

The Untamed Bride: An Exclusive Excerpt

Chapter One

December 11, 1822

Southampton Water, England

Del stood on the deck of the *Princess Louise*, the twelve-hundred-ton East Indiaman on which he and his small household had left Bombay, and watched the Southampton docks draw steadily nearer.

The wind whipped his hair, sent chill fingers sliding beneath his greatcoat collar. From horizon to horizon, the sky was an unrelieved steel-gray, but at least it wasn't raining; he was thankful for small mercies. After the warmth of India, and the balmy days rounding Africa, the change in temperature as they'd headed north over the last week had been an uncomfortable reminder of the reality of an English winter.

Artfully angled, the ship surged on the tide, aligning with the dock, the distance between lessening with every moment, the raucous cries of wheeling gulls a strident counterpoint to the bellows of the bosun as he directed the crew in the dicey business of bringing the heavy ship alongside the timber dock.

Del scanned the dockside crowd waiting to greet those on board. He was under no illusions; the instant he stepped off the gangplank, the Black Cobra's game would be afoot again. He felt restless, impatient for action—the same compulsion he was accustomed to feeling in those moments on the battlefield when, with his horse skittish beneath him, held on a tight rein, he would wait with his men for the order to charge. The same anticipation rode him now, yet with sharpened spurs.

Contrary to his expectations, the trip had been anything but uneventful. They'd sailed from Bombay only to fall foul of a storm, which had left them limping down the African coast with one of their three masts crippled. Once they'd reached Cape Town, repairs had taken three full weeks. While there, his batman, Cobby, had ferreted out the information that Roderick Ferrar had passed through a week ahead of them, on the *Elizabeth*, a fast frigate, also bound for Southampton.

He'd taken note, and so hadn't fallen victim to the knives of the two cult assassins left in Cape Town who had subsequently joined the *Princess Louise* as crew, and lain in wait for him on two separate moonless nights as they'd sailed up the west coast of Africa.

Luckily, the cultists had a superstitious aversion to firearms. Both assassins were now feeding the fishes, but Del suspected they'd merely been scouts, sent to do what they could if they could.

The Black Cobra itself lay ahead of him, coiled between him and his goal.

Wherever that proved to be.

Gripping the railing of the bridge deck, which, as a senior company officer—albeit resigned—he'd been given the freedom. He looked down at the main deck, to where his household staff—Mustaf, his general factotum, tall and thin, Amaya, Mustaf's short, rotund wife who served as Del's housekeeper, and Alia, their niece and maid-of-all-work—sat on their piled bags, ready to disembark the instant Cobby gave the signal.

Cobby himself, the only Englishman in Del's employ, short of stature, wiry, quick and canny, and cocky as only a cockney lad could be, stood by the main railing at the point where the gangplank would be rolled out, chatting amiably with some sailors. Cobby would be first among the passengers to disembark. He would scout the immediate area, then, if all was clear, signal Mustaf to bring the women down.

Del would bring up the rear, then, once they'd assembled on the dock, lead the way directly up the High Street to the Dolphin Inn.

As luck would have it, Wolverstone had nominated the inn Del habitually used when passing through Southampton. He hadn't, however, been there for years, not since he'd set sail for India in late '15, just over seven years ago.

It felt like more.

He was quite certain he'd aged more than seven years, and the last nine months, while they'd been hunting the Black Cobra, had been the most draining. He almost felt old.

Every time he thought of James MacFarlane, he felt helpless.

Seeing more scurrying below, hearing the change in the bosun's orders, feeling the slight bump as the padding slung along the ship's side met the dock, Del shook off all thoughts of the past and determinedly fixed his mind on the immediate future.

Sailors leapt down to the dock, hauling thick ropes to the capstans to secure the ship. Hearing the heavy rattle and splash as the anchor went down, then the squealing scrape as the railing was opened and the gangplank angled out, Del headed for the companionway to the main deck.

He swung off it in time to see Cobby scamper down the gangplank.

Reconnaissance, in this instance, wasn't simply a matter of scanning for those with dark skins. Southampton was one of the busiest ports in the world, and there were countless Indians and men of other dark-skinned races among the crews. But Cobby knew what to look for—the furtiveness, the attention locked on Del while attempting to remain inconspicuous. If there were cultists waiting to strike, Del was confident Cobby would spot them.

Yet it was more likely the cultists would watch and wait—they preferred to strike in less populated surrounds where escape after the event was more assured.

Del strolled to stand with Mustaf, Amaya and Alia. Mustaf nodded, then went back to scanning the crowd; he'd been a sowar—a cavalryman—until a knee injury had seen him pensioned off. The knee didn't discompose him in other ways; he was still a good man in a fight.

Alia bobbed her head, then resumed casting shy glances at the young sailors who rushed back and forth along the deck.

Amaya looked up at Del with liquid brown eyes. "It is very very cold here, Colonel-sahib. Colder than my cousin's house in Simla in the winter. I am being very very glad I was buying these shawls from Kashmir. They are just the thing."

Del smiled. Both Amaya and Alia were well wrapped in the thick woolen shawls. "When we stop at a big town, we'll have to get you some English coats. And gloves, too. They'll help keep out the wind."

"Ai, yes—the wind, it is like a knife. I am understanding that saying now." Amaya nodded, plump hands folded in her lap, thin gold bangles on her wrists peeking from beneath the edge of one shawl.

Despite her sweet face and matronly disposition, Amaya was quick-witted and observant. As for Alia, she would instantly obey any order from her uncle, aunt, Del or Cobby. When necessary, the small group operated as a unit; Del wasn't overly worried over having Amaya and Alia with them, even on the upcoming, more dangerous leg of their journey.

Regardless, knowing the Black Cobra cultists' vindictiveness, he wouldn't take the chance of leaving the women anywhere, even with Mustaf to guard them. To strike at him, the Black Cobra was perfectly capable of wiping out his household, simply to inspire fear, and to demonstrate his power.

Human life had long ago lost all meaning for the Black Cobra.

A shrill whistle pulled Del's attention back to the dock. Cobby caught his eye, snapped a jaunty salute. All clear.

"Come." Del took Amaya's arm and helped her to her feet. "Let's go down and head for our inn."

Cobby had commandeered a man with a wooden cart. Del waited with the women while their luggage was ferried down the gangplank and loaded in the cart, then he set off, leading the way off the dock and straight up High Street. The Dolphin wasn't far; Mustaf followed with the women close behind, with Cobby bringing up the rear, ambling alongside the carter, eyes constantly shifting this way and that as he chatted.

As Del walked up the street, he found his gaze drawn downward—to the cobbles that covered the ground, to the first steps he was taking on English soil after so many years away.

He wasn't sure what he felt. An odd sense of peace, perhaps because he knew this time his travels were over, a sense of anticipation over what his new and as yet unstructured future might hold, all tinged with a healthy dose of apprehension over what lay between this moment and being able to get started on shaping his new life.

Their mission to bring the Black Cobra to justice.

He was in it now. There was no going back, only forward. Ahead, through whatever fire the opposition might send his way.

Raising his head, he filled his lungs, looked about. It felt exactly like the moment after the charge began.

The Dolphin was a town landmark. It had stood for centuries and been refurbished several times; it currently sported two wide bow windows fronting the street, the solid front door in between.

Del glanced back along the street. He couldn't see any likely cultists, but there were plenty of people, carts, and the odd carriage thronging the cobbled thoroughfare—plenty of cover for anyone watching.

They would be watching.

Reaching the inn, he opened the door and went inside.

Securing suitable rooms was no difficulty; his years in India had left him very wealthy and he wasn't of a mind to stint either himself or his small household. The innkeeper, Bowden, a solidly built ex-sailor, responded appropriately, cheerily welcoming him to the town and summoning lads to help with the luggage as the others joined Del in the foyer.

With the rooms organized and their bags dispatched, and the women, Mustaf and Cobby following the luggage up the stairs, Bowden turned to Del. "Just remembered. I've two letters waiting for you."

Del turned back to the counter, brows rising.

Reaching beneath it, Bowden produced two missives. "The first—this one—came on the mail coach nearly four weeks ago. The other was left last evening by a gentleman.

He and another gentleman have looked in every day for the last week or so, asking after you."

Wolverstone's escorts. "Thank you." Del accepted the letters. It was midafternoon, and the inn's public rooms were quiet. He sent an easy smile Bowden's way. "If anyone should ask for me, I'll be in the tap."

"Of course, sir. Nice and quiet it is in there at present. Just ring the bell on the bar if you need anything."

With a nod, Del sauntered into the dining room and through an archway into the tap, a cozy room toward the back of the inn. There were a few patrons, all older men, gathered about small tables. He went to a table in the corner where the light from the rear window would allow him to read.

Sitting, he examined the two missives, then opened the one from the mystery gentleman.

The lines within were few and to the point, informing him that Tony Blake, Viscount Torrington, and Gervase Tregarth, Earl of Crowhurst, were holding themselves ready to escort him further on his mission. They were quartered nearby and would continue to call at the inn every evening to check for his arrival.

Reassured that he would be moving forward, in action again soon, he refolded the letter, tucked it inside his coat, then, mildly intrigued, opened the second missive. He'd recognized the handwriting, and assumed his aunts had written to welcome him home, and to ask and be reassured that he was, indeed, heading up to Humberside, to the house at Middleton on the Wolds that he'd inherited it from his father, and that remained their home.

As he unfolded the two pages, crossed and recrossed in his elder aunt's spidery script, he was already composing his reply—a brief note to let them know that he had landed and was on his way north, but that business dealings on the way might delay him for a week or so.

Reading his aunt's salutation, followed by an enthusiastic, even effusive, welcome, he smiled and read on.

He wasn't smiling by the time he reached the end of the first page. Laying it aside, he deciphered the rest, then tossed the second sheet on the first and quietly, but comprehensively, swore.

After staring at the sheets for several minutes, he gathered them up, rose and, stuffing the sheets in his pocket, made his way back to the inn's foyer.

Bowden heard his footsteps and came out from his office behind the counter. "Yes, Colonel?"

"I understand a young lady, a Miss Duncannon, was due to arrive here some weeks ago?"

Bowden smiled brightly. "Yes, indeed, sir. I'd forgotten—she asked after you, too."

"Indeed. I take it she's left and headed north?"

"Oh, no, sir. Her ship was delayed, too. She didn't get in until last week. Quite relieved, she was, to learn you'd been delayed, too. She's still here, waiting on your arrival."

"Ah. I see." Del suppressed a grimace and started making plans. "Perhaps if you could send word to her room that I've arrived, and would appreciate a moment of her time?"

Bowden shook his head. "No use at present—she's out, and she's taken her maid with her. But I can tell her as soon as she comes in."

Del nodded. "Thank you." He hesitated, then asked, "Is there a private parlor I might hire?" Somewhere where he and his unexpected burden could discuss her onward journey.

"I'm sorry, sir, but all our parlors are presently taken." Bowden paused, then said, "But it's Miss Duncannon herself as has the front parlor—perhaps, seeing she's waiting to see you, you might wait for her in there?"

"An excellent notion," Del responded dryly. "And I'll need to hire a carriage."

But again Bowden shook his head. "I'd like to oblige, Colonel, but this close to Christmas all our carriages are spoken for. Miss Duncannon herself took the last of our post chaises."

"Fortuitous," Del murmured. "I was wanting the carriage for her."

"Well, then." Bowden grinned. "All's well."

"Indeed." Del pointed to the room to the right of the foyer. "The front parlor?"

"Aye, sir. Go right in."

Del did, shutting the door behind him.

With white plaster walls and heavy timber beams crossing the ceiling, the parlor was neither overlarge nor cramped, and boasted one of the wide bow windows looking out on the street. The furniture was heavy, but comfortable, the pair of chintz-covered armchairs well-supplied with plump cushions. A well-polished round table with four chairs stood in the middle of the room, a large lamp at its center, while a crackling fire sparked and flared in the grate, throwing welcome heat into the room.

Gravitating toward the hearth, Del noticed the three watercolors above the mantelpiece. They were landscapes depicting green pastures and meadows, lush fields and richly canopied trees beneath pastel blue skies with fluffy white

clouds. The one in the middle, of rolling heathland, a vibrant patchwork of greens, caught his eye. He hadn't laid eyes on such landscapes for seven long years; it seemed odd to gain his first sense of home via pictures on a wall.

Glancing down, he drew out the letter from his aunts; standing before the fire, he scanned it anew, searching for some insight into why the devil they'd thought to saddle him with the duty of escorting a young gentlewoman, daughter of a neighboring landowner, home to Humberside.

His best guess was that his doting aunts had some idea of playing matchmaker.

They were going to be disappointed. There was no place for a young lady in his train, not while he was a decoy for the Black Cobra.

He'd been disappointed when he'd opened the scroll he'd selected and discovered he hadn't picked the original letter. Nevertheless, as Wolverstone had made clear, the missions of the three decoys would be vital in drawing out the Black Cobra's men, and ultimately the Black Cobra himself.

They needed to lure him into striking, and for that they needed to reduce his cultists sufficiently to force him to act in person.

Not an easy task, yet by any reasonable estimation it should be within their collective ability. As a decoy, his role would be to deliberately make himself a target, and he didn't want any extraneous young lady hanging on his arm while he was so engaged.

A tap on the door had him hesitating, then he called, "Come."

It was Cobby.

"Thought you'd want to know." Hand on the knob, his batman hovered by the door he'd closed. "I ducked back down the docks and asked around. Ferrar arrived over a week ago. Interesting thing is he had no bevy of natives with him—seems there was no room left on the frigate for more than him and his man."

Del raised his brows. "Definitely interesting, but no doubt he'll have had cultists coming in on other ships."

Cobby nodded. "So you'd think. But it does mean he won't necessarily have all that many just at present. Might have to resort to doing his own dirty work." Cobby grinned malevolently. "Now wouldn't that be a shame?"

Del smiled. "We can but hope."

He nodded a dismissal and Cobby left, closing the door behind him.

Del glanced at the clock ticking on a sideboard. It was already after three, and what daylight there was would soon fade. He fell to pacing slowly before the fire, rehearsing suitable words with which to break the news to Miss Duncannon that, contrary to his aunts' arrangements, she would be heading north alone.

It was well after four o'clock, and he'd grown increasingly impatient, before a feminine voice in the foyer, well modulated yet with an unmistakably haughty tone, heralded the return of Miss Duncannon.

Even as Del focused on the parlor door, the knob turned and the door swung inward. Bowden held it open to permit a lady—not so young—in a garnet red pelisse, her dark auburn hair swept up and tucked under a jaunty hat, who was juggling a plethora of bandboxes and packages, to enter.

She swept in, her face alight, a smile curving lush red lips, as Bowden hurriedly said, “I believe this is the gentleman you’ve been waiting for, miss.”

Miss Duncannon abruptly halted. Animation leaching from her face, she looked across the room and saw him. After a moment, her gaze slowly meandered upward, until it reached his face.

Then she simply stared.

Clearing his throat, Bowden retreated, closing the door behind her. She blinked, stared again, then baldly asked, “*You’re* Colonel Delborough?”

Del bit his tongue against an impulse to respond, “*You’re Miss Duncannon?*” Just one look, and his vision of a biddable young miss had evaporated; the lady was in her late twenties if she was a day.

And given the vision filling his eyes, why she was still a miss was beyond his comprehension.

She was . . . *lush* was the word that sprang to his mind. Taller than the average, she was built on stately, even queenly, lines, ripely curvaceous in all the right places. Even from across the room, he could tell her eyes were green; large, faintly slanting up at the outer corners, they were vibrantly alive, awake and aware, alert to all that went on around her.

Her features were elegant, refined, her lips full and ripe, elementally tempting, but the firmness of her chin suggested determination, backbone and a forthrightness beyond the norm.

Duly noting that last, he bowed. “Indeed—Colonel Derek Delborough.” *Sadly, not at your service.* Quashing the wayward thought, he smoothly continued, “I believe your parents made some arrangement with my aunts for me to act as escort on your journey north. Sadly, that’s not possible—I have business to attend to before I can return to Humberside.”

Deliah Duncannon blinked, with an effort dragged her senses from their preoccupation with shoulders and a wide chest which should by all rights have been encased in a uniform, replayed his words, then abruptly shook her head. “No.”

Moving further into the room, she set her boxes and bags on the table, distractedly wondering whether a uniform would have increased his impact, or lessened it. There was something anomalous in his appearance, as if the elegant civilian garb was a disguise. If the intention had been to screen his innately vigorous, even dangerous physique, the ploy had failed miserably.

Freeing her hands, she reached up to extract the long pin securing her hat. “I’m afraid, Colonel Delborough, that I must insist. I’ve been waiting for the better part of a week for you to arrive, and I really cannot journey on without a suitable escort.” Setting her hat on the table, she swung to face the recalcitrant ex-colonel—significantly younger and immeasurably more virile than she’d envisioned him. Than she’d been led to expect. “It’s quite unthinkable.”

Regardless of his age, his virility, or his propensity to argue, for her, it was, but the last thing she intended to do was explain.

His lips—mobile and distractingly masculine—firmed. “Miss Duncannon—”

“I expect you’re imagining that it will simply be a matter of bundling me into a carriage with my maid and household, and pointing north.” Pausing in the act of removing her leather gloves, she glanced at him and caught a telltale twist of those disturbing lips; that had, indeed, been precisely what he’d planned. “I have to inform you that that’s very definitely not the case.”

Dropping her gloves on the table behind her, she lifted her chin and faced him squarely—staring down her nose as well as she could given he was more than half a head taller than she. “I must insist, sir, that you honor the obligation.”

His lips were now a thin line—one she wanted to see relax and curve into a smile . . . what was the matter with her? Her pulse thrummed in her throat, her skin prickled with unexpected awareness, and he was still a good six feet away.

“Miss Duncannon, while regrettably my aunts overstepped their authority in seeking to oblige a neighbor, I would, in normal circumstances, do all in my power to, as you phrase it, honor the commitment they made. However, in this instance, it is entirely—”

“Colonel Delborough.” She hauled her gaze from his lips, for the first time met his gaze directly, deliberately locking her eyes on his. “Permit me to inform you that there is no reason you could advance, none whatever, that will induce me to excuse you from escorting me north.”

His eyes were dark brown, richly hued, unexpectedly intriguing, fringed with the longest, thickest lashes she’d ever seen. Those lashes were the same color as his burnished, lightly waving hair—a sable more black than brown.

“I regret, Miss Duncannon, that that is utterly impossible.”

When she set her chin, retreated not an inch, but kept her gaze meshed unwaveringly with his, Del hesitated, then, far more aware than he wished to be of her sinfully sensual mouth, stiffly added, “I’m presently on a mission, one vital to the country, and must see it to its conclusion before I’ll be free to indulge my aunts’ wishes.”

She frowned. “But you’ve resigned your commission.” Her gaze slid to his shoulders, as if confirming the absence of epaulettes.

“My mission is civilian rather than military.”

Her finely arched brows rose. Her gaze returning to his face, she considered him for an instant, then, in a deceptively mild—sarcastically challenging—tone, said, “So what do you suggest, sir? That I wait here, at your convenience, until you are free to escort me north?”

“No.” He struggled not to clench his teeth; his jaw was already tight. “I would respectfully suggest that, in the circumstances, and at this present season with much less traffic on the highways, it would be perfectly acceptable for you to head north with your maid—and I believe you mentioned a household? As you’ve already ordered a carriage—”

Her green eyes flashed. “With all due respect, Colonel, you are talking through your hat!” Belligerent, determined, she stepped forward, face tipping up as if she intended to go nose-to-nose with him. “The notion of me traveling north, in this season or any other, with no suitable gentleman arranged and accepted by my parents as escort, is quite simply ineligible. Unacceptable. Absolutely ‘not done.’ ”

She'd come so close that a wave of tempting warmth slid over the front of him, cascading down to heat his groin. So long had it been since he'd experienced such an explicit reaction he was, for just an instant, distracted enough to simply stand and enjoy it, drink it in. . . .

Her gaze abruptly shifted to his left. She was tall enough to see over his shoulder. He saw her focus, saw her gorgeous jade-green eyes widen—then flare.

“Good God!”

She seized his lapels and dragged him, hauled him, tumbled him down to the floor.

For one crazed instant, his brain interpreted her actions as lust gone wild—then the reverberating explosion and the tinkle of shattered glass raining down upon them jerked his wits back to reality.

She had never left it. Trapped half beneath him, she wriggled and squirmed to get free, her horrified gaze locked on the shattered pane.

Slamming a mental door on the effect of her curvaceous form bucking beneath him, he gritted his teeth and pushed back to his knees. After a quick glance out of the window at the stunned crowd milling in the darkened street, he got to his feet, and was assisting her to hers when the door slammed open.

Mustaf stood in the doorway, saber in his hand. Cobby stood beside him, a cocked pistol in his. Beyond them towered another Indian, swarthy and tall—Del stiffened instinctively. He started to step in front of Miss Duncannon, only to have her hand on his arm hold him back.

“I’m quite all right, Kumulay.” Her small, warm hand still resting on Del’s bicep, she looked up at him. “It wasn’t me the man was trying to kill.”

Del met her eyes. They were still wide, her pupils dilated, but she was utterly in control.

A hundred thoughts churned through his head. Every instinct screamed “*Chase!*” but this time that wasn’t his role. He looked back at Cobby, who had lowered his gun. “Get ready to leave immediately.”

Cobby nodded. “I’ll get the others.” He and Mustaf drew back.

The other man—Kumulay—remained in the open doorway, his impassive gaze locked on his mistress.

Del glanced at her. Met the green shards trained on his face.

“You are *not* leaving without me.” Each word was carefully enunciated.

He hesitated, giving his mind one more chance to come up with an alternative, then, jaw set, nodded. “Very well. Be ready to leave within the hour.”

“Finally!” More than two hours later, Del shut the door of the post chaise Miss Duncannon had been farsighted enough to hire, and dropped onto the seat beside his unlooked-for charge.

Her maid, Bess, an Englishwoman, sat in the corner on her other side. Along the seat opposite, in a colorful array of saris and woollen shawls, sat Amaya, Alia and another older Indian woman and two young girls, the latter three all members of Miss Duncannon's household.

Why she had a largely Indian household he had yet to learn.

The carriage rocked into motion, rolling ponderously up the High Street. As the vehicle tacked around Bargate, then headed on toward the London road, Del wondered, not for the first time over the last two and more hours, what had possessed him to agree to Miss Duncannon traveling on with him.

Unfortunately, he knew the answer, and it was one that left him with no other possible course. She'd seen the man who'd shot at him—which meant the man had almost certainly seen her.

Given cultists rarely, if ever, used firearms, that man was most likely Larkins, Ferrar's gentleman's gentleman and his master's most trusted aide, or Ferrar himself. Del's money was on Larkins.

Although Cobby had questioned all those who'd been standing in the street, still stunned and exclaiming over the shooting, no one had seen the man with the gun well enough to describe, let alone identify. All they'd learned was that, as expected, he'd been fair-skinned.

That the Black Cobra had struck so immediately and decisively had been a surprise, but on reflection, were he in Ferrar's shoes, Del might have mounted a similar preemptive gambit. If he'd been killed, the ensuing chaos might have proved sufficient for Ferrar to gain access to his room and baggage, and the scroll-holder. It wouldn't have played out that way, but Ferrar didn't know that. Regardless, Del was perfectly sure that if it hadn't been for Miss Duncannon's quick thinking—and actions—he would very likely be dead.

It was nearing seven o'clock. The night was dark, the moon cocooned in thick clouds. The carriage lamps beamed through the chill darkness as the four horses reached the macadam of the highway and lengthened their stride.

Del thought of the rest of their combined households, traveling with the bulk of their luggage in two open wagons, all Cobby had been able to hire at such short notice.

At least they were away, on the move.

And they knew that Larkins, and presumably therefore Ferrar, were close, and chasing him. The enemy had broken cover and engaged.

"I can't understand," Deliah said, "why you insisted nothing be said to the authorities." She spoke quietly, her voice sliding beneath the repetitive thud of the horses' hooves; she had no wish to communicate her dissatisfaction to anyone

other than the man beside her. "Bowden said you paid for the windowpane but insisted nothing more be made of the incident." She waited an instant, then demanded, "Why?"

She didn't turn to look at him. The interior of the carriage was a sea of shifting shadows; she couldn't see well enough to read anything from his face—and she'd already realized that only showed what he wanted it to.

Silence stretched, but she waited.

Eventually, he murmured, "The attack was linked to my mission. Can you describe the man with the pistol? It would help."

The vision she'd seen through the window was etched in her mind. "He was somewhat above average height, wearing a dark coat—nothing all that fashionable, but decent quality. He had on a dark hat, but I could see his hair was close-cropped. Beyond that . . . I really didn't have time to note every detail." She let a moment tick past, then asked, "Do you know who he was?"

"He sounds like one of the men linked with my mission."

"Your 'mission,' whatever it might be, doesn't explain why you refused to alert the authorities to the action of a felon—any more than it explains why we're racing away in the dead of night, as if we'd taken fright." She didn't know much about Colonel Derek Delborough, but he didn't seem the sort to cut and run.

He answered in a bored, superior tone. "It was the right thing to do."

"Humph." She frowned, disinclined to let him stop talking. His voice was deep, assured, his accents—those of a man accustomed to command—strangely soothing, and after the excitement of the shooting, she was still on edge. Her nerves were still jangling. She grimaced. "Even if you didn't want to draw attention to yourself, you might at least—"

Del transferred his gaze to the unrelieved darkness outside. He'd glanced at her, seen her grimace, seen her lips pout . . . and felt a nearly overwhelming urge to shut her up.

By sealing those pouting lips with his.

And finding out how soft they were, and what she tasted like.

Tart, or sweet? Or both?

Quite aside from the audience lined up on the opposite seat, he felt reasonably certain any such action would result in him receiving at least one boxed ear. Probably two. Yet having her sitting beside him, her hip less than an inch from his, her shoulder lightly brushing his arm with every rocking motion of the carriage, the warmth of her bathing his side, was a temptation to which his body was shamelessly responding.

The search for the Black Cobra had consumed him for months; he hadn't spared the time to dally with any woman—and it had been far longer since he'd been with an

Englishwoman, and never with a termagant of Miss Duncannon's ilk.

None of which explained why he was suddenly so attracted to a harridan with lips for which the most experienced courtesans would trade their souls.

He blotted out her voice, her insistent, persistent prodding, focused instead on the heavy rhythm of the horses' hooves. Leaving Southampton with all speed had been what he'd had to do, no matter how much it had gone against his grain. If he'd been carrying the original letter, then the necessity of keeping it out of Ferrar's clutches would have trumped any inclination to give chase.

If he'd stood and fought—tried to hunt down Larkins, even dallied to set the Watch on Ferrar's trail—Ferrar would have guessed that he wasn't all that concerned with the contents of the scroll-holder he carried. And then Ferrar would have shifted his attention, and that of his cultists, from Del to one of the others.

Were the others ahead of him, or were they yet to land in England?

With luck Torrington and Crowhurst would know. He'd left a short note for them with Bowden.

Given the hour, and the falling temperatures, and that more than half their number were traveling exposed, they couldn't go far. For tonight, Winchester was his goal.

He prayed he'd be able to resist the impulses provoked by the feminine muttering from beside him long enough for them to reach it.

The Swan Inn in Southgate Street proved sufficient for their needs.

Miss Duncannon predictably grumbled when he refused to stop at the larger Pelican Hotel. "There's so many of us to accommodate—they're more likely to have room."

"The Pelican is largely timber and lathe."

"So?"

"I have an unreasoning fear of waking to a house in flames." The Black Cobra's men had been known to use fire to flush out those they were chasing, without the slightest thought for any others who might get caught in the ensuing blaze. Climbing out of the carriage in the yard of the Swan, Del considered the inn, then turned to hand his burden down. "The Swan, however, is built of stone."

Taking his hand, she stepped down, paused to look at the inn, then, expressionless, looked at him. "Stone walls in winter."

He glanced up at the roof, to where multiple chimneys chuffed smoke. "Fires."

She sniffed, lifted her skirts, climbed the steps to the porch and led the way through the door the innkeeper was holding wide, bobbing and bowing as they passed.

Before Del could take charge, she did, sweeping to the inn's counter and stripping off her gloves. "Good evening." The innkeeper scurried around the counter to attend her.

"We need rooms for us all—one large chamber for me, another for the colonel, four smaller rooms for my staff and two more for his staff, and the colonel's parlor maid can room with my lady's maid—that's wiser, I think. Now, we'll all want dinner—I know it's late, but—"

Del halted just behind her—she knew he was there—and listened to her rattle off orders, directions and instructions, more or less without pause. He could have stepped in and taken over—he'd intended to—but as she was making such an excellent fist of organizing their combined party, there seemed little point.

By the time the luggage had been unloaded and ferried inside, the innkeeper had sorted out their rooms, arranged for a private parlor to be prepared for them, and sent orders to the kitchen for their meals. Del stood back and watched a round-eyed maid lead his charge upstairs to her chamber, then he turned to the innkeeper. "I need to hire two more carriages."

"Of course, sir. Dreadfully cold already, and they say there's worse to come. I don't have any carriages free myself, but I know the stableman at the Pelican—he'll oblige me, and I'm sure he'll have two he can let you have."

Del raised his eyes to the top of the stairs—and met Miss Duncannon's direct green gaze. She said nothing, however, but with a faint lift of her brows, continued on into the gallery. "Thank you." Returning his gaze to the innkeeper, he arranged for the members of his household and hers to be given whatever they wished from the tap, then left the now deserted foyer to climb the stairs to his room.

Half an hour later, washed and brushed, he was in the private parlor when Miss Duncannon entered. Two maids had just finished setting a small table for two before the fire; they retreated with bobbed curtsies. Del strolled to hold a chair for his charge.

She'd removed her pelisse, revealing a garnet-red gown trimmed with silk ribbon of the same hue, over which she'd draped a finely patterned silk shawl.

Sitting, she inclined her head. "Thank you, Colonel."

Strolling to his chair on the other side of the table, Del murmured, "Del." When she raised her brows, he explained, "Most people I know call me Del."

"I see." She considered him as he sat and shook out his napkin. "As we're apparently to be in each other's company for some time, it would be appropriate, I suppose, to make you free of my name. It's Deliah—not Delilah. Deliah."

He smiled, inclined his head. "Deliah."

Deliah struggled not to stare, struggled to keep her suddenly witless mind functioning. That was the first time he'd smiled at her—and she definitely didn't need the additional distraction. He was ridiculously handsome when serious and sober; when his lips softened and curved, he was seduction personified.

She, better than anyone, knew how dangerous such men were—especially to her.

The door opened and the maids reappeared, ferrying a soup tureen and a basket of bread.

She nodded her approval and the maids served. Deliah eyed the soup with something akin to gratitude, inwardly congratulating herself for having ordered it. One didn't need to converse while consuming soup. That would give her just a little more time to whip her unruly senses into line.

"Thank you." With a nod for the retreating maids, she picked up her spoon and supped.

He reached for the bread basket, offered it.

"No, thank you."

He smiled again—damn him!—and helped himself; she looked down at her soup and kept her gaze on her plate.

It had taken her all of the short journey, and most of the half hour she'd spent out of his sight, to untangle the skein of emotions besetting her. She'd initially attributed her skittering nerves and breathless state to the shock of finding herself looking down the barrel of a pistol, even if the gun hadn't been pointed at her.

The shot, the subsequent flurry, the rush to leave, the unexpected journey during which he'd remained stubbornly uncommunicative over his mysterious mission—the mission that had led to him being shot at—were all circumstances that might naturally be considered to have contributed to her overwrought state.

Except she'd never been the sort to allow circumstances—no matter how dire or unexpected—to upset her.

In the quiet of her chamber, she'd finally unraveled her feelings sufficiently to lay the truth bare—it had been that moment when she'd found herself on the wooden floor with his hard body covering hers that was the root of her problem.

The source of her skittishness.

If she thought of it, she could still feel the sensations—of his weight pinning her, hard muscles and heavy bones trapping her beneath him, his long legs tangling with hers,

his heat—then the searing instant of . . . whatever it had been that had afflicted her. Hot, intense, enough to make her squirm.

Enough to make her treacherous body yearn.

But she didn't think he knew. She glanced at him as he laid down his spoon.

He caught her eye. "I should thank you for taking charge of the domestic organization."

She shrugged. "I'm accustomed to managing my uncle's household. It's what I've been doing in my years away."

"Jamaica, I believe my aunt wrote. What took you there?"

Setting down her spoon, she leaned her elbows on the table, lacing her fingers and viewing him over them. "Originally I went out to visit my uncle, Sir Harold Duncannon.

He's the Chief Magistrate of Jamaica. I found the climate and the colony to my liking, so I stayed. As time passed, I took charge of his household."

"Your servants are Indian—are there many Indians in Jamaica?"

"These days, yes. After the slave ships stopped, many Indian and Chinese workers were brought in. All my staff were originally with my uncle's household, but over the

years became more mine than his, so I gave them the choice of staying in Jamaica or coming to England with me."

“And they chose England.” Del broke off as the maids reappeared. While they cleared the first course and laid out platters of succulent roast beef, roast potatoes and pumpkin, ham, and a jug of rich gravy, he had time to consider what her staff’s loyalty said of Miss Deliah—not Delilah—Duncannon.

“Thank you.” She nodded graciously to the maids, and they departed. Before he could frame his next question, she fixed her gaze on him. “You, I gather, have been with the East India Company for some time.”

He nodded, picking up the serving fork. “I’ve been in India for the past seven years. Before that, it was Waterloo, and before that, the Peninsula.”

“Quite a lengthy service—am I to take it you’re retiring permanently?”

“Yes.” They served themselves, and settled to eat.

Five minutes passed, then she said, “Tell me about India. Was the campaigning there the same as in Europe? Massed battles, army against army?”

“At first.” When he glanced up and saw her plainly waiting for more, he elaborated, “Over the first years I was there, we were extending territory—annexing areas for trade, as the company describes it. More or less routine campaigning. Later, however, it became more a case of . . . I suppose you could say keeping the peace. Keeping the unruly elements in check to protect the trade routes—that sort of thing. Not really campaigning, no battles as such.”

“And this mission of yours?”

“Is something that grew out of the peacekeeping, as it were.”

“Being something more civilian than military?”

He held her gaze. “Indeed.”

“I see. And will pursuing your mission necessitate you leaving me behind at some point well south of Humberside?”

He sat back. “No.”

She arched her brows. “You seem to have experienced a quite dramatic change of heart regarding my presence consequent on you being shot at. I’m not sure I see the connection.”

“Regardless, you see me resigned to your company—I’m waiting on confirmation of our exact route, but I believe we’ll need to spend a few days, perhaps a week, in London.”

“London?”

He’d hoped she’d be distracted with thoughts of shopping—she had been out of the country for years, after all—but from the calculation in her eyes, he could tell she was trying to see what going to London told her of his mission.

“Incidentally,” he said, “why Jamaica?”

After a moment, she shrugged. "I was in need of new horizons and the connection was there."

"How long ago did you leave England?"

"In '15. As a colonel, were you in charge of a . . . what? Squadron of men?"

"No." Again she waited, open curiosity coloring her eyes and her expression, until he added, "In India, I commanded a group of elite officers, each of whom could take command of company troops and deal with the constant small insurrections and disturbances that are always blowing up in the subcontinent. But tell me, was there much of a social circle in . . . Kingston, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes, Kingston. And yes, there was the usual social circle of expatriates, much like any colony, I expect. How was India in that regard?"

"I was stationed mostly in Calcutta—the company headquarters are there. There were always balls and parties in the so-called season, but not so much of the matchmaking one finds at Almack's and the like."

"Indeed? I would have thought—"

They continued to trade question and answer as they progressed through the courses. Del tried to ascertain why she'd felt the need for "new horizons" while avoiding falling into the conversational pits she dug and revealing more than she needed to know about his mission.

He might have to take her with him to ensure her safety, but he intended to do all in his power to keep her ignorant and entirely separate from his mission, and as far as possible out of the Black Cobra's sight.

It was only after they'd risen from the table and together walked out of the parlor and up the stairs that he realized he'd spent an entire evening alone with an unmarried lady, doing nothing more than talking, and he hadn't even thought of being bored.

Which he usually was. Thus far in his life, women, even ladies, had fulfilled one and only one role; he'd had very little interest in them outside that sphere. Yet although he'd focused on Deliah's luscious lips far too often for his comfort, he'd been too engaged in their mutual interrogation—her quick wits had ensured he'd had to keep his own about him—to dwell on her sexual potential, much less act on an attraction that, he was surprised to discover, had not just survived the last hours but had, if anything, grown.

She paused outside the door of the chamber next to his and glanced up at him. Her lips curved lightly—a genuine smile tinged with a hint of appreciation and a soupçon of challenge. "Good night . . . Del."

He forced his lips into an easy smile. Inclined his head. "Deliah."

Her smile fractionally deepened, but her tone was entirely innocent when she added, "Sleep well."

Del stood in the shadowed corridor and watched the chamber door close behind her, then he slowly walked the few paces to his own, reasonably certain that her last wish was very unlikely to be granted.

Chapter Two

December 12

The Swan Inn, Winchester

Del was woken from a slumber every bit as restless as he'd predicted by Cobby rattling the bedcurtains.

"It's morning, believe it or not. Gray as the grave, and equally cold. Whatever passes for sun these days it's not up yet, but there's two gentlemen downstairs waiting to see you—Torrington and Crowhurst."

Del grunted. He pushed back the covers and rose, stretched, suppressing a shiver at the chill in the air. "Tell them I'll be down directly."

"Aye, sir."

Del washed, quickly shaved, then dressed in the clothes Cobby had left warming by the fire. A quick glance out of the window showed a drear landscape bathed in pearl-gray light. No snow had yet fallen, and it wasn't raining. Good enough weather for traveling.

Downstairs, he passed Cobby in the foyer.

"In the parlor, they are. Thought I'd get breakfast served, seeing you were on your way."

With a nod, Del strolled on, opened the parlor door, and walked in to find two large gentlemen enthusiastically addressing plates piled with ham and sausages. Both looked up, smiled, and rose as he approached.

Both must have been in the Guards at some point—there was a certain set to their shoulders, a similarity in their long, tall frames.

The dark-haired, black-eyed one held out his hand with a smiling nod. "Delborough, I take it. I'm Torrington."

Del shook hands.

"Gervase Tregarth." The second man, with amber eyes and curly brown hair, likewise offered his hand. "Also known as Crowhurst."

Del smiled. "Call me Del." He took a seat facing them, his gaze lowering to the platters. "I haven't had a real English breakfast in over seven years. Is it any good?"

"Excellent." Torrington picked up his fork. "Very good ham. I'm Tony, by the way—Tony Blake."

"Blake." Del helped himself to the ham and three sausages. "There was a Blake behind enemy lines after Corunna."

"That was me. Old days long gone. Not much call for those sort of larks these days, not for any of us."

"Which," Gervase said, reaching for the coffeepot, "is why you'll find us all very grateful for this chance to get back into some action, no matter how briefly. Civilian life has its challenges, but they aren't quite the same."

Just those few exchanges put Del entirely at ease; men like these he understood, because they thought like him.

"We heard," Tony said around a mouthful of ham, "that you had a spot of bother at the Dolphin."

"Indeed—it seems the Black Cobra is aware I'm here, and ready, even eager, to engage."

"Excellent." Gervase grinned. "Reassuring to know the game is already afoot."

"So," Del said, "what word do you have from Wolverstone?"

"Who," Tony informed him, "is likewise grateful, but, as usual, is keeping his cards exceedingly close to his chest. We're to head into London, and spend a few days making noise and seeing what cult forces we can draw out. Royce has left the timing to us, but once we feel we've done all we can in the capital, we're to head to Cambridgeshire, to a house called Somersham Place."

"I know it," Del said. "Devil Cynster's home."

"Where," Gervase said, "Cynster will be waiting with a crew of other Cynsters. The idea is to lure the Black Cobra to strike at you while there—no reason the cult would know how many ex-Guardsmen are in the house."

Del chewed, nodded. "So it'll be an ambush of sorts."

"Exactly." Tony refilled his coffee cup, and sat back.

Del arched a brow at them both. "Do you know if any of the others have reached England?"

Tony shook his head.

"I sent word last night to Royce that you'd landed," Gervase said, "and that we'll proceed as planned. As far as we've heard, you're the first home."

Del hesitated, then said, "About proceeding as planned, we have a slight complication—an unexpected addition to our group." He told them of Miss Deliah Duncannon, and briefly explained why he hadn't been able to leave her behind.

Tony winced. "Last thing we need, to have to act as nursemaid to a sweet young thing all the way through London and into Cambridgeshire."

"At least we'll be able to hand her over to the Cynster ladies once there," Gervase said.

Del tried to imagine Deliah Duncannon being "handed over." Or nursemaided. Couldn't.

He was searching for words with which to correct their misapprehension that Deliah was “a sweet young thing” when Tony continued, “Still, I suppose it’ll just be a matter of leaving her with her maid and your people, well out of the action.” Setting down his empty cup, Tony reached for the coffeepot. “As we should get on the road in the next hour or so, I daresay the first step is to send a message up to this Miss Duncannon’s maid to get her mistress awake.”

“Miss Duncannon is already awake.”

The frosty words brought them to their feet as the door—which Del now realized hadn’t shut properly behind him—swung fully open to admit Deliah, ready for the day in a gray carriage dress, and transparently unimpressed.

Just how long she’d been standing outside the door was impossible to guess.

Del quickly made the introductions, which she acknowledged with a haughty air. Both Tony and Gervase bowed over her hand, endeavoring to appear cheery and charming. Del held a chair for her, while the others recommended the ham and sausages, which she waved away as a maid bustled in with fresh toast and a teapot.

“Thank you.” Deliah smiled at the maid, claimed a slice of toast, then fixed her eyes on Del’s guilty friends. “So how far do you plan to travel today?”

She’d addressed the question to Tony. He looked to Del, but she refused to follow his gaze and continued to look at him inquiringly . . . as she’d hoped, he felt compelled to answer.

“We should reach London late this afternoon.”

She nodded. “And then into Cambridgeshire.” When they exchanged quick glances, she added, “In time. A few days, maybe more?”

They didn’t correct her, so she nodded again, supposition confirmed. She nibbled her toast, then poured her tea and took a sip, all the while noting the telltale signs of their uncertainty over what to say to her, letting it grow. She set down her cup. “About this mission—what are the relevant details?”

All three shifted. The other two looked at Del, and didn’t look back at her. Eventually, Del said, “Our . . . commander, for want of a better term, isn’t one to encourage the unnecessary sharing of information.”

She raised her brows. “Indeed? And does this commander know of my existence—that I’ve unwittingly been drawn into his scheme?”

“No.”

“Then he can’t have made any decision against informing me of its details.”

Del met her limpid green gaze, held it. The others were leaving the question of her continued ignorance up to him. If she’d been a man, he would have told her and enlisted her aid. But she wasn’t a man—very definitely wasn’t—and every instinct he possessed came down firmly on the side of leaving her ignorance uninformed, unrelieved. “Be that as it may, there’s no reason for you to . . .”

Her tight smile was a warning. “Bother my pretty little head about it?”

Brazen, he nodded. "Something like that." He wasn't going to be intimidated into surrendering his position.

She held his gaze—again he had the impression they were standing toe-to-toe, certainly will-to-will, and once again found it inexplicably arousing—then she transferred her gaze to Tony. "As it appears we'll be spending a number of days in London, where are you intending to stay?"

The sudden shift in attack caught Tony unprepared. "Ah . . ." He glanced at Gervase, then briefly at Del before saying, "We had thought to put up at our private club, but now . . ."

"I take it it's a gentlemen's club?" she asked.

"Of a sort, but our wives also stay there when visiting town."

Her brows rose. "Indeed?" She appeared to consider, then shook her head. "I don't think any private establishment will do."

Del fully expected her to circle back to what she really wanted to know about—his mission. He cut in. "We can discuss the possibilities in the carriage." He glanced pointedly at the clock on the mantelpiece. "We should get underway as soon as possible."

She looked at him, then smiled. "Of course." She set down her empty cup, laid aside her napkin. With regal grace, she rose, bringing them to their feet. She inclined her head as she turned to the door. "Gentlemen. I'll be ready to leave in an hour."

They stood and watched her glide to the door; she opened it, then shut it quietly behind her.

"I assume," Gervase said, "that we're supposed to understand that she's not a cypher to be ignored."

Del snorted. "More that she's not a cypher—and *will not be* ignored."

"Well? Are you going to tell me or not?"

Head back against the squabs, eyes closed, arms crossed over his chest, Del supposed he should have expected the question. "Not."

He didn't bother opening his eyes. They'd left Winchester half an hour before, and were now bowling along the highway toward London. There was, however, a pertinent difference between their present journey and that of the evening before—today he and she were alone in the carriage. Her staff and his were following in the two carriages immediately behind, the three conveyances traveling in convoy. Gervase and Tony, the lucky sods, were on horseback, riding parallel to the road, close enough to keep watch, yet not so close that they would scare away any of the Black Cobra's men who might be tempted to stage an attack.

Del didn't think an attack at all likely. Even in this season, this highway was too busy, with mail coaches and all manner of private vehicles constantly bowling along in both directions. The Black Cobra cultists preferred less populated surrounds for their villainy.

"Where are the other two?"

He slitted open his eyes and saw her peering out of the carriage window.

"They said they'd ride with us, but I can't see them."

He closed his eyes again. "Don't worry. They're there."

He felt her sharp glance.

"I'm not worried. I'm curious."

"I've noticed."

Her gaze heated to a glare; even with his eyes closed he felt it.

"Let's see if I have this right." Her tone was the epitome of reason and sense. "You arrive in Southampton and take rooms at an inn, then discover you've been elected to be my escort and promptly try to divest yourself of the responsibility. Then someone tries to shoot you, and you immediately up stakes and quit said inn—even though your people have only just settled in and it's already evening—to rattle all of what?—ten miles?—further along the road. And by the next morning, you've acquired two . . . should I call them *guards*?"

His lips quirked before he stilled them.

She saw, humphed. "Are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

"No."

"Why? I cannot see how it would hurt for me to know what it is you're carrying—information or something more tangible—and what you want to do with it, who wants to stop you, and why."

At that he opened his eyes, turned his head and looked at her. Met her irritated green gaze. She'd guessed so much . . . he set his jaw. "It's better if you don't know."

Her eyes slitted, her lips thinned. "Better for whom?"

He wasn't, when it came to it, all that sure. Facing forward, resettling his head, he murmured, "I'll think about it."

And closed his eyes again.

He felt the heat of her temper focus on him, but then she shifted on the seat, and blessed silence descended.

It lasted. And lasted.

Eventually he opened his eyes enough to send a careful look her way.

She was sitting in the corner of the carriage, leaning against the side, watching the fields flash past. There was a faint frown on her face, and her lips were . . . just slightly pouting.

Minutes ticked by, then he forced his gaze forward and closed his eyes again.

They stopped for lunch at a small country inn in the village of Windlesham. Deliah had been unimpressed when he'd refused to halt at any of the major posting inns at Camberley but instead had directed the coachman to the much smaller—and therefore much safer—country village.

Tony and Gervase would hang back, keeping watch to see if they could spot anyone following. But as the Black Cobra had to suspect Del would make for London, he, Tony and Gervase were all of the opinion that it was more likely there would be watchers planted at vantage points along the road to report his passage to their master.

If Tony or Gervase could spot such a watcher, they might be able to follow the man back to the Black Cobra's lair. As the game stood, any information on the Black Cobra's forces would be welcome, while information on the Black Cobra himself would be gold.

Del climbed down from the carriage before the Windlesham Arms, and after a swift look around, handed Deliah down. She continued to grumble, which in her case was more like acerbic verbal sniping, which Del found amusing, although he was careful not to let his appreciation show.

But after the innkeeper bowed them into a pretty parlor with lace curtains and comfortable chairs, and then proceeded to serve an excellent meal, her griping ceased. By the time he escorted her back into the main tap and paused by the bar to settle the account, she was entirely appeased, and in a relatively mellow mood—not that she would admit it.

Lips curving, Del chatted to the barman while he waited for the innkeeper to tot up the damage.

The tap was half full. Rather than stand beside Del and be covertly studied by the occupants, Deliah wandered to an archway where a pair of glassed doors gave onto a small courtyard. Gently rolling lawns lay beyond; in summer, the area would, she suspected, be dotted with the trestles and benches she could see stacked to one side under a row of leafless trees.

Nearer at hand, a narrow bed ran along the wall of the inn, full of hellebores in bloom. It had been so long since she'd seen the so-called Christmas roses on impulse she opened the door and went out to admire them.

The plants were old, large, and carried many spikes of large, nodding white blooms. Some were even spotty. She bent down the better to see.

And heard a soft rush of footsteps coming up the lawn.

Straightening, she started to turn—just as a large man seized her from behind.

She screamed, struggled.

A second man tried to help the first, tried to hold her still as the first attempted to clap a hand over her mouth.

She ducked her head, jabbed an elbow back hard—into a flabby stomach. The first man gasped, then wheezed.

The second man swore and tried to haul her away from the inn as the first man's grip faltered.

She dug in her heels, dragged in a breath, and screamed again. Wrenching one arm free, she struck wildly at the second man.

Del erupted from the inn. Kumulay and Mustaf were on his heels.

The second man swore, and fled for his life.

The first man wasn't as fast; he was still clutching her, still wheezing. Del grabbed her free arm with one hand. His other fist flashed past her shoulder.

She heard a sickening crunch, then the large man's grip on her eased and fell away.

Del pulled her to him, to his other side. Peering back, around him, she saw the man who'd seized her laid out unconscious on the flagstone path.

Then every man and woman who'd been in the tap came pouring out—to see, exclaim, ask questions, demand answers.

Del suddenly found himself and Deliah surrounded by a well-meaning throng. Many seemed to think Deliah would be in imminent danger of collapse, presumably from overwrought sensibilities, an assumption she seemed to find as mystifying as, and rather more irritating than, he did.

Questions, solicitude and sympathetic outrage came from all sides; it took vital minutes to calm everyone down.

Finally Del looked up and saw Mustaf and Kumulay striding back up the lawn. Mustaf shook his head, gestured with his fingers—the man had had a horse waiting.

They'd intended to grab Deliah and take her somewhere. Del's mind supplied the where—wherever the Black Cobra or his lieutenant was waiting.

He swallowed a curse, looked for the man he'd laid out—then clamped his lips shut on an even more virulent oath.

The man had vanished.

Teeth gritted behind an entirely false smile, he tightened his hold on Deliah's arm and started steering her through the crowd, toward the front of the inn.

Having noted the disappearance of the man, and Del's direction, Mustaf and Kumulay went to summon the others and ready the carriages.

It was another twenty minutes before they were once again underway, and rolling out of the no-longer-so-sleepy village.

Del slumped back against the seat, finally registered the throbbing in his left hand. Lifting it, he saw he'd split the skin over one knuckle. He put the injured joint to his mouth.

Deliah noticed, frowned, then she looked ahead. Lifted her chin. After a moment, she said, "I believe your commander, whoever he is, would agree, now, that I have a right to know."

Del grimaced. He glanced at her profile; her lips weren't pouting—they were set in a grim line. "I don't suppose you'd accept that those men were merely footpads—itinerants looking for an easy mark?"

"No."

He sighed.

"If I'd known I stood in any danger of attack, I wouldn't have gone out of that door." She turned her head, met his eyes. "You can't not tell me—it's too dangerous for me not to know."

He held her gaze for a moment, then looked ahead, filled his lungs. And told her.

Initially he gave her a carefully edited description of the Black Cobra and his mission. She seemed to sense his prevarications and refused to let them lie, verbally pulling and prodding until she'd extracted an account a great deal closer to the full picture from him.

He inwardly winced as he heard himself tell her about the manner of James MacFarlane's death, and of the evidence he'd given his life to get to them.

"Poor boy—how utterly dreadful. Yet at least he died a true hero—I imagine that would have been important to him. And this is the evidence you and your friends are endeavoring to ensure gets into Wolverstone's hands?"

"Yes."

"And part of the plan is to make the Black Cobra attack, so he can be caught and thus implicated entirely independently of the evidence itself?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a moment, then said, "That's a very good plan."

He'd expected her to be appalled, and then horrified, frightened, even terrified by the very real threat of very real and nasty danger—something she certainly wouldn't have missed. Yet while she'd been as appalled as he'd imagined, horror, fright and terror didn't seem to be in her repertoire; if he'd had any real doubts that she was made of sterner stuff, her immediate focus on the salient points of his mission had slain them.

After another, longer silence, she looked at him, met his eyes. "I will, of course, help in whatever way I can—you have only to ask. As the Black Cobra clearly views me as part of your entourage, there's no sense in attempting to keep me distanced from your mission." He managed to hide his reaction. He could think of any number of reasons to keep her separate from his mission, all of which made excellent sense to him, but he hadn't attained the rank of colonel without having some idea of how to manage others—although he'd never tried his hand at managing a termagant before. "Thank you." With an inclination of his head, he accepted her pledge of help; if he'd tried to refuse it, to quash the enthusiasm burning in her green eyes, her resolve to assist would only have hardened. Instead, he could use her commitment as a subtle lever to keep her under control—to channel her contribution into safe arenas.

Speaking of which . . . "We still haven't decided where to stay in London ." Brows rising, he relaxed against the seat. "Do you know of any place that might suit?"

December 12

Grillon's Hotel, Albemarle Street, London

See?" Deliah stood just inside the foyer of fashionable Grillon's Hotel, and watched Del survey the critical amenities—the single handsome staircase leading to the upper floors, the dining room to one side, the parlor to the other, and directly opposite the main entrance, the only entrance from the street, the wide counter behind which two young men stood, ready to deal with any request from guests, all under the eagle eye of an older gentleman in a uniform sporting gilt-embroidered epaulettes. In addition, there were not one but two uniformed doormen manning the portal. "It's the perfect place for us to stay," she murmured. "Not only is it in the heart of London, but Grillon's reputation is based on security and propriety—they would never permit anything so gauche as an attack of any sort to occur on the premises."

Del had come to the same conclusion—the ex-soldier behind the counter was watching him steadily, and the doorman who had shown them in had yet to return outside. He nodded. "All in all, an excellent choice."

He walked forward. Deliah glided beside him, her long legs allowing her to keep pace easily. The head clerk behind the counter straightened, all but coming to attention; after decades in the army, Del's bearing inevitably gave him away.

"Can we help you, s—"

"I'm Miss Duncannon." Deliah laid her gloves on the counter, waited until the clerk looked her way. "I require a room for myself, and accommodation for my staff. Colonel Delborough"—with one hand she waved at him—"will also require a room—"

"And also has various stipulations to make." Del caught her eye when she glanced at him, captured her gaze and pointedly held it. "As I am escorting you north at your parents' request, it might perhaps be appropriate for you to consider me in *loco parentis*."

She blinked at him.

His smile took on an edge. "Perhaps you should allow me to organize our rooms."

She frowned.

Before she could argue, he looked at the clerk. "Miss Dun-cannon will require a suite overlooking the street, preferably with no balcony."

The head clerk consulted his list. "We have a suite that might suit, Colonel—it's on the first floor, but is some way from the stairs."

"That will do admirably. I'll want a bedchamber myself, on the same floor, between the suite and the stairs."

"Indeed, sir." The head clerk conferred with one of his underlings, then nodded. "We have a room four doors closer to the stairs, if that would suit?"

“Perfectly. We also require two more bedchambers for two gentlemen who will arrive in the next hour or so. Viscount Torrington and the Earl of Crowhurst. They would prefer to have rooms as close as possible to the stairs.”

Gervase and Tony were watching the carriages from further along the street; once they saw they were indeed staying at Grillon’s, they would head to the Bastion Club to check for any messages, then return to join them.

After more conferring, the head clerk said, “There *are* two single bedchambers that face the head of the stairs, but they overlook the lane. They’re rarely requested . . .” The clerk looked his question.

Del smiled. “They will suit us perfectly. In addition, as I’m returning from service in India , and Miss Duncannon is returning from an extended sojourn in Jamaica , we’re both traveling with household staff.”

“That will pose no difficulty, sir. Not at this time of year. If I might suggest, I can consult with your staff directly as to what arrangements might be best?”

Del nodded. “My batman is Cobby, and . . .” He looked at Deliah.

With a slight frown, she supplied, “My majordomo is Janay.”

“Excellent—I’ll speak with Mr. Cobby and Mr. Janay. I take it your carriages are outside?” When Del assented, the clerk dispatched his underlings to direct the carriages into the mews, then came around the counter. “If you’ll come this way, Colonel, Miss Duncannon, I’ll show you to your rooms. Your bags will be brought up momentarily.”

The next hours went in the inevitable bustle of settling into their rooms. The suite—something Deliah wouldn’t have thought of to request—was commodious. Both the large sitting room and her adjoining bedchamber had wide windows overlooking the street. Contrary to her expectations, Del had managed the arrangements perfectly well. While she dressed for dinner, she thought again of the stipulations he’d made, a clear indication of how seriously he took the threat of the Black Cobra.

She sat at the dressing table and let Bess have at her hair.

Deftly rewinding the long tresses into a neat knot, then anchoring it atop Deliah’s head with a tortoiseshell comb, Bess nodded at her in the mirror. “Just as well I didn’t put all your evening gowns in the big trunks.”

Deliah grimaced; most of her clothes, along with all her other baggage, were traveling north by carter. “How many do we have?”

“This, and the emerald silk.” Bess set in the final pin. “There.” She stood back. “Perhaps if there’s time while we’re in town, you might get another. If we’re going to some duke’s house, even for a few days, you’ll need it.”

“We’ll see.” Deliah rose; she paused by the cheval glass and checked the fall of her plum silk gown, with its raised waist and scalloped neckline. Satisfied, she headed for the door to the sitting room.

They’d arranged to have dinner in the suite. Approving the menu was something Del had left to her. Janay and Cobby would serve the meal, leaving them free to discuss their plans.

Walking into the sitting room, she found Del standing by the window looking out over Albemarle Street . He turned as she entered; for an instant he seemed surprised to see her, then a knock on the door had them both turning that way.

“Come,” she called.

The door opened to admit Tony and Gervase. Both nodded rather vaguely, absorbed with scanning the room, taking note of the window and the door to her bedchamber, before surveying the table laid ready for dinner, the comfortable armchairs set before the hearth, and the excellent fire.

Brows rising, Tony strolled forward. “Not a place I’d have picked, but it seems very well suited to our needs. Our rooms are right by the stairs, and we saw where yours is—couldn’t have been better.”

Del glanced at Deliah. “The accolades are due to Miss Duncannon—Grillon’s was her suggestion.”

Both Tony and Gervase smiled and half bowed to her.

The door opened again. Seeing Janay bearing a tureen, Deliah waved to the table. “Pray be seated, gentlemen. Dinner is here.”

Del held a chair for her. She sat, with Gervase on her right, and Tony opposite.

Janay served the soup, while Cobby offered bread. When they settled to sup, the two men left to fetch the next course.

“I have to say,” Gervase murmured, “that I never thought I’d ever stay here, bastion of the prim and proper that it is.” He glanced at Deliah. “We formed the Bastion Club late in ’15, more or less immediately we returned from the Continent, and for those of us without houses in town—like Tony here, and me—it’s become our London base over the last years.”

“We originally set it up as a gentlemen’s club,” Tony explained, “but we all married in ’16, over a period of about eight months, and our wives elected to use the club, too.”

“Gasthorpe, our majordomo, and his staff adjusted very readily.” Gervase grinned. “They’ve even coped with children on occasion.”

They were just making conversation, but Deliah wanted to know more. “How many club members are there?”

They explained, and when she probed further, elaborated. The more she heard of their families, their pasts, their presents, the more she understood of their connection to

the people on their country estates—an evolution from the protectiveness that must have driven them into the services years before—the more she relaxed with them. The more she trusted them.

The fruit platter had been decimated. As Cobby and Janay cleared the table, she glanced curiously at Del. She’d trusted him from the moment they’d met.

She knew better than to trust her instincts where men were concerned—especially handsome men who made her pulse race—yet there was no denying there was something very steadying, very steadfast, about Colonel Derek Delborough.

In lieu of port, Del told Cobby to fetch a bottle of arrack from his bags, Gervase and Tony having voiced a wish to sample the Indian version of brandy.

Tony glanced at Gervase, then looked at Del. "Perhaps we should repair to your room." He turned his charming smile on Deliah. "We should discuss strategy, which will no doubt bore Miss Duncannon to tears."

Deliah smiled, equally charming. "On the contrary, Miss Duncannon is all ears." Her smile took on an edge. "I know all about the Black Cobra—or at least all I need to. You and Gervase may speak freely."

Tony and Gervase exchanged a swift, surprised, not entirely approving look, then glanced at Del.

"Two men tried to abduct Miss Duncannon during our halt at Windlesham."

Tony and Gervase straightened. "That," Gervase said, glancing at Deliah, "is not good news."

"You didn't manage to capture them?" Tony asked.

Briefly, Del described what had happened. "After that, as Miss Duncannon—"

"Please call me Deliah—it's simpler, and we're clearly all in this together."

Del inclined his head. "As Deliah subsequently observed, given that the Cobra has demonstrated he definitely has her in his sights, it was too dangerous for her not to know what, precisely, was going on." He met her gaze. "Incidentally, did you get any hint that there were others nearby—the man who shot at me, for instance?"

"No—it was just the two you saw. I don't think there were any others close."

"Can you describe both men? The rest of us barely saw the one who fled."

She complied, painting a picture sufficiently detailed to have all three men frowning.

"It sounds very much as if the Black Cobra is hiring locals to assist him—specifically to act against us so that there's no chance he or his lieutenants will be implicated." Del's gaze rested on Deliah. "You described the man who shot at me

in Southampton—thinking of that now, I can't be sure if he was Ferrar's man Larkins, or a local hired to do the deed. If you saw him again, would you recognize him?"

"Definitely," Deliah averred. "I looked directly at him, and there were only ten yards or so between us."

And that, Del thought, very possibly explained the attack on her. Ferrar would also know that kidnapping her was a surefire way of pulling him into pursuit—pulling him away from his defined route, deflecting him from his mission.

"Given the current state of play"—he chose his words carefully—"you shouldn't venture outside—anywhere in public—without at least one of us in close attendance."

When he glanced at her, he was surprised by her ready nod. As if sensing his latent suspicion, she arched a brow.

"After all you've told me, I have no wish to become a . . . guest of the Black Cobra."

"No, indeed." His expression stripped of all levity, Tony looked at Del. "I should mention that while Gasthorpe and his minions are desolate to have missed the pleasure of putting you up, they're always delighted to play supporting roles in our little adventures. Consequently, they're presently throwing themselves into watching the hotel and scouting out the surrounding streets for any hint of our pursuers."

"I take it you saw no potential lookouts during the journey?" Del asked.

Gervase grimaced. "We saw no Indians, or even tanned Englishmen. We did, however, see numerous shifty characters watching the carriages roll by, but there was no way of telling those reporting to the Black Cobra from the others. No one worth following."

The three men fell silent.

Deliah eyed each face, then prompted, "So what are our plans?" When no one rushed to speak, she suggested, "Perhaps you might reiterate what you wish to achieve over our sojourn in town?"

"We want," Del said, "to leave the Black Cobra guessing whether or not I'm carrying the original or a copy of the evidence. If he learns I've got a copy, he'll lose interest in me and swing his focus onto the other three. We don't want to give him that option. The way I interpreted Wolverstone's plan, part of the intent was to force the Black Cobra to fight on four different fronts, either simultaneously or at the very least in rapid succession."

Gervase nodded. "That's correct—weaken him by forcing him to spread his troops thin."

"So," Del continued, his gaze on the table, "we keep the scroll-holder safe—that's taken care of, and given Grillon's security, it's as protected as we can make it. We don't need to do anything more on that front, so that's our defensive aspect covered. As for the rest, we should do what we can to assess the strength of the Black Cobra's forces—has he imported many cultists into the country, as we assumed he would, or has he got just a handful, and that's why he's hiring locals? Is he using locals because it's easier, or because he has no choice?"

He glanced at Tony and Gervase. "The Black Cobra's modus operandi is to smother opposition—he usually relies on numerical advantage and expendable troops to win any encounter. The cult preaches that death in the service of the Black Cobra brings glory. Strategically, he's accustomed to attacking with an excess of men. It would help—a lot—to know if he has a large number here, held in reserve to date, or if lack of numbers will force him to play the game more craftily."

Tony nodded. "So we need to draw him, or at least his forces, out. We need to metaphorically wave the standard and dare him to come and take it—we need to taunt and tempt, just as we would on a battlefield."

"Which," Gervase said, "fits with Royce's orders to spend some time making noise in town, attracting, then fixing, the enemy's attention, drawing as much down on our heads as we can handle before we go haring north to Somersham Place, with any luck drawing a goodly number of cultists with us, into an ambush there." He shrugged. "Standard procedure, all in all."

They spent some time discussing options as to what might serve as "waving the standard."

"I should at some point call at East India House," Del said, "if nothing else to give Ferrar a sleepless night—he'll at least feel forced to check that I haven't shown anyone there the letter."

“You could add in visits to Whitehall and to Guards’ Headquarters.” Tony reached for the now half empty bottle of arrack. “The latter is somewhere he might find difficult to penetrate.”

Deliah shifted in her chair. She could envision what they were suggesting and could see a potential problem, but she didn’t want to point it out. Better they saw it themselves.

Gervase frowned. “We can do all that, but I fear it’s all going to look too guarded. Too obvious. He’ll watch, but he won’t come into the open.”

Precisely. Deliah cleared her throat. “If I might suggest . . . the one element in your plan that the Black Cobra couldn’t have anticipated is me.” She glanced at Del. “Not even you knew I would be traveling with you. But he now knows I’m with you, and that you are, for some reason unknown to him, acting as my escort. If we—you and I—start going about town on the sorts of excursions a provincial lady—a flighty, demanding provincial lady—would be expected to go on, he’ll assume those excursions are driven by me, not you, that they’re about what I want to do, not about you trying to draw him out.

“And just think.” Seeing the sudden interest in their eyes, she let her own mounting enthusiasm show. “We can go for walks in the parks, shopping in Bond Street and Bruton Street , visiting the museum—and at this time of year fashionable London is almost deserted. He’s unlikely to mount an attack in Whitehall , or outside the Guards, but outside a dressmaker’s shop in Bruton Street ? In the park as the shadows are lengthening? There’s no reason for him to think such excursions are traps, not if you’re escorting me.”

Gervase slowly nodded. “That could work.”

Del thought it might, too, but felt distinctly reluctant. It hadn’t escaped him that, no matter her innocent I’m-merely-being-helpful attitude, Deliah had inserted herself into the heart of the action.

More, she’d made the worthiness of the excursions dependent on her.

Tony, too, waxed enthusiastic. “You could break up the fashionable excursions with those places Del mentioned— all places the Black Cobra would expect him to go.” He paused, then nodded. “That should work—we have to make the enemy believe he has a chance of success if we want him to risk his men.”

Del listened while the others discussed fashionable excursions with the potential to tempt an attack. He had to agree with their strategic assessment; Deliah’s presence would lure the cultists into discounting any chance of a trap. And although he inwardly disapproved of her exposure to potential harm, he would be beside her, and Tony and Gervase would be close, ready to come to their aid.

Still. . . .

It was late, and they’d been traveling. With a decent list of excursions to mull over, they agreed to make their final arrangements in the morning, and rose to go to their rooms.

Tony and Gervase made their goodnights and strolled out. Del followed them to the suite’s door, Deliah beside him.

He stepped into the corridor, then paused and glanced back at her.

She raised her brows. "What?"

He hesitated, then said, "Just because I've agreed to your involvement doesn't mean I'm in any way thrilled at the notion of you being exposed to danger, much less to the machinations of the Black Cobra."

She returned his regard levelly. "You'll be every bit as exposed to the same danger. And when all is said and done, you're not that much harder to kill than I am."

He frowned. Before he could correct her, she started to shut the door.

"Good night, Del. "

Her soft words reached him, then he was left staring at the closed door.

December 12

Shrewton House, London

The drawing room of Shrewton House in Grosvenor Square was exactly as Alex had imagined it. Of course, the family was presently not in residence, and all the furniture was shrouded in holland covers, yet even in the shadowed gloom with the chandeliers unlit, the proportions of the room, the elegant appointments, were evident.

Alex sank onto the chaise Roderick had uncovered, and watched him pacing before his ancestral hearth. More correctly, *their* ancestral hearth—they could all lay claim to it. Their servants had set a fire blazing, driving the frigid chill from the air.

Roderick grimaced. "Grillon's might be unsuitable for a direct attack, but at least we can keep watch on them there easily enough."

"And"—Daniel subsided, languidly elegant, into a still shrouded armchair—"I seriously doubt Delborough is naïve enough to imagine he can advance his cause by showing the letter around East India House, or even Whitehall ." Daniel looked at Roderick. "He knows your connections."

"Regardless," Roderick returned, "we'll watch."

"Indeed." Unshakably calm, Alex asked, "Meanwhile, what is Larkins doing about retrieving Delborough's letter?"

"His man inside Delborough's party is still there—a lucky break. Larkins is confident his man will find the letter and bring it out."

"But Larkins isn't simply relying on this thief of his, is he?" Daniel asked.

"No. If he sees a chance to take a hostage—the lady, for example—he'll act. And if for any reason he judges the letter has passed beyond our reach, unattainable by any means, he'll kill Delborough." Roderick continued to pace. "We'll

watch and attack if an opportunity presents—aside from all else, it's what Delborough will expect, and the attacks will keep him focused outward, not on his own household.”

“M'wallah tells me that Larkins isn't using our men.” Alex made the statement and waited for an explanation.

Roderick nodded. “I thought it best, at least while we're shorthanded and the rest of our men are still arriving, that wherever possible Larkins should use local hirelings, rather than risk our own forces.”

Alex smiled. “An excellent call.” It always paid to compliment Roderick when he got things right. “So where are the others—our far-flung cultists?”

“We've got groups waiting in every south coast port, and those on the east as far north as Whitby. There are assassins with each group, and of course we have men on the trail of the other three. Given their varied routes and the impossibility of correctly predicting which English port they'll eventually use, I've given orders that, should they make it alive and still carrying their scroll-holder to any of the embarkation ports on the Continent, the first thing the men following them should do is inform us immediately.” Roderick glanced at Daniel, then Alex. “That way, we'll have warning and time enough to get a suitable welcome in place.”

“A welcome that has yet to be successful in Delborough's case,” Alex coolly pointed out.

“We didn't have our usual complement of men available when Delborough arrived, but with a man inside his household, and the good colonel dallying in London with his mystery lady, we'll succeed.” Roderick paused and once again glanced at Daniel, then Alex. “Regardless of retrieving all four letters, we should ensure that the couriers—all four of them—do not escape unscathed.”

Alex smiled coldly, a chilling sight. “I agree entirely. We wouldn't want anyone to think we'd lost our fangs.”

Chapter Three

December 13

Grillon's Hotel

They gathered over breakfast in the sitting room. The suite, Deliah admitted, was a strategic advantage for which Del had foreseen the need. They had to meet with Tony and Gervase to discuss their plans, but wanted to avoid being seen in public with their secret guards.

They quickly decided on their program for that day.

“Some of Gasthorpe's lads will be assisting,” Gervase said, “so don't be surprised if they join in any fight.”

“How will we know who they are?” she asked.

Tony smiled. “They'll be fighting on our side.”

She would have made some retort, but Gervase quickly went on, "Gasthorpe sent word—a message from Royce." He nodded at Del. "You are the first one home, but Hamilton's reached Boulogne—he's expected to cross the Channel in the next few days."

"That's good news." Del felt a quiet relief knowing Gareth had made it that far unscathed.

"All is, we're told, in place for him to be met when he sets foot on English soil, but as usual Royce has omitted to mention where that will be." Gervase smiled resignedly. Del and Tony did, too.

Deliah asked, "Did this commander of yours say anything further?"

Gervase pushed his empty plate away. "Only that we should proceed as planned and draw out the cultists in London." He glanced at Del. "The letter's safe?"

Del nodded. "It's never left unattended."

"Right, then." Tony rose, gave his hand to Deliah and gallantly assisted her to her feet. "Let's get cracking. First stop, Bond Street."

"It's been years since I was here," Deliah said.

As she was standing with her nose all but pressed to the window of Asprey, Jewellers to the Crown, and had spoken without lifting her gaze from the sparkling display, Del had guessed as much. Her arm in his, she'd all but towed him down Albemarle Street, into Piccadilly and around the corner into Bond Street. Pretending to be dragging his heels hadn't been difficult.

Yet it was amusing—and revealing—to realize that the part she was playing, that of a provincial lady fascinated by and determined to enjoy all the typical London delights, wasn't all pretense.

She finally dragged her bright gaze from the scintillating array and looked further up the street. "There are more jewelers, aren't there?"

He pointed out Rundell & Bridge, further along on the other side of the street; all bustling determination, she towed him over. Given the entertainment, he had to make an effort to look suitably bored. They halted before the well-known jeweler's windows; while she examined an arrangement of necklaces, he glanced at her face.

No pretense; she coveted the sparkling gems as much as any other lady. He started to wonder what else might be revealed when, as per their plan, they continued on to the Bruton Street modistes.

His attraction to her hadn't waned, which he found rather strange. She was domineering—or would be if he let her be—opinionated, wasp-tongued and a great deal more willfully independent than he was comfortable with, yet she'd become a part of his mission—unwittingly and through no fault of her own—and was now assisting, a contributing player in the game, and somewhere beneath his reluctant resignation, he was grateful. Grateful it was her, with all her innate confidence, and not some wilting, shrinking, typical genteel young miss, who would cling and require constant reassurance, effective lead in his, Tony's and Gervase's saddlebags.

Holding to his ennui, he cast an idle—in reality acute—glance back along the street. Without hurry, he returned his gaze to the window. “We’re being followed, by locals.”

“The two men in brown coats back down the street?”

He hadn’t seen her look, much less notice.

She shifted and pointed, apparently through the window. “I think he—the man in a shabby bowler behind us—is watching us, too.”

Del focused on the reflection in the big window. Decided she was right. “They won’t close in along here—there are too many people to make any attempt on us.”

“ Bruton Street should be much less frequented at this hour.”

Del made a show of sighing, then tugging on her sleeve. When she turned, he pointed further up the street. She shook her head, and instead pointed to Bruton Street , off to their left. Pantomiming resigned frustration, he reluctantly escorted her that way.

They turned into Bruton Street . The man in the bowler crossed the mouth of the street, then also turned down it on the opposite side.

Deliah walked along, studying the plaques announcing various modistes and the gowns displayed in narrow windows alongside—watching the bowler-hatted man trail them.

Beside her, Del murmured, “The other two have just turned the corner, so once again we have three.”

“I wonder how they think they’re going to blend in in this neighborhood.”

“I suspect they think we’re oblivious.”

She humphed, then stopped before the next modiste’s window. “I’ve been away for so long, I have no idea which modiste is in favor. I don’t even know what the latest styles are.”

“There’s no point looking to me for assistance.” After a moment, he added, “Didn’t you see any of the latest fashions in Southampton ?”

“I wasn’t paying attention—I was just filling the time.”

“By shopping?”

“What else was I to do? Inspect ships?” Recollecting, she added, “Perhaps I should have—ships would undoubtedly have been more interesting.”

“I thought all ladies shopped whenever the opportunity presented.”

“I shop when I need something—I generally have better things to do.”

It wasn't so much the comment as her tone that jarred Del's memory. He'd never met her before Southampton, but he had heard of her. Heard tales of her when she, and he, had been much younger. She'd been the local tomboy, the bane of her mother's existence, as he recalled.

She'd noticed his abstraction. "What?"

He glanced at her, met her eyes. "Did you really tie a bell to Farmer Hanson's bull's tail?"

Her eyes narrowed, then she looked ahead. "I wondered if you would remember."

They walked on to the next modiste's window.

"So did you?"

"Martin Rigby dared me to, so yes, I did." She frowned at him, waved at the window. "You really have no recommendation—no preferences?"

He glanced along the street. The salons lining it were all similar. "None."

"In that case, I'll just pick one." She walked on, then halted before a window showcasing a simply cut but stylish gown of blue silk. "No ruffles, no frills, no furbelows. And a French name. This one will do."

Reaching for the door beside the window, Del read the brass plaque fixed to the wall beside it. "Madame Latour." He opened the door, held it.

As she passed through, Deliah murmured, "I haven't caught sight of our guards or their helpers."

"I suspect they're a trifle more expert in the art of unobtrusively trailing people. Don't worry—they'll be there."

A bell had jangled overhead when the door opened. Finding herself facing a narrow set of stairs, Deliah started to climb. A young assistant appeared at the top, smiling and bobbing in welcome.

"Good morning, ma'am. Sir. Please." The girl waved them through an open door. "Go through. Madame will be with you shortly."

It was barely ten o'clock, unfashionably early, so it was no great surprise to find no other patrons gracing the salon.

What was a surprise was Madame herself. She emerged from behind a curtain, a slim young woman, pale-skinned, with brown hair sleeked back in a tight bun and large hazel eyes. Madame was young—younger than Deliah. And after her first words, a heavily accented greeting, it was obvious Madame was no more French than Deliah was, either.

She pretended not to notice. "Bonjour, madame. I have this week returned from a prolonged sojourn overseas and am in dire need of new gowns." Gently reared young woman impoverished by harsh circumstance was Deliah's assessment of Madame. "I liked what I saw in your window. Perhaps you could show me what else you have?"

"*Absolument*. If madame would sit here?" Madame gestured to a satin-covered sofa, then glanced at Del. "And monsieur your husband, also?"

Deliah glanced at her escort. "The Colonel is an old family friend who has kindly consented to accompany me north."

She sat, and watched Del amble across the salon.

He smiled, charmingly, at Madame. "I've agreed to assist and lend my opinion." So saying, he sat beside Deliah, elegantly at ease, and looked inquiringly at Madame.

Who stared back as if unsure just what she'd invited into her salon.

Deliah couldn't blame her. He was large, and although he was wearing civilian clothes, nothing could cloak his military bearing, that dangerous, suggestively rakish aura that hung about him.

Thus far she'd managed to keep her skittering nerves within bounds and her reactions to him hidden. She'd even managed largely to ignore them, or at least not allow them to dominate her mind. Now . . . whether it was the heightened contrast of having him beside her, large and so brashly masculine in such an intensely feminine setting, she didn't know, but she was suddenly highly conscious of the tension that rode her, compressing her lungs, distracting her senses and setting her nerves flickering.

Still, as long as he didn't realize. . . .

She gestured to Madame. "Pray proceed."

Madame blinked, then bowed. "Ma'am. I have a number of styles available, suitable to be worn from morning to evening. Does madame wish to start with the morning gowns?"

"Indeed. I need gowns of all types."

With a nod, Madame whisked behind the curtain. From where they sat, they could hear a whispered conference beyond.

Still too aware of the hard heat beside her, Deliah glanced at the windows. "Those look over the street."

"True, but it's too soon to check. If they see me looking out all but immediately, they'll get suspicious."

Madame chose that moment to reappear, two gowns on her arm. Her little assistant staggered in her wake, bearing an armload of garments.

"First," Madame said, "I would suggest this." She held up her first offering, a plum-colored morning gown in soft cambric.

What followed was an education. Del relaxed on the sofa and watched. Watched Deliah respond to Madame's designs, and Madame grow steadily more confident. The youthful modiste presented each gown, holding it aloft to recite and display its features. Deliah would then either accept or decline to allow it to be added to the pile for her to try on. She asked questions, most of which were a mystery to Del, but apparently made excellent sense to Madame. Within minutes, Deliah and the modiste had established a rapport.

Regardless, it wasn't until they reached the evening gowns that Del realized Deliah was sincere in her intention to buy a number of Madame's creations. She'd already added to her pile for further consideration a sleekly simple gown in pale

green silk that even he could tell would look stunning on her, and was debating between a gown of soft gold satin and another of a delicate shade of sky blue.

“Try them both.”

Madame shot him a grateful smile.

Deliah looked at him, faintly shocked.

“If you’ll come into the dressing room, ma’am, we can see if these selections will suit.”

“An excellent idea.” Del couldn’t resist adding, “I’ll be waiting to give you my views on each.”

Deliah’s eyes narrowed. She flicked a glance toward the windows. “Shouldn’t you be keeping an eye out for our friends?”

“It’s too soon yet to look for them.”

She wanted to argue, but with Madame hovering, she rose and allowed herself to be shepherded beyond the curtain.

Del sat back and prepared to enjoy himself. Tony and Gervase, supported by the legendary Gasthorpe’s men, would be in place outside by now, but waiting a trifle longer would give the Black Cobra’s minions time to grow bored and careless.

The curtain rattled back, and Deliah came out arrayed in a morning gown of some pale gold material with small emerald green leaves liberally sprinkled over all. She looked like Spring personified. With nary a glance for him, she walked to the corner of the salon where four mirrored panels were arranged to allow ladies to view the gowns they wore from several different angles.

Deliah turned this way and that, her gaze following the lines of the gown, from the tightly fitting bodice to the trim raised waist, to where the skirts caressed her hips before falling to sway about her very long legs.

Del ’s gaze followed hers. Lingered. Appreciatively. “Very nice.”

She stiffened, glanced at him in the mirror.

Then she turned to the hovering modiste, nodded curtly. “Yes—I’ll take this one.”

Without again glancing his way, she stalked past him and back behind the curtain.

The parade that followed left Del questioning his sanity in remaining to view it and simultaneously pleased he had. While the more rational, logical side of his brain continued to insist she was nothing more than a female his aunts had thrown in his path, someone to be smiled at courteously and deposited safely back with her parents in Humberside, another, more primal side was far more viscerally interested in her on a personal, not to say primitive, level.

Of course, he couldn’t resist giving her his opinion on her appearance in the various gowns. Couldn’t resist giving himself the excuse to run his eyes down her evocatively feminine length, from her nicely rounded shoulders, bared by

the evening gowns, over the womanly swells of her breasts, the subtle curve of her neat waist, her sweetly rounded hips, and the fascinating length of her long legs.

The sum of her made his mouth water.

He would have suffered in relative silence had she not reacted. Had she not, after the first faint blush rose in her cheeks, decided to torment him. After modeling a carriage gown, to which, admittedly with his gaze fixed on the tightly fitting frogged bodice, he'd given his verbal stamp of approval, she'd shot him a look, whisked back behind the curtain, a definite tinge in her cheeks, then minutes later swanned back out in a gown of flame-colored silk and a temper equally fiery.

The fabric clung to every curve like paint. Man of the world that he was, that wouldn't, normally, have affected him all that much.

She, in that gown, in a mood part anger, part reaction, and all challenge, did. She swished, she swanned, she glided and pirouetted. Played to the mirror, to her gaze, and his. Then, over her shoulder, she glanced at him and brazenly asked his opinion.

He met her gaze and equally brazenly gave it. "Revealing. You should definitely indulge in that one." As he had no wish to shock Madame, he didn't specify exactly what he was recommending she indulge in, yet Deliah comprehended his meaning.

Her eyes glittered, then she looked back at the mirror, shamelessly twirled some more. Then she nodded decisively. "Yes, I believe I will."

With that, she swayed back behind the curtain.

Deliah let the silk gown slide down her body, felt its caress like a lover's hands, and knew responding to his blatant interest was madness.

A madness she hadn't felt for years. No—a madness beyond anything she'd felt before.

There was . . . something in the way he looked at her. Something that made her feel heated. Wicked. Wanton.

She'd known from her first sight of him that he was dangerous. That he could connect, draw forth, lure *her*—the real her—from the cavern she'd hidden in for seven long years. She hadn't told him why she'd gone—been sent—to Jamaica, that an old scandal had been to blame. That she'd been seduced, then betrayed, by a viscount's son on a repairing lease. That, innocent and wantonly passionate, she'd given her heart as well as her body, only later to learn that for him it had all been merely a challenge, a way to fill the time.

Her parents had railed, her father especially, church elder that he was. She'd had it drummed into her, in so many ways, that her inner self was *bad*. That she had to hide it, subdue it, suppress it at all costs.

She'd been packed off to Jamaica, and she'd never felt that inner self stir again. She'd thought it had died—of shame, of rejection.

Of imprisonment without succor.

Thanks to Colonel Derek Delborough, she now knew otherwise.

But while part of her rejoiced, the wiser, more cautious side of her foretold disaster.

Yet she was sick, so sick, of being only half alive.

So she let Miss Jennings—Madame Latour as she'd styled herself—slip the next gown, the gold satin evening gown, over her head. It fell with a soft *swoosh* over her limbs. She surveyed the effect in the mirror, as Miss Jennings, with pins between her lips, nipped and tucked.

The particular shade of gold made her skin glow like the costliest pearl, made her hair appear more intensely garnet-red.

She looked . . . like a king's ransom.

Lips curving, she turned and glided out to show Del, who sat like a pasha relaxed on the sofa, his eyes—richly dark and intent—locking on her, tracing her curves as, with flagrant disregard of his regard, she swept to the mirror. And performed.

Like a *hour*. A very English *hour*, yet a *hour* nonetheless. Del was finding it increasingly hard to catch his breath, to breathe freely. With effort he maintained his pose, his façade of relaxed ease, even though every muscle in his body had long ago tightened with sheer lust.

He was almost certain she knew.

Then she swirled, hips circling beneath the shimmering satin, and let her gaze meet his in the mirror, sending a shot of heat straight to his groin . . . oh, yes, she knew. She definitely knew.

Teeth gritted behind his easy smile, he waited until she slipped behind the curtain to stand, to force himself to walk to the window—to ease his mounting discomfort and try to get his mind back on the game he was supposed to be playing.

Away from the game he'd rather be playing with her.

Standing to one side of the window, he looked down on the street. The two men in brown coats and the man in the shabby bowler had given up waiting separately. They were standing, pretending to be chatting, on the pavement opposite Madame Latour's door. The occasional, surreptitious glances they cast toward the door foretold their plan.

Perfect.

Looking up the street, he saw a lounging figure chatting— with much greater success at projecting nonchalance—with two street sweepers. Tony.

And on the other side, the man leaning against the wall just this side of Bond Street and talking to two lads was Gervase.

Everyone was in place. It was time for action.

He turned from the window as Deliah swept back in.

In a pale green gown that nearly stopped his heart.

Deliah saw him by the window—instantly her need to tweak his nose fell away. “What is it?”

He held her gaze, then, as Miss Jennings followed her through the curtain, reached into his pocket. Pulling out his fob watch, he glanced at it, then tucked it back. “Time’s getting on.”

For one long instant, he let his eyes—his hot gaze—slide, long and lingeringly, over her body, over the pale green silk that clung lovingly to her form . . . then he raised his eyes, captured hers. Nodded. “That’s my favorite. I’m going to go down and hail a hackney while you change.”

With that, he strode for the door.

She started after him. “*Wait—*” But he was already gone.

Beneath her breath, she swore, then turned to Miss Jennings. “Quickly. I have to get out of this and into my clothes.”

Miss Jennings fluttered after her as she strode back behind the curtain. “If you’re late, I can pack them and send them on—”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes to make my selection. Here, hurry—help me out of this!”

Miss Jennings jumped, then responded to the voice of one used to giving orders. With her help, Deliah climbed out of the green silk, flung it aside and scabbled through

the welter of gowns for her own. “Damn him! I should have guessed he’d do this.”

Miss Jennings was entirely at sea. “Has he left you?”

“No, of course not. He thinks . . . oh, never mind. Here—do up my laces.” As Miss Jennings’s shaking fingers complied, Deliah added, “And don’t worry—I’ll be taking the gowns.”

She heard the young modiste haul in a huge breath, then her fingers steadied.

The instant the laces were cinched and tied, Deliah reached for her pelisse. As she shrugged it on, she heard a distant shout.

Grabbing her reticule, she dashed out of the dressing room and hurried to the window. She looked out. The street seemed empty, but she couldn’t see the pavement directly before the shop; an awning obstructed her view. All she caught were glimpses of a shifting mass of arms and shoulders.

Turning, she flew out of the open doorway and onto the stairs. Clattering down as fast as she could, she tugged her pelisse properly on, fumbled with the buttons.

Heart racing—what was going on outside the door?— she was almost at the bottom of the stairs when the door opened.

Breath catching in her throat, she looked up.

Del filled the doorway.

She tried to halt her precipitous rush. Her heel snagged in her pelisse's hem, jerking one shoulder—she twisted, lost her balance.

Pitched forward.

Straight into his arms.

Del stepped forward to catch her. Heard the door he'd sent swinging shut snick behind him just as she landed flush against him, and every sense he possessed focused, intent and hungry—suddenly ravenously hungry—on her.

On her long, tall, undeniably feminine form plastered to his.

On the warmth of her curves, on their lush promise.

On her face, jade eyes wide with shock.

Lips, rosy red and luscious, parted. . . .

Because she'd been above him, they were face-to-face, those luscious lips level with his.

He saw them shift, form words.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

He felt her hands grip his arms. When he lifted his gaze to her eyes, hers searched, urgently, almost frantically. The emotion lighting the jade was simple, undisguised concern.

She cared.

No woman had for decades.

Her lips firmed, then parted again. Her fingers gripped, and she tried to shake him. "Are. You. Hurt?"

He'd been struck—that he knew—but not by any fist.

She drew breath, her luscious lips parted again—and he knew he had to answer. So he did. In the most appropriate way.

He bent his head, covered her ruby lips with his.

Kissed her, not as he might any gently bred young lady but as he'd longed to kiss the houri who'd taunted him for the last hour.

Her lips had been parted. He took her mouth with no by your-leave. Simply waltzed in and laid claim . . .

And ended reeling. Sinking. Drowning.

Captive to an exchange too potent for excuses, too primitively powerful to ever be denied.

Too urgent to be brought to any quick and neat end.

His arms cinched tight, hauling her against him, locking her there—where she belonged. He felt her hands on his shoulders, then in his hair.

Felt—knew—when she succumbed to the compulsion, to the desire that suborned all reason, to the unrelenting thud of passion in his veins.

Their veins.

The sensation was so heady Deliah was helpless to resist. To pull away, retreat to safety, to step back. Instead, she plunged in.

Into the temptation of his hot demanding mouth, into the whirling vortex of desire that had seized the unlooked-for moment to manifest between them—the cumulative promise of the last hour's teasing; the nascent passion they'd both been deliberately prodding flared to urgent life between them.

She kissed him back, flagrantly demanding, joyously inciting, her inner self racing ahead, free of all restraint.

Wantonly enticing. Abandoned and eager.

Del sensed it, tasted her unleashed passion, and urgently wanted more.

But . . . wrong time, wrong place.

Some distant spark of sanity assured him that was so. With regret, he forced himself to draw back; only by reminding himself of all he would eventually gain did he manage to rein in his hunger, soothing it with promises of ultimate gluttony. That she would, at some time—the right place and the right time—appease his hunger, feed it until he—it—was utterly sated was, to his mind, an engagement already inscribed in stone.

Easing back from the kiss, he lifted his head and looked down into dazed jade eyes, took in her oddly blank, faraway expression—and knew a moment of intense satisfaction.

At last he'd found a surefire way to manage the willful woman.

A way to tame her, to bring her to him, to his bed. . . .

The sound of a throat clearing hauled his mind from that attractive track, from dwelling on the satisfaction having her beneath him would bring. Looking up, he saw Madame Latour and her assistant peering rather warily down.

“Pack up the gowns—all that were tried on—and send them to Miss Duncannon at Grillon’s. You may send your account to me there.”

Madame’s face lit. She bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, Colonel. Miss Duncannon. You won’t be disappointed.”

He was sure he wouldn’t be. He had plans for that pale green dress.

Looking down at Deliah, he set her on her feet.

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, he asked, “Are you ready to go on?”

She blinked, hearing, correctly, the latent triumph in his tone.

Remembering what had brought her rushing down the stairs, Deliah swallowed, nodded. She wasn’t yet sure she had command of her voice.

By the time he’d led her outside—where all appeared normal and utterly mundane—and she’d finished buttoning her pelisse against the increasingly biting wind, settling her reticule and gloves, then had taken his arm and begun strolling beside him, her wits had started to function again—enough to have her wondering if perhaps he’d kissed her, at least in part, because the modiste had been watching.

That didn’t seem convincing, not even to her, but if furthering their roles wasn’t his motive, she’d rather not think of what was.

Shouldn’t think of what was, or might be.

She was shocked enough by her own motives—by the reemergence of the wanton inner self she’d thought she’d buried, or at least bludgeoned into weakness, long ago. With him, that side of her wasn’t weak at all. She was going to have to be on guard henceforth; she couldn’t return to England after all these years, supposedly reformed, only to fall victim to her own desires with the first handsome man who crossed her path.

Admittedly, he was exceedingly handsome. But still. . . .

He’d been the first man to kiss her, at least like that, in more years than she cared to count . . . actually, in all her life.

After a moment, she blinked, inwardly shook her head. She was looking ahead down the street—and seeing his lips.

She needed to concentrate on the here and now. Replaying his last words . . . she frowned. “I can’t accept gowns from you. It wouldn’t be proper.”

He glanced her way, but she didn’t meet his eyes.

“What do you imagine I’m going to do with them? The least you can do is take them off my hands. Better yet, consider them a perquisite of helping me pursue the Black Cobra. Believe me”—his tone hardened—“it’s a small price to pay.”

“In that case, you can let me pay for them—I’m more than flush enough to buy my own gowns.”

“That’s not the issue. I can’t countenance you paying for the necessities to continue our ruse. This is my mission, not yours. My responsibility, not yours.”

Those last two points were ones Del felt sure he needed to stress—and often. In every possible way.

She grumbled, “I can’t see how those evening gowns could be deemed necessary.”

“Oh, they are. Believe me, they are.” They—and the visions of her in them—were going to keep him going through the coming days. His reward, as it were, for weathering the difficulties keeping her with him had already caused, and those yet to come.

“They’ll come to a pretty penny—you do realize that?”

“After all my years in India, I’m wealthy enough to rival Croesus, so your concern on that point, while appreciated, is unnecessary.”

She humphed. Eventually she said, by way of conceding, “Just be warned that that last evening gown alone will cost a small fortune. Madame may be young, but she values her work highly.”

“Rightly so.” He felt doubly triumphant that he’d won that round—won the right to pay for her gowns. He should, he knew, be exceedingly wary about such a reaction, but he was too busy wallowing in the victory to let such considerations dim his mood. “A workman is worthy of his hire, and all that. But your point is duly noted—I promise not to expire of shock.”

She gave an unladylike snort, then fell silent.

He strolled on, with her on his arm, and imagined seeing her in that pale green gown. Wondered how he might arrange it.

Some paces on, the fact that she’d been perfectly willing to part with “a small fortune” of her own registered. But her family wasn’t wealthy, and he was fairly certain she couldn’t have inherited more than a competence from any relative, not without his aunts mentioning it.

Now he thought of it, she was traveling with an entire household, staying at major inns, hiring carriages and private parlors—and she hadn’t even paused to consider the cost of putting up at Grillon’s. He’d be picking up the bill there, but she hadn’t known that, and still didn’t.

She was wealthy. But how?

“Did you and the others catch any of those men?”

Her question shook him out of his abstraction. “Yes.” They’d reached Berkeley Square. Halting, he glanced around, one comprehensive survey, then turned to her. “And as there appear to be no more following us, we’re going to take a detour.”

“Oh? To where?”

"The Bastion Club."