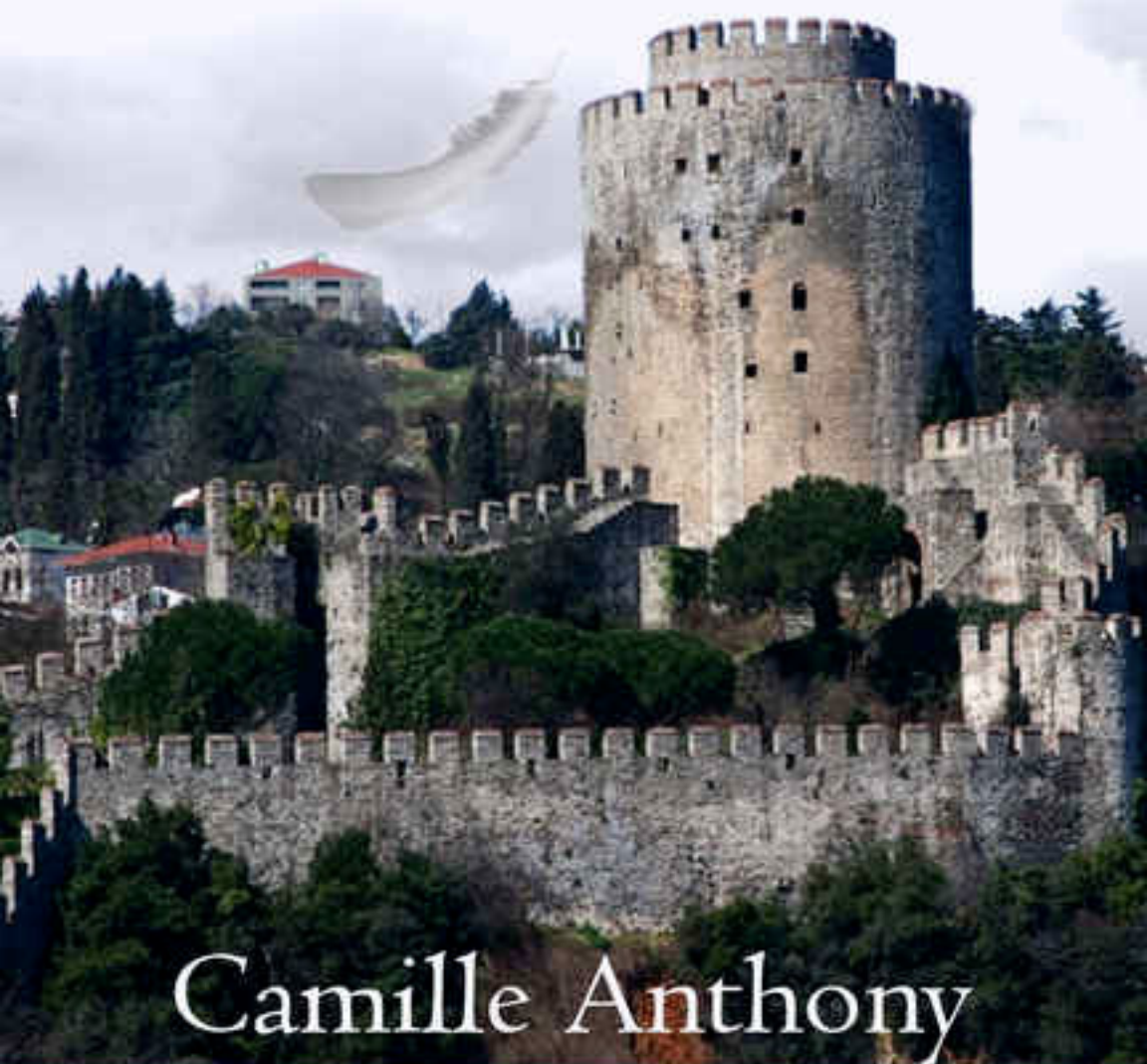


Feathers on the Wind



Camille Anthony

 **The Cygnets**

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

Red Rose Publishing

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Feathers on the Wind

Book 1: The Cygnets

By

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Historical Note

A glossary has been provided at the back of this story to assist with your reading.

Several characters in this story are actual people; the Sultan Selim III, the two sultanas, Mirhima and Nekshidel, to name a few. All others, except for one or two of the English cast, such as Prime Minister Pitt, are figments of my over-active imagination. However, I wish to point out that the Eastern characters are all historically true to life. In my research, I discovered people who acted exactly as my characters do. The Ottoman Empire, of which Turkey was the seat of power, was a strange, exotic mixture of civilization and barbarity. Men thought nothing of virtually locking women away, or using them as mindless receptacles for their intemperate lusts. Yet these same men revered their mothers and sisters. Their medical practices were far in advance of England's. You would not find an Eastern physician bleeding a patient who was already weakened by fever. On the other hand, they still attributed many illnesses to the work of demons or witches' curses. I have hurled my characters into this seething cauldron of intrigue and political mayhem, for from adversity, comes strength...

Camille Anthony

2006

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BOOK ONE: THE CYGNETS

Life is but the road that leads one to Love,
And for the young swan, there are many attractions.
Yet, when once the true mate is sighted,
All others become feathers on the wind...

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Prologue

The Cornish coast, England

November 1797

The Turkish ship rode at anchor almost a half mile out from shore, barely visible to the shivering man squinting through the spray-dampened mists. The sound of the sails snapping and creaking, their billowing tarps filling with the furious gusts fueled by the lashing storm, reached him where he hid behind the advantageous hillock of tangled sea grape and sand. Shifting uncomfortably, he shielded his eyes with a chilled hand and blinked rapidly in an attempt to focus his bleary gaze on the suspect he'd been doggedly following for the last three days.

* * * *

The wind howled, whipping away the man's expensive hat, the unruly gusts ruffling the rain-slicked black hair clinging to his forehead in damp curls. His black cloak billowed cloud-like about his broad shoulders, alternately obscuring and revealing the lines of his rugged physique.

The light of the moon, peeking fitfully between clashing clouds, played across stern, handsome features cut into a face as hard as rock. Deep-set eyes, harboring fathomless pools of mystery, looked out at the world with bitter cynicism. Large, square hands were thrust into the copious pockets of the black riding cape; the right hand, from long practice, absently toying with the small, roughly carved crystalline elephant, a cherished memento always on his person. His

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booted feet rested firmly at the crumbling edge of the cliffs fronting the storm-ripped stretch of beach, symbolic of the man's stance in life—he stood on the precipice of change.

This night he would complete his well-thought out, long-harbored revenge against a family that had dared to prosper while he, who should have been favored, had been forced to accept their insulting, casual generosity. His hatred ran deep, and would not be assuaged until his would-be benefactors—his enemies—groveled, begging, at his feet. He liked the idea that at the same time he brought down his prey, he would strike a blow against the country, the government that had stifled him all his life.

The man chuckled to himself, pondering the vagaries of his present situation, finding bitter humor in the convoluted maze his life had become. His treason against Country and Crown was such a small thing. After all, he owed no loyalty to England, being an exile in a land that had always been cold and harsh to him, cheating him of his rightful inheritance. A cuckoo's egg amid the plodding English, his singular strangeness had long gone un-remarked. Therefore, he felt no remorse over what he had set in motion. These steps were the opening gambit; an intricate invitation to dance. Eventually, he would cause them all to cavort on his puppeteer's strings...

Finally, I will have my due.

He exalted over what he did this night to destroy an important man. At long last, the place, the position he had maneuvered years to fill would become his. He planned to build his dynasty on the ruins of his Nemesis ... for she had

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planned it so. Every step well orchestrated; nothing left to chance—no, not even the presence of the duped witness believing himself well hidden beyond the shrub-littered bluff—

The signal-light flickered across the beach and his head came up as he snapped to alertness. Muscles quivering with eagerness, heart thudding erratically as a rush of adrenaline fueled his excitement, he braced his shoulders against the wind and began to pick his way down the sheer, crumbling cliffs...

Chapter One

Written from Wyndmere Castle, December 1797

Selim, I saved your life. Please, save my son's.

—Emily Tyson, Duchess of Wyndmere

London, England

March 1798

"The prisoner will face the King's bench."

The stentorian tones of the court clerk rang through the murmuring of the crowd gathered to watch the trial of a duke. Nobles mingled with commoners, all looking forward to the excitement afforded by this rare treat.

His grace, the Duke of Wyndmere, turned in the docks until he faced the row of his peers preparing to pronounce judgment on him. The habit of years enabled him to maintain an expression of remote unconcern, but at his side, his hands—shackled in heavy irons—balled into impotent fists.

After three months of trials, he no longer held any hope for a verdict of innocence. The evidence presented against him, though false, was impressive. The prosecution had produced numerous witnesses. A buxom tavern wench insisted he had visited often enough to become intimately acquainted with her charms. The wench was not even in his style—but he did not expect the court to know that. The ostler, who claimed to have held his horse, and the tavern-keeper, both testified Jared had been a frequent visitor during the past winter, using the tavern's back room to meet with shady characters that never showed their faces.

The witnesses' testimonies were devastating, but the veracity of the prosecution's main eyewitness sounded the death-knell to his hopes of acquittal. Robert Townesend claimed to have personally observed that infamous last exchange. He was there to see the information leaked that allowed Napoleon Bonaparte's Minister of Information to capture three of England's best under-cover agents.

Held in high regard among those in His Majesty's secret service, Robert, like Jared, himself, held the coveted distinction of having been one of Pitt's "Bulldogs". No one had reason to discount or doubt his evidence against Wyndmere, for during the course of the trial, it had become public knowledge that the two men had worked together back in '90 when Wyndmere had been a carefree Viscount. Townesend considered Jared his friend and the pain that had etched his face as he testified against his one-time partner had been evident to all who watched. The struggle between his duty and his loyalty to Wyndmere had been wrenchingly apparent when he'd broken down in tears at the last making his testimony doubly damning.

Even Wyndmere, *knowing* Robert lied, had felt moved by Townesend's supposed dilemma.

The Lord Chief Justice of England rose and nodded to the bailiff, who banged his staff repeatedly. The hollow booming echoed throughout the chamber, silencing the murmur of conversation and drawing the crowd's attention to the bench.

Clearing his throat, the Justice gazed down on Jared. "Before the court pronounces judgment, has the accused anything to say in his behalf?" Jared could read the

repugnance and acidic disgust stamped on the highest court official's face. Neither he, nor the audience had any doubt of the man's personal decision.

Coming to his full six feet, two inches of height, Jared tossed his head in an attempt to shift the stubbornly wayward ebony curl that immediately returned to rest upon his forehead, obscuring his vision. He needed a haircut, and a shave would not have come amiss.

Being a trained agent, adept at escape, Wyndmere had been denied visitors. Fearful of seeming to favor the high-profile prisoner their superiors appeared to hold in disgust, the guards had even waived the common practice of graft that encouraged family members to buy upgrades in food and life-comforts for the inmates. They repeatedly turned away his mother, along with her gifts meant to ease his way.

Three months in the bowels of the Tower with pan baths, no razors and not even a comb, meant he was not at his best as he stood before his accusers today. He knew it. Hell, he could smell it.

As he gathered his thoughts, his gaze roamed the gallery noting the so-called ladies among the group of avid spectators. They looked upon him with hungry eyes and he knew—knowing them intimately—that his sketchy grooming only served to lend him an aura of dark, animal magnetism arousing to those who spiced their lovemaking with danger.

The tower had brought out the beast in him, and several of the women, knowing his strong sexual appetites, shivered and licked their lips, their greedy, hungry eyes—speculative

over the last three months of abstinence must have wrought—watching Jared's every move.

The Duke let his gaze pass them as if they were invisible. Ignoring the importuning eyes of the women he hesitated to call Ladies, his amber-gold eyes sweeping the crowd. He passed over the rowdies in the near galleries to meet the old, sad eyes of one of his judges.

Arnold Beardsley, Duke of Raeburn, had been a friend of the Tyson family for years; an honorary uncle to the young Viscount. He and Jared's late father had been school chums, taken the grand tour together, and once upon a time, had found themselves rivals over the same woman.

Seeing the disappointment and loss of respect in those aged gray eyes scorched Jared's soul. Righteous anger boiled up inside but on its heels, an overwhelming sensation of futility swept over him.

For some unknown and unfathomable reason, someone had chosen to destroy his life, to impugn his honor. Working from the shadows, his foe had struck and retreated, never leaving a trace. How was he to fight an unseen, unknown enemy?

His breath hitched. How it galled him to stand before his peers, nakedly open to their judgment, his only covering the flimsy shield of his assertions of innocence, his denials of any treasonous acts.

He was the eighth Duke of Wyndmere, by damn. One of the most sought-after men in England, Jared knew himself to be passably good looking. However, had he been ugly as a troll, he'd still be mobbed in the hallowed halls of Almacks

because of his family's prominence and wealth. Imminently eligible, the Mamas of the Ton loved him. He controlled the vast land holdings and assorted business ventures of the Wyndmere family, not to mention the lands and holdings of his mother, one of the once celebrated and still notorious Barrington heiresses.

He faithfully dropped five thousand a month to his mother's favorite charities, and had long been sought after by ladybirds and Cyprians for both his dedication to their carnal pleasure and rumors of his flamboyant generosity.

He was honest in his dealings at the card table, paying promptly when losing, always willing to wait till the next quarter's allowance when owed by a young buck. He didn't fleece the green lordlings up from the country; indeed, he'd gone out of his way to rescue a few from the grasps of the Captain Sharps. Because of these practices, he was generally well-liked among the men of the Ton.

Why would anyone think the relatively piddling amount of cash he could gain selling state secrets would interest a man who had, in his wild, not-so-long-ago youth, served the government as an undercover agent?

Despite his openly lived life, he stood here accused and already condemned. There was a deep reasoning behind this farce, but Jared seriously doubted he would be allowed to investigate it. It would be, at best, improbable for him to be able to gather any kind of useful information before he would be forced to leave England forever. Knowing all that, aware of the futility of the gesture of a statement, he yet felt compelled to make one.

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Proudly lifting his head, making direct eye-contact with each member of the bench, he squared his shoulders and tried to reason with his judges.

"Sirs, it is obvious that treason was done here—I do not deny that. However, I am not the perpetrator. I have served my country and King without fail, and at times, to my own peril. I am wealthy beyond avarice. What use would I have for a paltry sum such as you claim was exchanged? I served England against Bonaparte and I continue to serve her, now. I am *innocent*. As God is my witness, I shall never cease to proclaim that innocence. By banishing me, you leave the real traitor free to continue his or her crimes. I urge you, if not for my sake, then for the security of England, not to let it end here. Keep searching until the traitor is found—."

"You ought t' be 'ung, bleedin traitor."

The shouted interruption came from the pits that catered to the lower classes. It was a rare occurrence for them to witness such prime entertainment as the trial of one of the nobility. The fellow's lowly neighbors cheered wildly, but the high-born audience occupying the horseshoe-shaped galleries that provided a ringside seat to the proceedings, shuffled their feet uncomfortably, casting their eyes anywhere but on the disheveled man who stood proudly erect in the stocks.

Jared snorted. As if it was somehow embarrassing, disturbing actually, to see such a haughty Lord brought low. How did one address a Duke fallen from grace, as it were? Was it even good *ton* to speak to a convicted Duke? And what would one say? "Good day, your Graceless Grace—?"

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Wyndmere's shoulders slumped. Obviously, his speech had been to no avail. Closing himself off, erasing all expression from his face, he wearily desisted, waiting numbly as the court conferred in low-voiced murmurs, preparing to conclude their business.

Pretending a disinterest he didn't feel, Jared's gaze was aimlessly wandering over the occupants in the galleries when he was jolted out of his woolgathering. Attention and more seized by the agitated, yet graceful hand movements of a lively girl intensely arguing with her companions, he strained to filter out hundreds of simultaneous conversations. Picking up fragments of her speech, he was stunned to hear the woman defending him.

Her contentions were logical, well thought out, and reasoned. Many were ones he had himself used during the long months his trial had dragged on. Her vocabulary was extensive, her superior schooling evident. There were not many young men as well-versed in Latin or Greek as she proved herself to be by quoting Aquinas and Socrates on logic—in their original tongues.

He was intrigued. At first glance she looked hardly more than a girl. But she turned and her profile belied that impression. An examination of her lush curves assured Jared that his interest had indeed been caught by a mature woman, albeit a young one.

At that moment, she glanced up and his breath froze. His heart pounded, pulse raced. Their gazes met and held from across the courtroom, which shrank and receded until the

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universe contained only tiger bright eyes timelessly enmeshed with silvery gray.

She was not the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, yet he couldn't help devouring the picture she presented. A pair of large, liquid, expressive gray eyes held a simple honesty, a depth of empathy he had never before encountered in a female. Her pale pink day-dress emphasized her youth, while providing a flattering foil for the thick clouds of black, glossy curls rioting about her face and down her back. Her full, sensuous lips begged a man's mouth, and Jared couldn't be sure, but he thought their deep pink color owed nothing to artifice.

Jared stiffened, watching as one of her companions tapped her shoulder and pointed his way, bringing the group's collective gaze to bear on him. Caught staring, he quirked a sardonic eyebrow and dipped his head in salute. A tide of red flowed up the girl's cheeks as she became aware she was the object of his intense perusal.

Damn the circumstances, and the person responsible for them. Jared fumed. And how ironic it was this trial brought him into the orbit of the first well-born woman to possibly interest him in a marital way. He closed his eyes on an internalized curse. Damn his enemy and the fates that he was in no position to pursue her.

But what did she think of him? Did she find him guilty? The look in her eyes, her words, said differently, but he feared the futility of hope. He watched, frustrated, as the ingénue shyly lowered her eyes before him. He cursed again, almost tangibly feeling something special slip from his life as the

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abrupt banging of the Lord Chief Justice's gavel broke the tableau as everyone raced back to their seats, not willing to miss a moment of the court's closing proceedings.

As he turned back to the bench, Jared caught a glimpse of his mother's avid gaze trained upon the girl's retreating back. A tiny spark of humor brightened his outlook. His mother and he often had the same idea at the same time. Throughout his childhood, they'd plagued his father with their uncanny connection.

At forty-seven years of age, his mother still glowed with the incredibly good looks of her youth, which had always owed more to country air and exercise than artifice. Her blond hair, gone silver, still framed her face in short, soft curls. Tears sketched a never-ending path down her rounded cheeks, though she surreptitiously made to wipe them away to hide her grief, holding herself sternly erect. Only someone who knew her well—as he did—could detect the effort she expended to remain in control. Her hands, half hidden among the concealing folds of her full skirts, nervously worried a soggy, tattered handkerchief, a clear indication of her upset.

Jared's lips tightened as his jaw firmed. He hated seeing her like this, hated being seen by *her* like this. His enemy had much to atone for...

Seated on a tier above yet quite close to her son, Emily Barrington Tyson watched the interplay between her son and the dark haired woman with surprised delight. How often had she pushed him to marry and set up his nursery only to be told that he would not contemplate marriage until he found a woman of intellect; one that could hold the attention of his

formidable mind both in and out of the bedroom? Now, her heart wrenched with pity as she beheld her son's obvious attraction.

Knowing her son, Emily realized his reaction to the young woman in the gallery was as shocking and unwelcome to him as the reverse was with her. He was obviously smitten and unable to do anything about the situation. What rotten luck that he should finally find a likely candidate while he was in this horrible situation.

Her eyes met those of Arnold Beardsley's and she looked quickly away, the pain almost more than she could bear. Arnold Beardsley thought her son guilty. As long as he felt that way, there could be no hope for them. No future.

Arnold had loved her for years. Like many of the other gentlemen of his generation, he had courted the "Bright Barrington" as she was known then, but unlike the other gentlemen who had simply been following a fad, Arnold had truly been heart-broken when Emily chose to accept his best friend's proposal. With a little more effort, she could have brought herself to love Arnold, but she had adored Randolph Tyson as he had adored her.

She knew Arnold had never stopped loving her even when, at his father's continued urging, he had arranged a marriage of convenience to secure his family's succession. Because he was an honorable man, Arnold had been faithful to his well-bred, but slightly dull wife and in due course, they had three children: two boys and one girl.

Though still considered in the prime of his life, Arnold had not taken another in wedlock after the death of his wife.

Instead, he'd waited until three years after Wyndmere's death before approaching Emily with another proposal. She might have been receptive to his suit but for this mess with her son that had taken up all her energy. Distracted and inattentive, she'd put him off with vague promises to consider his suit. Emily had finally ceased mourning Wyndmere, though she would miss him forever. Arnold's steadfast regard through the years spoke well for their chances at connubial bliss, but she'd marry no one who could look at her son as he just had.

Emily Barrington Tyson had no doubts about her son's innocence. She had not raised a traitor, though all the evidence in the world condemned him. There was too much of his father in Jared to allow such disloyalty. In fact, too much of both his fathers...

Acting upon her limited choices, Emily had already set certain events in motion. At the start of this mockery of a trial, she had written a desperate note to an old acquaintance; one of the most powerful men in the world. Shortly thereafter, another letter was sent to the Prime Minister, William Pitt. She had reason to know the King's so-called leniency was manufactured by the threat of possible military action and a breaking off of diplomatic relations by a certain head-of-state, should a single hair on the head of one Jared Michael Randolph Jamal Tyson, His Grace, the Duke of Wyndmere, be harmed. Of course, the disclosure Emily had been forced to make to Pitt made her son look that much guiltier. Yet it couldn't be helped for she was fighting for her son's life, and nothing, *nothing* was more important to her than that. Not the notoriety that would be hers should the

Ton find out her years-old secret ... not even the hatred she knew would be kindled in Jared's heart when he found out what she had done, for he had never been told his true history.

Emily was fully prepared to live with both notoriety and hatred, if only her son might be spared. The sound of the court official's voice broke her introspection. Here, then was the verdict...

"Jared Michael Randolph Jamal Tyson, Duke of Wyndmere, this court finds you guilty of treason against your King and country."

Hundreds of voices erupted at once, shattering the silence that had shrouded the great hall. Shrieks of feminine dismay rose amid loud-voiced, angry denials, yet the overwhelming majority of spectators were cheering the court's findings.

Jared looked heartened at the evidence that some of his friends still believed in his innocence though his features remained sternly blank in a proud refusal to bare his emotions before the slavering beast this crowd had become. Emily's heart sank at the crowd's response. They were like a pack of hounds with the scent of her son's blood in their nostrils.

"Treason of such magnitude usually carries a sentence of death," the Chief Justice informed the condemned sternly after the outbursts had died down. "However, His Majesty is inclined to be gracious due to the service you have rendered this country in the past, and the ties of friendship that once existed between the Tysons and the Crown." The speaker's features contorted in a grimace that plainly revealed his questioning of their sovereign's newly regained sanity. He

continued, "By order of His Majesty, you are to be banished from England for the remainder of your life. Unfortunately, in accordance with the perpetual charter granted the first Duke of Wyndmere by Charles Stuart I, you cannot be stripped of your title. Also, in accordance with said charter, any child of your body, male or female, may inherit the title and estates—" The speaker broke off to address the prisoner with more acrid words.

"It does not appear there is much this Court is allowed to do in punishment of your crimes, your Grace. However, we can restrict your goings and comings, and it is the decision of this Court to remand you back into strict custody of the Tower until such time all the arrangements that have been made are duly carried out..."

* * * *

Jared's lethargy was broken when he realized the court was announcing that contrary to the usual allowance for a prisoner to settle his affairs and bid farewell to family members, he would remain locked in the tower until he could be put aboard a Turkish brigantine scheduled to arrive within the week.

A Turkish ship? Jared wondered dazedly. He had been accused of dealing with the Ottoman government but knowing that to be a lie, he was stunned to learn that government had sent a ship for him. In fact, for it to be arriving within the week, it would have had to have been sent months ago. He *knew* he had not requested a ship of the Turkish government. Why should he when the Tyson fleet of ships numbered in the

hundreds? *Who had done this? Who had dared...?* A red mist obscured his vision as heated rage took over.

"I demand to see Pitt." He shouted. "I am being framed. I never requested a ship. I have not been in contact with the Ottoman government ... *what the hell is going on—?*"

Tiger-gold eyes flared angrily in heated denial as two burly court officers, answering the hurried order to escort the prisoner back to his cell, each grabbed an arm and proceeded to half drag, half-lead the shouting man out.

Jared dug his heels in, giving himself a scant moment's delay. He chanced a look back to find his mother's eyes fixed on him, awash with tears. She swayed where she stood, hovering on the edge of a faint.

"Mother—."

He cringed inside, dying from not being able to go to his mother, to comfort her. His eyes misted in gratitude as soft arms went around his mother's shoulders, bolstering her up, watched as his mother turned thankfully into those girlish arms to weep bitterly. His heart, immune to all other's showings of camaraderie, leaped anew at this evidence of sympathy from one who had so quickly and inexplicably become important to him. Large gray eyes met his, silently promising support. He kept his gaze locked with hers, drinking her in, until his guards yanked at his arms, abruptly breaking the contact. He looked until they hauled him out and away. It might be a long dry spell before he could look into those gentle gray eyes again, but he swore a vow to himself that he would. One day, he would see her again...

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A Turkish ship ... now who had instigated that? I could not have done better myself. Oh, this is delicious. Divine. Look at the two sanctimonious Tysons. How he suffers. How she grieves.

Boo-hoo. And I sit here, soaking it in, reveling in it.

Poor Townesend, cast in the role of the unsuspecting dupe; the former friend. And see how that old fool Raeburn looks upon him in disillusionment where once he looked in love.

Three taken away from you. Does it burn you, Jared, my own? Of course, it must. But not enough, my Nemesis, never enough.

Fingers curled tightly about a roughly-carved crystalline elephant.

Who is the girl? How did I miss her? Or is she a new development in the game? Do you begin to love her, Jared? I hope not, but I really believe you do. What a pity. She is so pretty, so ... fresh, yet she, too, must be eliminated. Everyone you love, Jared. Everything.

In the end, I will destroy you all.

Chapter Two

Excerpt from the personal diary of Emily Tyson, Duchess of Wyndmere:

March 24, 1800

Last month was the two year anniversary of my leave-taking with my son, yet the memories of that day are as clear as if it were yesterday. Jared was confused and angered by the ship Selim sent for him because its presence made him appear guilty of the charges of treason. Of course, he truly had no idea why the Sultan of Turkey would go out of his way to defend him, even to offering a treaty-agreement with England. I confess to cowardice, within these private pages, for when it was time to tell Jared the truth, I could not. I was afraid he would hate me when he learned the story of his birth, kept from him all these years. In the end, I left the sordid tale for Selim to impart. I am sorry for it, for my shirking of duty did me no good. I have not heard from Jared these two years. He returns my letters unopened and unread. I would know nothing if Selim did not keep me informed of his doings. I find myself resenting Randolph for dying. He has escaped this blame I am labeled with. Perhaps if I too were dead, Jared would think of me more kindly. His coldness hurts me so ... Will he ever understand that everything I did, I did that he might live? I love him more than life. I always have. Though he may hate me forever, I would do it all again...

Chapter Three

Selim, I know it must have been a shock when you finally met my son and realized that he was also yours. As he grew, the resemblance to you was startling. In answer to your question: No, I swear I did not know I was carrying Jared when I left you. Honesty compels me to admit it would have made no difference as long as Randolph wanted me. He did know. In fact, it was he who told me I was increasing. He was proud to adopt and raise Jared as his own. If you have gotten to know your son even a little, I think you have to agree he is a fine young man. I fear I should have told Jared the truth of his heritage when his father died, but we were both so grief-stricken at the time I could not bear to take away the image of the father he had always known. I suppose it is just that Jared hates me, and so I must deal with my sorrow in this. He returns all my letters unopened, and will not be reconciled. Please inform Jared that I am trying to keep things running well, but I am finding it hard. The Duke of Raeburn, an old family friend, has offered his assistance. Do you recall my sister, Amelia? Her son, Jason, has also been an enormous help. I have deposited more funds in his name with the bank of Italy and Jared may draw on them at will. The funds will be replenished as needed. I yearn for his return. I cannot believe that the real criminal will remain free while my son, who is innocent, suffers so. I will write again, soon. Please ... give our son my love.—Emily

Istanbul, Turkey

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October, 1800

By reason of the Sultan's desire for warmth, the winter palace at Ankara was opulent—more so than the larger summer palace located in Istanbul. Luscious furs were in plentiful supply. The pelt of the Siberian Wolf, the rare white-spotted coat of the Ounce also known as the Snow Leopard, the black mink from the Steppes of Russia—all lent their grandeur to the private audience chamber of His Serene Sultan Selim Jamal Abdullah III, ruler of the Ottoman Empire.

Selim watched under hooded lids as Jamal entered the vast chamber through the ornate door that opened from the "Hall of men". The guards at the door saluted smartly, bowing with hand over heart as he passed. A curt nod acknowledged the honor they accorded him as he swept down the center of the room, his eyes fixed sternly before him.

Selim smothered a smile and paused in his enjoyment of a succulent peach. His son walked boldly, like the prince he was, down the length of the room to stand before him.

Ah. His heart swelled as he gazed fondly upon this long-lost child—this child of his loins, his only son; begat upon his first great love, Emily. *Oh, Emily, my English rose.*

Selim had acquired her before he was the crown Emir—and therefore nothing. He had always known Emily did not return his feelings of ardor. After all these years, he still felt a touching fondness for the woman who had saved his life the night his uncle had assumed the throne. He no longer cared that she had been running away from him on that same night. After all, he earned his own freedom by becoming the next in line to the throne the night he allowed her to leave.

Instead of having him killed, his uncle, the new Sultan—a forward-thinking man—had treated Selim as a son and allowed him his own quarters, not even demanding he be confined to "the cage"; the traditional prison of all male relatives of the reigning Sultan where he had spent his youth.

Without removing his own amber gaze from the similar eyes locked with his, the Sultan gestured. A servant stepped forward with a damp cloth and proceeded to wipe his ruler's peach-sticky fingers. "You appear upset, Jamal. What is troubling you?"

Jamal executed a stiff bow. "Sir, I just came from the men's exercise yard where I had a slight altercation with Mustapha—"

Selim straightened abruptly. "Was your brother seriously injured, Jamal?" In respectful memory of his Uncle's kindness to him, Selim considered his young cousin as his son.

"No. I merely defended myself." Jamal shot a knowing gaze at the innocent look on his father's face. "Mustapha was under the mistaken impression that I was slated to ascend the throne ahead of him. I had to ask myself where he would get such erroneous information."

Selim heaved a long sigh. "I must confess that he heard it from me. I see no reason for Mustapha to continue in false hope. You are my eldest male relative, being twelve years older than Mustapha, therefore you are the Royal Emir, the 'Prince of Promise'."

"But I thought we were agreed that we would conceal the fact of my parentage to avoid just such undue confusion as this—" Jamal said, an irritable frown marring his handsome

face. He pushed a slim hand through his thick black locks of hair in a frustrated manner.

No doubt, being raised as a noble Englishman had not prepared Jamal for his role here in Turkey. He was used to having everything his way. Selim smiled to himself. Frustration may have been an emotion completely unfamiliar to his son two years ago, but it was about to become a common occurrence if he insisted on confronting his royal sire.

"I am not going to rule after you. I'm not trained for it. I'm not a Muslim, and most importantly, Sir, I'm not interested."

"I am glad you came to speak with me, my son." Selim beckoned Jamal closer. A servant placed a chair for him to sit. "I have been studying what to do with you," he continued as if he had not heard Jamal's protests. "I think we must find you a wife."

"A *what?*"

"A wife. A good Muslim woman who will—"

"Hell, no." Jamal shouted, coming up out of his chair, adding a belated, "Sir." Taking several agitated steps away from the throne he studied his father's face, his eyes narrowing. "I cannot believe what I am hearing."

"Be calm, my son," Selim advised, carefully selecting another ripe peach. He closed his eyes in delight as he bit into the succulent fruit. His constitution was such that he could indulge his appetites and still maintain his slim physique. "It is a responsibility you will grow into," he added calmly.

"You will excuse me if I inform you I have no intention of growing into that responsibility." Jamal strode about the

room, every step screaming his agitation with this new situation. "I have repeatedly stated that I have no interest in your throne. And I have no intention of marrying outside of my faith. It would only cause more trouble than I have now. Need I remind you that any child I beget will be heir to my titles and lands in England?"

"Just so. And you would expect that child to shoulder it's responsibilities without complaint, would you not?" The silken tones in which the Sultan spoke had the servants cringing at the doors. The calm before the storm, they warned of an emotional storm brewing. Jamal was not the only one used to getting his way.

Hiding his smile, Selim watched as his son lowered his head, right hand working at the knotted tension in his neck. He took a deep breath and held it. "Yes," he finally admitted, "I imagine I would expect any child of mine to take up the position I have been forced to vacate. Sir, I mean no disrespect, but such a child—a Muslim child—would never be accepted by the Ton."

Selim nonchalantly tossed the denuded peach pit to the floor beside his throne. He paid no attention to the servant who quickly darted over to retrieve the small stone and dispose of it.

"For the past twenty-four months you have moped about as though you had no future, as if you would escape the reality of your situation. This is painful to me. I do not bear pain well, nor for long. Since you have taken no efforts to see to your life, I have done so for you."

"I would not call it moping, exactly" Jamal demurred. He hastened to explain. "I have been learning your language, and getting to know more about this country."

Selim heard the guilt in his son's voice. He obviously realized mopping was indeed what he had been doing. "Yes," Selim agreed, "As though you planned to finish out your life here."

"I cannot return to England," Jamal retorted emphatically. "I had thought to do some exploring of the Americas and other lands. However, before I expose myself to such precarious plans, I will need to secure my title."

"And how do you intend to find a cultured English woman here in Ankara?" Selim raised a well-formed brow in question.

"*You* had no problem finding an English woman," Jamal sniped, bitterly.

Selim could understand his son having extreme difficulty accepting that his mother had been his bed-mate. She had conceived Jamal here, in Turkey. Returning to England, she'd fooled everyone, including Jamal, concealing from him the true facts of his heritage. His mother, who had instilled in him a strict code of honesty, had betrayed everything he held dear.

"How could she have withheld such vital information from me? I hated learning my entire life had been a lie. I've even wondered if my fath—if Randolph Tyson died believing me to be his true son ... or if he, too, had been in on the deceit."

"To this day, you deeply resent having had to learn the truth of you origins from me, your real father. But tell me, how could discovering you are of princely blood be so

devastating? Even a Duke is not as high in social ranking as that."

"How can *you* not understand that my entire life has been based upon a lie? One I never knew until I landed here. Upon first arriving in Turkey, I was taken to the summer palace in Istanbul, where I was told the Sultan currently held court. I was treated like a visiting prince, my slightest wish or desire anticipated, which only made me more suspicions of my companions."

"After all, I'd been accused of dealing with Turkish nationals. I suspected the true traitor was in cahoots with these Turks, and between them, meant to do away with me at some distant, private spot."

He paced up and down the hall, his boots ringing on the marble tiles. "Imagine my shock when I finally stood before His Serene Sultan, Selim Jamal Abdullah, third of that name. To give you your due, you too had also obviously been kept in the dark. I could only gaze upon you with wonder. It was like gazing into a looking glass."

Selim nodded. "The resemblance was marked."

"You can say that, again. I had always known I did not take after father's family; the portraits on the walls of castle Wyndmere bearing witness to that fact. I had thought mother's family lent me my dark, hawkish looks since my cousin also bore them, but one discerning glance at you consigned those long-held beliefs to perdition."

"Your shock was great, as was your anger. I feared you would succumb to a brain fever."

"How would you feel if you discovered something like that? As an observant child, I had often wondered over the foreignness of my fourth name. When I questioned my parents about it, they informed me I bore the name in honor of a family friend. Standing in the throne room of the summer palace, I learned the only thing I had inherited from my mother's family was their more-than-average height. My looks, my name, and especially these damned tiger-amber eyes were the gifts of the man I now recognize as my true father."

Selim watched as Jamal struggled with his inner thoughts. The father in him was proud over how his son had adapted to life in the palaces. Jamal had studied hard and diligently to learn the difficult language, even accepting the use of his Turkish name to facilitate assimilation. He was kind and patient with his younger cousins who occupied the women's quarters in the royal harem, especially to the young Mahmud, the son of the widowed Sultana Aimée, often bringing him news from outside the confining harem walls and taking him riding through the countryside.

Yes, Jamal was a fine man, and a worthy son. If he were only a father, he would have no complaints. Alas, he was not. He was Selim Jamal Abdullah, Sultan; Final Voice and Supreme Authority in the Ottoman Empire with more responsibilities than the simple ones of fatherhood. Jamal might think to content himself with traveling and exploring, but Selim had come to know him better.

When he had arrived in Istanbul almost two years ago, his son had been an angry young man—unjustly condemned, and

publicly humiliated. The Sultan knew that one day soon, Jamal would again burn to right the wrongs against him. Wrongs he'd been unjustly sentenced for. He would want to expose and punish the person truly responsible for disrupting his life and tarnishing his honor in the eyes of his peers.

Selim was prepared to help his son achieve his goals. He just happened to have the wherewithal to implement them now, and he had no need to wait until Jamal inevitably realized what he must do. Having experienced the stubbornness and determination Jamal was capable of, the Sultan had prepared a diversion to keep his son off-balance until the real trap he constructed reached completion.

"We will not speak of your mother now, I think," Selim said in a quietly stern voice. "You do not know the entire story, and your attitude towards her is lacking in respect. Your behavior is hurtful to her. You do not even read her letters. You should write to her and let her know you are well. At the very least, answer her letters to you..."

Jamal frowned. "No."

"Well, let that be for now," he allowed, waving the suggestion away as he caught the cold glint that had entered Jamal's eyes, the steel that hardened his jaw. *How Emily has hurt our son, all unintentionally.*

"Let us rather speak of you," he hastily suggested. "As my recognized heir, you are no longer confined to the guest halls. I have ordered a suite of rooms prepared for you and your belongings have already been moved. Beginning tomorrow, and continuing every second week until you choose a bride, a young virgin slave will come to your chambers. You will spend

the evening being entertained by her. If her conversation and appearance pleases you, you may allow her to ascend to your bed. She will then enter your harem, becoming eligible to be your first Kadin."

Jamal distractedly ran his hands over his hair. "I refuse to believe you are serious about this. How can I get my *firm* objections through to you when you will not listen?"

"On the contrary, my son," Selim reached for another fruit, "I am listening all the time. I have spoken. So shall it be." Selim spread his hands in a dismissing gesture.

Jamal refused to take the less-than-subtle hint to absent himself from the august presence of the Sultan. He obviously objected to his abrupt dismissal. "I will refuse to see any of your candidates," he threatened quietly.

Selim sighed. "Should the female return from your presence in less than an hour, I shall assume she did nothing to attempt to please you. That would be disobedience to my will, and her punishment shall be severe. Should she fail a second time, she will be disposed of."

Jamal jerked to his feet, face contorted in horrified disbelief. He tried twice before he could speak. "I cannot believe this of you," he finally said in a hoarse whisper.

"You would do well to believe, *ogul*," the Sultan replied, his tone hard, his bearing that of one long accustomed to rule without question. "Something must be done, and I have initiated it. Your body-servants inform me that you do not partake of the females available to the men of the household. There is some talk that you prefer men. I took such steps," he informed Jamal, noting with inward thankfulness the

distaste written on his son's face, "that I do not think we will hear any more such talk."

It was not that Selim himself so much objected to the practice of sodomy, for he was very accustomed to it, having been the victim of sodomy during his precarious youth. But it would not do for his son. Jamal would be returning to England eventually. The cold-blooded English did not look upon such vices lightly. He clapped sharply for an attendant, and again addressed Jamal, who still stood tense and straight before him, radiating censure.

"You have thirty years. It is a true thing that all men have the needs of the flesh put upon us by Allah. If, indeed the way of the Catamite is not yours, why do you reject the women I have sent you?"

"To be honest, Sir, they are not much to my taste."

"Taste. What taste? What is lacking in them? Come. Be open with me."

Jamal pursed his lips, probably considering how truthful he should be. "Sir, the majority of the women you've sent me barely have the years to claim that title. I cannot work up an interest for schoolroom aged girls. Frankly, the idea of bedding a child leaves me totally cold. Too, the women are ... hairless, so that those few who *are* old enough still look as though they are too childish to even grow pubic hair."

"You wish your women to be bushy?" The Sultan attempted to hide his reaction from his son, but he was too shocked and disgusted to succeed. "This is not hygienic. My son, the smell of ... of *woman* is trapped in such places, difficult to remove if one does not remove the hair. Even

then, the Koran instructs us to wash immediately after indulging with a female. Surely this is to ensure the smell of woman lingers not on our male organs. How is it that you find the presence of such hair pleasurable?"

A slight sensuous smile crossed Jamal's face. "As you stated, a bath after sex can solve that problem. Besides ... I like that *woman* smell." Jamal laughed when the Sultan grimaced. "I find something exciting about delving through the soft curls that veil a woman's ultimate secret. The sight alone of delicate pink lips winking through their fleecy covering is enough to bring my member to attention and—" he broke-off, shrugging at the look of disgusted disbelief on his father's face. "It is what I am accustomed to. To each his own, my Lord," He stated firmly. "I was not raised here in the East, so you cannot expect me to conform totally to your ways. Many of them are still strange to me."

Jamal left off his explanation as a tall, thick man in flowing robes slid gracefully to his knees before the Sultan's throne. He remembered his father signaling for a servant earlier, and listened as the bowing man asked, "My Lord commands—?"

"Ah. *kul*. This is my son, Jamal, the "Emir of Promise". You are now assigned to him exclusively. Escort him to the peacock suite, and see that his every need is met. Your life is now linked with my son's. Should anything befall him—" The Sultan's face hardened. He narrowed his tigerish eyes and gave a feral growl. "Let Us just say ... I expect nothing will befall him as long as you draw breath."

* * * *

Jamal silently shook his head, deploring the heavy-handed manipulations his father used so freely. He turned his gaze back to the poor slave who remained kneeling, quaking in his soft slippers. He couldn't help thinking the man's assignment to him was but another of his father's maneuvers to control him. Planting this spy in his quarters was an obvious move; one Selim did not even bother to hide. Ignoring the man who now crawled over to cower at his feet, Jamal found himself pondering a course of action that would allow him to slip out of the trap his father was fast laying for him.

Jamal grimaced. He knew the palaces had buzzed for months over the mystery of the Englishman. Now, in the presence and hearing of the servants in the throne room—the worst gossips of the Seraglio—the Sultan had declared him, a foreigner, to be the heir-apparent to the Ottoman throne.

"What is your name?" he asked the eunuch.

"May it please my Lord, it is whatever you wish it to be."

Jamal sighed with impatience. "What have you been called in the past?"

"I was Seuliman," the slave answered, trembling. "I am well trained, Lord. I have been in palace service since my entry into the ranks of the "hairless" at the age of six. I will serve you well, Master. Only command me—"

Jamal hadn't expected to be able to detect Seuliman's true feelings; the servant knew better than to betray any emotion in response to anything his masters might decree. Yet Jamal found the fawning of the man somewhat disconcerting. Also, knowing the palaces to be hot-beds of intrigue, information brokering, and positional jockeying, it disturbed him that

Seuliman would have all the other eunuchs fawning over him for tidbits of information concerning his master. Jamal disliked the idea of his private affairs becoming more public than they already were.

Slanting a wary glance towards the Sultan, who was watching the scene before him with unalloyed interest, Jamal issued his first edict. "I will not have my personal life made a public spectacle. Is that clear?"

Seuliman nodded vigorously.

"Because if I hear of any gossip circulating the palaces concerning my private activities," he continued, "I will promptly dismiss you."

Jamal watched as the man went gray, not understanding why a threat of dismissal would so terrify him. He glanced up at the Sultan, his eyes questioning.

"A slave is only dismissed through death." The Sultan smiled softly, saying, "This one knows that should he prove unsatisfactory, he will be disposed of."

His confusion cleared. It angered Jamal that in forgetting the barbarous way these Turks dealt with those dependent upon them, he had frightened the man without cause.

"I trust such drastic measures will not be necessary," he contented himself with saying. "Get up. I do not like to see my servants groveling about on the floor." He waited until Seuliman had risen, then turned to confront his sire.

"This discussion is not over, Sir," he warned quietly. Bowing deeply from the waist, he honored his father. Turning sharply, addressing his newly acquired bodyguard, he ordered, "Direct me to my new quarters."

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Seuliman bowed deeply. "If master will follow his humble servant—?"

Without looking back, Jamal strode from the throne room on the heels of his father's spy.

* * * *

As soon as his son left the throne room, the Sultan summoned his own personal servant. Frustrated, and unaccustomed to suffering a delay of gratification, Selim petulantly addressed the eunuch as soon as the non-man scurried into the room, barely giving the slave time to complete his obeisance.

"Tubal, what of the mission I assigned to the Bey of Seyhan? Has there been any word of progress? Why has he not yet arrived? Must I be always surrounded by incompetence?"

"Most Excellent Sire, have patience," Tubal urged as he had numerous times before. "The journey is a long and dangerous one. Secrecy slows any operation, and you have given certain requirements that must be closely followed. The woman you seek is so rare as to possibly be nonexistent."

The servant cringed at the frown that darkened Selim's brow. "Sire, think. A woman of eighteen years or more who is comely, highly learned, and pure—" Tubal spread his hands helplessly. "That alone, not regarding she must be of noble birth..." He shook his head, unable to calculate such phenomenal odds. "The Bey and his men are searching diligently, my Lord. They will not return without what you have commanded."

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"They must hurry, Tubal. Time is short. I must maintain this false position between my son and nephew and you know the dangers of the palaces. I fear that Mustapha, or his mother, will launch an attempt to remove Jamal before my plan can bear fruit. Mustapha will follow me on the peacock throne, but for now, all must think differently. Jamal must truly believe that he is being groomed for the seat of power until after his is safely married to one of his own kind."

"All is in progress, my Lord," soothed the faithful servant. "Let my Sultan's and Allah's will be done."

Salim eyed his longtime servant indulgently. A devout Muslim was never to place a mere man before Allah, but Tubal was first the hand of the Sultan, and a Muslim second. His sole purpose in life was to do the will and grant the slightest wish of Selim III, which was as it should be.

Chapter Four

Selim, I do not know that I agree with your plans for our son. He should have the right to choose a bride for himself. I question your methods of finding a suitable girl. I know how women are procured there, and I know you are ruthless when it comes to getting your way. Remember, I know how it feels to be enslaved, whisked away from all that is familiar and safe. Even should your goals be admirable, I fear Jared is too much like you. You both harbor a certain stubbornness in your natures. He will object just to be contrary. At any rate, I have little information for you. Jared was always very close-mouthed about his preference in women. I know he was always attracted to full-figured females, and he once stated he did not care for women who were all bust and no brains. Randolph was always after him to marry and set up his nursery. Jared told him he would be glad to marry when he found a girl that interested him outside the bedroom as well as in. I recall that girl who caught his attention at his trial. He seemed so taken with her that I made an effort to find the family so as to keep tabs on her. Her name is Merridyth St. John-Smythe. Unfortunately, she seems to have dropped out of the social scene. Oh, well. Whomever you seek must be good mother material, willing to have any number of children, as Jared always lamented the fact that he was an only child. I think she must be adventurous, too, as Jared is an explorer at heart. When he was five, he built a rickety old raft and informed us he was sailing to the new world. He promised to

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*return with rich jewels to lie at my feet. Ah. That was when
he loved me.—Emily*

Chapter Five

London, England

November, 1800

Hector St. John-Smythe stormed down the steep stairway, still yelling imprecations at his wayward daughter. Slapping his bloodied riding whip against his boot, he twisted his puffy neck 'round to bellow up from whence he came, "There's plenty more where that came from, you smart-mouthed piece. I'll not be gainsaid in my own house."

In the drawing room, Lady Judith sat on the yellow brocade love-seat, all of her children save one gathered about her. Celia and Caroline sat as close as they could, both too old to clutch at her as they had when they were younger, but little Raymond buried his face in her lap, shivering as the stomp of his father's boots sounded on the parquet squares of the entry-way. Lady Judith allowed one hand to fleetingly caress her son. "Sit up, Raymond. Papa is come for tea." Her calm, quiet tones belied her inner turmoil.

The demon was on him again, she feared; the demon that drove her husband to such cruelty towards their eldest daughter. Merridyth, the first-born child conceived during a night of terror; the wedding night of this troubled marriage.

Five year-old Raymond lifted a tear-stained cherub face, pale with fear, to his mother's and whispered fiercely, "Don't want tea with Papa. He makes Merri cry, and I hate him. *I hate him.*"

Lady Judith's two daughters sucked in a horrified breath at their brother's vehement statement. Their eyes flew to the door through which they could hear their father's raised voice, terrified that he might have heard Raymond's words and become angrier than he already was. But he was still shouting foul, threatening comments up the narrow stairway to their twenty year-old sister, who had once again been locked in her room.

The hinges of the parlor door protested as it was flung violently ajar. Hector St. John-Smythe—pronounced with the "y" as a long "i"—stood panting in the doorway, his squat body thickened by his addiction to strong drink and the over-indulgence of his sweet tooth.

Hector's mama had been a St. John, the youngest daughter of an Earl. She had fallen in love with a common shop-keeper, and run off to Gretna Green. Harold Smith had truly loved his lady, and through dint of hard work and determination, had built up a lively business in trade and shipping in order to keep his "treasure" in the style to which she had been born. He had succeeded beyond anyone's wildest thoughts, but no amount of success granted Harold entrance into the elite, reclusive upper ranks of the blue-blooded nobility. Mr. Smith cared nothing for the trappings of society, and his wife, due to the generosity of her sisters and brothers, was always invited to any events held in their numerous domiciles. Also, she was still accepted by others of the ton; school chums, family friends, and the like. But Hector, as the son of a Cit, was not so lucky. His aunts and uncles would have welcomed him, but he refused their

invitations, fancying to himself that others in society were snickering behind his back. He resented the fact that his mother had married below her station, thus robbing him of his rightful place among the nobility, and his title. As the daughter of an Earl, she was always a "lady". As the son of a merchant, he was nothing but a "mister". Upon his mother's death, he broke his father's heart by rejecting any idea of involvement in the family company, demanding his patrimony. In cash. He cut himself off from all contact with Mr. Smith. Changing the spelling and pronunciation of Smith to Smythe, he hyphenated it with his mother's maiden name.

Though he was mostly gone to rack and ruin, there were still traces of the sinfully handsome young man who had inspired a young, innocent Lady Judith Fellowes to vehemently defy her parents in favor of his suit. His curly hair was still abundant, with only temporal slashes of gray amid the raven-wing black. His cloud-gray eyes could still sparkle with wit, though increasingly, that wit was hurtfully spiteful. The small cupid's bow lips that once were so romantical now served to exaggerate the loose jowls of his sunken cheeks. At the moment, those lips were pursed tight, jowls quivering in anger.

"Judith, I've just left that hoyden of a daughter of yours," he began, his eyes narrowed accusingly on his wife. "She's deliberately balking me at every turn. And we know where she gets these ideas, don't we?" he asked as he stomped over to tower threateningly above Judith.

"You and your books. Your stupid belief that gels should be educated." When he received no response to his taunt, he

tried another tack. "Have you not been defying me at every turn?" His voice rose to an aggrieved wail as he spoke the greatest trespass. "Have you not even taught that uppity bitch to speak and read Greek?"

Lady Judith lowered her head, ashamed that her children had to witness their father's verbal abuse, and thanking God that her god-child Susan, her cousin's daughter, was currently out on a morning visit to a friend, thereby missing this ugly scene. Knowing her husband's moods and fits, she thought it hopeless to steer clear of a scalding scold, but felt moved to protest at any rate. "Please Hector ... the children—"

"The children, the children. What do I care if the children hear that their sister is a smart-mouthed slut, and that their disobedient mother has encouraged her in her waywardness? Beware, Madam," he warned, brandishing his riding crop in threat, "If there is any further collusion between you and that unnatural child, your own back will burn."

After the many years of abuse, the threat of promised physical retaliation did not come as a surprise to Judith, but she had not taken into consideration that her children had never before heard their father offer her violence. She was not prepared for her son's brave reaction.

"Don't you hit my Mama." Raymond shouted, coming to stand before Judith, his small arms outstretched to bar his father's way. "Go away. You jes' go away, you bad man."

"Why, you insolent pup." Hector snarled, reddening in anger, a pulse coming to throb at his temples. "I'll teach you to raise your hand to me," he promised. Raising his whip, he

brought it viciously down on his son's upraised arm, snarling, "You ungrateful little cur."

"Ow-ow. Mama. Mama, he hurt me." Raymond screamed in outraged pain. Judith rushed to her little one, frantically seeking to soothe him. Celia and Cynthia watched, horrified, as a bloody welt rose livid against the tender, baby-soft skin.

"Mister Smith." Lady Judith gritted out from between clenched teeth, finally losing her years-held control, "He is just a baby." She gathered her youngest child against her breast. He was crying now, deep sobs spasmodically jerking his little body.

Hector stood staring down at his wife, the crop frozen in up-swing. "What did you call me?" he asked in an unbelieving, furious whisper. "What did you dare to call me?"

Lady Judith looked up from comforting her baby, her eyes holding a cold look of distaste. The long habit of fear momentarily broken as with steely determination, she locked gazes with her husband. "I believe you have an appointment at your club," she stated quietly, not deigning to respond otherwise. "Please don't let us keep you—" A fine sarcasm colored that last statement, each word evenly spaced and enunciated as if the careful diction would hold back the expressions of utter loathing she felt towards her husband of twenty-one years.

* * * *

Hector slowly lowered the hand holding the bloody riding crop, even as his eyes dropped before his wife's icy glare. Somehow, in a way he could not understand, that look shook

him to his very boots. His heart thumped once, then slid down somewhere around his belly. He felt shaken and uncertain. For the first time since his wedding day, Hector knew himself to be out of control. Without a word, he turned and exited the room. Lady Judith and her children waited with bated breath until they heard the sound of the front door opening, then closing behind him.

* * * *

The Honorable Merridyth Elaine St. John-Smythe gritted her small white teeth, stubbornly refusing to release the screams that clawed at her throat as she stretched to reach the tiny row of buttons down her back. She had received many lashings from her father over the years, but this one had been applied with an especially heavy hand. Wincing as she gingerly pulled her torn, bloodstained dress away from her shoulders; Merri contemplated the depths of her father's anger and smiled. She might be hurting now, but she had won her point. Lord Ansel Wellmington, Viscount Worth, had been totally embarrassed by the show she had put on for his benefit. In response, he had withdrawn his offer of marriage. One Merri hadn't known about until two days ago.

Well, Merri mused, this flogging was worth the pain and discomfort if it rid her of the Viscount Worth's disgusting attention. Having watched her parent's marriage from close quarters, and being more aware of the true state of affairs than her mother realized, Merri possessed no desire to wed. The truth, plainly stated, was—she was terribly frightened. She paled at the idea of some man having the same total

control over her as her father exercised over her mother. In fact, she had only ever once seen a man intriguing enough to cause her to contemplate marriage.

Two years ago, Jared Tyson, the Duke of Wyndmere, had been on trial for treason. While attending criminal trials was really not something that usually caught her fancy, a group of well-born young ladies had, with several gentlemen in attendance, planned to observe the highly publicized court proceedings. As one of those ladies was Merridyth's good friend, Rebecca Henderly, who had prettily begged her to accompany them, she had given in to her pleas and made herself one of the party.

Listening and observing as all the evidence was brought against the Duke, Merri had found herself wondering what his motives could have been for betraying crown and country. Jared had everything, she had pointed out to her companions, immense wealth, extreme good looks and high family position. Treason for money was illogical in his case. Indeed, she had argued her point to some effect with the gentlemen of her party, unaware the Duke had heard her every word. For herself, she had found herself weighing his bearing, his air of righteous indignation, and could not allow any belief but that of innocence.

Merri paused in her soothing bath, sighing as she recalled how, in the midst of her impassioned speech, the Duke's eyes had suddenly swept the gallery and become entangled with hers. Met and clung...

His eyes had been the purest, darkest gold, bright and shining; molten as they bored into her very soul. It seemed,

in that moment, that they communicated. It was as though he spoke without words, pleading for her to believe in his innocence. And she had believed ... oh, she had. After that one searing glance, Merridyth had known she had found the only man she could accept as her mate; one that had not frightened her. Merridyth had mourned as if for the death of a loved-one when they'd convicted him, sent him away into exile. In the intervening years, she often recalled with a sweet sadness, that final glance shared between them before they'd rudely jerked him away. That glance had promised so much...

During her self-imposed time of mourning, her father had introduced several suitors for her approval. Successful at turning away the majority of her suitors without her father's knowledge, Merri had grown a bit complacent. Now Worth had disrupted everything. She found his sudden, persistent pursuit unsettling, especially when she discovered he had already gained her father's permission to speak to her.

Yet, it had been easy engineering the one thing certain to send Worth away speedily. She'd simply staged an occasion where she publicly discoursed with several gentlemen on the sexual vagaries of Aristotle's *Masterpiece*, such knowledge being a subject every highborn female was expected to be in well-bred ignorance of. To top all, she'd debated the facts in Greek, and had the audacity to win.

Such behavior had immediately set her beyond the pale as far as Worth was concerned. Merri was sure he would allow no wife of his to have a sensible thought in her head. Should such a thought happen to take up momentary residence, it

would be her duty to diligently chase it away; never, ever letting it escape in polite society.

A deep chuckle broke from Merri as she closed her eyes and saw again the appalled look on Viscount Worth's face when confronted with the fact that she was an unrepentant, dyed-in-the-wool bluestocking.

Kicking her ruined dress in to the corner of her small room, she stretched out on her bed, stuffing several pillows under her chest to prop her up. Hands under her chin, legs lazily crossed at the knees, she watched the clouds scudder past the small area of sky captured by her open window frame. The cool afternoon breeze fluttering her sheer, flowered curtains felt good flowing over her torn flesh.

Merri took one look at the soft cotton length of her nightrail, and knew she could not tolerate even that light material against her throbbing back. Oh, she would eventually pull one on, for she knew Berta, her long-time maid and friend, would soon be up to comfort her. The simple woman would be shocked to find her charge lazing about in the all-together. She'd dress, but not just yet. First, she would just close her eyes and rest for a moment—

Her head lowered to the satin pillow, and soon she was dreaming, impaled by a pair of golden, honey-warm eyes...

* * * *

Lady Judith sighed and glanced out the window taking a break from the letter she was penning. Her cousin-in-law, the Countess Fellhaven, had requested information on her daughter's first London season. Judith could sympathize with

Lorinda's thirst to share even minimally in her daughter's season, while being confined at home awaiting the birth of a child.

This child had come as a surprise to both her and the Earl. At thirty-seven, Lady Lorinda was somewhat beyond the usual age for birthing without problems. Many years had passed since she had last conceived and she'd suffered three miscarriages before finally giving birth to Susan. Lady Lorinda desperately wanted to bring this infant to term. Her unspoken hope was for a male child to secure the continuation of the Fellowes family name and title, and was relieved that Susan understood her concerns, and agreed with her precautions. When her doctor, after a thorough fifth-month examination, ordered complete bed-rest, she was determined to comply, even though it meant giving up accompanying her daughter to London.

Though Lady Lorinda bore a perpetual air of sadness about her for failing to give her husband an heir, everyone could see her failure in no way lessened her esteem in Andrew's doting eyes. Theirs was a true love-match, and Judith envied them their marital bliss. She also knew that her cousin, Andrew, cared not a whit about the sex of the coming child. His one concern was for his wife.

They had married long before Andrew came into his late uncle's title, and had struggled through lean times together, Lorinda never complaining, knowing how badly Andrew needed to feel that he was supporting his small family adequately. She had always joined with her husband in

politely rejecting the funds that the Earl of Fellhaven had offered many times to help ease their lot...

An urgent rapping on her private sitting-room door had Lady Judith looking up to behold Berta, Merri's long-time maid, standing in the doorway, her freckles burning against her pale cheeks. She was wringing her hands in agitation.

"What is it, Berta?" she asked, gently, motioning the young girl to come in.

"Oh, Mum." Berta exclaimed, "I can' get into Miss Merri's room. Master didn' leave the key in the usual place. I been up to check on her, and she don' answer a' tall. I heard master hit her sompen fierce this time, and I'm that worrit 'bout her ... she don' usually cry out so—"

Lady Judith cringed inwardly as she listened to the upset maid. "I think her father might have taken the key with him. I've asked Mrs. Davies to look through her set of the household keys for a duplicate, and sent one of the footmen after my husband. Meanwhile, you're not to worry." Judith came around her desk to place her arm about the chubby serving-girl's shoulders.

"In future, my husband shall no longer be indulging his habit of striking the members of this household," she promised grimly, giving the girl a reassuring squeeze. "As for your concern for Merri, she's more than likely napping. We'll go up now and check on her, shall we?" The look they exchanged said that both knew Merri had just cause to be worn out. Mistress and maid both proceeded to Merri's locked door. Tapping gently, Judith called out, "Merri, darling. Merri, are you all right?"

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"Mum...?" Thick and clumsy with sleep, Merridyth's muffled voice came through the dense door panels.

"Sweeting, we can't find the key. I've sent Harn around to your father's clubs with a note asking him to send the key home so we might let you out. I know you must be famished. Are you all right, otherwise, dear?"

"I'm fine. Just sleepy. So-o-o sleepy—"

"Then you just rest, my dear. Berta will sit outside your door should you need anything. I shan't make you wait too long. If necessary, I'll have this door removed."

Berta watched her mistress's face, awed at the new strength evident there. Perhaps things would be looking up.

Chapter Six

**Selim, You are not to worry. Indeed, I am much improved. The doctor termed it a serious case of influenza, but I swear I am much better now. Raeburn took it upon himself to oversee everything during my illness. He has practically moved in. His concern is that of an old family friend, and I was grateful for his help. He has been a pillar of strength to me. I feel I cannot leave the running of Wyndmere to Jason, often as he has offered. Really, he has not been trained for it. And it would not be proper to burden Arnold with the handling of my affairs. He is not, after all, a family member. Truthfully, I confess to an uneasiness regarding how Jared might respond to my presence. It is difficult enough to live with his second-hand rejections. I could not bear to be scorned by him in the flesh. You see, I am a coward where he is concerned. How goes the plot to distract him with your Muslim women? Take care your plan does not backfire, and he become enamored of one of your Turkish women. Please, convey my love once more. So Jared is now going by the name, Jamal? Since childhood he has been curious as to why we named him that. Now he knows.—
Emily**

London, England

Early Afternoon

"Aunt Judith."

Susan Fellowes' bright voice echoed up the stairway.

Going to the head of the landing, Lady Judith watched as her niece handed her packages to the hovering footman and removed her be-ribboned bonnet, shaking free her waist-length mane of thick, white-blond hair, tiredly running her fingers over her scalp. "I'm here, Susan. But why are you returned so soon? Did your visit with Rebeccah not go well?"

"Oh, Aunt Ju. It was above all things, wonderful. At least, everything was wonderful until..." Her words trailed off, and a peculiar expression passed over her petite face. Taking a deep breath, Susan squared her shoulders and gave her honorary aunt a direct look from piercing peridot eyes.

"Aunt Judith, at tea this afternoon, people started saying some horrid things about Merri. It seems that maggot, Viscount Worth, is spreading it about that he's had to break off his engagement with Merri because she is not a well-bred lady." Susan gave her relative an aggrieved look. "I informed everyone there in no uncertain terms that Merri had never been betrothed to Worth. Lord Darrow claimed to have been there when Merri made some rather unsavory comments, but I'll lay odds he was coached by Worth. Everyone knows Darrow is brown-nosed where Worth is concerned."

"Susan." Lady Judith exclaimed. "*Lay odds...? Brown-nosed...?*" she almost whispered. "What vulgar expressions. I believe I have mentioned before that young ladies do not use cant..." The admonition was automatic, as inside, Judith was reeling in shock as the meaning of several phrases from Hector's recent tirade became apparent.

"Aunt Judith, how can you worry about such trivial things at a time like this? Merri's social life is in danger." Susan chided, beginning an undignified, rushing ascent up the stairs to where her aunt stood. "Where is Merri, anyway? Why did she never join us at Lady Henderly's? Both Rebecca and her mother asked after her, and I didn't know what to say—"

"Merridyth is in her room, sleeping," Judith told her niece. She put forth a hand to halt Susan's headlong rush to Merridyth's door. "I'm afraid she had a ... disagreement with her father."

"Oh, Aunt Judith, not again," Susan cried, her outburst involuntary. Shaking, Susan allowed her aunt to turn her away from Merri's door. The bizarre, twisted relationships that existed between her uncle and his family seemed disquieting and unnerving to Susan. She had never before been subjected to the emotional strain and discomfort that was part and parcel of life among the St. John-Smythes.

"Shouldn't I go to her?" Susan asked, compassion for her cousin coloring her voice.

"You couldn't get in; Hector has the key. I've sent some of the men out to track him down, and they should return momentarily. Meanwhile, Berta is sitting outside the door should she awaken and need something." Lady Judith patted Susan's hand. "You're a dear to offer."

Though the two cousins were nothing alike in looks and temperament, being almost exact opposites, during the course of Susan's stay they had become as close as sisters. Merridyth, the elder by two years, had hip-length, curling raven-black hair. Her clear gray eyes, a legacy from her

father, were huge, and fringed with thick inky black lashes that swept her cheeks when lowered. Her nose was pert, stopping just short of tip-tilted. Her lips were another gift from Hector, being shaped in an exquisite cupid's bow of blushing pink; a pink that found its echo in the coloring of her high-boned cheeks. Merridyth carried a small excess of pounds that were off-set by her unfashionable height—she stood five feet, seven inches in her stockings—rendering her voluptuously, pleasingly plump, though jealous debutantes and their mothers were wont to comment on her excesses of both height and weight. However, the men of the Ton were drawn to her lush curves as well as her dark, vibrant coloring.

Being well educated, she was unafraid to voice her opinions in any company, and often did—with disastrous results. It was because of her forthright attitude that she had not been as popular as most during her first season. She intimidated the young males of the ton with distressing ease and many of the older ones, also.

Susan, on the other hand, had pale gold hair that denied any attempt at curling. Though thick and lustrous, it fell to below her waist in an unfashionable fall as straight as a sheaf of wheat. Peridot green eyes peeped from beneath pale gold lashes. Her nose was slim and straight, and her mouth, wide for the prevailing fashion, was graced with full lips that were shaded a delicate peach. She just escaped being petite at five feet, three inches. Both cousins were generously endowed with feminine curves, family names and money. And though Merridyth had the larger portion, it was Susan, with her quietly shy ways, that was the more sought after.

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As Susan and Lady Judith began to descend the stairs, Judith found herself pondering over her husband's recent behavior towards their daughter. The furious outbursts and beatings had begun three years ago, just before Merri was to have her first season. Prior to that, Hector had seemed to dote on Merri—in as much as it was possible for him to dote on anyone other than himself. Somewhere, there was a connection that she was overlooking. The key had to be in the past ... and possibly with the Viscount Worth. Her mind wandered down familiar paths...

It had not taken long for Hector to reveal his true interest in her. Much as she had hated to admit it, her parents had been right all along. Despite the trappings of high living, and his connection to the St. Johns, he was just a common fortune hunter; one with enough address to fool a young, fresh-from-the-country girl with declarations of romantic love. Judith clearly remembered the night her life fell apart. She had discovered Hector's true character the night of her wedding. Even now, she shuddered as the memories swept over her, blocking the here-and-now, and plunging her into a maelstrom of remembered emotion...

"Well, you certainly managed to fool me, didn't you, my dear?" Hector's smooth, quiet voice dripped with sarcasm, his handsome face twisted into an ugly mask of anger and scorn. They were standing in the wedding suite of Gunther's hotel where the lavish afternoon-into-evening reception had been held.

"I don't know what you mean, Hector," Judith quavered, some self-preserving instinct causing her to draw back from her advancing husband.

All during the reception, he had been silently brooding. Judith had stood by his side, growing increasingly more nervous and fearful as the hours wore on. The many sad looks she received from her mother, and the angry, helpless glances her father was shooting her way doing nothing to soothe her ruffled feelings. So that now, standing before her new husband in a modest nightgown, she was reduced to trembling.

"Don't you, my dear?" He purred; the danger palpable in his silky voice. Hector moved to the bedside table. Resplendent in a wine colored velvet smoking jacket, he was every young girl's picture of a romantic hero. Picking up a small nick-knack, he turned it absently in his hands. "How could you not know that your father had disinherited you?" There was a loud crash as the figurine shattered in the fireplace.

Judith jumped; her eyes wide with fright and disbelief. She dazedly shook her head back and forth. "I ... I don't believe you. My father wouldn't ... wouldn't do ... that ... not without telling me."

"Exactly." Hector growled, grabbing his shrinking wife by the shoulders and shaking her. "So you did know." He tossed her from him in disgust, and she landed in a heap against the side of the bed. She attempted to raise herself up, to confront his raving with dignity, but her muscles shook so, she could not gain control of her legs. She stayed on the floor, dazed,

listening as a stream of foul invective poured from Hector's mouth. With each sentence, her soul died a little more, shriveling under the heat of her husband's exposed duplicity.

"A lousy monthly stipend." He finally spat out. "A miserly stipend to keep up appearances, he said. Shall I tell you what else your dear father has done? Or don't you know that either, Judith?"

Squeezing her eyes shut over the pressure of sudden tears, Judith slowly shook her head. "I don't know, Hector. I honestly don't kn—" Her voice caught on a tearful gasp.

"You lying slut." The words impacted with almost as much force as the heavy blow from her husband's hand cracking against her cheek. The physical abuse shocked Judith, having never in her life been struck. She raised a shaking hand to her bruised cheek and huddled pathetically against the side of the mattress.

Hector stood over her, clear gray eyes narrowed. The sight of Judith cowering at his feet brought a rush of power to him. Suddenly, she was all of society in one package. His—not only to command, but to punish. The sense of control was overwhelming. Five minutes ago, he had felt no physical desire for his wife. Her slight curves not nearly abundant enough to spark his interest, but now his manhood rose up against his form-fitting trousers as he visualized the punishment he would mete out to this duke's daughter, and through her, the almighty Ton. The pressure of the taut cloth against the rigid length of his swollen organ increased his arousal, and Hector absently used his hand to ease his discomfort. The look of fear in his wife's eyes made him

chuckle sensually. "Since it seems I get nothing of real value from this marriage, I might as well reap this one benefit..."

Judith's eyes widened as Hector calmly began removing his clothing. When he stood naked before her, his weapon jutting out before him like a deep red battering ram, he came to her, lifting her none too gently from where she slumped beside the bed. One quick wrench tore her expensive, lace bed-gown from neck to waist.

"No-o-o." she moaned, shaking her head in terror as he coldly bared her to his chill examinations. He pushed her so that she fell sideways across the bed, and followed her down, his hands roughly grasping her knees to spread her legs, making her vulnerable and open to his callous approach. He positioned himself at the cleft of her thighs, then brutishly entered her, ripping through her maidenhood.

She was small and dry and could not withhold her cry of pain at his fierce entry. Tears flooded her eyes and fell across her cheeks as she lay helpless under her husband, his hips thrusting powerfully, hurtfully, forcing his engorged member deep within her narrow, abused woman's place.

"He has bypassed you completely," Hector taunted, grinding into her, pounding into her, not caring that he hurt her. Liking that he hurt her. "All of the money goes to your first-born, to be released when that child marries," he grunted out against her skin, his anger and passion flaring anew as he witnessed the bruises already forming on her pale skin.

Hector's mouth groped wildly at her breasts, teeth worrying Judith's nipples in an attempt to punish. Her

groaning cries from the additional pain caused him to peak. The urge for completion was irresistible and his tempo increased, the bed shaking under his fevered onslaught.

The change frightened Judith, and her eyes jerked open to reveal Hector's face contorted into a mask of animal lust. Numbly, she watched as a strange flush colored his skin, watched as the corded muscles in his neck swelled and distended. A guttural moan escaped from his wide-open mouth as he lunged hard one last time, holding high up inside her. She felt a jerking throb, as though the ... thing inside her had a life all its own. Then a jet of warm fluid erupted there, where his member was deeply embedded. She winced anew as her new husband's body collapsed heavily upon her.

Hector got up shortly, and left the bed. After lighting a cheroot and shrugging into his robe, he sauntered back over to where his wife lay. Terror caused her body to quake uncontrollably. He smiled, looking on in derision as Judith nervously clutched at a corner of the bedspread, pathetically attempting to cover her helplessly trembling body. She cringed as he yanked the covers away from her, exposing her shrinking flesh to his hard gaze. A hand at her chin forced her head up to meet his eyes.

"Do you think I'm enamored with this child's body of yours?" Hector drawled sardonically. "It was necessary to consummate this farce so there'd be no question of an annulment. As long as we remain married, I shall receive a monthly stipend. I'll not be cheated out of that, too." He grimaced in disgust, sweeping his wife's body with a fulminating glance. "But all may not be lost, after all. There

are ways to control a child's monies, especially a girl-child. But first we'll have to make one..."

Lady Judith blinked, disorganized by the onslaught of memories. Stumbled and caught herself quickly, grateful that Susan was still holding onto her arm. The descent right there was traitorous.

"Are you all right, Aunt Judith?" Susan questioned gently, tightening her hold on the older woman.

"Yes. Fine, Dear." Lady Judith said, absently patting her niece's hand, her attention riveted to her inner landscape. The brutal memories had replayed in seconds and though they had lost the power to terrify her, one ominous sentence continued to echo endlessly: "*... there are ways to control a child's monies...*"

As realization set in, heat burst in her head, rushing down the paths of blood and nerves until Judith felt as if a fireball had ignited under her skin. *He had sold her.* That inhuman, un-fatherly husband of hers had sold their daughter to the one money-grubbing Lord who would return to Hector a portion of his marriage-gotten goods.

The process of rebellion that had begun in the morning room earlier that afternoon now came bubbling to a head. In truth, it had been a gradual change over the years culminating in a final tiredness of always being abused. She was tired of living in a state of terrified jumpiness. She was tired of knowing her children were constantly frightened for her ... and for themselves. Whatever caused it, her restraint at long last snapped its bonds. She was free. Believing that she knew best, a young, headstrong girl had married against

her parents' wishes. Her marriage to date was the result of her youthful rebellion. Looking back, Lady Judith realized she had never rebelled against Hector's treatment of her because she had felt deserving of punishment; perceiving her wrong-headedness, and her opposition against her parents, as actions requiring penance. And she had paid copiously over the years, till even *she* felt she had paid enough.

But Merri had not asked for this. Her beloved daughter didn't deserve being a pawn in her father's continued quest for acquisition. Lady Judith's jaw firmed as she determined within herself that her daughter would not be mistreated further, would not be sacrificed upon the alter of Hector's greed. Unlike herself, Merridyth would not lie beneath a husband who had more love for her money than for herself. Hector had gone beyond the pale, seeking to profit from her daughter's unhappiness—for who could be happy married to Worth? And all for money, as usual. Judith—like every other well-informed mother in the ton—knew Lord Worth lived on promises and appearances. He was a gambler and a slacker, a wastrel who depended on the good name of his family to retain his position in society. A nobly bred fortune-hunter who was more concerned for the cut of his clothes than for his servants' welfare and whose solution to his money problems was to marry it. He was not good enough to lick Merridyth's slipper. Eyes narrowed, Judith vowed that Worth would never so much as lay a finger on her daughter.

Lady Judith smiled grimly as she entered her study. Like a general, she readied her battle plans, preparing to wage war. *Plain ol' Mr. Smith had better look to himself.* She thought,

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filled with determination. His familial reign of terror had come to an end.

Chapter Seven

Selim, I grow so weary of missing my son. Will he ever forgive me? Was what I did so wrong? I only wanted to save his life. Would he have really preferred that I let events take their natural course and see him hang for treason? I cannot believe that he would have it so. Would you ask him for me—? Ask him when he came to be so unforgiving. I recall when he was sixteen and was sent down from Cambridge. The masters had wrongly accused him of participating in a series of disgusting midnight revels. To protect his roommate, whose father was a religious fanatic, he silently took the blame to save his friend from a severe caning and possible disinheritance. You see, he knew that he could tell Randolph and me the truth and we would believe him. We were so close a family. Sometimes I think I shall die just from the pain of our emotional separation. I was deeply depressed the other day when Arnold came by to visit. He took me for an invigorating ride and managed to take my mind off my problems for awhile. I was very grateful. But nothing can keep my thoughts from my beloved son for long. Speak to him for me. I am not as young as I used to be. Shall I die without the love of my only child embracing me? Oh, Selim, I fear I shall never know his love again. Why can he not forgive me?—Emily

London, England

Two hours before sunset

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by Camille Anthony

The Boar's Head was a dingy, nondescript little pub situated midway between the fashionable dwellings of the privileged upper-crust and the fringes of London's worst slums. It catered to any and all who could pay the cover charge demanded by the landlord, and was a common meeting place for those individuals of all stations that had dealings with the darker side of human nature.

It was around four in the afternoon when a hired hack pulled up to the back entrance of the pub, carrying a tall, slim man. His cravat was snowy-white and fell in carefully contrived casualness to rest against a figured-gold waistcoat. The outfit was completed with a matching maroon coat and pantaloons that clung snugly to his long, spare legs. The points of his linen shirt were sharply starched and reached well beyond the lobes of his ears, making it almost impossible to turn his head. After a quick glance assured the street was empty, the man alighted.

With studied nonchalance, the man entered the pub. A furtive monetary exchange and a quietly-spoken word to the barkeep gave him egress to the door behind which lay the pub's labyrinth of secret passageways, which in turn led to even more secret rooms.

The man stopped at the door of one of those most clandestine rooms. The men guarding it were easily identified as foreigners both by their swarthy skin and their outlandish clothing. The Englishman shook his head in disgust.

That stiff-necked pride of theirs would lead to their discovery, he reckoned. These Turks would never learn to bend to necessity, to utilize deceit. Dressed so outlandishly,

they were infinitely memorable. Well, it was their funeral ... literally. He was here to collect the generous payment being offered for services rendered. No one would ever be able to connect him to the disappearance of his ex-fiancée.

Looking back, he wondered what maggot had put it into his head that Merridyth St. John-Smythe would suit him nicely for a wife. He'd had some erroneous idea that she'd be properly grateful ... after all, she was much plumper than the current fashion, was older than most gels still on the social trot, and had failed to completely "take" her first season out. None of the three conditions were singly disastrous, but together they formed a formidable obstacle to a "desirable connection". While her family ties had helped him overlook Merridyth's lack of figure, fame and youth, it was her pending inheritance that the Viscount Worth had found so fatally attractive. She would come into over three-quarters of a million pounds upon her marriage, and contrary to appearances, the Viscount was in dire need of those funds.

He recalled the day St. John-Smythe had sent up his card requesting a business audience. Normally, he did not deign to entertain such social riffraff as St. John-Smythe, whom Society laughingly knew to be plain "Smith", but these days his straitened circumstances dictated his social contacts. He had found himself listening to a business proposal that would enable him to live—to flourish, really—in the style to which his family prominence and rank entitled him. He had readily agreed to St. John-Smythe's demand for one-fourth of the dowry for he had never intended that the old fool should see

one pence of the money. But all this was before the gel had humiliated him in public.

Not even her money was worth the snickers that followed him about town. That demmed rackety Earl of Donchester'd had the audacity to laugh in his face at Whites. But he'd not be cheated. He was going to reap some benefit off the St. John-Smythe bitch and hurt her in the process. That was true justice. A fitting revenge.

He walked up boldly to the servants guarding the door he had been directed to. "I am here to see your master."

The two hulking guards did not betray by a flicker of an eyelash that a human had spoken to them.

Worth did not know what to make of this outlandish behavior. He drew himself up to his full height, speaking harshly. "Did you hear me? I said your master is expecting me."

The monster to the right turned his dark, burning eyes to the pale man before him. "You did not say, before, that the Bey was expecting you. Remain here."

Rapping a peculiar tattoo on the door panel before entering, the large guard waited until an answering rap sounded from inside the room. He disappeared shortly to return almost immediately. Bowing towards the Englishman, he gestured him into the room.

The man seated at the end of the room was small and dark with a neatly-trimmed, pointed beard that gave off the fragrance of sandalwood. His eyes were large and well shaped; their color a deep, dense obsidian that seemed to swallow light. If it was true that a person's eyes were

windows through which their souls could be discerned, then the Bey's windows were closed, and his soul was hidden or missing. His probing, intense gaze seemed to reveal one's insecurities and foibles, while concealing his own.

His head was covered by a turban adorned with a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg. The stone glowed with the fires of a crimson sunset. His robes were stiff with gold embroidery and what looked to be genuine pearls. His feet rested against a cushion, which in turn rested on the back of a small, light-skinned page-boy, dressed in identical clothes as the Bey.

A hookah rested on an ornamental stand, and occasionally, the Turkish potentate pulled against the mouthpiece with a strong suction drawing the fumes of the powerful hashish deep into his lungs.

There were four other people in the room: two guards, who could have been the twins of the two outside the room, and a third individual who was, most likely, also a guard.

He was a giant of a man; his head coming to just inches below the eight-foot ceiling. His chest and shoulders were immense, his arms and thighs as thick as the trunks of young elm trees. His skin was the darkest black Worth had ever seen; his teeth and the whites of his eyes, the whitest white. He wore trousers of a sturdy striped material, loose and baggy, banded by a wide red sash that held a wicked-looking curved sword.

This behemoth stood to the left of the Bey's ornately decorated chair. The stony gaze of this man settled upon Worth, causing a frisson of fear to slide down his spine and pool in a lump of discomfort in his innards. Worth knew that

the mammoth would, with an order from the Bey, kill him and enjoy the doing of it. So great was his fear that he almost overlooked the last occupant of the room, and that surprised him more than his fear, for a beautiful woman was something the Viscount never overlooked.

Worth prided himself on being a man-about-town; one with enough polish to carry off any situation, but what he now witnessed was frankly shocking. A beautiful oriental girl, petite, with large black eyes, and thick black hair falling straight to the bend of her knees, moved from one side of the room to stand before the Bey. She was completely naked. The translucent tones of her skin and the fluidity of grace she exhibited with each movement of her small, compact body was spellbinding. Her figure was generously curved, her breasts luscious globes topped by coral nipples. Her eyes modestly lowered before her master's, she spoke two sentences. Her words, though beautiful in their liquid tones, were a foreign jumble to Worth. But through the supplicating gestures she made—arms uplifted, pleading—and the urgency of her requests, her voice sliding into a whine on the last words, he was able, somewhat, to understand the gist of the matter ... this woman had failed at some appointed task, and was seeking forgiveness—

Ignoring his slave for the moment, the Bey addressed Worth. His voice was soft and melodious. "The disciplining of a slave is a responsibility to be taken very seriously." His eyes captured Worth's, his gaze piercing and direct. "Allah gives them into our keeping," he continued quietly, "to instruct and train as if they were our children. A lesson well learned, a

duty correctly performed, is rewarded. In contrast, a servant that refuses to perform an expected duty, or one so reckless as to refuse training..." The Bey shrugged his shoulders, "That servant must be corrected. To withhold punishment is to confuse the servant. Shirka." His gaze whipped to the giant man behind his throne, his right hand indicated the frightened woman.

Stepping from his place by the wide chair, Shirka held out his left hand. One of the guards hurried to place a small, many-lashed whip in it. Gesturing to the girl, he indicated the floor before the Bey.

With a wild, frightened cry, the girl ran towards the throne, throwing her body across the knees of the Turk. A sharp word, a fierce frown drove her in terror back to where the hulking servant stood waiting impassively.

Slowly, lips trembling, the girl sank to her knees.

Gathering her hair in one large fist, Shirka applied an upward pressure until the girl's knees barely touched the floor, stringing out the pure lines of her body. With a sudden move Shirka brought down the whip, the sharp sounds loud in the room as it cracked again and again against the slave's back. Her body arched away from the blows, her lush breasts quivering as her body trembled under the pain of the lashing.

The voice of the Bey continued all the while the whip rose and fell in measured strokes. "You might notice that the lash is made of softly tanned leather. The body of my slave is precious to me, and I do not desire that she be permanently marked. The pain, however, is intense. She is to be given ten strokes and has been informed that the lashing will be

doubled should she cry out." He tilted his head to better observe the proceeding.

Shirka brought the lash down one final time. Hand still entwined in her hair, he drew the girl to her feet. Thrusting the whip in her face, he waited until she brought her lips to the handle submissively kissing the instrument of her punishment.

As she was turned to face the Bey, Worth noted that the girl's back was patterned with crisscrossing swollen red welts, her face wet with tears. Unbelievably, Worth felt a swelling of his own. He shifted uncomfortably. He shifted again, feeling the cold gaze of the foreign potentate trained upon him.

The Bey addressed the girl, his voice as gentle as a summer breeze. The girl answered voice thick with tears and fright.

A sharp question from the Bey.

The girl's body shook as though in a strong wind. With bowed head, she whispered her response. At a nod from the Bey, she sank to her knees and approached her master. Circling the small page who had not moved during this entire interval, she eased herself between the open legs of the Bey burrowing her head up under his robes. The Bey pulled at his hookah and obligingly widened his legs to give his slave easier access. The disciplining of his reluctant slave in hand, he returned his attention to his visitor. Motioning him forward, the Bey asked, "You are Lord Worth?"

Worth nodded, unable to make his voice work. He was incensed, could not believe that this barbarian was having himself serviced while holding a business meeting with him.

"I am Emil al Hadeem el Bakaar, Bey of Seyhan, servant of the Sultan Selim III. May Allah lighten your days. You know of a female? One who fits all of our criteria?"

Again Worth nodded.

"Her name?" The Bey's voice held a sharpness that jerked Worth out of his retrospection.

"Um ... um, her name is Merridyth St. John-Smythe".

His face completely still, the Bey contemplated Worth for a long moment.

"Is this not the woman recently connected with you in the newspapers?"

Worth's mouth went dry. *How the hell did he know that?*

"Well, yes." He cleared his throat. "She is everything you mentioned: learned, of good birth, a virgin, and not too young—"

"And yet you found her ... not worthy of you? Not to your taste, hmm? Perhaps there is something you experienced with her? Something you might wish to share with us about her that caused you to reject her as suitable as your bride?"

Worth looked at the Bey, trying and failing to keep his eyes from straying to the slight rippling of the cloth covering the man's lap; the betraying movements of the slave hidden within its voluminous folds. Worth jerked his eyes back up to the face of the Bey, whose countenance bore a knowing look that discomfited the sweating Lord.

Remembering his humiliation urged Worth to secure his ex-fiancée's downfall. "I haven't had intimate relations with her," He muttered angrily, "if that's what you mean to imply. But I can tell you why I found her unsatisfactory. The girl is

headstrong and haughty. She thinks herself above everyone because she is a great heiress. She tried to humiliate me in front of—"

The Bey had straightened in his seat. "How great an heiress?"

"Three-quarters of a million pounds." Worth answered in sulky tones insulted that he was interrupted as though he were no better than a school boy. *Didn't these Cretins know who he was?* "She comes into it when she marries."

"I see..." The Bey closed his eyes. His hands clinched on the arms of his chair, knuckles showing pale from the strength of his grip. His body tensed, every muscle rigid and still. Then his head lolled backwards coming to rest against the raised support at his back. His mouth opened, and a husky foreign word was hissed slowly, repeatedly between tightly gritted teeth. A long sigh left him. He took a shaky pull on the hookah. Pulled again. Held it, savoring the potent, acrid smoke. Opened his eyes.

The slave crawled out from between his legs and came to sit on her knees to the right of the Bey's throne. She hid her face, still damp with tears, against her master's hard thigh. Her body, already flushed from her exertions, tremored out of control when the Bey's right hand languidly toyed with her left breast. "Pride is not an attribute tolerated in a slave," he stated, returning to the topic of Merridyth St. John-Smythe. "That—and any other undesirable trait—can be conditioned out of her. This one here," he continued to caress the naked slave girl at his feet, "began life as a royal princess in the Chinese court. She might eventually make an adequate slave.

"As for your haughty lady," the Bey said, bringing his direct gaze to bear on Ware, "we will pay two thousand pounds now. If we are satisfied, you will receive the other eight thousand pounds in a draft drawn on the Bank of London."

"I was told ten thousand for a name and the direction of her house." Worth exclaimed, unhappy about having to wait for the majority of the money he had thought to collect immediately.

The Bey's eyes narrowed. "You were misinformed. Perhaps you would like to lodge a complaint...? I will be happy to deal with them—"

"No. It is of no matter, only—" Worth hesitated. "I know you will find all in order, only ... uh ... what would happen if ... should you decide not to take Miss St. John-Smythe?"

The Bey raised an expressive eyebrow. "Why, someone would need to return to collect our two thousand pounds from you." He tapped his pointed chin with a dark finger. "Shirka, I believe. Yes. I send Shirka to handle all ... collections when necessary."

Worth looked over at the hulking giant who was smiling, fingering his curved scimitar, and suppressed a shudder. "I believe you'll be satisfied," He croaked nervously.

"I hope so, Lord Worth." The Bey steepled his fingers. "It is always better that one's superiors be pleased. Shirka will see you out."

Worth was glad to go. Outside once more, Lord Worth took a deep cleansing breath and stepped into his coach. Once safely inside, his neutral expression changed to one of

disgust. *His superiors*. They should live to see the day. He knew a slight when he was dealt one; Emil having that slut between his legs while conversing with him. As for the money, two thousand pounds wasn't much, but it would at least keep the hounds at bay for a while longer. As soon as he had the remainder of his monies, he intended to inform the Harbor guards of the Turkish ship and its cargo. Merridyth would be ruined when it was known she had been aboard, and that damned, slimy Turk, the Bey, would fail in his mission for his superiors.

Inside, the Bey was issuing orders. "You will take two of the guards and go at once to this house. You will discover the maiden and bring her to the ship. Take care no one witnesses your deed. The one maiden we have already purchased is proving to be ... slow in her lessons. She might not work out. Meanwhile, our most illustrious Lord is impatient to present his beloved son with an English rose, therefore, we sail immediately upon your return."

"It shall be as you wish, my Lord," Shirka promised. A hungry glint appeared in his eyes. "What of the Lord who has just departed?"

"The infidel dog does not know when he has been insulted." The Bey laughed, not at all humorously. "He is ignorant as are all these indolent English nobility. Yet there was ... something, about him, Shirka. A low cunning I could not like. Have one of the guards follow him. Report to me his every movement, even after we depart. I believe he bears watching."

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by Camille Anthony

Shirka bowed himself almost to the ground. "Even as you command, Great One, let it be so."

Emil rose from his chair and sauntered across the room. The little page scurried to lift the draperies that secured the bedroom alcove, watching curiously as his master beckoned to his recently acquired slave. She hurried to his side in panicked response. Using only one hand, Emil caressed her soft skin, carefully attending to all of her erogenous zones. Against her will, a moan escaped lips opened to gasp suddenly rare air. Her soft brown nipples budded into tight, pert flowers. Her body shook as if buffeted by a strong wind, and a tear leaked down her cheek, evidence of painful emotions. Emil intently noted her reactions. He inclined his head towards the bed, at the same time motioning his little slave away from the alcove.

"Let us attempt that last lesson again, Princess," he suggested softly, in his most dangerous voice. "This time with no interruptions..."

Chapter Eight

Selim, Please inform Jared I desperately need to be in touch with him. Tell him he has won. If he will answer this one letter, I shall no longer bother to send letters to him only to see them returned to me unopened. He has desired this all along, and I am only giving him what he wants ... Why then, does it feel like I am deserting him?—Emily

Chapter Nine

Open Sea, November
One day out of London

A pounding headache was the first thing that Merridyth noticed upon awakening. The second was that, by the brightness of the light stabbing into her tortured eyes, it was no longer late afternoon. But the most frightening realization was the chilling fact that she was not at home, safe in her own room. Indeed, the plunging, rhythmic movements of the pillow-strewn deck on which she was sprawled told her she was aboard a wave-tossed ship. And she had no memory of how she came to be there.

Moving cautiously, Merri sat up, shivering. She was still garbed in the thin cotton nightgown she had donned before Susan had entered her room with the dinner tray. A fierce pain radiated from a knot at the base of her skull. Raising her hand, she gingerly felt at the back of her head. Exploring with her fingers, she believed the skin to be unbroken, and this was born out when she looked at her hand, noting the absence of blood.

Squinting against the light, Merridyth studied the cabin, sweeping an observant gaze over everything in sight. It was large, as ship cabins go, and of an odd shape. Obviously, every space was utilized, nothing going to waste. The walls had been softened with the draping of cloths suspended from the low-beamed ceiling. The beautifully tinted, sheer lengths diffused the brilliant light pouring from the two portholes. It

was like being encased in the heart of a rainbow. Huge multi-colored pillows littered all but the central area of the room in which a low, heavily-carved, black lacquered teakwood table held pride of place. Everything was soft and muted, pleasing to the eye. In short, it was a room designed to please the eyes of women. And there were two other females occupying the room. Merri recognized one of the women.

"Su—" Merridyth blinked at the croaking coming from her throat. She swallowed to ease her dry, swollen throat, and tried again.

"Susan. Move carefully." She warned as she watched her pale cousin stirring. "Heavens. I can see the lump on your head from here. What happened? I can't seem to recall a thing—"

Moaning a little, Susan gingerly raised herself to a sitting position. A deeper groan escaped her as pain exploded at her temples in answer to her movement. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to crawl across the floor towards her cousin.

"I ... think we've been abducted. I seem to recall two foreign-looking men that snatched us from your chamber. Do you—?"

Merri carefully moved her head in negation. "I cannot recall anything beyond placing our empty dinner tray in the corridor for Berta to remove."

"Heavens, Merri." Susan's gaze was worried as she examined her cousin, frustrated because she didn't even know what she should look for. "I don't remember you hitting your head when you fell ... oh. But later ... when we were in the carriage ... one of them did strike you. Do you think a

blow on the head could have caused you to forget those events?"

"All I know is that my head aches abominably." Merri said.

Across the room, the other occupant watched as the cousins tenderly helped each other maneuver themselves until they were resting side by side against one wall of the cabin, her expression one of intense hatred.

Despite her mulish expression, the girl was beautiful, in the first flush of womanhood. Her figure was still girlish, long slim legs giving her a coltish look. Her hands and feet were fine-boned and small, the curve of her breasts slight. Her waist was tiny enough not to require the tight lacings of a corset to mold her into fashion's ideal. Only the generous curving of her hips declared her feminine maturity.

Red was the common name of the magnificent mane of hair that graced her head, though it was deserving of a much more flamboyant description. The lustrous curls were a dark, deep mahogany until light revealed the crimson strands highlighted by glints of gold throughout.

A lively intelligence shone out of her eyes, which were an interesting admixture of browns, framed in thick sable lashes. At the moment the girl's eyes were a dull brown shot with flecks of burnished gold as she directed her angry glare towards the two women sharing her prison.

From where they reclined against the rough walls of the ship's cabin, the two cousins felt the scorching power of the woman's gaze and cringed, wondering why the girl directed such an inimical look towards them. In retaliation, they subjected the other to an intense perusal of their own.

She seemed to be in much the same state as they. Exchanging speaking glances, they shrugged, at a loss to understand why she should bear them any ill will.

Merridyth nodded at the woman. "Hello. My name is Merridyth St. John-Smythe, and this is my cousin, Lady Susan Fellows. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Hell."

Merridyth's mouth opened to deliver a tart response when Susan's gentle touch halted her. Across the cabin, the young woman's face had crumpled into despair before she could hide it behind her upraised hands.

Through tears, sounding shocked and disgusted at her own course language, she said, "A week ago I should never have thought such a word, let alone used it." Even under stress, her voice held the refined lilt associated with those of well-born Scottish blood.

"Please," Susan whispered, "We did not mean to upset you; however, we need to know where we are and what has happened to us. Can you tell us how we've come to be here?"

Her voice seemed to calm the girl, and with some effort, she regained control enough to answer, "My name is Seana. Lady Seana Brigitta MacCarris. And I, like you, have been sold into slavery."

"What—?"

"Sold?"

"I believe so," Seana answered quietly. "Though I cannot say for sure how you came to be here, I know for a fact that I was sold to these people."

"Why?"

"How? Who would dare—?" Merri asked, so indignant she could hardly get the words out.

"In your case, I do not know." Seana answered with a shrug. "But I was sold by my own brother—my twin." Her voice throbbed with emotion and new-welling tears. Her small hands clenched into impotent fists, and her body vibrated with the helpless anger engulfing her. "I shall never, ever forgive him. One day he shall pay for this betrayal."

"Lady MacCarris—." Merri called sharply, bringing the girl back from her visions of vengeance. "Now is not the time to be distracted with thoughts other than escape. Do you know who these people are?"

Seana heaved a sigh, and fought to compose herself. "I apologize for my loss of control." She continued after the girls accepted her apology with a dismissing wave. "I believe us to be on a Turkish brigantine. The people I have had occasion to see or speak with appear to be Eastern in dress and habit—"

"I remember something." Susan exclaimed. "The men who attacked us were dressed in outfits that reminded me of those stories from the Tales of the Arabian Nights. Merri, you recall that risqué book Rebecca shared with us this summer...?"

"I remember the book," Merridyth admitted, "However, the events of our kidnapping still remain vague. Now would be a good time to refresh my memory, Susan. Then Seana can tell us her story if that is agreeable—?" A quick glance at the titian-haired girl assured them of her agreement.

"...so, because you were still too tired to go down to supper, I ate with you in your room. You had just finished setting the dinner tray outside, and closing the door when we

both heard a noise at the window. A big man was climbing over the sill, and before you could reopen the door and call for help, he blew through a small pipe. Something struck you in the neck, and you collapsed almost immediately. I managed to scream once, before I was koshed on the head by the second man through the window. When I awoke, I felt myself lowered onto a coach bench. You had regained consciousness and were struggling and yelling. I saw your captor hit you and you slumped over. They placed a foul-smelling cloth over my nose and mouth, and that is all I truly recall until I heard you calling me just now—" Susan coughed roughly, tried to swallow. "My throat is so dry," she complained. "I need water. When will these people come to check on us? Don't they care how we are faring? Surely they did not go through the trouble of obtaining us just to see us perish from neglect—?"

"They will come," Seana promised ominously, "in their own good time—."

"Why not tell us your story now, Seana," Merri prompted gently, concerned at the vagueness that seemed to come and go at random in the girl's eyes. Watching Seana wring her hands in agitation, Merri feared that the young woman had reached the limits of her endurance and with little more adversity, might break under the strain.

"My brother is Laird Sean Ian MacCarris," Seana began in a strained whisper, "the new Earl of Rotherdam. You see, my cousin Gerold was The MacCarris, but he and Sean went hunting three months ago, and there was an accident. Anyway, everyone thought it was an accident—"

"Do you mean to say your brother *murdered* your cousin?" Susan gasped. Merridyth was also shocked at what Seana seemed to be implying.

Seana shrugged. "Once I would have said such an act was impossible for my brother. Now ... who's to say? No one witnessed the act, and from his recent actions, I can no longer believe him innocent. Not even of that heinous crime."

Seana's statement had a sobering effect on the two listeners. They shared the closest relationship as cousins, and found it hard to accept that one cousin could kill the other for gain. They linked hands needing to feel connected to each other.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Susan apologized, almost sorry they had asked to hear Seana's story. "Pray, continue."

"Well, Sean was all set to take up his role as the rich Laird of MacCarris Hall when the solicitors came with the news that Gerold had gambled everything away. All Sean held was an empty title and a large amount of inherited debts. The lands and hall were entailed, so they couldn't be sold off, yet there was no capital for their upkeep. Since Sean was addicted to gambling himself, and had long since gone through what little inheritance our father had left him, he found a way to break the trust-fund my mother had left me as a dowry. He went to London at my expense.

"I objected, of course," Seana said bitterly, "However, he was the executor of our parents' estates ... and my legal guardian. Where could I turn for protection against my own brother?"

Merridyth nodded sympathetically. She knew what it was like to be vulnerable to someone who misused their power, who masqueraded as an upright pillar of society, all the while secretly inflicting harm, telling themselves their abuse was in the best interest of the victim.

Seana met Merri's sad, wise eyes and knew there was a story behind her understanding look. Against her will, she found her lips twitching into a smile. Her trust had been brutally betrayed and she felt it would be difficult to ever rely on someone again. But for some reason, she felt drawn to the two cousins. There was a sense of connectedness about them, something that linked them and made them, together, strong. Seana ached for that sense of belonging. To all intents and purposes, her brother was dead to her. She was adrift in the world with no family. No one to comfort her and stand between her and catastrophe—her eyes roved over the two girls sitting so close to each other, lending each other strength—no one to hold hands with ... She sighed and continued. "My dowry paid off the majority of the debts against the land, and even then Sean was not satisfied. Two weeks ago, he had me brought down from Scotland. I was ecstatic. I believed he planned to use me to his advantage in a marriage to some rich Lord. I didn't mind in the least," she admitted hardily at Merridyth's outraged gasp. "Truly, anything that took me away from that moldering, run-down castle was welcome.

"During that first week, Sean was all that was kind. He allowed me to go shopping for new dresses, took me about town—did everything to see me comfortable—" she sadly

shook her head. "He found something wrong with each and every gown, and demanded the seamstress take them back for repairs. My purchases disappeared, and he blamed the thievery of the servants. In truth, he had returned everything and collected his money in exchange. He fooled me totally."

"Three days ago, I received a note from Sean asking me to meet him here at the docks. I hesitated, but the man he sent urged me to hurry made some vague allusion to my brother having been hurt. Oh, I had been at loggerheads with Sean for some time, but he was my brother, and I loved him. We were all we had left of family. So I went with the man—"

Susan and Merridyth watched tear after tear slide quietly down Seana's face. "You were brought here...?" Merridyth prompted gently, sensing she needed to finish her tale, needed the catharsis of admitting verbally what her brother had done to her, needed to make it real.

"Yes. Sean waited on deck, unharmed, while I was brought to this cabin. A thin, tall man, who introduced himself as a physician, informed me he was to check me over. Two of those giant guards held me down, and two women lifted my dress and underthings up and ... that man placed ... his hand ... his finger ... inside me. I was terrified. I screamed myself hoarse calling for Sean. My loving brother never responded, never came to help me. I was a verra fool. I wanted to believe in Sean's innocence, that this was all some ghastly mistake—Sean would come back for me when he realized what he had done—" Seana stopped to swipe at the tears escaping her eyes. "I swore I wouldnae weep over him again." she said in angry disgust over her weakness.

"Anyway, some man claiming to be the leader of these people came down and talked with me. He said Sean had sold me for ten thousand pounds. He informed me that I was not to be afraid. I was not to be ... molested, as my worth was in my pureness. He promised I would not be harmed if I would devote myself to my ... lessons. With luck, he said, I was destined to belong to their Emir Jamal, the son of their Sultan."

Seana drew her legs up under her skirts and rested her chin atop them. "They bring food four times daily," she said, "and I go for a walk on deck twice a day. In the afternoons, the women come and show me many things: how to drape sheer cloth about myself, fashioning it into a modest covering, how to dress my hair in their manner ... things like that. Yesterday, they dumped you in here and set sail soon afterward. I could hear a lot of activity going on up above, as well as a lot of yelling. No one was been back since."

Merridyth and Susan looked at Seana for a long time. Then they looked at each other and nodded. Both moved at once with the same thought in mind. Two sets of arms came about to embrace the Scottish maiden. Seana broke down in heart-rending tears, leaning into their caring hugs.

"Shh, shh." Susan crooned, rocking the sobbing younger girl gently. "It will be all right, Seana ... You're not alone any longer. Whatever comes, we will face it together. It's all right."

Seana wept for a long time, all the bottled-up pain and fear pouring out of her at this unexpected touch of kindness.

"I have been so frightened, so isolated—" she gulped out between sobs.

"No more," Merri promised. "We'll help each other through this." Her voice hardened. "And whomever is responsible for our being in this situation ... well, one day they are all going to pay. And pay. And pay. I vow it."

"I vow it." Susan and Seana echoed the grim promise.

Indeed, the Bey thought as he looked through the view-port of the cabin, I have captured a most impressive bouquet of English flowers for the garden of my Lord, Jamal. The beauty of the young misses is worthy of the Sultan, himself.

Black, red and blond heads held closely together, the three women complimented each other to the degree that each one appeared more beautiful when bracketed with the others.

The Bey nodded sharply at Shirka, who pushed open the cabin door, then stood aside to allow Emil to enter first. Behind the Bey came two serving women carrying trays of food and drink. They quietly placed the trays upon the black lacquered table and retreated to stand, heads bowed, beside the door.

Sweeping his assessing gaze over the three captives, the Bey noticed with some surprise, the defiance etched on the raised faces of the two newer women seated on the rough-planked floor. *So, he mused to himself, these two have courage. Good.* Aloud, he said, "I am Emil al Hadeem el Bakaar, Bey of Seyhan, and servant to my Lord the Supreme Sultan Selim—third of that name—may he reign forever." He bowed slightly. "While it is true you are destined for the Harem of our Divine Master, until you are delivered to him, I

am your Lord. You are required to stand when I honor you by entering the place where you are abiding."

Although the instruction was voiced in the gentlest tones, the cousins were not fooled. There was a definite threat present in the man's words. Merridyth came to her knees to answer him. "We do not recognize your authority," she stated. Her heart thumped hollowly as she saw the Bey's eyes flair in anger. Gathering her dwindling nerve, she taunted, "In fact, I see only a common, cowardly abductor who waits safely aboard while his henchmen carry out all his dirty commands."

Even while Susan and Seana were gasping in response to Merridyth's bold words, both women abandoned their spots on the floor to crawl over to Merri, clearly aligning themselves with her. And Merridyth, trying to hide the fact that she was practically shaking apart with fear, was amazed and shocked to see amusement replace the ire in the Bey's eyes.

Executing a brief bow, Emil spoke. "I salute you, Miss St. John-Smythe. I have always revered courage bold enough to outface anything. Nevertheless, I am afraid I must insist normal protocol be followed, for such a bad example could cause needless trouble down the way." The smile dropped from his face. His voice cracked out the next sentence. "You will stand. *Now*. Or you will receive the first lessoning in obedience at Shirka's hand." He indicated the giant lurking in the doorway behind him.

Knowing her cousin and afraid of how she might respond to such a threat, Susan squeezed Merri's hand, silently communicating that now was not the time to challenge this

man. They needed to know a lot more about him before they could reasonably hope to succeed against him.

Merridyth nodded in mute agreement. Stiffly, with obvious distaste, the three ladies rose to their feet, standing almost painfully erect.

The Bey's eyes glinted with hidden amusement, then narrowed menacingly as he noticed the difficulty with which the two latest acquisitions moved; their wincing and gingerly movements bespeaking much discomfort. His eyes grew even more dangerous when he spotted the dark bruises on the forehead of the pale-haired one. In his own language, he snapped at Shirka, "What is this? This girl is marked, and the other appears to be in some pain. Explain yourself."

Shirka prostrated himself before the Bey. "Oh, my master." He cried, "know that your servants had much difficulty obtaining these two. They fought like she-lions, and in order to escape before they roused the household against us, it was necessary to subdue the pale one with physical force. The other recovered from the drug too soon, and began to fight and scream in the street. She was likewise subdued. If your servant has erred in this, I beg forgiveness, and place myself at thy feet for punishment."

Emil tapped his foot irritably. "You know how I feel about marking a woman, Shirka," he admonished, speaking Turkistan. "There is never an excuse for that. Also, one of these women is destined to be the wife of the Sultan's son. As such, she will have immense power ... and women have long memories. Ah, well. I will place your fate in the hands of those you have abused..."

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Emil bowed low to Merri and Susan, and apologized, telling them the huge man prostrated before them had had no orders to so assault them. He went on, offering to mete out any punishment they deemed worthy—even death..

"Are we to understand that this man is your slave?" Merri questioned.

"He is."

"And was he under your orders to kidnap us?"

"He was."

"Then what justice would be served in punishing him because we fought him? Did you think we would come along tamely?"

"Other women would have done so."

The girls both stiffened at that. "We, sir, are not other women." Merri averred coldly.

"So I begin to see," Emil said. He stroked his short beard. "Am I correct in assuming then, that you do not wish this man to be punished?"

"For doing what he was ordered to do?" Susan shook her head. "We hardly think so."

Emil nodded his head, pleased. His sense of honor had made him offer the females a chance at revenge. His respect for them rose when they proved themselves above such petty vengeance. Not many in their place would have chosen so. "Well, Shirka—?"

The large Black man, who understood a bit of the heathen English, was amazed that the women had not taken this chance to harm him or cause his death. In gratitude, he threw himself down at their feet fervently promising, "I swear

before Allah, barring only my loyalty to my master, the Bey, I shall serve the *effendiler* all the days of my miserable life."

Finished with the situation, and thereby no longer interested in it, the Bey signaled for Shirka to leave. Gesturing towards the food-laden table, he asked, "Are you not thirsty and hungry? Come, refresh yourself."

Looking at the array of foods and juices, the girls' bellies rumbled in unison, and they realized it had been a very long time since their last meal. Their mouths watered, and they found themselves edging closer to the table.

"How do we know you won't drug us again?" Merri asked, wanting the food, but remembering how quickly their systems had succumbed under the influence of that earlier drug.

"There is no reason to render you unconscious here," Emil pointed out. "The food and drink is without taint. The effendi Seana can attest to that."

Seana slowly nodded her head in affirmation. "It's true. They have never drugged me."

"So, then. Enjoy your repast," the Bey urged. "I will send the physician to attend you when you have finished your meal."

"The physician—? For this little bump?" Merri snorted. "We are not so fragile—"

The Bey did not answer immediately. Sweeping all but one serving woman before him with an expansive gesture, he cleared the room. "The physician is to examine you, and report back to me with the outcome of his exam."

"For what purpose?" Susan asked suspiciously.

"To insure you are worthy to be presented to my Master." The door closed behind the Bey with quiet finality.

"Why a physician, Seana?" Merri questioned, her face terrible as she turned to confront the Scottish girl, somehow knowing she would not like the answer. "What kind of exam?"

Seana shivered, crossing her arms to rub away the goose-bumps that puckered her flesh. "I told you earlier," she whispered miserably. "The tall, thin man ... he ... the one who..." her voice faltered. "They have to make sure you are ... virtuous. He will touch you ... there." Her voice dropped on the last word, her remembered shame choking her anew.

"No." The word was a harsh whisper. Her face pale with shock, Merri reeled against a cloth-swathed wall. The last two days finally caught up with her and it was suddenly too much. First, the public fiasco with Worth—a traumatic experience, though she had initiated it herself. The beating administered by her father, the kidnap, the knock on the head, waking up aboard a vessel peopled with creatures from an outlandish fairy-tale, and finally ... this outrage.

"No." She ran.

Merri."

"Stop."

The anguished cries of Susan and Seana were unable to pierce through the fog of panic that had engulfed Merridyth. She barreled into the thin serving-woman, knocking her aside as she fumbled at the door, desperate to find a way out. The door opened under her determined assault, and she fled past the startled guard, who made a futile grab at her. Voices yelled, sentences in many languages struck her ears, making

no sense to her darkened reasoning. She fled on, instinctively making her way up from the bowels of the ship.

And then she was topside. Merridyth swayed on her feet, inhaling raggedly, letting the sharply crisp sea breeze bring her back to her senses. She glanced about; startled to see how far they had come from England's shores. She saw nothing familiar. The ship had ventured so far out to sea that no land blued the horizon. No gulls screamed their cries or swooped for fish disturbed by the turbulence of the ship's passing, telling Merri they were many fathoms away from land and help. She stood trembling, turning this way and that, as a crowd of people rushed towards her, converging from every direction.

"Effendi."

The soft, sympathetic voice of the man, Shirka, had her spinning towards him.

"There is no place to go, effendi. Take my hand," he pleaded earnestly, holding out a huge appendage towards the frightened girl. "There will be no punishment for this action," he reassured her.

Wild-eyed, she backed away from him.

"My master understands. He has promised to be lenient." His soft words urged her to calm down. He could see it was futile. His deep black eyes widened as he saw the girl look away from his outstretched hands, her own eyes drawn fatalistically down to the waves that crashed against the sides of the ship, their explosive pounding ending in a fine spray that wet the deck of the ship and all that stood upon it. Unbelieving, Shirka watched her little chin firm in a manner

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by Camille Anthony

that was quickly becoming familiar. Too late, he recognized what she planned to do.

"Effendi, no."

Moving faster than he ever had in his life, Shirka strove mightily to reach the determined girl. His despairing cry rent the sky and he dove for her, even as she launched herself over the side of the ship. Shirka howled to the heavens, his empty hands grasping air where, scant seconds before, the English woman's airborne body had been. Leaning against the rail, he watched, frozen in horror, as the black haired English woman disappeared beneath the turbulent, hungry waves.

Chapter Ten

...and what was I supposed to do? Sit back and see you hanged? Not likely—. Which was it you resented more? My not telling you before all this happened, or my telling Pitt and the King? If it was the former, you must blame your— Randolph, also, for it was his decision, alone, to keep this from you. I am tired of bearing the guilt alone. If you cannot understand what moved me, then I disown you. I know your stubbornness, Jared. When you were a little boy, I tried to spank that right out of you. You are beyond me, now—. I wrote you this letter with the main intent of informing you that Arnold has asked me to marry him. I'm inclined to consent. I am lonely with both Randolph and you gone from me, and Arnold has always been a good friend. I believe I can be comfortable with him. If you cannot bear it, I will, of course say no. You are, after all, the head of the family. Only, please bestir yourself and say something. If not out of concern for me, then bear in mind that I cannot keep Raeburn dangling. It would not be fair. Now, as to the other business affairs I need to discuss with you...

Chapter Eleven

Ankara, Turkey

Late November, 1800

Jamal strode into the presence of his father with little pomp and no circumstance. The servants no longer gasped at the liberties his father allowed. It had become an accepted fact that the Sultan was pleased to indulge his *ogul gavur*, his infidel son in all things.

"Has she written to you also ... as usual? And have you heard my mother's latest start—?" Jamal questioned, waving Emily's letter before his father's amused face. He came to a halt before the peacock-backed couch upon which his sire reclined, feeling sensitive and out-of-sorts before the laughter that lit Selim's countenance, not sure why it was making him so angry.

"I see nothing amusing in this." he growled. "She wants to remarry, to replace my father with Raeburn. *Raeburn*. He was at my trial, you know, and was one of those who thought me guilty. I could read it in his face—. I cannot see why he would lower himself to marry the mother of a traitor..."

Selim gestured for a chair and signaled his son to sit. An indulgent half-smile played about his lips. Engrossed in his musings, Jamal stumbled and tripped over the low, backless chair quickly positioned by an eager-to-please servant.

"Have you considered the possibility that the man has changed his mind concerning your guilt?" Selim asked.

"Perhaps he feels that a woman with such purity of values—a

woman like Emily—could not rear a child that would turn to treachery. Indeed, would not be capable of breeding such perfidy into her offspring—"

"*Pure*. That's a joke for those who know better, isn't it?" Jamal sneered, hurt rising anew at the memory of his mother's deceit. He had thought they'd had no secrets from each other, and for years, she had been hiding the most devastating one.

Twin pairs of tiger-gold eyes measured the other, raking over features that were so alike it was almost uncanny. Jamal's ugly insinuation lay, stark and naked between the two men; father and son.

The tableau held until the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire reared up on his throne. Pointing an imperious finger shaking with rage, he shouted in an awful voice, "Be silent and hold thy intemperate tongue, thou jackal of sons, lest I have it held for thee. There comes a time when leniency must cease and we have come upon it. I will bear no further rending of the mother's tender soul. Thou shalt hear from my own lips, the tale of thy *Anne*, and henceforth, shalt hold her in reverence, as Allah commends all faithful sons to do."

Jamal had risen in agitation, his mouth open to refute his father's statements, but abruptly changed his mind as Selim sharply clapped his hands, causing two burly eunuch guards to move in close at his back.

"*Not one word*." Selim-the-father had been totally submerged into Selim-the-Sultan, supreme potentate of one of the most powerful, wide-spread kingdoms in the world. He would brook no interruptions. Jamal clamped his lips together

and settled, seething, back onto his chair. He recognized what had happened and knew he had no choice but to hear his new-found father out. He would try to hold his peace, no matter how difficult. He shook his head. Nothing Selim could tell him could change the facts: his mother—the woman he had placed on a pedestal all his life—had been anything but pure. A whore bearing a child out of wedlock, he growled silently, then cringed at the ugly name he had labeled his mother. Even in the private depths of his tortured soul, the label didn't fit the woman he had known all the growing and shaping years of his life. Yet the facts of his birth remained and were irrefutable. He, Jared Michael Randolph Jamal Tyson, eighth Duke of Wyndmere, had been born a bastard.

"Upuzun hakiyat bu nutuk dir. Art thou prepared to listen?"

Jamal would have known his sire was upset, even without the guards. Selim spoke several languages, English being especially well-known since childhood. When he reverted to "thees" and "thous" or his own native tongue, it was a sure sign of deep agitation.

"You spoke that first too fast for me," Jamal said stiffly, disliking the feeling of inadequacy. "I did not quite understand you."

His father nodded sagely. "I say to thee: the speech I would tell thee is truth, has been truth for a long time."

"In that case ... behold me all ears, O, my father." Jamal taunted, needing, in his overweening anger, to lash out. And his father was not an innocent in the events of long ago.

Selim cocked an eyebrow, but apparently decided not to comment on his son's disrespect. "I understand the strain you

are under, wanting desperately to be reconciled with your mother. Your strict moral codes have been deeply ingrained and according to those codes, your mother has fallen short. I know the truth—know Emily has never disgraced herself. The Englishman who spirited her away also knew the full story, but he is now dead, and therefore, eternally silent on the matter. Personally, I feel Emily and her English husband should have told you of your true heritage long ago. Had they done so, the present situation need never have arisen. And while I can not be sorry for the chance to come to know my only son—even if you are an infidel—yet the circumstances could have been more auspicious. Well, the story...

"You are aware that your maternal grandfather was, for a short time, the Crown-appointed English ambassador to the Ottoman Empire?"

"It is a matter of history," Jamal said impatiently. "I hope you plan to cut to the heart of the matter, for that information is very old news. What bearing does it have on this situation?"

"You lack patience, my son," Selim reprimanded. "Like most Eastern people, I enjoy the dramatic re-telling of a good story, and this one has all the elements: passion, betrayal, redemption.... Oh, yes. It runs the entire gamut of emotions. I begin ... *again*."

"Your story begins with your grandfather. Your *Anne's Baba* was a despot and a poor Ambassador for England. Instead of fostering closer relationships between our two countries, he set out to amass an even greater fortune than he already possessed. That was fine, in itself. We Ottomans

understand the compulsion to gather wealth and secure one's family in whatever ways possible. Indeed, in that arena, your Grandfather's behavior was expected ... even applauded. What was not expected, nor acceptable, was the dishonorable love-affair between your grandfather and a certain Sultana.

"What?"

Selim nodded. "Your shock is understandable, *ogul*. A Sultana is not just a concubine or *Odalisque*, she is a woman who has born a child by the Sultan; a wife.

"Attempting to appear more Westernized, the ruling Sultan, Mustapha III, allowed his three wives to be present at a dinner given in the Ambassador's honor. One of his wives was smitten with love ... or lust. Whichever it was really doesn't matter after all this time. Suffice it to say that the Ambassador and the Sultana were soon setting clandestine meetings—"

"How was the Sultana able to do this from within a guarded harem?" Jamal interrupted, becoming intrigued despite himself.

"Trust me, my son," Selim said dryly, looking pensive, "No matter how tight the cage, there are ways out ... One has but to look diligently. Many things are possible, even inside a guarded harem. And when the people are ruled by the strongest emotions—" He shrugged his shoulders with an Eastern man's fatalistic outlook. "Of course, this was not just any Sultana. Oh, no. This was the *Hatun*; the first wife, *anne* of the first-born child. The insult to the Sultan was enormous. Still, they might have gotten away with their plans to secretly flee the country—they knew there would be no safe place for

them here—" Selim stroked his pointed beard while momentarily sunk in retrospection. "You know, I wonder at your Grandfather. He should have known there was no way he could hide the Sultana. England, itself, could not have harbored the two in obscurity, for the wrath of the Sultan was great. And he was a very vengeful man—"

Jamal heaved a sigh at the round-about way the story was unfolding. He was totally engrossed now and resented these frequent asides. "I assume they were caught," he prompted, no longer interested in being subtle with his interest. "What was it that gave them away?"

"Not what, but whom. The *Hatun's* private guard, a eunuch named Asheed, had been her lover for years. When he discovered their plans to flee, he betrayed the lovers to the Sultan in a fit of jealous rage. The Sultana was invited to drink the Bosphorus—"

"To do what?"

"It is a saying which means she was drowned," Selim said matter-of-factly. "Her death was relatively easy. It was not so for the Ambassador. He disappeared into the dungeons for quite some time. Over a month later when he was brought out to be publicly impaled, he was unrecognizable. Even to his daughters, your *anne* and *teyze*, who were forced to witness the gory execution.

"You must understand, *ogul*," the Sultan explained, "the Eastern mind is much more sequential than that of the West. Events must follow a pattern and that pattern must be complete. The Sultan was desperate for revenge, and to us, revenge is not complete unless the person suffers on every

level. It is believed that, though dead and beyond pain, a man is aware of his family's suffering in some mystical sense. Therefore revenge often encompasses those left behind. For revenge, your *anne* and *teyze* were taken as slaves and brought into the Great Harem. The Sultan himself took your *teyze* Amelia, but he gifted me with Emily." Selim's eyes grew vague as they focused on long ago.

"I was a hot-blooded young man of fifteen years and I had been incarcerated in the *Kafes* for the majority of my life. My goings and comings were extremely restricted, and it was rare, very rare, that I was allowed to indulge my lusts for female flesh. You can imagine my feelings at having a woman of my own whom I could take at will, over and over, and thus assuage my great, pent-up needs."

"Usually, any woman given to an *Emir* in the *Kafes* is rendered infertile. Emily escaped this because Mustapha III wanted her to become *enciente*. Understand, to control the succession, any child fathered by me would be killed before it left the womb, along with the mother. For the Sultan, knowing Emily would be killed the moment it became known she was carrying a child was but one more point of revenge against your grandfather." Selim stopped and regarded his tight-lipped son warily. "I know you do not enjoy hearing this portion of the story, yet I reveal all to you so you may understand."

"I was young, I say. And though I knew your mother's fate, I did not care. On the one hand, I was only overjoyed to accept the gift of a female of my own. But on the other, she was the daughter of the man who had grossly insulted and

spat upon my sovereign and family member ... It was not until later that I came to love Emily. Being arrogant and young, I believed she would eventually come to love me in return."

"To say that Emily was not quite as overjoyed or as in love as I, is an understatement. Your *anne* hated me. Though it made not a whit of difference to me, she informed me she was betrothed to the Duke of Wyndmere, who had traveled to Turkey to take her home for the wedding. I bedded her in spite of her tears and pleas. In fact, I drugged her to make her compliant and willing. After that first time, she fought no more, submitting quietly to my attentions. Still, she never came to me, never offered herself. She rejected all my attempts at pleasuring her and made it an uncomfortable exercise each and every time." Selim grew pensive as he thought on those past days and nights, fraught with so much pain and glory.

"She once told me that I could control her body, but never her heart. That was her own and she would bestow it upon whom she wished. In her heart, she was always faithful to her betrothed—" Selim sighed. "You cannot imagine how that only made me want her more. Made me long to be the recipient of such prevailing loyalty. I showered her with gifts and presents." The Sultan shrugged. "I was trying to bribe her ... all to no avail. She would not love me. In the end, it was again Asheed who destroyed a harem romance ... this time mine."

"Through the efforts of a Jewish 'bundle-woman', the Duke managed to infiltrate the harem hoping to find someone to

help him get the two sisters out. Asheed, who was still grieving over his Sultana's death, and feeling guilty about the part he had played in bringing it about, was willing to help the daughters of the Sultana's lover escape their fate. It helped that the Duke was paying a large sum in reward. They made their plans, choosing the night of a holy day celebration; one that with all the chaotic partying and noise would suit their purposes well. None of them took into account that the Sultan, who had been ill, would choose that same night to die."

"The small group of your *teyze, anne*, Asheed, and the Duke, had almost won free of the harem courts when they heard the tumultuous roar of a thousand voices rocking the palace. Asheed quickly found out what was happening. Seems the Captain of the guard—thinking to please the new Sultan, Abdülhamid, who was away from the capitol that night, engaged in a skirmish on one of our many troubled frontiers—had taken it upon himself to rid the throne of any contenders ... one of whom was myself. It mattered not that my uncle had not ordered the execution; the deed would have been accomplished before he returned, and there would have been nothing he could do to reverse that action."

The Sultan shifted uneasily. "What I tell you now, I could myself, never understand: after all I had done to her, Emily insisted that Wyndmere turn back and rescue me from where I languished in the *Kafes*, a helpless target for the overzealous captain. The Duke fought with the men sent to strangle me, killing two before the others broke and ran. He took me with them as far as the city gates, where I decided I

would go no farther. You see, though I was grateful to have had my life spared, I was angry beyond belief that Emily had contrived to leave me. Ah, Jamal," Selim drawled, a half-smile crooking his lips as he shook his head over his remembered folly, "the arrogance of the young. She could not leave knowing I was doomed, soon to be dead. And so she attempted to help, driven by her tender heart. She had every intention of leaving with her beloved Wyndmere, and there was nothing I could do to stop her. That night was the last I saw or heard from her until her letter reached me almost three years ago. Did I ever tell you how it read?"

Jamal silently shook his head, dazed at the things he had heard.

"She wrote: 'Selim, I saved your life. Please save my son.' Because of that night—and what she had once been to me—I was pleased to help Emily's son. I cared not what you may have done; your crime mattered not at all. Whatever your transgression, you would have found a safe refuge here in honor of my debt to your mother and father. Her letter explaining the true facts of your birth did not reach me before your ship docked, so you may imagine my shock when I first beheld you. I believe her when she says she did not know of you the night she fled. I also know it would not have made a difference for her. And Wyndmere ... I tell you truly, I have never seen a man so deeply in love with a woman. Emily could have been dragging five children behind her, and he would have accepted them all to please her. Your *anne* was, and remains to this day, a remarkable Lady. You owe her much ... the least being respect," Selim finished softly.

Jamal nodded wordlessly, unashamed that his father saw the tears that were blurring his vision. "I have been so wrong," he admitted his voice pained. "I have misjudged her so—" his tones were filled with self-loathing, "—hurt her so. *Anlamadim*." Jamal grated out in an anguished whisper.

"Well, you should have understood," Selim sternly admonished. "You, raised beneath her hand, should not have had to be told what manner of woman your mother is. Still, luckily for you, she is the forgiving type. It is not too late to make amends."

Jamal stood up. "With your permission, I am going to write her at once and grovel at her feet, figuratively speaking. God. I wish I could tender my apologies to her face-to-face—"

His long strides took him across the wide expanse of the *Divan*. At the doors of the audience hall, Jamal turned back to gaze for a long, still time at the man who was his father. Selim straightened under the perusal. Jamal's voice was quiet, manner-of-fact, when he said, "If you weren't my *Baba*, I'd have to kill you for what you did to my mother."

Selim, the third Turkish Sultan to bear the name, sat still and silent under his son's stern gaze. Before Jamal turned again and exited the through the doorway, he called out, "Jamal."

He stopped. "Yes?"

Selim shocked him by bowing to him. "I believe you would, *ogul*, for there is much of myself in you. I feel great pride inside.""

* * * *

Jamal reclined in his chair. There, he thought triumphantly, the letter is done, to be carried off on the first available ship to England.

With his apologies to his mother finished, he felt light and carefree, as if a great weight had fallen from him. Above all, he was thankful to right the wrong he had done his mother by his biased judgment of her. He had spared himself no contrition, and he knew his mother would be surprised when she read his missive, for he had been very unrestrained in his written outpourings, which was not his wont.

Now that he allowed himself the luxury of thinking kindly of her, Jamal realized how much he missed the dowager Duchess. She had always been available to him, unlike most society mothers of the day who tossed their children into the nursery and forgot them until special occasions. He fondly recalled the times his mother had boldly stood between himself and his father, reminding Randolph of the mayhem and mischief he, himself, had gotten into when he was their son's age ... and beyond. It was still widely known among the ton that Randolph, seventh Duke of Wyndemere, had once been an outrageous flirt; an avowed rake who had earned the risqué title: Randy Randolph. A former rake who proudly announced that he had been tamed by the best of women...

Jamal smiled at his memories. Yes, his mother fit the above description. Deep inside, he had never lost sight of that. His memories of his mother and father's marital relationship had him aching for a similar one for himself. And he couldn't help wondering if his mother had been manipulated in her loneliness. He had asked her to wait on

the matter of the Duke of Raeburn's proposal. He felt uneasy, fearing he might be succumbing to jealousy, yet he could not shake off his concerns regarding this romance of his mother's.

A knock at the door brought his head around, jarring him out of his circular thoughts. Seuliman moved to the portal, his cat-sleek walk making it seem as though he floated along the ground, and Jamal wondered anew over the grace exhibited by the hulking eunuch. The servant bowed slightly, stepping aside to allow entrance to the person standing in the doorway.

Jamal tightened his jaw in disgust, an aggrieved breath blowing out. His eyes went cold and brooding as he viewed the slim woman bowing before him. So far, he had managed to circumvent his father's plans without endangering the women being sent to him. He had three women occupying his harem; women he had not touched. Now his father sent this girl, and as far as Jamal was concerned, she was the last straw. The girl was slender but curved in all the right places. Her dark hair fell straight as a shadowed waterfall to below her trim waist. Taller than the other girls had been, she looked older, and her eyes were huge and sultry with sensual knowledge. Obviously, she was virgin in flesh only.

He beckoned, and as he watched her walk towards him, Jamal felt heat kindle in his blood. Every one of her separate parts moved in concert with the others, creating a lilting symphony. The thin garments that barely covered her rippled with the wind of her movements, and Jamal's eyes were drawn, all unwillingly, to the jutting peaks of the girl's generous breasts. She had rouged her nipples, and their

seductive, scarlet color was easily discernible through the semi-transparent silk.

Feeling overly warm, Jamal swallowed to ease his dry throat. Tearing his gaze from the luscious sight before him, he gestured for Seuliman to draw nearer. "Escort the young lady to the quarters prepared for her," he commanded hoarsely.

"My Lord, I beg you—" The young girl prostrated herself before him. "I have not been with my Lord for an hour, and the Sultan—*may he live forever*—will know this. He will have me killed for not attempting to please my Lord." Her fear was apparent in her trembling limbs.

Jamal cursed, rescinding his order. In his haste to rid himself of this girl, who should not have been a temptation, he had forgotten his father's wily manipulation. And he could not deny that this girl was proving to be a strong temptation. He had been celibate for almost two years, and his normal urges had just woken up, becoming immediate and urgent. Besides this woman's obvious maturity, she was displaying nothing of the fright and timidity the three earlier women had suffered from. This bold lass stood eyeing him so hungrily, Jamal almost expected her to lick her lips. What could he do to pass the required time without giving in to his growing need?

"What is your name, girl?" The question came out roughened by gritty determination.

"If it pleases my Lord, his humble servant is called Elma, though it is your right to give me a name of your own choosing."

Jamal felt her voice flowing over him like warm milk. Her name: Apple, was appropriate, for her cheeks glowed with the healthy color of the ripe red fruit, her lips and jaunty nipples echoing the attention-grabbing color. He found himself clearing his throat again, before he could say, "Serve me tea, Elma."

The girl jumped up, smiling, to run do his bidding. Too quickly, she returned with a large silver tray laden with fresh, hot tea, and food items designed to tempt the most fickle palate. Settling the tray carefully upon the low tripod next to Jamal's chair, Elma sank gracefully to her knees, painstakingly pouring a delicate porcelain cup half-full of strong black tea. Glancing up with a coy flick of thick eyelashes, she purred, "Does Master desire something ... sweet with his tea?" Her lips caressed the words even as her hands caressed the tea cup.

Jamal started to squirm and caught himself. A slow burn ignited beneath his skin at the girl's suggestive tone. His pulse quickened, and his tight-fitting pants became tighter. He inwardly cursed his habit of wearing Western-style clothing in his private quarters, in contrast to the loose, flowing, concealing Eastern garb. It would be undignified to adjust the fit of his pants, which became tighter still when Jamal's sideways glance caught Elma's knowing gaze fixed avidly on his crotch.

"Thank you, no," he barked, "I take it black."

Elma, who had almost forgotten the question, jumped in alarm, unable to control her momentary fear in response to the harshness in her new master's tones. Upon reflection, she

rallied in understanding; the Master was racked with a desire he fought to deny. The Mistress of students had informed her of her Master's barbarian weakness: his inability to feel normal desire. She had been filled with disgust when told what was needed to bring his ivory pillar to attention, yet she had consented to forgo the proper preparations, that she might better drive him to his lust's completion. If she was able to bring this *gavûr* to bed, she, though but a slave, could yet attain a very high position—

Raising herself slightly off her heels, Elma turned her torso towards Jamal to present the cooling cup of tea. In this practiced position, she exposed the creamy tops of her breasts to his hungry view. The Mistress of students held that no red-blooded male could resist such a view.

Jamal was male. Jamal's red blood was boiling. Ignoring the tea cup in the girl's out-stretched hand, he came up out of his chair. With a preemptory gesture, he gathered Seuliman's attention. "You are dismissed. Await my summons in the outer chambers."

Hard put to hide a smile, Seuliman gravely bowed before his troubled master. The door closed silently behind him.

"Get up," Jamal ordered the still kneeling woman. He felt an anger that grew at the same rate as his burgeoning desire, and it colored his voice. He was irritated and frustrated over his inability to control his impulses better. However, he had recalled a sure-fire way to quench this wayward desire. Eastern women shaved their pubes, resulting in them appearing childlike and immature. He would have her remove

all her clothes. Surely her girlish, hairless mound would dampen his rampant ardor...

Elma gracefully came to her feet and stepped close to Jamal, awaiting his next orders. When he curtly gestured towards the sleeping alcove, she turned, still without a word, and proceeded him into the next room. She did not smile until her back was to him, and the smile was gone by the time she turned to face the glowering man standing at the foot of the bed.

"Strip."

The garb for Eastern slave women was simple in function. It was to entice, and at the same time, facilitate quick access once the enticement was successful. To that end, there were few items, and those were generally sheer and brilliantly colored. And easily shed. Elma slowly released the ornate catch that held her bolero-like over-garment. It fluttered to the floor. Before it had settled into a rosy puddle, the skimpy, beaded bra had landed beside it, and the breathing houri stood exposed to the waist. Her breasts rose high and firm, her large crimson nipples were swollen and pointed with her own need.

Jamal felt targeted. Those berry-bright nubbins were aimed directly towards his mouth. His mouth watered, and he swallowed twice, inwardly begging her to hurry with the unveiling. Surely her little naked mound will remind me of a girl-child's, he thought, desperately, and I'll be able to end this madness.

Elma smiled as she slowly pulled on the drawstring holding up her baggy pants. The cloth slithered lovingly down her

lush thighs as though reluctant to leave the fragrant flesh it had encased.

Damn it. She was unshaven. Her pubic hairs were curly and so short that her pouty pink nether lips were clearly visible within the tender nest. The hairs glistened in the afternoon light, already wet with her ready juices of desire.

Jamal could not bring himself to deny longer that this was no child before him, but a ripe, willing woman. His eyes bulged and his manhood rose higher to push stiffly against his pants, straining the material until there was no concealing his massive arousal. The feel of the woman's hot stare on that jutting part of his anatomy only heightened his desire. He stood, turned to stone as Elma approached him. He felt powerful, yet at the same time, he felt she stalked him like prey.

Her smile was the smile of eternal Eve as she came to him, placing her hands on him, her palms lightly resting on his chest. She walked her fingers over him through the linen weave of his shirt, pinpointing his flat broad nipples. She stabbed them with a playful finger, playing hide-n-seek through the cloth. Quickly tiring of this, she pried the edges of the finely made shirt apart to delve into the swirls of hair decorating his muscular upper body. Searching out the male buttons that had swollen in need, she tugged on them, delighted at their instant responsiveness. She rose on tiptoe to lave a pert peak, then ran her tongue around and around the perimeter, defining, delineating. She tightened her tongue, made it a spear and stabbed sharply at the center of the masculine nipple. She flicked the other nipple with a

finger nail, then urged it to rise by repeatedly lapping it with her tongue, and using her full lips to suction it into her voracious mouth.

Jamal groaned, then exploded into action. His hands came up to grip her shoulders and pull her into his arms, against his chest. His mouth covered hers, his tongue aggressively parting her lips to delve deeply into her honeyed, dark interior.

She moaned as Jamal's mouth worked on her, her limbs melting as heat flashed through her. Her hands swept down his chest, coming to rest on the closure of his straining pants. She boldly stroked his hard arousal through the cloth, squeezing, measuring its length, and was rewarded by the tortured sound that tore out of Jamal's throat. Then it was her turn as he administered a series of nibbling bites so intensely pleasurable they bordered on pain. His mouth moved lower, still nipping at sensitized flesh. One arm nestled in the small of her back, arching her up as his head lowered to nuzzle her bountiful breasts. He took one distended nipple into the hot cavern of his mouth, and swirled his tongue over and over the tip, wetting it thoroughly, lifting his head to examine his handiwork. The bright crimson was gone, replaced by a pale residue of pink, and the plump tidbit stood up proud and erect, mutely begging for more. The colorful state of the unattended nubbin drew his attention, and he cupped it, bringing the tip up to completely encompass it with his mouth, drawing on it with a strong suctioning action as if to devour it whole. A gasping sigh trembled on Elma's lips; her

hand convulsively tightened on the pillar of flesh rising strong and full between her master's wide-spread legs.

Jamal was beyond thought now. He pushed at the woman, knowing the bed was behind her, and was shocked into growling anger when she somehow twisted out from under him, leaving him to sprawl on the mound of pillows. Before he could come up on his knees, intending who knew what, she was there, stroking his shoulders, soothing and arousing him anew. Breath almost lost in passion, she managed to gasp out, "Please, Master. I would ready you—"

Jamal laughed, choked out: "Any readier, and I shall explode." He worked at his pants buttons. Again, she was there, her hands taking over the task, and his clothes fell away under her expert handling.

"All right." He conceded.

Elma licked her lips. At least this would be right. She removed the rest of Jamal's clothing, making sure to brush against his straining body at every opportunity. When he lay totally naked, one leg bent at the knee, she moved to the foot of the bed and stood there contemplating the man that would take her virginity.

Oh, but he was beautiful. He was big, taller than the average Turk. And his skin was a pale honey that rarely saw the sun. His eyes almost frightened her, so clear a yellow were they, like a tiger's, or an eagle's. Dangerous. And the fathomless black of his pupils, dilated now with passion, so that there was only a thin rimming of the yellow about them, set deep in his head. Thick brows, thick lashes. His dark hair silky on his head, and thicker, curlier on his broad chest and

around his sex. His muscular arms and legs dusted with short black swirls, a few on the backs of his hands. The unacknowledged son of the Sultan. A manly man. A powerful man. Elma felt a gush of liquid at her thighs. Power excited her. Now she would excite him...

He watched her eyeing him hard mouth tipped in a taunting grin as if he reveled in the heat her gaze generated. She stood still as a statue at the foot of the couch. When his muscles bunched, signaling his intent to move, to take control, she dropped to her knees. Her breasts jiggled and bounced with her movements.

Lowering her head, she delicately took the smallest toe of his right foot into her mouth. Her hands remained at her sides. She didn't suck it, just held it liquidly still in the womb behind her lips. Then her tongue touched the crease beneath the toe, where grass was wont to cut. Beneath her, she felt Jamal react to the erotic power of her actions. His body pulsed, throbbed.

She introduced the second toe into her mouth without releasing the first, her tongue a little more active now swiping over the third, then the fourth.

He groaned, asked if she would engulf his whole foot, if she could accommodate his big toe as well, but then she was slowly releasing each toe, giving them a slow lap with her tongue. She moved in slow-motion, languid and unhurried. With that same pace, she approached the biggest toe, but there the similarities ended. She bit at the tip, sucked it hard, nibbled at the ball of the toe, and at the meaty base where it attached to his foot. Made juicy, slurping sounds that had

Jamal's muscles tightening all over his body. Then she stopped.

"This slave," she whispered, "though unworthy, desires to please you. Will you permit it?"

Jamal nodded, probably too aroused to speak.

The slave girl eased up onto the foot of the sleeping couch. She lightly caressed him, running her hands up both legs, applying an asking pressure, just enough to indicate what she wished, to the insides of his thighs. He cooperated, lying back on his forearms, widening the space between his legs as he watched her crawl up on her belly, like a sensuous snake. Her tongue emerged from between her lips to lap at his testicles. They drew up, tightening with the pleasure she instigated.

She drew a wet, hot line up the center of the sacs, took them into her mouth, moving her head from side-to-side so that her mouth caressed his balls while her nose and eyelashes brushed the base of his jerking penis.

She spent a long time moving up to the tip of his throbbing rod. When she took him fully into her mouth, he came up off his arms, groaning, and grabbed her head, bringing her closer. The powerful muscles of his arms contracted, forcing her head forward and back on his length, and she worked with him, driving him to the point of madness.

He used the same strong muscles to pry her off and position her under him. Elma spread her legs wide, and with no hint of reservation, thrust her hips up to meet Jamal's descending shaft, crying out at the tearing pain of his entering.

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The encounter was fast and turbulent; Elma's head thrashed on the pillows, her hair tangling wildly as she fought for control of the situation. Her legs locked about his hips, she held him with a passionate grip that belied her small stature while Jamal plunged blindly between her legs, his mouth frantic at her breasts, feasting from one to the other until both were rosy pink and swollen from his rough attentions.

When he felt himself reaching his peak, Jamal reached down between their heaving bodies to manipulate the small bud hidden inside her lower lips. The woman exploded against him with a warbling cry, her body convulsing mindlessly yet powerfully, forcing him to bear down on her to avoid being bucked off. When he was sure she had gained her pleasure, Jamal thrust a few more times before withdrawing from the hot pulsating sheath. With a lusty cry, he let go, spraying Elma's belly with his seed in a long climactic stream that left him drained and numb.

He came to himself to find Elma nestled against him, purring in her sleep like a contented kitten. His weak moral fiber disgusted him. He should have been stronger. How could he have given in to the woman's lures? He was infuriated that he had fallen into his father's trap. Under all the disgust and fury, another emotion rose to choke him.

Now that passion had receded, guilt inundated Jamal.. The face he had visualized at the moment of climax had not been the exotic one of the woman sleeping beside him, but that of an innocent, gray-eyed face framed with inky-black curls.

He rose from the mussed bed, the rich, heavy scent of sex wafting about him as he flung on his shirt and trousers.

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Marching to the door, he summoned Seuliman, steeling himself against the knowing look on his servant's face. In a voice more growl than words, he commanded the removal of Elma to his women's quarters. "Seuliman, see she receives the coins tradition demands as she pleased me well."

He ignored her sultry pleas that he send for her soon and, feeling drained and weary, made his way back to his room. The mingled smells of his and Elma's secretions slapped at him, and he ripped the soiled bedding off, before throwing himself down on the bare mattress.

He closed his eyes and immediately she was there. He visualized her as she had been at his trial, saw the way she used her hands in speaking gestures, the sparkle in her fine gray eyes. In his mind's eye he traced the curve of her breasts, defined by the bodice of her pink day dress. He saw her rosy, slightly pouty lips with their perfect cupid's bow and despite the fact that he had just been sexually satisfied, his manhood stirred at the sweet memories.

He groaned and flopped over onto his stomach, pressing his wayward member into the surface beneath him. He wanted her with a desire that went beyond lust. His memories were two years new, and had never dimmed. He laughed at himself, shaking his head over the pathetic fact of being in love with a woman whose name he had never heard. A woman he had never met, would never have a chance to woo. He cursed himself for a fool.

Chapter Twelve

Oh, my son, of course I forgive you. You do not know how happy you have made me. I confess I was worried you would resent my past when you learned of it. Please bear in mind I had no choice in what happened to me. I thanked God daily that your father loved me as he did, and was able to accept you despite your being the actual son of some other man. You do understand that by Turkish law and tradition, being his slave, I was married to Selim in a way. Randolph always told me I had nothing to be ashamed of. He loved you as if you were truly his. He was quite happy to adopt you, to make sure you would inherit, even though people always thought you were his natural child (Randolph and I were married on board ship before reaching England). The years went by and we found we could not have children together. Randolph said you were God's way of giving him a child. As you grew, we could see the likeness of Selim in you, but as Selim was a worthy man in his own way, we felt no alarm. We never envisioned that you would ever come face-to-face with your real sire, and so we put off speaking to you about it. Randolph was going to talk with you before you became seriously interested in matrimony, just so you would be aware of your bloodlines. By blood and name, you are related to royalty, and have much to be proud of. Through blood, you are part of the Ottoman family which has ruled the majority of Europe for over five hundred years. And through your Wyndmere name—which you are legally entitled to—you are

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connected to the Royal house of Stuart.—Mum

Chapter Thirteen

The House of Tears

Ankara, Turkey December 1800

In the Old Palace—often called the Palace of the Unwanted Ones, but best known as the House of Tears—Mihrima Sultana was busy plotting the downfall of her old rival, Nakshedil Sultana, favored wife of the late Sultan, and once known as Aimée DeBucq de Rivery. A foul curse falling from her lips, Mihrima Sultana contemplated with relish, the difficult task of bringing about the destruction of the hated French witch.

Unlike herself and Nükhet Seza Sultana—another widow of the late Sultan Abdülhamid—the third Kadin, whose harem name meant Embroidered on the Heart, had not been banished to the House of Tears. No. She had, along with her son, Mahmud, been asked to remain in the main Seraglio. The new Sultan, Selim, nephew to her late husband, had asked this. It was unheard of unseemly.

Mihrima's fine stable of spies had informed her of the many sexual meetings between Selim and Nakshedil. Mihrima seethed. Not content with having stolen away the affections of their late husband, the loose woman was now attempting to ensnare the present Sultan in her coils, though the Koran strictly forbade their sexual congress. Long years ago, Nakshedil had pretended to convert to the true faith, yet consequent events were proving her conversion false. For if she was truly devout, she would have insisted that she, along

with the rest of the late Sultan's entourage, also be sent to the House of Tears.

Mihrima Sultana was not fooled. She knew what the French woman was planning. Royal sons died easily in the harem, and Mihrima had always known that her own son would ascend to the Peacock Throne only if she were diligent in preventing any harm to befall him while another occupied the seat of power.

With both of the other wives having sons, she had known the competition and danger to be doubled. Just before the late Sultan's death, Mihrima had taken care of Nükhet Seza's son, arranging his death with no one the wiser; having been careful to also eliminate the boy's murderer. Now the only remaining threat to her son was that brat of Nakshedil's. Mahmud must die, in order that Mustapha's way to the throne remain clear.

Mihrima had lately, of course, heard rumors of the *gavür* son who had appeared so suddenly to claim unheard of privileges from the soft-hearted Selim. She did not, however, count him as a threat.

Selim might be a doting father, but he would never leave his Empire to an infidel who knew not the Koran, nor followed its sacred teachings. No. This son might be feted and pampered, but he would not ascend to the greatest throne in the world. She, alone, would be the Valide Sultana; the most powerful woman in the most powerful Empire. And she was willing to do anything towards that end. With that thought in mind, she clapped her hands sharply, summoning her personal eunuch, who was never out of earshot.

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Kubota hurried gladly into the presence of his mistress. He had been with Mihrima Sultana for many, many years. Long ago, at the age of thirteen, his wish to enter her service had led to him becoming one of the hairless—the true translation of the word: eunuch. Now, standing in his mistress' doorway, his memories swept him back to that fateful time...

He had willingly undergone the castrati procedure. For weeks before the operation, he had questioned many eunuchs. How painful was it? What was the success rate? Did one lose all desire for women? There had been as many answers as there had been eunuchs. His passionate love for Mihrima had driven him forward.

No amount of preparation could have lessened his shock and pain during the operation. The physicians had tightly bound his belly and the upper parts of his thighs with white strips of cloth to prevent excessive bleeding. He had reclined on a stone slab while his penis, testicles, and the surrounding areas were washed with hot water that had been boiled with peppercorns. When this cleansing procedure was complete, both organs were sliced off with a knife curved in the shape of a sickle, removed as close to the body as possible.

They'd used n, and the pain had been intense. During the last phase of the operation, a small pewter tube or spigot was inserted into the main orifice at the base of the penis, and the wound covered with paper soaked in cold water. Then the whole was bound up. Immediately, he was made to walk about the room for three hours, his pain-weakened body supported by two assistants.

The following three days he was denied all liquids. He suffered greatly from the pain of the operation, as well as from unbearable thirst. The need to urinate was excessive, overwhelming, yet the inserted pewter tube allowed no passage of water from his swollen bladder. At times, he thought he would burst from the pressure inexorably building within his pain-racked body. At the end of the third day, the bandages were unwrapped and the spigot removed.

No urine flow issued forth, and Kubota trembled, for he knew the horror stories; knew that the eunuch who was unable to void was doomed to a miserable and hideous death. Panic blossomed, and he wailed loud and long. His cries came to an abrupt halt and he gasped with surprise as the physician placed a hand on his swollen abdomen, pressing hard against the bladder.

A stream of urine shot away from his body, fountaining out in vast amounts. So great was his relief, Kubota's legs gave way beneath him. The assistants held him while his body joyfully emptied itself of the enforced build-up. Tears welled up in his eyes. The intense force of the jetting stream sparked a sexual climax. Whimpering and shaking as the storm rolled over him, too caught up to care that the physician and assistants watched him in his ecstasy, Kubota rode the never-ending ejaculation. Ever after, he would associate sexual pleasure with the relieving functions of the bladder...

Kubota was of average height, about five feet, eight inches. His muscles were still fairly well-defined, for before the operation, he had already been producing testosterone. Lately though, with both scrotum and penis removed, and his

body no longer manufacturing the needed hormone, his muscles had begun to turn flabby. He was now putting on the fat bulk normally associated with eunuchs created before puberty.

His dark eyes intent on the woman old enough to be his mother, yet loved in a very different way, Kubota stoically awaited her wishes. For this woman he had given up a "normal" life, and to this day he would change nothing. He never regretted his irreversible steps. He was exclusively hers. Being the Sultana's personal eunuch prohibited him having recourse to any other female in the harem. He was never apart from her long enough to engage a male lover. He even slept before his Lady's chamber. A deep codependency had developed between the mistress and slave-lover.

It was from the Sultana Kubota received his most intensely felt pleasure. It was in servicing her sexual needs that his life took on its true meaning. He knew he was good at it. It had once been said that he was among the most skillful of eunuchs experienced in giving pleasure to women.

The Sultana had once loaned him to a high-born lady, and it was later rumored the Lady had been divorced by her Lord because she ever after complained he could not please her as well as a certain eunuch. Kubota had always felt there was much pride to be taken in that.

The Sultana finally deigned to beckon him, her eyes holding a certain sultry gleam so that, even before she touched him, his body began to tremble in anticipation. Oh, he recognized the signs. They would take pleasure of each other before she informed him of whatever business she

required of him. He advanced to her couch, going down on his knees before her.

Her scent washed over him, a mixture of sandalwood and the exotic remnant of the *gelincik* pills she habitually chewed. He quivered, his nostrils flaring as he caught the mustier scent of her sex. Her soft hand came to stroke down his dark cheek, and he closed his eyes, pressing closer against her palm, happy to be where he was.

A finger under his chin lifted his face until his eyes meshed with his mistress'. Unspoken communication arced between them. In silent reverence, Kubota moved to the end of the narrow divan occupied by the Sultana. In a voluptuous move, she shifted onto her back, allowing her legs to fall gracefully to either side of the couch, baring herself to her slave. She sighed softly as the sheer material draping her drifted with her movements, sliding deliciously over her exposed flesh.

It was a languid dance, one well-rehearsed. Each partner intimately familiar with their steps, moving in a choreographed ritual perfected over the years with much practice. Being a slave, Kubota approached his love from her feet, kissing the balls of each foot and progressing upward. Her toes arched upward, away from his mouth, and a fierce excitement welled in him.

So, she would play the reluctant lover today. She would resist, forcing him to wrest each response from her unwilling body.

He smiled.

Oh, the power that would be his. Kubota exalted within, knowing his mistress would soon be writhing beneath him,

helpless to deny the ecstasy he would force upon her. And then she would reward him. She would stroke and caress him, finally taking the hollow tube, and with her own hand, insert it into his urethra. His urine would spurt from him in ecstatic bursts, fountaining hot and foamy like heady beer into the vessel waiting beside the mistress' divan. His bladder tightened in anticipation; his signal of sexual excitement. Mouth watering, he bent his head, his tongue coming forth to gently tease the sensitive cleft that already throbbed and wept, begging for his attention. Carefully, he gathered a pearl of moisture from her open petals and meticulously spread it over the aching spot just within her woman's portal. Then, with long, lush swipes he laved the lushly fragrant groove till it dripped with a mixture of her juices and his own.

Mihrima Sultana danced upon her couch, her body abandoned to pulsing pleasure, thoughts of murder and revenge giving way to the elemental satisfaction that, though not all she craved, was all she would avail herself of. She was faithful to the teachings of the Koran. As the wife of a Sultan, no other male could penetrate her.

Alas. She was forgotten. There was no Sultan to call her to his bed, no man to ease her need. She had only this hairless one, this non-man with tongue and hands of fire that scorched her even as they cooled her ever-raging inner heat.

* * * *

There were voices calling her, tugging at her, worrying her until she could find no rest. She twisted on hot coals and dreamed of ice-laden rivers chilling her flesh. Her parched lips

cracked and bled, were soothed, and cracked again. She would have pleaded for water but she had no voice, no mouth, only the lips that cracked and bled. She stumbled through a dense darkness, lost and frightened and alone. Her tears fell but could not cool her heat-flushed cheeks. And always there were voices pleading, begging and demanding something of her. Something she fought against, something beyond her strength...

"She is no better," Susan said shortly, her chin raised to an insolent degree, too tired to elaborate. She no longer cowered before the Bey, though she had not completely lost her fear of him.

"In fact," she continued to the man who had come this day, as he had every day of the last two weeks without fail, to check on the patient, "she's burning up with fever. If we do not find a way to cool her, she will die."

The Bey nodded. "The physician tells me he has reached the limits of his knowledge and does not know what else to do for her."

A sound from Susan had him pausing, yet when he looked at her, she had lowered her head, fighting for composure, not wanting him to see the tears that threatened so readily these last few days. The girl looked worn, almost plain in her fatigue. She, with the other's help, had been caring for her cousin, yet despite all she did for her, the fever Merridyth had contracted continued to weaken her. Susan now feared Merridyth was succumbing to it.

The Bey's impassive face rarely revealed his thoughts or reactions, so Susan was startled to see his uneasy expression

as he stood looking down at Merridyth. It shocked her to realize the man was worried. A thoughtful frown creased her brow as she pondered this; why would an important man such as the Bey be so concerned about the life of one slave?

Unaware she had spoken her thoughts aloud, Susan was more surprised when the Bey answered, "As I have stated before, all three of you were destined for the Sultan's palace. It was from the great Peacock Throne, itself, that the order came forth to acquire a fair English maiden; pure, learned and beauteous. This one's spirit—" he indicated Merri, "—was such that she could have graced the royal harem as its finest jewel. But now..." The Bey sadly shook his head, turning both hands upward in a throw-away gesture.

"Do not be speaking of her, then, as if she was already dead." Seana delivered her angry demand in a heavy Scottish brogue, her correct English diction torn away by her agitation. She placed a protective hand on the invalid's blanket-covered shoulder. "I am appalled that everyone seems to have just given up on Merri's survival. Well, everyone except Shirka."

Seana recalled how the hulking Black slave had braved the turbulent swells to rescue the drowning girl, and shivered anew as memory caused the frightful scenes to flash before her again.

Merri and Shirka had both very nearly been swept away before a boat had been readied and lowered to retrieve the bedraggled pair. Everyone had marveled that Shirka, knowing he could not swim, had hurled himself into the sea, desperate to save Merridyth's life. It seemed, now, that his heroic act was going to be rendered futile. He sat silently beside Merri's

bed, one of his large hands covering the pale, fragile hand resting limply atop the covers, the struts and webbing of bones and ligaments visible through the paper-thin flesh. His eyes dumbly pleaded with the unconscious girl to return, as his lips moved soundlessly in prayer to whatever God he petitioned.

Seana moved her palm from Merri's shoulder to her forehead in an automatic checking of her patient's well-being. The heat radiating from the wraith-like body was frightening.

"She's too hot," she cried. "We have ta do something fast, or we're going ta lose her."

One of the serving women timidly suggested, "Why not shear the hair to allow the brain to breathe?"

Susan shook her head in negation. Tears of exhaustion seeped down her pale cheeks. Her voice dull with resignation, she quietly said, "I fear it is too late for that. If we cannot break Merridyth's fever immediately, she will d-die."

A tumult erupted at the door of the cabin, breaking into Susan's speech. An older woman, dressed in more layers of clothes than Susan had ever seen on one person, pushed her way through the crowd to the invalid's bed. Short and swarthy, the chubby woman had bright twinkling brown eyes set deep in a wrinkled face. She looked old enough to be the mother of the world. She proceeded to bustle about Merri; prying her lids open and checking her pupils, laying her hand against the erratically heaving chest to monitor her breathing patterns, and holding a limp wrist to feel the thump of a weak pulse.

Straightening, she placed hands on hips and twirled about to face the Bey. Making sharp tsking noises with her tongue, and shaking her head, she addressed Emil in an ancient-sounding language.

Susan imagined she asked why she had not been called, demanded to know—in irate tones—how the Bey could have been so unthinking as to let this situation get so totally out of hand? Emil, accustomed to being taken so to task, stood there momentarily mute, his face mottled with fury and chagrin.

Susan and Seana were speechless as they witnessed this turn of events. It was obvious to them, despite the language barrier, that this little woman was berating the Bey. Never had they seen this man, who exercised such power over them all, give way before another as he did to this miniature whirlwind.

Grandly ignoring both the Bey's sputtering, and the girls' incredulous looks, the old crone clapped her hands sharply, gesturing towards the sickbed, and rapping out numerous instructions. The servants scurried to obey. Gently, yet firmly moving Seana and Susan out of their way, they began removing the blankets from Merri's small form.

The two young ladies protested this action vehemently; frightened Merri would take a chill. They fought with the women, attempting to wrest the blankets from them until Shirka took them by the arms and forcefully escorted them out of the cabin.

"Trust Adina," he advised softly. "We should have sent for her earlier, despite the Bey's objections. She is a great witch,

knowing many things, both to heal or kill. The *effendi* is in good hands now." His voice rang with the faith he had in this Adina woman.

"But Shirka," Susan wailed, still attempting to free her arm from his grip as she was towed along behind him, "they are uncovering Merri. If they allow her to get chilled she might die—"

Her words trailed off in a whimper as Shirka stopped and faced her squarely. "Little *effendi*, is she not now leaning over the abyss?" His eyes, filled with compassion, nevertheless searched Susan's relentlessly, demanding she face the truth.

Susan bent her head. Her pale wheat-colored hair swung forward to obscure her face, hiding the quivering of her chin as she acknowledged the inescapable fact of Merri's imminent death. Knowing that she had done all in her power, and realizing Merri's fate rested out of her hands, Susan finally consented to leave.

"If we cannot remain with Merri, only give us someplace where we might pray for her in peace and solitude," Seana requested meekly.

Shirka nodded and silently led them to another small cabin.

Some time later, the girls were jarred from their prayers by a growing tumult coming from the direction of Merridyth's cabin. Sticking their heads out the door to inspect this mystery, both ladies were shocked to see two burly men carrying a blanket-wrapped body towards the curved port-side wall of the ship.

"Stop. What are you doing?" A horrified cry left Susan's throat, and she hurled herself at the blanket, convinced Merri had died. She was certain the men planned to callously toss her cousin's unshriven body overboard, and she became an enraged demonness, tearing at their clothes, their arms—any portion of their bodies that came within her frenzied reach.

A sharp slap to her face, and a loud burst of words caused Susan to jump in confusion. The witch stood before her, a stream of unintelligible invectives pouring from her mouth. Apparently realizing she was not getting through to the bereaved girl, Adina heaved an exasperated sigh and knocked the English lady out of the way, high-handedly gesturing for the men to continue with their task.

Susan sank to her knees, tears pouring down her face, her chest tight, heaving with painful, racking sobs. She was so alone now ... so terribly frightened. How could Merri, who had been so daring, so full of life and joy, die so pitifully far from home and family? Would the same happen to her? Would anyone ever know or care what had become of her? At that moment, Susan wanted to die also, and she cried harder at the thought that she could never do as Merri had done. She was too cowardly to throw herself into the depths of a roaring sea.

"Stop this." she sharply admonished herself. "Now is not the time to dwell on my shortcomings. I should be thinking about Merridyth."

Resolutely wiping her eyes with shaking fingers, she forced herself to her feet, refusing Seana's tearful offer of aid. She determined to pray and hold her own services for her cousin

as the men lowered Merri's body into the waves. Her cousin would have this last vigil.

Folding her hands in prayer, Susan sank to her knees and bowed her head. Tears clogging her heart, she thought of all the things she and her cousin had planned to do together ... things that would now never be done. So lost was she in her mourning, it took considerable shaking by Seana to get her attention.

"Susan. Susan, *look*."

Something, perhaps the dawning joy in Seana's voice, made Susan pause, her eyes focusing anew upon what she was seeing. The men had lowered the blanket into the waves, but now they were lifting it out again. They dunked it once more, and again, they lifted it out. This strange ritual continued until Adina signaled the men to cease. Leaning into the blankets, she placed a small seeking hand inside. She seemed pleased with what she found, for a slight smile appeared on her wrinkled face. Straightening up, she found the Bey's eyes and slowly nodded. Then she turned back into a whirlwind, and with a flurry of words and motions, indicated to the men they were to return with their burden to the aft cabin.

Susan and Seana followed dazedly behind, just now coming to the realization that Merri still lived.. Clutching each other tightly, laughing even while the tears streamed in rivulets down the creases furrowed by smiles, the two women gave thanks that Merri was still with them. Susan even felt a sense of gratitude towards the old crone whose outlandish methods seemed to have worked where hers had not.

Hearing a harsh, choking sound behind them, they turned to find Shirka on his knees, his face buried in his hands as his massive shoulders shook under the force of his emotions. Tenderly, they wrapped their arms about him, gathering him in. Together, they rejoiced.

Merri gradually regained her health. Like their journey, it was a long, slow process. She was forced to take each new step cautiously, a tip-toe at a time. And as her normal vigor returned, she began to rebel against the cotton-wool wrappings; deeply irritated by the restrictions.

Seana and Susan were forbidden to visit, and Merri worried over this until the Bey calmly informed her that the other two women had begun their lessons in Turkish manners and the protocols of the harem. A promised future visit with the recovering invalid was the incentive the Bey was dangling before them, to spur them on in their efforts.

The Bey's visit did little to reassure Merridyth as the one time Susan and Seana were allowed to see her, both girls were strangely quiet and reticent about the full scope of their training. The growing impression the others were hiding something from her caused Merri to chaff even more at the slow pace with which she healed.

There were some diversions. Every afternoon, Shirka faithfully arrived to carry her above-decks so she could have the benefit of fresh air. Also the Bey, who, because of her lingering weakness had excused her from the lessons the other girls were studying, occasionally came in the early evenings to engage her in a tournament of chess.

He professed himself pleasantly surprised at her skills claiming he enjoyed the challenge she presented him. Indeed, he seemed more joyous over her wins than his own.

One blustery afternoon weeks later, when fluffy clouds dotted a deeply blue sky, and the ship was running before the wind, its sails billowed and full, Shirka brought Merri on deck. She walked slowly, yet she walked. Unsteadily perhaps, listing a bit to port, yet she moved under her own steam.

Shirka hovered close to her, ready to lend support at the first sign of faltering and Merridyth, still tiring easily was not too proud to take advantage of his strong black arm to help her reach their destination.

Breathing hard, she leaned against the high side of the ship, gulping much-needed air. Lifting her head, she removed her scarf, baring her hair to the brisk breeze. With a small shake, she flung her head back, allowing the wind to snatch up her unruly locks, blowing them back from her flushed cheeks. The same strong wind whipped her skirts about her knees and molded her lightweight dress to her body. A body that still possessed some rounded curves, though her illness had carved away the excessive plumpness she had carried when kidnapped. Merri sighed. Not even illness seemed capable of ridding her of those unwanted pounds.

She closed her eyes, letting her mind drift with the breeze. With the loss of Susan and Seana's company, she had grown increasingly introspective. They had been traveling for quite some time now, and Merri knew she would soon have to face the problems confronting her and her cousin. She felt deeply ashamed when she recalled her panicked flight and suicidal

jump. By that cowardly act, she had betrayed her innermost self. Never, again, she vowed, would she take the easy way out—

"Look, *effendi*," Shirka exclaimed from beside her. "There in the distance—That darker blue line ... do you see it?" The excitement in his voice acted as a lodestone, pulling Merri's gaze to his outstretched arm, along the path of his pointing finger.

"What is it, Shirka?"

"It is our destination. This time tomorrow we will be in Türkiye, your new home." he promised.

Merridyth was very quiet. That distant blue line brought home to her the reality of her situation. The period of grace was over. This journey had been the calm before the storm, and she feared the coming storm would sweep away everything she had formerly been or known. She would not succumb tamely. Would not meekly place her body upon an alter of lust or sacrifice. She was not a lamb to be led docilely to the slaughter.

"It is not *my* home, Shirka. Nor will it ever be. I cannot share the joy of your homecoming. Indeed, I wish I had as long a journey before us as we have just finished, for I want, above all things, to return to my *own* country ... my *own* home."

Shirka's sharp gaze probed Merridyth's countenance. "My words have given you *hüzün*, and I did not wish that," he murmured unhappily. "I have been a slave for a long time, still I recall those beginnings. I did not always call Türkiye my home. In my youth, I lived free in the wide, fertile valley of

Lake Chad. Then Moslem slavers came, and to save his own position, the chieftain of my village sold my family and many other villagers into their hands. It took long years and harsh treatments; many beatings, and much heartache before I accepted my fate." Shirka turned away from the listening woman, uncomfortable with how this conversation exposed his vulnerable, sometimes still rebellious soul, yet felt strongly the need to warn her—

"I do not wish for you to suffer as I did, little *effendi*. Make peace with your destiny," he urged, eyes pleading. "Only in this way can you find happiness in this new life."

Merri absently soothed Shirka's linen-clad arm, her eyes steady on the approaching shore. It appeared distressingly near. "How earnest you sound, my friend," she said. "I do thank you for your concern, but I am afraid that submitting is not in my nature."

Shirka desperately wished he could approach the Bey on her behalf, but he dared not.. "If I could help you—," he trailed off, uncertain how to finish, what to say.

"It is all right. Truly," Merri assured him. "I only wish you could be with me where I am to go," she continued softly, almost to herself. "I have a feeling I will be needing a friend..." her voice trailed off.

"I am your friend.." Shirka reassured her. "If you are ever in need, send for me. There are ways around the harem guards," he whispered, glancing quickly around to make certain their conversation could not be overheard. "In a few weeks, I will contact you. My promise."

The sound of footsteps interrupted them. They saw Susan and Seana coming towards them accompanied by two burly guards. Merri looked about for any sign of the Bey. Satisfied that he was not lurking about, she went to meet her cousin and her friend, catching the girls each by an arm. "That dark blue line is Turkey, my friends," she announced.

Seana blanched. "What awaits us there?" she wondered fearfully. "I believe the uncertainty is worse than any actuality."

"I agree, Seana," Susan said, her voice tight with anxiety, working at keeping her terror from leaking through to the others. "What will become of us?"

Merri hugged each girl, herself shaking with dread. "I am frightened, also," she admitted quietly, "But we are together. We must draw our courage from each other, face whatever comes and overcome it. We will survive. I promise you both ... we will survive, and live to have our revenge.."

Shirka gazed sadly down at his charge, marveling at how quickly his emotions had become entangled with this vibrant woman. Knowing the cruelties of the Ottoman system, he dreaded the future that awaited his little lady as a member of the royal harem. The Ottoman Empire had been in the business of slavery for countless years. She would find herself submitting, and submitting, and submitting. Or she would be broken ... perhaps beyond repair...

Chapter Fourteen

My dear son,

I am glad to be on good terms with you again. There are many things I have been dying to tell you. First, as you suggested, I told Arnold I should like to wait on getting married. He is not happy about it, but will abide by my decision. Then a bit of gossip—Do you recall the daughter of the old Earl of Fellhaven? The one married to that St. John-Smythe person? Well, she has disappeared, along with her last three children. What with the sudden disappearance of her eldest daughter, Merridyth, four months ago, people are beginning to suspect foul play.. St. John-Smythe denies any knowledge of his family's whereabouts and he appears frantic enough to be telling the truth. I never liked the man. Still, I cannot believe even he would do away with his entire family. Bye-the-bye, a friend of yours visited asking to be remembered to you. Ferdie (I must remember to call him by his rightful title, as he is now the Marquis of Donchester.) is convinced you are innocent and was angry enough to give Lord Worth the cut direct after hearing him malign your name. We had tea, and he told me an amusing tale of Worth being set down sharply by the eldest St. John-Smythe gel ... in Greek, no less.. Worth had decided to try his suit there just before she disappeared (she is a great heiress), but the girl was having none of it. Good for her, I say.. Oh, I almost forgot—. Jason tells me you have withdrawn none of the funds we placed for you with the bank of Italy. If there is a

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by Camille Anthony

problem, please let us know.. I would hate to think you were in need and could not access your own money.. We love you, and long for your return..—Mum.

Chapter Fifteen

Ankara, Turkey

February, 1801

The huge bay stallion flew across the lush green valley, expertly handled by the large man seated firmly in the saddle, his muscles cording and bunching as his thighs tightened to control the magnificent beast. His iron-hard wrists directed the horse, his demands communicated through his masterful grip on the reins. Occasionally, he leaned forward to whisper encouragement into the ears that flicked backwards to catch his sibilant, soft-spoken phrases. The wind whipped through the man's hair and the horse's mane, tangling both into a wild, frothy banner. A loud, exuberant shout of laughter rolled from his throat as he urged his mount faster into the face of the gale.

He was free. Here, in this vast land, he had managed, for a brief span, to forget all his troubles. It had been too long since he had ridden like this. With a gay, mocking taunt for the less experienced riders falling far behind him, Jamal spurred his horse to greater speed, and the massive beast gallantly responded, lengthening its powerful stride to give its all to the superb rider who had tamed it without breaking its spirit.

Jamal rode hard, all his mind and energy focused on the small lake that lay surrounded by a stand of trees at the far edge of the valley, the agreed upon meeting place. He reached it all too soon.

Sliding gracefully off his horse, he breathed praises into the ears of the valiant steed. The bay was only slightly winded, its sides heaving at a measured pace, drawing in vast amounts of air, and blowing it noisily out its widespread nostrils. Jamal removed the saddle and rubbed the sweat off the horse, leading it to the edge of the lake where he hobbled it, allowing it to drink and graze. Untying his cravat, he dipped it into the cool waters, bringing it to his face. The damp neckcloth felt good against his flushed cheeks, for though the day was moderate for these mountainous climes, his exertions had heated him.

Retrieving two apples from his saddlebags, Jamal fed one to the horse for a reward, and tossed the other in his left hand as he sauntered over to a large shady tree. Sitting down at its base, he proceeded to eat the fruit, sinking his strong white teeth into the meat. The apple was crisp and tangy. Sweet juices overflowed his mouth, and Jamal swiped at his chin, catching the trailing liquid before it could drip off, using his fingers to transfer the juice back to his lips. He finished the apple and casually tossed the core in his horse's direction. Having plenty of time, he leaned his head against the tree trunk and composed himself for a short nap, knowing he had left his companions several leagues behind.

The moment he closed his eyes, a face formed against the darkness of his inner lids. *Elma*. In the last month, she had tried everything in her power to return to his bed. She had bribed servants to deliver messages to him, begging him for an audience. She had even attempted to corrupt Seuliman into championing her cause. But the final straw had been the

night he had returned to his rooms from a banquet that had lasted long into the night to find Elma stretched out naked and inviting on his bed. The roar of anger he'd released had brought several palace guards running. With tight-lipped control, Jamal had ordered the woman removed from his chambers, then spent the rest of that night pacing his apartments in pain from the fire that burned in his loins.

He'd prowled the rooms like a caged tiger, circling back and forth while his aching body argued with his aching heart. His one frantic encounter with Elma, though explosively sensual, had taught Jamal he couldn't quench the fire raging within him by having sex with just any woman. Oh, it could be banked, but it smoldered all the hotter for the tamping, clawing at his guts for an exit. He needed only one woman ... and she was out of his grasp. He refused to prostitute his feelings again.

He had gone almost two years without the empty coupling that was all the sex act was without love, and was determined to return to that celibate way of life no matter what temptations were thrown his way. So, he mused, in a sense, Elma was responsible for this hunting trip, for when the eldest son of the Bey of Manisa had approached Jamal with the invitation to join him and five other young nobles, Jamal had jumped at the chance to escape Elma's manipulations.

Ordinarily, he was more decisive and in control in situations like this, yet his guilt regarding this circumstance between himself and Elma had his hands tied. It was not her fault that his desire for her had burned out almost as soon as it had been kindled. By rights, and harem tradition, Elma was

not being unreasonable in her demands. A little forward, perhaps, but not out of line.

Normally, if a woman pleased her master, she could expect to be recalled within three nights. And Elma knew she had given Jamal satisfaction. It wasn't something he could have hidden while writhing in the throes of the pounding, pulsating orgasm they had shared.

Before leaving on the hunting trip, Jamal had issued orders to Seuliman. The servant was to see Elma dowered generously and returned to her family home. Perhaps she would marry. Whatever path she chose, she would be safely removed from his quarters.

Far away from temptation, Jamal shook his head, remembering that torrid afternoon. She was a hot little number having been extensively trained to sexually excite any red-blooded male. Elma couldn't help being an innocent pawn in his father's machinations, and in truth, deserved a man who would delight in her sensually outgoing nature, who would gladly satisfy her sexual needs.

Despite his one lapse, Jamal knew he would never be the man for her, nor she the woman for him. He looked forward to returning to quarters that had regained their peaceful aspect.

Feeling much more relaxed, though he had not slept, Jamal arose, dusting off his riding pants and moved over to his placidly grazing horse. He made quick work of resaddling, making sure the girth was nice and tight. The big bay had the evil habit of holding air in so the saddle would appear snug, then gleefully dumping its rider in the dust.. Jamal grunted as

he gave the lap strap an extra tug. He had no intention of eating dirt today..

Six riders, trailed distantly by their entourage of servants, thundered up to Jamal, hailing him with loud yells of laughing praise, salted with playful admonitions of his having fed them his dust for so many miles. With an answering laugh, Jamal joined his dismounting companions glad to put aside everything but this pleasure trip.

They had three months before they had to rejoin the court. By then, the Sultan would have moved the government to Istanbul where he spent the mild, spring months each year. It was less opulent and smaller than the palace at Ankara.

Jamal preferred the larger dwelling, as the palace in Istanbul did not have the space for him to have his own rooms. He felt uncomfortable being so close to his father's apartments, which abutted the harem proper, and each year requested he be housed in an apartment in the town. Selim would not hear of it, so Jamal made sure to be absent as often as possible, which was the second reason he had assented to this hunting excursion. He sighed, shaking off his introspective mood. He was here to enjoy himself. Time enough to ponder his problems once he returned to his father's palace.

* * * *

"Praise be to Allah." Tubal rushed into his master's presence full of excitement, dropping his usual stiff correct demeanor. "They are here. The ship docked early this

morning, and the Bey now awaits your pleasure in the ante-chamber."

"Has—"

"It is said he has garnered three magnificent blooms for your delectation, Oh my master."

"Did—"

"Surely with such a bouquet to choose from, the Lord Jamal cannot help but be pleased."

The exhilarated servant did not notice the Sultan trying to interject something between his copious speech. He blithely rushed on, until Selim exploded.

"You chatter like an idle old woman, Tubal.." The Sultan finally shouted, too gratified with the news of the Bey's arrival to be really irritated. "Cease this endless prattle and bring the Bey in to me at once."

Tubal, chagrined at how completely he had abandoned his normal, dignified manner, bowed deeply. "My master has but to speak—" he began.

"And he has done so, fool." Selim's voice was no longer a tolerant rumble. It had become an impatient roar. Tubal, reacting instantly to his master's ire, backed, bowing towards the double doors of the divan to flamboyantly fling both wide. In stentorian tones he announced, "Come forth Emil al Hadeem el Bakaar, by Allah's grace and the Sultan's allowance, Bey of Seyhan, to give report to your master.."

Long training had accustomed the Bey to guarding his reactions, so he smothered a smile before moving forward into his Lord's presence. He moved with quick grace coming to a halt a short distance from the man occupying the great

Peacock throne. Executing a profound obeisance, he smoothly swept his right hand from head to lips to heart, indicating his loyalty in thought, word and deed. "Behold your obedient servant."

"Your journey lasted longer than was expected, Bey," the Sultan accused petulantly. "I could not hold Jamal here twirling his thumbs with nothing to do while I waited on you." Selim's eyes flashed angrily. He did not like having his plans inconvenienced. "He is off on a hunting trip with some of my younger nobles and is not expected back for at least another month. Even should I send for him now, it could take the messenger almost that long to find his party. Tell me," the Sultan demanded, "was it so difficult to find one or two English women of good mind and pure bodies?"

"Our difficulty was not in obtaining the women, my Lord," Emil explained matter-of-factly. "Within sight of home shores we encountered a fierce storm that swept us many leagues off course and caused some minor damage to the main mast. We limped to a port where we could effect repairs and replenish our stores and have arrived just today. I have hastened to bring my report to you."

Selim nodded his head graciously, a slight smile on his lips, his earlier, quick anger forgotten as he listened to the Bey's reasonable explanations. "So—," he leaned back against the high backed throne, "tell me about these women. I hear they are so beautiful they rival the sun.."

The Bey allowed himself a chuckle. "Indeed, Great One, they are magnificent.. All three are singly worthy of a king's ransom. In addition to the vibrant beauty you have heard of,

they all possess an abundance of courage and spirit. I believe you would find them suitable as additions to your own harem, should that be your pleasure."

"No, no." Selim demurred. "I have designated these women for my son's pleasure. I expect one to attach his interests enough that he will become marriage-minded."

Emil shrugged. "I have no doubt that it will be as you wish, Lord," he stated firmly and positively. "The only difficulty he should have is choosing which blossom to pick."

The Sultan allowed the Bey to see how pleased he was with his service. He rubbed his hands together in glee as he envisioned his plans cementing about his son.

"You have done well, Emil," he praised, "and will be well rewarded."

"That you are pleased is reward enough for me, my Sultan."

"I should like to view the women—"

"Alas. They are still aboard ship. I hesitated to convey them to the palace without sufficient guards. Men would kill for such as these. If my Lord would see fit to send a company of his eunuchs...?"

"See to it." Selim snapped his fingers. Knowing his wishes would be instantly set in motion, Selim dismissed everything from his mind except the present conversation. He eagerly returned his attention to Emil. "I would hear of your journey," he commanded. "No doubt there are several tales you could relate concerning these beauties," he hinted humorously. "Enlighten me on how you went about obtaining the blossoms soon to grace Jamal's garden, hmm?"

A smile glinted in Emil's dark eyes. "The first has hair the color of the black cherry, its scarlet hidden among the tresses until the light uncovers its brilliance," he began. "Her eyes are the changing colors of the earth and old grass; sometimes one, sometimes the other, oftentimes both at once.. She is like a ripe peach ... all juicy and ready to pick. She was our first acquisition, sold to us by her own brother—"

"Her brother—?" The Sultan shook his head at Emil's affirmative nod. In his experience, high-born Englishmen sold their sisters in the marriage-mart. They did not sell their sisters to a people they considered to be infidels. "This is a puzzle to me," the Sultan admitted, after pondering the strange act of the Englishman towards the one Allah had placed in his hands to protect and guard.

"To us, also, my Lord," Emil said. "Perhaps she angered him in some way, and this is her punishment." He shrugged, indicating his puzzlement in the whys and wherefores of the situation. Whatever her past, the girl Seana was no longer English or high-born. She was now but a slave of the Ottoman Empire.

"But let me tell you of the second girl," Emil suggested, continuing at the Sultan's nodded permission. "She is light to the first one's darkness. Straight, thick hair falls to beyond her waist, framing a delicate, pink-tinged face. Her eyes are huge; the clear green color of new grass, or the peridot stone. She is slimly built, almost boyish, with delicate curves ... nothing overblown. She is all feminine seduction, understated, muted, but definitely *there*."

Selim had slid forward in his chair, eyes fixed avidly upon his high-ranking subject. "Your descriptions have my mouth watering. Almost, you make me wish I had not set apart these lovely jewels for Jamal. Perhaps, when he has chosen one, I may indeed taste the nectar from the heart of at least one of these foreign flowers. But continue. Tell me of the third slave.."

"Aah-h-h. Now, the third one is the true prize. If my Lord Jamal is a normal man, he will not be able to resist this one.. She is darkly colored. Her complexion is dusky-rose. Slashing black eyebrows wing across her face, and her hair is a cloud of ebony curls; the dark black coal from which the diamond springs. These curls riot down her back to below her sweetly rounded buttocks. Her lips pout redly, as though they be already kiss-swollen. And her eyes....

My Lord, her eyes glint with challenge and intelligence, yet they are womanly soft and melting. When she is at peace, they are the smooth silky gray of a dove's wing. But when she is angry or excited, then they flash and swirl like the gray sky and turbulent wind-swept waves of a stormy sea. Oh, she is fire and lightening.. Just to look upon her calls forth pictures of rumpled sheets and wild, fierce matings. And she is a giant among women. It will take a giant among men to tame her."

Selim leaned back against his throne, almost panting, more than half-aroused by the Bey's descriptions. While occupied with his own lusts, still Selim's keen eyes missed nothing of the Bey's unconscious animation. Selim had known Emil many years, and seldom, if ever, had the Sultan seen

him display such emotion on any subject, let alone the relatively unimportant fate of female captives.

There was something more, though, in his tones when he spoke of this third one. Emil seemed almost enamored of this one. If he spoke not from his infatuation and did not exaggerate her charms and fire of spirit, then this just might be the woman he needed for his son. A duel of the sexes would put Jamal in the right frame of mind making him want to clear his name for his woman, if not for himself...

While the Bey entertained the Sultan with the stories of their acquisition, Seana, Merridyth and Susan anxiously waited for the signal to disembark. They stood on deck watching the bustle and activity of the port, highly aware of being just as avidly watched by the men on shore.

Though they had not thought it possible, they were actually grateful for the concealing folds of the eastern clothes they wore. From head to foot, they were clothed in sheer cream, their faces covered by gauzy veils. They had refused the veils at first, but Shirka, mindful of his responsibilities and noticing how quickly the dock had filled with men of all ages straining to get a closer look at the beauties glimpsed aboard, had insisted on the veils.

Seana had tried to argue that the presence of the guards would keep the men at bay, yet Shirka, knowing the Turks, was not willing to take any chances. He gave his charges a firm ultimatum: either wear the veils or remain out of sight below decks. The girls, having noticed the avid, excited interest they were garnering from the crowd, gave in. They stoically submitted to the handmaidens' finicky twitching,

their insistence that the concealing raiment fall just so. Indeed, it was not that bad. The thinness of the weave allowed for plentiful airflow while concealing their uneasiness as well as their heated cheeks from any wayward stares.

They were still waiting hours later. When the sun rode just above the water, they went below to eat a light dinner, and then returned to their positions at the ship's railing. Just before true dark, they noticed a wave of disturbance swelling from the back of the dock crowd. At first, they believed it was the Bey, returned from his court appearance and were disappointed to find it was not he. Their disappointment quickly turned to sadness, tinged with dread, when they realized the disturbance was a contingent of soldiers who were obviously intent upon their ship. With pomp and ceremony, the palace guards arrived. After saluting the ship's guards, they relayed the Sultan's commands and demanded immediate obedience.

With stricken looks, Susan and Seana bid tearful farewells to the companions they had come to know during the long four-month ocean voyage, for not even Shirka could accompany them to the palace.

Merri's eyes were dry, her good-byes and thanks restrained. Since first sighting that dark blue strip between sky and sea, and learning it was the land of her captivity, Merri had locked her emotions deep inside. She would allow nothing to touch her, would expose no weakness to her enemies.

* * * *

High in the Riza mountains, Jamal lay close to the campfire, his blankets carefully spread to protect the three mewling Ounce cubs huddled tightly together, their small bodies shivering in the chill night air despite the fur they were covered with. Though spring was far advanced in the low-lands, this high up, the mountain was still encased in a winter-like frost.

Earlier that morning, when their group had accidentally come upon the lair of a recently-delivered Ounce and her three cubs, Jamal had been forced to kill the mother, who had been a fierce opponent in the protection of her cubs. Sickened by the needless death of so worthy an adversary, Jamal had refused to allow the others of his group to skin her and use her pelt for profit. The rosette pelts of the mountain Ounce, more commonly called Snow leopards, were highly prized among the Turks, and the young nobles argued repeatedly that it would be a shame not to take the fur. After all, the mother no longer needed it..

Their words made sense to Jamal. His companions were shocked, however, when he dressed out the mother cat's fur and wrapped her three orphaned cubs in it. Again, they attempted to reason with him. There was little hope of the cubs surviving without their mother. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions.. Jamal, focusing his tigerish eyes upon each of his companions, had informed them coldly and finally that he would not abandon the cubs.

All argument ceased. The six young men had been about court often enough to recognize an Imperial air. In his anger, Jamal closely resembled his father, the Sultan. The jovial

spirit of the hunting trip decreased from that moment. Jamal had inadvertently pulled rank, and the young nobles were now very aware of his position and power. To the Turks, their Sultan was a half-step down from Allah. And Jamal was not only his firstborn son, but his oldest male relative; by Ottoman law, the next Sultan.

By mutual, unspoken agreement, the men decided to cut short their trip and begin the long journey back to the spring palace at Istanbul. On the morrow, they would descend from these heights and finish their trek out of the mountains.

Wide awake, Jamal watched the burning stars above him, feeling alone, and set apart. From the other side of the fire, he could hear the soft rustling of clothes and bedrolls as his companions paired off in their usual couplings. Not long after, the slurping sounds of lips devouring cocks and the sharp wet sucking noise that accompanied cocks sinking in and out of tight male asses rose around him...

Shortly thereafter, the groaning sounds of male pleasure and release rose on the thin night air, and while he had no inclination to join them, still Jamal felt isolated. Lonely. Turning, he leaned over to check his little charges. They were sleeping soundly ... something he doubted he would do this night.

Upon arrival in Turkey, Jamal had been shocked at the openness with which the cadomite way was practiced among both the nobles and the royal soldiers, called Janizzaries. The men thought nothing of flaunting their male affairs and often coupled in plain sight of others when their ardor overtook them.

He by no means considered himself a prude, but he found the public fucking discomfited him. Though sodomy was illegal in England, he knew lonely boys at Eton often sought comfort, turning to the older upperclassmen, who eagerly introduced them to dark seduction of male on male love.

Grown to manhood, he had refused to sit in judgement of those schoolmates and remained friends with a few of them though he knew they still secretly practiced the act society deemed deviant.

While he had always been a believer in living his life and allowing others to live theirs, he often felt uncomfortable with many of the Ottoman ways. Now he lay listening to the soft susurrations of lovers' voices whispering in the chill dark. He could see tiny pinpricks of light that were the glowing tips of hand-rolled cigarettes wafting up and down. He felt his own need arise as he heard the sounds of sexual activity, and his body reacted. Through the long night, he lay watching the stars, pondering the many different customs he had encountered while living in the Grand Seraglio...

Hours later, pale fingers of light crept over the top of the mountain, gently touching upon the open eyes of the quiet, wakeful man. A cool breeze skittered the loose leaves, dancing them about, moving on to ruffle the edge of a blanket, tickle an exposed toe. It blew playfully across Jamal's face. And he felt something ... a pressure building about him, a picture forming...

She stood leaning against the railing of a Turkish brigantine. Her hair and body obscured from sight, covered in voluminous folds of cream drapery. He recognized her. Her

eyes shone stark gray above the veil hiding her lower face. Her gaze held remembered torment and present sadness, and his heart twisted in agony that he had not been there to help her in her time of need. This was not the bright girl he had last seen in the courtroom, but a woman tempered by fire. How she shone.... His woman. A light sparked spreading from her eyes and brightening, glowing and expanding until the brilliant haze obscured her image...

And reality intruded. Jamal lay with his right forearm pressed across his stinging eyes trying to hold the after-image of his Love. It had burned into his retina, yet now faded against the dark screen of his closed lids slipping away even as he strove to hold it close. A vision? He wondered and didn't know. A dream? Perhaps just his heart's knowing that she was close., maybe even here in Turkey. He didn't know how he knew, but the knowledge within him was sure.

Restlessly, Jamal flung back his covers. His sudden movement woke his small charges, and his eyes lit upon the three startled cubs mewling pitifully at the sudden cold rush of air. Bending, Jamal picked up one cub after the other. Two were male, the other female. All three cubs had clear, luminous silvery-gray eyes. *Her eyes.* It seemed but one more omen to him.

Flinging his head back, Jamal gave in to the joyous shout welling up from deep within him, startling his companions awake. "We ride." he shouted, new life bubbling and boiling up in him. Seething in him. Driven by anticipation, spurred by a hope shining with an almost feral light, he bundled the cubs warmly while harrying his sleepy party.

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

Breakfast was a rushed affair. The nobles whispered among themselves as they readied themselves for the long journey. Casting wondering gazes on their leader, they shook their heads at his frantic energy. From the looks of him, they expected to ride hard and long this day. For some reason, the Prince was now in a hurry to reach home.

Chapter Sixteen

Jared—

I am so sorry. I have not been able to locate a girl of good family that meets your description. I have had all my cronies haunting Almacks. Surely, if she were of age, and acceptable, she would eventually be seen at that bastion of the haut ton. No one has caught sight of anyone remotely like the girl you have written asking me about. I shall, of course, continue the search for you. You know how intrigued I am. It sounds as though you are smitten ... I know you have no intention of enlightening me. Still, as your mother, I feel I should at least be informed of the fact if you are now considering marriage. Has some new evidence come to light regarding your situation? If not, how would you go about courting this Miss should I find her? I also beg to remind you that you have put my own marriage plans on hold. A little dog-in-the-mangerish, do you not agree?—Mum

Chapter Seventeen

Selim—What have you done? My son is looking for a woman that has been missing for over five months now. He met her at his trial and was instantly intrigued. I tell you about it and a short while later she is nowhere to be found. Is this your doing? If so, I am extremely upset and angry with you. I thought you had learned what could come of interfering with other people's lives. On your head be it. I do not want Jared to think I was even slightly involved in something like this, if it is indeed what you have done. What on earth could you possibly be planning?—Angry Emily

Chapter Eighteen

Istanbul, Turkey

May 1801

The Grand Seraglio was a world within itself. The hugely sprawling palace housed the thousands needed to minister to the private and administrative needs of the Sultan. Both the Sultan's private quarters, or *Mabeyn*, as well as the public offices known as the *Divans*, were housed within the massive gates that shut out the world. And it was here, since the middle 1500's, that the members of the royal harem were incarcerated.

Located between the *Mabeyn* and the apartments of the chief Black eunuch, or *Kislar Agasi*; literally "master of the girls", the harem consisted of almost four hundred rooms, all centered around the Courtyard of the Valide Sultana, containing the apartments and dormitories of the lesser women. Connected to the outside world by the Carriage House gate—which opened at dawn and closed at dusk—and the Bird House gate, the harem was assiduously guarded from within by the corps of eunuchs and, outside, by Halberdiers, or royal guards devoted to the sequestering of the Sultan's females.

Enclosed and shut away from the outside world, the women and children of the Sultan's family, their slaves and servants, existed in a private, jealously guarded environment that revolved around the whims and vagaries of one man. The harem seethed with intrigue and danger. The politics of

sex was the road to power and many wielded that weapon with a ruthless, sharp-edged expertise that left untold numbers of rivals dead. In powerful contrast, there were often close, fiercely loyal friendships forged through shared adversity that flourished despite the constant intrigue always fomenting in the "curtained world".

Competition, ever rampant among the harem occupants, was not allowed to impact upon these friendships. Those who chose to enter into such a pact had learned that ultimately the women confined together in the elaborate, opulent cage could depend only on each other.

It was into this turbulent, shifting, confused atmosphere that Merridyth, Susan and Seana were thrust. In the absence of a Valide Sultana, the three captives had been presented to the Mistress of the House, who, having been told the girls were to be offered to the young Emir, immediately started them on an intense course of study in the Turkish language, palace etiquette, and the Islamic culture. There were also lessons in the Eastern style of dance, poetry, and musical instruments. And, as a matter of course, taking their future roles into account, they were expected to master the many erotic arts needed to please their new master. Problems arose at once.

* * * *

Laihla, a lithe Black woman who had entered the harem over four years before on her thirteenth birthday, was lying in her cubicle, indolently awaiting her lover. Unlike the three new captives, Laihla had willingly entered the "curtained

world" to escape the poverty that had been her lot as the youngest daughter in a family of eight children. Since her fate was to be sold, she preferred selling herself into the most advantageous circumstances she could manage.

She was blessed with delicate features. Large liquid brown eyes set in a face of surpassing dark beauty; a beauty she cultivated carefully, and which had caught the eye of the Sultan in her second year. She had spent two wonderfully frightening nights in the royal bedchambers.. As a result, she now occupied a private cubicle in the women's seraglio. It wasn't much; a curtained-off area that contained a couch, a trunk where she stored a few precious personal items, and a low table that held a squat brass lamp. It was more than most had.

Laihla had lost the Sultan's interest as easily as she had caught it and was never recalled after her second night. She regretted only her failure to become pregnant from the two times she had visited the Sultan's bed. Had she borne a child, male or female, she would now be a Sultana, and entitled to live in a sumptuous two-room apartment with real walls that fronted on the courtyard. Along with the apartment would have come two Odalisques, or room-girls, and a eunuch servant.

Laihla let go of her "might-have-beens" with an inward shrug. Except for a constant boredom, she was content. She had the comfort of privacy while the majority of the women shared common sleeping barracks and a thin pallet with a lidded wicker basket at its foot where they could store their meager belongings. To conquer the pervasive ennui that she

and every other woman immured in the seraglio faced daily, she had the dangerous intrigue of her love affair with Amil, a White eunuch.

The White eunuchs' apartments were outside the women's section of the harem, but when one had a great enough need, the women's quarters could be reached by going through the Black eunuchs' quarters and exiting out their courtyard, which was adjacent to the courtyard of the Kadins. Since there were only two Kadins at the present time, Amil had little worries of being caught in a section of the harem where he, as an intact eunuch, had no business being. The tricky part was getting through the Black eunuchs' territory without being questioned. Luckily, he had arranged with Ory—a Black eunuch he had known for a long time—for safe passage.

Amil and Ory were friends. The deeply devoted kind of friendship that was possible between two "hairless ones". Ory's sexual orientation was firmly towards males, and at one time, he had been highly attracted to Amil. But Amil was still attracted to females, and he'd gently rebuffed Ory's overtures. Things had been strained between them until Ory fell in love with a young eunuch newly assigned to the Mistress of the girls. So once again, they were comfortable in their friendship, and for the love Ory still remembered, he was willing to be drawn into an intrigue so that Amil might see his dangerous lady-love.

A sound alerted her and Laihla looked up through sultry eyes to see Amil silhouetted against her thin curtains. Raising her arms, she silently beckoned to her lover to join her in her cubicle. Amil glanced around, sweeping the area with cautious

care, making sure he had not been seen. With a twitch of the concealing curtains, he entered the room. "My—"

"Shh-h-h." A slim Black hand quickly covered his mouth. "Yaz & Ccedil;çek is asleep in her cubicle," Laihla warned quietly, "And while I believe she will not betray us, I am not willing to put it to the test unless it is unavoidable."

"You are right, my Dove," Amil whispered. Both knew what they were doing was punishable by death. Laihla had been bedded by the Sultan. As long as he lived, it was unlawful for her to have another man unless she were given away in marriage by the Sultan himself. "I would not like to lose that which gives you and I such pleasure," he continued, reaching between his legs to cup the erection that rose, swollen and pulsing at his groin.

Laihla licked her lips at the salacious sight. Amil was a functioning eunuch. As a child, his stones had been crushed, leaving him unable to father children, but still capable of achieving and maintaining an erection. If Laihla were caught with a complete eunuch, she would most likely suffer a severe punishment. If she were caught with Amil, who could penetrate her—Oh, how he penetrated her—she would be tortured and killed. Yet this rush of excitement mixed with fear was worth any risk..

Laihla's eyes widened as she followed the path of Amil's hand. She ran a moist tongue over dry lips as she watched him slip out of his loose tunic and pants. Her heart kicked into overdrive as his pale, compact body came into full view. He was beautifully built and hung like a bull. His organ looked even larger when seen against the shriveled, empty sacs of

his testes. He used a hand-over-hand motion to milk himself as he waited for Laihla to remove her clothes. "We shall proceed quietly ... but quickly. Quickly." he demanded.

She was already wet, dripping, when he came between her open thighs. Rearing back on her elbows she let out an ululating moan, and there was a sudden noise and movement in the next cubicle. Amil's hand came up quickly to cover her mouth, eyes wide in startled fear. She laughed low and huskily, arching her back to offer her full breasts to his mouth while urging him with hoarse, hushed pleas to ride her hard and deep. Harder. *Deeper*. Even the glorious feel of his rod pumping strongly within her paled next to the delicious, shivery threat of discovery...

* * * *

The Mistress of the House, Niaya, was incensed at the stubbornness of her three new charges and highly frightened of what the Sultan would have to say about her failure to present them trained and ready, as commanded. As female overseer of the harem, she would be held accountable for the English girls' untrained status. Having been forbidden to mark them or even frighten them unduly, another flogging so soon after the first was out of the question. It was for this reason she had requested an audience with the *Kislar Agasi*.

As the "Sultan's voice in the harem" and the voice of authority over all the eunuchs, she needed to seek his guidance and cooperation to deal with the backwards girls. She shifted from foot to foot unused to the feelings of inadequacy roiling through her. Never before had she failed at

any given task. Her gaze swept quickly over the man before her, then just as quickly lowered to the floor. It would not do for the *Kislar Agasi* to catch her gawking at him.

The *Kislar Agasi* was an enormous Black eunuch. His six feet plus of massive fat was covered by the finest black silk raiment. His shaved head sported a black velvet fez with a golden-thread tassel. He was aware of the power he wielded and carried himself accordingly. Now he stood amidst the luxuries of his apartments awaiting the Mistress of the House, whom he'd ordered to attend him.

His feet were splayed wide in a stance that shouted of control. His pudgy, beringed hands were fisted at his hips. He eyed the trembling woman before him and smiled inside. Theirs was a rivalry that spanned years. The gimlet-eyed hag had always resented his early rise to power. Years ago, she had backed the wrong eunuch and now had to scramble for whatever power and influence she could garner. How he relished having this uppity whore at a disadvantage.. Whatever she wanted, he would not make it easy for her—

"Well, woman." he boomed, his basso voice so powerful she fancied she felt its vibrations travel through the floor, up her legs, to quaver in her belly. "What is this problem you cannot deal with?"

The Mistress quailed. She'd known he would do that ... bring it down to what she could not accomplish without his help. Her eyes flashed with rage, but she kept her head down until she had control of the anger. She would not give him another weapon to use, she vowed silently. "The three girls set aside for the *gavūr* Emir refuse all attempts at training."

"For this I am called?" The Agasi's surprise was unfeigned. "Whip them. Compel them to obey." he shouted, working himself up into full disgust. "For this you interrupt my afternoon *divan*?" The eunuch shook his head in disbelief. "Perhaps I should have *you* flogged, woman."

"Have mercy, great one." The mistress flung herself prostrate before her superior. Her words tripped over themselves in her panic to exonerate herself. She cried, clutching at his robes, "I am at a loss. The Sultan ordered no severe punishments for the three English girls. I have already punished them with five lashes and two day's fasting ... and still they refuse to cooperate.."

"The English girls, you say?" asked the eunuch as he rubbed his smooth chin. "I have heard of their beauty and spirit ... hhm-m-m ... Oh, get up." A sharp kick to the ribs had Niaya scrambling to her feet. "Prepare the harem." the Master of the girls ordered. "I shall make a progression."

* * * *

The harem was all atwitter.. The three English women continued to resist the orders of the Sultan. His Serene Highness demanded the girls be taught the hundred and one ways to please a man that they might be readied for their presentation before the young Emir Jamal. They flatly refused. Even after a punishment of five lashes and several missed meals, they remained adamant in their stand. Now the *Kislar Agasi* had bestirred himself and was coming to deal with their insurrection personally.

Laihla avidly watched the drama surrounding the three English captives. They fascinated her. They were so different from what she was used to. In a world where every day was virtually the same, where boredom and inactivity threatened to unravel the thin strands of sanity, the three women's reactions were a source of wonderful diversion—especially this latest, juicy scandal.

Laihla found it hard to believe the three captives had refused the will of the Sultan. Such rebellion was unthinkable to her for no woman in her right mind would challenge the way of the harem. Shaking her head in baffled disbelief, she nevertheless sidled closer to where the three sat talking quietly to each other. She strained to hear their muffled conversation, not wanting to miss a thing.

"I am not interested in learning the ten different names of the male sex organ." Seana declared in stinging tones, her Turkish surprisingly good after five months of intensive study in the language. With hands balled tightly at her hips, she mocked, "The jade stem, the pillar of power, the ivory tower ... really. 'Tis disgusting and sinful, and I'll have no part of it." Her thickened Scottish brogue, while sounding hilarious with the Turkish, betrayed her agitation.

"I confess I am not comfortable with the situation, either," Susan stated quietly, "but shouldn't we save our energy for the battles more worth fighting?" She paused in her pacing to face Seana and Merridyth. For all she had walked the perimeter of the room several times, she'd yet to notice the rich beauty surrounding her.

Merridyth seemed to deliberate carefully before entering her comments. "Secretly, I've always been curious about the differences between women and men. I'm amused by the fact that now, far from being denied the information, we're actually being forced to acquire the knowledge. Personally, I cannot see the harm in learning such information. Being forced to use it would be a different matter."

Seana looked horrified at Merri's answer. Her lips tightened in a thin, disapproving line. "I am a good and devout Catholic," she said, "and I'll nae be endangerin' ma verra soul with sich goin's on."

Laihla was perplexed as she eavesdropped on the women. They must be fools. Only fools would choose to remain ignorant when knowledge was life and advancement.. The three were obviously intelligent; look how quickly improved they had in their use of the language. Also, they were adept at all the other tasks they attempted, yet they refused the very lessons that could make them truly powerful.

Tsking in disgust, Laihla decided she should take a hand in this situation else the women were going to get themselves killed early on, and the excitement would be over before she had a chance to really enjoy it.. Emerging from her hiding place, she boldly confronted the women where they sat near her secluded corner of the public apartments. "Allah's greetings to you, my new sisters," Laihla greeted, bowing slightly, palms pressed respectfully together.

The three women turned sharply, startled from their self-absorption by the sudden appearance of an outsider. Suspicion darkened the red-head's features as she took in the

uncompromising alienness of the woman standing regally before them. Laihla knew the English girl saw smooth, unlined skin dark as cherry wood, Eyes deeply brown, almost black, and slanted just a bit at the inside corners and hair full and heavy, a rich charcoal wave flowing like lava to her shoulders. Her body was lushly curved: high, full breasts; small waist; hips a wide delta sweeping into long, firm legs. Laihla knew she was the most exotically beautiful creature Seana had ever seen.

"What do you want?" Seana's voice was rife with hostility.

Merridyth placed a restraining hand on her friend's arm. "Let's not take our frustrations out on the innocent," she cautioned. "How do we know this woman is not in much the same bind we are facing? Also ... a knowledgeable friend could prove an asset."

The two others nodded in agreement. By mutual, unspoken agreement, they remained silent, allowing Merri to carry the conversation. "Susan and Seana are both more fluent in Turkish than me, due to my illness while on the ship; however, I manage to understand and make myself understood." She spoke slowly now, hoping the woman would take the hint and respond in kind. "So," she intoned softly, hands folded politely together as she had been taught, "may we ask the name of the one who speaks with us?"

"I am *gözye* Laihla. I would be your friend," she offered, her eagerness childlike and earnest.

"A friend here would be welcome," Merri said with a bittersweet smile. "Tell me, Laihla, what does your title mean?"

The Ethiopian woman smiled. "To be "gözye" means to be "in-the-eye" of the Sultan. It designates a woman who has been called to the Sultan's bed more than once, yet has not conceived."

Merri drew back. "We are not worthy of the honor you offer."

"You do not wish my friendship?" A frown marred the dark beauty of the patrician face. "I can be of much help to you," she suggested, "for I have many contacts, and access to much information ... in fact, to prove my usefulness..." She looked furtively about before beckoning them closer to whisper, "The *Kislar Agasi* is to make a progression of the harem. The Mistress has complained of your behavior, and together, they plan to bring you under control."

"We do not spurn your friendship," Merridyth explained in her slow Turkish, "we welcome it. Also, our thanks for this information you give, though—," she spread her empty arms indicating herself and her friends ... and their lack of possessions, "we have nothing with which to repay you."

"In the harem, knowledge is power," Laihla instructed sagely, hoping the women would take that bit of information to heart. "In return for my meager help, I would like you to teach me your language."

"Why would you want to learn English?"

Laihla shrugged. "I have nothing else to do and it may one day be a useful tool. Do you agree?"

The friends exchanged secretive glances. "Agreed." The three said together. Merri smiled at Laihla. "You don't want much, and knowledge is the only coin we are rich in."

* * * *

"Now," Susan mused aloud, "if only we could find away to deal with this man ... what did you call him...? Oh, yes. The Master of the Girls."

Laihla's eyes grew large. "One does not *deal* with the Master," she warned. "He will deal with you. The *Kislar Agasi's* is the highest voice in the harem beside the Sultan's—may he live forever. You will be made to submit, or it will go hard on you." Lowering her voice, she continued, "Is it not possible ... preferable to give in over the lessons in sensual matters? Is there not wisdom in seeming to submit before a greater force, thereby maintaining an illusion of obedience?"

"I am not so devious as that." Seana exclaimed angrily.

"You had better become so, then," Laihla shot back, fast losing her patience with this bitter woman. Did she think she was the only one here against her will?

"Or do you choose death...? For that is what it will come to. How long do you think they will tolerate disobedience from you? You are but a lowly female, and what is there to recommend you? Beauty? Look around you, there are many here whose beauty rivals yours, so there is no protection in that. High birth? There are princesses here who serve as laundry maids, so how could you imagine your noble birth would buy you privileges? Purity? Know that we all were pure when first we entered this harem. We have all learned, as will you, that having our maidenheads taken is not a fate worse than death—," Laihla broke off with a frustrated sigh. The varied looks of dismay on the three faces before her stumped

her. Most women entering the "curtained world" knew these things intrinsically. These western women knew nothing. How could she get through to them?

"Can you not understand that training brings status? Right now, you are naught but a possession. You possess nothing, not even a name—"

"I am Lady Seana Brigitta MacCarris."

"No," Laihla said, not without some pity. "You have no name here. Your former life ended the moment you entered these quarters. The woman who was Seana died. She is no more. Your name is now *kis*, "girl", until you are named by the Sultan or the man you are ultimately given to. You might receive a temporary name from the Master of the girls, or the Mistress, but until you are recognized, you are a non-person."

She softened more as she saw the shock of reality on the girls' faces. Pity moved through her, yet she knew they could not afford gentle treatment now. If they were intent in challenging the forces of power in the harem, they needed to be strong in their anger, resolute in their stance. Even then, she feared they had no real hopes of winning in the end.

"It is the way of the Seraglio, and has been for many hundreds of years. It will be so when we are dust. How can you hope to prevail?"

Seana attempted to explain, "Whatever I am called, the woman that I am ... she exists here." A finger touched her forehead. "But if I do what you tell me ... if I give in ... give up, then the woman in here—" again she touched her temple, "will truly die. So I do not have a choice. I must fight against what I know to be wrong ... for me."

"They will torture you." The whispered words fell with an eerie clarity into the pool of silence Seana's impassioned speech had created. "They will break you. I, myself, have seen this. Once, a new slave—she had been a royal princess in her land—refused as you do now. She was punished with the whip ... as you were. She continued to rebel, and they cut off her button; she was no longer able to feel pleasure. Her petals were sewn shut around a straw so she could be as an eunuch. They cut off her pillows—" Laihla unconsciously cupped her own generous breasts in sympathetic memory, "because, they said, no master would rest his head there. They cut out her tongue for refusing to say pleasing words to her masters. And we were all made to watch, so we would not dare to do as she did."

Laihla starkly met each woman's horrified stare. "She is the mute slave belonging to the Mistress of the laundry. Shall I take you to see her?" While she was speaking, she kept her eyes trained on Seana forcing the other woman to meet her gaze. "If they do these things to you, will the woman in here—" her forefinger lightly stroked Seana's pale, sweat-sheened forehead, "still survive? Could she endure such things? Or will both she and you cease to exist?"

Seana mutely shook her head, unable to answer. Her limbs quaked as she stumbled up and fled this new, implacable friend who had just stripped away her fantasy of control. She moved only a few feet before she shakily collapsed onto a low bench. As had become habit, she looked back to Merridyth and Susan, her eyes beseeching help, and both immediately rose from their seats and came to her.

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

Seana's trembling hands crept up to cover her mouth as if she could stop the keening, high-pitched moans from leaking out from between her fingers. She had survived a neglected childhood, the harsh knock of her brother's betrayal, the loss of everything familiar to her: home, society; her very future. How could she survive the loss of herself?

Now, the truth became her breaking point for this last she could not countenance. Her mind twisted away from what it could not endure, and she felt herself dwindling, withdrawing ... and tried to cry out to her friends. She could produce nothing but the animal-like moans that rose in volume until the whole room echoed with their chilling noise.

Sighing and shaking her head, Laihla watched as Susan and Merridyth both embraced and comforted her as best they could stroking her hair and soothing her, witnessed them attending to the stricken girl who rocked back and forth in an agony of denial. They were a closed circle; the three of them together. And the red-haired one had a closed mind.

Laihla did not believe the girl had it in her to act upon her warnings, yet it hurt her to see the girl so distressed. She fervently wished for them all to survive the harem, but she harbored no foolish hopes. Her heart was sorrowful as she watched the English women. Those who could not bend were often broken by the relentless pressures that the harem inflicted upon its inhabitants.

Chapter Nineteen

...Dearest, thank you for the birthday gifts. How unusual they are. I wore them to Lady Overton's affair and everyone was atwitter over the striking pair. The peacock fan is so brilliantly feathered ... I am sure no one has ever seen one like it, let alone possessed one. And the tiara fashioned in the likeness of a spread peacock tail is marvelous. Tell me, is it truly lapis lazuli that forms the deep blue eye of the feathers? I believe it is, however Raeburn claims it is too costly a stone for them to be genuine. I informed him I was your favorite mother, and nothing was too costly for me. He laughed, the scoundrel. Have you heard of the possibility of another war with the colonies? I am not sure what has stirred up the government now—I am not so well informed as I used to be when I had you to keep me up to date. Ferdie visited again, wanting to know if I had any news of you. He warned me to have a care for myself ... said something about evil lurking close to home. He always was a strange one, with his father being so religiously fanatical. Oh, well. At least he believes in your innocence, and has remained a true friend. He misses you. I miss you, also—Mum

Chapter Twenty

Merridyth could not sleep. She lay awake in the last hours of the night, her burning eyes resting unseeing on the colorfully patterned cloth over her head. In the close confines of the private room they shared, she could hear the soft broken murmur of Susan's uneven breaths still catching in the occasional sob. Recalling her cousin's public and tearful loss of control, Merri gave silent thanks for Laihla, who had generously given over the use of her curtained quarters so that Merridyth and Susan might do their grieving and regrouping in private.

Susan had finally succumbed to the uncertain blessing of sleep, and while wishing she could also partake of that comfort, Merri turned restlessly, knowing it was not to be. Whenever she attempted to rest, whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Seana's body hanging in the bathing-room, slowly twisting to and fro as if a careless hand had set a child's spinning top in motion. She swallowed sickly, fighting an upsurge of bile, unable to stop her mind from replaying the horrific events of three nights ago...

The summery night was too warm, and Merri, more accustomed to the cooler English climate, had trouble dropping off to sleep. Thinking she might cool off by taking a quick dip in the bathing pool located in the bathroom complex, she rose from her thin pallet, suppressing a groan at the twinges of sore muscles and bruised skin. She had not

yet grown used to sleeping on a hard floor with only a thin mattress between her body and bare planks.

She hesitated at Susan's pallet, then moved on; she couldn't bear to awaken her. Even in sleep, her cousin looked worn and was obviously in need of her rest. It would be selfish to rouse Susan just so she might keep her company. Seana, however, loved the water. She would probably enjoy a late-night swim especially as she did not like to undress before so many others, and the rooms were always crowded during the day.

Merri quietly tiptoed over to Seana's bed and straightened in surprise. Seana's pallet was empty. "That is strange," she thought for Seana insisted either Susan or Merridyth be with her at all times; even a trip to the necessary was undertaken with an escort.

Merri had never had a premonition, and she wouldn't have recognized the feelings of dread inundating her and turning her blood to ice as being her first. Panic overwhelmed her. Her heart skittered to a stop, and when it resumed, it had left the hollow chamber of her chest to pound frantically in the cave of her belly. Something was terribly wrong.

Merridyth rushed back to Susan's side, crying, "Sue, get up."

She yanked the covers off her startled cousin. "Seana is missing. Help me find her." Merri grabbed the sleep-slowed Susan by the hand and pulled her up and around to face her. "I'm frightened, Susan ... and I don't think we have much time. Hurry."

Susan shook off the last remnants of sleep, her eyes growing wide in dread. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go to Laihla. Maybe Seana is only trying to escape. Laihla might have some idea of where a person could squeeze through the guards. Hurry." she urged again, unable to control the rising tide of unease within her.

As Susan rushed off to awaken Laihla, Merri began a frantic search of the adjoining rooms moving in ever-widening circles. She was breathing hard, almost winded by running through a dozen rooms when she came to the hall that opened onto the bathing rooms. Hearing a sudden uproar behind her, Merri assumed Susan had gained Laihla's help and was searching in the other direction. She stepped through the ornate doorway of the main baths and froze.

Because of a former Sultan's penchant towards voyeurism, these particular bathing rooms were constructed under a room possessing a glass floor. The ceiling of the main bathing room was decorated with open beams that allowed a person in the room above to observe the women below without their knowledge.

Seana was hanging from the open lattice work. Somehow, she had knotted together several of the diaphanous veils and wound them through the widely spaced wooden scroll work. Apparently, after dragging two heavy benches to the middle of the floor, she had managed to get them stacked on top of each other. The top one was now half toppled over as if from an ill-placed kick, and Seana's body was swaying gently; a bizarre, mute wind chime in the slight breeze. The sheer, but tensile cloth fastened about her neck had tightened until her

face was a mottled blue, her staring eyes protruding in her head, and her tongue, visible between her open blue lips, swollen and dark.

Merridyth gasped, and in the same instant hurled herself up on the bench beneath Seana, her arms wrapping around the girl's still-warm legs. She pushed up, trying to loosen the drag of the cloth garrote. "Help me! I'm in the baths!" She screamed for someone, anyone to help her. "Hurry, hurry, hurry...!"

Her arms trembled with the strain of pushing upward from such an awkward position. "Oh God," she panted, terrified no one would come. Holding up Seana's limp form was agonizing, her muscles clenching in pain as tendons and bones unaccustomed to such activity were called into play.

"Help ... someone ... oh, God ... please..." she whimpered repeatedly, praying someone would hear her before her strength ran out. She knew she held Seana's life in her weakening hands and was determined not to let go. But her will was stronger than her flesh, and she moaned, petrified as her friend sagged heavier in her arms.

On the verge of collapse, Merri, sobbing her despair, dredged up one last ounce of strength from deep within. Bracing her legs, she lifted her shoulders and straightened under the precious load of her unconscious friend.

Then there were lights ... a thousand voices ... hands reaching above hers to steady the body. Other hands grabbing the legs, pushing up sharply to increase the slack while still others cut the cloth.

Seana's body sagged like un-molded clay into the waiting arms below. Merri collapsed beside her, unable to make her fingers release their vise-like grip, the metacarpals having frozen into tight curls. Strong hands pried hers loose from their stranglehold, and she fought them, crying, unwilling to give up that last connection, knowing ... *knowing* ... Seana was slipping away like water through her shaking fingers.

She cursed the hands that tried to draw her away and struggled back to Seana's side. Catching up one of her friend's limp hands, she hugged it tightly to her chest. Closing her eyes to shut out the unacceptable reality, and better concentrate, Merri reminded Seana of their promises to each other:

"Together, Seana," she whispered breathlessly, "together ... our promise ... Remember. Remember..."

Her vision darkened. She did not hear it said Seana breathed still. Did not feel Susan's arms about her as she gave way to the blackness, letting it suck her under ... It was the last time she had closed her eyes without seeing the horror of Seana's attempted suicide.

* * * *

"Merri, please don't cry." Susan said, her soft voice coming out of the quiet darkness, guessing the cause of Merri's tears. Knowing how sleep eluded her, and how the memory of three nights ago was burned into the lids of her cousin's eyes so that she saw the replay whenever she closed them. "At least Seana is still alive. She may yet get better—" She broke off, unable to finish voicing what she now believed was a lie. After

only three days, even optimistic Susan had trouble believing Seana would improve. She reached out, gently wiping the tears from Merridyth's face, ignoring her own as she recalled the vacant, staring mask that had become Seana's face.

The court physician could not or would not say if the damage to Seana's mind was permanent caused by loss of oxygen to the brain or a withdrawal on the girl's part—a disassociation from an unacceptable reality—or how long it would last.

In either case, Seana was an empty husk. A doll. A lifeless caricature of her former self. She voided on herself like an infant, and unless led about by the hand, simply wandered aimlessly all day. When not walking, she sat and rocked endlessly, gazing into the distance with unseeing eyes. She would eat if someone put food in her mouth, or grab at whatever came to hand.

Susan shuddered, remembering some of the girl's impromptu meals. Shuddered again, recalling and how Seana had choked and gagged on a large chunk of bread some pitying person had stuffed into her mouth. That incident had taught them to cut up Seana's food into fine portions, and to soften it in milk or some other liquid. Despite their efforts, she still ended by wearing more than half of anything they tried to feed her.

And the sounds. Susan despaired anew, recalling the shrill grunts and moans that issued from Seana's slack mouth; a series of random, senseless noises that repeated over and over and over. She no longer attempted to convince herself that the sounds might be an effort to communicate on

Seana's part. As had become her wont, she turned to Merridyth for reassurance.

"What are we going to do about Seana, Merri?" she asked worriedly. "I have overheard several of the women talking. They do not want her here. Said she was bad luck or some such." Susan leaned closer to Merri, her concern plain in her voice. "We cannot let them send her away somewhere. Who would care for her? Watch over her? What of our promise to her? Merri," Susan cried, becoming increasingly agitated, "she'll die if we cannot keep her here with us."

Merridyth sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the raised pallet platform. She groaned, gathering her meager blankets about her. She leaned forward, scrubbing at her face with stiff fingers, then speared them through the thick, black fall of hair that had swung forward hiding her face from Susan.

How Susan longed for someone they could give all their problems to, secure in the knowledge that they would disappear like the wispy mists that faded in the brightness of a spring day.

Merridyth echoed her thoughts unknowingly. "God, Susan, if only I were home right now locked in my room awaiting father ... a familiar problem, and one I have always taken in stride..." Merri heaved a heavy sigh. "For all my wishing, I'm not home; I'm here."

She turned away from the desperation Susan knew her cousin could see in her eyes. She knew it wasn't fair, but she looked to Merri for strength because she had little enough for herself.

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

"After the morning meal, I will find a way to speak to the Mistress of the girls," Merri informed Susan in quiet English, careful of eavesdroppers. "She might be able to help us, though with all the trouble we have been lately, I doubt her willingness to put herself out. It might be necessary to go to the *Agasi* or even the Sultan himself. I think I will consult Laihla on how best to approach this. If I can manage to strike a bargain with them over Seana, I tell you now," she warned Susan strictly, "you must be willing to agree to anything they may require of us ... *whatever* it may be."

BOOK TWO: MATING DANCE

Their eyes lock long before their necks entwine

Their mating ritual is a slow and stately dance

Paramount to the lovers is the spiritual bonding

Their bodies meet almost by chance...

Chapter Twenty-one

...Do you recall the bit of town gossip I imparted in one of my earlier letters? I referred to the daughter of the late Earl of Fellhaven, Mrs. St. John-Smythe, who had disappeared along with her four children. Well, the eldest daughter, as well as the daughter of the present Earl, is still missing. However, the Earl has received a letter from Mrs. St. John-Smythe declaring that she holds her husband responsible in some manner for the disappearance of the two girls (they went missing at the same time). She writes that she intends to live separately from her husband from now until forever. That is just how she put it. She refuses to reveal where she is staying at present, as she is fearful of Mr. St. John-Smythe discovering where she and the other children have hidden themselves away. On a more serious note, another war with that jumped-up little Colonel seems to be shaping up into a grim reality. They say he has escaped, or was turned loose, and is moving to re-consolidate his position. While war has not yet been officially declared, there seems to be no doubt in most minds that it will soon come down to a serious battle. I thought we were done with that unpleasant business, and I confess I am thankful you are out of it this time around. By the by, I had a curious visit last week from that false friend of yours, Robert Townesend. He came to ask if I had heard anything of your whereabouts—as if I would tell him. Then he asked for Jason, though I was unaware that he had ever met him. I was glad to be able to truthfully say Jason was away

taking care of some estate matters for me. To think that I used to welcome that man in my house. I will never forgive him for what he did to you. On still another note, Jason has suggested that he be given the power to sign for you during your absence. He thought doing so would make it easier on me. He does not realize that I have always managed most of my own affairs. And while he has been such a God-send since your absence, I do not want to make a move like that without your okay. I do not know what I would do without him and Raeburn. However, never think they replace you in my affections. Nothing and no one could ever do that.—Mum

Chapter Twenty-two

The Sultan was furious. The harem was in an uproar. The *Kislar Agasi* had been ordered to the *divan* of the Sultan to be straightway questioned. His subsequent return to his apartments, a subdued and frightened man, had the harem gossips whispering that he had a threat of death hanging over him.

Due to her incompetent handling of the English captives, ex-mistress of the girls had been stripped of all authority. To underscore the Sultan's displeasure, she had received a merciless sentence of fifty lashes. When the flogging was over, flashes of pale whitish bone gleamed through the ruined red mess of her quivering flesh. Presently, she lay secluded in the open quarters shared with the newly acquired odalisques while her servant nursed her, trying to bring down the fever that had resulted from the festering of her whip-scored back.

If she survived the fever, the Sultan had decreed she become the body-slave of the lowliest eunuch.

* * * *

Meanwhile, the morning had not gone well for the two Englishwomen. Having awakened to find Seana missing, Merridyth and Susan had suffered a frightening, frantic time until they had, with the help of numerous servants, ran the missing girl to ground in a little-used garden area. Two eunuchs had finally located her in the public gardens attached to the quarters of the Black eunuchs, a place forbidden to the harem women. She had apparently been there since early morning, having innocently wandered out behind a careless eunuch, who had not believed any woman would be foolish enough to risk death by leaving the harem without permission.

While in the garden, Seana must have managed to sample a number of interesting things residing in the grass and greenery that had caught her wayward attention. When Susan saw their friend, Seana had just finished stuffing a fat, wriggling worm into her mouth. Ignoring Susan's indelicate shout, or simply not hearing it, Seana bit down on the juicy slug, swallowed ... and promptly threw it back up. Judging by the assorted mess that spewed from her mouth along with the desiccated worm, she had ingested quite an impressive array of specimens.

Susan went pale. Feeling ill at the thought of what else Seana might have eaten before they had caught up with her and disgusted with the careless manner of most eunuchs in

general, Susan turned to the hapless men before her. "Look what your carelessness has caused. What if she gets sick and dies?"

She continued to give them the sharp side of her tongue, haranguing them quite colorfully on the subject of the irresponsibility of guards not taking harmful things—like bugs, and who-knew-what-all—away from helpless women. She showed no sign of slowing down until Merri interjected the timely reminder that Seana required a thorough cleaning—and they had still other items on their morning's agenda.

It took the two friends quite a while to get Seana cleaned up and into new raiment. Like a mindless infant, she never stopped her aimless, unfocused movements, which made her grooming a difficult chore. By the time they finished, the morning had advanced well towards early afternoon, and they still faced the chore of getting Seana fed; another task that required great deals of time and patience.

"Why didn't we feed her before we changed her?" Susan ruefully wondered aloud, panting as she fought to get Seana's right arm into the sleeve of her second clean blouse for the day. "That way, we would have only had to do this once."

Merridyth glanced up, pausing in her struggle to get both of Seana's legs into the corresponding legs of the sheer pantaloons. "You're right, Sue," she agreed. "We shall have to remember that for the next time," she said, huffing between breaths.

"There. That's finished." She sighed, moving over to assist Susan with the insertion of Seana's left arm into the tight-fitting sleeve. Done, she plopped down on a nearby bench.

"My goodness, I'm exhausted. "I am constantly startled by the realization of how much energy it requires to clean and dress one smallish woman when that woman is totally uncooperative." She picked up the hem of her long cloak and began to fan her exertion-heated cheeks.

"If you would, Sue," Merri began after resting a bit, "I need you to keep an eye on Seana while I go find Laihla. I have to talk with her. As we've just learned, we cannot leave Seana unattended. I, for one, do not want to have to go through another cleaning session today."

"Nor do I." Susan exclaimed while she buttoned Seana's blouse. "And of course I shall watch Seana. What do you plan to speak about with Laihla?" she asked, smoothing the riotous curls back from Seana's now clean forehead, confining the abundant, wine-red tresses at the nape with a bit of colorful ribbon.

"I am hoping she will be able to tell me the best way to go about obtaining an interview with the *Kislar Agasi*," Merri answered. "So far, she has proven to be a veritable fountain of useful information, and we need to know what they might be planning to do about Seana. I do not like living with the threat of her being taken away from us hanging over my head."

Susan looked up from searching Seana's blank face. "No. It is untenable," she agreed pensively. "Even with all the extra trouble, I would not give her up. I know she would have fought to keep me with her had the situation been reversed. Go to Laihla," she said. "I will try to get Seana to lie down for a while. And when you meet with the *Agasi*, remember to ask

if we might have a servant to assist with Seana's care," Sue's mouth quirked in an ironic smile. "We might as well bargain for as much as possible if we must sell our souls."

Reaching Laihla's private cubicle took longer than expected for Merridyth was stopped more than once by several of the harem women expressing sympathy over the tragic event of her friend's attempted suicide. All revealed curiosity and concern over how Susan and she were handling their grief.

While Merri felt touched by the compassion these women showed, she couldn't help noticing they spoke of Seana as if she were already dead. Or at best, destined to remain as is: a broken, empty shell. Also, each time Seana was mentioned by name, the women made a furtive, half-hidden gesture with the fingers of their right hands. Merridyth knew they were making the sign that warded off the evil eye.

She shook her head in wonder that such suspicious nonsense still flourished in the modern year of 1801. Yet, upon further reflection, she had never realized there were places like this Seraglio where men held women as virtual slaves, to be educated only in bringing the utmost pleasure to a male. All things considered, she was inclined to excuse the harem women their superstitions, however unfounded.

Having braved the lengthy gauntlet, Merridyth stood at last in front of Laihla's small room, poised to announce her presence. Before she could do so, she became aware of strange sounds coming from inside the curtained room.

A low, ominous growling assaulted her ears along with the mewling whimpers of a woman suffering either from pain ... or an overwhelming fear. Having heard those same sounds

coming from her own mouth a time or two, Merri was convinced her new friend was being attacked. Gathering her courage and resolve, Merri did what she had always prayed her mother would do for her. On a swell of indignation, determined to protect Laihla—even if it meant attacking the attacker himself—she burst into the room, and skidded to an appalled stop.

Laihla was lying on the raised mat, eyes squeezed tightly shut. Her lips were pulled back in a fierce grimace while her fisted hands were lost in the pale blond hair of a squarely-built man. Her slim, coffee colored legs were splayed wide kicking at the air, and all the while, the pitiful sounds of an injured animal were spilling from her lips.

The man was ... a man. His hairless body was scantily covered with a pair of sagging, cotton pants, the closure gaping open to reveal a thick, bulging erection, red, ropy veins running along its length, topped by a bulbous head swollen to enormous proportions. The thing seemed to have a life of its own. Under Merri's horrified, fascinated gaze, it jerked and pulsed with the man's every movement.

His pale, stocky body, a sharp contrast to Laihla's creamy chocolate skin, was wedged between the Black woman's thighs, his hands a tight manacle about each well-turned ankle, forcing her legs up and apart. And as a stunned Merri watched, one of his hands moved up to clench upon a vulnerable breast. Merri saw the soft brown flesh indented where his fingers dug in for a handhold.

The man was still unaware that his privacy had been breached. His face was buried deep in the V of Laihla's spread

thighs, moving voraciously from side to side. He was the one making the growling, grunting sounds Merri had heard from outside the room, and she was suddenly light-headed with horror as she realized the man was savaging Laihla's private parts with his mouth. Righteous anger galvanized her into frenzied action.

"Get off of her, you animal!." Merri shouted, launching herself onto the back of the startled man, who threw her off in a reflex of frightened disbelief, only to find himself the object of a flurry of blows delivered by a fire-breathing female with death in her eyes.

Leaping up, the man retreated from the virago before him, lifting his arms to protect his eyes from the battling madwoman. The crazed woman was shrieking at the top of her lungs. He spared no thought for how ludicrous he looked with his pants drooping about his hips, his now limp penis an accurate indicator of his terror and lost passion. Fear squeezed his heart, and his belly felt hollow. *At this rate, she would have the entire harem on top of them in minutes!.*

"Laihla," he groaned, "We are lost, *los*—oof." His last word broke off as the breath was knocked out of him by the blow landing against his breast-bone. A flurry of blows followed the first, and the terrified man backed away before the advance of the mad English female.

The aim of her next series of blows proved she was no longer content with just ripping at his face. When she launched a hard kick at his exposed, vulnerable groin area, the man grabbed at the menace in a horrified effort to stave off injury to what, to him, was a much more important area

than his face. He might not be a full man, able to father children, but he treasured his functioning equipment dearly. With renewed determination, he caught at the intruder, yanking her close to him, where she could not effectively continue her attack.

In response, Merridyth jerked forward, butting her captor in the stomach with her head, then backed out of his reach as he doubled over from the blow. Yelling a string of scathing invectives in her native tongue, she returned to the attack. A quick movement caused her foot to catch on the rucked edge of the embroidered throw rug, and she yelled again in startled surprise as her feet flew out from under her. She fell hard. The sharp crack of her head hitting the side of the oaken bed platform sounded loudly in the small cubicle.

The sound roused Laihla from the stunned stupor that had held her immobile since she had looked up to see Merridyth bearing down on them like an avenging angel. Shuddering, Laihla thanked Allah, The All-Merciful, that in her agitation, Merridyth had spoken only her native English, for though it had felt like an eternity, the whole debacle had lasted only seconds. It might be possible to salvage the situation if she acted quickly.

Rising with alacrity, she bent down to check the unconscious girl, ignoring, for the moment, the terrified sputtering of her lover. Merri did not move nor respond, but her breathing was slow and steady. Searching, Laihla found a large bump on the left side of Merridyth's head, covered—thank Allah—by the natural fall of her hair. Luckily, it was the only injury she found.

Laihla looked up from her inspection to see Amil cowering just inside the door-curtain, his body quivering with the lingering residue of a massive adrenaline surge. He was struggling with the fastening of his pants, his unsteady hands taking too long to accomplish the task, his heart beating hard and fast in his laboring chest.

"I didn't mean to hurt her," he wailed, twisting up the corded string of his pants in anguished fear. "Is she dead? What shall we do?" His questions stumbled over themselves.

"She is not dead." Laihla answered briskly. She moved over to the doorway and cautiously peeped out. The way was clear. Turning back to Amil, keeping her words low and hurried, she said, "She will be all right, but you must go quickly. The other women will be here any minute to see what caused all that commotion. You must not be here. We are incredibly lucky that there was no one nearby."

"How can I leave you to face this, alone?" he asked. "Let me stay," he entreated his lover, his fear overcome by his caring.

"No!" Laihla answered sharply. "Shall we both die? Go. I can handle this," she assured him confidently. She frowned as she watched Amil bite his lip and scuff his feet, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Go." She commanded again, feeling like strangling the fool. *What a time to play the hero*, she fumed silently, breathing a relieved sigh when he finally nodded and whisked himself around the curtain and out of her sight, whispering a final good-bye.

And it was good-bye, though he knew it not. Shaking, Laihla silently acknowledged her overwhelming arrogance. She had been careless beyond belief to risk meeting with him with so much happening in the harem, yet the temptation had been so hard to resist. Without the electrifying thrill of danger, she had not really felt alive, had never felt that essential spark needed to ratify her existence. But this time she had come too close to the edge, too close to falling over the cliff of discovery.

Discovery, she realized, was not the exciting experience her imagined fancies had led her to believe. Life, despite its boredom, was too sweet to gamble in needless risk-taking. Had they been discovered by any other than Merridyth. Laihla trembled anew at the thought, promising herself she would never again test fate so recklessly.

She was struggling to get Merri's limp body off the floor and onto the bed by the time the army of curious women invaded her privacy.

Anera, Laihla's personal odalisque, was the first to arrive, and Laihla mutely motioned one-handedly for help, saving her breath as she supported Merridyth's waist to prevent her slumping back to the floor. It was a good thing Anera was a big, strapping woman from the Taurus mountain ranges of Turkey—a harsh environment that bred strength and endurance in its inhabitants—for Merri was no lightweight. Together, they worked to get the unconscious girl comfortably ensconced on Laihla's raised pallet.

"What happened here? Who was doing all that yelling?"

Laihla groaned, recognizing the voice issuing the authoritative questions. She looked up to see Ablā—Elder Sister they called her, her real name having long been lost in the mists of her harem history—standing framed in the doorway, her arms akimbo at her waist. Some whispered that Ablā was a witch who could curse as well as bless. Though merely a servant, she held much power in the harem, and only a fool, or the uninformed, challenged her. Even the *Agasi* deferred to her when he could do so without losing face.

Huffing a resigned sigh, Laihla faced the ancient crone, knowing she must choose her words carefully for the old woman was a terrible gossip. Whatever was said in the next few minutes would be retold at the Carriage House gate before an hour was past, and whispered in the avid ears of the Sultan's spies soon after.

"The English came to visit," she invented quickly. "She needed relief from caring for—," she gestured towards the section where the new entrants of the harem slept—" *Hanim arkadas*; the *kari kirmizi*." She would not speak the ill one's name, yet all the women crowded together in her doorway knew whom she meant, and quickly raised their hands, tracing the sign to ward off evil, even while nodding in sympathy.

"We teach each other our words ... the words of Londra and the words of Türkiye. I think we will learn more if we use these words in fun, so we play the Stones, and she becomes excited. She has *ugur*. She gains *zafer*! And then ... *zahmet*; she rises to dance the *zafer* dance, and her foot entangles in this treacherous carpet." She kicked the offending item.

"She calls out in fear as she falls. She strikes her head against the side of the platform. See, here is the spot—" She dramatically pointed to the corner where Merri's head had impacted. "You can see the blood there."

The women pressed forward to inspect this evidence, a sharp cry sounding from the midst of the crowd when an unfortunate woman inadvertently barred Abila's view.

After examining the evidence, the ladies in front obligingly squeezed over to allow the women in back a chance to see also, but they were very careful not to give up their vantage point.

"They are weak, these *gâvurlar*," Laihla said, silently asking Merri's forgiveness for maligning her courage. "When she saw her own blood, she screeched like a *tavuk* in it's *ölüm*, and fell down in a swoon, and has not yet roused."

Abila nodded sagely after deliberating on the facts. "With so small an injury, she will no doubt awaken soon." She shook her head, features creased in disappointment. "With all that yelling, we had hoped it would be something more exciting—" She broke off with a shrug when she noticed Laihla's disapproving stare.

"Not that we really wish her harm, mind you," she continued off-handedly, "but you know how we all live for something different, something ... titillating to happen within these walls. It is not often we have even the small excitement these three have offered lately," she finished meaningfully. She shot Laihla a private look that had her heart up in her throat.

Abila knew.

Having just acknowledged, and rued, her own penchant for the dark drug of danger, Laihla could not help but agree with Aba's words. She contented herself with saying, "She has become my *arkadas*." Her words gave notice to all that the two had formed a harem alliance.

Again, Aba nodded; her eyes both knowing and sad as she issued her dire warning. "This one is not for you to play with. She is destined for great things. Stand far back from her, or your life will flow in strange and dangerous channels."

No one knew how Aba saw and foretold the things she did, yet she had been right countless numbers of times. Only a fool would ignore the information she offered. Recognizing a *seeing*, Laihla bowed her head in submission, yet she raised her chin defiantly.

"I accept, and thank you for your warning," she said sincerely, "Yet, I repeat, we are friends. What kind of friend would I be if I stood afar off, knowing there was *zahmet* ahead?"

"If you remain on this course," the old woman foretold, "soon the harem will know you no more. The pallet where you now sleep will house a new kadin; a light skinned, light haired kadin who will give the Sultan a girl child. *Bu is istemez olecak*."

Laihla sank to her knees. It sounded as if Aba had seen her death. Almost in tears, she said, "I accept my *kismet*. I am honored that you seek to aid me."

Seeing that she had been heeded, Aba nodded, then clapped her hands sharply hustling the crowd of ladies and servants away from Laihla's apartment with a few pithy

words. "Come." she cried, "Let us depart. *Simsiyah gül* is in need of quiet and rest to recover from this mild upset."

"Have you named her, then?" came a naive question from one of the lingering servants.

"*Sakin kul!*" Her own mistress admonished her with a hard slap. "*Isimler* are for the Sultan alone."

The harem ladies slowly departed, looking over their shoulders, and whispering among themselves as they went. Though none spoke it aloud, all knew the Sultan would give the English girl the very name just spoken by Abla. They had seen such before, and with Abla, would doubtless see it again. Somehow, the name suited the girl for she bore the striking coloring of the rare jet-black rose whose signature beauty was a fine pink blushing of velvety petals nestled deep in the heart of the darkest flower.

Chapter Twenty-three

...I mean it. If I do not hear something soon, I might just send Jason over there to find out what you are really doing. I cannot believe you could be so reticent when you know how I yearn for news of my son. First you, then he writes, asking about one woman in particular. What does this mean? Is Jared finally ready to take up the task of proving his innocence? I certainly hope so, for I need him home. It has been over two years now, and while Jason is proving himself to be a good student of land management, still the land and the tenants miss the masterful way Jared took care of business. Besides all that, I miss him. Give me some information, or I will garner it for myself.—Determined Emily

Chapter Twenty-four

"Oh, my head..." Merri lifted a shaking hand to probe the tender, throbbing spot over her left ear. With the amount of pain she was feeling, it did not surprise her to feel the good-sized lump that had developed.

"I am glad you have regained your senses."

A cool cloth landed over her forehead, and Merri cautiously opened her eyes to find Laihla hovering over her.

"I am so sorry you tripped on the rug in your excitement over our game," Laihla continued, her words deliberately spaced, voice heavy with hints and meaning, her eyes demanding and pleading all at once.

Merri's confused gaze swept the room. With the exception of a tall odalisque who stood at attention by the curtained doorway, they were alone in the small cubicle.

"What happened to—?"

"Does your head hurt much?" Laihla interjected, cutting off Merri's half-formed question. "Shall I send Anera for the court physician?"

"No," Merri answered slowly, her eyes coming up to meet Laihla's, a tardy enlightenment coming over her features.

"I ... did I ... win, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope it was worth all this pain." Merri groaned.

"You won a great thing. A fortune."

Merri could not decide if the glint in Laihla's eyes were tears or laughter.

"You were not ... hurt ... by my winning, were you?" Merridyth asked, her gaze probing desperately, seeking understanding.

A large grin erupted on the Black woman's face. Her full lips parted over beautiful white teeth as she threw back her head, laughing with delight. "I am fine. I am so glad it was to you I lost. It was a great ... diversion ... seeing you ... play so energetically. And as for me, I promise you, no harm was done."

"I am glad," Merri murmured quietly. "Yet, I find my head does hurt dreadfully after all. Perhaps you could send for that physician, now?"

"At once." Laihla made a quick gesture towards the door, and Anera slipped through the curtain running to fetch the court surgeon. And to inform the others that the *kari gâvur* was awake.

Merri struggled to sit up as soon as Anera cleared the door. "Now that she's gone, will you please tell me what was really happening?" she beseeched the dark beauty. "I thought you were being attacked by that man, yet I must have been mistaken. The truth, please?"

"Of course, the truth," Laihla replied, "for are we not *Arkadaslar*?"

"Yes, friends." Merri smiled.

"It was a daring thing I did," Laihla boasted, "for that was Amil, my lover. He is a functioning eunuch." When she saw Merridyth did not understand, she explained, in explicit, cheek-reddening detail just what the term meant.

"So you see, while Amil has been rendered incapable of fathering children, he can still sustain an erection. As for what he was doing when you entered—," she shrugged, a cat-smooth smile coming to her generous mouth. She licked her plump lips in remembered contentment. "Have you not yet reached the lessons on gathering honey?"

"No, and I do not understand what you are saying," Merri shook her head in frustration, then winced at the stabbing pain which resulted. "Explain this gathering honey. It didn't look pleasurable. Actually, it looked painfully uncomfortable to me. And you did not sound as if you were enjoying it. In fact, it was the anguished sounds I heard while standing outside your room that caused me to believe you to be under attack."

"You are a true innocent," Laihla taunted her, not unkindly, "virgin in mind as well as flesh. Why, it is a crime." the long-time harem resident declared, sounding shocked and disbelieving. "You have no experience at all."

"Of course I am inexperienced," Merri exclaimed, feeling, for some unfathomable reason as if she had been insulted or found lacking. "I am an unmarried lady."

"You are an ignorant woman." Laihla returned in disgust. "It is a miserable shame the way you Western women are kept in such sensual darkness. It is good you are being trained in the arts of love for the training is not only to teach you what men enjoy. It will also allow you to uncover your own inner sensuality; the true core of your femaleness. The lessons will teach you to reach for your own deep enjoyment. You will come to know and expect a pleasure so intense, it can border on the most exquisite pain."

Merri looked thoughtful remembering the scene she had witnessed. In retrospect, the grimace she'd seen on Laihla's face took on a new meaning and the whimpers—could they have been caused, not by pain, but by a pleasure so great? Merri could feel her cheeks heating as she asked, "Is that what you were feeling ... a ... a painful pleasure?"

She colored up brightly at Laihla's nod and low chuckle. "You must have been angry with me, then," she said in a small voice, feeling foolish, "for interrupting you." Merri had thought she was coming to a friend's rescue, being so concerned and brave, when all she had done was disturb a lovers' tryst that they must have worked hard to contrive.

"No, indeed no." Laihla caught Merri's hands and her attention. "Hear me. You taught me a much-needed lesson. Yes, you did," she added emphatically when Merri shook her head in disparagement. "I had grown too complaisant and much too arrogant. Eventually we were bound to be caught in our carelessness. I am glad it was you."

"I am so ashamed," Merridyth moaned, her cheeks glowing bright red.

"*Ne var utanacak?*" Laihla shrugged, unconcerned.

"Perhaps not ashamed, but ... well ... I was definitely embarrassed." Merri rolled her eyes in disgust at her own naiveté. "Busting in here and ... And..." she moaned again, her hands coming up to hide her hot face as she said, "Why, I saw that man with his face buried in your ... in your ... buried *there*." Her eyes involuntarily journeyed to the vee of Laihla's thighs, then shot away in even deeper mortification.

"I simply question why you need feel shame or embarrassment when I do not." Laihla soothed the agitated woman, yet she had been aware of where Merri's eyes went. "Truly, you are a *cocuk*, a *bebek* in these matters. I will help you. I will bring you along gently. You will see.," she promised, "Ecstasy, pleasure, feeling at ease with your own womanhood; all these things are right and good, and you will enjoy them more than you can now imagine."

"I fear I shall never grow accustomed to this place and its practices," Merridyth said, heaving a massive sigh. She lay back down and closed her eyes. Reopened them, and shot straight into an upright position. She gasped at the agony that exploded in her temple with the injudicious movement.

"I remember what I came to see you about." she exclaimed in a whisper after recovering from the burst of pain. "I need advice on how to approach the Mistress or maybe the *Kislar Agasi*. It is imperative I speak with one of them regarding—"

"Wait." Laihla cautioned, assisting Merri back into a more comfortable position. "Let us speak of this after the physician has left," she suggested.

Merri nodded in weary consent, finding she really did need to rest for the few minutes they had left before Anera returned with the thin eunuch who dispensed medical care to the women of the Seraglio. Right now, she cared about nothing so much as the promise of getting rid of the pain in her head. She'd worry about the master of the girls later. Besides, she had faith Laihla would be able to give her the advice she needed.

The physician came and went after administering a much-needed headache powder as well as a thorough physical examination of the patient. Merri was embarrassed, as usual, at having to expose her body to a male doctor, yet while she would never be totally comfortable about it, the experience was fast becoming less alarming as she grew more accustomed to dealing with the non-men who inhabited the Seraglio alongside the captive women. And this particular eunuch's unusual thinness fascinated her.

"Laihla," Merridyth asked as soon as the doctor had left the room, a contemplative frown on her face, "why do you suppose that physician is so thin? I thought all eunuchs grew to be, well ... fatter after their ... ah, uhm ... operation."

"Abla tells us he retains his pre-eunuch size due to his drinking the urine of pregnant women."

"*Eeuuww*. How disgusting. Surely you jest. You love to shock me, is all."

"No, no! I swear it is true."

Merri's mouth twisted as if she had tasted something extremely nasty. "I should rather waddle all my days than resort to something so foul." An arrested look came over her features and she froze.

"Ugh. He touched me with his urine hands." she cried.

Laihla laughed in outright enjoyment. She fell over and rolled across the pallet in unrestrained hilarity. Merridyth was not amused. With narrowed eyes, she contemplated kicking the convulsing woman, but rose above the provocation. Moving gingerly over to the table that held a pitcher of water and its matching basin, Merridyth took up the pitcher and

poured water into the basin laving her hands with some of the soft soap contained in a glass dish.

"I can assure you," she said grimly, "he will never attend me or mine again." She meant every word. She firmly ignored Laihla's renewed laughter as she continued to wash and dry her hands. Furthermore, she determined she would wash everywhere that eunuch had touched her at the earliest opportunity.

For the next two hours, Merri listened as Laihla instructed her on the proper etiquette of attending the Mistress, the *Agasi* or the Sultan. She carefully noted all the do's and do not's in the potentially deadly dance of court appearances. During the lecture, Laihla repeatedly reduced her to uncontrollable bouts of merriment. Despite the seriousness of her situation, she found it almost impossible to contain her laughter, which in turn set Laihla off. Biting her generous bottom lip, the dark beauty would persevere, fighting against the urge to giggle until she caught Merri's eye. The two women finally calmed enough to complete their business, but when Merri returned to Susan and Seana, the lightness of shared laughter buoyed her steps.

The excellent advice she had received from Laihla notwithstanding, Merri found her hopes for an immediate interview with the Mistress dashed. The woman had disappeared. No matter how many people she asked, Merri couldn't get a single person to open up about her whereabouts.

The *Kislar Agasi* also refused her request. Underground gossip had him cowering in his apartments, wanting nothing

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further to do with a situation that had brought the Sultan's searing anger down around his head.

Chapter Twenty-five

In his sumptuously appointed quarters, the *Kislar Agasi* paced angrily, smarting at being forced to even acknowledge Merri's appeal for an audience with himself or the Sultan. Though he had refused to see her, he dared not simply ignore the request the dark-haired one had sent through one of the harem guards.

The gossip machine would certainly carry the tale to the Sultan, and if anything occurred to either of the remaining women while under his charge, he would suffer the ultimate punishment. The tongue-lashing he had received from the Sultan had terrified him since the Sultan was not known for his patience or fairness. His temper was unpredictable, and he was as likely to order a hanging or drowning as he was to order the kind of lashing meted out to the former mistress of the girls.

Despite his anger over this situation, the *Agasi* was not willing to jeopardize his position. He had amassed a battalion of enemies during his years in power, and he knew they were watching from the sidelines, licking their lips, waiting for him to falter. He clenched his fists thoughts worrying at the problem before him. There had to be a way to circumvent this English thorn in his side. The Sultan had ordered that *Simsiyah Gül* be treated with extreme carefulness.

Well, he mused, rubbing his hands in anticipation of the debacle he would doubtless soon be privileged to observe, let her take her demands directly to the Sultan. He will quickly

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depress her pushy, unwomanly pretensions. His belly shook from the force of the laugh that thundered out of him as he envisioned a meeting between those two. He gleefully sent a eunuch with a message relaying the girl's request of an appointment with the Sultan to Tubal, the court's Major Domo and the eunuch in charge of vetting the sultan's appointments.

Chapter Twenty-six

The Sultan was enjoying himself. While the *Kislar Aghasi's* messenger was hurrying towards the public divans, Selim was holding a luncheon in his private apartments to celebrate the return of his son. When the meal was finished, he planned to tell Jamal of the three women. Selim frowned, recalling the flame-haired one's attempt to take her own life. She was now nothing but an empty shell, and thus no longer considered eligible for his son.

A renewed rush of anger filled him as he contemplated the disaster that might have occurred had it been the black-haired woman. Selim had long since uncovered her importance to Jamal. Upon first hearing her name, he had rushed to re-read Emily's letters. As he'd suspected, he'd found the girl written of therein. Allah had vindicated his plans by placing within his grasp the only woman his son had ever shown a serious interest in. Still, the incompetence of his staff in this matter was intolerable.

When Tubal appraised him of the unstable situation, he had taken quick measures to ensure the other two women did not follow in the steps of their companion by assigning guards to watch over each of them. One woman was destined for his son ... and he had enjoyable personal plans for the other. He'd always been partial to the sunny coloring of the traditional blonde-haired English woman.

Selim looked to where his son sat leaning against a plush purple cushion, talking with the Bey of Seyhan and idly

picking over the variety of foodstuffs before him. Jamal looked to be enjoying his conversation with the Bey.

It had been a long time since he'd conversed with someone so learned, sophisticated and well traveled. He was especially interested to learn the Bey had recently completed a trip to England. Though the Bey was somewhat older than he was, Jamal was glad to find they held many opinions in common. Of course, they also differed diametrically in some areas, which was okay. Their differences added spice to their conversation.

Currently, the Bey—Emil, he had been invited to call him—was expounding on the role of women in the Islamic culture, and Jamal could hardly wait for him to finish his sentence before rebutting.

"Surely, as an educated man, you cannot believe that women are soulless. We men have souls, and we are of the same species as women. We men sire daughters as well as sons. Shall one child be soulless and another, not? Or how then can it be that a soulless creature would bring forth that which is not within itself?"

Emil smiled. "You make a good point, young Emir, yet you overlook the power of Allah. He is able to overrule nature, that his plans be made perfect. However, you mistake our stand. Of course women have souls. It is not living women, we call soulless. We speak of the houris that await the just in paradise, those exquisite females designed to provide unending sexual pleasure for those males attaining the highest reward." Emil reached for a black, plump fig,

examining it for imperfections. Finding none, he bit into it, closing his eyes at the tart taste of the seedy fruit.

"Yes, our women have souls, but they are like small children, needing the guiding hand of one concerned for their welfare and safety. Males are responsible for protecting their women from themselves. The Koran tells us that women are natural seducers, seeking to turn a man from his devotions to Allah, and lead him astray in the valley of lusts. This is why we keep our women sequestered in harems. Behind veils and private walls, they cannot tempt men and they are kept safe from their own in-born tendencies to wander in un-godly paths.

Jamal shook his head. "You make a woman sound like she has nothing in her head but air. I know several women who are just as you have described, yet I know many more that are quite capable of running their own affairs; my mother being a prime example."

Emil nodded. "It is a sad but true fact that where women have not been nurtured as they deserve, some have had to take on the roles usually reserved for the male. While they have obtained some small measure of success in these endeavors, they have lost sight of the more important goal for their lives—"

Jamal leaned forward studying Emil's earnest expression with deep attention. "And that is...?"

While he waited for Emil to finish chewing the morsel of food, he pondered the man's arguments. How fascinating that a highly intelligent man could actually seek to defend the belief of women having inferior minds. Then again, he ruefully

acknowledged to himself, there were many men in England who held those same beliefs. The difference was that most English men would not dare voice that opinion except in the privacy of their clubs.

His own opinions had been formed by observing several strong females during his formative years: Grandmother Tyson had been a regal old martinet ruling her family with an iron hand after the death of her husband. His father—*Randolph*—had often said Granny had a better grasp of political matters than the inept politicians of her day who had mangled England's foreign policy programs.

Then there was his mother. Jamal knew Her Grace, Emily Elaine Barrington Tyson, Dowager Duchess of Wyndmere, to be one of the most intelligent, self-sufficient human beings it had been his pleasure to associate with.

"...to be the penultimate woman!" Rapping the table for emphasis ... and to draw Jamal back from his inner musings, Emil elaborated. "There is no greater or higher work for a woman than that she give succor to her master and bear him sons. That she be meek and obedient to his commands and submissive to his will."

Jamal threw back his head and laughed. "Where is this paragon hiding?" he asked jokingly. "For I tell you, I have never seen such a woman. Nor do I ever expect to."

"You are young, yet my son." The Sultan's voice was a reminder that the two men, so deeply involved in their discussion, were not alone at the table.

Jamal inclined his head. "May I say," he said, a smile lighting his eyes, "if the two of you hold such beliefs, you are

both younger than I took you to be." They all laughed, though the Sultan looked momentarily stunned.

Jamal ate his fill as the conversation flowed back and forth. The three men talked of many things ... and nothing in particular. Belly pleasantly stuffed, Jamal drowsed in the warm afternoon heat, resting back on his hands as he listened to the voices of his father and the Bey. Content and relaxed, he allowed his mind to wander to the events of the evening before...

Jamal, accompanied by six young nobles, had ridden into the palace courtyards at dusk. After turning his three small ounce cubs over to a grounds-man with orders to find them milk, Jamal had retired immediately to his quarters to indulge in a hot steaming bath, read the latest packet of letters from his mother, and endure the fawning attentions of his servant, Seuliman.

The silence of his apartments was a Godsend after the past several weeks of having to listen to, and often arbitrate between, his garrulous hunting companions. While the outing had been opportune—and the hunt had actually been exciting at times—Jamal, lazing under the soothing waters of the bath had just been thankful it was over.

There was also the added relief of having his quarters all to himself. Seuliman had met him at the entrance to his apartments with the news that Elba was gone. Instead of being sent home his servant had arranged for her to be gifted, in Jamal's name, to a wealthy, widowed merchant who'd been in the market for a new playmate. Both were happy with the situation. The merchant relished the prestige

of owning a beautiful woman trained in the harem of the Sultan. Elba rejoiced that she now had a wealthy master who delighted in pampering her and treated her as she deserved to be treated, lustily seeking her out at every opportunity.

Tiredness and the hot water combined to melt his cares away and Jamal had drowsed in the tub, the sheaf of letters falling from his hand. What seemed like seconds later, he yawned lazily and looked up to find Seuliman hovering over him, a large linen bath sheet folded over his arm.

"I must have fallen asleep." He sat up, anxiously looking over the edge of the brass bathing tub. A relieved sigh escaped him at sight of the papers lying scattered on the floor. "I was afraid I'd dropped my letters in the drink—"

Seuliman looked confused. "Master had no drink—" The eunuch looked even more confused when he burst out laughing. Jamal could almost hear him thinking about the strangeness of the man he was forced to serve, but the eunuch stoically extended him the drying cloth. "Please Effendi, allow your humble servant to assist you..."

Jamal stood up, still chuckling. He'd taken the sheet from the man, waving him away before wrapping it securely about himself.

"No need, Seuliman. I can manage." He vigorously toweled his dripping locks of hair before patting the moisture from his skin. "Tell me what has been occurring here while I was away." He knew Seuliman thrived on gossip ... and the retelling of it.

By the time the garrulous servant was through, Jamal had learned all about the recent happenings in the harem: about

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the new women—*Sounds as if they might be English*, he'd mused, thinking he'd have to check into that. About the punishment of the harem's Mistress of girls over some woman trying to hang herself; and sundry other court matters that should never have been discussed outside the legal divans. The palace was always a hothouse bed of intrigue. It seemed his servant had managed to be at the heart of the gossip, as usual...

Chapter Twenty-seven

I heard from a friend in the war department that a request to reexamine your court transcripts had been submitted with the view to reopening your case. I was not surprised, as I knew you had been one of the best operatives the war department had ever trained, and they will need all the good men they can get to counter the threat of Napoleon regaining control of France. Imagine my shock when I learned it was none other than Robert Townesend behind the requests. No one knows what he is about, and we may never know as they eventually denied his requests. The department felt it would be a mistake to reopen the case after so long with no new information to consider. Jason says Robert has been very unpopular among the set you used to run about with. He thinks it may be a ploy to get your friends' regard back. I confess, I do not see how he could think anything might help him in this, what with the way he so totally betrayed you—
Mum

Chapter Twenty-eight

Jamal shook his head, his mind worrying over the few details he had managed to garner about the three new additions to his father's harem. Something about the situation bothered him. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He frowned, sighed heavily, and looked up to find both the Bey and the Sultan staring at him. "What? What is it?" He questioned them. "Why are you both staring at me?"

The two Eastern princes exchanged a puzzled glance. "We cannot fathom why he suddenly stopped participating in our lively exchange and began frowning and muttering to yourself."

The Bey frowned at Jamal. "For a few minutes we entertained the dread notion you might be having a seizure; however, you soon disabused us of this by calmly examining the foods on the laden table and selecting an interesting tidbit, which you popped into your mouth, chewing vigorously, all the while, continuing your internal conversation."

The Sultan leaned forward, studying his son. "We have called your name twice, *oglan*, and received no answer. What troubles you to the extent that you speak out loud—but not to us—and do not hear our words and respond?"

Jamal leaned back, wrapping his arms about his folded legs, his relaxed pose in juxtaposition to his inner tensions. He hesitated to reply, knowing his next words would bring

dissension ending this peaceful interlude of conversation and food.

His father was aware of his views on the eastern practice of abducting women and holding them in virtual slavery, as he was equally aware of his father's views. There could be no middle ground for them on this issue. Over the last two years, they'd had numerous, heated discussions that inevitably broke down into acrimonious arguments. He was about to introduce a subject that would herald the beginning of another such argument...

"I was pondering the news I've recently heard about your having acquired new slaves for your harem, Sir. Three new English slaves—" He was unable to keep the censure out of his voice.

"Who dared to spoil my surprise?" The Sultan roared as he rose from his seat, his turbulent anger sparking the air about him. Startled, Jamal's mouth fell open as he watched his father explode into molten wrath. The sultan's rage was like an animal out of control. His eyes burned with fiery heat and his jaw clenched, the picture of anger loosed and on the prowl.

The Bey had also risen, and now approached his Sultan. "Be calm, O great one. Palace gossip has always been ripe. The eunuchs—"

Selim waved the Bey to silence and back to his seat. "I will allow no soothing to abate my righteous anger. Those cursed eunuchs are worse than women! I decreed that none should speak of this, and yet someone has set my command at naught. The eunuchs gabble and babble in all my business

and feel themselves immune from my ire." His eyes narrowed in deliberation. "They need a sharp reminder that my word is law. Perhaps I should cut out their tongues as well as their—"

Jamal raised a negligent finger, interrupting. "Before you sharply remind them, or cut off any extra appendages, could you respond to my question?"

Selim's eyes shot daggers at the younger, more muscular version of himself. Despite his son's attempts to conceal his agitation, Selim knew Jamal was experiencing a very real anger. "Take care," Selim warned. "I shall not forgive your upbringing much more," Selim snapped peevishly at his only son. "The women are for you. Have I not declared, several times, my express desire that you marry?"

"You have, Sir. Just as I have told you—"

Selim held up an imperious hand to halt Jamal's impassioned protest. "Yes, yes, I know you have no wish to marry at this time. You have said so on many occasions. However, you are residing in my Kingdom, and my expressed desires are law. I am your father. It is your duty to obey my will where it does not conflict with your religion or your duty to your English monarch. Is this not so?"

The sultan's voice dripped sarcasm and something else. Jealousy? Yearning? Jamal couldn't discern which emotion he had heard so fleetingly. His resigned nod of consent was Selim's cue to continue

"You have objected to the women I made available to you on the grounds that they were not of your religious, social or educational status and upbringing. I have magnanimously decided that, on these issues, your points were valid. I have

now provided you with two women to choose between. Both females are English ladies; virgins of standard education and sensibilities. Both are beautiful, though in different styles. I had planned to present them to you for your selection later this evening. Now, I am not in the mood. I intend to deal sharply with the palace gossips after which I shall take care of some lingering divan business this afternoon. I will send Tubal to inform you of when we will view the women."

Recognizing a royal dismissal, Emil rose and bowed, waiting for Jamal to do the same, then both exited through the doors held widely open by two trembling eunuchs who had heard the imperial comments and were so overcome with fear they could barely stand erect.

Once outside the doors, Jamal stopped the Bey with a hand on his arm. "Am I mistaken in thinking that your recent trip to England had something to do with this situation?"

"No, effendi," Emil replied quietly. "You are not mistaken. It was my privilege to obey my Sultan in this, as in all things. I spent quite some time with all three of the young females. If you wish, I will tell you something of them." Jamal's confused frown did not go unnoticed.

"But I speak of three when the Sultan mentioned only two." Emil paused for a moment, debating within himself for a moment before deciding to reveal all. "There are indeed three women. One recently attempted suicide and sustained untold damage to her faculties. It is not known to what extent she is mentally impaired, or if she will ever regain use of her mind. At this time, she is no longer a candidate for your consideration. I, and the Sultan, suspect gross

mismanagement of the women led to the tragic event for I came to know each woman, and I would have said their spirits were too strong to break under the stress of being incarcerated in the harem."

Jamal gestured towards the hallway that led to his quarters. "I would like to hear more. Would you honor me by accepting a coffee in my rooms where we can continue this conversation?"

Emil graciously assented. He liked this *gavür* effendi—this heathen prince. He was sorry their dinner had ended so abruptly, yet there was no swaying the Sultan when his anger was high. It was better to remove oneself from the path of destruction and wait until the Great One was calm once more. Grabbing at this chance to further his knowledge of Jamal, he followed the tall, broad-shouldered man down the wide corridor to the men's section of the Seraglio. To his left was the hallway that opened onto the Black eunuch's quarters and barracks. The loud commotion coming through the thin walls told Emil that the inhabitants had already heard the threats uttered by the Sultan. He smothered a sighing laugh, cutting his glance sideways at his companion only to find Jamal's gaze directed toward himself.

The young prince controlled his own desire to laugh when he saw the way Emil struggled with the mirth that threatened to overcome him any moment. "There seems to be some disquiet among the hairless this evening," he commented, tongue-in-cheek. "Perhaps I should warn my man to lay low until this thing blows over." Emil halted abruptly causing Jamal to pause and inquire what was wrong.

"Though you were jesting, the Sultan was entirely serious in his threats," Emil pointed out soberly. You should indeed tell your eunuch to keep to your rooms." He nodded back towards the eunuch's hall. "They know their peril. That panic you hear is in response to real danger. Consider ... it will not take the Sultan long to realize that your eunuch had to be one of the main gossip-spreaders. How else did you come to hear this information so quickly after your return?"

Jamal no longer felt the urge to laugh. "I have been here for better than two years, yet I still have difficulty believing the barbaric things I see. I'm sorry," he exclaimed, witnessing the closed, distant look that came to Emil's proud face. "Perhaps barbaric was the wrong choice of words. I know how civilized your people can be, yet you have to realize many things occur in this country that belies that very claim."

"Ours is an old land with many old ways. Some of them are changing. But slowly, slowly. And I saw many barbaric occurrences in your own country, effendi. Perhaps there is need and room for both our peoples to advance?"

"You are correct, of course," Jamal conceded thoughtfully. "I apologize. I meant no offense, Emil. I hope you did not take my words of censure personally for I have the highest respect for you."

"So do I hold you in the greatest regard, Emir." Emil bowed. "Let us speak of other things," he suggested prudently. "I heard you brought in three ounce cubs. How did you come by them?"

"Sheer chance, I assure you." Jamal followed the Bey's lead, moving on to discuss other topics until they reached his apartments.

A shaky, subdued Seuliman met them at the portal and Jamal knew he had already heard of the Sultan's rage. After ordering a pot of the thick black, heavily sugared Turkish coffee and a tray of honeyed pastries, Jamal settled himself comfortably on one of the low sofas—throwing off several of the over-stuffed pillows to do so—and gestured for Emil to make himself at home. When Seuliman returned with the refreshments laid out on a wheeled table, Jamal dismissed him, but warned him to remain in the suite, thereby avoiding the danger of falling prey to the Sultan's decree. The two men watched as the frazzled eunuch served them, smiles curving their lips.

Once his servant exited the room, retiring to his own small room in the apartment suite, determined to wait out the Sultan's anger, they returned to their earlier conversation. "Now, then..." Jamal turned to Emil, ready to hear about the women that were even now awaiting their fate at the hands of his capricious father. "Tell me everything you know about these ladies..."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Selim III brought his hands together sharply. Tubal, who had been waiting for just such summons, hurried into the presence of his Lord and master bowing before the ornate throne resting upon a raised dais. The look on the Sultan's face was cold and severe. Anger roiled close to the surface and Jubal trembled. The potentate was not in the habit of controlling his wrath. Indeed, he was more likely to indulge his rage to an outlandish degree.

I grow too old for this. Tubal thought, sighing deeply and shaking his wooly-grey head. The next few minutes would be fraught with danger, however softly he trod. Still, he was used to soothing this wounded tiger. It took only a little distraction, a little intrigue and ... a lot of luck.

"I was just coming to you when you called, O Great One." The old eunuch belted out waving a heavy parchment in the air like an unfurled banner. "Just see what that inept *Agasi* has sent you. The nerve of him! The insolence."

Selim's well-shaped brows drew together into a fiercer frown. "What is it you are ranting on about, Tubal? Must you shout as though everyone were as hard of hearing as yourself?"

Tubal paused in mid-step, a hurt look bathing his wrinkled features.

"Oh, bring the thing here and do not dare to sulk." Selim snapped. He softened his tones guiltily, seeing he'd again hurt

his personal servant's feelings. "Do not pout old man. You know I mean nothing by it."

Tubal sniffed. Indeed, he did. If Selim loved anyone, it was Tubal, who had cared for him since before his incarceration in the *Kafes* at age seven. Tubal was the closest thing to a father Selim had ever known. For that reason, whenever he thought about it, Selim avoided hurting or upsetting the crusty old eunuch.

"You have managed to tweak my interest as I know you meant to," Selim told the old servant. "And for Allah's sake, do not mist up like a black rain cloud. Who else will I yell at, if not you?"

"The Sovereign of the East and the West need not bother his head over such a lowly one as I," Tubal intoned solemnly. "Surely the Master of the Two Continents and the Two Seas has more on his mind than an old, used-up relic such as this humble servant. Never mind that it was this gray beard you tugged on in your infancy, or this tired boney lap you napped upon in your youth ... why, the Koran says—"

"Now there, I draw the line and so should you!" Selim shook an admonishing finger at Tubal, an unwilling, reluctant smile coming to his well-turned lips. "Do not dare to quote scripture to me, you old reprobate. Are you not he who instructed me in my youth, to take all that I read with a grain of common sense? Especially the Koran?"

Tubal drew himself up righteously. "I admit it. I was a young infidel. But my gray hairs have brought me wisdom. Allah grant you the same, oh King of Kings."

This was the third time Tubal had salted his sentences with his master's obscure titles. Used only during high holy days, or official visits, their presence in Tubal's mouth let Selim know the servant considered himself insulted.

The Sultan grimaced. "If you do not cease to trouble me, I will have you included in the order I have issued having all palace eunuchs whipped with ten lashes. I tire of placating you." He held his hand out. "Now, bring me that message and get me something to drink. I'm thirsty."

Tubal slapped the parchment into his master's outstretched hand harrumphing loudly to show how little he fretted over Selim's threat. He stomped over to a low table holding an assortment of nuts and candied figs along with several containers of liquid refreshments. He poured fruit juice into a tall goblet. The juice had been cooled by resting the pitcher in a bed of ice, ice that had been brought down at great expense and manpower from the snow-covered heights of Mount Ararat by an ice caravan., Tubal presented the juice to the Sultan who was busy reading the note sent by the *Kislar Agasi*.

Selim looked up from the parchment, absentmindedly took the goblet Tubal extended, and then went back to perusing the message. Finally, he snapped the heavy paper together. "Since when does the Agasi send such a request on to me?" he mused, not waiting for an answer. "This seems so minor ... why could he not deal with it himself?" He fixed his gaze on the age-bent man before him and asked, tapping the parchment, "What does this mean, Tubal?"

Tubal hesitated for maximum effect. "The *Agasi* was ... upset over his reprimand of the other day and does not wish to chance angering you again."

Selim raised his eyebrows. A moment later, they twitched together in a fierce frown. "The *Kislar Agasi* forgets who he is ... and whom he serves." He thought for a while, absently drumming his slim, long nailed fingers against the wide wooden arm of his throne. "See to it that the *Agasi* receives the same ten lashes as all the other eunuchs."

"Sire." Tubal was taken aback. The *Agasi* was usually exempt from the consequences that befell the lesser eunuchs, those with no rank or recourse from the fractious whims of their master. Tubal sighed. Selim must really be annoyed to upset the status quo by ordering a whipping administered to the third most important man in the empire. "Master—" he began.

But Selim shook his head silently denying Tubal the opportunity to voice his concerns. He tapped the rolled scroll in Tubal's hands, explaining, "He calls the girl *Simsiyah Gül*; Black Rose. There being no Mistress at the moment, the girl does right in petitioning him. He thinks to shirk his duty, at the same time he thinks to use my anger at this insult to teach the girl a lesson. He oversteps his bounds. I will not tolerate such from him." His fierce look returned for a moment. "I will not tolerate such from *anyone*."

Tubal was impressed. He rarely saw Selim express such insight and restraint. "It shall be as you desire," he said, bowing as Selim rose and moved towards the massive, open double doors.

As Selim quit the room, he tossed over his shoulder, "I might as well see what new trouble the *Kislar Agasi* has bestirred now. I will see the girl after the morning divan," he ordered, and forgot it immediately, relying on Tubal set up the appointment and remind him to attend, just as he had done for over forty years.

The elderly servant remained bent over until his master had completely cleared the doorway. Straightening with a sigh and taking a small wax tablet out of one of his copious, well-hidden pockets, Tubal etched in: Ten lashes to the *Kislar Agasi ... Simsiyah Gül* to be seen after first courts—then quickly trotted down the wide corridors after his ruler and charge. When the Sultan was in one of his excitable moods, experience had taught Tubal it was good policy to stay close at hand ... for damage control.

Chapter Thirty

She was to see the Sultan on the morrow.

Merri's heart thumped erratically, fear warring with hope. She had hoped only to speak with the master of the girls. She'd been shocked when told she had gained an audience with the Sultan. Laihla had frightened them with her many stories of her master's ways; his excessive sexual appetite. They'd been regaled with tales of Selim's casual cruelties, his random outbursts of generosity coupled with the occasional eruptions of insanely grotesque rages.

With all her heart, Merri wished she could forego this meeting, yet Seana's safety depended on her. Since the accident, the women of the harem had become coldly suspicious and fearful of Seana. Many little instances of cruelty and "accidental" incidents of injury had befallen the hapless girl whenever the other two had not been nearby to watch over her.

Remembering these escalating occurrences, Merri knew she had to keep her appointment with the Sultan no matter what bizarre preparations it might entail. His directions didn't make any sense. The Sultan's orders were incomprehensible to Merridyth. For instance, the Sultan demanded both she and Susan bathe in the same bathing room where Seana's mishap had occurred. Additionally, they were to keep a strict schedule for the time of their bathing. Why should that be so important to the Sultan? Yet, those precise instructions had

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accompanied the command to present herself for an audience with the potentate.

Merri had no answers to any of these questions but she would comply with every stipulation. She would bargain, promise, even lie if necessary. She would do whatever it took to keep Seana by her side where she and Susan could protect her.

Chapter Thirty-one

My boy, can you ever forgive me? Though you may not believe it, I knew you to be innocent before Emily beat me over the head with it. I confess to a moment of doubt at the trial, yet memories of you came back to prod me. I have known you all your life. Your father, Randolph was my closest friend, and I know he instilled in you the same values he cherished. While I love your mother, and always have, I would not compromise my conscious even for her. No, you are innocent, and that leads me to thinking of that last speech you gave. If you are not the traitor, who is? I tell you, boy, it disturbs my sleep of a night. We need to get this thing worked out. Not only must we vindicate you for justice's sake, but also because your mother refuses to wed until you can give her away ... and she insists on an English wedding. Allow me to be your ears and eyes here. If you have any leads, I will hunt them down. Let me hear from you soon, and do not forget to write to your mother. She lives for your letters. —
Raeburn

Chapter Thirty-two

The Sultan was impatient to bestow his surprise upon his son. Halfway through a night spent in restless sleep, he awoke and sent for Tubal, never giving a thought to interrupting the elderly man's sleep. He issued two commands making sure the servant knew he was to see to their prompt execution: first was an order for the new

Mistress of the harem to see that the two English women bathed in the central bathing room—the one with the viewing port incorporated in the ceiling. The second command was an early-morning summons for his son, Jamal, who was to be escorted to the entrance of the Woman's Harem, where Selim would be waiting. He wanted to see Jamal's face when he realized *Simsiyah Gül* and the English girl Jamal had caught sight of at his trial were one in the same...

Selim sighed impatiently. He hated waiting. According to Emily, Jamal had been intensely attracted to this woman and had shown quite pointed signs of wishing to pursue their acquaintance. Of course, it had been supreme serendipity, or Kismet, that Selim's net had captured the girl. Yet was not that very random element of chance proof that Jamal was meant to be with the dark beauty?

Selim knew Allah had blessed his course of action, mayhap had even been the initiator of the plan Selim had conceived all those months ago. No matter how it came about, the girl was here, soon to be reunited with his son. Selim chuckled, rubbing his hands together. Surely, Jamal would be grateful. Enough, perhaps, to finally show some filial affection toward his long-suffering parent.

* * * *

Selim was hungry, having delayed his breakfast, and therefore doubly irritated at Tubal's delay. He leaned at the entrance of the "golden path", foot tapping impatiently. The empty hallway led from his private chambers to the entrance of the women's quarters. He straightened suddenly, watching

as Jamal turned a corner and strode towards him, his silky black hair caught back with a plain black ribbon, dressed in the loose, flowing robes he had grown to prefer, his long-legged strides purposeful. Tubal puffed along in his wake.

"Ah. Jamal. Good morning." Selim called out. His voice sharpened as he looked beyond his son to address the grey-haired Black eunuch who stood stooped over, panting, aged lungs laboring like bellows. "What took you so long, great tortoise?"

Tubal wheezed a bit as he sucked in air. "Forgive ... this unworthy ... one, master." he begged. "I am truly upset over taking so long to perform my Lord's command. The effendi was not in his quarters and after last night's events, it was difficult finding eunuchs to seek him out."

"Why were you up and about so early, my son?" Selim probed.

Jamal gave a slight nod. "I checked on the three ounce cubs I brought in from our trip. The mother cat attacked our party when we came upon her den unexpectedly. I had no choice but to kill her. The others felt I was being overly sensitive, but I feel responsible for the orphans. They are cute little things, and appear to be thriving for now."

"The Ounce is a majestic cat, worthy of the hunt," Selim said, never doubting the necessity—not to mention difficulty—of killing a den-cornered Snow Leopard. "They are a fierce opponent, very territorial. But the three cubs ... what will you do with them?"

"I thought to keep one for myself and give the others as gifts—"

Jamal broke off as Tubal who, having finally regained his breath, lost it again, making a strangled sound that might have been the beginning of a word, before choking it back. Both men watched in amusement as the eunuch tried to regain his nonchalant demeanor. His aged frame actually vibrated with pent-up desire as he followed the conversation with bated breath.

"Everyone knows the species is too wild to make good pets." Selim raised his eyebrows at his son, cluing him in on his joke.

Tubal wilted.

Selim snorted, his eyes dancing. "But I will accept one for this old fool. If anyone can gentle a savage beast, it will be he." The Sultan's self-mocking tones acknowledged his own oft-times wild nature, and the older man's frequently failed attempts to tame it.

Tubal's eyes lit up like fireworks on a Holy Day. Master, truly—?"

Jamal smiled at the grizzled old eunuch. "I would be glad to give you one of the cubs. I have kept one male for myself. However, there is another male and one female, both are beautiful and well marked. Accompany me to the stables later this morning, and choose which you would like."

"Tubal's eyes burned brilliant through a sheen of tears. "I-I..." he broke off sniffing, wiped his face on his sleeve.

"I should have taken better care of you once I ascended to power," Selim admitted. "That I've never spared a thought to what was owed my most loyal servant, therein lies my shame..."

Tubal violently shook his head, his shocked expression matching his horrified words. "Master, never speak so! No one could have been a better master than you, no one."

A half smile turned the corner of Selim's mouth up. "We both know that is not true."

Jamal looked confused. "What are you two going on about? Is having a pet such a big thing?"

Selim nodded, eyes locked with those of the older man. "For Tubal, yes." He shook his head. "I rarely recall the early days of this life because I loathe being reminded of the uncertainties Tubal and I faced. Back then, any day could be our last."

"When I was three years old, my mother died. Tubal was assigned to care for me and we continued to live in the harem-proper until I reached seven years, the age when all young males are removed from their mother's care. We went from the security of harem to the *Kafes*—known as the Golden Cage, yet actually a suite of guarded and barred rooms. It was supposed to be for my protection as an heir of the sultan, but all knew it was a way to keep me, the eldest, at arm's reach—an easy kill should the sultan have a son he wished to inherit the throne after him."

"Tubal was as much a prisoner as was I, cut-off from the rest of the Seraglio, from the company of other eunuchs. His entire existence consisted of guarding me, protecting me from the murderous schemes of the other princes' mothers and their servants. No one but Tubal was allowed to prepare my food, and before I partook, he tasted each dish."

"The poor fool's opportunities for friendships were severely limited. Between us, we always understood Tubal was my last and only line of defense. Without him, I would have stood exposed and alone—ripe for the assassination plots that proliferated in the fertile breeding grounds of the seraglio."

"Whew! That sounds like it was rough ... on both of you," Jamal commiserated. "I couldn't begin to imagine having to live like that."

"It was." Selim acknowledged his son's sympathetic comment. "But as hard as I found that existence, I believe Tubal had it worse. After all, I had his affection and love always. It was rare I showed him any in return."

"Master...!"

"Silence, old man, I am speaking."

Selim softened his rebuke with a smile and Tubal relaxed, shoulders rounding as he shook his grizzled head. Glancing over at Jamal, the eunuch cupped his hand to the side of his mouth. In words loud enough for Selim to overhear, he mumbled, "When he finishes, I'll give you the true recounting of our history."

Jamal laughed, tiger-gold eyes a light with teasing as he turned to his father. "So, since I'm assured of getting the real story later, go ahead with your version of it, sire."

"Harrumph!" Selim pretended to frown, biting back the smile that wanted to curve his lips. "You are both lucky I feel magnanimous today."

"You call this magnanimous?" Jamal murmured under his breath.

There was nothing wrong with Selim's hearing. "Yes, I do. Now stop interrupting me. As I was saying, many highly favored servants owned animals as pets. Much like these animals, a slave is always at the beck and call of his or her master and a slave's attention must always be on his master. As my only servant, Tubal had no free time, certainly none I would allow him to spend with a pet. Selfishly, I required all his diligence, demanded all his attention centered upon me."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Effendi, please do not say so!" Tubal protested Jamal's sarcastic comment.

Selim held up a hand to interrupt his servant, feeling ashamed at the old man's vehement support. Tubal had always been like that. Salim hadn't survived the treacherous years of his youth without learning to be aware of all that was going on about him and he'd always been aware of his servant's weakness for the pets that roamed the royal palaces. He'd seen how he would watch them with furtive glances, sneak scraps to them, and indulge himself with stroking or petting them at every opportunity. Yet, until this morning, Selim had never realized just how badly his elderly retainer had ached for such a relatively minor and insignificant thing as a living object on which to vent his affection and care.

"I ... did not know you were this serious about wanting a damned animal to tag along under your feet. You only mentioned it once or twice in twenty years." Selim felt an uncommon twinge of remorse thinking how easily he could

have arranged something like this, had he only paid attention to what might please Tubal.

Tubal shook his head, tears spilling over to run down the furrowed creases of his weathered cheeks. "It was so unimportant ... I did not want to pester you—"he broke off to clear his throat. "It truly did not matter, my Lord, I was content," he said, sniffing, not attempting to wipe away the evidence of his emotions.

"It does matter," Selim said shortly. "You have served me faithfully all the years of my life. I should have at least ... If you had asked, I would have ... You should have asked."

Tubal's eyes widened. "Master, I-I..."

"So, you old fool—" Selim taunted gently, "We finally render you speechless." His words were tender as he spoke to his long-time slave. "I have not been fair with you."

"My Lord has always been indulgent with me. It is enough that you now show this great generosity to your lowly slave."

"And that is another thing." Selim exclaimed almost angrily. "I tire of hearing this lowly slave nonsense when we both know you have never been anything but in control of me and, when you deemed it necessary, everything else around you."

His father's disgruntled words surprised a chuckle out of Jamal. He was even more surprised when Selim snapped out, "Write a notation, Tubal!"

Conditioned by years of service, the eunuch withdrew a stylus and slate from his voluminous robes and waited for the announcement.

"By my right as Supreme Authority under Allah, I, Selim, third of the name, do hereby free the man Tubal. I do further give him the title of ... Bey of Larrise with the income annually realized from those lands, witnessed this day ... blah, blah, blah ... by the Emir Jamal."

Tubal was stunned. As he wrote, his eyes grew larger and larger until they were starting out of his head. The writing utensils fell from nerveless fingers. "Master."

"Of course," the Sultan continued, his voice very soft, very quietly sincere, "you are free to do anything you want, go anywhere you wish, but as your Sultan, I forbid you to forsake me." In a rare gesture of caring, Selim placed his hands on Tubal's aged shoulders. "Old man, we have been through much. I ... do not want you to ... do not leave me, old *dede*," he finally ended, uncomfortable at revealing his true emotions, even to Tubal.

A tearful Tubal threw himself down to embrace Selim's feet. "I would never leave you, Lord." Tubal cried. "Where could I live, but at your feet?"

Jamal looked on, his own chest feeling tight, before glancing away, knowing Selim would be prickly about someone witnessing this touching scene between the two men who had spent most of their lives together.

In fact, while Tubal lay prostrate before him, Selim chanced a quick, half-shamed glance at his son, relieved to see Jamal gazing off down the hallway determined not to intrude. Finding himself unobserved, he surreptitiously swiped the sleeve of his ornate morning robe across his eyes, removing telling moisture before addressing the man he had

called grandfather; a title of much respect and love. "Get up, you old fool," he ordered. "My Beys cannot go groveling about on the floor. What kind of impression will that make to the eunuchs around here?"

Jamal reached down to assist Tubal up off the floor. He smiled, extending his hand. "Congratulations, my lord."

Tubal took the offered hand, and huffed, jerking his head at the Sultan. "It is all fine and well," he said, "but you will see it amounts to nothing. I will still be running about, fixing the Great One's mistakes, and holding the basin when he over-indulges—"

"You see." Selim laughed, relieved and thankful for the lighter mood laughter allowed. "You see why I have not done this years before, Jamal. This jackal would have driven me into the arms of Allah ages since had he had the freedom he now enjoys."

Jamal was aware of why the servant had made the joke, and his quick glance assured Tubal his secret was safe. Tubal's slight smile neither confirmed nor denied. A look at the pad in his hands brought Tubal's mind back to the reason the three men were standing in the corridor attached to the women's section of the seraglio. He cleared his throat to get Selim's attention, and then murmured, "It is time. The women will be at their baths even now."

All laughter fell from Selim as he focused on what would transpire in the next few moments. "Yes," he agreed, "it is high time we got into position." Turning to Jamal, he said, "I brought you here to observe two new members of the harem. I believe you will find at least one of them to your liking. As I

informed you last evening, I took your protests to heart. I have gone to great effort to find you a woman worthy of your seed. Come, *ogul*. Let me show you..."

Selim led the way to a doorway further down the corridor. Before a solid door, a stiff-faced eunuch stood guard, bared scimitar in hand. When the guard saw the Sultan, he made a deep obeisance and opened the door. The three men entered the room, and the eunuch silently closed the door behind them.

"What is so special about this room that there is a guard assigned here?" Jamal asked, not seeing anything to warrant such care.

Selim said, "You will soon see."

The plainly furnished room held several comfortable looking chaise lounges, piled high with pillows. A low, functional table held a burning lamp. The couches sat fairly close to the walls, but were all placed facing the same corner. There were no pictures on the walls, yet they were not without adornment.

At first glance, the walls appeared to be panels of ornate woodcuttings, carved into fantastical swirls and curlicues. The inter-connecting patterns drew the eye so well it was difficult to discern what lay hidden behind the sculpted wooden panels. The walls, themselves, were of some clear substance and they revealed two rooms in the harem proper.

The first of the rooms looked like a huge closet. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of garments lay heaped onto every available surface. Silks, chiffons, brocades, samites and laces ... a rainbow conglomeration of materials spilled out of casks

and boxes and drawers. A wall of mirrors multiplied the seeming confusion broken only by two low, wide, white marble benches adorned with simple cushions. A floor-to-ceiling shelved storage area took up another wall. This room was unoccupied.

The other room was a cavernous, steamy area with a large free-form bathing pool at its center. Huge potted plants ringed three of its sides, and ferns drooped their frilled fronds towards the water lightly brushing the surface. Steam rose up from the heated waves, misting the air, giving it an otherworldly atmosphere. It, too, was empty.

"What is it we are supposed to see?" Jamal asked impatiently when over five minutes of dead time had elapsed.

"But wait, and all will be revealed," the Sultan answered, chuckling to himself. He gestured to one of the chairs angled towards the bathing room watching in satisfaction as his son seated himself.

"Many generations ago, an ancestor had a penchant for watching his women at their grooming without all the posturing and posing that goes on whenever the Sultan makes a progression into the harem," Selim said, the tone of his voice light for he found amusement in the story he related. "That distant sultan had these viewing rooms made. Over the years, the women came to know of their existence, yet have never learned of their whereabouts. In truth, there are several more such rooms scattered throughout the seraglio. There is even one or two in the young eunuchs' quarters, as several past Sultans have leaned in that direction." A shrug indicated his disinterest. "Because the

women never know if they are being observed, they always strive to present themselves at their best."

"I feel like a damned peeping Tom." Jamal murmured in a disgruntled voice.

"Like a who?"

"A peeping—," Jamal shook his head. "Never mind, sire. How long is this going to take?"

"Not long. I gave strict instructions—ah. Look there."

Through the arched, key-shaped doorway of the cluttered room came a group of women. The Mistress of the girls came first, then two ladies, followed by two serving girls; their arms laden with toweling and bath accessories. The servants unloaded their burdens on one of the scattered benches, then turned to assist the two women with the removal of their clothes. The women appeared uneasy—it was clear they were not comfortable with the idea of shedding their garments in front of an audience. However, with determined diligence, the servants divested the two women of every shred of concealing cloth.

They were beautiful. Jamal had never seen two women more unlike, yet they complimented each other. He smiled, watching the dark-haired beauty bend to take towels from the stacks on the marble bench, handing one to her companion, both wrapping themselves in the cotton lengths. "I suppose these are the English women," he commented, his gaze intent upon them. There was something about that dark girl, though—

"Yes." Selim kept his gaze locked on his son, whose eyes were locked on the women. He did not want to miss seeing Jamal's expression when he recognized Simsiyah Gül.

Jamal's avid gaze noted the graceful way both girls moved as they left what he had mentally dubbed the "closet" and made their way to the bathing room. They did not drop their towels until they had lowered themselves into the steaming water. Once covered, they seemed to relax, their soft voices carrying clearly into the viewing room.

"If we can hear them, can they not hear us?" Jamal whispered, wondering over the acoustics built into the other room.

"Fear not." Selim said. "They can neither see nor hear."

"How can that be?"

"The architects responsible for planning and building the Seraglio had no equals among their kind," Selim boasted.

Jamal turned his eyes away from the women to pierce his father with a strict gaze. "I can see at a glance, these ladies' fine breeding and beautiful bodies; however, I have yet to see anything that would motivate me to take either to wife. My strongest motivation would be to remove such innocent pawns from this prison. Since that would liberate only one of them—and even my limited observation informs me those two are friends—I doubt one would accept her freedom if it meant leaving the other behind."

"Keep looking."

"What is it? What knowledge do you have that I do not?" Jamal asked, not liking the feeling of uneasiness he was

experiencing. Something about this situation was sounding warning bells in his head.

"I know everything." Selim boasted. He left his chair and approached the right wall. "Come," he ordered, gesturing for his son to follow. "You obviously require a closer look."

Jamal, giving in to a driving compulsion, rose to follow. He watched in fascination as his father pressed an artfully concealed button and an entire panel slid to the left, leaving only the clear material of the wall through which all three watchers had an unobstructed view.

Both the blonde and the brunette were executing lazy strokes through the water, their sleek bodies cutting the waves with little splashing. Glimpses of slim flanks and curving shoulders drew Jamal closer to the barrier to press his face against the glass like a small orphan pressing against the store window at Christmas, all his dreams on the other side of the glass.

He knew the brunette. Perhaps it was the turn of her head, or the wide-flung gesture of her arm, but the knowledge came to him all at once as blinding as a lightning strike. His heart pounded. His breath caught. He stood suspended in disbelief and horror, dawning hope and unreasoning joy. And, as he realized how she must have come to be in that other room, anger arose in him. Anger so intense his sight darkened and the pulse at his temple pounded.

"How the hell did you do this?" He growled, his hands bunching into fists at his side as he turned on the megalomaniacal manipulator standing there grinning, for all the world like a proud rooster crowing of his accomplishment.

"I didn't even know her name, yet though worlds apart, you casually reach out your hand and snatch her away as if you read my thoughts, my dreams—" Jamal broke off and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his anger burning so hotly, he felt as if his blood sizzled.

"I thought you would be pleased," Selim said, his expression frosting over as he took offense at his son's volatile reaction to his grand surprise.

"Pleased? *Pleased?* I am not pleased that the woman I have affection for suffered such an ordeal. I am not pleased that even now, you gaze at her unclothed form. Am I supposed to be pleased that others have also seen and touched what I would hold sacred?" Jamal snarled, "I think I can safely say that I am *not* pleased."

"I do not notice her," Selim objected, choosing to address only that one issue. "She is for you. While others have seen her naked form, you must understand we do not assign importance to that. The physician has seen her, some few of the women, perhaps one or two eunuchs. I find your upset excessive for so minor a thing."

"Excessive. I cannot reason with you now," Jamal sighed angrily. "I am beyond reason. I want only..." he hesitated, loath to ask, then gave in, "What is her name?"

"Her English one? Or the one given her since she came to be in the harem?"

Jamal glared, his impatience visible. "The English name. *Her* name."

Selim gestured, and Tubal read, "The Honorable Merridyth Elaine St. John-Smythe."

Jamal frowned. "Why do I know that name?"

"Your mother wrote of it several times."

Jamal snapped his fingers. "Of course. The girl that went missing ... then the blond must be her cousin, the Earl of Fellhaven's daugh—Father!" Jamal was so shocked at the audacity of the man he inadvertently called Selim by the intimate title, something he had not done often. "You have kidnapped the daughter of an *Earl*!"

"Only inadvertently," Selim explained with a shrug. "She was a bonus, we got her free. We paid for the others, so it was not kidnapping."

"You might recall that England does not traffic in human flesh. What you did was barbarous and heinous."

"Come, now. I am no barbarian. The women were harmed and they are cared for, pampered. Why—"

"What of the girl who attempted to hang herself? Would you say she was unharmed? Pampered?"

Selim threw up his hands. "There is no talking with you." he accused, pacing away from the wall. "Allah vindicated my plans by placing in my hands the one woman you were interested in. It was not I who decreed she would be here, but Allah. And she is not all sweetness, you know," the Sultan railed. "Already she disrupts the smooth running of my women's quarters. I tire of this. Tell me now," he demanded, "do you want this woman ... yes or no?"

Jamal opened his mouth to argue, and paused, nonplused. For the truth of it was, he did want her. Desperately. Madly. Any way he could get her. As his father had pointed out, she was here. There was nothing he could do about the past, no

way he could have prevented her heartache or fear. But he could rescue her from her present situation. If nothing else, he mused, it would present him to her in the role of hero.

"Yes. I want her."

"Then all is well! Come over here for I wish to show you something."

When Jamal stood beside his father, the Sultan pointed to a raised curlicue engraved about shoulder-level to Jamal.

"This is the mechanism that opens the door between this room and the others. When I leave, you may go through the door and claim your woman. Bring her through the door we came in, for the guard will have instructions to allow you and the woman passage. Be certain to close this portal behind you when you return from the bathing room."

Jamal said nothing, only nodded his understanding.

"Come to me when you finish with the woman," Selim commanded. "We will talk." With a high-handed gesture, he gathered Tubal up and left without a backwards glance.

Jamal waited until he heard the outer door shut signaling his father's complete departure, then turned, allowing his facial muscles to relax as his eyes hungrily devoured the woman he had desired for years. She looked slimmer than she'd been two years ago, though what he could see of her figure remained lushly abundant. The creamy swells of her round breasts floated just above the water, their firm little nipples making his cock harden and rise. His mouth went dry as he watched the two women cavorting in the heated pool, both unaware they were under scrutiny.

He didn't know how long he stood watching her; hours could have gone by. Finally, the blond hoisted herself out of the pool; her body pinkened and flushed by the warmth of the water. Wrapping up in one towel, she briskly dried her long, sheaf-straight hair with another. She left the room, tossing a laughing comment back over her shoulder to her cousin, who still floated in the heated waters.

Jamal didn't move, wishing to savor these moments when he had Merridyth to himself, wishing he could simply stand and watch this beautiful vision cavorting like a care-free child, her hair a cloud of dark mist on the water. His body reacted in the age-old way, his balls drawing up until his groin ached, full and heavy with need.

Soon, he thought. Nothing ... nothing will stand between my desire and me.

He pressed against the cool glass, rubbing his heated forehead back and forth in an effort to rein in his wayward impulses. He wanted to enter that shadowed room and haul his woman up out of the water. He wanted to press her—dripping and warm and wet—against his throbbing cock, wanted to plunge into her hot, welcoming channel. The compulsion grew until he could stand it no longer. Lifting his hand, he pressed the button, activating the secret door.

Beneath his hand, the well-oiled door silently swung open...

Chapter Thirty-three

I know the identity of the girl at your trial. Before that day, we had never made her acquaintance as her family and ours do not run in the same circles; however, the family is good with the exception of the father. Of course, his blood on his mother's side is good, but his breeding leaves something to be desired. I speak of Mr. St. John-Smythe. The eldest daughter is the monetary heir of the late Earl of Fellhaven. I have done a lot of snooping and the gist is this: the title and lands were entailed, and went to the male cousin living in the Colonies. Lady Judith would have inherited all the rest, but it seems the young Lady Judith was enamored of Hector and married him against the wishes of her parents. The Earl cut her off but for a monthly portion, but all the cash wealth went to the first-born child to be put in their control at the age of twenty-five, or upon an approved of marriage. That child is Merridyth Elaine St. John-Smythe; the young lady that was so attentive and helpful to me that dreadful day during your sentencing. Now that you know her name, what will you do? You must recall that she is missing, and has been missing for over five months. Everyone believes she and her cousin, Lady Susan, are dead. I, however, have had letters from Selim, and I have my own thoughts about the possible whereabouts of the two girls. My suggestion to you is to search in Turkey for her. The Sultan has a penchant for callously rearranging the lives of those around him merely on a whim, and he questioned me, in earlier letters, on the matter of your

interests and preferences; attributes you would look for in a wife. Unfortunately, the girl, and your reaction to her (which I must say was fairly evident to me and the world) was uppermost in my mind, and when I wrote back, I fear I told him all I knew about her. Now, with the disappearance (did I mention the girls were taken from their own home?), and the fact that nobody has seen them since, added to the fact that there was no ransom note, lead me to suspect ... well, you know what I suspect. I may be over-stepping the bonds of motherhood, yet I feel I must tell you the following—so bear with me. Son, against my will, I was taken into bondage and mistreated. I wanted to die. I seriously considered taking my life. Your father, Randolph, made me realize how much he loved me, and I listened to him, believed him, and chose to return to England with him and build a new life. You were a part of that life, yet, at first, I feared Randolph would resent you—the child of another man. But your father loved you almost as much as he loved me. He never once blamed me for the circumstances of your birth. Jared, if the Turks have indeed taken Merridyth, there is every possibility they have forced her to do things that many people would fault her for. If you love this woman, and I realize that may be too strong a word to use, since you did not even have conversation with her, please remember that if she survives her ordeal, she will prove to be a very strong woman, someone capable of great endurance and courage. She may well be the most suitable wife for you. If, however, you cannot stomach what has been done to her, then, for the love you bear me, do all in your power to free her and return her home. You will owe her that

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much, especially if what I suspect is true. I curse my inability to control my pen. Think on what I have told you, and know this ... No matter what she may have gone through, if you bring Merridyth home as your wife, I will accept her with an open heart and open arms. And I shall see to it that the Ton does the same.—Mum

Chapter Thirty-four

Susan swam to the edge of the pool and grabbed a towel. Once she was decently covered, she turned to talk to her companion smiling and shaking her head as she watched her cousin; for someone who had almost drowned, the girl did love water.

Merridyth floated in the warm womb-like waters of the pool, her mind drifting much like her body; aimlessly and peacefully. Laihla had agreed to watch Seana for this short time, though she had hidden her fears of such a duty badly. Merri was thankful for such a friend as she and Susan had both been in need of this peaceful time together.

"I think I shall dress, now, Merri," Susan called from the pool's edge, breaking into Merri's drifting thoughts. "And you shall wrinkle like a prune if you stay in there much longer." she warned playfully.

Merridyth chuckled, but didn't open her eyes. The water carried the sound of her small laugh clearly. "I dare say I shall not stay in much longer," she called out, "however, I think I will just float here a few moments more ... it is so quiet and calm that I am pretending I am far away from this place..."

"Do not stay in too long," Susan admonished. "We were given an hour, and we have already used much of it. Allow yourself time to dress. Remember, you have that appointment with the Sultan later on today."

"I could hardly forget that." Merridyth retorted sharply, her pleasure evaporating at the reminder of the unpleasant, unnerving events awaiting her this day. "If it weren't for Seana—"

"I know."

"Sometimes, I feel so burdened I want to scream." Merri admitted, ashamed to sound like she was complaining. "Then I feel horrible for thinking of Seana as a burden."

"You should not feel guilty for feeling like that," Susan said, "for though she cannot help herself, she is a burden right now." Susan sighed. "She is not the only one. I know I have been no help to you, expecting you to take care of everything."

"Oh, Susan, that is not true!" Merri came to her feet in the water, shaking her head in denial of her cousin's allegation.

"It *is* true." Susan declared, talking over Merri's protests. "I rely on you to be my tower of strength, yet we are in the same situation. My only explanation is that you have always been stronger and braver than me. I have always looked up to you. Believe me, I know I have not been fair to you. I promise I will do better."

"You have been a great help to me," Merri assured Susan. "I do not know what I should have done without you."

"Survived, I dare say," Susan said dryly. "You would probably be running the harem by now," she added, trying to lighten the conversation and failing miserably. She turned away from her cousin's troubled face, rattled by a harsh shiver. "I am cold. I really am going to get dressed now."

She left Merri sputtering denials and slapping the water in frustration.

"You know how I hate not having the last word in an argument, Susan." she called to her cousin's retreating back.

Susan's laugh floated back behind her.

Merri stretched her arms out at her side and eased back into the water, allowing her feet to lift off the floor of the pool. Her eyes drifted closed and she floated on the swells of the soothing waters, her ears picking up the muted whispers of Susan's movements in the next room. The soft, sibilant sounds of cloth sliding against skin was somehow magnified by the water. She kicked her feet a little, propelling herself across the bathing-pool, her arms moving in a languidly graceful figure eight.

The sound of breathing came to her, amplified by the acoustics of the water-filled room. Close. Near the edge of the pool.

"I'm not ready to come out, yet, Susan," she half-whispered, eyes still closed.

"By all means, stay as long as you like. I am enjoying the view."

"Arrghh-hh." Merri screamed in shock. Her feet snapped up, submerging her head as her over-compensating motion tipped her backwards. She quickly regained her balance and stood up, flinging her hair out of her face, and giving the intruder her back.

"We had permission to bathe without eunuch supervision." She announced harshly, every inch the English lady,

regardless of her state of undress. She was very angry at the interruption and resentful of having her privacy violated.

A masculine chuckle echoed off the dark, cool walls of the bathing room, sounding eerie and mysterious. "I am no eunuch, *Simsiyah Gül*."

Merridyth whirled about, her eyes widening as they encountered dancing golden eyes. Eyes trained, with haughty male interest, on her own exposed curves. With another gasp, she bent from the waist, attempting to cover herself, frantically placing one hand over her lower privates, the other hand splaying wide-fingered, across both breasts. She sank down until only her shoulders were above the water line.

A quick glance upward showed the man standing at ease, his legs braced firmly, hands resting on his hips. She thought them interesting hands; wide palmed, clean, long fingered hands with a dusting of fine black hairs that disappeared into the sleeves of his robes.

His hands were not the only things she found herself noticing. He was tall. Taller than most of the eunuchs she had seen around the palace, though perhaps not quite as tall as Shirka. It was difficult to judge his body type, concealed as it was by the flowing eastern robes he wore. He carried himself like a prince. She could not see his face clearly in the mottled shadows of the room, yet there was something familiar...

Her mind, as it was accustomed to do after two years, compared it to the face often seen in her dreams. Could it be? No. This is the last place he would be. She shook off the lingering impression, chiding herself. You are seeing him

everywhere you look. It has been well over two years. Time to let your fantasy go...

"This is part of the Sultan's harem," she warned, her voice shaking. "You will be killed if you are found here. Leave now, and I won't scream—" her voice trailed off. For some unfathomable reason, she hoped it would not come to her having to carry out her implied threat.

"I have wondered," he mused aloud, "whether or not you were a screamer. Will you moan when I caress you, take your beautiful breasts in my mouth, find the jewel hidden between your thighs and give you your woman's pleasure? Will you scream my name, then? I think I would like that." The man's soft voice, barely above a whisper, rasped against her nerves causing her to quiver.

Merridyth backed away in the water, her steps unsteady as she battled a sudden weakness in her knees. Down low in her belly, a shivering quake awoke; a sensation of heat and turmoil. "How dare you say these things to me?" she asked breathlessly, incredulous that a stranger would speak such intimate words in such calm tones, as though he spoke polite nothings to a casual acquaintance at an afternoon soiree. She frowned in arrested suspicion. "Who are you?"

The man bowed from the waist. "Forgive my neglect of the proprieties," he said, making gentle mock of their situation, his voice soft and caressing, almost physical in its effect on her heightened sensibilities. "But what else can you expect when you are naked in a harem, worrying over the lack of conventions," he finished, his quiet laugh skittering like ice down her spine.

"Clearly, you are no gentleman to remark upon my situation." Merri accused, wondering frantically where Susan might be. Couldn't she hear their voices from the other room?

"Ahh," the man sighed. "You are, of course correct in your assessment of me," he allowed. "I certainly do not feel very gentlemanly at this precise moment." As he spoke, he was carefully lowering himself into the pool. The bottom of his robes immediately became soaked. "Yet I find I cannot lie and ask forgiveness, for I am not in the least sorry to view such stunning charms. And I ask myself ... do you feel especially like a gentlewoman right now?" His smile terrified her.

Merri's backward movements through the water became panicked flight. Ignoring his question, she watched him advance, stalking her. Heated discomfort expanded inside as she recognized the predatory message his eyes were sending. She lowered her head and half turned from him, too embarrassed to continue meeting his direct gaze. Her voice shook in fear as she asked her own questions. "Why are you—what are you doing?"

"I am merely attempting to behave in a gentlemanly manner," he replied derisively, his tiger-bright eyes gleaming goldly in the muted lighting of the room. "Does not a gentleman take a lady's hand upon being introduced?" he taunted, moving steadily towards her as she just as steadily retreated from him.

"Stop," Merri begged, on the verge of hysteria. "Please do not come any closer." She did not know why she was so terrified of this unknown man, only that she was. She sensed an implacable determination in him, a resolve so powerful

nothing could withstand his will. She backed up another cringing step and felt the stone edge of the pool cool against her naked back. She saw the knowledge of her entrapment in the man's tawny eyes, saw the flame burning in them, and began to tremble.

"Merridyth, you do not need to fear me."

His deep voice fascinated her and she watched that full bottom lip move as his lips caressed her name. His eyes gleamed hotly, sweeping over her from crown to water's edge and beyond. His breath wafted hot against her mist-dampened face as he moved close, closer. His robes floated up and out from him, moving on the surface of the water, brushing her waist and breasts as he came to a halt scant inches before her, the water soaked cloth abrading her tender flesh.

In defiance, she lifted her chin to gaze upon the harshly beautiful planes of his face, heart pounding at the physical threat of his big body practically on top of hers. She leaned far back, felt the humid air caress her bare breasts and swallowed the lump in her throat to beg, "Please ... at least tell me ... who you are?"

Placing his large right hand over her left one where it struggled to cover her generous bosom, he curled his fingers about hers so the hair on his knuckles brushed against the sensitive tip of her left breast. Bending to place his lips right against the delicate shell of her ear he, whispered so quietly the water could not grasp his words to magnify them, "I am your destiny, your kismet."

Merri jumped, heated sensation flooding through her from where his big palm covered her much smaller hand. Her knees weakened. Jerking away from the distracting, disturbing contact, she skittered sideways, noticing too late the move completely uncovered her body to him. She whirled in the water, facing away to present only the smooth, slim line of her back to him. "I refuse to accept that."

She knew he allowed her to break his hold, moving with her, forcing her right up against the stone skirt of the pool. Her nipples pebbled with cold as they pressed against the chill damp tiles. Using both arms, he caged her from behind, his hands coming around to rest dangerously close to her exposed breasts. He leaned his weight on her, making her feel his heat at her back.

Merridyth moaned, overwhelmingly aware of this stranger's strength, his potent male allure even as she sought to escape him. Fearful as she was, she could feel something within her straining to break free, something wild and powerful that wanted what the hard, male body behind her offered. It petrified her to realize she had so little control over her own body.

A calloused hand swept slowly across the expanse of her quivering belly and she let out an abrupt squeal. One blunt fingertip delved into her navel, slowly circling. She moaned at the unexpected rush of feelings even as the flesh between her thighs grew slick and wet with something other than water. She felt the rumble of his amused chuckle and shrank in on herself, mortified that he had taken note of her helpless reaction.

The man tightened his grip, body rock solid against the shivers racking her limbs, coursing through her body as she struggled, trying to break free of his restricting hands. He laughed and she seethed, growing angry that the lout so easily held her.

"You cannot deny me. See how your body trembles? It pleases me that you are so responsive to my touch." His voice dipped in awe as he continued, almost to himself, "We have not even kissed, you and I ... yet, you respond so beautifully, as though made for my pleasure."

Merri's eyes widened as he dared to palm an upraised nipple. The male pride evident in his voice as he assured her, "You will be mine!" set her teeth on edge.

She tugged at his trespassing fingers, trying to dislodge his hand from her shrinking mound. Telling herself it was tremors of cold racking her body from where her shrinking flesh pressed against the pool's edge and not lust from the heated threat of the body pressing her from behind, Merri cried out in impotent anger. "You pompous, detestable animal, I am not your possession, nor anyone's."

He frowned blackly. "I like not your comment. You'll find I am a jealous lover. I will not tolerate even the thought of you in another's arms. You are mine," he reiterated, hands unconsciously tightening in ownership. "You were brought here to be my—"

Merri interrupted his sentence with a sharp backwards push against his encircling arms. "I belong to myself. You disgust me. You are a savage who thinks nothing of another's dignity, to would accost a lady in her bath like this. I would

never submit to a barbarian like you. Oh—!" She shrieked as she was jerked abruptly about to face the man's angry visage.

"That is twice you have maligned me," he growled, hands digging into her shoulders. She winced, and immediately, he loosened his hold, the fire in his eyes banking to a smolder. "First, I am not a gentleman, now I am a barbarian and a savage. You would be well served should I act according to your expectations." His eyes flared, glowing with some strong emotion. Without warning, he bent his head to hers, firm lips dropping to brand hers with a fiery kiss.

They dueled with their lips and their bodies, his aggressive, powerful; hers resisting, stiff, yet on the verge of yielding until, with an agonized cry, she wrenched herself free.

"You have already shown me what an animal you are." Merry flung at him from between gritted teeth, savagely wiping at her swollen mouth in an attempt to erase the lingering impact of his touch. "And keep your hands off me," she warned, snarling, as he moved to recapture her.

"One day soon, you will beg for my touch," he promised grimly, hauling her back against his muscular chest in a calculated display of powerful male muscle. "And I will be eager to comply with your request."

"Then do me a favor now," Merri snapped, trying to keep space between their bodies "Hold your breath for three days."

The man threw back his head and laughed, allowing her to gain a few inches. His laughter changed his countenance, softening the planes of his handsome face from sternness to

youthful exuberance, stunning Merri. He was beautiful. Her wayward heart sat up and took notice, but she stopped its clamoring with a sharp internal reprimand.

"You are magnificent. A worthy consort," he complimented her. "What times we will have, you and I. You make me wonder ... who will tame whom? Can you bend me to your will? Or, will you succumb to mine?" He gazed down at her, eyes blazing, and his hands tightened until he was painfully squeezing her shoulders.

She followed the direction of his transfixed stare, and saw he was visually devouring her breasts where they bobbed in the buoyant waters, round and full, their deeply pink tips hardened in response to the cold, the fear, and—she acknowledged, if only to herself—the man. His concentrated attention made her painfully aware of her nakedness ... again.

"Oh, I truly hate you," she whispered through unsteady lips, her face flushing rosily.

"I doubt that, my lovely, but if so, I will change your mind," the intruder whispered arrogantly, once more brushing her ear with the movements of his lips, this time putting the tip of his tongue right inside. "If only you could see how beautifully your blushing cheeks match the soft rose color of your pretty little nipples..."

Merri yelled again, raising her hands to strike at him. "I hate you."

He caught her hands, shaking his head in warning. "I would not do that were I you. Should someone witness your striking me, you could be invited to drink the Bosphorus."

Merridyth stilled under his hands, going pale. She had heard that phrase somewhere. It was a phrase meaning the person would be drowned. Merri began to shake uncontrollably.

"I was joking." the man said, frowning over how his words had affected her. He gathered her trembling form closer. "I would never allow harm to come to you."

Was he trying to comfort her? Merri wondered, becoming angry all over again. New odalisques' first lessons were the penalties imposed for disobedience. It was a death offense to raise one's hand, or offer violence to the Sultan.

Oh my god, have I been fighting and resisting Selim III? Merri had assumed the ruler was a much older man, but having never seen him, she could not be sure ... and she did have an appointment with him today. *If this man was the Turkish Sultan, the ruler of the empire...* She whimpered. "Oh, glory."

"Aren't you ready to get out of there, Merri?" Susan's voice rang in the sudden silence. "I have already been to check on Seana, and here you are, still—"

Susan stood frozen in horror at the tableau before her. Her struggling, naked cousin was closely constrained in the embrace of some intruder. Letting out a shout loud enough to rival her cousin's Amazon cry, Susan launched herself straight at the interloper.

"Susan, no!" Merry moved quickly, interposing her body between her attacking cousin and the man she suspected was the Sultan of the Turkish Empire. "For glory-sakes, Susan." she begged, "Do not hit him ... you'll be killed."

Susan lowered her fists. "Killed? Because I would protect my cousin and rout an intruder?" She shrugged off the linen cloak draped over her flimsy harem garments and passed it to Merri. "Here, put this on."

Merri lost no time donning the voluminous shawl. Feeling reasonably covered, she turned to face her tormentor.

He was staring at her borrowed robe as if contemplating tearing it off. "Feel safer with that flimsy garment, do you?" he asked tightly, totally ignoring Susan's presence.

"As a matter of fact," Merri retorted, her chin rising pugnaciously, "I do."

Lifting a wicked eyebrow, he grinned showing even, white teeth and drawled, "I can see right through it."

Merri struggled for composure. Grabbing the outer edges of her robe and overlapping them tightly, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Is that better?" she asked sarcastically.

The infuriating man shrugged. "I certainly do not think so, yet I suppose *better* depends upon your point of view. I liked you wearing something a little less ... concealing—"

"I was wearing air."

"And very beautifully, too." He smiled. "I shall have the court seamstresses run up an abundance of the material for you."

His lips twitched, and he yanked them back into a straight line. Merri frowned, somehow sensing he played with her. Her suspicions were vindicated when he said, "Ah, Merridyth, I could not resist teasing. Your dumfounded expression is so cute."

"Cute?" Merri sputtered. Her hands curled into fists as she fought the urge to slap the impudent male.

Susan, her mouth hanging agape, stood watching the exchange between her cousin and the man. Her head snapped back and forth, following their conversation until she grew dizzy. She instinctively knew—and her searching gaze lent weight to her conclusion—that the man was someone of importance, for he carried himself with an air of practiced, unconcerned nobility. Even standing waist-deep in a pool, dripping wet, he exuded an air of effortless self-assurance.

Susan turned her attention back to her cousin. Merri was acting most unlike herself. Instead of her usual modest manner, she seemed to have no idea of the impropriety of talking to a man while in the bath. In fact, her modest cousin had actually been standing naked before him, apparently unconcerned at her state of undress. She certainly did not appear to be frightened of the stranger. "Have I interrupted something?" Susan finally asked uncertainly.

"Yes!"

"No!"

Merri and the intruder shouted their answer at the same time.

The man quirked a slashing black eyebrow, moderated his voice and used softer tones. "Actually, Lady Susan, you interrupted an introduction."

"How do you know my name, Sir?"

"And is it not high time that we know yours?" Merri pounced, not waiting for him to answer Susan's question. After all, it was late in the day to modify her behavior. If he

was the Sultan, she had probably made an awful first impression. Weren't women of the harem supposed to aspire to the Sultan's bed? She had rebuffed him ... several times.

"I will answer all your questions," the man promised, dropping his sexually teasing manner, "but first, allow me to assist you out of the pool." Ruefully indicating his sopping clothes, he smilingly said, "I, for one, would like to carry on this conversation in a more comfortable atmosphere."

Since Susan concurred before Merri could voice her own protest, she was reduced to watching, inwardly drooling, as the mystery man turn from her to lift her younger cousin out of the water, depositing her on the tiles with little effort, his muscles rippling and surging under his skin. It wasn't until he turned back to her that she realized he would be putting his hands on her again, under the guise of assisting her from the pool. She surged sideways through the water in a futile attempt to escape his nefarious design. With a crack of exuberant laughter, he caught her before she had gone many steps.

Holding her twisting, resisting body with ease, he waded to the shallow side of the pool, striding up the steps submerged there. He smiled down into her angry face, eyes glinting in a challenge only she could see as he slid her curvy form down his rock hard body, uninterested that Susan stood watching, her face crimson with embarrassment at being a witness of such blatant sexual maneuvering.

As soon as her feet touched solid ground, Merri dashed to Susan's side, distancing herself from temptation. While in his arms, she had almost given way to the urge to embrace the

scoundrel. She couldn't understand why she was still reacting this way after the strict talking-to she had given herself.

"Now then," Susan said, briskly shaking out her clinging robes, "you, sir, have the advantage of us, for you know my name, and Merri's. Shall we get to that introduction?" she prompted.

"Merry?" Eyes that could have been at home in a jungle burned into Merridyth. "Are you so joyful, then?" He made the obvious play on her name.

"With an 'i'," Merridyth said scathingly, frost dripping off her words, "A family name. And do not change the subject. For the third time ... who are you?"

Taking one of Susan's hands and bending over it in a courtly manner, the man said, "I am the Emir Jamal, son of the Sultan, Selim III."

"Oh, my." Susan gasped. "I have heard of you."

"I do not doubt it," the prince said dryly. Turning to Merridyth, he lifted her hand, his eyes lifting to search her face when he felt her resistance. He let her tug at her imprisoned hand a moment, before proving his superior strength by bringing her hand up to brush her knuckles with warm lips. "I am also ... Jared Michael Randolph Jamal Tyson, eighth Duke of Wyndmere."

Merridyth's eyes widened. She wordlessly shook her head no.

"My cousin knows you, sir?" Susan questioned incredulously.

"No." Merri choked out.

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

"Yes," the Duke answered calmly, speaking over Merri's disbelief. "Rather ... she knows of me. We ... saw each other almost three years ago, and shared a ... meeting of minds. As I recall, there was no time for a formal introduction."

"Oh, for goodness sake!" Merri gasped. "It was *you*." Merridyth's eyes rolled up in her head. Without pomp or circumstance, she dropped into a dead faint.

"Ah, my darling," Jared crooned softly, catching her falling body up in his arms. He placed a tender, lingering kiss on her unconscious brow. "You *do* remember me."

Chapter Thirty-five

Enclosed, please find the letter from Ferdie. I told him I would send it on. He seemed more disturbed and agitated than usual, and was adamant about your needing to receive the information at the Soonest Possible Moment. (I do so hate the way that child talks in capitals.) At any rate, I resisted the urge to peek. Please write soon and tell me what bee is in his bonnet now. As usual, you have all my love—Mum

Chapter Thirty-six

"I am really getting tired of waking up with a headache." Merridyth groaned without opening her eyes. Susan's nearby chuckle caused her to turn her head, opening her eyes to locate her cousin bending low above her. Her brow creased. "Gracious. I was ... in the ... bathing room—" Merri's words trailed off in confusion. She sat up, asking, "How did I get back here?"

"You fainted," Susan said softly, rescuing the damp cloth dislodged from Merridyth's forehead with her sudden movement. "I would never have believed you to be so fragile, Merridyth. The *Emir* Jamal wanted to take you to his quarters after you fainted. I managed to convince him to wait until you had recovered, and I tell you, that was not an easy task. He really seems to have some strong feelings for you."

She waited for Merri to respond. "Come on, Merri, say something. I'm eaten up with curiosity over this situation between you and the Sultan's son."

With a shake of her head, Merri refused to answer.

With a shrug of her own, Susan continued, "He finally had a eunuch return you here. Much as it seemed to infuriate him, even he is not allowed in the harem-proper—" She broke off to scrutinize Merri closely. "You frightened me," she said quietly. "The prince was quite frantic, also. Are you feeling any better?" she asked. When Merridyth nodded, Susan said, "Good, because I have a million, million questions, and I'll have you know beforehand that I have every intention of

harassing you until you divulge where, when and how you met that intriguingly handsome man."

Merridyth groaned and turned her face away. "I really do not want to talk about this now, Susan," she grated out. "My heart is still pounding from the stressful, emotionally upsetting meeting. I'm feeling a jangle of confused feelings and don't know what to make of them."

He is here! The man I thought innocent, the man I mooned over for two years of my life, refusing all others because they hadn't measured up to my memories of him. The Duke who had so earnestly declared his innocence is here in a foreign court, hobnobbing with the people he'd been accused of aiding and abetting...

Deep inside, Merridyth felt her heart breaking as her long-held dreams shattered in the face of this overwhelming evidence. He must have been working with the Turks all along, Merri decided. After all, here he was, the Sultan's son, pampered and indulged—obviously holding a privileged position among the Beys and Nobles. He had been a traitor from the beginning, and she had been duped by a pair of golden eyes and a fine physique.

"Too bad, missy," Susan snapped, interrupting Merri's tortured thoughts. "Do you really expect me to act as though everything is normal when that man admitted who he was? Merri, we were abducted from our homes, subjected to humiliating experiences, and it was all for the benefit of a man who states he is an Eastern prince, and in the same breath, claims to be an English peer." Susan planted her fists

on her hips. "You definitely owe it to me, to tell me something."

"You're right—" Merri conceded, sighing. "You are deeply involved, and have every right to know what is going on. I will tell you what I know," she added with a grimace, "which, considering recent disturbing developments, does not seem to be as much as I had thought."

"Whatever you tell me will be more than I know now," Susan pointed out. "So start talking, and do not leave anything out." She ignored Merri's heavy sigh, and plopped down beside her. "I'm ready to listen."

"In '98, I attended a trial. It was not an outing of my usual sort, for as a rule I do not enjoy watching people suffer so; I imagine it must be painful to have one's personal business and life on display to the masses. I did not truly wish to attend, however, it was Rebecca Henderly's dearly held desire to go, and her mother would only allow her inclusion if I were a member of the party. For some reason, Lady Henderly always felt I was an uplifting influence on Rebecca—" Merri shook her head ruefully.

"At any rate, we attended the trial. It was there I first saw the Duke of Wyndmere on trial for treason. They said he spied for the Turks, selling them State secrets. Oh, Susan—" Merri jumped up to pace about the room with agitated steps—"I took one look and—"

"And what...?" Susan prompted impatiently when Merri's words abruptly stopped. "You took one look, and what?"

"I fell in love. Deeply, eternally..." she sighed. "At least, I thought so at the time." Merri spoke quietly, starkly, her

words trailing off as she followed a dark vision into the past. She stopped her frenetic pacing to stand in front of her cousin, and looked straight into Susan's eyes, her own gaze steady, revealing a vulnerable nakedness she rarely exposed. She did not attempt to avoid her cousin's searching look, but allowed her to plumb the depths of the pain that lurked behind her silvery grey pupils.

Susan lowered her eyes, the feelings she saw in Merri's unguarded gaze, disconcerting. "You were young. It was almost three years ago, Merri," she said, offering the only comfort she could. Moisture gleamed in her clear green eyes. "It is no sin to believe yourself in love."

"Ah-h, but it was not love, Susan. It was all just an illusion," she admitted firmly, convinced of her culpability. "My dreams and hopes were a fantasy, my shining knight a chimera. I believed him innocent, you see, solely because it suited me. In my naiveté, my arrogant assumption that I had to be right, I dismissed unimpeachable evidence, overlooked the studied opinions of heads wiser than mine, even ignored my own misgivings ... did everything except admit that I wanted him to be innocent—whether he was or not—because with one glance, I'd fallen into a brain-fever masquerading as love. I spent the following years measuring every male acquaintance against his standard—my standard, and every single one of them came up short."

"So you have high standards. We both do—"

Merri barked a bitter little laugh. "I hope your standards are a mite more realistic than mine, cousin, or you are apt to find yourself alone and unmarried. No man could measure up

to what I expected, for the simple fact that I had set my standard way too high."

"Why are you blaming yourself? Why are you being so hard on yourself? I suppose you are not allowed to make mistakes like the rest of us. You had no way of knowing for sure that the Duke was guilty. He could as easily been innocent, like you said—"

"Susan, please." Merridyth threw up her hands in disgust. "His own best friend testified against him. Perhaps, had I been thinking clearly, I might not have dismissed that telling fact. Regardless, the fact that he is here, in this, of all places, convinces me of his guilt."

Merri sat down heavily and put her face into her hands. Tears leaked through her splayed fingers. Beside her, Susan tentatively massaged her tense shoulders. "Please, Merri, do not do this to yourself," she begged, almost in tears, herself.

Merri scrubbed at her eyes before dragging her hands down her cheeks, obliterating all sign of her tears. When she finally spoke, her voice was flat, her tones deadened. "I haven't done this to myself, Susan. I've done it to you. And Seana. When will you realize that we were kidnapped because of the Duke? He had us brought here. Well, he had me brought here, and you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, with me."

"I know I said something like that earlier, but I find it hard to believe."

Merri nodded dispiritedly, in answer to Susan's disbelieving gasp. "Believe it because it's true," she said, staring down at her clenched hands, unable to meet the condemnation in her

younger cousin's eyes. "He told me so, himself, boasted of the fact that I had been brought here for his pleasure. If it weren't for me," she finally gathered the courage to meet the other woman's eyes, "you would be home where you belong."

Susan shook her head. "Oh, Merridyth, how many times must I say this before you'll believe? You. Are. Not. To. Blame. Seana and I were not the only ones snatched away—"

"Seana. Oh, God, Su—" Merri rocked back on the bench, horror and dismay evident in the lines of her recoiling body.

"Don't you dare try to take responsibility for what happened to Seana," Susan warned in a firm voice. "That is the outside of enough."

"But—"

"I said, no." Susan wagged her forefinger in Merri's face, daring her to continue. The dejected girl subsided, deciding it was better to keep her opinions to herself. She had no need to continue verbalizing her guilt. She sat, her attention turned inward, castigating herself. She should have known. Perhaps, if she hadn't shown herself so sympathetic towards the Duke at his trial, thing might have turned out differently...

"That's it. I am totally fed up." Susan grabbed Merridyth by the arm and began hauling her out of the curtained area of the new women's dormitory.

"Susan, stop. What are you doing?"

Susan turned to the older girl. She planted her fisted hands on her hips, her breath small explosive huffs as she fought to control her anger. "I am taking you to talk to Laihla, who just might be able to get through to you. Then I am going to assist you in dressing. You may want to sit here

moping about something you had no control over, but I recall your appointment with the Sultan. If you miss that, you surely will have something to cry over."

"Oh, my gosh ... the Sultan!" Merri wrung her hands. "I was totally insulting to the Prince. The Sultan is bound to be angry with me. I've completely ruined our chances of keeping Seana with us."

"What is wrong with you?" Susan frowned, voice filled with frustration. "I have never seen you like this. Merri!" The shorter woman snapped, grabbed her cousin by the shoulders and administered a punitive shake. "Pull yourself together. You are allowing this man to have untold power over you. The Merri I know would never stand still for that, even if she loved him ... and you keep saying that you do not—"

"I do not."

"Then prove it," Susan said, ticking points off her fingers. "Get dressed. Talk to Laihla. See the Sultan. Do what you have to do, then fall apart afterward, if you still feel the need."

Merri shook her head in wonder. "When did you become so strong and assured?" she asked.

"Well," Susan allowed, "I suppose I can be calm because it wasn't I naked in the pool, being pursued by an amorous male ... a very gorgeous amorous male, at that."

"I'd gladly change places with you."

"Somehow, I doubt that." The blond woman murmured under her breath.

"What did you say?" asked Merri, suspicious of Susan's mumbles.

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"Never mind," Susan retorted smartly, pushing a change of clothes on her flustered companion. "Just get dressed and out of here."

Chapter Thirty-seven

Jared stormed into his chambers, calling for Seuliman before the door had shut behind him. The servant came running, clearly alarmed at the note of savagery in his master's voice. The eunuch skidded to a halt as the irritated lord flung his sodden clothes about the room as he quickly undressed.

Seuliman tracked his master's progress by following the path of his wet footprints. "Master Jamal, have you met with an accident? Why are your outer clothes so wet? Did you fall into a fountain?" The harried servant followed along behind the younger man, stooping to pick up the offending articles. He bumped into the prince, who had stopped, frozen in place, the strangest look on his stunned face.

Jared had called himself Jamal since shortly after his arrival over two years ago, yet his servant's use of the name just now, had jarred him. After some thought, he realized he had reverted to thinking of himself as Jared, an English peer, Duke of the Realm. His lips curled up in amusement; just one more thing to lay at Merridyth's door.

"Never mind that, Seuliman," Jared instructed brusquely. "Just lay out some fresh things for me. And hurry. I need to see the Sultan shortly; he's expecting me before the morning *divan*, which is about ready to start.

"You have an audience with the Sultan?" Seuliman gasped, the dripping clothes falling from his slack arms.

Jared laughed at the eunuch, who'd already forgotten his orders due to the excitement over possibly attending his master in the official public chambers. It wasn't often his servant could interact with so many people coming and going, where there was so much information to gather. He figured Seuliman could hardly wait to accompany him.

"Western or Eastern wear, my Lord?"

Before answering, Jared glanced down at himself to find he was still semi-hard from just thinking about the woman he'd left in his father's harem. He dragged his thoughts away lest the memories had him pulsing and swelling to his limit.

Flicking an admonishing finger at the bobbing head of his eager member, he spoke in low, self-mocking tones. "Down boy! There'll be no relief for you any time soon." In a slightly louder voice he ordered his man to prepare the clothes he'd become accustomed to. "The Eastern robes with the silver trim, I believe, Seuliman. They'll hide a multitude of sins ... or sinful thoughts."

Seuliman's gaze went to his master's protruding thoughts and prudently turned his erupting laugh into a cough. "At once, Lord."

The prince threw himself down dejectedly onto a low, pillow-strewn couch, to wait while Seuliman gathered his court dress. Closing his eyes with a sigh, he leaned his head against the back of the couch, relaxing his tight throat muscles, and reviewed his meeting with Merridyth ... Merri—with an "i".

There had been thunderclouds in those fine grey eyes of hers, he mused, no softening, no love—just a lot of fear. It

was only natural, he reasoned. She had been through many harrowing adventures, all against her will. He had not meant to frighten her, but from the moment she'd spoken, and her husky voice had washed over him, he'd lost all control. Despite her fear and anger, he hadn't been able to keep his hands off her.

She, meanwhile, had managed, in a ridiculously short amount of time, to make him sad, angry, amused, aroused and ... confused. Sad, to see her fear and know he was the cause; angry that she couldn't seem to see to the heart of him, as he could see to hers; and—*gods*—she amused him with her candor, her dogged, head-on approach at obstacles, her refusal to back down. He laughed painfully, remembering her acidic comment: *Do me a favor and hold your breath ... for three days.*

Jared shook his head, bemused. He had been aroused since early morning. Ever since seeing her, touching her, breathing her. His body burned and throbbed with constant readiness, painful and aching. No woman had ever had such an effect on him, and he almost resented her power over him, especially as she did not seem to be as effected as he was.

Perhaps, he argued to himself, her control came of not knowing what was in store for her. After all, fear of the unknown tempered her passion. He, on the other hand, had memories of her soft flesh; soft arms, softer lips and, oh, what a plump bottom and soft bosoms. He sighed, dreaming of all he wanted to do to her lush untapped body.

She was the one for him. He knew it like he knew his own name. Also knew she had cared for him once, if only enough

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to defend his honor before her peers. He would make her care for him, come to love him by being caring and loving towards her. With such treatment, she would soon overcome her maidenly fears.

Meanwhile, Jared couldn't stand the thought of Merridyth remaining in his father's harem. He intended to request—demand if necessary—the right to move her into his empty women's quarters.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Tubal pattered about the emptying divan, shooing out the last of the stragglers. All the while, he surreptitiously darted worried looks towards his beloved Lord and Master. Selim had been distracted during the morning courts, which was, in itself, highly unusual, for the Sultan took the duty of officiating over high legal matters very seriously. Tubal wondered if the son had again said something upsetting to his father. It hadn't looked so, but Tubal had not been close enough to overhear their intense, hand waving exchange, and so could not be sure.

Tubal chuckled to himself, shaking his head. Both men, though separated by age and cultures, were so much alike he marveled over them daily. Both enjoyed the lean, powerful build of their Turkish-Ottoman blood made rich by the contribution of the blood of Circassian slave women added to the ruling gene pool over several hundred years. The two men shared sharply chiseled features enhanced by elegant, Greek-influenced noses and piercing clear gold eyes. Among the Ottomans, those warm honeyed, tiger-gold eyes were a recurring mark of the ruling family, so it was no surprise to Tubal that Jamal's eyes matched the Sultan's exactly. The servant lovingly recalled a young lad who had once given him a polished topaz stone. A memento, the lad had said earnestly, a reminder. Not that Tubal had ever needed anything to remind him of Selim, the son of his heart.

Casting a frowning sideways glance at his silent master, Tubal completed another sweep of the room shooing out the opportunistic petitioners. *I just refuse to ask. If Selim wished to keep things to himself, that is fine with me. Besides, I have other tasks with which to occupy myself.*

Selim broodingly watched as Tubal made yet another aimless circuit about the emptying room, almost tasting the man's curiosity. Tubal hated being left out of any knowledge loop and was champing at the bit to discover what his and Jamal's conversation had been about.

A sharp-edged smile lifted one corner of Selim's mouth. With hooded eyes, the Sultan gleefully regarded his servant, knowing he would not have long to wait before Tubal's patience ran out.

He anticipated garnering quite a lot of amusement from his servant's predictable antics—his eyebrows drew down into a fierce crease, twisting his handsome features into a dark scowl—a far pleasanter feeling than the ones he had felt during his talk with Jamal. That boy found the strangest things over which to concern himself.

Since ascending the throne, everyone actively courted his good will and Selim had quickly grown unaccustomed to being the center of anyone's regard. Now here was Jamal, a man worthy of respect in his own right, and one with whom Selim desperately wished to make a good impression. The task was proving to be more difficult than he had at first expected. His son was not so easily impressed.

Having gone to great lengths to supply the boy with a suitable mate, Selim expected praise and thanks. Instead of

being appropriately grateful, Jamal was throwing up barriers as fast as he, Selim, attempted to tear them down. The boy could not deny he wanted the luscious English woman as his own, yet he was still insisting she be allowed to come to him without coercion. As if a mere woman could choose in such matters.

Well, Selim determined, I may not be able to convince my wayward son of what is proper and good, but I can certainly control the responses of the woman he has chosen as his own. She will bow to my wishes, or she will have the rest of her life to regret the foolishness of her rebellion.

Tubal finished clearing the room and came to stand at Selim's side. He fidgeted, twitching at his robes of state, adjusting and readjusting their fall. He cleared his throat a few times, and shuffled his feet. "You are a cruel and fearsome master! You know how I burn to know what transpired between you and that boy of yours," he blurted out finally. "Why do you always make me *ask*?"

Selim threw back his head and laughed. At least some things never changed.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Thank you for your consent, but Raeburn and I are content to announce only our betrothal, as neither one of us wishes to marry without your presence. Arnold's exact words were: "I've waited this long for you, I can wait a little while longer. Just so all those vultures out there know you're spoken for." Speaking of betrothals ... I have heard nothing from you since my letter regarding the fate of that poor girl, Merridyth. Have you been able to find any clues that might help locate her? I realize you may already have a packet to me in route, I just could not wait longer to write you. If you find her, do not hesitate to send her home to me. Even if you do not wish to be personally involved, I would shelter and care for her, for her kindness to me when I most needed it. On a business note: Jason reports a marked decrease in the wool tally from Willow Walk Estate. Also, a very poor showing of salable produce from Glen Morag, despite the large amounts spent this last year in improvements. Since my bout of influenza over a year ago, the doctors have curtailed many of my pursuits. I find it difficult to be restricted so severely, yet I feel our estates would fare better if I were to make a circuit as you or I were wont to since the days after your father's death. At least the formal notice of betrothal will serve some purpose (besides my niggling pleasure), as Raeburn has offered to make the trips for me, and knowledge of our coming marriage will ease the tenants' minds about dealing with a stranger. Together, we will keep the home fires

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burning.—Mum

Chapter Forty

Grand Throne Room

Topkapi Palace

An hour after the *Divan* concluded Merri stood waiting at the double doors leading to the throne room, her knees weak and knocking, barely up to sustaining her weight. The silent eunuch beside her stood stoically awaiting the signal to accompany her into the presence of the Sultan. She resented being reduced to cooling her heels outside, and the heated discomfort of three layers of formal, court attire did not help her rising temper. All things not being equal, Merri had occasion to be grateful—being angry left no room for fear. As her temper rose, so did her courage. By the time she was ushered into the Sultan's august presence, she was no longer trembling.

"*Simsiyah Gül*, keep your head lowered while the Sultan speaks to you, and do not dare to speak until the Sultan commands it. I may not enter here, but will await your return." The eunuch whispered his instructions in a low, hurried voice as he gestured towards the ornate double doors opening onto the throne room.

Merri nodded in understanding. Peeking a look at the man occupying the chair upon the raised dais while keeping her head down was difficult, but she managed it. Merri's first impression of the Sultan was he looked much like the Duke. Her second was that the Sultan was more ruthless and focused than the Duke. *This man is dangerous.*

Having been schooled by Laihla, Merridyth dropped without prompting into a graceful curtsy worthy of royalty. She had made her bow to the Regent at her debut, thinking it the high point of her life, yet now, she sensed this audience would supplant every important event that had come before.

A languid finger motioned permission, and Merri rose from her curtsy to face the Sultan square on, her chin firming and rising in an unconscious mannerism that others had come to despair over, forgetting the cautioning words of the eunuch, that quickly.

"Buraya gel-me-niz-i istiyorum."

No questioning inflection at the end. A sentence, then. What had he said? Merri blinked, frozen in incomprehension.

"Buraya gel-me-niz-i istiyorum." The repeated words were harsh, as though the speaker were not accustomed to speaking more than once. Frowning, the sultan snapped, "I said I want you to come here. Come closer, girl! Do so at once!"

"I ... ex-excuse me, Excellency..." she stammered as she stumbled closer to the throne. Her words gained clarity as she let her anger flow. "I am learning your language, yet I am not so proficient that I can understand words barked at me so fast."

A sharp burst of laughter, instantly quelled, erupted from the stooped elderly man, standing slightly behind and to the side of the imposing throne. Merri's startled gaze locked with his, and she was pleased at the twinkle she detected there. Her lips turned up and her face brightened in instinctive response.

She learned later, her smile saved her. Selim, who was about to give way to his famous temper saw the smile and froze. *"At rest," he later shared, "your face is only above average, but that smile bathed your features in radiant beauty, and suddenly, I could understand my son's riveted attention."*

"In deference to your incompetent Turkish, we will conduct this entire audience in English," he conceded snidely.

"Approach Us. We would examine you."

The Sultan's accented voice rolled over her, and Merri heaved a sigh, glad she would not have to struggle with an unfamiliar language while dealing with this stressful situation. "I thank your Majesty," she said, keeping her head lowered as she moved slightly closer to the raised dais, "and beg His indulgence. I would entreat Him to have patience with me for I am unused to the presence of Royalty and might act inappropriately. I assure you, it will not be on purpose." It was a struggle to keep her words soft and meek.

Selim relaxed back into his chair and raised one languid hand. At the circular motion of a long, slim finger, she swelled with outrage, but obediently rotated in place, allowing the Sultan to view her from all angles.

"Sisman koyunlar sevmek." Selim chuckled to Tubal. "I envy Jamal for he will have both hands over-full."

Merri gasped, sucking in a shocked breath. She knew enough Turkish to understand the man was talking about her breasts. They were *not* fat. She savagely bit down on her bottom lip to keep from blurting out all the scathing remarks she was dying to release.

She felt Selim's golden gaze locked on her chest noticing her harsh breathing and the flush of anger on her cheeks. "So, you have enough words to understand my comment of your big breasts."

His unfeeling words left her speechless. He shrugged at her open-mouthed response. "You are nothing but a slave. How dare you take offense at my comments?"

Merri clenched her fists at her side and reminded herself what she was here to accomplish. She apologized. "I am a young maiden, my Lord, unused to hearing men speak of such things in my presence."

"You sought this meeting between us," the Sultan remarked coldly. "*Niçin*? Why? Could not the new Mistress of Girls or the *Kislar Agasi* satisfy your needs? Am I now to be burdened with the commands and requests of every disgruntled *odalisque*?"

Anger welled up anew at the ruler's words. Merri choked it back, gritting her teeth on the retort she wished to hurl at his face, ever mindful of Seana and Susan. "I did approach the master of the girls, Sire," she said when she had regained her calm demeanor. "It was his decision to seek your wisdom in this sad situation." There, that sounded suitably toadying, she thought.

The skeptical gleam in the potentate's eyes let her know he was not deceived. His next words disabused her of the notion, totally. "As the wisdom of the *Agasi* is not to be questioned by a lowly woman such as yourself, we have no choice but to accept his judgment."

Merri bowed her head to keep her expression hidden. The Sultan was a master game-player and she was out of her league, yet she had no option but to continue. She refused to play by his rules, though, and impulsively threw truth into the equation. Her opening sentence was stark. Frank. Hiding nothing but her desperation.

"My Lord, you know I and my two friends were brought here against our will. While I could argue your right to keep us locked up, we both know that would be a futile debate for surely there are many in the Seraglio who have lived out their lives here against their will—" She spoke quickly, hoping to get through her speech without interruption. "We have been through much, and in desperation, one of my companions—Lady Seana MacCarris—attempted to take her own life."

"We were much dismayed and infuriated that such was allowed to take place," the Sultan interjected; his words and manner cold enough to firm butter. His golden eyes glittered with shards of bright anger. Merri shivered, glad he did not now aim that cold animosity toward her.

"Yes. Well ... she, uhm ... sustained some mental damage, and is no longer capable of looking after herself. The Master of Girls informs us that custom demands she be put out of the harem. Tossed into the streets to fend for herself. My Lord, I am here to beg you not to allow this injustice."

Selim shifted back in his chair and flashed a quick, triumphant smirk in Tubal's direction. He had determined on threats to bring this woman into line, and now found he would not need them. She had delivered herself into his hands by revealing her concern for her crazed friend.

"It seems we must question the *Agasi's* wisdom, after all," he snidely remarked. "Woman," he continued, "we rule a vast kingdom. What makes you think we have either the time or the interest to waste for one lone woman? We have hundreds of women at our beck and call, even more thousands ready to grace our bed, should we be so inclined. We do not concern our self with any of them. They come at our bidding and go at our whim. What is your friend to us, that we should bestir our self on her behalf?"

"Nothing," Merri whispered dejectedly. "She is nothing to you, but much to me. Does not the Koran teach that men are blessed by being merciful? Will you not show mercy to one who cannot help herself?"

"We do not read the Koran," Selim drawled, impervious to the gasps of disbelief his statement garnered. He continued, clarifying, "We have ministers who do that for us. And as for mercy, we have found it to be a quality much unequal in its application. You see, it is always those who have nothing to offer, who demand it."

"I do not demand, I beg." Merri returned, dropping gracefully to her knees and extending her arms towards the throne, and the aloof man who sat upon it.

"For what do you beg?" Selim asked, leaning forward, "And ... do be specific."

Merri's head snapped up. She sensed a trap, but was committed. She would not risk twisting and turning, and perhaps losing all. "I beg the right to keep Lady MacCarris with me, to care for her..." She faltered, looking into the hardened features of the Eastern monarch. "To-to be her

friend," she finished dauntlessly, daring to match Selim glance for glance.

"How selfless and self-sacrificing," he sneered. "We, our self, abandoned such sentiment long ago. And so we ask: What do we gain, should we acquiesce to your ... request?"

Merridyth spread her hands in an age-old gesture of questioning. "How would I begin to offer you value for what I request?" She asked, truly puzzled over what the royal ruler might want.

"In normal circumstances, I would not hesitate to offer a substantial monetary gift as a 'thank you', but these are extraordinary times for me. I have nothing of my own." She indicated her clothes, "Even these clothes I wear are not mine. What, then, could I offer you, Sire?"

Selim rested his head against the back of his chair. His right hand combed through his silky short beard as he pretended to contemplate his answer. He watched the black-haired one, curious to see if his prolonged silence would discomfit her. To his chagrin, the woman revealed no hint of her inner turmoil, if such existed, but stood proudly at attention, never moving a muscle as she waited for him to finish pondering his role in this unfolding drama.

A sudden fit of ennui overtook him, and Selim tired of the game. He instantly acted to relieve the familiar annoyance. Irritated that so simple a thing as providing a woman for his son's enjoyment should become so complicated, the Sultan determined to bring his baiting to a close. To that end, he sat up and slid forward onto the lip of the marble throne. "Attend us." Unadulterated authority sounded in that command,

bringing Merri and the room's other occupants to attention. "You ask what we would have of you, woman. Know this: Of our self, we desire nothing from you—"

Merri sighed in relief, yet the feeling didn't last long. Dropping the affectation of the royal "we", the Sultan continued. "I have a son, who has a ... need. That need has a name: the name of a flower; *Simsiyah Gül*. Will you willingly and submissively meet his need?"

A moan of denial left her lips, a spark of defiance. She should have known it would come to this, yet she'd been unprepared. The suddenness of the request left her shaken. Her answer was automatic. "No."

"Then it is *hayir* to the walking dead woman," he decreed coldly. "No."

Merri sank to her knees, bowed her head to the floor, uncaring that her hair trailed in dust of a thousand servant's bare feet. Lost in despair, she didn't hear the Sultan leave his throne and approach. He squatted beside her, raised her chin with that languid hand that hid steely strength.

"But why say no?" he tempted, staring into her flooded eyes, his honeyed words dripping sweetness, trailing fire. "Say yes to luxury ... yes to servants to care for your helpless friend. Yes to the fulfillment my son can offer you."

Merri swayed where she knelt. Eyes tightly closed, thoughts turned inward, she searched her soul. Trembling, she knew she would say the word the Sultan wanted to hear. Recalling her warnings to Susan about being prepared to sacrifice their dignity, even their morals, if it meant keeping Seana with them, she shuddered, feeling the hypocrite.

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Everyone would assume she capitulated for Seana's sake but all the while, she alone would know it was because of her weakness for a pair of broad shoulders and golden eyes ... and for the chance to taste, once more, the glorious passion of the Duke's kiss.

Finally, daring to open her eyes and meet the stern hard gaze of the man bent over her, she nodded. Softly enough to strain the hearing of the Sultan, yet loudly enough to rock the foundations of her world, Merri betrayed her honor by one word. "Yes."

Chapter Forty-one

Grand Seraglio, Women's Quarters Ankara, Turkey

Laihla swept through the open area of the women's barracks, her bounteous hips swaying in natural rhythm to the long-legged paces she took. She walked like a queen, a privileged being far above the lowly inhabitants of these miserly quarters, the knowledge of her own private room putting the "jounce" in her steps.

It was late afternoon. A few intrepid women splashed in the cool green waters of the open pool located near the Sultan's private rooms under the bored eyes of the Black eunuchs assigned to guard-duty this shift. The rest rested on their pallets. Some languidly sipped at glasses of *raki*, a drink of fermented grapes flavored with anise that turned milky white when mixed with water or ice. Others chewed the *gelincik* balls favored by the majority of harem residents. The sweet narcotic treat gave waking dreams. Large numbers of women chose to relieve their boredom in this manner, becoming helplessly addicted to the drug, reduced, finally, to living in a world of constant shadows, divorced from reality.

Because the withholding of the drug was oftentimes used as a punishment or teaching tool, Laihla had never taken up the habit. She was not willing to give up one iota of dominion into another's hands. The minute bits and pieces of her self-controlled life were precious to her, and despite her flirting with discovery—which was not really very likely—she was

loath to risk her privileged position without promise of a seriously major return on the risk.

No such promise was forthcoming in this situation with the English girls, yet she was compelled by debt and friendship. In one fell swoop, she discharged the one and honored the other. News was buzzing along the information lines, and Merridyth's name was prominent, linked with that of the Emir Jamal's.

The English—which was what the harem population had taken to calling the three friends, lumping them all according to their nationality—were resting on their pallets. Laihla saw they had stacked their wicker chests in a row to shield the bed of the crazy one. Inwardly, she applauded this measure. The more Merri and Susan could keep their stricken friend from the notice of their neighbors, the better.

Laihla had warned them of the smoldering anger building around the issue of Seana. The Seraglio housed a superstitious lot that easily became dangerous when frightened or threatened. On one hand, the harem looked upon insanity as a special or favored condition. The victim marked or "touched" by Allah, was therefore untouchable by men. Yet, the *kirmizi kiz* had—in an attempted act of wanton self-destruction—inflicted herself with madness.

To a People willing to endure unending hardship and outright torture because of their belief in Kismet, this act was an abomination. Their belief in the futility of struggling against what has been ordained motivated their actions. At some deep level, Seana's deed was seen as an indictment against the others' complacent compliance. It struck at the

pride of the imprisoned women. They felt uneasy without knowing, why, which caused them to resent the situation all the more. Heated, hating murmurs grew louder daily. The women wanted the madness gone from among them, and there were some in that group with the power to make their voices heard.

Laihla stood over the three friends, observing their positions. Even in sleep, Merri seemed to watch out for her companions. She lay in the outer-most position, her back to the other two women, facing the common room, in an unconscious, guarding position. Behind her, Seana was sleeping the deep sleep of the *cocuk*, or the innocent. She lay on her side, legs drawn tight to her body, her hands tucked under her chin. A line of drool issued from her slack lips, dribbled across her cheek to soak into her thin pillow. Susan laid farthest from her, sprawled on her back, a thin silk ribbon connecting her wrist to Seana's as a precaution against the Red one's wandering. Her eyes were open, watchfully trained on Laihla's face.

Placing a cautioning finger to her lips, Susan warned Laihla to silence. Sitting up, she loosened the length of ribbon, slipped it off her wrist, and arose, silently beckoning Laihla to follow her. She moved out of easy listening range of her friends, grateful for the slight breeze stirred at her passage. She pulled at the damp clinging, material of her under-robe, waving it to get a cooling draft to her perspiring skin.

"*Sicak dir.*" She whispered to Laihla, who had followed close behind her. Susan was a little disgruntled that the Black woman showed no sign of suffering from the moist heat.

"Evet," Laihla agreed, "*artik yaz geldi*. Soon, we will have ... how do you say, *müthis sıcak*?"

"Terrible hot?" Susan said tentatively, not sure if her stab at translating was quite right, but the dusky beauty nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes. Much heat. Soon coming."

"Please do not say that," Susan begged, groaning. "It is so hot now, I can hardly bear it. And Seana insists on removing her clothes at the first opportunity." She shook her head, recalling her futile attempts to keep her friend appropriately dressed.

Laihla nodded in sympathy. Caring for the vacant one was an all-day chore. She knew she would not want to do it and marveled at the sort of friendship that would willingly take on such a monumental task. "*Bana ihtiyac-iniz-ol-up ol-ma-digini öğrenmege geldim*."

"Thank you for that," Susan replied, reaching out to touch Laihla's shoulder in thankful acknowledgment. "Coming to see if we need anything is the act of a true friend, especially with the anger the other women are showing toward us." She sighed. "I am not certain what will happen, but I believe whatever it is will be soon." She gave a worried glance over to where Merri lay, sleeping deeply, having finally succumbed to flat out exhaustion.

"When Merri came back from her meeting with the Sultan, she refused to say anything other than that she had taken care of everything, but needed to be alone for a while." Susan turned troubled eyes to Laihla. "I am sorely afraid of the bargain she may have been forced to make to safeguard us."

"It remains her decision, whatever it may be," Laihla warned in her stilted English. "It would not be right to minimize her accomplishment by undermining her determination."

"I know," Susan admitted unhappily. "She needs to do this. For some reason, she has become convinced that she is responsible for us being here and must somehow make amends. Regardless of how I try to convince her otherwise, she clings stubbornly to her beliefs."

"We have spoken, her and me," Laihla said. "There is much that might support her belief in this matter."

"You will not convince me that Merri is the cause for our being here." Susan said, her hands curling into fists at her side.

Laihla placed her hands over the tight balls, gently stroking them into peace. "But think ... the Emir comes to Turkey. The Emir is much in love with Merri. The Sultan commands that women be brought to ease the Emir's desire for his own kind, and voila. Merri is here." The Black woman's look was slightly sardonic. "Now, even here in the 'curtained world', we know such coincidences do not just happen."

Susan shook her head in disbelief. "You are saying the Prince had Merri kidnapped."

"I am saying no such thing. I am saying the Sultan knew of Merri, and had her brought here as a pawn in a game he is playing."

Looking thoughtful, Susan said, "Merri thinks the Prince was instrumental in having her brought here. This is what is really behind her anger and disillusionment. She will never

admit her true feeling for him as long as she believes him capable of so callously manipulating other's lives."

Laihla nodded sagely. "You have seen this, also. *Sismsiyah gül* has much love for the Emir, yet she buries it in a mountain of hate. If left to fester, this hate will eventually twist her into a shape that will destroy her, for her heart is too loving. She will grow to hate herself."

"We cannot allow that to happen." Susan exclaimed. "Yet, she will not listen to me. Every time I try to start a conversation about the Duke, she cuts me off. There is so much pain in her eyes; I cannot bear to continue pressing her." Susan's pale features tightened as she confided, "At night, I can hear her crying into the covers when she thinks me asleep. Such heartbroken sobs. I feel her agony, and I hate knowing there is nothing she will allow me to do to help ease her suffering."

"Then we must help her in spite of herself," Laihla decided.

Susan looked up hopefully. "Do you know of something?" she asked, teetering wildly between optimism and despair. "I would do anything to help her."

"But of course you would." Laihla patted Susan's arm, smiling. "Not all journeys end quicker by traveling the straight line. One of the first things we learn in the harem is how to take the circuitous route. First, let me check something..."

In her excitement, Laihla lost control of her meager English, and Susan, grown fluent over the months and intent on her words and lively gestures, moved closer to her, never noticing when the beautiful Black concubine switched to her native language. "...then *yarın gelip beni görünüz aksam!*"

Chapter Forty-two

Dearest Mum,

I have just recently returned from a hunting trip in the mountains of central Turkey to find your letter waiting for me. Having now read the contents, I can imagine how you must have worried when you did not receive a response from me. I do not know if what I have to impart will totally allay your fears for the young woman, however, I will not attempt to evade your concerns regarding the missing heiress: Yes, Merridyth is here, along with her cousin, the Lady Susan Fellowes. Also, you were right to doubt Selim's good intentions. He had her brought here for some nefarious purpose of his own, though he now claims he did not know of her significance to me until he returned to your early letters and read of her again. Do you know he keeps all your letters? The angriest I have ever seen him was when I was grousing on about you ... He pulled me up short, I must say, and I certainly deserved it. But I regress. I rejoice to inform you I have every intention of making Merridyth my bride ... as soon as I can get her to look upon me favorably. I know you will not fathom it, but she holds me in great dislike at the moment. Somehow, she has gotten the mistaken idea that I was instrumental in bringing her to these shores, and is steadfast in her refusal to hear my numerous attempts to inform her otherwise. Believe me, Mother, it is too involved to go into right now. Circumstances continue to conspire against us, and I have not yet had the opportunity to sit down with

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

her and quietly explain the past ... and my present intentions. However, I have cause to think the time is fast approaching. Wish me luck, Mum. I will need it if I am to gain as wife, the daughter-in-law you seem to have set your heart upon. Meanwhile, observe me the ever-dutiful son ... closing with the sentiments you have demanded.—Love, Wyndmere

Chapter Forty-three

Take care! If Selim has declared you the "Prince of Promise" even temporarily, you will need to watch your back and your food. The most common way to remove a rival is through poison. Trust me ... I know what I am talking about. You can have no idea how rabid some of the women of the harem can be—How dedicated to their own agendas! I have been behind the veil in the curtained world, and it is a frightening place to live. Any woman you take to yourself will also be in danger. I remember one wife to the old sultan. God, she was a fierce baggage; spouted lines and stanzas from the Koran as if she had written it, herself. She was a great one for the 'right and proper' thing. Her son should be next in line for the throne. I tell you this: If she feels his position is threatened by your existence, she will turn murderous! Do not make it necessary for me come to Turkey to claim your body—Mum

Grand Seraglio, Harem complex

Istanbul, Turkey

Three days had passed since Merri's audience with the Sultan. Three days since Susan and Laihla had met to discuss a strategy aimed at getting a willing Merridyth into Prince Jamal's bed. Laihla's plan was brash, daring, and sneaky. It was a risky one, involving drugging an unsuspecting Merri with a mild opiate that would lower her inhibitions. Under the drug's influence, she could respond to the Prince's amorous attentions with her true, inmost feelings.

Susan had not been one hundred percent in agreement with it, yet felt she had no choice but to go along with it, since she remained unable to come up with anything better. When she'd left Laihla's room, she carried a small packet of white powder with her.

Three days had passed, and each day the summons did not come was another day Susan watched Merri fret and worry over her ability to follow through on her promise. Each day weighed on Susan's uneasy conscious, weakening her resolve.

Now, on the fourth day, Susan stood half-concealed, watching the pompous Sueliman exit the harem. She decided she did not like the arrogant, pretentious eunuch and sighed, glad to see his back. Now she worried over how Merridyth would respond to the information the eunuch had delivered to the Mistress of the House: Tonight—two hours after the evening meal—his master, the Emir of Promise, would deign to receive *Simsiyah Gül* in his private quarters.

The harem bustled with frantic activity! Usually, things settled down after the evening meal, but this night, industrious servants engaged in frantic preparations surrounding a silent Merri, who stood stoically divorced from the excitement.

Her hair, brushed 'til it gleamed darkly, rippled freely down her back under a sheer veil; a proud sign of her virginity. Her face was delicately made up to enhance her dusky beauty, her hands and feet stained with henna for good luck, her pulse-points touched with an alluring scent; a gift from the Emir, who had requested she wear it on this special night.

The women of the harem oohed and aahed, thinking it all highly romantic. One envious girl, casting Merri a fulminating look said with bitter emphasis, "Untrained and unshaven! What a waste! If it were I who had been lucky enough to catch the eye of the future Sultan, I'd certainly know what to do about it—"

She was shushed by the other women who—though they harbored many of the same thoughts—were too frightened of the power that would one day be Merri's to speak out.

"*Bu is istemez olecak*. The summons was past time, and you know it." Susan repeated the truth again, determined to make Merri admit these events were inevitable. She'd had three more days than expected ... especially after her harrowing interview with the Sultan. Indeed, they'd all been expecting some such summons for the last four days, The gossip-vine was humming about how vocal the Sultan's son had been in his impatient desire for Merridyth.

"I admit I've had more time than I'd first believed possible, still, I find myself unready for this—" Merri's hand swept the air in a vague gesture indicating the industrious movements of the numerous servant girls assigned to assist her. She glanced about her, taking in the envious looks of the other women, and sighed. "If they but knew ... I would change places with any one of them at this moment!"

About ready to conclude her cousin had no intention of answering her, Susan relaxed and hugged Merridyth. "Brace up! After all, you have been in love with this man for over two long years!"

"I was in love with a dream." Merri evaded the hands of the hairdresser to pace in agitated strides, never taking note of how the little woman chased after her, clicking her teeth, and muttering over the "wrong-headedness" of certain foreigners. "I could never love some Eastern prince so puffed up with his own glory, he cannot see the perverseness of his actions!"

Susan gazed at her cousin. "Then love Jared Tyson, love the Duke of Wyndmere."

"Can't you see? I cannot bear to think of him as Jared or the Duke. Logically, I know there is no reason to expect him to behave properly, as an English Lord should even in these strange circumstances, yet I find myself disappointed that he has not. And with that disappointment has come the realization that I cannot give myself to a man I do not respect. Not even for Seana, though the memory of finding her hanging from the bathing-room ceiling is still a subject of my nightmares."

"Then what shall we do?"

"I don't know, Susan. I am of half a mind to back out of the deal I've struck with the Sultan. Every time I contemplate that course of action, terror of how the Sultan will react—I've witnessed his violent, unreasoning rage—wins out. Susan—?"

Susan searched Merri's face, a frown of concern beetling her own brow. "Yes, what is it?"

"I cannot do it!" The words came on a gasping inhalation of breath.

"It is too late to come to this conclusion now. Have you any idea what would occur?"

"I cannot go to ... him ... like this—so cold and matter-of-factly!" Merri began to shake. "It is against everything we have been taught ... everything I believe in! Susan, what am I going to do?" Her voice rose as hysteria gripped her, stripping away her usual self-control.

"Oh, Merri," Susan sighed, taking the taller girl's hands in hers, "you are having an attack of vapors." She rubbed briskly to bring warmth back to Merri's clammy skin. "It is only normal. In fact, I thought something like this might hap—"

"Vapors!" Merridyth snapped. "I am no mawkish girl to have vapors, Sue! This is more like an attack of sense." She jerked her hands away from Susan's frantic ministrations, wringing them together as she jumped up and resumed pacing.

"I cannot just cold-bloodedly give myself to a man who has absolutely no respect or regard for me," she cried, desperate to make her cousin understand. She slammed to a halt, her abrupt standstill causing three women to pile up behind her. She closed her eyes on a wave of despair. "How could I have even imagined doing such a thing?"

"Desperation leads us into many strange paths," Susan said quietly. Recapturing her cousin's hands, she firmly drew her to a seat by the pool, demanding she sit and listen. "In a moment, I am going to take you back to our cubby and fix you a soothing drink," she said, speaking of the private room the Sultan had ordered for the three women. "First, I want you to calm down, and make sure you have thought this course through! Take a deep breath. That's right. Now, let it

out slowly ... slow-w-ly. Good! And again!" Susan smiled, encouraging her cousin.

"I want you to know whatever you choose to do, I will stand behind your decision," she said, in between coaching Merridyth's breathing.

Merri nodded. "You are so good to me, Susan. I love you."

"I love you too, silly. Now don't attempt to speak, just concentrate on calming your racing heart."

"All right," Merri murmured.

Susan bent and helped the panicked girl gain her feet. "I do not want you to upset yourself. Just think about getting through this one moment, one step at a time. We'll just get you that drink..."

In their room, Susan prepared the drink, adding the powders Laihla had supplied, hoping with all her heart she was doing the right thing. Feeling like a Judas, she handed the warm drug-laced tea to her cousin.

Merri tasted the heavily sweetened contents of the dainty tea cup. She wrinkled her nose. "What is in this drink? It's bitter."

Susan's heart quailed. Did Merri detect something, suspect anything? "It is just an herbal drink I received from Laihla," she said honestly. "She gave it to me days ago. You know how nervous and agitated I've been lately?"

Merri nodded, taking another cautious sip.

"S-she promised me it was a—a ... soothing remedy."

"It tastes fine, I suppose," Merri took a bigger swallow, "though you were a little heavy-handed with the cloves."

Merri suspected nothing! Susan breathed an inward sigh, feeling horribly guilty, though she knew herself to be working in Merri's best interest. Three different sentences; three true statements—comprising the only lie she had ever told her cousin. She was frequently nervous, never more so than now, as she stood silently observing Merri down the disguised opiate. The drink was "the-hair-of-the-dog-that-bit-them" a soothing remedy used by many of the harem women. A mild opiate, it was used to relieve the common-place headaches and nausea that plagued one after indulging in the purer, more potent form of the drug. In one who did not habitually partake, it caused a mild euphoria, a pleasant sense of freedom—by Laihla's report, at least—enough to get Merri over the deeply ingrained inhibitions that were manifesting themselves in this present panic attack. For the thousandth time, Susan prayed she had done the right thing. Whether right or wrong, the deed was done. There was no going back.

Merri finished her drink and set the cup down on the low table before her. "I must remember to thank Laihla," she said gratefully. "I feel ever so much better!"

"I am glad of that." Susan wasn't sure how quickly the drug was supposed to work, but Merri did not look all that relaxed to her. Laihla had said there was enough powder for two drinks, so she'd used half the packet. She thought it too soon to judge, and even in the face of non-results, she was uncertain about the wisdom of dosing Merri twice.

"Oh, I still intend to tell that pompous Duke where to shove off," Merri continued, her spine curving fluidly into the pillows of the couch she was reclining on.

"What about the Sultan's anger, should you decry now?" Susan asked, horrified to hear Merri still clinging to her plans of refusing the Prince.

Merri looked puzzled for a moment, then brightened. "I shall simply tell him I have changed my mind. I am sure he will understand. And if he does not ... piffle on him!" Merri flipped a pert hand at the absent ruler. "He blows like a bag of wind."

"An important, powerful bag of wind," Susan cautioned, fascinated at how the drug was already loosening her straight-laced cousin's demeanor.

"A fart!" Merri chuckled. "I say, Susan, do you see? If he blows like a bag of powerful wind ... he's nothing but a big old fart!"

"Merri, such language—!" Susan had never heard her cousin use such low-bred words.

Merridyth sobered, shocked at her own words. Her hands crept up to cover her mouth, as if she were afraid of what else would emerge. A second later she giggled. "Balderalol and hogwash!" She chortled "I might as well say what I will. After all, who in the Ton is here to be shocked? You?" She trained laughing eyes on her stunned cousin.

"I ... I ... uhm...!" Susan could not get a coherent answer past her shock.

"I thought not!" Merri sang out triumphantly. Then she leaned closer to Susan, minutely inspecting her face. "Did you know your eyes are very green?" She whispered, "My brother Raymond has marbles just like that. He calls them cat's eyes!"

"M—m—marbles...?"

Something was dreadfully wrong. Bemused, Susan watched the wild contracting of her relative's eyes, terrified at her cousin's escalating behavior. Laihla had said nothing about Merridyth responding in this bizarre manner. She was supposed to drink the tea, and in five to ten minutes, be very calm and relaxed, but still rational.

Merri was anything but calm. Her face was flushed, her eyes feverish and her words tripping over each other. Frightened she might have over-medicated Merri, Susan decided she'd better get some answers from Laihla.

"Uhm ... why don't you lie down and take a little rest," she suggested, "while I go see about getting Laihla to come help us plan what you wish to say to the Prince?"

"Good idea, cuz!" Merri enthused, jumping up from the couch, whipping about the room and touching everything that caught her attention. "I haven't slept a wink for the last two days," she confided. "I've been too bothered with lust for that handsome Devil—though I still refuse to bed him in such a business-like fashion!" she finished in plaintive tone, abruptly flopping back onto the couch. "Just imagine! He has not even courted me properly. I am afraid he will just have to—" she broke off.

For one brief minute, she turned terribly sober. "Susan, I feel ... strange!" she blurted out, before bursting into tumultuous, wailing sobs. "What shall I—I do? I know he doesn't love me!" she cried, her wild, inconsolable tears streaming down, sudden and fierce as monsoon rains. "How can I go to him ... and be with ... him ... when I love ... him

so?" Merri reached up to grab Susan's clothes, shaking her as she asked, "What shall I do?"

"Oh, my God!" Susan called for one of the general odalisques to come sit with her sobbing cousin while she raced to find Laihla. "Just lay back, Merri," she urged, "I'll be right back with help..."

At the same time Susan was rushing to Lailha's small apartment, the Mistress of the Girls was receiving a hushed report on the scandalous goings-on of the dark-haired English woman. Mistress Liilah had served as the former mistress' underling for twenty years. Now, thanks to the mismanagement of her predecessor, she occupied the position of power she had never dreamed of achieving. She was determined to let nothing threaten her new standing. So when the hysterical attendants ran to her in a panic, shrieking about how the English girl was balking at the last minute, refusing to go to the Prince, she knew she had to do something. Fast.

Obviously, the girl was suffering an attack of pre-sex jitters. Well, what else could one expect of an untrained virgin? Liilha tsked impatiently. This was what came of not being firm in the matter of the lessons all *odaliques* were required to take! What was needed in this situation was some nurturing, and a calming tonic. She whipped out instructions, and the women rushed to do her bidding. She smiled grimly, liking the way they responded to her every order. She intended to revel in those feelings for a long time...

A growing wave of sound grated in Merri's ears, and she brought her head up to stare blearily at the wavering figure

standing over her. She groaned at the familiar pain she was experiencing. She hated the aftermath of tears; her eyes burned and itched, and her head felt swollen and stuffed, like a ten ton olive. "Wha—? Get that light out of my eyes!" she begged, squinting, flinging her arms up to shield her face.

The Mistress stood glowering down at her. "Less than an hour before you are due at the Prince's apartments, and you are far from ready! Sit up, *Simisyah Gül*," she ordered briskly. "We must finish your preparations. The Prince will be expecting your arrival soon."

"Not going to the Prince," Merri replied groggily. "Don' like him ... don' want him..."

The Mistress stood aghast. "Not want the Prince? Girl, you must be out of your mind!" Her hands came up to caress her throat. "If the Sultan hears how his beloved son is being insulted, heads will roll—ours being the first to fall!"

The Mistress gestured to the women accompanying her. "This will not do! If one word of this conversation leaves this place, I will know who spoke it, and well before the Sultan can move against me, I will have my revenge!"

Her dire threats fell on fertile ground. All the women under her firm control believed her capable of exacting an imaginative vengeance.

When she indicated she was ready to deal with the wayward girl, one of the servers timidly brought forth the tray loaded with a hot pot of tea, a cup, and a bowl of cinnamon sugar. Pouring the tea herself, Liilha surreptitiously mixed in the powdery contents of a small brown envelope drawn from within her robes. The white dust dissolved quickly. Four

heaping spoons of sugar later, she handed the cup over, with the strict admonishment to drink it all up. Confused and disoriented, Merri did so.

The Mistress of the House stayed long enough to see the servants finish their work on the rebellious woman. She had departed only a few minutes before Laihla and a distraught Susan returned.

They found Merri lying on the couch, humming to herself. The attendants had been busy, however, and she was now dressed in sheer lilac pantaloons with a matching bolero jacket. The matching set was accented with embroidery stitched in gold thread and revealed her shy belly button, buried in the soft pale skin of her midriff. The flimsy top barely contained her abundant breasts.

Unaware of the Mistress' visit, Susan shooed the lingering maids out of the room and bent to examine her cousin, deeply concerned about her. "She does not appear to be as agitated as she was before I came for you," she informed Laihla, finally finished with her close scrutiny.

"See how she now lies calm and restful." Laihla pointed out. "Did I not tell you the drug requires some time to fully enter the body?"

"Yes, it is as you said it would be." Susan sighed in relief. "I am sorry to be such a timid mouse, but I have never done something like this before. I find myself in agreement with your other suggestion, also," she said slowly. "I will give Merri the remainder of the powder you supplied. It would be horrible if the drug wore off before she and the Prince managed to ... uhm ... come together—"

"I see how you became confused. I told you I had obtained enough for two drinks, and you should return for the second package, should the first dose prove ineffective."

"You must remember I am not fluent in Turkish yet. Neither are you very good at English," Susan retorted, barely holding one to her frazzled temper. "It should not surprise either of us when we run into problems trying to communicate." Susan looked around for a pitcher of water. "I wish I had kept the teapot. There is nothing to heat water in."

"It will not matter." Laihla took the glass Susan held. "She is deep enough under that she will not notice what this tastes like, and it will dissolve in tepid water just as well."

She glanced at Merri, judging her susceptibility to the drug infiltrating her body. "She must be naturally resistive," Laihla decided, producing the second package. "This drug is usually effective immediately. Give her this whole one, instead of the other half package. It should keep her relaxed and sedated until after her rendezvous with the Emir."

Susan took the innocent looking packet, tore the flap off, and held the open envelope poised over the glass of water. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"If she was acting as you described—?" Laihla spread her hands in a what-have-you gesture. "Dare you take the risk that she might emerge too soon and insult the Prince or the Sultan with her words or actions? And think hard before you answer," Laihla cautioned, "for any insult to Selim is bound to be fatal."

Susan stared down at the small packet for a long moment. With a heavy sigh, she poured the entire contents into the

water. With a sweep of the spoon, the innocuous-looking powders swirled into the waiting liquid, turning the clear water cloudy before the largest particles reached the bottom of the glass.

Merridyth attempted to refuse the drink. "I'm not thirsty," she protested, turning her face away, and pushing the cup back at Susan. "I already had tea."

"Please, Merri," Susan urged gently, flashing an urgent look at Laihla over her cousin's head, "drink this and we will leave you alone."

"Promise?" Merri asked querulously.

"Yes, dear heart," Susan assured her.

"Oh, all right, then! Give it here," Merri demanded peevishly, then haphazardly tossed the lukewarm liquid down her throat. "Ughh! That was really nasty, Sue!"

"I know it is," Susan commiserated. "Drink it all up anyway."

"Yuck! Here, I'm done." A yawn cracking her jaw, Merri subsided back onto the couch. "Lands sake, I am sleepy. Haven't been able to sleep much lately, you know."

"She'll not be sleeping much tonight, either, the lucky girl!" Laihla said in a low aside to Susan, sounding envious of Merridyth's approaching tryst with the handsome Lord. "From the gossip I have heard of the Emir, he is reported to be quite ... potent between the sheets!"

Grand Seraglio, later that evening...

Jared Michael Randolph Jamal Tyson—spy extraordinaire, eighth Duke of Wyndmere, Prince of a Turkish Sultanate—no longer knew, with any clarity, who he was. Pacing the

polished marble floors of his spacious apartments, he awaited the arrival of Merridyth, worrying the internal itch like a dog worrying a bone; coming back to it over and over, wearing it down inch by incremental inch.

Stripped of his pride and position, who was he? Where did he to fit in? What was expected of him? More importantly, what did he expect of himself? It seemed everyone held the answers to his questions. Everyone except him.

To the Sultan, knew he was a pawn first, then a son—someone to relieve the boredom of ultimate power; a new plaything he thought could be made to dance and prance at his will. To the other Turkish Royals and court hangers-on, he was a curiosity and a wonder—someone who continually went head-to-head with a demi-god to emerge unscathed time after time.

To the three desperate English women who sought their freedom and a way to regain their interrupted lives, he was doubtless, a disappointment. The three women resided in the harem of the Sultan, by Turkish law, his property. As earnestly as he wished to help them, he was trapped by the same circumstances as they. Looking to him as their savior was a futile exercise on their parts, for getting them all out of the harem was impossible.

Lady Seana was, regrettably, not a problem. To the Turks, she was as one dead. They would no sooner harm her than spit upon their prophet.

Lady Susan was another matter, though. He feared for her, having several times caught a certain look in his father's eyes when they rested on that young lady. Selim yearned for

an English rose, perhaps as a replacement of the one he'd lost so many years ago and Susan was blessed, or cursed as the case may be, to have the coloring reminiscent of traditional English beauty.

Jared closed his eyes and breathed deeply, directing a silent apology towards Susan for, unless he were to voice an interest in her there could be saving her from the Sultan's lust—and he dared not do so, because Jared had also seen his father's face light up whenever he so much as spoke Merrydith's name.

Something primitive and atavistic raged in him at the thought of another man—especially his father—coveting the woman he considered his. A cold, tight pain flared within Jared's breast. Selim had best content himself with Susan, for he would never be allowed to have the true object of his wicked desires, Jared thought savagely. *I would kill him first before I let him touch her!*

Merridyth owned his soul and Jared wanted no other. His feelings for Merri-with-an-"i" had grown beyond the pale concepts of right and wrong. She was his alone, soon to be his mate in every sense of the word. When it came to Merridyth, he was not an English Duke or an Eastern Prince, but a man, one deeply in love, were he to acknowledge the truth.

For Susan, he could do nothing ... but what wouldn't he do for Merridyth? Jared didn't know his limits when it came to that. What did he expect of himself? And how much of his ideals would he betray to keep her...?

Jared's pacing stopped at the open window facing the courtyard of the *Valide Sultana*. Selim III's mother—his grandmother—was long dead so the apartments allocated the mother of the reigning Sultan stood empty. His apartments, reached only by traveling the "Golden way"—the corridor Merridyth would use to come to him this night—faced the same courtyard, from the opposite direction. Resting his arms on the carved wooden sill, he leaned out at the window, eyes turned inward as he examined his soul...

During his thirty-two—almost thirty-three relatively short span of years—Jared had been many things: A son, a duke, a spy, a prince, and a lover. Randolph Tyson, seventh Duke of Wyndmere had been his father in every sense of the word. Though his had not been the genetic material from which Jared had sprung, he had supplied all else.

When he was twenty-seven years old, the man he had loved and admired above all else had succumbed to an unexpected heart-seizure, leaving Jared his title as the eighth in a line of illustrious Dukes, his wealth—along with its encumbering responsibilities ... and a gaping, hurting, father-shaped hole that could never be filled.

For the hundredth time, Jared wished he had been present at his father's side before death claimed him. There were so many things he'd never had a chance to say to Randolph, so many answers that only his father could have given him. Jared missed him even more, now he knew the true depth of his father's love for a son not of his own body.

As a spy for his country, Jared had been one of the best, ferreting out the closely-held secrets of many governments.

Known to his opponents only as the Zephyr, he had been as elusive as a capricious breeze; his influence felt everywhere, his presence impossible to detect. As an added tweak of the nose to his enemies, he had taken to leaving an eagle's feather as his calling card. In all his years of service, never had he come close to being caught, something Pitt and the others in the War Offices should have taken into consideration, even if those blind idiot judges of the House of Royals could not!

English society expected its scions and favored sons to "sow their wild oats" and during his youth he'd plowed his share of fields. Women were drawn to his looks, his money, and his prestige, and he'd been young and wild, indulging his sexual urges frequently and indiscriminately. In retrospect, he'd had no unfortunate consequences from his self-indulgence, though he had come close once...

A middle-aged Cyprian had attempted to blackmail a young, inexperienced Marquis as insurance for her later years, when her already fading looks would be completely gone by claiming he'd sired a child on her. Luckily, Jared had gone to his father, and the Duke, no slouch in such matters, had quickly scragged that scheme. Setting up an elaborate counter scheme, he'd easily proven the woman had previously duped other lords with the same story. In truth, she'd bought a babe from a gin-sotted prostitute and passed it off as hers and the lord's. The woman had quickly retracted her claim when threatened with prison. She'd accepted a ticket to Australia, where any woman—faded looks or not—was desperately welcome.

The long-past incident had taught Jared a much-needed lesson. He was glad now, that no woman could say, with truth, that he had fathered a child upon her. He had always known his duty to family; known he would eventually have to marry and set up his nursery, yet, while he'd continued to enjoy the charms and arms of many women, his heart had never been engaged. He had begun to despair of ever finding a woman he could love, when, ironically, in the midst of betrayal and tragedy, across a crowded courtroom, his eyes had lit upon Merridyth—and his world had come to a screeching halt!

"Master!"

Jared jerked about, startled out of his private thoughts. Seuliman stood in the doorway. The servant appeared agitated about something. "Yes, what is it?"

"The *hanim* has arrived!"

Jared's heart leaped in his chest, took up a pounding, beating pulse that echoed at his temple and in his groin. "Is everything prepared? Seuliman, tell me everything is in order!"

"All is as my Master has ordained," the servant replied, ticking points off his fingers. "The tray of cheeses and sweets; the scented candles in the bed-chamber; the flowers..."

Jared's body smoldered with gathering heat. "Excellent!"

He shook inside, excitement and anticipation setting him on edge. *There's no need to feel like an untried youngster*, he chided himself. *Indeed, it is my Merri—being a virgin—who is the one totally lacking experience.* When he thought of what she must be feeling at this moment, awaiting his arrival in the

outer chamber, his passion cooled in sympathy, and he was able to reign in his rising excitement.

She will be terrified, he reasoned, but I will teach her there is nothing to fear from a man and woman's coming together. No matter how long I have to keep my passions in check, he promised himself, I will handle her gently, initiate her slowly.

"Let us not keep the *hanim* waiting, Seuliman!" he declared, then added quietly, pitching his voice low so as not to be heard from the other room, "Instead of serving us this evening, I want you to retire to the Eunuch's dorm tonight. The *hanim* will be under enough stress without the added discomfort of an unnecessary witness. I will take care of serving the refreshments, as I want her to be as comfortable as possible—" He broke off, shaking his head. "I know it is not what you are used to, and if it is an inconvenience to you, I am sorry for it." His smile was rueful. "I must confess even I find it difficult to perform with an audience ... and I am no virgin."

"Master has no need to explain himself to this lowly slave," Seuliman replied with an obsequious bow, "but ... is the Master certain he will not need my services? Perhaps to hold the woman's legs open for you, should she prove unwilling or to assist in tying her to your couch?"

Ice water dribbled down Jared's back, horrified disgust stiffening his spine. He could feel his facial features hardening into a chiseled sternness seen only by his Country's unfortunate enemies. "If you ever," he growled in warning, teeth clenched in effort as he teetered on the edge of control "...ever repeat such obscenities in my hearing, I will rip your

tongue out!" His voice shook with, his mind reeled with the grim realization that Merri and Susan, and the other woman whose name he could not recall, were all subject to the callous treatment Seuliman had so carelessly verbalized, treating these things as common occurrences. As though, Jared thought, any one might order a servant to hold down a fighting, frightened, unwilling woman while he blithely raped her, stripping away her dignity, her self-respect ... her very humanity. Making her nothing more than a warm hole to wet his cock in!

Shaking and begging for his life, Seuliman threw himself to the floor, covering his head with trembling arms. "Mercy, my Lord, mercy—!" he cried, squirming about, trying to present a moving target, yet not quite daring to evade his angry master's wrath.

Jared sighed, his anger draining from him as he watched the pitiful actions of the slave. He was left with an aching bitterness, an acrid taste in the back of his mouth. How could he be angry with the poor sod before him, who had been trained in the practices of the Seraglio all his life? Moreover, could he hold Seuliman to blame, when he was just as guilty, if only by omission...?

He had lived in Turkey over two years, all the while turning a blind eye to the immoral, inhuman practices of the Topkopi palace's grand seraglio, soothing his conscious with the excuse that he was powerless to change things.

Jared groaned. His silence had made him an accomplice—by unspoken consent—to all the crimes perpetrated in this place, but no more! He could not continue to sanction those

behaviors by continuing to live here, not and be able to live with himself. Whatever it took, he resolved to get himself and Merri out of Turkey and if possible, her relative and friend, also. He glanced down at Seuliman, who had never ceased to make his tearful apologies for errors he didn't even realize he had made.

"Oh, get up!" Jared commanded harshly. His features twisted with sharp-edged sarcasm. "I find it offensive that you still cringe about me ... as if I have ever struck you in all the two-plus years we have been together."

Seuliman got up, hanging his head shamefully. "I humbly beg your indulgence for that, *effendi*," he whispered, voice still quivering from his recent panic. "I know in my heart you will not harm me—at least, I hope it—but my head has been hit too many times to forget the twenty-plus years I have lived and served here before you came."

Jared's hand came down softly on Seuliman's shoulder, conveying forgiveness and sympathetic understanding. "I am sorry, also. I should have remembered that, myself," he admitted ruefully. "I was just ... too sickened ... by your comments to recall what palace-life can be like—" He paused, taking a steadying breath, raking his hands through his night-dark hair, ignoring the errant curl that bounced down onto his brow. "Look, Lady Merridyth must be on pins and needles by now. While I go meet her, you make sure the tea is ready, and then leave. I believe we shall be fine, tonight."

"Yes, *effendi*, as you wish."

"Oh! And when you come back in the morning, do not enter the sleeping-room if the curtains are still drawn!"

Jared was a "morning" man, frequently awakening with his manhood stiff and aching. Usually, he took the situation in hand and dealt with it swiftly. Tomorrow's dawn would find Merri with him, and he anticipated a more pleasurable interlude than usual. He wouldn't have Merri put to the blush by having an early morning session of heated lovemaking interrupted by an over-zealous servant.

A knowing smile curled the corners of Seuliman's lips.
"Definitely not, my *Emir*!"

An answering smile curved Jared's own firm lips as he preceded his servant into the outer salon. He went no further than the arched doorway where his steps slowed, then stopped. *My god, she is magnificent!*

His eyes burned with his efforts to hold back tears as his hungry gaze roved over the woman standing straight and proud between two burly eunuchs. She was beautiful, her unusual height no deterrent—in his eyes at least—to her graceful, womanly appearance. She was wearing some sort of see-through, pale purple and silver outfit designed to veil her womanly charms. To Jared, it seemed the barely-there clothes emphasized what they sought to conceal so well he fought the temptation to snatch her away from even the lurid gazes of the servants! Her full breasts played hide-and-seek with that cunning, bolero jacket, and he felt his temperature rise remembering the heft of their buoyant weight in his hands; the sensuous give of the soft tissue pressing solidly against his chest.

Jared walked up to Merridyth, blindly gesturing the eunuchs away, eyes locked on the large, smoky pupils of the

woman who had captured both his body and his heart.

"Merri—with an 'i'—" he said softly, his words pulsing with happiness, his gruff voice breaking on her name. "I am glad you are here. At last."

Merridyth gazed back at him in silence, her dove gray eyes bright and glittering. Her chest heaved rhythmically with agitated breaths, her cheeks warmly flushed. There was a fine sheen of moisture on her forehead, her skin was pale, and her lips plump and red where she had chewed them in nervousness. She gave the Prince a jerky nod, unsure of what to say.

"Would you like some tea?" Jared offered solicitously, conscious of his duties as host and suddenly not at all sure of where or how to begin this seduction, though they both knew why they were here ... and what this tryst was leading to. He could almost taste her nervousness, and he wondered what he could do or say to put her at her ease.

The laughter she loosed in response to his innocent question held a slightly hysterical note. "I have been drowned in tea this evening," she said starkly. "Tea is the last thing I want."

"A small pastry, then? Or can I interest you in—?" The discreet rustle of his eunuch's robes caused Jared to break off impatiently. "Yes, Seuliman, what is it?"

"All is in readiness, just as you have commanded, my Prince." The servant bowed low.

"Thank you!" Jared nodded curtly, acknowledging the servant's announcement. He made no attempt to hide his impatience. "You may retire, now."

Merridyth watched them both with wide, unfocused eyes. She thought she recognized the servant as the one who had earlier delivered her summons to the Mistress of Girls. Yes, it was he.

"Susan hates you, eunuch," she blurted out abruptly, one outstretched finger pointing towards the retreating slave.

"Me, my Lady?" Seuliman turned, his face showing his dismay. "B-but why?" he stammered out, sure he had never crossed this Susan's path. How could he have offended her?

"You are arrogant and uppity," Merri sang out, gleefully ticking points off her slim fingers. "You slide when you walk and you hold your lips like this—" she pursed her own full lips into a tight rosebud—"and you gossip like a woman!" she concluded, proud to have faithfully repeated all of Susan's stated reasons for her dislike of the "hairless" non-man.

"Merridyth?" Jared was surprised at her callousness. He had not thought her a woman capable of taunting a hapless servant. She had been so compassionate at his trial...! Her behavior towards him, her tender treatment of his mother had been the only bright spot during that society circus ... His prior experience with her had led him to believe her a gentle, caring person who would rather cut off a limb before causing someone intentional hurt, yet he had no way of reconciling her present actions to that assessment. "That was uncalled for."

She ignored Jared's mild reprimand to inform him of her other friend's opinion concerning his own sexual prowess. "Laihla thinks you are ... potent in the bed-sheets ... or was

that impotent?" she shrugged. "At any rate, she wishes it were she sharing this night with you instead of me."

Jared opened his mouth to make a sharp retort, but closed it, nonplused. Her conversation and actions were totally unlike those he had observed in the past, and he became suspicious as he bent an examining gaze on her. He was not so poor a judge of character that he could have been so mistaken in Merridyth. Either she had fooled him at the trial and later in the pool, or there was something terribly wrong now...

The flush on her cheeks, her erratic breathing, her glittering eyes should have tipped him off before, would have done so had he not been so busy salivating over the contrary woman. She was drugged!

"How many cups of 'tea' have you had?" he asked, grabbing her arms, hauling her up close to him. He was sick-at-heart knowing she had needed to cloud her mind before being able to get near him. "How much of the drug was necessary to stomach being with me?"

"Drug? What are you talking about?" Merri snapped, thoroughly confused, her right hand prying at his fingers' tight hold.

"I am talking about the opium you have ingested to dull your senses," Jared answered, giving her a shake, his anger tightening his lips and narrowing his eyes. "And stop that damned useless twisting," he snarled "since you have no hope of breaking my hold, as you should recall from our encounter in the pool room." He wanted to prick her, hurt her as her actions had hurt him.

"You must be insane!" Merridyth gasped, throwing even more effort into getting away from the maddened Prince.

"How can you deny using some drug when your pupils are dilated and your behavior bizarre? Look at you...!" Jared accused eyes hard and flinty. "You can hardly stand on your own two feet. I see why they sent two eunuchs to accompany you—"

Anger such as she had never known suffused Merridyth, and she froze, abandoning her fruitless attempts at gaining freedom. Her mouth tightening, chin lifting in determination, she lowered her head and sunk her teeth into the muscular hand squeezing her right arm.

Jared howled with surprise, as well as pain, and reflexively loosed his hold on her. She swung her free hand, fetching him a ringing blow to the side of his head, and immediately let out a pained yelp of her own.

"Do not ever accuse me of so vile an act again!" she warned, shaking her aching hand, "For if you do, you can look for more of the same!" Righteous anger and triumph rode her face for a split second, turning her eyes incandescent. Then nausea squirmed across her features.

"You do not look well," Jared noted, ruefully rubbing his sore jaw. His lady could certainly pack a whollop! "Obviously, violence does not sit well with you." His voice was smug in the extreme.

"I feel sick," Merri moaned. "Your foul accusations have made me ill!"

Jared stepped nearer to her, his anger forgotten in his worry over her health. He moved into firing range just as

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

Merridyth lost her battle to control her upset stomach and vomited all over his feet.

Chapter Forty-three

I received a letter last month, and was shocked to discover it was from Mistress Janelle Tyson-Henke, the cousin from the Americas who had contacted your father just before his death. I know you have always worried about not being able to find her afterwards. I, too, have wondered what might have happened to that poor, hapless lady. Her letter says she has been in service to a country gentleman's family, as governess to his two children for three years—she makes no mention of the two years after she first contacted us, and the thought of what she might have had to endure makes me shudder! She writes she is just now getting in contact because she wished us to know she was well, and harbored no ill-will at our reluctance to acknowledge her as kin. You can imagine how badly that made me feel—

We both know Randolph had every intention of coming to her aid, and had made the appointment to meet with her, when he suffered that unexpected heart-seizure. Doubtless, she never knew why he had not shown up. I quickly sent a reply, inviting her to visit with us, so I could explain in more detail what had really occurred five years ago, and, if she were able to forgive our seeming neglect, to tender her an offer of a home with us. Her return letter refused the invitation. Jason showed marvelous insight when he suggested she might not have the wherewithal to undertake such a journey—she is located near the coast, a full six day's travel at least—he volunteered to travel to her location,

taking our belated explanations, and the money Randolph had intended to settle upon her. It was his thought she might be more inclined to trust our good intentions if she were not so monetarily dependent upon us. He left last week, and I have heard nothing as of yet. I will inform you of what transpires when he returns—Mum

Grand Seraglio, Sultan's quarters

The morning after the night before...

Susan checked on Seana, who was sitting in the corner of the small room, silently rocking back and forth, her eyes glazed and empty. Her slim fingers picked restlessly at a loose thread in her blouse, returning again and again to the small diversion. Her hair was combed and she was clean ... for the moment. She had been fed early, so Susan could devote the rest of the morning to Merri. So far, Seana had been good. In fact, Susan mused, it was almost unbelievable that she'd not had to chase her down or hunt her up these last few hours. She felt guilty at ignoring the confused woman, who had come to look to her as her main care-giver, yet she needed to devote the majority of her care to Merridyth. Her soul would writhe in tormented shame for the rest of her days if her cousin did not recover.

Though she had just left her side minutes ago, Susan went to check Merri's condition once more, her ever hopeful heart convinced she would see some improvement ... this time. She paused on her way, passing her hand across Seana's hair in an unthinking caress. In her anxiousness to get back to Merri, her preoccupied mind never registered the response of a slight, tentative touch against her fingers.

There was no change. Merridyth lay in the grip of a death-like sleep, eyes closed, oblivious to her surroundings. Forcing back an upsurge of tears—there had been enough of those to last a lifetime—Susan bent over to plump the pillow behind her cousin's head, her mind wandering back to the terrible events of the evening before when the Prince had caused a furor by broaching the sanctity of the women's harem to return an unconscious Merridyth back to the harem. Voice fraught with fright and rage brought on by his inability to help or shield his woman, he'd bellowed for a physician, demanding one see to Merridyth at once.

Overdosed. Unexpected reaction. Coma!

Reeling under the shock of the doctor's diagnosis, Susan finally understood the depths of despair that had driven Seana to her near-fatal act. Her heart had stumbled within her, only to resume at an accelerated pace in her chest, knocking forcefully against her ribs. She had done this! In her arrogance, she had decided she knew what was best for Merri, and it had led to this—her closest relative and friend lying in a deadly swoon, hanging to life with an ever-weakening will.

If Seana, and now Merri, had not needed her so desperately, Susan would have taken her own life that night. As it was, it had fallen to her to care for her cousin, who required around the clock monitoring. Seana was in no condition to help, and Laihla had collapsed into hysteria, frightened by the very real possibility that the Emir would seek to punish her for her collusion in Merri's break down.

She also feared Susan would blame her for suggesting the drug in the first place.

Susan shook her head at Laihla's fears, absent-mindedly smoothing the bedclothes, heedless of the steady tears that came against her will. As if she had the right to attach blame to anyone when she was foul with it!

According to the doctor, the gravest danger was the possibility that Merri's respirations would drop to a dangerously low number, which would necessitate more aggressive treatment. Should that occur, he had informed Susan strictly, he was to be notified at once. Other than keep a diligent watch, there was nothing she could do for her injured companion.

After the doctor had been and gone, the Emir had conducted a fearsome inquiry into just how Merri had come to be in possession of such drugs. Susan and Laihla, tearfully confessing their part in Merri's condition, had felt no lessening of guilt upon hearing the Mistress' of the Girls added admission of culpability.

Disgusted, the Prince had been scathing in his denouncements. His burning golden gaze, his incredible aura of inimical threat reminded more than one trembling woman of his lordly father, the Sultan. The three women had shuddered in terror while the Prince told them exactly what each could expect if Merridyth did not recover. They had breathed a collective sigh of relief when he had finally departed to speak with the Sultan, leaving behind his demands for hourly reports—and eunuchs stationed at the

door of Merri's chambers, whose sole duties were to run messages between Susan and himself.

A noise brought Susan out of her reverie, and she glanced up, surprised to see four towering eunuchs, dressed in the striped purple and red trousers that denoted their positions as personal guards to the Sultan, standing in her doorway. They wore nothing else, except a grim expression, and Susan felt a trickle of dread slide down her back. "What is it? What do you want here?" she asked, moving to block Merri's bed. Had the Sultan sent these eunuchs to kill her helpless cousin?

No answer was forthcoming. The four giants split formation, two moving towards Susan, the other two intent upon the corner where Seana still sat, rocking gently and crooning non-intelligible sounds to herself. Susan was grasped firmly, hauled up and away without a single syllable in explanation.

She fought, but to no avail, and was obliged to watch helplessly as the other two guards latched onto an unsuspecting Seana, who emitted a surprised squeak, eyes wide with terror, then slumped over in an unresponsive puddle of clothes and flesh. As she was carted ignominiously from the room, Susan frantically swept the common chambers, searching for a sympathetic face in the crowd of women gathered along the walls, far out of the path of the imperial guards. Just before she was jerked out the double doors, she spotted Laihla's tear-stained face in the rear of the crowd, caught the word Laihla was mouthing over and over: *Submit!*

Submit to what? Susan wondered wildly, continuing to buck in the eunuch's grasps.

Selim was like an injured lion, stalking the ornate, overly decorated staterooms of his suite, snarling and snapping at any hapless person unlucky enough to be in his presence. Upon learning of the events that had occurred in his son's apartments—and before—the Sultan had fallen into one of his deadly rages.

Though Selim was not strict in keeping all of his own bargains, he insisted that others keep theirs with him. Learning that Merridyth had planned on backing out, that she'd had to be drugged and forced to carry out her part of their deal, and furthermore, that she had insulted both his son and himself, infuriated him. Only the fact of her accidental over-dose, and her lapse into an unconscious state—from which the court physician had not yet been able to rouse her—had stopped him from ordering Merridyth's immediate beheading. His final revenge upon her would have to wait, but he still burned within at the thought of her duplicity.

She would regret her deceit, he promised himself. He had already made plans to remove the other girl—the crazy one. He had promised *Simsiyah Gül* the *kirmizi kız* would go should their agreement be reneged upon, and go she would!

He had also sent for the cousin. Though he had always planned on bringing her to his bed, he would gain added pleasure knowing the dark cousin assumed Susan's call to his couch was part of her punishment. Selim smiled. Agonizing

over her two friend's situations was to be only the beginning of her payments—

Of the worried servants assigned to the royal person, Tubal, alone, felt relatively safe, though even he recognized the dangers of allowing the Sultan's rage to continue. Soon, his Ottoman temperament would escalate, driving him to action—something that needed to be avoided at all costs—for when driven by unreasoning anger, the Sultan was capable of any atrocity.

Tubal searched his mind for some way to draw his master's thoughts away from the debacle of the night past, but as it turned out, he saw Selim had supplied his own distraction. Two eunuchs were now entering the room, hauling a frightened, struggling Susan between them. They came to a halt before Selim, who was reclining on his day-bed, and threw the woman to her knees, one of them holding her down with one strong, muscular hand. A buzzing noise filled the chamber as the servants engaged in whispered conversations of wild conjecture.

A sharp hand-clap thundered over her head, causing a sudden silence to fall over the room, and Susan reared up as far as she could under the restraining palm, twisting her neck to gain a glimpse of the one responsible for her being brought from her cousin's bedside. Try as she might, she could only see the sharp angle of a swarthy, clean-shaven chin, part of a slim shoulder covered with expensive, heavily embroidered cloth that looked like a brocade, and the outline of long legs, their exact shape hidden by the drape of wide-legged baggy trousers fashioned out of a buttery-colored linen material.

His feet, high-arched, lean and definitely masculine, were bare. The toes were long and square with a light sprinkling of fine black hairs dusting their backs. They fascinated her. Susan had never seen a man's naked feet before, and she stared at the ones in front of her with a blank, uncomprehending gaze. In all her childhood years, she could not recall seeing her father without his shirt and points. He had never exposed his chest or arms, let alone his lower extremities. Even while living in the wilds of the American Colonies, her parents had maintained a genteel modesty that had protected and shielded their small daughter. Now this one glimpse of masculine toes brought home to her the alienness of her position—those ignominiously bare toes told Susan how far away from home she was, and how far from any hope of safety....

"Get up!" The voice crackled with power and authority, and drew Susan's wandering attention like a gun-shot.

Susan scrambled to stand. Fear made her legs weak, tangled her feet in her long, voluminous robes. With a startled cry, she caught at the arm of one of the towering eunuchs beside her, trying to abort her fall. To her dismay, he jerked away from her, a look of pure terror crossing his face. She pin wheeled frantically making a futile attempt to regain her balance. Failing, she clumsily sank back to the ground, eyes closing in deep embarrassment, cringing at the soft sounds of sadistic laughter.

Her second attempt was more successful, and she gained her feet to stand resolutely upright, her light green eyes glittering with suppressed emotions as she boldly met the

hooded gaze of the man seated in nonchalant splendor before her. She ignored the audible gasps of the servers and eunuchs at her audacity, taking this opportunity to examine the one responsible for all her present troubles.

"Do you know who I am?" The man questioned, appearing mildly amused at her daring scrutiny.

She was fairly certain of his identity, having recently seen it faithfully reproduced in the visage of his son. While both the Sultan and the Duke had eyes of the same burnished, tawny gold, the Duke's facial features were more civilized, Susan thought, harking back to her instinctual feminine reaction to Wyndemere. Yet, the man before her was also impressive in facial feature and bearing.

Despite her lack of knowledge in these matters, Susan couldn't help recognizing the sheer maleness of the specimen seated so regally, examining her with a disturbing thoroughness. *This man radiates masculinity!*

"You are the Sultan, I presume." Susan gulped, gave a nervous toss of her head, unused to such boldness. Merri was the fire-eater, yet, while she had rarely spoken up, Susan was not a coward. She had no intentions of allowing this man to reduce her to a cowering lump! She did some scrutinizing of her own.

The Sultan did not appear overly tall; though she realized she might be mistaken about that—height being difficult to judge while a person is seated. His skin was pale, almost sickly so. Ink-black hair fell back from his wide forehead in deep waves, contrasting dramatically with the matte pall of his coloring. His physique, though slight, was muscular and

his taste in clothes was impeccable. He was dressed in more jewels and ornaments than Susan had ever seen gathered together in one place and time on one body.

She stood close enough to catch the occasional whiff of his breath, and she found it pleasant. Minty, with a crisp undertone of ... bell peppers? Cucumbers? She could not place the scent, and could not think why it should be so important, nevertheless, her mind worried over it until she identified the smell as celery. For some reason, she found it hilarious that the Sultan's breath should smell of celery. She giggled.

"You are correct. I am Selim, third of the name ... your master, girl." He stopped, frowning. "I find your behavior, your levity, unseemly."

Susan jumped at his voice, eyes huge and startled, the pupils dilated widely. "My father is my master," she said, shaking inwardly. "My King is my master. You are merely my ... abductor." She silently congratulated herself on the steadiness of her voice even though she hadn't managed to keep her knees from knocking.

Selim raised one thin finger, and with that small gesture, a eunuch moved with quiet dispatch, his powerful fist sweeping across Susan's unsuspecting face. A flash of blinding pain knocked Susan to her knees, where she huddled in shocked horror, cradling her throbbing cheek with a shaking hand.

"By my will, you live," the Sultan informed her coldly. "It is by my will you are cared for and pampered. Your continued well-being is also subject to my will. Take care you do not cause me to demonstrate my ill-will further." His chilly warning fell on receptive ears.

With a tilt of his head, Selim regarded her, perhaps seeking to see the level of her distress. Susan wisely remained silent. When the Sultan gestured for her to rise, she did so with fearful alacrity. It wasn't as easy to meet his eyes this time, still Susan brought her gaze up to clash with the golden predatory stare that seemed to pin her in place.

There was something inimical in the eyes that burned into her. Though she had never seen such a look focused on her before, Susan shivered, realizing she stared into the heart of uncontrolled lust. Even as she came to that conclusion, Selim's tongue slid out to damp his lips, and he brought his hand up to wipe at the corners of his mouth where excess moisture had gathered.

Fear coiled through Susan, leeching courage from her knees. Her milky complexion turned pasty white. "Why have you sent for me?" she questioned, afraid of the answer.

Selim slid back, leaning sideways and lifting his right leg over the arm of his throne, where he allowed his foot to dangle nonchalantly. His eyes roamed over her body, seeming to miss nothing. His greedy gaze latched onto the high, round curves of her breasts that were heaving in an attempt to draw air through fear-constricted lungs. Eyes clung to the round pink flesh of the arms visible through the sheer drape of the traditional harem garb, to the flair of womanly hips that flowed gracefully into long slim legs.

His manhood stirred and rose, tenting his robes, calling attention to its expanding dimensions. He did nothing to conceal his aroused state. Rather, he watched as Susan's eyes were unwillingly drawn to his lap, where the pillar of his

penis was a bold shape beneath his thin robes, and smiled a shark's enjoyment as pink flowed in a hot tide up over her face before she lowered her face and gaze, hiding her shocked reaction.

"Why else would I send for you? What other need of you could I possibly have save that most elemental one?"

As he taunted her slyly, Selim dropped a hand to his lap, unashamedly caressing his growing arousal. Watching, watching while Susan jerked dismayed eyes away from the graphic motions, only to have her gaze inch back again and again in horrified fascination.

He watched her delicate tongue dart out to lick dry lips, all the while allowing his lean, long-fingered hand to delineate the shape of his aching shaft, making the fall of his robes work for him. Brazenly, wanting to shock the composure from the calm-looking woman standing rigidly before him, Selim threw up his robes and opened the fastening of his pants to reveal his hard, pulsating member.

The woman stared transfixed, hardly seeming to breathe as the red, bulbous head of his cock weaved and bobbed at her—a cobra with flared head that moved to the seductive, beckoning music of the magic flute of lust. Her knees shook, and she glanced about, pitifully seeking help. Every gaze except one was stony with indifference, or rapt with lechery.

"Does The Master of Earth and Sky wish to record this joining in the Book of Nights before retiring to his bed-chamber?" Tubal's voice shattered the brooding silence in the room, disrupting the building sexual tension.

Frustrated, Selim loosed his anger at Tubal, roaring, "Only you would have the balls to interfere—if you had any balls!" Selim knew his old retainer well, knew Tubal had used the innocuous question to call a halt to his pleasurable torture of the English woman. He was not accustomed to reigning in his desires. He rose from the wide chair, rearranging his clothing. His voice hoarse, he snarled, "You over-step your bounds, old man!"

"I only wished to know if I should record your joining, as the woman might well become with child from this ... encounter," Tubal returned sharply. "You seem to be very fertile where English women are concerned."

Every person in attendance knew Selim had fathered only one child: Jamal, from his English mother.

"Horse shit!" Selim's glare dared any of the eunuchs to react by so much as a blink. "Always too tender hearted, you don't like my taunting of the wench," he sneered.

"I am sure you will gain immense pleasure reducing the female to a shivering wretch, incapable of responding to your amorous overtures." Tubal sniffed. "I merely felt it beneath your dignity to be conducting your affairs before the eunuchs." His cold gaze and elevated eyebrows indicated the engrossed look on the servants' faces; each and every one busy storing up this juicy event for later gossip.

"I would think the eunuchs all remember my displeasure in the form of a whipping a short time ago," the Sultan reminded, the threat clear in his voice, "I doubt they would like to forego their tongues as well as their man hoods." His

words wiped the avid looks off the faces of the "hairless". He smiled.

Standing ignored in the middle of the room, Susan felt near to fainting. She was innocent, not ignorant, and she knew the fate awaiting her. The Sultan meant to ravish her, to impale her with that enormous ... jade stem ... pillar of power ... ivory tower ... Whichever one of the hundred-and-one names used for the male organ, his looked to be a battering ram. He would split her in two with that monstrous thing! She quaked in her flimsy slippers at the thought, newly ashamed that she had so blithely sent Merri off the night before, to contend with this self-same thing. Fearsome!

She vowed to throw herself at Merri's feet in abject apology, the first chance she got. Of course, she probably would never have that opportunity for she would surely die at the Sultan's hands should he continue with his obvious plans. Well, not at his hands, per se...

Selim, his tirade brought to a halt by the impeccable reasoning of his long-time servant, was not best pleased at having been shown his error. The frown distorting his face was fierce, and his temper flared anew. It was the woman's fault, he reasoned petulantly. Her beauty had bewitched him, her innocent guile overpowering his senses.

He turned to her, observing her trembling with a satisfied smirk. He walked up to her, around her, one hand coming up to trail a line across her shoulders, back, and breasts as he completed his circle. She shook mightily, but did not move to protest. Wise of her! His intent cruel, his hands strong, his movement unexpected, Selim ripped all three layers of the

flimsy robes from Susan, exposing her to the waist. She shrieked, bending over and bringing her hands up, desperate to conceal her sudden nakedness.

Selim glanced at Tubal, gestured back toward Susan. "I trust it is all right to reveal my slave before the eunuchs?" he asked Tubal. "Surely I can allow them to at least see this beauty and bounty they may never touch."

Tubal refused to answer, letting his eloquent eyes speak for him.

Displeased, Selim turned back to Susan, slapping at her frantic hands. "Stop that!" he ordered sharply. "Stand up straight, and push those luscious breasts out at me!" When she continued to cover her blushing flesh, he warned, "I will have you taken to the city square and publicly stripped and whipped!"

With a smothered sob, Susan dropped her arms. Face hot with shame, she stood still as a statue, eyes trained on a blank spot on the wall. She told herself the men watching her so avidly were not men, that they were used to seeing naked women that this meant nothing...

It didn't work. She could not delude herself about the lustful intent of their stares. Merri had told her about Laihla's eunuch. They had also heard how some of the eunuchs tied fake instruments about their waists and serviced the women thusly. She felt the weight of their panting interest, and continued to stand still, hands half curled into fists at her side. It was the hardest thing she had ever done.

"Better!" Selim crooned, the tip of a finger rubbing at her lips, across the tops of her breasts, pushing in a nipple, then

circling it. He walked behind her, sliding his hands around to curl about her swelling curves. She overflowed between his splayed fingers, and he caught her nipples between the scissors of two fingers, squeezing them into prominence. His hands were hot against her pebbled skin, sending electric shocks through her as he plumped and hefted the small weight of her breasts.

Susan felt her nipple hardening under his ministrations, her body out of control, and a tear joined the rebellion, slipping down her cheek. He saw it ... brought the drop to his lips. "The tears of the vanquished—" he sighed, closing his eyes as he savored the salty moisture "—nectar of the gods!"

His hands slid down her ribcage, grabbing and bunching the material that rode low on her hips, tugging until Susan stood exposed before the salivating servants and their master, her pink and white flesh shrinking under their concentrated scrutiny.

Selim's hooded gaze traveled her trembling form, sought out the apex of her thighs. His rod jerked into a longer length, his scrotum tightened and drew up in delicious anticipation.

By Allah! But the woman excited him! The dainty tufts of reddish-blond hair partially hiding the jewel peeking from between the woman's thighs looked soft and inviting. The pouty lips were little hillocks covered with wispy fronds. At long last, he understood his son's strange addiction to feminine hair! How he longed to delve into that forest, to plant his stone tower among her sweet grasses!

Susan, standing cold and humiliated in the midst of slavering beasts, watched with trepidation as the Sultan circled her once more. He placed his hands where they were not welcomed, making her squirm in discomfort and disgust when he slid a questing finger down the sensitive crease of her bottom. Through it all, she stood still—at least she tried—until the tip of one long masculine finger parted the hair guarding her mound, burrowing its marauding way up inside the portal of her femininity, testing, probing its narrow channel.

Fear, and some other nameless emotion, uncoiled in her belly, pushing out caution. Driven beyond care, beyond reason, her open hand landed a telling blow against the Sultan's sculpted cheekbone. *I will die now*, she mused uncaring, sure the Turkish potentate would kill her for her unthinking assault.

Selim gingerly felt his cheek. The area where her blow had landed was hot to the touch, sore. He said nothing ... just stood there touching one finger to his hurt, his eyes burning.

"Sire! She is untrained, unused to the ways of the harem and court—"

"Tubal ... I love you, but leave me. Take all but my personal guard and go from my presence now!" Selim pointed to the door, eyes narrowing in earnestness "—before I have to kill you. I will not, even from you, tolerate another interruption!"

When Selim turned his face back to Susan, the indulgent look he had worn while watching his loyal servants leave had evaporated. Capturing her gaze and imprisoning it, he began

revealing the powerful lines of his strangely beautiful body. Inch by slow inch, forcing Susan to watch by the sheer strength of his will, he methodically removed his robes and pants. When he stood naked before her, he lifted his gaze to his guard, gesturing with his eyes.

Obedying a silent order, three eunuchs moved to the side of the wary woman. Two taking an arm, they lifted her from the floor, and with a hand under each knee, spread wide her thighs. Behind her, facing in the opposite direction, the other guard bent over so her bottom rested on his back. Susan struggled, sobbing raggedly, but couldn't break free from their hold. Tears streaking down her face, she lost all control and bucked in the eunuchs' grasp, desperate to get away. To close herself to Selim's lascivious attentions became her life's goal.

Selim moved into the space between her spread legs, bringing her struggles to naught, while the two "hairless" immediately adjusted Susan to his height. He leaned into her, letting her feel him there, at the door of her quivering womanhood. Catching her jaw in his grasp, he brought her face around to gaze into her eyes. He was so close; his breath stroked her face, his rasping words frightening her with their intensity.

"To strike me is a capital offense. By doing so, you have earned a slow, painful death," he whispered against her lips. His eyes narrowed as he continued, "I would have taken you on a soft bed, in privacy—regardless of what I chose to do as preliminaries—but your rash action has changed that. Now I

will take you as a punishment ... in public, against the back of a slave!"

All the while he spoke, he rubbed his swollen member along the sensitive folds of the frightened woman's vulnerable lower lips. Pre-cum dripped from his organ and he spread the liquid over and into her portal, lubricating it for his entrance.

Susan felt him with every tension-alerted nerve, felt the friction of his movements against her and tried to squirm up the back of the slave behind her. A despairing moan escaped her parted lips. The muscles buried deep in her womanly core clenched involuntarily, and her pink flesh pulsed and quivered as she felt his engorged shaft seeking entrance. It hurt! *It hurt!*

He ignored Susan's frantic head shaking, going slowly until the head of his penis crested her opening. He paused then, reveling in her tightness, and felt his rod widen and lengthen to press against the spasming walls of her inner folds. How hot she was! Hot and tight...! With a cry, and a powerful surge of his hips, he thrust deeply, sharply, welcoming the high-pitched cry of pain that was wrenched from Susan as he seated himself fully in her snug, no longer virginal passage.

Susan wept openly, sobbing and shuddering at the pain, the uncomfortable feeling of fullness radiating from the abused, torn flesh between her legs. Her pitiful attempts to reject him proved useless, her cries falling on deaf ears, for the Sultan was intent upon exacting every ounce of vengeance on her helpless body.

He surged in and out of her sore body with powerfully rhythmic motions, his hips flexing strongly, his thrusts

flattening her against the body of the eunuch supporting her. She wished for death, wished there was some way she could retreat from what was happening, but her mind was too strong. The horror of her circumstances chained her attention, forcing her to endure the embarrassment and pain without the mercy of swooning.

Selim, working his rampant member in and out of the tight, hugging walls of his slave's sheath, gloried in his possession. Another woman would have fainted or lain dormant beneath him—she was still fighting him! *What pleasure she gives me*, he thought. I would be a fool to kill her! I will keep her near, and teach her myself. I am the Sultan, now, not powerless as I was all those years ago. This English rose I will keep ... I will not lose her as I lost Emily...

Feeling his crisis coming, Selim reluctantly slid from Susan's gloriously snug core. What had started as a punishment had become the most exciting bout of sex he had engaged in for a long while. Determined to make her enjoy it as much as he, Selim arrogantly decided to woo her, to awaken her carnal nature and use it in his service. He moved away from her, his hungry, tumescent staff jutting out proudly, covered with the red slick of her virgin's blood.

Ignoring his rod's continued need for completion, he silently gestured the sentinels out, while the two holding Susan were ordered into the bed chamber with their burden. There she was given a choice: Submit to the him, and have privacy—the act kept between the two of them—or continue her struggles and be held down ... and open.

Knowing the helplessness of her situation, Susan chose the privacy. Having those men look on her while the Sultan had been inside of her was the worst thing she had ever lived through. She never wanted to go through that again.

Vague feelings of betrayal coursed through Susan as the eunuchs lowered her to the Sultan's couch. She rejoiced inwardly when they silently exited the room, leaving her to the Sultan's non-existent mercies. She could feel Selim's eyes upon her, yet could no longer bring herself to meet his gaze. She didn't want to see his victory reflected there.

As Selim stood looking down at her, his long-buried conscious stirred and awoke. Gazing at her beauty, her bewildered tears and hurt look, he felt a moment's shame for his treatment of her. After all, it was really the cousin he was angry with. He should not have tortured and prodded her as he had. Her striking out was the action of a cornered animal, not her fault.

Going to the basin of water kept for cleaning, he wet a cloth and rung it out. Back at her side, he knelt beside the low bed, pressing the cool cloth against her bruised, torn flesh. She jumped a little, then, obviously recalling her vow of submission, stilled her instinctive movements. Her breasts rose and fell quickly, the only visible sign of her increased agitation. He found his gaze riveted on those breasts.

She was lying on her back and they were slightly flattened in that condition, but still full and round. The nipples, a light peach color, rode the bed of coral that were her crests. They were puckered and tight, and reminded Selim of berries. His

mouth watered, and, not given to self-control, he bent and took one tempting morsel into the hot cavern of his mouth.

When the hot slick feel of his tongue and lips covered her, Susan snapped out of her waking daydream. A volcano flowered down low in her pelvis, the unaccustomed feelings frightening her. She felt the heated drawing that connected her breasts to the cauldron seething between her legs, and opened her eyes to find the Sultan's head resting against her as his mouth moved in a suctioning motion, his cheeks caving in as he tugged on her sensitive nubbins. Fire shot up from her depths, and she frantically wondered how she could feel anything but hatred at the hands of the man who had recently taken her so before others, not caring about her feelings or according her the dignity any woman deserved. Her hands lifted to seize his hair, her fingers tangling in the night-dark strands.

Selim acknowledged her tug, lifting his head to meet her eyes. His voice was smooth as silk, low and intimate as he said, "I wish to bring you joy, sweet lady. You must not mind the pain before—" he urged her. "Had you married a staid Englishman in church, and sedately opened yourself to his conjugal visit, it would have hurt the same." He shrugged.

"Thus is the way of nature, the way of a virgin's first coupling. I ... regret my temper. You need not fear for your life. My taunting drove you to your rash actions so I will not hold them against you. Only ... let me show you what I can give you, long to give you—"

He lowered his head and resumed nursing at her breasts, taking his time and giving both orbs equally close attention.

One lean hand caressed and shaped one plump mound while his untiring mouth lavished an erotic treatment on the other. His tongue and teeth were relentless devils, urging her to fire, and she felt her body flame at his touch. When his mouth released her tender flesh to drop biting kisses in a stinging string down her quivering middle, she grabbed the covers beneath her, her fingers digging into the mattress as she tried to anchor her rising passion.

She tensed at the feel of his hot breath wafting over her privates, and almost came up off the bed when his relentless lips and tongue burrowed into her steaming cleft. Against all reason, Susan's emotions took flight as she reared up to grasp his ebony hair, not sure she meant to push him away, or pull him closer.

Her passion-stunned eyes watched in glassy wonder the wickedly arousing sight of a man worshipping at her alter of Venus. The feelings he invoked were overwhelming, her nerves jumped and sizzled, overloading on sensation. Her inner muscles began to rhythmically pulsate, and she writhed on the bed, lost to all restraint.

No matter how she admonished herself, forcibly recalling his sins against her, she was too naive and untutored to withhold her body's burgeoning responses. When he reared up on his elbows using one hand to widen her legs, making a place for himself she moaned in fearful anticipation. Slowly, carefully, he inserted his rigid penis in her weeping portal, forging steadily inwards, his goal her heated womb. She arched mindlessly up to meet him, her innocent passion destroying his hard-held control.

With a guttural imprecation, Selim thrust home and immediately began a pounding assault, all the while whispering hot, smoldering phrases against her lips, her ears, her neck. His body strained against hers, demanding a response, and she gave it to him, raw and unschooled.

Using his hands, he guided her until she caught the rhythm, then freed them to gather a double handful of her glorious hair, twining it about his knuckles, using it to pull her head up for a ravenous kiss. Their lips opened, meshed, drank deeply of each other. His tongue searched out the darkest recesses of her mouth; the cool roof, the jagged edge of her teeth.

She tentatively returned his ardor, her shy tongue venturing forth to twine with his. Her body undulated sensually, melting and steaming under the steady onslaught of his overwhelming caresses. They raced towards the finish—he knowingly, she blindly—both straining and striving to reach the pounding fulfillment shimmering on the horizon of their senses.

A long finger edged its way into her heated center, rubbing at the small button of nerves, setting up a counter-point of friction that began her unraveling. When he bent to her sensitized breast, sucking an engorged nipple into his mouth, she came up from the covers with a sharp, despairing cry, wrapping her long legs about his hips and squeezing tightly. Her body rocking under thunder-claps of ecstasy, shattering into glittering rainbow fragments, Susan succumbed to the addicting power of his dark mastery.

Chapter Forty-four

Wyndmere,

You probably do not wish to hear from me, but I felt I had to write. Since the trial, I have been doing nothing but thinking and remembering...

In all our adventures together, I have never known you to be as sloppy as you were that night on the beach. Working closely with you gave me a chance to learn your ways, and I should have known then, what I am positive of now—It could not have been you on that storm-tossed cliff. But if it was not you, then who? I want you to know I applied to the courts to reopen your case, but they denied the petition due to lack of new evidence. I have several leads that I am following. Can you give me any information that would assist my search? Anything you can think of ... You never know what will jog someone's memory. I have listed my direction below. Please contact me as soon as possible. I know you cannot think it, especially when I inadvertently betrayed you so horribly at the trial, but truly, I remain your most earnest friend, and I have never ceased to labor in your behalf—

Robert Townesend

Grand Seraglio, Sultan's Quarters

A month later

One look at Merri's cousin told Jared his father had bedded the woman. Knowing the Sultan's penchant for cruelty, he dreaded thinking under what circumstances the young woman had been forced to endure his attentions.

Jared cursed silently, reminding himself of his powerlessness here in his father's domain, and most especially here in the Sultan's private chambers. Lady Susan's ravishment had all ready happened. There was nothing he could do about it.

It was hard, though, remembering the fire she had revealed at their prior meeting, to see the Lady Susan so ... subdued. No, that wasn't the word. Crushed—yes, that was a better word. She reminded him of a fragile dandelion that had been half blown away. Decimated. What was left was naught but a sad, pitiful remnant. To see her slumped in abject surrender at Selim's feet, leeches of all her spontaneous vitality cut him deeply, yet he could do nothing.

His many attempts at catching her eye proved futile, countered by Susan's refusal to allow him contact by keeping her head lowered and her eyes down. After a while, Jared gave up, turning his attention back to the half-ignored conversation with the Sultan.

"...she deserves to be punished!" Selim was saying, his mouth hard, eyes glittering with malice. His gaze softened when he caught a glimpse of Susan's pale, worried face out of the corner of his eye. She hid her agitation well, but he had come to know her expressions over these last few weeks. She was terribly upset over the threat to her cousin. He might just be able to use that to his advantage.

"I grant that her words were inflammatory, however, I ask that you take into account the extenuating circumstances—"

"We have had this conversation before, my son," Selim said firmly. "She will be punished!" Selim watched Jared's

expression change, his features tightening with determination until they assumed the hard, ruthless look of a warrior, and Selim smiled, knowing he had succeeded beyond his fondest hopes! His son's protective instincts were awake and at full alert where his woman was concerned.

"I will not allow you to hurt her." Jared was adamant. His eyes flicked towards the silent woman who sat at the Sultan's feet, and back. *Like you have harmed this one!* His unspoken words were loud between the two men who looked so much alike; both sets of golden eyes growing hot with anger and antagonism.

Susan fidgeted, aware of the building tensions in the room, uncomfortable at being its focus. She knew the Prince was angry on her behalf, but really, what could he do? She avoided his persistent gaze, refusing to meet his eyes. She did not think she could bear to see the reflection of the pitiful thing she had become.

She was so confused. Somewhere during this long, hellish month, she had suffered a sea-change, and no longer knew what she was, what she wanted. She only knew she craved, yet hated, the heady swell of sensations she tasted under the relentless conditioning of the man who called himself her master. The limits he had forced her past ... the things he had done to her—and she'd wallowed in—the sheer, unimaginable, fantastical feelings he coaxed from her with his devil's magic!

Her body tightened in response to the flood of explicit memories. Her face flushed as the core of her womanhood liquefied and spilled over with heated desire.

She shuddered, recognizing the true depths of her situation. Selim's expert handling had awakened the ravening hungers of her body, stripping away her flimsy covering of civilized manners to lay bare the wanting, needing animal inside.

Her turbulent passions were at the mercy of her tormentor; a man who demanded her full sexual surrender, never allowing her to hold any portion of herself back. He was relentless in his conquering of her body, never ceasing his maddeningly diabolical assaults until she begged, weeping, to experience his total possession.

Only then would he generously give her what she craved ... what she needed like air in her starving lungs. Give her the hard, hot length of him. And though doubtless it was not in his plans, he always lost himself in her embrace, in the end, giving her back in full measure, the control he had wrested from her.

Every night, he took her ... sometimes twice a day, three times—whenever the whim moved him. He conditioned her body to answer to his, honed her passions until they were in sync with his. Until only he could give her what she needed with increasing frequency.

Now, responding in newly acquired habit, she turned to the Sultan, her look sultry and urgent, yet despairing; the pleading, despondent look of an addict desperate for the next "dose", hating the poison needed for basic survival. She felt like a whore, paid only in the dark coin of temporary satiation. The sex never satisfied her for long. She always needed more.

As if his body were attuned to her, as if he could smell her arousal, Selim suddenly broke off, abandoning his conversation in the midst of a sentence. He glanced down to find Susan's eyes trained on him, and his own lit up with inward fire, recognizing her blatant need.

He turned to her, ran a caressing hand through her straight, cornsilk hair, eager to show her off to Jamal. "My chosen *haseki*," he informed his son. "Possibly the new *ikbal* ... though that remains to be seen. I have named her *Sari Kar*." His words were addressed to Jared as he lifted Susan's face, planting a lingering kiss on her trembling lips.

"Yellow Snow for her hair and the frosty way she looked at me—" Smiling into Susan's green eyes, now back-lit with raging desire, he shook his head, continuing wryly, "I shall have to find a name more suitable, for it seems the summer thaw has set in."

Flames shot through Susan from where his lips touched hers, yet even as she burned with the strength of her arousal, she felt the familiar, knife-edged blade of shame ripping at her soul. That he could speak so of her so before others—even if it were his son—cheapened both her and the acts she committed with him.

"...Retire to our chamber and await me," her royal lover was saying when next she was capable of noticing anything other than that sharp, stunning pain, "in the manner in which I have taught you."

The look he slanted her way was one of warning, making her recall his last lesson and the punishment he had meted out when she'd dared to disagree with him.

"A slave approaches the bed of her master from the foot, on her knees and belly, low to the ground. You will so approach our bed unless and until I give you leave to do otherwise—"

"I will never see you as my master. My ravisher, perhaps my executioner."

"A slave is naked before her master, unless he gives her leave to adorn herself ... and then she should take care to please her master in her manner of dress—"

"An interesting idea ... for you, and an easy one to enforce, for you ripped my only garments that first day, and have not allowed me others while in these rooms. However, I have decided my dignity is not dependent upon dress or the lack thereof. After all, Christ was naked on the cross, and never was he more dignified than when he suffered for others!"

"I wouldn't know, I am not of that faith. But I do not take your point in any case, for you do not suffer for others, do you? Or ... do you call what you endured earlier a sort of suffering? If so, I must say, never before have I witnessed someone in the throes of such exquisite torment. How sweetly you writhed beneath me, clutching at my back, biting and nipping at me! What glorious pain you must have suffered, shivering apart around my deeply buried shaft!"

"Stop it! I will not hear you!"

"Yes, you will. Oh, you will! I shall enjoy exposing all your inner passions, your carnal impulses, one by one, until you are totally revealed, and come to me freely—a woman who

takes deep pleasure in pleasing, and receiving pleasure from her master!"

"I will never come to you so..."

"We both know that you will. Do you lie to yourself as well as to me?"

"I do not lie!"

"Now you force me to prove your lie..."

"Please do not touch me! No! Stop! I said ... ooh! Oh, god!"

"So soon, my heart?"

"...please...!"

"Sweet Snow ... cold Snow ... yes, melt for me! You like this, no? And this...? But you love this best, do you not?"

"Oh, yes ... yes! Yes—oh, yes—oh, yes—!"

"Drop to your knees ... yes, right there! Now come to me. No! Do not stand up. On your knees ... on all fours, all the way! Good ... good! Now, over on your back and spread your legs. Let me see how wet you are ... how ready. Oh, very ready, aren't we my thawing Snow! Now beg me to take you. Say: 'Please take my cunt, master!' Say it!"

"Please ... do not make me do this!"

"What is this ... tears? Come, you know you want me to fuck you—want more than my hand, do you not?"

"No! Yes! Oh, god! P-please ... t-t-take m-my ... c-c-cunt, master!"

"You beg so nicely, my cold English beauty, my melting Snow! Let me reward you, like this ... and this. Yes, open wider! Can you feel how deep I am in you...? How hard you

*have made me? How strong I feel when you melt around me!
Feel it ... feel it ... yes! Now ... come for me! Come!"*

"Arghhhhh...!"

Susan bit her lip as the memories inundated her, overwhelming her resolve. Yes, she would await him, naked on her knees. And when he commanded, she would beg for his penetration for she could no longer live without the lush, melting fullness of his thick, hard maleness buried deep inside her empty, aching sheath.

"I will come to you when I am done speaking with my son," the Sultan promised with a final caress, releasing Susan to do his bidding. She nodded reluctantly, torn between obeying and rebellion, her measured steps barely camouflaging her reluctant eagerness.

Jared, watching her go, thought he had never seen someone so given over to silence, to resignation. His own words of protest, held until she was gone, poured out as he confronted his smiling, smug sire. "What you have done to that girl is criminal!" he declared, voice raised in righteous anger.

"What I have done to that woman was inevitable," the Sultan returned in much cooler tones, determined to keep tight control over his errant temper. He despaired of ever having a conversation with this difficult son that did not finally break down into disagreement. He held up a hand to forestall Jared's heated reply. "I will not discuss this matter with you, *ogul*. It is none of your concern."

"You once offered her to me—"

"And you refused her. She is no longer available to you."

"She is an Englishwoman.—"

"There are many such in my harem. You do not seem overly concerned for them."

"This is different. She is the kinswoman to my ... uh, my—" his voice trailed off.

"Yes, she is kinswoman to your *concubine*. So this is ... how do you say ... the pot calling the skillet black...? We both know the cousin would have already been in your bed had she not suffered that unfortunate illness of the mind. Stay back, my son, and concentrate on your own woman, the Storm-bringer—"

"Her name is Merridyth. She prefers Merri with an 'i'." As he said that, he recalled her terse explanation, and his lips curled up into an unwilling smile.

"I have given her to you ... call her whatever you choose! I care not, having but one concern with her at the moment—"

"I know your concern," Jared said, "and it is on that subject I would speak with you."

Selim shook his head. "There must be a punishment meted out, for she maligned me to the women of the harem in such ringing tones, the Black eunuchs by the Carriage Gate heard of it before I did." True rancor was evident in Selim's angry bellow. "When I finally convinced Tubal to tell me just what this ... big old fart was, I became so enraged I thought my blood would boil!"

"I know, Great One," Jared dared to taunt the pacing Ruler, "I'm sure there was not one person residing in Istanbul who did not hear that explosion."

Selim regarded his bold son in wonderment, truly fascinated at the intrepid spirit he had helped to fashion. "Are you not the least in awe of me?"

"No. Should I be?" Jared questioned nonchalantly.

"Yes. Sometimes a fever of anger comes upon me, and even Tubal trembles before my wrath at such times."

Jared blinked. "Hhm-mm ... I'll keep it in mind," he promised off-handedly, obviously not meaning a word of it.

Selim sighed, and ceased trying to intimidate his son. "I do not wish to argue with you, but the woman must be dealt with," the Sultan insisted. "I would be satisfied with a public whipping," he offered, enthusiastic in his efforts to find an acceptable compromise. "A light one—say ... ten lashes...?"

"Out of the question!"

"A private one then, with a few nobles to pass along the word the deed was done. Five lashes?"

"Absolutely not! I won't hear of it!"

Jared did some insisting of his own. "Listen! She was drugged three times, with a drug her system could not tolerate. She was not responsible for anything she did during that time ... let alone anything she said!" Jared ran an agitated hand through his hair, ruffling the wavy locks. "Just this once, I wish you could let it go—after all, you have taken away her relative and friend. That, more than anything else, will eat at her heart like a canker. Please—" he said earnestly, on the verge of begging, "—let it rest there. Otherwise, you will force me to become your enemy. I cannot stand idly by and watch her hurt ... I cannot!"

Selim stood in silent thought, then nodded. "Very well, *ogul*," he decided. "I will withhold my judgment until she has recovered from this illness. I will speak with her then, and determine what is to be done. I will even allow her another chance to fulfill her commitment of a night with you—"

"I won't have her frightened ... or threatened into my bed," Jared protested. Can you imagine how it would make me feel, knowing she was with me on sufferance? Forced into intimacy against her will?"

"Yes. In fact, *ogul*, I know exactly how that feels. One gets used to it." The Sultan's words were stark with recalled pain.

"Then at least grant me the mercy of avoiding that ache," his son requested.

Selim mused quietly. "I will not harm the woman," he reiterated. "I will speak with her. I will examine her motives. It may be I will forgive her this transgression..."

"For that, I thank you," Jared sighed.

"How magnanimous!" the Sultan sneered. "No—" he caught himself, not wanting to spark a fight now, when they had managed to avert an argument. "No thanks are needed ... but leave me now ... I would join my concubine." A salacious smile widened his full lips. "She becomes impossible to handle when kept waiting ... I end up taking her twice; once to lesson her and again to satisfy her!"

Jared's own lips tightened, and he bit back the scathing reprimand burning his tongue, determined not to spoil all he had gained by interfering in his father's private concerns. But it took a major effort on his part not to offer further biting commentary; the Lady Susan deserved better. Yet, he dared

not jeopardize Merri's reprieve. Angry at himself, yet angrier at the Sultan, Jared spun on his heels and exited his father's chambers without another word.

Women's quarters, Grand Seraglio

Merridyth awoke groggy and in a foul mood. It didn't help that Susan was not about to answer her weak, worried calls, or that the sly, lazy servant girl assigned to wait upon them had contrived to absent herself as well. Merri had tried to stand up, but became disoriented and weak upon gaining her feet. She laid back down, cooled her heels and waited as patiently as possible until someone came by to check on her....

Laihla came that afternoon. She stayed only a short while, then was shooed out by the Mistress of the girls, who hovered over the patient like a mother hen. One would think her own life hung in the balance, Merri thought in disgruntlement, not at all happy about having the Black woman's stay cut short.

By the second day of her recovery, Merridyth was ready to climb the walls, frightened and worried over Susan and Seana's continued non-appearance. She nearly pounced on Laihla when she returned in the late morning, firing a string of anxious questions, the first being: Where was Susan and Seana?

Laihla hated having to be the one to do so, but the Mistress had decided Merri would take the news better coming from a friend. So here she was ... delegated to this unpleasant task. "Seana was removed from the harem the same day you become ill," she said starkly. Even more

reluctantly, she told Merri of how Susan had been called to the Sultan's couch, and that she had not been seen since.

Laihla was privy to no inside information this time, for all her usual sources had mysteriously dried up. And no one was saying what, if anything, they knew about either of the missing women.

Laihla had heard a half-hearted rumor that Susan had struck the Sultan and been beheaded, but forbore to burden Merri with that grotesque worry, doubting the veracity of that report. The Sultan's practice was to display the heads of those he had executed on the pikes above the Carriage Gate and Susan's head was not one of the gruesome trophies adorning the gate—she knew, having checked for herself.

Merri impatiently swiped at the moisture obscuring her vision—tears came easily in her weakened state. "He did this as a punishment for me," she cried, chin wobbling. "My friends are suffering or dead because I could not go through with my agreement. How I wish I not been so rash as to publicly declare my dissatisfaction!"

"This blame you take upon yourself ... it is your favorite past-time, no?" Laihla asked in disgusted tones, planting her fists on her hips. "Why must every evil thing that befalls us be your fault? Why can it not be the Sultan's fault for falling into an unreasoning fit of temper?"

Her questions were crisp with displeasure, and had Merri hanging her head in guilt, for what Laihla accused her of was true. No matter how many times she told herself differently, she always ended up blaming herself.

"I know you are right," she said to placate her irate friend, "yet I cannot help thinking—in this case—that Susan would not have been summoned if I had not reneged on my agreement with the Sultan.—"

"If you believe that, then you are a fool!" Laihla exclaimed, throwing up her hands, unable to recall ever having met someone more willingly blind to the reality of all the women's lives—and uses—in the harem. "The Sultan has been salivating over the two of you since you first arrived. And if the prince had not shown such a definite interest in you, it would be you lying in his blankets right now!"

Merri, who had been sipping a glass of water, choked and sputtered, and Laihla leaped to her feet, energetically thumping her on the back. The invalid waved her away, irritated eyes streaming with tears.

With an enormous sigh, Laihla sat back on the bed beside her friend, soothing her brow with a gentle hand. "Listen ... Just because no one has seen her since she walked the Golden Way, there is no reason to fret. I am sure Susan is all right." She smiled, sure her words were reassuring her worried friend. She missed the look of horror that tightened Merri's visage. "Had Selim executed her," she blithely continued, "her head would be impaled on a pike of the Carriage Gate—it is his favorite position for such things, as he can see the gate spikes from his windows. But it is not there ... her head, I mean. So Susan is alive, though in all likelihood, she has suffered impaling this last month, albeit on a more fleshly pike—"

Merri's face flared with heat. "Must you always be so graphic?" she asked plaintively, those hated easy tears leaking out again.

Laihla was instantly sorry. "Look what all you have been through! And I yell at you and tease—" She patted Merridyth's hand. "You must forget my bad behavior," she implored in apology, her quaint English lilting and child-like, not so, the mind behind the words.

"Forgive. *Forgive* your behavior," Merri interrupted, automatically correcting the other's English in a tired voice. "And there is nothing to forgive. You are simply performing the duty of a friend when you do not allow me to wallow in self-pity."

"Perhaps," Laihla conceded, "this is one time you should be allowed to wallow." Her features were fine-drawn with remembered stress. "You still do not know how close we came to losing you—and through our own faults!"

"What are you saying, Laihla?" Merri questioned. Surely there was no way her friend could have been remotely responsible for her sudden illness. Unless ... Merri's eyes narrowed in stunned suspicion. "Do you mean to say my illness was not natural?" She drew several deep breaths, trying to remain calm, and cursed the lingering weakness that was proving to be so debilitating.

Cringing inside, Laihla nevertheless turned to face Merri squarely. "You were not ill ... exactly," she began, harboring no hope that Merri would be able to understand and forgive what she was about to tell her. "Susan and I drugged your tea."

"You what...?" Merri's disbelieving yelp was totally involuntary.

"You must not blame Susan," Laihla hurried to admit, "for it was my idea. We meant no harm ... truly! You were so frightened about having to go to the *Emir*, and we simply wanted you to be relaxed—" A questioning look came over Laihla's face. "What is that noise?"

Merry clamped the muscles of her jaw tight, clenching her teeth, and the noise stopped. "Never mind," she gritted out. "Just get on with this explanation!"

Her face falling, the Black woman continued. "As I was saying, we gave you the drug in your tea. It should have made you calm and relaxed, and ... open to suggestion. However, you became increasingly agitated, and Susan—who did not really want to give you anything in the first place—panicked, and came looking for me. While she was gone, the Mistress of the Girls came to your room, and administered a second dose, not knowing you had already received one. She had heard that you intended to refuse the Prince, and was afraid the Sultan would blame her for your decision—"

"My goodness, this gets more and more unbelievable!" Merri shook her head in fascination. "So I was drugged twice?"

"Well..." Laihla hesitated, "it turned out to be ... a triple dose."

"A triple—? No!" Merri put her hands out as if to ward off trouble, "I do not want to hear any more." She stopped abruptly, blowing out a frustrated gust of air, and squeezing her eyes shut for a moment. As though gathering a measure

of calm. "On second thought, I do want to hear the rest. After all, what could be worse?"

"Uhh-hhm, ah-hh..."

Merri, listening to Laihla's stuttering evasion, felt a ball of ice shiver in the pit of her stomach. "Please tell me it does not get worse, Laihla!"

Laihla, who had never panicked in a crisis situation, who lived for adventure and intrigue, could not face the condemnation on her friend's face. She lowered her own, tears falling in a silent, steady stream down her coffee-brown cheeks. "We did not know you were one of those who could not tolerate the drug," she said, frantic to excuse their actions. "We only saw that you were still acting strangely excited, and so we gave you one more dose. Of course, we did not know the Mistress had also been busy on the same errand."

"All right," Merri sighed. "We have gotten to the part where I received three doses of whatever drug you slipped me. Now tell me what else happened!" she commanded, quickly losing all traces of patience.

Laihla gulped. Nodding resolutely, she finished in a rush of words, "You were really loud. Everything you said was yelled at the top of your voice. You said the Sultan was a ... you called him a ... a powerful bag of wind. A big old fart—"

All color leached from Merri's stunned features. "I never!" she whispered in horror. "I would never speak so ... not even in jest." Her voice shook as she said, "The Sultan would kill someone for mouthing an insult such as that should he catch wind of it—" She paused in mid-sentence, a smile struggling

to supplant her frown as she pondered her inadvertent play on words. If she'd thought Laihla would have understood the joke, she would have shared it, but Laihla was not amused. In fact, she was acting very strangely.

"What now?" Merri's exasperation was reaching monumental heights.

Laihla had buried her head in her hands, loud sobbing cries pouring out in a torrent of grief. Haltingly, between sobs, she blurted out the last of her dreadful news. "The Sultan has heard of your insults—some horrid serving girl blabbed it to a eunuch, who took it straight to the *Kislar Agasi*. The Sultan became very angry. He has vowed to punish you—possibly kill you!" Laihla struggled to keep her voice low, to avoid others in the harem overhearing their conversation.

"No one has ever seen him so out of control! Even the old man, Tubal, has not been able to soothe him. He seeks revenge, and has ordered he be informed the minute you are recovered. All this while, he has been biding his time," Laihla peeked at Merri, both her hands unconsciously engaged in a wringing match. "Every one is walking on tip-toe, trying not to re-awaken his temper. The women fear he may have already dispatched Sus—" With a harsh gasp, Laihla clapped her hands over her uncontrollable mouth, her guilty eyes caught by Merri's. "I did not mean to say that!" she cried. "It is only vicious gossip."

"I do not doubt you are sorry for letting it slip!" Merri concurred grimly. The dark haired English woman threw back her covers, swinging her legs over the side of the sleeping couch. She had to sit there a while, to allow her head to stop

Feathers in the Wind: The Cygnets
by Camille Anthony

its spinning. When she had regained her equilibrium, she pinned Laihla with a challenging glare. "Get me some clothes and help me dress, or get out of my way!" she snapped.

"What are you doing?" Laihla asked, looking askance at the labored movements of the invalid.

"I am getting up." Merri said shortly. "With or without your help. I want to see the Sultan ... now!"

Chapter Forty-six

Jason has finally written me regarding your cousin! She has consented to journeying for a visit, and will come as soon as she can complete her obligation to her employers. Of course, I am delighted to know she will give us a chance to explain just what occurrences transpired to keep us from tendering the help she needed. I know nothing we do now will make up for the hardships she must have gone through, however, I cannot bear that she think ill of Randolph. He was many things, your father, but he was never neglectful of family! Jason is not staying on to accompany her, but will travel back later this month. He informs me he will be going on another business trip, and will probably miss cousin Janelle's visit. That boy stays so busy, and is always on the go! You will never know how I have come to depend upon Jason—! He had truly been a God-send, helping me in so many ways during this last winter when I was so ill. Thankfully, I am feeling much better lately! Soon, Jason will be able to take a much-needed and well-deserved rest. I know he will most likely not appreciate that, as he has become accustomed to hard, never-ceasing work on my behalf. We do not pay him half enough.

Love, Mum

P.S. It is past time I received a letter from you, young man. I await with bated breath the answer to my meddling. Write soon.—Mum

Merridyth fidgeted, waiting to be seen by the Sultan. Unlike the last time, she had some idea of what the impending audience would entail; what she would be facing when the doors to the *mabeyn* opened and she met with the Sultan for the second time. The knowledge was not reassuring. He was bound to be incensed over her reversal, and his anger brought a dangerous element to their coming encounter ... dangerous for her, at any rate!

The great doors swung open. An eunuch gestured towards her, and Merridyth walked forward, tossing a hurried harried prayer heaven-ward, knowing she would need all the help she could beg, borrow or bargain for...

"So! You look well ... for an opium-head."

The unexpected viciousness of the taunt rocked her, halting her progress across the wide marbled floor. Her first impulse was to answer with a sharp retort, but she gave herself a shake, choking back the hot words she wanted to hurl in the arrogant bully's face.

"Thank you, Sire," she bowed low, her own words sarcastically calm; her stance composed. "You have excellent medical help available here at Topkapi palace."

"Certainly, our physicians are far superior to any practicing their barbarous quackery in England." Selim blithely insulted the entire English medical profession.

Oh, you're just enjoying yourself immensely, aren't you? Merri narrowed her eyes at the potentate, certain he could barely manage to control the urge to rub his hands together in glee. He in turn was not fooled by her cool façade. He had

to know his words had made her angry as homeless hornets, and he couldn't wait to rub more salt into her wounds.

"Approach me, *kiz*," he ordered. "I would have your opinion of my newest *haseki*—"

Merri had totally overlooked the veiled woman seated so silently and still at the Sultan's feet. Glancing over at her now, she saw nothing to merit a second glance. Then the Sultan spoke again.

"Remove your covering Snow. Are we not among ... friends?"

The woman removed her veil, shaking her head to allow her hair to fall about her shoulders. Tears ran down her face and dripped off her chin.

"Susan!" Merri gasped, leaping towards her cousin, so glad to see her she felt faint with relief. Tears rose and overflowed as the cousins embraced. Susan had a death-grip on her taller relative. Her shoulders shook with the force of her sobs.

"Merri, you are well!"

"Thank God you're alive!"

"I knew you were dying, and there was nothing I could do!"

"I could not gain any information of where you were ... No one would tell me anything! I didn't know what to think!"

Selim's generous top lip firmed and thinned. His nostrils flared. Susan was gripping her cousin as if she would never let go. Her eyes, though awash with tears, were shining, more alive than he had ever seen them—even in the midst of passion. The vibrant light of love softened the features of her face. Selim growled. He did not like to see Susan so

emotional with her cousin; so open in her caring when she still refused to admit to her feelings for him!

"Where is Seana?"

The Storm-bringer's question brought the Sultan's attention back to the point, and he waited to see what Susan would say.

"I do not know. She was taken from the harem the same day I was brought here. I have not been allowed out of these chambers since. The Sultan—" she cast a fulminating glare his way "—refuses to answer my questions concerning her, other than to say she has been removed to a private place."

Merri kept hold of Susan's hand when she turned to face the Ottoman ruler. "Please, I am deeply sorry for the words I spoke while under the influence of that drug. Can we not be at peace? Believe me, I am mortified over what I have been told of my actions and conversation during that time. I have never gone back on my word before, nor maligned someone behind their back..." She paused.

"I have not seen anything to indicate that you are not a just ruler. How long will you continue to punish others for my mistake? Punish me, instead, and allow my cousin and my friend to go free."

Selim stood up and beckoned to Susan. He found he did not like her holding hands or touching anyone other than himself. His eyes narrowed warningly when she hesitated. She read the warning correctly and, tearing her hand from Merri's compulsive grip, she slipped away to stand beside the sultan.

"I will never let Susan go free from me." Selim exclaimed in a firm voice. "She is *haseki* now, and I find her service ... adequate."

Merri was silent as she ran the unfamiliar word through her mind. "*Haseki* ... *haseki*...! That means body ... no, sex slave!" Merri drew an indignant breath. "You cannot treat her thus!"

"I have."

"But," Merri fumbled, seeking a plausible excuse, "she is untrained."

"I have undertaken her training myself. She is coming along ... quite nicely."

Selim's condescending words left the fuming Merri fuming no argument.

Susan caught her eye. "Just let it go for now, Merri."

"What of Seana, then? What have you done with her? Is she safe? Being cared for?"

"So many questions! One would think you cared." Selim mocked her again by questioning her concern for the missing child-woman.

"I do care!" Merri insisted furiously.

"Then you should have honored your commitment to me, and gone willingly to my son's bed!" The Sultan's eyes snapped with ire.

Merri gritted her teeth. "I have told you and told you—" she stated with slow, evenly spaced words, "I was not responsible for my actions. Had I been sober and alert, I would have chosen to fulfill my word to you and your son. I

am still willing to do so. What must I do to convince you of my sincerity?"

"Certainly more than you did the last time we played this scene."

Susan's head went back and forth, watching Merri and Selim sparring. "The two of you are somewhat alike. It's true," she insisted when both Selim and Merri stared at her in consternation. "Merri, while not a despot, you have been known to bully one into doing what you wish. In fact, because your home-life was a series of traumatic events, a steady diet of upheavals, you learned early on to maneuver people and events so they came out the way you wanted. In short, you are a despot-in-training; albeit a benevolent one."

Merri stood there with her mouth hung open as she turned to Selim.

"You, sire, on the other hand, are leagues in advance of Merri when it comes to despotism. You've had years of absolute rule to perfect your skills in manipulation and trickery. You wield enormous power, not hesitating to administer judgment in life and death situations, and have grown inured to the softer emotions of love and affection. You are capable of acts of mercy, but are seldom motivated by kindness. Your wants and needs are paramount to you, taking precedence in all things. Sometimes, even over justice."

"I am nothing like that!"

"I am not a despot!"

"You are a trouble maker, which is why I call you the Storm-bringer!"

"Well, you are a ravisher of women and make with no mistake about it, the world will know of your perfidy!"

The fight waged on. The Sultan reverted to his usual threats and coercion; Merri retreating into an adamantine stubbornness. Down at her side, her hands tightened into fists, and she was suddenly tired of all their fighting.

"Stop it!" she ordered shrilly, driven beyond exasperation by their continued arguments, their selfish determination to win. Moving to stand between them, she held a hand up on either side of her body, silently daring them to pass her improvised barrier. "I am sick to death of this fighting and posturing!" she said, words spilling out of control. "You neither of you have a care for those of us caught up in this situation with you. The Prince, Seana, myself ... we all should have a voice in determining the outcome of our lives!" She paused, gathering her breath, her courage. "I am entering this equation," she announced firmly. "I have a ... bargain of my own to make."

The silence that met her declaration was fraught with disbelief. Then both antagonists spoke at once...

"Well, well...! It seems my frozen Snow hides the heart of a volcano!"

"Susan, no!"

"Susan, yes!" Merri's blond cousin replied adamantly. "And why not Susan?" she asked. "Do you think you are the only one who can dictate terms and make soul-destroying transactions? Are you the only one capable of heroic decisions? I do not need taking care of, Merri. I can take care

of myself ... and sometimes, I can protect my own interests ... and those of my friends."

"But you do not have to do this" Merri protested.

"Yes, I do! And for the same reasons you made that earlier bargain, the exact same reason." She watched Merri's eyes widen, and knew her cousin understood her unspoken motivation. She only wished Merridyth would be as understanding as she, herself had been when the tables had been reversed.

"I am waiting to hear what bargain you offer," Selim interrupted the women's conversation without apology.

Merridyth turned on the Sultan, almost spiting in her resentful anger. "This is all your fault!" she accused bitterly. "If not for your infernal intentions, my cousin would not feel compelled to—" She broke off suddenly, lifting a hand to her forehead and brushing off a wayward fall of hair. She swayed on her feet, her knees weak; barely able to support her weight. Her face was pale. Perspiration dotted her skin, giving it a pearlescent glow; attractive, but dangerous in her weakened condition.

"Permit her to sit down, please!" Susan begged the Sultan, reminding him Merri had only just risen from a sick-bed. She breathed a sigh of relief when he magnanimously nodded his consent. She watched gestured for a eunuch to bring a backless stool and place it near the dais where the Sultan's throne rested.

"Thank you," she breathed, newly aware of how much power this man held over her and her friends. She could only imagine how exhausted Merri was by the alacrity with which

she sank onto the low camp chair. By sheer force of will, she clasped her hands together, holding herself back from rushing to Merri's side.

"Now that your cousin, the Storm-bringer is somewhat recovered, will you now share with us your plans?"

Merri attempted to rise from her perch on the stool, determined to reassure Susan that her sacrifice was not necessary, but was waved back by a pass of her cousin's hand.

"Certainly, my Lord," Susan said. She lifted her chin in an unconscious imitation of Merri's practiced gesture. "I propose an exchange. Seana's safe return for my ... surrender."

A crack of laughter escaped the Sultan. "What kind of bargain is that?" he chuckled. "I already own you. You already occupy my bed."

"But not willingly. You control my body and, yes, you elicit a response from me even when I fight you with all my being. But I have lain beside you afterwards, and I know you want something more ... You want what I refuse to give you."

Selim looked a little uncomfortable at having Merri hear what Susan was revealing, however, he chose to have her continue. "And what do you think that is...?"

"You want my willing participation, my active enjoyment and my arms enfolding you rather than pushing you away. You crave at least the semblance of a loving relationship ... true?"

Selim turned away and walked back to his throne. He sat with a heavy sigh, leaned back, and simply looked at Susan from under hooded lids, his expression guarded and closed.

"Su-san!" Merri implored in a small voice that broke in the midst of the name.

Susan ignored the plea. "Wouldn't you like me to initiate the encounters sometimes? Does it not wear on you to always be the supplicant? For that is what you are—what you do. Your body begs, though your mouth is silent. Your empty arms speak louder than your words ... and they tell a different story altogether."

Selim held up a hand, the imperial gesture enough to stop her words, but not her speaking eyes. "What would your bargain demand of me? What would you expect of me?"

"Forgive Merri her trespass against you. Allow her to fulfill the bargain she made with you."

"Done."

"Give Seana back to us."

Selim frowned. "That I cannot do."

"You mean you will not do it," Merri accused, eyes narrowed in scorn.

"No, I mean I *cannot* return her to you." He heaved an exasperated sigh. "But I will tell you one thing," he said, "I tire of your interference. For the moment, this conversation is between the *haseki* and me. If you persist in participating where you are not welcome, I will have you removed."

Her pardon was too new, and Merri was not willing to chance angering the Sultan beyond what his uncertain tempter would allow. She bit her bottom lip, worrying the tender flesh as she conceded the battle to Susan.

"Why do you say Seana is not able to return to us? Are you not the Sultan?" Susan taunted, driven by desperation.

"Master of all you survey? Surely there is nothing you cannot control, no situation you cannot overpower."

A dread thought crossed Susan's mind. The same possibility must have occurred to Merridyth, for she sprang up from the stool, forgetful and uncaring of her recent bout of weakness, gasping, "Oh, no...!"

"Selim, have you had her ... put to death?" It was the hardest question Susan had ever asked, for she feared the answer more than she feared her unwanted, growing feelings for the Sultan.

Selim turned a disapproving glare upon Susan, the fierce expression furrowing wrinkles across his forehead. "She is one of Allah's chosen—one who has been touched by the deity's finger. It is forbidden to harm such as she. I am hurt by your suspicions. She lives," he stated coldly, "but in another man's harem. She was my gift to him."

Susan did not understand the significance of his words, did not care for anything but Seana's return. "Why can you not just order him to give her back?"

"Not even a Sultan may violate a man's private seraglio. When a Sultan gives a virgin from his own harem, it is a great honor. It would be considered an insult to merely keep the woman as chattel. The man receiving such a gift marries the woman, thereby forming a bond of family with the Sultan. It could be considered justification for revolution against my rule should I demand the woman back without provocation."

Merri slumped down on the stool, more tired and dejected than she had ever been. "Then all is lost for her."

"I refuse to believe that." Susan moved to confront Selim. "Can you get the man to allow a visit? Here or at his home?" When the Sultan did not answer right away, she added, "I would still honor the bargain if you could just let us see her. We need to know she is all right."

"My word will not suffice?"

Both women looked at him askance, their glances so similar and synchronized it startled a laugh out of the potentate. "I suppose not!" he said when he'd finished laughing. "Very well," he concurred, "I will arrange something. However, I have some stipulations of my own."

Susan straightened her shoulders and braced herself. "Go on."

"First," Selim ticked the points off his fingers, "the Storm-bringer goes to my son this very night."

"But she is still ill!" Susan argued to no avail.

"The night's activity will not require much energy on her part this first time," the Sultan pointed out matter-of-factly. "She is, after all, a virgin. Jamal will not expect anything out of the way." He waited to see if either woman had any opposition before continuing. "My second stipulation requires you begin fulfilling your half of this bargain—as a show of good intentions—before the projected visit with your red-haired friend." He trained his intent stare Susan's way. Under that direct gaze, she felt the room heat up as the temperature rose to an uncomfortable degree ... or was it only her?

"When would you expect that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Immediately," Selim answered quickly. "Tonight. Now!"

Now? Susan had expected to have at least a couple of days to prepare herself before having to uphold her side of any bargain. *So much for that!* She thought wryly. She nodded her head, conceding. "Very well ... tonight."

"Susan you do not have to do this for me—" Merri moaned.

"Merri, do not worry so!" Susan pleaded. "I know what I am doing! Believe me and trust me."

"Instead of worrying over Susan, who is at least accustomed to what she faces," the Sultan cut in not unkindly, "I suggest you study how you might please my son. You haven't much time." He grinned, gold eyes mocking. "Jamal having waited such a long time for you, I am sure this night will not come quickly enough for him. Nor will it hold enough hours in which to do all he has planned. A rest might be in order."

Chapter Forty-six

Peacock Villa in Istanbul, home of Emil, Bay of Seyhan

"What is the meaning of this?" Emil stormed about his private harem, anger evident in his flashing eyes and harsh words. He came to a stop before a low couch upon which was huddled the pathetic bundle of clothes that was the Lady Seana McCarris.

She was a mess—hair matted with bits of food, clothes likewise soiled and smelly—her skin, all that was exposed, was filthy. And she stank to high heaven.

"When I give orders, I expect them to be carried out expressly." The Bey's voice dipped in threat, his volume lowering in direct contrast to his rising temper until his words were a raspy whisper.

"Master! We attempted to—"

An up-flung hand stopped the flow of excuses. "I did not say *attempt* to keep her clean, did I?" he asked, his tones coldly sarcastic.

The harried mistress of the harem shook her bowed head. "No, *effendi*, but—"

"Whenever I come to visit with her, I expect her to be clean, presentable, and dressed as befits a wife offered from the hand of the Sultan, himself. The message will be driven home with severe punishments all around, should I find it necessary to repeat myself again!"

Emil squatted down to peer into Seana's grubby face, a careful hand smoothing back her wild tresses. "There, little

one, little Seana..." he crooned, his voice soft and unthreatening. She trembled under his hand, and his lips folded tight with displeasure. "Why is she terrified?"

The Mistress shrugged her shoulders "Perhaps it is the presence of the eunuchs."

The Bey slanted a disbelieving look at her through his slitted eyes.

"We have done nothing to her, Master!" the woman cried at his skeptical glance. "She is always fearful. We cannot make her understand even simple things like bathing or eating!"

Feeling a tug on his robes, Emil glanced down to see Seana absently playing with the cord of his belt, twisting it about her slim fingers—unaware it was attached to one of those frightening male entities. She hummed in an off-key, oddly-melodic drone. He patted her fingers, stilling their random movements. "In the Sultan's harem," he said, "she was always clean and presentable. The same will be so for her here."

He gently tilted her face until he could gaze into her blank multi-colored eyes, fascinated by their swirls of gold, green and brown. A small pitying smile came to his lips. "I would you were whole once more, little bird," he sighed, remembering her as the vibrant, intelligent woman she had once been. For a startled moment, he fancied he saw a flicker of response ... a moment of sanity, but the moment passed when Seana jerked away, chattering gibberish in a low monotone, the blankness returning so completely Emil

reluctantly discounted his impression as mere wishful thinking.

Shura, a tall beautiful blonde *haseki*, pushed her way through the eunuchs and women surrounding the Bey to stand defiantly at his side. Her appearance sent Seana scuttling around, trying to hide from the towering woman, distressed moans pouring out of her slack mouth.

Her mouth twisted in disgust, Shura called after Seana, "You had better move, disgusting one!" The frightened girl scurried away, crawling faster when she heard the up-raised voice behind her.

"Why do you tolerate that defective woman?" she asked Emil scornfully, haughtily. So sure of her standing with him, she neglected to address him by title. "She is touched by her own hand, and can only bring misfortune upon you and this house. She should be thrown into the streets to fend for herself!"

Shura looked around, her glance encouraging others to voice their support of her statements. No one dared to comment, having just observed the Master's obvious preference for the red-headed woman, regardless of her unfortunate mental status.

Emil watched through narrowed eyes as Seana frantically put more distance between herself and the blond beauty. Knowing his current favorite's tendencies toward cruelty, he was fairly sure he had found the reason for Seana's constant fearfulness. He sighed. Shura was innovative and aggressive in the sheets, loving it rough, and he had needed her ferociousness at times, to satisfy his fierce sexual tendencies.

However, the pleasure he received did not blind him to her faults.

In the main, the women of his household could hold their own against her, for there was only so much power a woman of the harem could wield. The wife of his youth—the only woman to bear him children, thus hold real power in his home—was long dead. His wife's mother would have nothing to do with ruling his harem, preferring to tend to her own arcane business, so he had made Hakima, his wife's old servant-woman, his *kalfa*: Mistress of the House.

Shura had no status other than *haseki*, and if she had ignored his commands, her sexual expertise would not protect her from his wrath.

"Shura, have you been tormenting this poor woman?" he asked in a cold voice.

Shura drew herself up in indignation. "I would not stoop so low, Emil!" she cried. "I caught the little camel spittle pawing through my things, and ran her away from my room, giving her a few solid smacks. I do not want her around me, her presence distresses me."

Emil's face darkened with rage. "I ordered she was never to be struck. You have disobeyed me, Shura, and I am highly displeased."

Shura moved to stand in front of Emil, allowing her breasts to brush against his robes. "I can take away your displeasure, my love," she purred, lifting her hands to his chest.

He caught them before they could land. "You have borne me no children."

A practiced pout pursed Shura's already full lips. "Not ... yet, my Lord."

"And are you now with child, Shura?"

The woman sullenly shook her head.

"Good! I do not like separating a mother from her child. Kalid!"

An eunuch stepped forth. "Lord...?"

"Take her to Shirka. Tell him to whip her well, and then sell her. See it done at once!"

"As you wish, my Lord!"

No longer interested in Shura's fate, Emil ignored the cries and pleas pouring from her panicked lips. All his attention was on Seana, who, driven by fear, had managed to wedge herself under a small corner table. He tried everything: blandishments and imaginative threats. Nothing drew her forth. Finally, he resorted to bribery. Dangling a pair of ornate shoes before her, he caught her eyes, distracting her with their bright bead-work and shiny threads. Seana caught at the shoes with eager hands, following Emil from under the table while her attention—admittedly of a short span—was focused on the glittering items.

Once he had her out, he handed her over to Hakima. "Care for her well, *kalfa*. Not only because I command it, but because the Sultan himself might one day inquire after her. I would not be found wanting in his service. I doubt any in this household would survive his royal displeasure."

"Sh-she will be w-well cared for, my Lord!" the Mistress stuttered out, bulging eyes riveted on the girl's playthings,

her words tripping over themselves. "I shall personally see to it, if I must do it myself!"

"There is no need to exert yourself, Hakima," Emil returned, aware of the woman's stunned insight. "Your service and age have earned you rest. You have but to speak the orders. If there are not enough serving-women, you must inform Shirka, and he will supply you with all you need. Likewise, whatever my little bird might require, I want her to have it."

"I ... understand ... my Lord," Hakima said, bowing low, gaze on those significant pair of shoes. Whether this child regained her senses or not, she was destined to share the Master's bed. Given the important role this woman might one day play, Hakima took a closer, more discerning look at Seana and found that, under all that incrustated grime, her sturdy frame and face was beautiful. The Master had always had a preference for flame-bright hair. In fact, the *kalfa* saw many similarities between this young English captive and her former mistress.

"Inform Shirka when she is cleaned up," Emil instructed, "I want her delivered to my private chambers for every meal. She shall eat with me while I am in residence."

"Are you sure, Master?" Hakima asked diffidently. "She does not ... her eating habits are ... uhm ... uncivilized, to say the least. As you can see, she usually wears more than she eats."

"I see she has lost too much weight in just a month. I would monitor what she takes in." Emil's explanation was a rare departure from his usual stance. He wanted everyone to

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hear of his concern, and know he meant Seana to be treated well.

Hakima shrugged well-padded shoulders, and spread her hands. "It shall be as you wish, my master."

"Good!" Emil pressed the shoes into Seana's fascinated hands, and moved to the entrance. Before he left his harem quarters, he turned back to add, "See that she wears the shoes!"

When he was gone, Hakima muttered in a harried voice, "Allah, help us all!" Then she resignedly saw to the cleaning and preparing of her new mistress.

Chapter Forty-seven

The Sultan's quarters

Grand Seraglio

Selim had spent all the rest of the morning with Susan, *negotiating* the terms of her agreement. As a result, Selim had gone about wearing a perpetual smirk. Even the afternoon Divans—which were usually contentious and aggravating—had gone smoothly.

Tubal went from marveling over how reasonably his master was behaving, to cursing his unpredictability when, without explanation, the sultan suddenly called a halt mid-way the lengthy legal proceedings and returned to his quarters, claiming he had important negotiations to deal with for the remainder of the afternoon. His mood continued sublime into the evening, and as a token of his deep pleasure and satisfaction with his new favorite, he allowed Susan a few moments alone to meet Merri at the doors of their private quarters.

Susan gaped at her cousin in wordless awe. Never had Merri looked more beautiful. She realized Merri might complain that the preparations she'd had to endure before being considered presentable to the Emir had been extensive and exhaustive, but she had to admit they'd definitely been worthwhile.

A hot mixture of almond paste, oil, lemon juice and honey—an ancient mixture used in Eastern harems since biblical days—had been used as a depilatory, painted onto on

her arms and legs and in the hidden wells of her arms to be peeled off when dried and tacky. Next, she had enjoyed a hot, soaking bath in waters scented with jasmine and hyacinth blossoms, followed by a hot-oil treatment to hair, scalp and skin. A deep, full-body massage came next, administered by a muscular eunuch. She had drawn the line at the scheduled soap-and-water enema, adamant in her shocked refusals.

Fortified by her victory over that relatively minor issue, she had found it easier to resist the traditional henna stain to feet, hands and scalp, and much more importantly, she won the argument over retaining her pubic hair. The odalisques charged with preparing Merri, being zealous in the pursuit of their duty and frightened of what the Mistress might say, had been hesitant to consider these insidious changes. They'd deferred the decision to the Mistress of the Girls. They were surprised—to say the least—when she allowed the deviations. Merri, herself went a long way towards alleviating everyone's concerns by agreeing to take an additional bath thereby insuring she would be as clean as soap and water—outside her body—could get her. Now, standing in the Sultan's doorway, she was as ready as she would ever be.

She stood before Susan, a smile warring with an uneasy frown, her midnight-hued tresses swept back from her face with two jeweled combs, the heavy lustrous bulk of it flowing down her back to swing in the small of her back, brushing her full buttocks. Her diaphanous harem garb was very similar to the set she had worn for that last disastrous rendezvous with the *emir*; pale lilac and fitted tightly to the abundant curves

of her lush form. A wispy veil lay against the side of her left cheek, attached to one of the hook-and-eye fasteners. Her two eunuch shadows would make sure she secured it firmly before escorting her across the gardens to the Prince's apartments.

The Eastern Sovereign's summons had come as an unpleasant surprise. Merri had seen more of the Sultan than she'd liked—once earlier that morning having been enough for her, though he obviously thought otherwise. So, here she was, wanting nothing more than to be gone again. "Why am I here, Susan?" she asked, "And why now, when I was on my way to Jar—to meeting with the Prince?"

"I am not really sure," Susan answered, "except, the Sultan has expressed two very good reasons—hard as they will be for you to credit."

"Behold me all ears."

"Well ... first, I think he wants you to see that I am all right ... that my spirit hasn't been broken or some such. As you can see, I am in no danger of committing self-immolation ... a sacrificial atoning on the alter of lost virtue as it were—" she smiled at the thought.

"Good heavens, Susan." Merri said, "How can you joke about something like this?"

Susan sighed. "You will soon find out, will you not?"

Merri shuddered. "Please. Do not remind me of what I must face."

"And that shudder you just gave is the second reason Selim sent for you, to ease your fears of the Prince."

"*Selim*? My, we have gotten chummy quickly, haven't we?" Merri taunted. "Whatever happened to his title?" Merri's eyes narrowed in unpleasant suspicion. "Just what all has he accomplished in the few hours I've been gone?"

Susan flushed darkly and turned away from her cousin's mockery. Her eyes, before she hid them, were bruised and dulled from deep pain; a pain only Merri, who knew her well, could have so easily afflicted.

"Sue. Oh, Susan, I'm sorry." Merry went to her cousin. Putting her arms about her, she rocked her younger relative in silence. "I am so sorry," she whispered after a while.

"It's okay. I am fine." The automatic disclaimer was as stiff and cold as the feel of Susan's body.

"It is not okay ... you are *not* okay, Susan. Nothing about our situation is okay."

"My situation is more than ... okay." she admitted softly, pulling away enough to see Merri's face, knowing hers was naked, openly vulnerable to her cousin's return scrutiny. "I ... love him, Merri. At least ... I believe I am falling in love with him."

Seeing Merri was about to say something, feeling sure it would not be positive, Susan rushed to finish, "It is not just the—the love-making. It is so many things about him."

"Name one." Merri challenged, crossing her arms.

Susan's eyes sparked in militant fervor. "Well, for starters, before you saw me this morning, you'd heard I struck the Sultan and feared he might have killed me. I had. Yet, he forgave me."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Susan," Merri all but yelled. "The man raped you in front of a room full of eunuchs. You call that forgiveness?"

"It wasn't a room-full, only three—and they could not see anything." Susan defended. "And he stopped before—" her words stopped at Merri's look of skepticism "He did stop." she insisted.

"Susan." Merri said, shaking her head, "You have convinced yourself you love this man because you could not survive what he does to you otherwise."

"I *love* what he does to me." Susan blurted out, angry enough at Merri's high-handed pontificating not to care about her cousin's possible reaction to her wanton statement.

Merri's flabbergasted look would have been comical to her under other circumstances.

"Yes. I know I should not." Susan admitted boldly. "We both know society and custom say I should kill myself because I am no longer pure, no longer fit to be a decent man's wife. Well, I am not such a hypocrite. You know I never cared for society. I was brought up to consider more important things than snobbish approbation. I never cared about snagging a husband from among the ton, and I do not mourn the hypothetical loss of one now."

Susan took a deep, fortifying breath. "Truthfully, had I known what awaited me when I was first summoned to the Sultan's bed, I would have ... I would have *run* to him, needing no urging." Susan took an agitated turn about the floor. "I tell you, I never knew there could be so much ... *pleasure* ... so much ecstasy contained in my body"—she

broke off, pressing both hands against her belly as if to capture the joy she spoke of, glancing down as though checking to make sure the abundance did not leak out between her cupped fingers—"yet I overflow with it, explode with streams and streams of it whenever Selim touches me." Her voice was breathy and soft, her eyes dreamy.

"I am gratified to hear you say so, my *ikbal*, for I have discovered pleasure has a name, and it is: *Sari Kar*."

Both girls turned toward the entrance. The Sultan, having entered the room silently, had obviously overheard most of their conversation. Both women colored up. Merri, because he had eavesdropped on such a private talk, and Susan because she had just revealed to the man standing arrogantly in the doorway, just how deeply her emotions were involved. Despite her consternation, when he opened his arms, she flew into them.

Selim enfolded the slim English woman in his arms, bending his head to take her lips, his manhood rising eagerly as soon as he touched her, saw her. It had been thus since he first took her, that sultry afternoon a month ago. He was beginning to believe it might be so for the rest of his life. He had thought himself resigned to caring for another woman who could not, would not love him in return, yet hearing her admit to her feelings for him had set off such a series of explosive emotions in his heart that he was still reeling. He wasn't sure what the future held for them, but he knew he would never let her go. Never.

"I came to share *tay* with you and your kinswoman before she goes to become my kinswoman." Selim sat on a low couch and reclined back, his hands still about Susan's waist.

"I do not care for tea ... I am sure you will understand why." Merri retorted. She frowned, upset and very uncomfortable at watching the ease with which the Sultan and her cousin touched and caressed each other. "But what did you mean, I am about to become your kinswoman?"

Selim sighed. His whisper audible to Merri, he set Susan away from him. "I cannot think when you are this close to me. I want only one thing ... to be alone with you."

"I ... want that, too." she admitted in a breathless rush of words, looking reluctant to be parted from him.

Merridyth was grateful her cousin managed to resist the urge to snuggle back against the sultan. She simply found it wrong on so many levels.

Selim closed his eyes to gather his shredding control. "Behave." he ordered sharply, "Lest we further embarrass young *Simsiyah Gul*. She hasn't your experience ... *yet*." He turned his twinkling gaze toward Merridyth. Stunned, she realized the Turk was extremely handsome. Laughing and relaxed, he resembled his son, to an inordinate degree.

No matter how much he might resemble her beloved, the man standing before her was far different from his son. *Unlike Jared*, Merri reminded herself, *Selim is a manipulative despot, sneaky, conniving ... and those are his better points*. She could not afford to lose sight of that.

"You need not worry about the tea," the Sultan was saying. "I have tasters to assure that no poison or drug is

slipped into the food. As for your earlier question, all will be revealed at the appropriate time."

An unseen signal brought servants bearing trays of sweets and the inevitable tray of coffee and tea makings. "If you like," Selim offered politely, "you may have the coffee rather than the tea."

"I would prefer neither one," Merri stated, eyeing the trays askance. "I am ... somewhat bilious—nerves, I think."

"I must insist." the Sultan said, his tones hardening. "It is considered an insult for a guest to refuse the host's offered hospitality. Earlier, you were anxious to sue for peace. Do you not still wish for an end to the hostility between us?" he asked.

Merri reluctantly nodded.

Selim smiled. "I, too, wish to be at peace with you, kinswoman of my *ikbal*. If *Allah* wills it, you may someday be *teyze* to my children. Once you have eaten or drank at my table, there can no longer be war between us. It is the law of the desert and of the *Koran*."

As far as she could tell, both the Sultan's gaze and words were sincere. For Susan's sake, Merri could not bring herself to disregard his overtures of peace. With a resigned sigh, she sank into a graceful curtsy before sitting on a plump, oversized cushion. "I will have tea," she said in resigned tones, "one lump of sugar, please."

The food-taster was an emaciated eunuch. A serving girl presented a sampling of each item of food or drink to the taster on a golden platter. He would eat it, and when—after a few moments—no ill effects were noted, the servant would

serve the Sultan and his guests. The tea was poured from one pot into four cups. After the taster had partaken of his, the odalisque proceeded to pass around the hot drink. The Sultan was served first, then Susan, then Merri.

Merri chuckled inwardly. The odalisque certainly knew the new pecking order. Having just been declared the favorite of the motherless Sultan, Susan had risen to the fourth most powerful position in the Ottoman kingdom.

For some reason, her cousin's good spirits made her own rise, and Merri was able to hold a polite conversation with the Sultan as she sipped at her tea. There was no bitter aftertaste, and feeling a bit more confident, she proceeded to drain the cup. The tea helped to settle her jumping nerves, calmed her tummy nicely.

The servant took her empty cup, replacing it on the ravaged tray. Merri did not recall having eaten so many pastries, but between her, the Sultan and Susan, the sweets were all gone.

"Your appetite seems to have improved," the Sultan noted with a sly smile.

"I suppose so." Merri answered uncertainly, marveling over how much she had managed to eat.

"I am pleased you were able to partake," Selim said. "Now, I believe it is time for you to go. My son will be awaiting you."

"Yes," Merri agreed, rising to her feet as gracefully as possible. "No need putting this off any longer."

The Sultan stood, silently watching as the two women exchanged hugs. Long after Merri had left, he gazed after her, lost in introspection. Then he laughed.

Susan leaned up on her tip-toes to wipe a crumb away from his bottom lip, her body brushing lightly against his. He stilled abruptly, body responding eagerly to her nearness.

"What do you find so humorous?" she asked.

"Appetites ... and how they grow." Selim growled, turning Susan into a tight embrace.

She leaned back against his arms to laugh up into his face. "Would you mind elaborating on that statement since you have me totally confused?"

"My son is going to have an armful of eager woman in less than half an hour." Selim crowed, twirling Susan about in a circle. "Very eager..."

"How can you possibly know that?" Susan wondered aloud.

"The same way I know you will soon be burning for my caresses."

"I always burn for your touch." Susan admitted in a shy voice, still uncomfortable with sexy repartee, but more than willing to grow accustomed.

"Yes, you are." Selim rewarded her with an opened-mouth kiss, visibly pleased with her honest acknowledgment.

"However, this time the burning will be a mutual conflagration. There was an aphrodisiac in our cups of tay."

"What?"

"A prized compound here in the east; an agent that greatly heightens sexual desire. One takes it in order to enjoy their partner to the utmost. I partook along with you, as this night, I intend to arouse, and then satisfy your every wanton fantasy and unspoken desire. Come, *Kar*," he offered, "sit with me and we will await the affects of the elixir together."

Susan's smile faded from her face, a cold knot forming in her belly. "You didn't. Please, Selim. Tell me you didn't."

"But what is wrong, my Snow? Why are you so upset?"

"You had no right!" Susan cried, tears crystallizing the clear green luminosity of her eyes.

"Right? *Right*? You forget to whom you are speaking." His face flushed with ire, his quick anger as great as his lack of understanding.

"How did you do it?" Susan demanded to know. "Is that poor eunuch somewhere burning with desire right now with no way to assuage it?"

"Of course he is not. Our cups were prepared by Tubal before the tray was brought into the room. The drug is strictly controlled for it is highly poisonous in larger doses. The only way to safely administer it is to lightly dust the bowl of the cup, blowing out the excess. That powder is extremely expensive and powerful. I would not waste the pleasure of it on a mere eunuch, though why you should concern yourself with a eunuch is beyond me."

"I couldn't care less about the eunuch," Susan shouted. "What I care about is the right to make choices of my own. I might have been interested in trying that ... that ... whatever you call it."

"An aphrodisiac," Selim informed her. "From Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and sexual love—"

Susan felt like yanking her hair out. On second thought, she decided she'd rather yank out his. "I am not interested. Get me paper and pen. I need to write a note."

Selim bristled. "To whom?"

"I do not have time to cater to your ridiculous jealousy, Selim. Find me something to write with," she ordered, as imperious as he in her anxious need.

The Sultan sat down and crossed his legs. "I do not believe I wish to assist you in this endeavor," he said, sulkily.

"Don't be petulant." Susan begged. "I really do not have much time."

"Time for what?"

"To undo the damage you have caused with your heavy-handed manipulating." Susan paused and heaved a sigh. He looked so good, sitting there with that childish pout on his handsome face. His lips were very red. They always looked as though he had rouged them, or as if he'd just finished eating berries, or exchanging deep plumbing kisses.

Stop. She closed her eyes against temptation, shaking her head as she caught her imagination up sharply. The drug racing through her system was the cause of her splintered attention. She could almost feel it—liquid lightning—as it coursed its way through every blood vessel, sparking heated responses in every limb. Even her toes had begun to tingle. Time was running out. Soon she would have to satisfy the itch building under her skin, but before that happened, she had to help Merri.

"Selim, try to understand," she implored. "You did not see the Duke when he brought Merri back to the harem that last time. He was torn asunder by the thought she had taken something to help her ... *stomach* being with him. But he believes her to be an innocent, unfamiliar with passion. How

do you think he will treat her when she acts like a whore with him?"

Selim face froze in an arrested moue. "I had not thought of that." he conceded shamefacedly, recalling a snippet of a recent conversation with his son. *Can you imagine how that would make me feel, Sir? Knowing she was with me on sufferance? Forced into intimacy against her will?*

Selim clapped his hands. When an eunuch appeared, he ordered, "Fetch paper and pen for the *ikbal*. *Yibbi. Yibbi.*"

While they waited for the eunuch to return with the writing materials, Susan and Selim shared another torrid kiss, unable to keep their hands off each other. "The drug works faster the more agitated we become," he cautioned, cradling her against him in a soothing, calming grip. "Our anger has increased the drug's action within us." As he held her, he came as close to an apology as he ever would by saying, "I meant no harm by using the drug. It was the girl's reticence that caused the problem last time, and I only meant to make it easier on her ... for your sake."

Susan soothed the hair back off his forehead and planted a forgiving kiss there. "I believe you. I am sorry I became angry and harangued you so."

Selim chuckled and squeezed her tight in a bear-hug, squashing her pliant breasts against his chest. "I like to see you on fire ... even when it is anger directed at me. I will confess that I found your former silence unnerving."

"I did, also." Susan smiled into his shirt. "Silence is totally unlike my usual behavior, and I warn you ... the day will come when you crave that silence back."

"Never." A discreet knock signaled the eunuch's return, and Selim reluctantly set Susan aside. "Write your note quickly," he urged her. "I would be done with this, and on to more important matters." His fevered glance was full of meaning.

With a knowing smirk, Susan bent to the paper, rapidly scribbling a note. "What is the problem?" she taunted, knowing she played with fire, planning on fanning the flames. "Can it be your ... *appetite* is up?"

Laughing out loud, Selim came to press his rampant body against her raised derriere, letting her feel his urgent, heavy arousal. "Something is up," he purred threateningly, "and hungry for you. You may call it anything you like, as long as you feed it."

Chapter Forty-eight

Jared had no appetite. For food. He sighed, restless gaze falling on the silver serving trays filled with tempting hors d'oeuvres. They remained as full now as when Seuliman had delivered them. The food, though excellently prepared, did not tempt him. The dainty arrangements, beautifully laid out, remained untouched and untasted.

He struggled with another, more demanding appetite. Need for Merridyth raged in him. He wanted only her; craved her kisses, her shy, sweetly innocent responses to his ardor.

Tonight! He rejoiced. Tonight I will feast on ambrosia and sip at the fount of youth. I shall enter the portals of heaven and taste the nectar of the gods.

"The *hanim* has arrived, my Lord." Seuliman's agitated voice interrupted his musings. Jared looked up to find the servant standing in the doorway, hands clasped behind him to hide his vicarious excitement.

"Escort her to this room, Seuliman. I will see her here."

"Surely not ... uh ... my Lord, are you sure? I have ordered the salon prepared."

"Here, please." Jared insisted. "I want no reminders of the last catastrophe and this room will be fine for our purposes. Besides, we will end here anyway."

Seuliman covertly scanned the sleeping chamber, his pinched expression making it clear he was appalled at the disorder. "As you wish, my Lord," he acceded, moving about twitching covers straight and surreptitiously picking up stray

articles of clothing—the Prince not being the tidiest of men. "I shall escort the young *hanim* here at once."

Jared closed his eyes, easing his head back against the low back of the couch and waited for Seuliman to return with Merridyth. Raising his arms above his head, he stretched out the kinks in his long body. He was casually dressed, having recently come in from riding. The almost sheer lawn shirt he wore moved with him, the finely woven material stroking his furred chest. His legs were encased in tight riding breeches, his feet shod in riding boots, the highly polished leather ending at his knees.

His last encounter with Merridyth had ended badly; he was determined such would not be the case a second time. She was coming to him in honesty, honoring her debt to the Sultan, even though the prospect clearly frightened her. She deserved to be treated with all honor. For that reason, he had not planned any elaborate seduction scenes. He'd use no gimmicks or games to entice or entrap her. They would simply talk first. He wished to clear the air, make her aware of several misconceptions. Afterwards, they might decide to—

"Y-Your Grace...?" The timid voice sounded loud in the still room.

Jared's eyes snapped open, and he came to his feet in an abrupt, yet graceful motion. He stood gazing down at the woman who had inhabited his dreams, epitomized his hopes and speeded his heart-rate whenever his thoughts strayed to her. *To finally have her here, in the same room.*

"Lady Merridyth. Please, come have a seat," Jared offered his hand to assist her over to the couch.

She hesitated a moment, then took the proffered appendage, settling gently against the cushions that served as back-rests. "Thank you, Your Grace. I feel I should inform you that I am not entitled to be addressed as a 'Lady'. My father is no Lord."

"On the contrary," Jared disagreed. "You are gently-bred, intelligent, and honorable. That alone would be grounds for the courtesy. And please, call me Jared."

"That would not be proper, Your Grace," Merri pointed out dryly. "Of course, this situation I find myself in is not a very proper, lady-like one."

"True," Jared conceded. "However, a real 'Lady' rises above all situations to make them her own."

Merri smiled. "You have a quaint way of turning a phrase. If I say 'thank you', I am assuming you account me a real Lady. If I demur, you might brand me coy. Either way, I am shown in a bad light; being too proud or too timid."

"I perceive you perfection."

Merri dropped her eyes. "And I detect a master flatterer at work."

"Flattery, my mother was wont to say, are but lies dressed up in truth's clothes; hard to discern and harder to resist."

"A wise woman, your mother."

"She is that. But then, having met her, you would already know that."

"I interacted with her for a moment, only. Our acquaintance was ... fleeting."

"Never-the-less, she was most impressed with your compassionate assistance. She holds you in high regard."

Remind me to let you read some of the letters my mother has written while I have been exiled here. You will be surprised at how often your name appears."

"I but did what anyone would have done in the crisis of the moment," Merri disclaimed modestly, uncomfortable with his praise.

"Not everyone." Jared said, his face grown hard with bitter memories. "There were not many in that courtroom that showed sympathy for the mother of a traitor."

"We both know I did not deem you to be disloyal."

"And I shall never be able to tell you what that meant to me. You were like a ray of light shining in my darkness."

"More flattery, Your Grace?"

"Not about that. *Never* about that."

"You put me to the blush."

Jared raised her face with a gentle hand under her chin. "I have never used flattery as a device to advance my cause with a woman." He looked directly into Merridyth's startled eyes. "You may rest assured that every word out of my mouth is sincere. My mother is not the only one who holds you in high esteem."

Flustered, not knowing how to respond, Merri lowered her gaze. "I thank you," she whispered. "Please do not ... take offense when I tell you ... I am finding this very difficult. You see, I do not know how I should go on."

Chancing a quick glance upward, she surprised a slight smile tilting the corners of the Duke's wide mouth, his amber eyes hotly intent upon her face; the look in them robbing her of breath.

"I expected no differently," Jared said, his words bluntly direct. "You are an innocent, inexperienced young woman unsure of what to expect, and therefore feel yourself at a disadvantage." He pondered his next move for a minute. When next he spoke, he seemed to have come to a decision. "I have planned something that might make things a little easier for you. Will you come with me?" he requested, jumping up from the pillows and extending his hands to help her up.

She took them, gazing up into his face in trusting innocence, her open expression revealing every thought and emotion running through her mind. Jared's heart caught at the look of adoration plainly evident on Merri's guileless face. He determined to do nothing that would wipe that look away.

He led her to a sparsely furnished antechamber where a small man waited. The little man wore a pair of round, wire-framed glasses perched on the end of his nose, and he had to keep pushing them up as they refused to stay perched upon that narrow proboscis. He was seated at a long work-table. At his elbow rested a giant tome; its plain cover of dark brown leather soft with the suppleness of age. The court scribe, for such he was, jumped up when they entered, startled from whatever faraway place his thoughts had been. With much clearing of his throat, he shook his robes about himself and harrumphed a few more times for good measure.

"*Harrumph*. Well, it is past time ... past time, my Prince. Hmm. Let's get to it then, shall we?" He riffled the pages of the book, fingers flying over the thin vellum. "Ah. Here we go. Now, name of Prince: *mumble, mumble* ... name of consort?"

He glanced up, a bird-like twist of his head centering his left eye on the two silent people standing in the doorway. "Well? Well? Name of consort? Come on, now. Unlike you two, I haven't got all night."

"Merridyth St. John-Smythe," Jared replied, trying and failing to hide a smile.

"Harem name?"

His voice growing chill, Jared ordered, "Let the first name suffice."

The small man slammed shut his book to glare at the Emir. "Suffice. Suffice, he says? Do you know nothing of records? I cannot record half the information. I must record all. I must cross-reference this, double record that." He tapped the top of the weighty tome. "Does this Book of Nights look like a trifling matter? Shall we have half a princely heir nine months from now?"

"What nonsense are you spouting?" Jared asked, no longer amused by the small scribe.

"Half a record, half a prince. Or double the trouble. There are many women in the seraglio who have sons with royal blood, but no record of the official deed. If the mother is not recorded correctly, the child can never ascend the throne." the scribe warned. "Dire circumstances could come of not being exact ... Dire circumstances."

Merri, who had finally figured out what the scribe and his book was for, smiled with joy. Laying a placating hand over the Duke's, she swallowed back happy tears to say, "It is all right, my Lord." And to the palace recorder, "My harem name is *Simsiyah Gul*."

The man's sharp eyes glinted behind the shield of his glasses, as he stared at Merri. "*Harrumph. Harrumph.* Apt name. Wise, too."

Reopening his book, the scribe again flipped through the numerous pages until he arrived at the one he had begun writing upon moments ago. "*Mumble, mumble ... Ah. Occasion?*"

"One moment." Jared begged. Raising his voice, he called, "Now, Seuliman." He suddenly felt very nervous.

The eunuch entered the room carrying a small pillow. Resting on top was a dainty pair of slippers, heavily encrusted with jewels and embroidery; heavy gold and multi-colored threads vied with rubies, sapphires, emeralds and diamonds. Not one inch was left unadorned. The servant brought these to his master, his dark face wreathed in smiles.

Jared removed the slippers and turning to Merridyth, offered them to her, saying: "My Lady, by accepting these shoes as a token of my desire to care for all your needs for the rest of our lives, you become my wife by Turkish law. Are you willing to join your life with mine?"

"Are you sure?" Merri asked, in love and overwhelmed at his thoughtfulness.

"I have been sure since I first laid eyes on you across a noisy courtroom, years ago." A relieved smile tugged at Jared's lips. "Say yes, and take these shoes so I can cease shaking in my damned boots." he ordered playfully.

"Yes. Thank you. I will."

"I think that about covers everything." Feeling smug over her eagerness for him, Jared turned back to the scribe and said, "The occasion is *dügün*; our wedding."

"Congratulations. May Allah bless the union with many sons. Now if we may finish? I have three more appointments before I can retire for the evening."

* * * *

"I was afraid you would say no."

The scribe had quickly finished his part and departed, leaving them to return to the Duke's large sleeping-room. They reclined on the low couch, arms about each other as they talked. Merri shifted a little, settling deeper into Jared's cherishing embrace. "Why did you think that?"

"You were not well-disposed towards me when last we spoke," Jared reminded her.

"Yes, well, Susan convinced me I had jumped to conclusions where you were concerned. Once I calmed down, I just could not believe you were the kind of person who could play with a person's life so callously. I was determined to let you have your say." Merri pulled away and turned to meet his eyes. "I have a question for you—"

"Ask it."

"The last time I was here ... had you planned the wedding ceremony for then?"

"I had, yes. I knew you would keep your word and come to me. I also knew you would find it impossible—or at least—very difficult to forgive either yourself or me, if we made love without first making a binding commitment with each other."

Tears choked her, making it hard to speak. "I-I love you. So much."

Jared ran his hands down her arms and captured her hands, curling her fingers inside his own. His mouth stretched wide in a happy grin. "I also love you, Merridyth ... so much. For two long, lonely years, I have thought of you, dreamed of you, longed for you."

He bent over her where she lay on the couch, his head lowering to take her lips. Every sweep of his tongue elicited a burst of steamy pleasure within her, and she moaned into his open mouth, pressing a hand into his hair, fingers curling convulsively, bunching his raven tresses between them, using the unruly locks as purchase to pull him down onto her, turning his gentle kiss into a hot, lush sharing of mouths. She needed to feel his weight, his muscular body against her own feminine curves. Her hips sought his arousal, arching up from the couch in a frantic bid to align her aching body to his.

He endeared himself to her by being careful where he allowed his hands to roam, knowing she was still nervous about where this was all leading, cautious not to frighten her. She shivered with rising excitement, her skin flushing under his sweeping caresses. The feel of his arms about her incited waves of heat inside her. A pulse began beating between her legs, and she squeezed her knees together and shifted, seeking ease.

Jared tightened his grasp on her, his hands traveling a slow path from her shoulder-blades to the small of her back where he kneaded the tight muscles bunched there. Her body undulated under his stroking fingers and his body shuddered.

Lowering himself until his distended rod brushed against the juncture of her thighs, he stilled, letting her feel the heavy weight of his erection.

She knew he could feel the heart of her, the heated core of her sex radiating through the layers of her clothing, beckoning his straining manhood. All she could do was surrender to the heat.

Merri was burning, just burning up ... reduced to cinders where he touched her. And he touched her everywhere, in every way. She shuddered at the feel of his large, strong hands moving her here and there, turning her for his pleasure. She thrilled when he pressed her to his chest, flattening her swollen breasts, the pale peach crests tightening to diamond hardness. She used her smooth creamy flesh to taunt him, dragging his head, his delicious mouth to her swelling curves, daring him to conquer her. The cloth of her jacket grew wet under his ministrations, but the material muted the luscious feel of his lips and tongue, and in despair, Merri ripped at her jacket, desperate to bare herself to his hungry suckling.

Jared helped her, yanking the bolero down her shoulders, imprisoning her arms. His hands in the small of her back, he arched her up, flexing her backwards, allowing her breasts to ride high and free. His rough positioning jarred her bosom, and he froze, eyes riveted to her buoyant flesh, watching as the naked mounds bounced and jiggled with her movements.

His open mouth moved over her eyebrows, kissed her lids shut, then returned to her berry-ripe lips. He licked at the plump top curve, gathering its sweetness on his tongue. He

sucked the full bottom lip into his mouth, using his teeth to lightly abrade it, reluctantly releasing it to delve boldly back into the dark honeyed cavern of her mouth. With deep strokes, he instructed her, teaching her the motions of love until her lower body echoed the movements, rocking against the elongated evidence of his desire.

With a growl of need, he deepened the kiss again holding her cheeks between his hands and seeking the slick glide of her tongue. Strong suction brought the tender pink morsel to him, and he worshiped her, exploring the roof of her mouth, the ridges of her teeth. Claiming every inch, branding it his. Eyes aflame, growling savagely, he swooped to a brazen nipple, devouring it, cheeks hollowing as he sucked it deep, deep inside his mouth, rearing his head to stretch out her resilient flesh, then letting his head fall back to her, burying his face against her burgeoning flesh. His teeth worried the sensitive tip, his tongue lapped at her, its rough wet texture driving her insane with cascading need while his hands kneaded and plumped the other breast preparing it for his voracious attentions.

She jack-knifed in his arms, her kisses frantic, falling everywhere; his chest becoming wet with her open-mouthed caresses. She panted harshly, her hands clutching his shirt, his skin, his hair.

"Slow down, love." Jared cautioned roughly, pulling back, seeking to moderate their headlong pace. Knowing he had to cool down before he hurt her. He kept reminding himself she was an innocent virgin. But she wasn't acting like one, and

her passionate response was making it difficult to hold back his straining ardor.

"Oh, God I ache. *I ache.*" Merri tried to burrow deeper into his arms. His shirt tore under her frantic handling. "Hold me tight." she begged. "*Tighter.*"

Her sleek slim thighs rubbed against each other, her movements gaining in momentum until her legs were thrashing about wildly, bumping into Jared's thighs, one violent knee coming close to striking his groin.

"Bloody hell." Jared roared, jerking backwards in the nick of time. Disengaging himself from Merri, he rolled off the side of the couch, and came hurriedly to his feet. A confused frown on his face, he stood watching his innocent wife writhing on the low divan, her body convulsing in the throes of uncontrollable passion.

In the three years since his arrival in Turkey, Jared had seen extensive use of the drug called unicorn's horn and had seen the drug's heightening effect on one's carnal drive. His past observations made it easy for him to recognize the symptoms Merri displayed now. It was obvious his bride had partaken of the powerful aphrodisiac.

Why? Jared wondered, running shaking hands through his already disheveled hair. *Why would she take so dangerous a drug putting her very life at risk? He didn't want it to be because she couldn't endure his possession any other way, but what other answer was there? What other reason could she have?*

Knowing she had been under the influence of the drug threw a different light on her earlier actions. With a sinking

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heart, Jared recalled her seeming happiness, her loving declarations. Her duplicity devastated him, striking deep at the heart of his pride and self-esteem. Overwhelmed by the pain roaring through him, Jared lifted his head and screamed a hoarse cry of denial.

Jared and Merridyth have finally come together only to find deception and heartache. Will their marriage be over before it begins? Find out in Feathers On the Wind: Mated Swans, coming soon from Red Rose Publishing

Glossary of Turkish Words and Phrases

Because the Turkish changes with usage, or the placement in a sentence, I've chosen to list the English translation first. While this is somewhat confusing if you're looking up the word or phrase, it's still the best way to alphabetize the list.

aforementioned: *mezkûr* apple: *elma* arm: *kol*

army: *ordu* in our army: *ordumuzda* art: *san'at*

at the gate: *kapıda* aunt maternal : *teyze* aunt paternal:

hala

baby: *bebek* basket: *sepet* to beat: *dövmek*

beautiful: *güzel* how beautiful: *Ne güzel* to believe:

inanmak

bird: *kus* black: *siyah* jet black: *simsiyah*

book: *kitap* bosom/breast: *koyun* boy: *oglan*

bride: *gelin* brother: *kardes* ceremony: *tören*

chicken: *tavuk* child: *cocuk* cold: *souk*

color: *renk* come and see me tomorrow: *yarın gelip beni*

görünüz

cursing: *tel'in* dark: *karanlık* day: *gün*

death: *ölüm* desert: *çöl* doubt: *süphe*

duck: *ördek* earthquake: *zelzele* effect: *tesir*

eight: *sekiz* eighty: *seksen* evening: *akşameye*

in the eye: *göz* [gyoz] far: *uzak* favorite: *ikbal*

fat: *sisman* father: *baba* with his father: *babsiyle*

fifty: *elli* flower: *çiçek* foot: *ayak*

forbidden: *yasak* forest: *orman* to the forest: *ormana*

friend: *arkadas* girl(s): *kiz(lar)* god: *Allah*

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gold: *altın* golden cage: *kafes* grandfather: *dede*
grapes: *üzüm* grass: *ot* grief: *gam*
he came: *geldi* hen-pecked husband: *kilibik*
his hand: *eli* hour: *saat* house: *ev*
to the house: *eve* hot: *sıcak* hundred: *yüz*
I: *ben* I'm ashamed: *Utanırım.*
I must shave: *tırus olma-m lâzim*
I have come in order to learn whether or not you have
need of me:
Bana ihtiyac-iniz-ol-up ol-ma-digini öğrenmege geldim
I have not understood: *anlamadım* I shall not go:
gitmizeceğim
I want you to come here: *Buraya gel-me-niz-i istiyorum if:*
eger
infidel, *Giaour*: *gâvur* in the net: *agda* is: *dir*
just (fair): *âdil* kalfa: *secretary* kismet: *fate*
known: *malum* lady: *hanım* life: *ömür*
lightning: *simsek* London: *Londra* long: *uzun*
longer: *daka uzun* longest: *enuzun* to love: *sevmek*
luck: *ugur* mad dog: *kuduz-rabis*
maid-in-waiting: *gedikli* man: *adam* market: *pazar*
to get married: *evlenmek* master: *Aga*
master of the girls: *kızlar agası* meat: *et* melon: *kavun*
mother: *anne* mountain: *dağ [dai]* murder: *katil*
murderer: *kaatil* name: *isim* his name: *isimi*
nation: *ulus* needle: *igne* necessary: *lâzim*
neck: *boyun* nest: *yuva* nine: *dokuz*
ninety: *dohsan* no: *hayır* noble one: *effendi*
number: *numara* oar: *kürek* one, a: *bir*

ornate: *süslü* patience: *sabir* pear: *armut*
his pear: *armudu* place: *yer* his or her or its place: *yeri*
pleasure: *keyif, lezzet* pocket: *cep* point: *nokta*
poppy: *gelincik* to praise: *övmek* prince: *Emir*
profit: *kâr [kair]* quay: *rihtim*
Fermented grape wine flavored with anise-turns milky
white when water or ice is added: *raki*
red: *kirmizi* right: *hak* his right: *hakki*
rose: *gül* sadness: *hüzün* school: *mektep*
sex slave: *haseki* sea: *deniz* sister (elder): *abla*
shy: *çekingen* slave: *kul* snow: *kar*
son: *ogul* his son: *ogli* speech: *nutuk*
summer: *yaz* summer has come at last: *artık yaz geldi*
table: *masa* take care: *sakin* tea: *çay*
ten: *on* terrible: *müthiş* that, he, she, it: *o*
they did not die: *ölmediler* they did not become: *ölmadılar*
this: *bu* this is going to be, like it or not: *Bu is istemez
olecak*
That room over there is more spacious than this: *Öteki oda
bunden genistir*
thread: *ip* three: *üç* thus: *öyle*
tongue: *dil* tree: *agaç* his tree: *agaçi*
trouble/bother: *zahmet* truth: *hakiyat* Turkey: *Türkiye*
in Turkey: *Türkiyede* very long: *upuzun* victory: *zafer*
void: *halâ* wedding: *düğün*
what's there to be ashamed of?: *Ne var utanacak?*
where are you going?: *Nereye gidiyorsunuz?*
white *beyaz* why?: *niçin* wife: *kadin*
my wife: *karim* winter: *kis* woman: *kari*

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woman of the room(servant): *odalisque* year: *yil* yellow:
sari

yes: *evet* yet: *hâla* [*haila*]

common suffixes:

lar, ler= plural

in= of

About the author:

www.camilleanthony.com/

She has many books out with Ellora's Cave, Loose Id and Changeling Press.

* * * *

Who am I?

A dreamer of dreams, a teller of tales...

Well, yeah. I've been doing that all my life. When people ask what I do, I tell them a little bit of everything. My imagination takes me to many exotic climes where I meet interesting beings and indulge in numerous adventures.

A woman, a child, a mystery in and of myself.

Still learning myself, my limits, my horizons.

Circumstances have hobbled me lately, yet I am determined to shrug off the chains of physical limitations and rise up, to soar into a wide blue sky of infinite possibilities. Come fly with me...

Full of possibilities and endless wondering...

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Started out a black woman and now find myself on a journey to become all women. I hope my writing reflects my growth.

Seer of fantastical landscapes and intimate formations.

Tell me your dreams ... I'll paint you pictures in bold splashes of black and white ... or white on blue. The mediums may vary—paper and ink or screen and electronic lightning—the tale's the thing...

I am your mirror, your herald, your sage.

See my worlds, experience the thrills of discovery, not just of the past, present or future, but the unexplored inner-space of our imaginations. Follow my footprints ... see, I've printed them in the sand. Let me show you the way to all things possible.

Just turn the page...

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