutherford stood in the open doorway. “Exciting evening?” he inquired.

“You could say that,” Lily replied. “Bring some brandy, hot water, and a pot of tea to Mister Barker-Finch’s room, please.” She handed Ari’s greatcoat to the footman and put her arm around Ari’s waist as she helped him up the stairs.

“Bugger me,” Rutherford muttered as he shook out the coat and saw the long rent made by the Limehouse brawler’s knife. “Does everyone in London want to poke

holes in our barrister?"

"I heard that," Ari called over his shoulder.

Once they reached his bedchamber, Lily helped him to sit on the side of the bed. She started with his crumpled neckcloth and very carefully removed his clothing a piece at the time. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but her words refused to move past the lump in her throat. By the time Rutherford arrived with the items she'd sent for, Ari was down to his breeches alone. She had torn a strip from one of her petticoats and fastened the muslin pad soaked in Carrington-Bowles fiery medicine in place over the cut on Ari's back.

"Do you have a nightshirt?" she went to the highboy and began to rummage through the drawers. Once she found a plain cotton nightshirt she placed it over a chair near the fire.

"Done you a nice one, sir," Rutherford observed as he used the basin of hot water and a flannel to help Ari to bathe.

"There were three of them." Ari's voice, tinged with the onset of overwhelming weariness still managed to sound affronted.

"One of them was the man from the fight in the garden," Lily said. She wandered to the fireplace and picked up the beautifully carved horse on the mantel. She stroked the silky, smooth wood and her nerves settled somewhat." Ari and Rutherford turned as one to stare at her.

"I recognized his voice. The one you shot, Rutherford. He was limping tonight."

"Told you I hit him," he mumbled at Ari, who rolled his eyes. The footman towed Ari dry and helped him into the nightshirt. He piled several pillows against the head

of the bed and soon had Ari sitting up with the covers pulled to his waist.

“Thank you, Rutherford. Good night,” Lily said. “And please check all the doors and windows.”

“Will do, Miss. Wouldn’t want anyone else out for this one’s blood to make his way into the house.”

“Go away, Rutherford,” Ari said hoarsely. “You are not the least bit amusing.”

Lily prepared a cup of tea and added a generous portion of brandy to the cup, which she held to Ari’s lips as he drank. When she put the cup on the bedside table he grasped her hand.

“I am happy you are safe, Lily. Had you been alone tonight...” His eyes were filled with pain, and somehow, she knew it wasn’t from his wound. He cared for her. A dangerous, intoxicating thought. One she could not entertain. Especially not with this night’s events and the arrival of Fanny Easterling in London. She picked up the horse from the place on the counterpane where she’d lain it.

“I wasn’t alone. Neither of us was. I don’t suppose you would tell me what these attacks are all about, would you?” He shook his head.

“Then tell me where you acquired this beautiful carving. I have never seen anything so exquisite.” He stared at the horse for a long time, and she saw his throat work with words unspoken and emotions he refused to make known.

“Nor will you ever see the like again. The horse was a gift from a young boy in Edinburgh. A boy dead now. Because I killed him.”

Lily placed the horse on the bedside table. She grasped both of Ari's hands in hers, and the strength she conveyed with the simple press of her flesh to his shook him to his very soul. She'd said not a word after his somewhat startling announcement. At least his words should have shocked her, but her expression remained the same, full of compassion and understanding. He was happy she understood, as his understanding of what his life had been had flown at the foot of a hangman's gallows in Edinburgh. Still, she waited in silence, only squeezed his hands from time to time.

Perhaps it was because he was tired, his body aching from the fight. Perhaps all of the rage and primal instincts that cried out for him to save her at all costs had seeped from his body, washed away by brandy, an abbreviated bath, and the warmth and comfort of a bed and a well-made fire in the hearth. He took a long breath and closed his eyes, unable to take in her sympathetic gaze.

"His was the last case I argued, the very last. He was accused of murdering his master, a well-known peer in Edinburgh. William was a simple, gentle lad of not quite fifteen years. He'd never hurt anyone in his life. It wasn't in him. I took his case and assured him I would win. I visited him in gaol to let the magistrates and prosecutors know I was involved. My reputation was one of never losing, after all.

He tried to tell me they were visiting him as well. Talking to him, persuading him, offering him things they never intended to deliver. I was too busy and too arrogant to listen to him. Patted him on the head and told him all would be well. I did not discover until he had his day in court that they'd persuaded him to sign a confession, a confession he could not read."

Ari opened his eyes. “He could not read, Lily. I handed him over to them on a platter made of my pride and reputation, and they hanged him for it.” His throat began to close. “I did everything I could, but they were determined, and he had signed their confession. He carved that horse for me and told me everything would be fine. Said he was ready to go.” His voice on a gasp against the pain. “At fifteen he was ready to go. How can that be?”

“Ari.” She took his face in her hands. “Ari, for some people, life has worn them down so far that death is a relief. You did the best you could. How were you to know what they would do? They are the ones that murdered him. Not you.” She nodded at the carved horse. “No one creates something that beautiful and gifts it to you with blame or malice in their heart. Don’t deny William’s feelings to assuage guilt that is not yours. If you do, you will allow the ones who killed him to take one more thing from him. Something perhaps even more important than his life.”

“What could be more important than his life, Lily?”

“His memory. You will always remember William and now so will I, which means he isn’t really dead, Ari. And you will teach me to read for his sake, which is another reason he will live on.” She leaned in to kiss him slowly and with a tenderness that took his breath away. “Ari, you are a good man. A good and kind man. A rarity in this world. Trust me.”

He slid his hand around to caress the back of her neck. She tugged the blond wig off and dropped it to the floor. One by one, she drew the pins from her hair and tossed them onto the bedside table. She turned to straddle him with her back to him as he undid the tapes and fasteners at the back of her gown. He dragged the bodice down. Her breasts sprang free as she’d worn no stays, no chemise because of the gown’s low cut.

Ari reached around to cup her breasts. She arched into his hands with a soft hiss of

pleasure. Whilst he massaged her fullness and then slowly brushed his palms over her nipples, she gathered her skirts and petticoats in her hands. With his help she drew her gown over her head and tossed it toward the foot of the bed. Ari flinched as he did the same with his nightshirt. He pushed the bedclothes down so that her wet cunny brushed against his hard cock. Lily braced her hands on his knees and moved her lush arse back and forth dragging herself across his cock with each stroke.

He leaned forward to press a kiss to the base of her spine. With his hands on her hips, he pressed her down to caress the length of his cock with her engorged nether lips. He nipped her buttocks which elicited a little gasp from her. She braced her hands on the bed and was on her hands and knees facing the foot of the bed as she pleased herself on the jutting hardness of his eager cock. He let her set the pace and angle, but wrapped one hand around her hip to direct her strokes.

Her scent of lemon and jasmine and the musk of her cunny filled his mind. The pain and sorrow of before was replaced in that moment with nothing but pure animal desire, and he reveled in that desire. He wet his fingers and worked first one and then another inside her. Her rhythm faltered for a moment, and then she pushed hard against his questing fingers. Using his fingers and the steadying hand on her hip he stroked inside her faster and faster. Her breath came in harsh gasps as she pumped against him in search of completion.

“Hmmm,” she moaned. “Ari, please. Please.” She tried to reach for his cock. He knew what she wanted, but he needed her to say the words. He needed those words more than anything.

“Tell me, love. Tell me what you want.” He was already moving from beneath her, sliding around to his knees behind her. “Say it, Lily. Say what you want.”

“Fuck me, Ari. Please. Fuck me.”

He took his cock in one hand and steadied her with the other. Her cunny was wet and ready as he slid the head and then his full length inside her until his hipbones rested against the plush softness of her buttocks. She let loose a soft cry, half moan and half siren call. He withdrew slowly and then entered again with one swift thrust. She set up a rhythm he could not resist. In moments they were gasping and grunting in unison. He felt her fingers as she stroked herself. Her panting breaths came faster and faster and his hands gripped her hard as he urged her harder and higher.

“Yes, Lily. Sweet, Lily. That’s it. That’s it. That’s it, love. Oh. God. Yesss!” He collapsed across her back and continued to pump his hips against her until he felt her shudder, lock in one long spasm before she subsided onto the bed gasping his name.

He gathered her in his arms and turned her to cradle her against his chest.

“Your back,” she whispered as she touched his face. “Ari.”

“My back is the least of my worries, my love. What are you doing to my heart?”

She made him no answer, only smiled sadly and continued to caress his face, as if memorizing his features for some unknown reason. His chest ached, and the pain had nothing to do with the physical but everything to do with the unknown.

“Can I assume, though my invitation to this welcome and delicious breakfast is one I would never be so foolish as to send my regrets, that we are here for some purpose other than to lick our wounds and commiserate by consuming large portions of Mister Charpentier’s matchless culinary efforts?” Derek raised his Sevres cup in salute to the chef who sat to the left of Lady Camilla, their hostess for the impressive morning repast.

Any table set for a meal in her St. James Square home was certain to be impeccable. However, after last night’s failed attempt to thwart the blackmailer, all he wanted was

more than the odd three hours of sleep he'd enjoyed before the summons to appear at this meeting had roused him from his slumber and forced him to shave and dress for the day. Well, that and to have the leather pouch full of no less than five thousand guineas that he'd lost last night returned to him.

"You didn't call this meeting?" Archer Colwyn asked as he slapped Atherton's hand away from his plate. "If you filch one more of these magnificent kippers from me, I shall be forced to call you out, Ath. Could someone please bring Captain Atherton his own plate of kippers before we resort to fisticuffs in Lady Camilla's dining room?"

Lady Camilla beckoned one of the footmen who stood next to the sideboard that fairly groaned with the various dishes that apparently comprised breakfast since Nathaniel Charpentier had moved in with Lionel Carrington-Bowles and his doting aunt. Derek had always known CB's preference for men, though that preference had never troubled him as it might others of so-called good society. CB had ever been Derek's defender when they were in school together. He'd never had a brother, but if he counted anyone in that role it was the man who was now, finally, involved with someone who loved him and whom he loved in return. Derek was happy for his old friend and perhaps a bit jealous.

"Fisticuffs in the dining room?" As if Derek's thoughts had conjured him, CB strolled into the room, dressed in Weston's finest, but sporting a blackened eye and a split lip. He made his way to the chair across from Charpentier's, kissed Lady Camilla's proffered cheek, and fell into said chair with a groan even as he dropped the large, battered leather satchel he'd carried into the room at his feet. "Wouldn't be the first time, would it Sythe? God, yes, John, coffee would be perfect." He held up his cup for the footman to fill and caught the piece of toast Stephen Forsythe tossed at him.

"I did not start that particular bit of mayhem," Forsythe said as he covered his own piece of toast with what looked and smelled like fresh orange marmalade.

“No, Atherton did as I recall,” Derek offered as he waved at Forsythe to hand over the pot of marmalade.

“After Forsythe called me a cankerous whore.” Atherton attacked the plate of kippers in some sort of superior wine sauce like a starving infantryman. “I am not now, nor never have been cankerous.”

“Gentlemen.” Colwyn nodded at Lady Camilla at the head of the table. “There is a lady present.”

“Thank you, Archer. Although I have heard it all before many times.”

“Do they ever not fight?” Charpentier asked Lady Camilla though he gave CB a questioning look and touched his finger to his lip.

“It’s nothing,” CB mouthed.

“Rarely,” she replied. “I saw that, Lionel. Those injuries do not constitute ‘nothing,’ even in present company. As you are the one who insisted on this gathering, I suggest you carry on before someone else ends up with a split lip or worse.”

“You called this meeting?” Derek made no attempt to hide his surprise.

“Yes, and in the interest of expedience I shall speak, and you ruffians shall listen. Agreed?”

“Do we have to stop eating?” Atherton asked.

“God man, does that wife of yours not feed you?” Colwyn asked.

“My wife takes care of all of my needs, I assure you. Well. Very well.” He forked

half a kipper into his mouth whilst a heartfelt groan of derision went round the table.

CB cleared his throat. "Whilst you four..." He indicated Atherton, Colwyn, Forsythe, and Derek. "Were allowing a slip of a tavern wench with a nice pair of...accoutrements to relieve Framlingwood of the blackmail money, I was watching a man in black, your blackmailer I presume, observe the entire episode from a chair on the balcony overlooking the river. When you four finally awoke from your bosom-induced stupor and went after the wench, I followed the blackmailer."

"What?"

"You followed—"

"The devil you did!"

"Are you mad, CB? You could have been killed." Derek threw his serviette onto the table.

"Framlingwood is right, my boy." Lady Camilla's face went white. "You could have suffered much worse than a black eye. What were you thinking?" Charpentier reached over to squeeze her hand. "The blackmailer never saw him. Those injuries came later." He scowled at CB. "During the knife fight with the men the blackmailer sent to attack Miss Venable and Mister Barker-Finch."

Derek leapt from his chair. The room erupted into a cacophony of accusations and questions. His head began to pound. CB pulled him back into his seat.

A sharp, rude whistle brought instant silence. "Oy!" Dickie Jones ambled into the dining room from the servants' door, hands in his pockets. "Stubble it. No one got murdered, just knocked about a bit. 'Cept Jimmy, the butcher's boy, said Mister Carrington-Bowles here fair broke one of 'em's leg and split 'is nose wide open in

all. Word's all over the docks, Jimmy says. Told you gents you should have let me come. I'd have seen what Sally Big'uns was about before she got her hands on the gold, wouldn't I?" He plopped into the seat Nathaniel pulled out next to him. The footman placed a plate of food in front of the boy. "Thanks, John. I'll have some coffee too."

Derek still seethed with rage, but seeing the look Lady Camilla gave each of them and her tsk of censure made him feel like a lad of fourteen in that rare way she had. As wrung out and on edge as he was, when he looked around the room the kinship he'd felt with these men when they were boys made him feel, even as hopeless as this all seemed, somehow it would work out.

"Shall I tell you the rest or shall we spend another quarter of an hour shouting at each other?" Trust CB to settle things in short order. He'd been making the peace amongst them for years.

"Go on," Colwyn said. "Where did you follow the man in black to and what happened to him?"

"To him? Nothing. I followed him to a boarding house on Narrow Street. Three large villainous sounding wretches were waiting at the gate. He told them where to meet a hackney carrying the red-haired actress and the barrister. An expensive unmarked carriage took up the man in black and headed for Mayfair. I sent a friend into the boarding house to make inquiries and followed the hired noisy louts back to Limehouse, helped Barker-Finch defend Miss Venable, saw them home safely and...I believe that is everything, is it not, Dickie?"

The lad chewed his mouthful of food and finally swallowed. "I reckon, sir. 'Cept for what Mean Meg found in ta boarding house." He pointed across the table at the satchel next to CB's chair. "Yer man in black were staying there near three months now, so the landlady says to Mean Meg. 'Spect he's cleared out now seeing as Mean

Meg thieved him of all his belongings and gave them to Mister Carrington-Bowles.”

Derek stood and tried to reach for the satchel. CB beat him to it and tossed the leather case down the table to their resident Bow Street Runner. “Sit down, Framlingwood, You are disturbing my digestion. Your blackmailer has been busy. He’s been gathering information about all five of your mistresses for months now. There are missives in there from his employer, no names, of course. Meg gathered every piece of paper in his rooms as she didn’t have time to decide what was important and what was not.”

Colwyn began to rifle through the leather case whilst Derek and the rest looked on in anticipation. It appeared to be stuffed nigh on to bursting with pieces of paper of every size and type. Some expensive writing paper. Most pieces of cut parchment. He pulled out a very nice and costly looking snuff box. When he glanced down the table at CB and raised an eyebrow their friend laughed softly.

“Mean Meg would have kept that for herself,” CB said. “But she recognized the snuff as a special blend only available at Fribourg & Treyer on Haymarket. Your blackmailer has expensive tastes, according to her.”

“And Mean Meg knows her stuff,” Dickie said. “You can wager a monkey on that.”

“After what I said the last time we met,” Derek said, doing his best to maintain an even tone of voice. “Please assure me this one had nothing to do with your adventures last night.” He turned to fix CB with an intent glare. His tether was drawn bowstring tight about the involvement of his friends, about the attacks on his mistresses, let alone his worries about this child’s part in the Scots murder play his life was these days.

“He was here all night, Framlingwood,” Lady Camilla said. She tapped her spoon against Derek’s cup to draw his attention. “Robbing my friends and I blind at vingt-

et-un . The boy is a menace at cards.”

This drew a smile from everyone. Lady Camilla was a Captain Sharpe in her own right. If Dickie had bested her, Derek would have to remind himself never to play cards with the lad.

“So, Bow Street,” Dickie called down the table to Colwyn, “can you make something of all that? Or are we still pissing in the wind?”

Lily crept to the side of her upstairs drawing room and pressed her ear to the wall. Rutherford had interrupted her reading lesson over half an hour past to announce that the earl was in the little study next to the drawing room and wished to speak with Mister Barker-Finch. The two men had been in there ever since, and their voices had been raised more than once, though she could not make out what they were saying. A week had passed since she and Ari were attacked on the way back from the theatre. She and he both had hoped the earl had not heard of the...incident or if he had, that Mister Carrington-Bowles had smoothed over Framlingwood's increasingly volatile reactions to the attacks on his mistresses.

In the last week she'd learned a great deal in regard to her reading. She'd also done her best to avoid any further discussions of Ari's feelings for her. The ones he'd expressed the night of the attack after telling her of his guilt over the death of the boy, William, tormented her constantly. The depth of his growing attachment to her had not been something of the moment, declared in a flash of passion and gratitude for her words of care and compassion. No, he'd meant every word and used every opportunity to try and declare himself again.

Fortunately, she'd always been able to distract him with their insatiable lust for each other. And it was mere animal lust. It had to be. Her constant desire for him could not be anything else. Her need to be in his presence and her vast contentment merely sitting in her parlor and listening to him read to her was simply a result of her loneliness lately.

Of course, she gazed at his head bowed over a book and studied the sharp lines of his

features and smiled fondly to herself. He was a handsome gentleman. He was an imaginative and generous lover. Any woman would smile. The idea of any other woman enjoying his company, however, brought a burning, sour sensation to her belly.

“You have far more worrisome matters to attend,” she muttered as she moved away from the wall and subsided into an accommodating chair. Lily pulled the latest crumpled piece of parchment from her pocket. Her entire body went cold. This was the third since the night of the attack in the garden. They were all small pieces of torn parchment placed so she alone was certain to find them. She could read them now, though that was of little matter. They all said the same thing.

I know who you are.

She’d considered them a joke or a mistake until she’d discovered Fanny Easterling was in London, treading the boards at the Theatre Royal every night. Now she was not certain of anything, except she needed to prepare herself to flee. The comfort and safety, the friends she’d made, the security the earl had afforded her—all faded to nearly nought when she considered making her escape meant leaving Ari behind forever. And she would. He meant too much to her for her to drag him into her past. He meant...too much...everything. To quote Slow Rutherford, “Bloody bugging hell!”

Titania danced across the carpet and leapt into Lily’s lap. In order to catch the mischievous kitten before she slid off her lap, she dropped the scrap of parchment. She heard male voices pass by the drawing room door. Shite! With the kitten clutched to her chest she dropped to the floor and scrambled under her chair to retrieve the damning note. She’d shown the three scraps of paper to no one, and she didn’t intend to start now.

“Lost something, love?” Ari was suddenly kneeling beside her.

“Here.” She shoved Titania into his arms, grabbed the note and shoved it into her bodice and backed out from under the chair. “She is being very naughty today.” Lily took the hand he offered and rose to pat her hair back into place.

“Titania?” he said more than asked. “Never. She is a perfect angel.” They walked back to the library table. “You, however, provoked some very naughty thoughts in me on your hands and knees with your lovely arse in the air.”

She gave him a shove. “I have an appointment with my modiste almost this very minute, and you needs must tell me what Derek had to say to you.”

“Nothing of import. He was understandably concerned about the aftermath of our theatre trip, but I assured him you were never really in danger.”

“And you two took nearly an hour to impart this information to each other?”

He settled into his chair where Titania settled in his lap for him to deliver the mandatory petting she considered her due. “We’re men, Lily. A certain portion of posturing and bluster is required for such a conversation. Not to worry. He is satisfied that all is well.”

She rolled her eyes, but studied his face carefully. He was hiding something. She knew him that well already. Unfortunately, he knew her too, and every time she interrupted his efforts to woo her with blatant erotic overtures he accepted with alacrity, but the look in his eyes told her he knew what she was about. And each time, he withdrew a little bit more. Which was, of course, her intention. Wasn’t it?

After a brief knock, Slow Rutherford stepped into the room. “The modiste is here, Miss Venable.”

Ari gave her his long-suffering smile, which always made her laugh, especially when

he added an exaggerated sigh. “That is our cue, Miss Titania. Come long, little one. I shall see you at dinner?”

“Of course. Off with you now. I have the earl’s money to spend.”

He and Rutherford sidled out of the room past the half dozen assistants bearing every fabric and lace and ribbon imaginable as they entered and began to arrange their wares. London’s most exclusive and most expensive modiste swanned into the room and offered Lily an abbreviated bow.

“I have the most exquisite silks and satins to show you,” the woman announced in her cultured French accent.

“Yes, of course, madam. But I shall want some simple wool and merino dresses as well. Dresses meant for travel.” Lily drew the note from her bodice and tucked it into her pocket.

Ari started for the stairs up to the second floor. He had some messages to send and some arrangements to make. Framlingwood had not been a fount of information on the progress that had been made toward capturing the blackmailer. It was not in Ari’s nature to wait.

His realization of his feelings for Lily had not set his machinations in motion, but the fact he was in love with the passionate, stubborn, exasperating minx had added an urgency nigh on to panic to his plans. He had no idea if the attacks on Lily had to do with the mysterious blackmailer or the arrival of the actress from Edinburgh. Frankly, he didn’t give a fucking damn.

Whether she ever returned his love or not, Lily was his to protect, and by God, that is what he fully intended to do.

“Mister Barker-Finch?” Rutherford called. “You have an appointment, sir.”

Ari glanced down the stairs as the footman came up to join him on the second-floor landing. “I do?”

“Yes, sir.” He handed Ari a folded note on very expensive writing paper. Ari opened the missive and read the elegant script. Twice.

“What is this?” Titania scrambled up to perch on his shoulder.

“An invitation to tea, sir. With the mistresses. All of them. In Miss Fauchette’s parlor. Now. I’ll show you the way.”

Ari had seen Rutherford in many circumstances, but he allowed he’d never seen the footman quite so...afraid. He led Ari to the wall at the end of the corridor and touched a section of silk embossed wall covering. An inset door sprang open. There were mount lamps along the walls of a narrow passage. Titania rode on his shoulder as if this sort of place was nothing new. Apparently, all of the females on Grosvenor Street were singularly fearless.

“What the devil is all this, Rutherford?”

“Servants’ passages and staircases. All of these five houses are connected. That is how Mrs. Collins manages to run things so efficiently and keep his lordship in the dark about some of the goings on here.” The footman looked over his shoulder at Ari and gave him a meaningful glare. “Here we are, sir. Good luck.” He stopped at another inset door.

“Good luck? Why would I need good luck to talk to an assembly of mistresses.”

“Luck?” The footman snorted. “Do you have a suit of armor handy?”

“Of course not.”

“Pity, that.” Rutherford touched the inset spot and pushed the door open. “You’re bloody well going to need one.”

“Good afternoon, ladies.” Mister Barker-Finch’s deep voice shot through the mistresses’ tea gathering like a cannon shot across the bow of one of His Majesty’s ships.

Mrs. Collins noted, however, the barrister offered them a perfectly executed bow, at least as perfectly executed as a man might sporting a kitten on his shoulder.

Margot pointed him toward a chair in the middle of the room.

He had to walk past Adrienne and Sophia in chairs to one side, and Gabrielle and Cassandra herself on the other side. Margot took the chair next to Gabrielle.

The poor man bore their scrutiny with good grace, but Cassandra had dealt with men like him—wealthy, educated, and born of privilege all her life. He was completely at sea as to what this was all about which was good for the purposes of Lily’s friends and fellow mistresses. Cassandra felt she’d been invited merely to make certain there was no bloodshed.

She put herself to work pouring tea for everyone and passed the cups around one by one. Mister Barker-Finch took his, but did not drink. Likely, he suspected poison as all men did when a group of women sought to put them at a disadvantage.

“As delightful as I find your company, and as much as I must confess myself in deepest admiration of Lord Framlingwood’s inestimable taste in female companions,” he stated, “exactly what can I possibly do for you ladies?”

“You can tell us what your intentions are toward our Lily.” Trust Margot to return the first shot.

Cassandra shook her head. This was not going to go well for Lily’s reading tutor.

“I believe that information is for Miss Venable’s ear alone. She, like all of you, is mistress of the Earl of Framlingwood. By all rights, I am allowed no intentions toward her at all.” Titania slid down his arm and perched on his knee to begin drinking tea from his cup.

“Cut line,” Adrienne said. “Margot and Saida have been listening to you express those intentions every night for weeks now.”

“My compliments on your stamina, sir,” Saida murmured with a wicked half-smile. Gabrielle giggled and quickly covered her mouth.

Mister Barker-Finch blushed a nearly crimson red and coughed as if choking. Adrienne reached over and slapped him heartily on the back. He juggled the teacup, but did not drop it, and a good thing too as Titania was most insulted by the bit of tea that sloshed onto her fur.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Does Framlingwood have any idea the nest of Boudica’s he’s landed himself in with you ladies?”

“I assure you,” Cassandra said. “His lordship is fully aware of the worth of each of these ladies. I believe they wish to know if you are aware of Miss Venable’s worth.”

“Mrs. Collins.” He cleared his throat and placed the kitten and the teacup on the floor next to his chair. “My admiration for Lily is without bounds. She is as brilliant, as fierce, as capable, and as stubborn as any woman I have ever met. Her kindness and courage are unmatched. Beyond that, my feelings for her are for her alone to hear

before I voice them to anyone else.” He leveled them each with a brief but determined stare.

“That’s all well and good, sir,” Sophia said. “But what are your intentions ? The current situation is most dire for her and for Margot. The rest of us are married and have husbands to care for us. Fortunately, our husbands know the extent of the forces working against us. Lily and Margot have been told only half truths, and frankly, I’m not certain even the earl knows everything. What are you willing to do to ensure Lily’s safety, no matter what the future brings?”

The ladies all turned their entire attention to him. Cassandra almost felt sorry for the barrister, but she suspected her sympathy was wasted on a man of his character.

“I would die for her,” he said, his tone absent even the slightest hint of hesitation. “I will, if necessary. What are you ladies willing to do?”

“Us?” Gabrielle asked. “What do you mean?”

“You say none of you knows precisely what concerns the earl about your safety, about her safety. Is that true? Or are you holding your own secrets as life perhaps has taught you to do?” He rose to his full height and bowed again. “If you know something that will help me keep her safe, I suggest you share it with me, if you will not share it with Framlingwood.”

As Cassandra expected, not a one of them said a word.

“Very well.” He scooped up the kitten. “Titania and I thank you for the tea and for the conversation. Good day.” He strode to the inset door and in a blink of a moment was gone.

“Well!” Margot crossed her arms and slumped into her chair. “That was bloody

pointless.”

“Indeed,” Gabrielle agreed. “He is handsome, but a bit of an arse.”

“Arse or not,” Adrienne said, as she retrieved a plate of tarts and macarons from the table behind her chair, “he is in love with our Lily.”

“Bollocks,” Margot said, passing the plate to Gabrielle and then across to Sophia.

“I’d say he’s very much in love,” Saida said, whilst Sophia, her mouth full of macaron, nodded in agreement.

“I would have to concur,” Cassandra said. “the important question is, is Lily in love with him?”

Ari fairly stumbled down to the ground floor and made his way to the breakfast room in search of some peace and quiet, both from within and without the cacophony in his head. He wasn't absolutely certain of his intentions himself, and Framlingwood's women wanted to know? He was more in a quandary as to Lily's intentions.

She'd run from Edinburgh. She'd run again if he couldn't keep her safe from the earl's blackmailer and God only knew who else. Even then she might not love him. Oh, she loved the nights they spent together. Of that he had no doubt. But he had no delusions when it came to women. Only a truly arrogant man believed if a woman fucked him, she must love him. Otherwise, what could she possibly receive from a good fuck?

What could she receive? The same thing as a man, pleasure. Any man who chose not to believe so was a damned fool. Ari was no fool. He was a man in love. Possibly with a woman who was only using him for his cock and his skill as a lover. Ari wasn't arrogant as he lay replete in her arms and listened to her sleep. He was terrified. He dropped into a chair at the small breakfast table and deposited Titania on the fat, tufted ottoman before the fire.

Rutherford stuck his head in the door. "I see you survived. Hiding out for a bit?"

"Too damned right I am. I assume the earl has never had tea with all of his mistresses at once?"

"Not a chance," Rutherford replied.

“It they ever invite him to do so, I suggest you tell him to run. Fast and far. Those women make the Spanish Inquisition look like a Venetian breakfast. You should have warned me.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

“Should have told me to run. Bring me some coffee and some of those gooseberry tarts we had for luncheon, unless you or your brothers have devoured them all.”

“I might be able to scare up one or two. There’s someone here to see you. Has the look of a Bow Street man.”

Ari’s heart raced for several beats. “Did he give a name?”

“Archer Colwyn.”

Ari sighed with relief. “Send him in and bring a second cup for the coffee.”

Rutherford touched two fingers to his brow and withdrew. Booted footsteps on the marble floor of the corridor announced Colwyn’s arrival. Dressed in the severe black of a Bow Street runner, his expression grim, he walked into the room and placed a stack of papers in front of Ari.

“What is this?” Ari asked, as he began to peruse the pages.

“This is a copy of the information our blackmailer discovered about Miss Venable.” Col sat down across from him. “And by the way, her name is not Lily Venable. It’s—”

“Lillian Sanderson,” Ari said. “Or at least that was her name in Edinburgh ten years ago.”

Archer Colwyn appeared stunned. Ari suspected that didn't happen to this man often. "I see," he finally said. "Are you aware she is wanted for—"

"Murder and jewelry theft." Ari pushed the papers back across the table. He pressed his fingers into the oak surface of the table until they turned white. "Have you shown this to anyone else?"

"Not yet." He leaned forward across the table and gathered the papers. "Soon, I will have no choice. There are rumblings at Bow Street that the actress from whom she stole, whose husband she murdered, is here in London and intends to report Miss Venable, or Miss Sanderson, to the magistrates. These attacks on you two may be from our blackmailer who knows all of this or from someone working for the actress. Either way, the situation is dangerous, Barker-Finch, for both of you. I cannot withhold this information from Framlingwood or from Bow Street."

"Give me some time, a few days at most. I have someone here in London who is looking into the actress. He knew her and Lily in Edinburgh. He just returned from Bath the day before yesterday. Give him some time to find a way to exonerate Lily."

"How long have you known all of this? For God's sake, you might have told me. You've bolloxed this up good and proper, my friend." Colwyn drummed his fingers on the table and shook his head.

"I had my reasons," Ari said, a cold sweat breaking out across the back of his neck. He and Colwyn had been friends a long time, but he knew better than anyone when one was an officer of the court, reputation was everything.

"The reason between your legs seldom takes precedence over the reason between your ears. Dammit." He shoved to his feet and tucked the papers into his inside jacket pocket. "You have two days. Send word to me, and whilst you're at it, discover a way to drag us both out of this soup before we drown in it."

“You have my thanks, Colwyn. Truly.”

“Bugger your thanks. Find some evidence I can use.” He passed Rutherford in the doorway. The footman placed a tray with a silver coffee pot and two cups onto the table. As the door was open, Ari heard Colwyn reach the foyer, but then his footsteps stopped. He spoke to someone, and that person replied in muffled tones, but Ari feared he knew who the second person was. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Rutherford went to the commode in the corner and reached inside to fetch a bottle of brandy.

“You’re going to need this, sir.” He placed the bottle and a glass in front of where Ari sat. “I’m sorry, sir. I truly am.” He bowed respectfully and quit the room on quick, quiet feet.

Ari’s stomach lurched. He would know her step anywhere, especially when she was angry. He glanced around the breakfast room. There was a bright and airy landscape hanging on the wall across from where he sat. Next to the painting was a nearly invisible line in the butter-colored wall covering—another inset door. The downstairs drawing room was on the other side. He and Lily had laughed when she covered one of the paintings in his chamber because there was a strategically placed hole in it that would allow someone to watch them in bed. He wasn’t laughing now. She’d seen and heard his and Colwyn’s entire conversation.

The door slammed against the wall as she stormed in, Colwyn’s papers clutched in her hand. “How long, you lying bloody arse? How long have you known? Don’t get up. Sit down! I don’t want you looming over me. Sit down and answer my fucking questions.”

“I’m sorry, Lily.” His apology sounded weak even to his own ears, but he was not concentrating on his words. His entire being was engulfed in studying her—the pink-tinged porcelain of her skin, the fire flashing in her eyes, her glorious hair glinting red

and gold in the lamplight. She was magnificent even in her fury, and he wanted to remember her thus even as the realization this was the end began to seep into his bones. “I only ever wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me? From what? From you? A deceiving failed drunkard of a barrister who took on the job of teaching an earl’s whore to read out of pity and guilt?”

“It wasn’t like that, Lily. It was never like that. Not for me. I’ve been half in love with you since I saw you onstage the first time in Edinburgh. When I arrived and realized who you were, I had forgotten about the scandal. I only remembered the details recently. I sent for—”

“I don’t care if you’ve sent for Wellington himself.” She rounded the table and tossed the papers at him. He pushed them to the floor and got to his feet. “I want you out of this house, my house, before your Bow Street comes back to arrest me.”

“I will never allow him to do that. Nor will Framlingwood. You are safe here, Lily. We’ll sort this out, I promise you. Believe me, I only—”

Crack!

She slapped him so hard his head snapped back and he saw stars. When his vision cleared, he saw the tears shimmering on her eyelashes.

“Lily, please.” He grasped her hands. “I love you. I will never allow anyone to hurt you ever again.”

“More’s the pity,” she replied and snatched her hands free. “For I never loved you, you fool. You have been nothing to me but a tutor and a hard cock at the ready, Mister Barker-Finch. Nothing more.”

“You’re lying.” Ari’s heart sank. Her eyes were flat and cold. In all their time together he’d never seen her like this. Once again, his arrogance had cost him everything. Everything that mattered.

“No, Mister Barker-Finch, that is your provenance, I suspect. There is a reason you became a barrister. I expect you out of my house as quickly as possible.”

“Framlingwood may have something to say about your safety, Lily.”

“The earl will have nothing to say about my life from now on. I am ending my liaison with him and leaving London. I never wish to see either of you ever again.” She stood there, chest heaving, blinking desperately at the tears in her eyes, her delicate fists clinched tightly.

“I beg you, Lily.” He took a step toward her, half expecting her to step back, but she didn’t. His magnificent Lily stood her ground. “Allow me to stay until I’m certain you’re safe, from whoever is behind these attacks, and from Mrs. Easterling.”

“Safe? Safe, Ari? I thought I was safe with you. I know now I will never be safe again. Leave. Or I shall have the Rutherfords throw you out.” She picked up Titania, gave him a look that sliced him deeper than any blade and left the room.

Ari collapsed into the chair and stared at the bottle of brandy. He poured himself a glass, downed the burning amber drink in one long draught and poured himself another. There was a bell pull on the wall next to his chair. With a pull hard enough to nearly rend the damned thing from its moorings he summoned Slow Rutherford.

“I didn’t know she was listening until she came out of the drawing room,” the footman said. “I am truly sorry, sir. I know you...care for her.”

“Yes, I do.” Ari drank the second glass of brandy dry. “Which is why you are going

to help me stay in this house for the next two days no matter what she or Mrs. Collins say.”

“I am?”

“Indeed. Who is the most reliable and discreet messenger you know?”

“That would be Dickie Jones, sir.”

“Can you send for him at once?”

“I expect so. Where is he going?”

“To my house on Bedford Square. He’s to take a message to a Mister Davies.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Rutherford picked up the bottle of brandy and poured a cup of coffee from the silver pot. “If you intend to save our Miss Venable, you’ll be needing to be sober.” He left with the brandy in hand.

“I’ll save her,” Ari muttered as he rubbed his fist over the middle of his chest. “What will I do after that?”

“Are you certain you wish to do this, Lily?” the earl asked. “No matter what happens I will not allow them to prosecute you for a crime you did not commit. There are some advantages to being an earl, I assure you.” Seated in her upstairs library, the Earl of Framlingwood had been discussing Lily’s future with her most of the morning.

When a man made a decision about his life, people assumed he knew his own mind. When a woman did so, everyone felt they had a voice in what she was supposed to do. For the last two days she’d talked nearly every daylight hour with Mrs. Collins, with the other mistresses, even Captain El, when the Duchess of Chelmsford had come by and offered her help and advice.

How Lily wished they would simply respect her wishes and leave her be. Especially when she chose to dine in her chambers and spend her evenings pacing her parlor or weeping in her bed, which she despised. She had not seen Ari, though she knew he was still in residence. He’d begun to use the breakfast room as his meeting place. Men of every description were in and out at all hours. She’d been tempted to listen from the downstairs dining room or from one of the servants’ passageways, but she refused to appear interested in his machinations in any way. She had no idea what he was up to, nor did she care.

This morning, however, she’d been taken aback to discover his trunks and portmanteaus packed and neatly stacked in the foyer. Worse, she’d awakened to find the carved horse on her bedside table. He’d been in her bedchamber whilst she slept and left his most prized possession. She’d walked across the corridor at once to return

the carving but discovered his door locked. Against her every instinct, the horse was now packed in one of the large carpet bags she intended to take in the carriage with her when she left London for all and good.

“Here,” the earl handed her a bank draft made out for a ridiculous sum.

“I cannot take this, my lord.”

“You can, and you will. Consider doing so obeying my last order to you as my mistress.” He handed her a large envelope. “This is the deed to this house. I have gifted it to you so you will always have a place to stay should you decide to return to London.”

“Derek.” She sighed and fought not to dissolve in tears once again. She’d wept more in the last two days than in her entire life, and she had no desire to weep in front of this man who’d always been so kind.

He waved her to silence. “I will brook no refusals, my dear.” He gazed at her for several moments. “If you run now, you will always be running. You have never struck me as a coward. And if you stand and fight now, you will not be fighting alone. I can protect you. Her Grace of Chelmsford has assured me her husband will stand with you. And Barker-Finch has been working tirelessly to prove your innocence. If you could but wait—”

“I’m tired of waiting for men to save me, my lord. Especially, men who lie to me to do so. I cannot wait for fear I...” She closed her mouth tight enough to draw her lips into a thin line.

“For fear you may begin to listen to him when he says he loves you?”

Lily blinked. He was smiling, the earl was smiling at her, and she realized he likely

knew everything. The back of her neck grew warm. “Derek, I—”

“Please, Lily. I have been told I am oblivious to the feelings of others, but I’ve always known none of you ladies is in love with me.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but thought better of it.

“You are all fond of me and have always been more than generous and understanding of me. I’ll admit I’ve only recently come to understand that...with the help of a dear friend.”

Mrs. Collins. Lily would never say so out loud, but she and the other ladies had long noticed the friendship between him and their mysterious housekeeper.

“We men are not terribly intelligent creatures. We protect, even when women neither need nor want us to do so. As a result, we tend to bollox it up more often than not, but we don’t mean to and being in love tends to make us even less intelligent and more reliant on those terrible, primitive instincts at our core.”

“I needed him to be honest with me. He wasn’t.”

“And were you honest with him?”

“Of course I was.”

“Did you tell him you love him?”

“I-I...That is nonsense. I don’t love him.”

“Now who is lying?”

An urgent knock at the door saved her from having to answer him, though his scrutiny and her inability to look him in the eyes was answer enough. Slow Rutherford stepped into the room, disheveled and out of breath. “Best come downstairs, my lord. Perhaps Miss Venable should leave out the back. I can have the carriage made ready.”

“What the devil?” Framlingwood leapt to his feet and brushed past Lily. “Stay here.”

“Like hell,” she muttered as she followed close behind him. When she reached the balustrade looking over into the foyer a scene from her worst nightmares unfolded. Ari’s Bow Street friend, accompanied by two more Runners stood at the bottom of the stairs. Fanny Easterling, dressed in her finest and dripping with jewels stood behind them, a large handkerchief pressed to her face in a dramatic attempt to convey the tears of a stricken woman. Lily rolled her eyes.

“There she is,” Fanny cried. “There’s the whore who murdered my poor George and ran off with my jewels. Arrest her, Mister Colwyn. You’ll hang for this, Lillian Sanderson.”

Tall Rutherford and Young Rutherford stood at the bottom of the staircase. Slow Rutherford rushed down to join them. Mrs. Collins stood in the foyer, hands on hips.

“What is the meaning of this, Mister Colwyn?”

“Yes, Col,” the earl called down. “What are you about?”

“She is a murderess,” Fanny shrieked. “I will have justice for my late husband no matter whose mistress she is.”

“Really, Mrs. Easterling?” Ari strode into the foyer dressed to perfection and looking every inch the successful and commanding barrister. Lily cursed her traitorous heart

that leapt in hope at his appearance.

“What evidence do you have that Miss Sanderson committed this crime?” He looked over his shoulder at Lily and winked. The great looby winked!

“Everyone knows she did. My George caught her robbing my jewelry box whilst I was on stage and she killed him to make her escape. She’s been running from the authorities in Edinburgh for ten years.”

“Can you describe the jewelry she is supposed to have taken?”

“Of course I can, but the authorities have a list. It was in all the papers.”

“It was indeed. And you had a personal dresser, did you not? He would be able to identify this jewelry, would he not?”

Fanny stilled and paled slightly. What was Ari doing? “I am certain he would, but I have not seen the man for some ten years.”

“Davies?” Ari called.

“Yes, sir. Here, sir.” A thin, wiry, smartly dressed gentleman of some forty or fifty years came out of the downstairs drawing room. Geoffrey Davies! Lily had known him in her days in Edinburgh. He walked up to Fanny and looked her up and down. Ari handed him a section of news sheet. “A ruby and diamond necklace.” He pointed to the piece presently around Fanny’s neck. “A pair of ruby and diamond earrings.” He pointed to her ears. Lily could feel the earl shaking with silent laughter at her side. She bit her lip to keep from joining him.

“I had them remade,” Fanny cried. “These are not the same pieces.”

“I beg to differ, madam,” Davies pointed at the largest stone in the middle of the necklace. “Your necklace had a chip here where you threw it at your late husband during an argument.”

“There are other pieces as I recall,” Ari’s Bow Street friend said. “Are they in Miss Sanderson’s possession?”

“No, your nibs.” Dickie Jones came out of the drawing room holding a lacquered jewelry case. “Found these in her dressing room.” He pointed at Fanny and then turned to wave at Lily. She blew him a kiss.

“Do you have an explanation for this, Mrs. Easterling?” Mister Colwyn, now Lily remembered his name, asked.

“I...I...This urchin is in on it with her. He broke into my dressing room and placed those jewels there.”

“Oy, ye awd bitch. I’m no thief. Found these about the time Bow Street here arrested that seedy Frenchie ye’ve been paying ta shag you these ten years. The man pinched on you like a girl caught stealing her first apple, he did. You paid him to kill yer husband and ta have Miss Lily tapped for it. Ye’re a nasty piece of work, you are.” He turned to Mister Colwyn. “What’cha waitin’ for, Bow Street? It’s the gaol for you, Missus.” The boy ambled over to the foot of the stairs and sat down. Davies joined him.

“Col?” The earl called from his place next to Lily.

“I’ll do what I can, Framlingwood. Barker-Finch? You’ll bring your man down to Bow Street to make a statement? And bring this one too?” He indicated Dickie.

“I ain’t done nuffink,” Dickie stated indignantly.

“Oh, yes you have.” Lily ran down the stairs and threw her arms around the boy. She kissed his cheek, which he immediately wiped away.

“Here now,” Dickie complained. “Enough of that. Kiss Mister Barker-Finch. He’s the one who saved your neck, he did.”

Ari was speaking quietly to Mrs. Collins. Fanny Easterling was screaming in the street as Mister Colwyn and his men dragged her out and bundled her into a black carriage. Lily turned her attention to Davies.

“Thank you, Davies,” she said as she hugged him. “I am so happy to see you.”

“I am happy to see you as well, Miss Sanderson.” He nodded toward where Ari stood. “He sent for me the minute he knew who you were and that you were in trouble. He and I have been investigating Fanny Easterling for weeks. He’s always known you didn’t do it.”

She finally turned to gaze at Ari. As if he sensed her eyes on him, he turned toward her.

“Remember what I said about honesty,” the earl said. “A chance to be with someone who will do anything for love of you is rare, Lily dear.” He crossed the foyer and joined Mrs. Collins in conversation with the Rutherfords. Titania wandered into the foyer from the back of the house. Ari picked her up and held her against his chest.

Lily marched up to him and held out her hands. “My kitten, please.”

“I don’t think so,” Ari replied. “This kitten is the only thing between me and a slap or a punch or something from my luggage being tossed at my head.”

“Where did you find Davies?” she asked, as she took in the shadows under his eyes

and the pallor of his face.

“Edinburgh. He’s been my valet for years. Framlingwood and his cronies kidnapped and sent him off to Bath when they pressed me into service as your tutor. I sent for him as soon as I realized Fanny Easterling might be behind these attacks on you. I hoped he might know something, and he did.”

“Ari, I...” Every word Shakespeare had written danced around in her head, but she could think of nothing to say. She pressed her palm to his chest and felt the steady beat of his heart.

“I was going to do anything to save you, Lily, because I love you. I should have told you the truth from the beginning. I was simply...”

“Being a man, according to a very wise friend of ours.” She glanced at the earl who smiled encouragingly and nodded as if in consent.

“Lily, I don’t care if you don’t love me. I love you enough for the both of us. But I do want to spend the rest of my life talking you into loving me. I am a barrister, after all. And—”

“You barrister types never know when to stop talking, do you?”

“Amen,” Dickie said, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “Get on wif it, your nibs. Before she changes her mind again. Women do, you know.” He rolled his eyes for good measure and Lily had to laugh.

“What the hell?” Ari handed her Titania. He went down on one knee. “If you punch me or refuse me, I won’t have nearly as far to fall from here.” He cleared his throat.

Tears spilled over Lily’s cheeks. She bent down to whisper to him. “You do realize

you're proposing to an earl's mistress in the presence of said earl, don't you?"

"Former mistress," Framlingwood said loudly. "She gave me my congé this morning."

"Makes it awright then, don't it? Go on, then. We ain't got all day." Dickie's sigh of disgust echoed in the foyer.

Lily began to giggle. Ari snorted. In a minute or two his face grew solemn, but his eyes shone with the sort of love she'd only ever dreamed of or seen onstage.

"Liliana Sanderson? Lily Venable? Lily, my love, will you make me the very happiest of men, and marry me, please?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, I will, Aristotle Lycurgus Solon Barker-Finch. On one condition."

"Anything, my love." He took her hands in his and kissed each palm in turn.

"You don't allow your mother to name our children."

"Too bloody right there, Miss," Dickie said with a groan. "Prinny's pizzle, what a name."

"The name of the man I love," Lily murmured against Ari's lips. "The name of the man I love."

Ari tried to glance around the beautifully decorated downstairs drawing room and tried to ascertain if any of his and Lily's guests were missing. He would have been satisfied to marry her with only the two necessary witnesses and the vicar in said vicar's parlor. Mrs. Collins, however, in concert with Lady Camilla and the infamous Captain El, now the Duchess of Chelmsford, had put paid to that notion the moment they were informed he'd proposed.

Of course, once the other mistresses explained they would murder him in his sleep if he didn't arrange for them to at least see and hear the ceremony, the choice of this particular drawing room made perfect sense. He'd arranged for the Rutherfords to hang a large painting over the fireplace before which he, Lily, and the vicar would stand. Behind said fireplace ran a servants' passageway. Ari, Davies, and the ever-competent Fitz had constructed a raised platform with chairs angled in such a way the ladies had a perfect view through a series of gauze covered windows. Davies' years in the theatre proved a great help.

At present, however, the valet was more annoyance than help. He continued to fuss over Ari's attire, and his attention to the snowy white neckcloth he'd tied to perfection prevented Ari from taking in the entire flower-bedecked room. Every conservatory in London had to be bare at the moment as there were little to no surfaces and spaces not covered with blooms, greenery, ribbons, and lace.

"Have Mister Carrington-Bowles and Mister Charpentier arrived?" he asked.

"Indeed, they have. Mister Charpentier is supervising the final preparations of the

wedding breakfast in the upstairs dining room, and he has seen to it that the...other guests have a similar repast ready in Miss Godot's dining room."

"And is Miss Venable's escort dressed and ready to do his duty?" Ari pushed Davies's hands away and looked around the room.

"If you mean, is he trussed up like a Christmas goose and itching like the devil down to the soles of his bloody feet?" CB asked as he joined Ari at the front of the room. "Yes. Dickie is dressed and has been delivered to Miss Venable's chambers where he has been told to remain perfectly tidied and clean on pain of death."

"Do we know why the lady chose a ten-year-old boy to walk her down the aisle?" The Duke of Chelmsford was a formidable man in any attire. Dressed in severe formal black, he was intimidating beyond measure. Ari was glad he was meeting the man as a friend and not an adversary.

"Dickie is the one who found Lily crying and starving in an alley when she first arrived in London," Captain El said, as she looped her arm through her husband's and caressed his silk clad bicep. "And after his role in bringing down the perfidious Mrs. Easterling, Lily said he was the only other man who had saved her life twice." She gave Ari a regal nod.

"Well then," the duke said. "Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? How is Framlingwood dealing with all of this?" He nodded to where the earl stood talking to Mrs. Collins.

"Let us find out," Captain El suggested. "Gentlemen." She led her husband across the room and flicked her gaze intently at the drawing room doors.

Forsythe, Colwyn, and Charpentier spotted Ari and Lionel and skirted the edge of the drawing room to join them.

“I’ll tell everyone to take their seats and inform Miss Lily we are ready to begin,” Davies said, as he bowed and began to work his way from guest to guest.

Ari took one look at his friends’ faces and steadied himself with a breath. “What has happened?”

“Colwyn has news,” Forsythe said. “We wanted to tell you before you leave on your wedding trip. We’ll tell Framlingwood after the wedding celebrations are over. No need to spoil the nuptials.”

“Spoil? Why? Where’s Atherton?”

“Apparently, Lady Honoria has chosen today to deliver Atherton’s heir. They send their regrets, and she sent this for your reading lessons with your bride.” Charpentier handed Ari a beautiful leather bound and gilt-lettered volume. The Insatiable Lady’s latest book. His Grace’s sister-in-law had this one made up especially.”

They all glanced at Chelmsford deep in conversation with Framlingwood. The staid, dignified duke’s younger brother ran the most successful naughty bookshop in London. And the brother’s new bride wrote some of the most wicked prose ever printed under the name, The Insatiable Lady. Ari slipped the book into the back pocket of his tailcoat.

“Be certain Atherton and his lady receive our thanks. Now, what has Colwyn here looking like an undertaker on the happiest day of my life?”

“Our blackmailer is Bow Street trained. He is either a former Runner or one who has left the profession. His notes on the ladies are in a style only Bow Street uses. I know I have seen his handwriting before and I recognize his voice as familiar thanks to Miss Saida’s cockatoo.”

“Good God,” Ari said. “Can you discover who he is? Are the ladies safe from him? Is my Lily safe?”

“I will find him,” Colwyn declared. “But there is one more thing. I believe his employer to be a woman. The orders he is following are all written in the same hand and on the same paper. The hand is feminine and there is a scent of some exotic spice on the paper. Sythe’s wife is attempting to identify the spice.”

Ari searched the room until he found Forsythe’s wife, Lady Jane, and Colwyn’s wife talking with Captain El. Lady Jane was born and raised in India. If anyone could solve this mystery, it would be her.

“What do we do now?” Ari asked. The room erupted into the scraping chairs and the low hum of hushed voices. Carrington-Bowles nodded toward the drawing room doors where two of the Rutherfords stood sentry, ready to open both doors.

“We deliver you to the parson’s noose,” the Seven Dials physician said. He took Ari by the arm and steered him into position before the vicar. CB was standing up with Ari by virtue of his role in saving Lily from the attack of the blackmailer’s brawlers. The footmen opened the doors and the room gave a collective gasp, then a sigh.

Lily was glorious. Her gown was of the deepest green, silk and fashioned to cling to her shoulders and caress her form in sweeping lines. Her hair had been dressed in curls on top of her head with jewels winking from nearly every strand. She carried a small nosegay of jasmine in her hands. One of her arms was through the crook of Dickie Jones’s who was dressed in a ten-year-old’s version of Ari’s formal morning suit. His expression was a comical mix of solemn decorum and absolute disgust.

“Here you go, your nibs,” the boy said as he placed Lily’s hand in Ari’s. “Make her cry a single day and they’ll find you floating in the Thames.” Lily bent down to kiss his cheek whilst a rumble of laughter circled the room. When she rose and her gaze

met his, Ari thought he might go blind from what he felt for this woman. Only a few weeks ago he was a broken shell of a man with no friends, no family to speak of, no future, and no hope.

In this room, thanks to his Lily, he had family and friends and a direction for his life. He had joy and passion and a vision of a future with his stubborn redhead, the little kitten Titania even now circling their feet, and love. Dear God, so much love.

“Thank you, Lily,” he said softly and blinked against the sting of tears.

She squeezed his hand. “For what, my love?”

“For marrying me, for pledging your life to mine forever.”

“She ain’t done it yet, has she?” Dickie called from his seat between Lady Camilla and Nathaniel Charpentier. “He’s a barrister, Vicar. We’ll be here all day if you let him start. Get on widdit, before she gets away, you daft gabber.”

The room erupted in laughter, and even the vicar had no choice but to join them.

“I’ll never let you get away, Lily Venable Sanderson Barker-Finch,” Ari said as he pulled her into his arms. “I’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth.”

“I’m counting on it, Aristotle,” she said as she cupped his cheek. “I am bloody well counting on it.”

- THE END -

EPILOGUE

Number Four Grosvenor Street

London

November, 1831

Lily shifted her infant daughter against her breast and sighed as Miss Camilla Titania Barker-Finch latched on and began to feast noisily. She glanced up at the two people bent over the large mahogany desk in the middle of what had been the upstairs drawing room but was now her library and her husband's study. The two dark-haired heads laboring with noisy quills over a piece of parchment were the two most handsome in all of Christendom so far as she was concerned. Two of the three most precious souls in her world and she marveled at what her life had become.

"I did it, Papa. Look. I did it."

Ari gazed over their four-year-old son's head and smiled the smile only she and he understood. "And very well done it is, William. Show your Mama. She is very knowledgeable of the fields of reading and writing. He helped the boy down and handed him the piece of parchment.

"See, Mama," William said as he ran across the room, giving the fat and sassy white cat on a cushion in the middle of the floor a wide berth. "I wrote my whole name."

Lily draped a fichu over her breast and her suckling babe and took the parchment he

presented to her. “William Derek Barker-Finch. A very fine hand, my darling. A hand such as this will be greatly appreciated by the clerks in your law offices to be sure.”

A scratch at the door drew her attention to the entrance of their butler, Fitz, followed closely by Ari’s devoted valet, Davies.

“The mail, sir.” Fitz handed Ari a stack of letters. “Ma’am.” He delivered a smaller stack to Lily.

“Look, Davies,” William cried as he ran to the valet. “Look what I did.” The valet lifted the boy into his arms and studied the piece of parchment clutched in his little hand.

“That is quite impressive, Master William. I know of no lad of four as talented as you. Do you, Mister Fitz?”

“Most assuredly not,” Fitz said as he came to look at William’s penmanship. “I believe this deserves one of Cook’s gooseberry tarts at least. Don’t you agree, Mister Davies?”

“At least one, and perhaps two. If your Mama agrees?”

“Go,” Lily said and waved them off with a laugh. “And you two will be sitting up with him this night when his belly pains him and he cast up his accounts all over the nursery.”

“Huzzah!” William cried as his two devoted minions carried him from the room.

“You do realize he will be impossible if those two continue to spoil him so,” Ari said as he came to sit beside her on the settee.

“Says the man who refuses to allow me or her nanny to pick Camilla up when she

cries in the night, but insists on doing so himself.” She peeked under the fichu. “She is finally sated and asleep.”

“She prefers I pick her up, thank you very much.” Ari took her from Lily and cradled the babe in his arms. “Thank you, my Lily, for giving me such beautiful children.”

“You did play a slight role in their creation, sir.” She ran her finger across his bottom lip.

“The most enjoyable part of their creation to be sure. What is in your post?”

“Our invitation to Lionel and Nathaniel’s for Christmas.” She showed him the letter in Nathaniel’s elegant script. We are going are we not?”

“So soon after Camilla’s birth? Are you sure you’re fit to travel?”

Lily rolled her eyes. “It was childbirth, Ari. Not a deadly disease. I wouldn’t miss their Christmas gathering for the world. I do so love when we are all together. Not to mention Nathaniel will be in command of the kitchens.”

“Every man one of us thanks the Almighty that Charpentier prefers men. None of us would be married if that man preferred women. We’d all be thrown over, and he would have a veritable sultan’s harem. A chef, no less.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lily said. “Charpentier’s cooking is not his sole attraction. According to Lionel he is a very skilled lover as well.”

“Good heavens, Mrs. Barker-Finch, not in front of our daughter. My mother would be appalled.”

“Where is your mother these days, my love?”

“Far away from us,” Ari replied. “That is all I care to know after the scandal she caused denying you to the entire ton.

“Hush,” Lily whispered and then kissed him tenderly. “We have our family. We don’t need her. We have our servants, the children, and we have the family life has given us. We will go and share Christmas with them, and nothing could be more loving and family than that.”

“You are my family, Lily. You are the reason my friends came back into my life and have become more than brothers to me. You are the reason I have a home and children. You are the reason CB and I are able to save so many of the people of Seven Dials from disease and injustice with our foundation. You are the reason for every good thing in my life.”

“And you are the reason I have returned to the stage, the reason I can read, the reason I rise in the morning with a smile on my face. You, my love, are the reason for my every happiness. And you always will be.”

And he was. And she was. And they were for the rest of their lives.

Wait a minute... If you’ve enjoyed the adventures of Lily and Ari on their way to their happily ever after, just wait until you see what happens to the Earl of Framlingwood’s remaining mistress in *A Pearl Enraptured*, Book 5 in our series, “5 Pearls for the Earl.”

Strong, scrappy Margot and her beloved lady’s maid Gabrielle meet their match in a pair of successful Mayfair drapers who come from Captain El’s undercover collection of former tough river smugglers.