



FIONA

LINDA ANDREWS



Daughters of Destiny

# FIONA



LINDA ANDREWS



*zumaya embraces*

2010

*AUSTIN TX*

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*To my wonderful family and friends for their  
support, love and guidance.*

# CHAPTER 1

*London Docks, England*  
*May 1892*

*Someone was behind her. Awareness prickled the back of her neck. Fiona Grey* peered through the darkness and the thick pea-soup fog, searching the alley for a place to hide.

There. Perhaps the doorway...

Before she could move, a hand covered her mouth. The unmistakable odor of male assaulted her nose as a forearm pressed against her chest and another hand closed around her upper arm. Fiona's heart picked up tempo as the man's hard body pressed against the length of hers. She stiffened in his arms. In all her twenty-one years, she'd never been treated this way.

She twisted in his hold. How dare he!

"Shh..." Ale-scented breath hissed past her ear seconds before his hold tightened.

A moment later, her boot heels bumped over the cobblestones. Merciful heavens, where was he taking her?

Instead of anger and fear from his grip, a pleasant tingle raced through her. Most peculiar. Sure, she craved a bit of excitement, but she preferred to experience a kidnapping within the covers of a book, not in person.

The restless spirit of her dead fiancé, Milton Davis, hovered near the center of the alley. His opaque form appeared in shades of gray against the yellowish fog and glow of gaslight.

— *I say, he's being a bit rough, isn't he?*

Rough? The stranger's grasp exuded determination, not cruelty or punishment. Of course, given her wealth, he wouldn't want harm to befall her and

risk his ransom. No, he presented only a minor annoyance. As for the other presence in the alley...

Fiona glared at her not-so-dearly departed fiancé. Did he truly think such an observation would help her? Of course she didn't precisely need his assistance. She had looked after herself for two years.

Wiggling a bit in her captor's hold, she brushed her weapons with her fingertips. The stranger held her only because she allowed it.

Milton adjusted the cuffs of his gray burial suit.

— *Don't look at me like I'm infested with beetles, Fi. I did not encourage this midnight jaunt. I thought London to be a civilized place, not some godforsaken den of iniquity.*

Fiona cast her gaze upwards. Milton hadn't encouraged her escape from the *Revere*, but he had urged her to walk slowly so she might see who followed her. Had he known she would be grabbed? No, she refused to believe he would endanger her life just to prove the dockyards were no place for a lady.

She wiggled. And just what manner of man was this stranger? Granted, this was her first kidnapping, but he seemed to be going about it in a rather peculiar manner. Instead of carrying her off to a waiting carriage, he appeared to be manhandling her into the very doorway she'd planned to hide in. She inhaled sharply. The scents of sea and soap filled her lungs. Alarm rippled through her—something did not ring true.

"I mean you no harm, madam." The man's breath was hot against her ear and tart with the smell of alcohol. "I must have your compliance and silence if we are to escape the docks."

Compliance and silence. This man was no common sailor. Indeed, his speech was refined, his vocabulary educated. A captain, then? Fiona struggled to fit the facts to her conclusion. In her experience running her family's shipping company, captains swaggered not skulked, and few wished to escape their beloved ships.

— *Ha, I believe you owe me an apology, Fi. Milton smoothed the lapels of his burial suit. I surmised a sailor to be the perfect guide out of this place. He wishes to escape just as much as you.*

"Mmoo uph pht." Her jaw moved against the man's palm, felt the rasp of skin against her lips. The calluses were wrong, and the hand was soft—too soft for a salt, young or old. She waited for fear to ice her skin. Instead, a sense of protection warmed her.

"Do you understand?" the stranger whispered.

"Umph." Fiona jerked her head once then stilled.

"Your complete silence, please." He gave her arm a little shake. "I can assure you those who lurk in the mist would not grant you safe passage."

Her shoulders straightened. Safe passage. So, he was no kidnapper. She fought the tendrils of disappointment. Ah, well, she'd had enough adventure for one night.

Clearing her throat, she sighed then jerked her head to indicate her compliance.

“I will release you now.”

His hand lifted off her mouth, but he kept it near her head. She remained still. Would he bolt down the alley if she turned to look at him? She counted to twenty. Thirty. At forty, he hadn’t moved.

Milton fingered the dark spot where the cleft in his chin had been.

— *Are you well, Fi? You seem rather quiet.*

Quiet? She was silent, as requested, and stared at the wooden door in front of her face.

Fiona cleared her throat and tapped her rescuer’s shoe with the toe of her boot. He remained a statue by her side. She turned slightly. He was taller than Milton had been, with a straight profile and strong chin.

“Pardon my ignorance,” she whispered when he still hadn’t moved, “but isn’t haste a virtue at present?”

“Indeed, madam, indeed.” He slid his hand down her arm and laced his fingers with her gloved ones.

Shock coursed through her. She fixated on their clasped hands. How could the press of a stranger’s palm against hers seem more intimate than Milton’s kisses?

“Where is your child?”

In the murky lamplight, she watched his dark brows meet in a V above his aquiline nose.

Child? Fiona glanced around her. *Milton*. He had heard her talking to Milton and thought her companion to be a child. Fortunately, Milton didn’t seem to make the connection.

She stepped away from the stranger then turned to face him. Her gaze flicked over his shadowy features. She doubted he would accept her denial, so she must find another means to distract him. Fortunately, most men possessed vanity and pride.

“Is a child pivotal to your rather, um, theatrical assistance?”

He stiffened. “Theatrical assistance?”

“Lurking in the shadows, sneaking across the clearing and tossing stones in every direction.” She tugged her hand from his grasp. Three fingers waved at him, one for each of his actions.

“See here, Madam, I am a...” He swallowed hard. “...an Englishman. My actions were dictated by reason not...not by a pampered Parisienne.” He flicked the velvet collar of her cape.

What kind of sailor knew about fashions, Parisian or otherwise? This man was not as he seemed. Had he heard of her or her family? *Faith, Fiona, this is another country*. The Greys’ membership in the First Four Hundred probably meant nothing to the English.

“Monsieur Worth designed my wardrobe, not—”

"Yet another point of honor succumbs to the folly of fashion," he growled.

"Honor!" She tried to make the connection between her cape and her honor.

He placed a finger to her lips, stilling her shout but not quelling the outrage shaking her frame.

"You agreed to keep your silence."

Her teeth clicked near his finger. She tossed her head and stepped back.

"*You* offered to guide me through this maze." She drilled his chest with her index finger.

"I cannot allow you to leave your child behind."

Child. Affronted pride would not dissuade the man from his topic. Interesting. If only she had more time to consider the puzzle he presented.

"You cannot—" She swallowed her rising voice. A close version of the truth would assuage his concerns and, more important, get her off these docks. She hoped.

"Precisely. Furthermore, I insist you collect the infant immediately." He glanced over his shoulder. "Time is of the essence."

Cursing drifted down the alley.

— *Make up something, Fi.* Milton flitted toward the voices. *I'd recognize Bosson's voice anywhere.*

Bosson. Fiona's heart kicked up-tempo. She didn't want to meet Bosson in a drawing room, let alone in a dark alley.

"Madam, please." Her rescuer plowed his fingers through his hair. His seaman's cap rolled down his back and plopped onto the ground.

"I have no child, and my traveling companion is dead." She tried to ease around the stranger's bulk, but he blocked her way.

— *But not forgotten.* Milton winked at her. *Now, urge the fellow in that direction.* He pointed the way she had been traveling before the man had grabbed her.

"Then with whom were you conversing?" Confusion thickened the man's voice.

"My companion." Fiona shifted to the other side. The man filled the doorway. How was she to urge someone that large to move in *any* direction?

— *Perhaps you should not mention me, Fi.* Milton drifted close and stuck his face near the stranger's. *His kind aren't exactly known for their intelligence.*

Fiona shook her head. Outside of her family, she had yet to meet a man who was.

The stranger cocked his head to the side.

"You just said—"

A loud banging from the direction of the railyard interrupted him.

"Sir, may I remind you that I am a *lady* standing on a decrepit dock in the wee hours of the morning? I have no baggage, unless you count the menace lurking in the shadows."



She glanced at Milton. He crossed his arms.

— *That's a fine way to treat your protector.*

Fiona resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She carried her protectors on her hip.

"Perhaps we might quibble another time?"

"Just so." The stranger offered her his hand. Warmth surrounded hers as she accepted. He tugged her out of the doorway and down the alley, taking the right lane when the path forked. "This way."

"Are you quite certain?" Fiona glanced at the buildings towering above her. "I believe I followed this path before." And ended up back where she had begun.

"I can assure you, I have my bearings."

For a while, silence reigned as they rushed down the narrow lanes. Dawn pushed back the darkness and the fog thinned, allowing her a better look at the buildings. Fiona eyed the mortar and pestle visible through the cracked paint on the building's swinging wooden sign.

"Didn't we pass the apothecary's shop before? I only ask because it appears quite familiar. And look at those golden balls." She pointed to the next placard. "I'm certain that is the same pawnshop."

His fingers tightened around hers. "Madam, I am fulfilling my part of the bargain. Do you not think you could reciprocate?"

"If you need to concentrate—"

— *Must you provoke the man, Fi?* Milton huffed. *Do you wish to arrive at your uncle's house tonight?*

How had she forgotten how sore men became when questioned?

"Very well." She pressed her lips tightly together. She would be compliant and silent.

Gradually, the crowded lanes and alleys of Wapping gave way to more modern buildings and somewhat cleaner streets. Conversation drifted out of the fog. Grunting filtered from a nearby alley. The acrid air burned her lungs. Her guide coughed.

"Commercial Road is ahead. I've a cab waiting."

Fiona nodded once, opened her mouth then shut it with a click. A group of men emerged from the mist—dockers with meaty fists swinging at their sides.

Her rescuer looped an arm around her shoulders.

Fiona resisted the urge to stiffen at his intimate liberties. The territorial move protected her from the workers' leers. Determined to help in this ruse, she leaned against his side, rested her hand on his chest. Funny, she hadn't realized how cold she was until she felt his body heat. His heart thudded against her palm. It beat almost as fast as hers. Guess he wasn't accustomed to the excitement, either.

The crooked street emptied onto a wide lane. A hansom cab wavered like a phantom in a yellow arc of light. Disappointment pulled on her, and she pushed out of his hold.

“Your coach, I believe.” Relief weakened her knees. They had made it.

“Ere now, ye didn’t think the likes of you could escape us?”

Fiona pivoted. Behind her, two men stepped from the thinning fog onto the cobbled street. The smaller one tossed a knife from hand to hand. Bosson, the *Revere*’s first mate, pointed a rusted revolver at her rescuer’s heart.

## CHAPTER 2

— *Ha! Milton glided between the three men. See how he places himself between your person and those cads? Not that flesh would stop anything at this range.* Ghostly hands measured the distance between the pistol and her rescuer's chest. *No, indeed.* Milton clapped his hands then frowned at the lack of sound. *I'll wager the bullet smashes through him and lodges in you.*

"Milton." Under her cape, Fiona set her hands on her hips. Someone must have chiseled "Rest in Peace" off his tombstone. Someone who hated her.

The stranger squared off against Bosson and his henchman. They seemed to have forgotten her altogether. She had to think, while she had time.

— *Oh, right. I've sworn off betting.* Arms crossed his translucent chest as he tilted his head. *Really, Fi, it's not as if I can die again.* Gray lips puckered. The pout was sharp against the yellow fog.

"Not now," Fiona hissed. Why had she ever mourned his passing? Why had she ever wanted a spirit of her own? She could have waited for Gran. Enjoyed those blissful solitary years. Unease troubled her conscience. Surely, mentioning him a time or two in passing wouldn't have caused this haunting?

— *You should have heeded my advice. Hiding that telegram from your parents, haring off to England and slipping off the boat.* Milton wagged an unsubstantial finger at her. *Really, Fi, you're positively reckless with your life.*

Outrage tightened her throat and immobilized her vocal cords. *She* was reckless with her life! The man had died trying to win a race! He adjusted the cuff on his best suit, but rose tinged his shadowy face. She'd talk to him about recklessness later.

"Oi thinks we'll cage these pigeons in the alley." Bosson jerked his pistol towards the narrow street.

Fear iced Fiona's spine. Would she die just as the new day dawned? Would Mam and Da remain ignorant of her fate? If only Uncle Andrew had met the boat. If only...

Scenarios swirled inside her skull. It served no purpose other than to paralyze her will.

Her fingers swept over the Colt shoved into her waistband. The pads bumped over the C-S-A carved into the grip. Too bad Da never let her practice with his gun. Now, when she needed the expertise, she was liable to shoot her rescuer rather than Bosson.

Her hand dropped to her whip, caressed the cool leather then brushed the hemp lasso. Which would be most effective against her enemy?

"The lady stays." The growl rumbled from deep between her rescuer's rigid shoulders.

"Now, why would Oi do that?" Crooked yellow teeth flashed in Bosson's sneer.

— *See, I was right.* A smug expression enveloped Milton's shadowed face. *He's a trustworthy fellow. Led you out of that hell, and now he's willing to die for you.*

Leave it to Milton to take credit for a fortuitous coincidence. No doubt he would gloat for weeks about his triumph over the shady sailors. Air hissed between her teeth, freeing her muscles of irritation. Of course, she still had to triumph over Bosson.

Fiona shoved at her rescuer's shoulder. Heat seared her palm, muscles trembled. Her view remained blocked. She stepped to the side. He shadowed her movements.

His hand shot out, closed around her hip and held her firmly behind him.

"You'll leave the lady alone to avoid bloodshed. Yours."

His answer rumbled inside Fiona's skull. Her gaze slid over his broad shoulders to the white-knuckled fists, down his muscled legs and stopped on his worn shoes. No doubt her rescuer could take Bosson in a fair fight.

But the pistol emphasized the edge held by the old salt.

Alarm thundered in her chest. Truly, any blood spilled would be his. Leading her from the river's edge was one thing, this was another. She tossed the warm velvet cape over her shoulder.

Fiona Grey took care of herself.

Her hand hovered over her cache of weapons. John Bosson was nothing compared to the obstacles she'd overcome. As soon as her Don Quixote stepped out of the way, she'd prove it.

— *Pluck to the backbone. Though I still say he's hiding something.* Transparent fingers met in a pyramid underneath Milton's pointed chin. *Look—only two days on English soil, and I already have the habits of that chap from the papers.*

That chap from the papers. Milton was no more Sherlock Holmes than she was Watson. Heaven knew she made a better detective. Too bad Milton offered nothing more than distracting commentary.

"E's a bit nickey for a swell." Bosson tapped a tobacco-stained finger against his temple.

"Leave now, and I'll spare your life, Bosson."

Fiona blinked. Her rescuer was obviously mad to take on a pistol with fists. And just how did he know Bosson? Later. She'd think about it later.

Leaning, she peered around his shoulder. *Think, Fi. Think. You must stop him before he gets you both killed.*

Bosson's eyes narrowed to slits. "Kill me, 'e says. Open yer peelers. Oi've the barker, and me mate has the shiv."

Crimson followed the knife's progress along his rumpled companion's finger.

Milton clapped his insubstantial hands.

— *I say, this is better than that shoot-out in Phoenix.*

Fiona glared at him. This was nothing like the gunfight in Phoenix. There, both men had been armed...

Armed. Her hand closed around the revolver's grip. She relieved the weight pressing against her belly. Cold steel ringed her finger. With a flick of her wrist the gun spun. She caught the barrel with a slap then ran the butt of the weapon down her rescuer's arm and tapped the top of his hand.

He patted her hand.

— *Give him your gun*, Milton hissed in her ear.

Fiona's throat burned with a silent shout. What did he think she was doing? Trying to hold the man's hand? Wood smacked bone. Her rescuer grunted and dropped his hand from her hip. Was he ignorant of her offer or had pride stopped him from accepting the firearm?

Frustration clawed her. Men. Mr. Darwin's time would have been better spent studying the mysteries of his own gender's behavior.

"You won't get what you want." Boredom saturated the stranger's provoking statement.

Fiona sighed. Maybe the man *wanted* to die on the docks. Well, he'd rescued her, she would return the favor.

"Oi thinks oi will." Bosson sneered.

"You're very much mistaken."

— *The chap's liable to talk the man to death. Don't worry, Fi. I'll give them what for.* Milton spat into his palms then raised his fists. One jab then another found its mark in Bosson's stomach. Dirty fingers rubbed the first mate's belly as his frame shuddered from Death's touch.

— *I did it, Fi. I did it. You saw him shudder. That was me.* Milton pummeled the man a few more times. *Wait till I tell Gran. I'll bet I could knock the gun from his hand.*

Golden light infused his translucent form as he raised his fists above his head.

“Wild Bill.”

She glanced at the pistol. How difficult would it be to fire? Surely, she could hit the rather large target Bosson presented.

Milton’s head jerked towards her.

— *Eh?*

“Wild Bill,” she hissed. The code from their childhood pastime penetrated his skull. Seconds ticked by until understanding lit his features.

— *You want me to distract them like Brianna used to do to your parents while we hid the evidence of our shows.*

Fiona jerked her head. His smoky chest puffed out.

— *Right.*

Fiona transferred the gun to her other hand. Steady fingers jerked on the leather thong hooked around her belt. Her whip tumbled into her right palm. She eased one step to her right. No hand rose to stop her. Another step. The men’s attention was completely focused on each other. With the third step, she cleared her human barrier. She pinched the whip’s handle. The lash uncoiled down her leg and lay like a rattlesnake waiting to strike.

— *Abh, the whip. Excellent choice.* Milton rubbed his hands together. *I’ll take the knife, you can take the gun.* He drifted into position and raised his hand. Ready.

Bosson lifted his chin. The instant his finger twitched on the trigger, Fiona flicked her wrist. The whip cracked. Metal clattered to the ground a second before the blast ripped through the fog.

“What the hell!” her rescuer cursed.

Time slowed. Bosson clutched his hand to his chest. Blood dripped through his fingers. His partner stared at the knife winking at his feet. Rage twisted Bosson’s features. He lurched at her rescuer.

Fiona stepped forward, aiming the gun at his paunch.

“I wouldn’t.”

Bosson halted mid-step. His beady eyes trained on the shiny Colt.

“It’s quite old but functions perfectly.”

Bosson’s adam’s apple bobbed.

“Ye ‘aven’t the—”

“Haven’t I?” Her brave words barely penetrated the pounding in her ears. *Stare him down, Fi. Just as you did that hydrophobic wolf at Gillian’s ranch.* She willed her hand not to tremble.

“The territories are a violent place. Why, so far this year, three men have already expired at my feet.” She forced her stiff lips into a smile. “Of course, it is only May. I have seven more months to make up the slack.”

“By all means, let’s add to your collection, my dear.” Warm hands closed around her hand, eased the Colt from her grip. The barrel tapped Bosson’s

forehead and followed him as he straightened. "The Thames won't notice the extra refuse."

"Knew ye two were trouble," Bosson spat. With a vile curse, he and his crony turned on their heels and sprinted into the fog.

Victory jangled along Fiona's nerves. She had done it! Not that she'd had any doubts...

"Of all the harebrained—"

The world spun as her rescuer whirled her about. He loomed over her, his face inches from hers. His nostrils flared. White rimmed his full lips.

"Harebrained?" Fiona tossed back her shoulders, jerking out of his grip. The whip wiggled against the canvas leg of her Levi's, chased the throb from her upper arm. "You were unarmed and threatening them." Her voice rose on the last word. Warm adrenaline receded, leaving behind cold flesh, a chilling reminder of what could have happened. She cleared the hysteria from her throat. "What were you going to do? Attack them with your bare hands."

"Trust me." The words slipped between clenched white teeth. He stepped closer, forcing her to tilt her head back or stare at his adam's apple. "I am more than capable of ripping someone limb from limb."

Fiona retreated a pace. Typical male, bullying when charm failed. Well, she'd print a special edition just for his pride. No man intimidated Fiona Grey. Especially not one who gambled with his life.

"He would have shot you before you took the first step."

"*You* were more likely to shoot me than he was. Your hands shook so much I thought the earth quaked beneath your feet." Her rescuer jammed the gun into his trouser pocket. "Have you ever discharged a weapon before?"

"Once." Guilt splashed her anger. She stoked the embers, felt warmed by the rush of rage. How dare he make her feel guilty? Her quick thinking had saved his life.

"Once! And that gives you leave to wave it in front of a man?"

"It is not difficult. Point and pull the trigger."

"Point and pull..." His blunt fingers delved into his brown locks, cutting white furrows across his skull. Anger and fear warred in his brown eyes.

Fear. He had been afraid for her. His concern blanketed her, smothering her fury.

"I did attempt to hand you the pistol, but you kept patting my hand like I was some sort of faithful hound nipping at your heels."

"You tried to give me the gun?" Shock colored his question. His brows met over his nose.

"Of course. I am well aware of my limitations. The only reason I took Da's gun—"

"Your father gave you a weapon?" He crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at her.

"Not...precisely." The truth bumped against her lips. Fiona resisted the urge to chew on her fingernails. Her reasons had been sound, and the gun had proved useful.

"How *precisely* did you end up with your father's revolver?"

She raised her chin and looked him in the eye. He would not make her regret her actions. He would not.

"I took it."

"Indeed." His left eyebrow soared halfway up his forehead. "You're deucedly lucky, Miss—"

"Fi-Fiona." She cleared her throat. "Given all that has transpired..."

He nodded. "You're deucedly lucky, Miss Fiona. I doubt many experts could have knocked a gun out of a man's hand with one shot."

"Oh, but I didn't use the firearm, Mr..." Stagnant breath filled her mouth. Would he reciprocate with the use of Christian name? Her heart thudded dully in her ears.

"Hugh." He blinked then nodded once as if agreeing with a voice inside his head. "Please call me Hugh." A dimple flashed in his left cheek. "And while I beg to disagree with a lady, I distinctly heard..."

Hugh. Her rescuer's name was Hugh. And he still thought of her as a lady. Joy breezed through Fiona, curving her lips.

"Alice did sound like a shot, didn't she?"

"Alice?" Confusion furrowed his brow. "Is she your...your late companion?"

Late companion? Their first conversation rushed back to Fiona.

"Oh, no. Alice was a wretched girl at Miss Maple's Academy for Young Ladies. She did not approve of much—and of me, in particular. Mister Greenbottom had struck it rich in the mines before my father, and well, she thought that entitled her to certain privileges." Including passing judgment. Fiona shook out her fists.

"You should have seen her face when she found out that all her daddy's gold couldn't get her into New York society whereas Da's mother practically ran it." Fiona snapped her mouth shut. More information knocked against her teeth. She had already stepped so far from propriety she might have to circle the globe to get back in.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"When I began to practice for our Wild West show, I pretended Alice was the target. It became a code. I would tell Brianna that I wanted to play with Alice, and my sister would make certain my parents never found out about the whip. After a couple years, I just called her Alice." Fiona tugged on the lash. Finger-thick leather snaked across her palm.

— *I called her Alice first, Milton huffed. I suppose this will be just another thankless task performed by the dead.*



"You used a whip?" The words strangled in Hugh's throat. His eyes bulged in his head as they traveled over her flannel shirt, down her Levi's, flicked over her boots then whisked back to her face.

"I thought it better than the lasso. I am quite proficient in both." Unease itched her spine. She glanced over her shoulder. Nothing menacing lurked in the shadows. She turned back to her companion. A purplish cast hung over his face. Disappointment pinched her insides. The excitement must have been too much for him. "I think—"

"I bloody well doubt that." Hugh closed the distance between them in one step and jerked her cape closed, pinching the ends together with one hand. He raised his free hand and placed two fingers to his lips. An earsplitting whistle rent the air. "Good God, woman, you should have at least dressed."

"My attire is perfectly acceptable." She plucked ineffectually at the fingers. "Oh, I see—you'd both rather I slithered out a ship's window in a dress and bustle."

"You climbed out a ship's window?" A vein throbbed at Hugh's temple. The man obviously suffered from a nervous condition.

Fiona patted his hand. She'd give him one of Brianna's soothing tonics. And perhaps take something to slow her racing heart. Except the tonics were still on the ship with her trunk. Ah, well, she'd just have to use her voice. Brianna always quieted at the sound of her voice.

"Well, I couldn't very well walk across the deck while Bosson entertained his guest."

"I suppose it never occurred to you to stay put." Muscles corded his neck, like strands of rope lashing his head to his body.

Fiona's temper frayed. A nervous disposition excused only so much. She raised herself on her toes and stared into his chocolate-colored eyes.

"I waited for two *long* days."

"Proper young ladies do not—"

Hooves clomped on cobblestones. Harness jingled. Black filled Fiona's peripheral vision. She turned to stare at the hansom stopped along the curb.

"Mil...er, sir. Madam."

The carriage rocked as the burly man jumped from his perch behind the passenger's seat. The lantern in his beefy fist cast a jaundiced pall over his broken nose, pockmarked cheeks and puckered lip.

— *Egad, I've spied corpses who looked less gruesome.* Milton soared between the newest threat and her. *You cannot intend to go with that...that brute. I'll hail another cab, Fi.*

Two pistols winked from the brute's open coat. Beady eyes peered into the yellow mist while he fingered one revolver.

"Your carriage, milady." Hugh bowed and offered her his free hand.

— *Dammit, Fi.* Milton stopped in front of her, arms spread wide. Red suffused his gray body. *Don't you dare climb into that coach.*

“Perhaps this conversation would be best suited for a rapidly retreating cab.” Ignoring Milton, Fiona slipped her hand in Hugh’s. She’d ride with the devil to get to her uncle’s house. Fortunately, a ride with Hugh promised to be much more entertaining.

## CHAPTER 3

*The cab thumped in and out of a pothole. A shoulder bumped his. Hugh Gurnsey-Barrett, sixth Marquess of Kingslea, ninth Earl of Bookingham, locked his jaw. Cold brushed his exposed flesh. He hunkered further into his borrowed sailor's jacket. Awareness zapped his skin, electrified the hair on his neck and arm. For an instant, flowers perfumed the air. A heartbeat later the acrid coal smoke belching from thousands of chimneys stung his nose. The flame flickered in the lamps as another chunk of missing cobblestones personified Houseman's displeasure.*

Leather creaked. Wood groaned. The small interior tilted to the left. His companion slid against his side. Her thigh flattened against his.

"Perhaps you'd prefer to drive. You have the necessary accouterments, I believe."

"My expertise resides solely as a passenger. Not that I haven't tried to drive." A smile teased her lips. Her gaze flitted to his before scampering back to admire the horse's head. "I simply don't have that magic touch."

Yet, she did seem to have bewitched him.

Bewitched. Logic railed at the fanciful notion. The lady's attraction lay in her presence, a presence that extended his adventure. Kingslea forced the sentiment from mind. There could be no other reason. He wouldn't allow it.

The lamp's golden light bathed her high forehead, pert nose and stubborn chin. Such scrutiny exercised his powers of observation and had absolutely nothing to do with a fascination for her person or her unusual accomplishments.

White satin-clad fingers tucked a strand of loose hair behind a delicate ear. They returned to her lap and clasped her black-clad ones. Mismatched gloves. Amusement rattled his control.

"Have you found yet another fault with my attire?"

Blue eyes pinned his gaze. Irritation flashed in the azure depths, tightened the delicate skin around her eyes. Guilt lashed his pleasure. This night's adventure had bruised her delicate complexion. His poorly verbalized surprise had furthered her discomfort. *Well done, Kingslea. Shall we move up to snatching candy from babes?*

Charm had never numbered among his assets. Neither did social grace. Hell, the list of his failings was endless. Parallel lines appeared on her forehead. Still, only a cad wouldn't try to make amends for his crass bumbling.

"Who could fault perfection?" The praise tripped from his lips. Perhaps he had learned a thing or two in the past five years.

Her thick lashes met then parted. Pleasure bloomed in her cheeks.

"But you are looking for something."

"Always." Restlessness prodded his relaxed muscles. He *was* always looking for something. The captain's logbook poked his belly. He had thought he had found it, yet the dawn's light revealed no solutions, only more mysteries.

First, the collector of vouchers. Now the woman.

No, not woman. Lady. An *American* lady.

"Fiona." Her name whispered across his palate. His gaze dropped to her blue-clad thigh. He'd never understood the attraction of a trim ankle, but such a well-formed limb...

His mind recalled the press of her bottom against him like a favored memory. Heat simmered in his gut. God help mankind should women ever take to wearing trousers.

"Is something amiss?" Her hand rested on his forearm.

His hand covered hers. So small and delicate, yet powerful, too. Heat seared his flesh, branding his brain with images better suited for the bedroom. His bedroom, with her black hair tumbled around her shoulders. Kingslea blinked away the images.

"A man should have some control."

"You handled the situation admirably." She squeezed his forearm. "Please don't allow your passionate nature to overset your nerves."

"Passionate nature?" He ignored the spurt of pleasure. Her personality contained as many facets as the stained glass windows in St. Paul's Cathedral did shards of color. Whereas he—he was a pane of clear lead glass. Kingslea the Cold. Bookingham the Bore. The adolescent taunts, the adult classifications.

"I can assure you, madam, I do not have a passionate nature."

"No, of course not."

His mouth opened. The words intended to disabuse her of such a foolish notion never materialized. His teeth clicked together. If she wanted to see him in such a manner...

Kingslea shrugged off his thoughts. It was the disguise—bronze skin, weathered features and ragged clothing. Sailors battled the elements every day. The rational explanation echoed in his hollow chest.

"It was very kind of your coachman to wait."

"Houseman? Kind? Such words rarely dwell in the same sentence."

Another pothole rattled the cab. Fiona braced herself against the grip but still bounced against him. He ignored the ache filling his chest as she scooted away.

"The damp and an injury had more to do with Houseman's patience than any kindness."

By rights, the valet-cum-coachman should be recovering from his gunshot wound instead of charging all over London. Unease shook Kingslea's equanimity. The bullet would have ended his life if Houseman hadn't interfered. Another errand for an anonymous debt collector. A deadly errand. Still, what could possibly connect the retrieval of personal letters and the theft of a captain's logbook?

What besides his stepmother's penchant for whist?

"Hugh." Her hand tightened on his. "Hugh?"

Kingslea shoved aside the disjointed thoughts. He would find the connection later. His gaze followed the curve of his companion's smooth cheek before settling on her eyes.

"Yes, Fiona."

"Thank you for leading me from the shipyard. I had been wandering those lanes for at least an hour without much luck." She tugged her cape close. "I shudder to think what would have happened if Bosson had found us in one of those narrow alleys."

"Bosson?" Suspicion itched Hugh's skin. How did the woman know the sailor?

"You know, the *Revere's* first mate. His attentions had become a trifle too forward since Captain List disappeared last night. Or, more precisely, the night before last." She smoothed the thought from her forehead. "He was planning something. Something unpleasant. I thought about leaving when the captain didn't return for dinner, but Milton talked me out of it. Now, I'm glad he did." Fiona beamed at him. "Your rescue is certainly something I will tell my grandchildren."

Doubts solidified, connected divergent tracts of thought. His stepmother had been eager for him to redeem her debts. All too impatient for him to make tonight's trip. Bloody hell. The woman had baited her trap well. His folded arms contained the rage roaring to life in his breast.

"You timed your arrival perfectly. A dashing prince stepping from the mist just when I thought all was lost." Admiration blazed in her eyes.

"Hardly a prince." Bitter residue coated his tongue. Merely a second son who had the misfortune to inherit a penniless title. A title his stepmother seemed determined to auction off to the highest bidder. Preferably an American heiress with a bottomless purse. Did the Marchioness know how uncon-

ventional her earmarked daughter-in-law was? Perhaps Elspeth thought to mold her as she had worked to reform him?

"Certainly, a more noble man could not be found in all of England."

"You'd be surprised," Kingslea said dryly.

So his stepmother had decided to bring Polite Society to his door, since he refused to cross its threshold. Only one question remained—Was Fiona Grey a pawn in his stepmother's machinations, or was she party to the plot?

"London's aristocracy would be better for your admittance." Candor blazed across her features.

Hope flickered before he extinguished the flame. He had been fooled once before.

Lilly's porcelain complexion replaced Fiona's smiling face.



"Don't you see? Once the duke has his heir we can be together."

"And you will be another man's wife. Marry me, Lilly. Now, before it is too late." Raw need was in his words.

"Father would never settle for a second son. He wants a title for his money, and your brother is far too healthy."



He shook off the past.

"I dub thee Sir Hugh the Rescuer, Knight of the London Dock and Protector of its people." Fiona touched her bullwhip to his shoulder.

"I prefer to remain as I am."

She shrugged. "Just as well, I think only a queen can knight a man."

Shadows moved in the mist. Shop clerks and street vendors rushed along the sidewalks. London was awake. Awake and aware. Someone was bound to notice Fiona's arrival. Her chance of a match would narrow if someone told of her arrival with him. Not that anyone would look beyond his disguise.

But if his presence compromised her, honor would provide the means for his stepmother to get her way. A wise man would leave Fiona before the trap was sprung. Kingslea settled into the leather. This enemy required further study.

"Hugh?" She turned her large blue eyes on him.

"Yes?"

"Why are you dressed as a sailor?"

He started, shaking off his lethargy like a dog did water on his coat.

"That is what I am."

"True, your disguise is almost complete." Fiona smiled.

Coy or cunning? Kingslea scratched his chin. A day's growth of beard rasped his skin.

"I can assure you my clothes are those of a genuine sailor."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Humor snapped in her eyes. "But you have recently repaired the shoulders." Her touch danced over the stitches closing a popped seam. "This herringbone stitch is not in keeping with the long stitch used by a man of the sea."

Hugh caught her hand and dropped it into her lap. Blast! Leave it to a woman to notice something as mundane as stitching. A woman...

"Perhaps I have a wife to repair my clothing."

"Perhaps, but your hands are too soft for a sailor." She clasped his left hand between hers. Her thumb brushed the soft pads then stilled. She cleared her throat then tucked the black-clad hand behind her back.

"Of course, most sailors' coloring doesn't bleed onto their collar." She waved her white-gloved hand near the lamp, highlighting the reddish brown streaked across her gloves. "A true salt's tan covers more flesh than his shirt, whereas I'd bet your sun-kissed skin stops an inch or two under your sleeves."

The truth of her logic burned Kingslea's neck, stained his cheeks. She had ripped the disguise from his person while maintaining her own mask. Better to retreat than to find yourself at the altar. He touched his hand to his chest.

"You have found me out, madam."

She blinked once and cocked her head to the left.

"Yet I have discovered nothing." Her dichromatic palms flashed at him.

"I fear you have discerned too much." On impulse, he caught her gloved hand and raised it to his lips. Tingles raced across the sensitive flesh as gardenias and soap overwhelmed his senses. He dropped her hand and banged his fist on the roof, driving her touch from his skin. "Houseman. Stop here."

"Please, I—"

The cab halted near a towering elm.

"I have pressing business." Kingslea tossed the door open and jumped from the cab. Green and brown swirled as he pivoted. The door slammed shut as he stepped back. "Houseman will see you safely to your destination."

"At least tell me who you are."

Who he was? Who was she? Pawn or plotter? He would know once the captain's logbook was claimed.

"I am whoever I need to be." He touched his forehead and sketched a bow. "Safe journey."

"And to you as well." She raised her hand in salute than held the back of it to her cheek.

Kingslea felt her gaze on him as he picked his way through Hyde Park. Soon he would reach Speaker's Corner. Soon he would have proof of his step-mother's duplicity.

## CHAPTER 4

*Silk slipped over Fiona's cheek. Odd how the tingles racing up her arm didn't* jump from her hand to her face. But then, Hugh hadn't kissed her cheek. Her tongue moistened her dry lips. Disappointment snaked through her insides before coiling in her belly.

Her gaze traveled along the path he had trod. Her chatter had chased him away. Never had she prattled on so. Never had her curiosity been so aroused. Thumb and fingers met, evening out the smear of actor's paint dying her gloves.

What had come over her? Brown eyes stared out from her memory. She had barely kept herself from brushing the lock off his forehead, caressing the dimple in his chin.

The past week's events were affecting her manners. No one in Society would believe that Fiona Grey would be dashing through London in a Worth cape and her brother's waist overalls, caressing a stranger, and giving him leave to call her by her Christian name. To everyone, she was the epitome of proper deportment, good manners and ladylike modesty.

Everyone but Hugh.

*I am whatever I need to be.*

His forceful statement filled her with sadness. How awful to drift through life being only what others needed one to be. If only she could help him.

"Madam?" The coachman's words interrupted her analysis.

Perhaps she would help him once she solved Uncle Andrew's problem. Fiona pulled her gaze away from the foggy park.

"Yes, Houseman."

"Perhaps we should depart. 'Tisn't safe for a lady alone."



Alone. Bleating sheep and clomping hooves filled the silence. Fiona glanced around the cab. Milton was missing as well. She shrugged. No doubt her late fiancé had swooped across the Channel to tell Gran of his heroics.

"Very well." She sighed.

"Perhaps if Miss told me which direction she wished to go?"

Leather creaked as Fiona pushed against the seat. Silk bunched around her fingers as they dove into her pocket to retrieve the telegram. She scanned the scrap of paper.

"Number One-eighteen Piccadilly."

"Very good, madam." The reins snapped over the horse's rump.

On impulse, Fiona leaned out of cab and glanced behind her. Hugh was gone, undoubtedly for good, and she had other things to concentrate on.

She smoothed the creased paper over her knees.

BRIGHID'S HELP NEEDED FOR HOUSE CLEANING STOP  
MATTER IS URGENT STOP  
ANDREW  
118 PICCADILLY, LONDON

What matter could be so important that her uncle would interrupt her parents' holiday? He knew how much Mam and Da had suffered during the years of her sister's illness, knew how important this trip was to them all.

*Matter is urgent.*

"There is nothing Mam can do that I cannot." Doubt disturbed Fiona's confidence. She sucked on her bottom lip, tugged the soft flesh free of her teeth. Why hadn't Uncle Andrew met her ship when she arrived three days ago? And why had he specifically requested her mother's talents?

She tucked a wool blanket around her shoulders. She would help her uncle. After all, she had made it to England and was only minutes away from his townhouse. She would find answers to her questions as well as her uncle's. A shiver fluttered up her spine. Still...

No good ever came from talking to the dead.

## CHAPTER 5

*Fiona stared at the white marble facade of her uncle's townhouse. Peach curtains* glowed in the bay windows. Gilded eyes stared back at her from the brass lion's head mounted on the door. *Thump. Thump.* The knocker resonated deep in the house like teardrops on a crypt.

"Do be sensible, Fi." The whisper teased her ears. Muscles trembled from raw emotion—elation at her safe arrival, torment at her uncle's uncharacteristic absence. Two sides of a coin flipping for control.

"No more Mr. Poe for you." She tucked an escaped curl behind her ear. He had fulfilled his purpose last night, keeping her awake until her moment of escape, but this morning was different. This morning her uncle starred in one of Mr. Poe's macabre stories.

Her gaze drifted from the shut dark-green door to the bannister. No raven cawed her uncle's name. No severed heart lay beating under the floorboards.

"It's the lack of sleep. Nothing more." *Nevermore.* The poem haunted her. She shrugged off the unease. "All will be well once I'm inside."

"Shall I wait, miss?" Houseman's voice drifted from his perch on the hansom cab. Fiona turned to the groom. The white mist swept past his cheeks, cascaded down his shirtfront. Black-shrouded servants glided across the sidewalks like shadows behind gauze.

Muscles clenched, bracing for a shudder. She'd never cared for fog. She could never shake the notion these earthbound clouds were all that remained after restless spirits finally left this plane of existence. Spectral garments abandoned by the dead. Fiona tugged her cape closer and focused on the living groom.

"No, thank you, Houseman. I am certain someone will be with me shortly."

The driver's long whip lounged against the top of the cab. The black stallion shifted his weight. Irritation smashed through Fiona's fear. She was no child to be fretted over, no maiden in need of rescue. She was an adult, and her family needed her. Shoulders straight, chin raised.

"You may leave now."

"Very well, miss." The coachman tipped his top hat and clucked at the horse. They trotted down the lane.

The words to call him back clogged her throat. Uncle Andrew needed her. Fiona turned back to the door and grabbed the brass ring. Clammy metal dampened her glove. She banged the knocker against the brass plate. Once. Twice.

Nothing stirred on the ground floor. Her gaze slid down the wall to the servants' area. Golden light spilled onto the stone steps, flicked over the wrought iron fence delineating the entrance and cast a gridwork over the hazy street. A silhouette interrupted the flow of light at intermittent intervals.

At least the servants were up, but would they answer the door at such an unfashionable hour?

Her knees buckled before she locked them and clung to the building. Cool marble sweated against her cheek. For a moment, she had actually believed...

No. No, she had not. There had been no black crepe draped over the windows, no jet wreath affixed to the door. Her aunt and uncle were alive.

So, why hadn't they come for her?

"Any number of reasons, Fi. Any number. A ship could have been lost at sea. The children could be ill." She ticked off the excuses, but the lies never persuaded her heart.

And none of her reasons explained Gibson's absence. Nothing short of dynamite could eject her uncle's stately butler from his post. Her sisters, brother and Uncle Heberon had spent endless summer days herding frogs, enacting dramatic tableaux and relating tales of certain death. Nothing worked.

Fiona tugged her watch from her shirt pocket. Of course, genteel callers did not arrive at eight in the morning. Unease slithered down her back. Uncle Andrew always left for his office at half-past. Gibson would never allow his master to rise before him. Something was amiss. Fiona worried her bottom lip as scenarios raged in her skull.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake. The silly door knocker will not supply the answer. You must get inside."

Her gaze flitted to the narrow door opening onto the Area. She could try the servant's entrance. Her feet remained still. At home, she wouldn't hesitate, but she wasn't in San Francisco. She was in England. English servants were firmly set in their proper place and, more important, determined to stick her

in hers. So, here she was on the stoop, nagged by horrible thoughts, waiting for admission.

Silk fingers closed around the shiny knob. She was tired of waiting.

"And I shall finally do honor to the family name." The voice glided through the morning like oil across water, slick and sullyng.

"What about Heberon?"

Fiona spun on her heel. Revulsion crawled up her spine. She knew that gloat. Her cousin was back in Town.

"That fool." A soft tick followed the scrape of boots.

The cane. How had she forgotten the cane? *He* had taken to using it after a fall. One he'd taken running away from the fury of the Grey girls. Hatred blazed through Fiona. She'd burn that cane while she was here and smash the mirror he used to admire his crooked teeth and weak chin.

"He'll be committed soon enough. And I'll inherit everything." Shadows solidified farther down the street. The wasted figure of her cousin drifted next to a husky man. Light winked from the mirror-topped cane. "Chart and those fools will have to bow to me. Piers Montague will no longer be tainted by trade. I will finally claim my birthright."

Emaciated arms swung a hand at the beefy companion's head.

"Thought your sire was a second."

Oswin. The name blew from the depth of Fiona's memory. So, her cousin still retained his old friend. Together, they weren't bright enough to outshine a candle.

"He was, you halfwit." The cane jumped in Piers's hand. He thumped the tip against Oswin's rotund torso. "I inherit the title since that buffoon Heberon can't do his duty."

Uncle Heberon was no buffoon. His mind had simply stopped growing long before his body. But then, so had Piers's.

Fiona started down the steps then stopped. She would scrub her uncle's stoop with Piers's pomaded thatch of hair.

"That's something else to thank my poor aunt for." Piers chuckled.

"Something else? You mean other than dying?"

"No, although that was precipitous. Gad, I hated wasting away in that crumbling monstrosity while that *American* played lord of the manor and dispensed a pittance for us to live on while he entertained Society and ate turtle soup."

Fiona's fists ground into her hips. An asp had fed on Uncle Andrew's generosity. She would slay the vermin then find her answers.

Her leg jumped, dispersing her impatience into the stoop. Piers would have to run a long way to gain his mother's protection.

"Then what?"

Fiona's gaze flicked to her cousin's companion. Time had not been kind to Oswin. His button eyes, upturned nose and thin mouth appeared to have been sewn too tightly to his moon face.

"The money." Piers rubbed his hands together.

"But you lost..." Oswin dabbed at the stain on his waistcoat.

"A pittance, compared to what I now control." Piers dispelled the thought with a limp wave. "With my foolish aunt dead, Heberon is guardian of the children and their money."

Oswin's forehead wrinkled. "You're going to play father?"

Piers would play tiddly winks with his teeth before anyone in her family allowed him near Melinda or Cedric. The lariat scratched Fiona's palm through her glove.

"Good God, no." Piers turned to Oswin before placing a polished shoe on the bottom step. "The brats will be shipped off to school as soon as Mother arranges it. I will merely control their fortune."

"Fortune." Oswin licked his lips.

"Hell-lo." Piers's pale blue eyes traveled insolently up her legs before languishing on her breasts. "What have we here?"

Oswin blinked up at her. "Looks like a lady."

"No *lady* calls at a bachelor's establishment." Piers strummed the trio of gold chains roped across the loose fabric of his waistcoat before tugging a shiny watch free of his puce vest. "Especially not at this hour."

"You..." Rage closed Fiona's throat.

"Yes, me." He leapt over the remaining steps and sailed across the landing. Spittle bubbled in the corner of his mouth; lust glowed in his eyes. "You see, Oswin, with money, looks and a title, the ladies line up on my doorstep." Sallow hands wrapped around her upper arms.

"Looks!" Fiona snorted. Her contempt bounced off her cousin's ballooning vanity. "I've seen handsomer wet rags."

"Careful, my sweet." Clammy lips smeared wetness across her cheek.

"You big baboon." Fiona rammed her knee into his groin, felt the give of soft flesh against her Levi's.

Alcohol-scented breath heated the side of her face. Something hard thudded against her chin, pain radiated from the point of impact. Hands shoved her backwards. Her cape trapped her bootheel. The door caught her back, slammed the air from her lungs.

Piers doubled over, cradling his abused flesh. Red suffused his face as he coughed into the banister.

"Grab her."

Fiona threw her cape over her shoulder. A foot of rope slipped through her hand. Her wrist turned, faster and faster. The lasso opened, big enough to hog-tie a man.

Oswin advanced.

"Stay where you are," she gasped, raising her arm. The widening noose clipped the bay window, bounced off the wall and knocked her hat off.

Oswin paused. His gaze traveled from Piers to Fiona before settling on her hat. Buttons popped as he bent over. Thick fingers trailed up the ostrich feather.

"Not the hat," Piers wheezed. "*Her*. Get *her*, you idiot."

Fiona's heartbeat drummed in her ear. Stiff fingers tightened the flaccid lariat. One turn. Two. The circle wobbled. *Concentrate, Fi, you can do this*.

Oswin grunted and straightened. His foot crushed the felt hat. The lasso bounced off his cheek then tumbled uselessly to the landing.

"She likes it rough." Piers staggered over to her side and clawed up her body to stand upright. "Never let it be said a gentleman didn't oblige a lady."

"You're no gentleman." Fiona slammed her knee into his groin. Again. He grunted and stumbled backward. She kicked, her boot catching him in the knee. He reeled down the steps and landed with a thump.

Pain blazed across her toes and up her shin. She'd gladly endure more to repay Piers for the insult to her family.

"You'll pay for that." Piers tugged at his neckcloth. Blood pulsed in her hand as one meaty fist captured her arm.

"If you believe that..." Fiona wrapped her hand around his index fingers. "...then you're a bigger fool than I remember." She yanked the digits backwards.

Yowling, Piers released her. She tossed his touch away. A moment later, he latched onto her wrists. Muscles burned as he tried to overpower her. She lashed out with her feet and kicked air.

"I'll give you something to remember," he hissed. "I'll take you on the doorstep, then I'll hand you over to an abbess I know who'll teach you respect for your betters."

"You'll never best me." Fiona spat on him.

Color suffused his face as the spittle trailed down his cheek. Hatred blazed in his eyes.

Fear dried her mouth. The cowboys on Gilly and Aidan's farm had taught her one more trick. A silent prayer winged its way heavenward. She filled her lungs with air, reared her head back and slammed it into his nose.

Stars exploded inside her skull.

"You bitch!" Piers flung off her hold. His hands cupped his nose; blood seeped between his fingers.

Bile burned Fiona's throat. The world swam in the tears filling her eyes. Small wonder the hands had used the violence as a last resort. It incapacitated both fighters.

She staggered back, tripped over her cape again. Her body tensed, expecting the collision with the door.

She continued to fall.



"The lady knocked on the door of One-eighteen Piccadilly." Houseman stretched out on the grass under the towering elm tree. A battered bowler had replaced his top hat.

Kingslea clamped down on the frustration shredding his control. Two hours had passed since the appointed rendezvous. Two miserable hours of fending off birds and constables. Both were equally irritating.

"She arrived safely, then?"

"Aye. Well..." Houseman plucked a blade of grass from the lush lawn and chewed on the green tip. "I didn't actually see her enter the establishment."

"Why not?"

"She waved me off." Houseman's arms crossed his chest, and he glared at Kingslea. "The lady is skilled with her weapons. I thought it wise to leave."

Shock and fear rattled Kingslea's control. He leapt to his feet and shoved away from the tree.

"You left her unprotected in the middle of London?" Long strides carried him to the break in the fence. If anything happened to her...

"You forget the whip and her rope." Houseman caught up with him.

"She is a *lady*. Their delicate sensibilities—" He caught the grin spreading across Houseman's features. His hands fisted at his sides. "Is there a particular reason you're grinning like an idiot?"

"Haven't much luck with this particular favor, eh, milord?"

*Milord.* What knot of tangled reasoning clogged the insolent man's head. Kingslea picked at a thread waving from a popped seam. The next time his valet met a bullet, the gun might be in milord's hand.

"So, you didn't actually see her go inside?"

"Ye've your doubts about the lady?"

"Indeed, I believe her to be the worst sort of lady." Kingslea's gaze swung to Houseman. Ahh, so the groom hadn't figured everything out.

"Her?"

"Indeed." Kingslea watched as bushy black brows collided over his companion's brown eyes. "She's a huntress."

"Aye. Well, 'tis what a miss does, ain't it?" Eyeteeth winked Houseman's humor.

"True. But I believe this one to be in league with the marchioness."

"Well, that makes sense, then."

Nothing made sense. Kingslea waited until they neared the edge of the park before stopping. Houseman's penchant for keeping his thoughts to himself could be downright annoying.

"What makes sense?"

"Number One-eighteen belongs to Lord Heberon."

"Lord Heberon? I don't believe he moves in my stepmother's circles."

"Aye, well, you never know. His lordship resides with his sister, the former Lady Caroline Wickshire. She married an American." Houseman rocked back on his heels, watched a bird swoop from the tree and tipped his hat to a woman with a basket of flowers on her head.

Kingslea counted to twenty then thirty. Patience was not a virtue. Fiona smiled from his memory. Damnation, he had just quoted a woman. Only a stiff drink and several hours' sleep could blot out the memory.

"You may have heard of him. Goes by the name Andrew Grey."

"Of Grey Shipping?"

"The same."

"Bloody Hell." Kingslea pounded on his legs. Why couldn't he have been wrong for once in his miserable life?

"Aye. And there's more."

"More?" What more could there be? A special license. The banns posted in *The Times*? He would pick the bride, *if* he ever married.

"Course, it's not about the lady." Houseman scratched his chin. "You still want to hear it?"

"Yes," Kingslea hissed. "I want to know."

"Seems the Greys went missing four weeks past, and what with Lord Heberon's faculties being to let, the heir apparent has moved in."

"Who?"

"Piers Montague."

"Good God. No wonder the poor girl wants to marry me. Hell, I might just wed the chit to save her from that depraved creature."

Houseman's eyebrows rubbed against his hairline. Kingslea blinked. Had he really just considered marriage? No, of course he hadn't.

"Well, I can't shoot her and put her out of her misery."

"Of course not, milord."

*Milord* again. Amusement or arrogance. Neither was particularly desirable in a servant.

"At least you've made use of your time."

"You haven't nabbed the man?"

"No. This is beginning to look more and more like a fool's errand."

"Then why are we leaving?"

Why *was* he leaving? For a manipulative woman who wanted to purchase his title? He was not some horse to be auctioned off. He stuffed her image in a small corner of his mind.

"We're not." Kingslea spun on his heel and marched back to the Speaker's Corner. "No one even stopped to look at it?"

"Just a child."

Damnation. He lengthened his stride to a sprint. Thoughts of the woman had snatched reason from his skull.

"He slowed by the bench, but he didn't stop."



“Were you late?”

“The appointment was at seven. I arrived at six-fifty-eight.”

They sprinted round the corner. The bench came into view.

“You want me to keep watch?”

“No.” Kingslea’s lungs burned from the exercise. “I want to catch him.”

“You still think the lady’s involved.”

“I think our encounter with the lady exceeds the probability of coincidence.”

Gravel sprayed the bench as they slid to a halt. Kingslea stiffened. A small bundle lay on top of the captain’s log.

“Why would they leave the note and the book?”

Why, indeed? The crisp vellum fluttered in the breeze. The marchioness’s handwriting was scrawled across the parchment. He added up the totals on the paper. Half the promised amount. Half. Red wax marred a folded scrap. He broke the seal and stared at the spidery handwriting.

“That doesn’t look like your stepmother’s mark.” Houseman squinted at the scrawl.

“It isn’t.” Kingslea wadded the note into a ball and crammed it into his pocket. “It’s more bloody instructions.”

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