

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELIZABETH
HOYT
THIEF *of* SHADOWS

Book Four in the MAIDEN LANE SERIES

"Elizabeth Hoyt has outdone herself." —JENNIFER ASHLEY,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Duke's Perfect Wife*

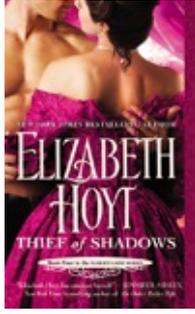
ELIZABETH
HOYT

THIEF *of* SHADOWS



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Preview of *Lord of Darkness*](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

This is for my favorite brother-in-law, Charles, an intriguingly talented interdisciplinary artist with interests in dance, theater, and visual arts who, nevertheless, does not mind slumming in the occasional romance novel video. 😊

Acknowledgments

As always I need to thank the team of professionals who helped to polish a terribly rough draft into a final product somewhat more readable: my savvy agent, Susannah Taylor, my patient editor, Amy Pierpont, and my meticulous copy editor, Carrie Andrews. In addition, Amy's assistant, Lauren Plude, is always scandalously good-natured, Diane Luger from the GCP art department has once again outdone herself with the cover, and Nick Small and Brianne Beers from publicity have worked tirelessly to make sure you've actually heard of this book.

Thank you all.

Chapter One



*Oh, gather 'round, my dears, and keep the candles burning bright, for tonight I'll tell
you the tale of the Harlequin Ghost of St. Giles...*
—from *The Legend of the Harlequin Ghost of St. Giles*

LONDON, ENGLAND
MAY 1738

The body in the road was the absolute cap to the day.

Isabel Beckinshall—Baroness Beckinshall—sighed silently to herself. Her carriage had come to a standstill in the worst part of London—the dirty streets of St. Giles. And *why* was she in St. Giles as dark descended? Because she'd volunteered to represent the Ladies' Syndicate for the Benefit of the Home for Unfortunate Infants and Foundling Children at the final inspection of the new home, more fool she.

Never volunteer. Not even when pleasantly filled with warm scones and hot tea. Warm scones were obviously the work of the devil or perhaps of Lady Hero Reading, one of the two founding patronesses of the home. Lady Hero had refilled her teacup and looked at Isabel with guileless gray eyes, asking prettily if Isabel would mind meeting with Mr. Winter Makepeace, the home's dour manager, to look over the new building. And Isabel had blithely agreed like some scone-filled, mindless cow.

And the damned man hadn't even shown!

"Moo," Isabel muttered to herself just as the carriage door opened to admit her lady's maid, Pinkney.

"Ma'am?" Pinkney asked, her blue eyes wide and startled. Of course, Pinkney's blue eyes were nearly always wide and startled. She was one of the most sought-after lady's maids in London and a paragon of the latest fashion, despite being barely past one and twenty and somewhat naïve.

"Nothing," Isabel said, waving aside her bovine utterance. "Did you find out why it's taking so long to move the dead man?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," Pinkney said. "It's because he's not dead." Her pretty dark blond brows drew together. "Well, not yet anyway. Harold the footman is having a time pulling him aside, and you wouldn't credit it, ma'am, but he's a comic actor."

It was Isabel's turn to blink. "*Harold?*"

"Oh, no, my lady!" Pinkney giggled until she caught Isabel's steady gaze. "Er"—the maid cleared her throat—"the not-yet-dead man is. A comic actor, that is. He's

dressed as a harlequin, mask and all...”

Isabel was no longer listening. She’d opened the door and climbed from the carriage. Outside, the gray day was growing grimmer with the advent of nightfall. Fires flared to the west, and she could hear the rumbling of rioters from that direction. They were very near. Isabel shivered and hurried to where Harold and the other footman were bent over a figure on the ground. Pinkney had probably mistaken the costume or the man or the mask or—

But no.

Isabel drew in a sharp breath. She’d never seen the notorious Ghost of St. Giles in person, but she had no doubt at all that this must be him. The prone man wore black and red motley. His floppy brimmed black hat had fallen from his head, and she could see that his brown hair was tied back simply. A short sword was sheathed at his side and a long sword lay by one broad hand. A black half-mask with a ridiculously long nose covered the upper half of his face, leaving his square chin and wide mouth revealed. His lips were parted over straight white teeth, the upper lip a little bigger than the bottom.

Isabel snapped her attention up to her footman. “Is he alive?”

“He’s still breathin’ at least, m’lady.” Harold shook his head. “Don’t know for how long, though.”

A shout came from nearby and the sound of smashing glass.

“Put him in the carriage,” Isabel said. She bent to pick up his hat.

Will, the second footman, frowned. “But, m’lady—”

“Now. And don’t forget his sword.”

Already she could see a mass of people rounding the corner down the street. The footmen glanced at each other then as one lifted the Ghost. Harold grunted under the weight, but he made no complaint.

A crowd gathered at the end of the street and someone gave a shout.

The rioters had spotted the carriage.

Isabel picked up her skirts and trotted after her footmen. Harold gave a great heave and dumped the Ghost and his sword into the carriage. Isabel scrambled rather inelegantly inside. Pinkney was staring wide-eyed at the Ghost sprawled on the floor of the carriage, but for the moment Isabel ignored him. She tossed the hat on top of him, lifted her seat, and withdrew two pistols from the hidden compartment underneath.

Pinkney squeaked in alarm.

Isabel turned and handed the pistols to the footmen at the carriage door. “Don’t let anyone climb the carriage.”

Harold’s jaw tightened. “Yes, m’lady.”

He took the pistols, gave one to Will, and mounted the running board behind the carriage.

Isabel closed the carriage door and knocked on the roof. “Fast as you can, John!”

The carriage started forward with a lurch just as something hit the side.

“My lady!” Pinkney cried.

“Hush,” Isabel said.

There was a lap robe on the maid’s seat, and Isabel tossed it over the Ghost. She sat back on her own seat, clutching the window as the carriage rocked around a corner.

Something else knocked against the carriage. A grimacing face appeared suddenly at the window, its tongue smearing lewdly against the glass.

Pinkney screamed.

Isabel stared at the man, her heart racing but her gaze steady as she met his eyes. They were bloodshot and filled with maddened rage. The carriage jolted and the man fell away.

One of the pistols fired.

“My lady,” Pinkney whispered, her face white, “the dead man—”

“Not-quite-dead man,” Isabel muttered, eyeing the robe. Hopefully anyone glancing inside would see a robe thrown carelessly on the floor, *not* the hidden Ghost of St. Giles. She braced herself as the carriage swung wildly around a corner.

“Not-quite-dead man,” Pinkney obediently repeated. “Who is he?”

“The Ghost of St. Giles.”

Pinkney’s robin’s-egg-blue eyes widened. “Who?”

Isabel stared at her lady’s maid in exasperation. “The Ghost of St. Giles? The most notorious footpad in London? Goes about in a harlequin’s costume, either ravishing and murdering or rescuing and defending, depending on whose stories you believe?”

If Pinkney’s eyes got any bigger, they might fall out of her head altogether.

“No?” Isabel waved a hand toward the window and the shouting and screaming outside and said sweetly, “The man that mob wants dead?”

Horrified, Pinkney stared at the robe. “But... why, my lady?”

The second pistol fired with a deafening *BOOM!* Pinkney jumped and looked wildly out the window.

Dear God, they were out of ammunition. Isabel prayed the footmen were safe—and that they could hold off the rioters without their guns. She was an aristocrat, but just last year a viscount had been dragged from his carriage, beaten, and robbed in St. Giles.

Isabel took a deep breath and felt under the robe until she found the hilt of the Ghost’s sword. She drew it out as Pinkney eyed her askance and put the heavy thing across her lap. If nothing else, she could hit someone over the head with it. “They want him dead because this morning he cut Charming Mickey O’Connor down from the gallows.”

Pinkney actually brightened at this. “Oh, Charming Mickey the pirate! *Him* I’ve heard of. They say he’s handsome as sin and dresses better than the king himself.”

Of course her lady’s maid had heard of a well-dressed pirate.

“Quite.” Isabel flinched as something hit the window, cracking the glass. “They probably chased him all the way from Tyburn gallows, poor man.”

“Oh.” Pinkney bit her lip. “Pardon me, my lady, but *why* have we picked him up?”

“Well, it does seem a pity to let anyone be torn apart by a mob,” Isabel drawled, not letting the girl see the fear that made her heart beat hard. “Especially a young, handsome man.”

Pinkney looked timidly at Isabel. “But, my lady, if the mob wants him and he’s in our carriage... ah...”

Isabel drew on all her strength to smile firmly. Her hand tightened on the hilt of the sword across her lap. “That’s why we’re not going to let them know we have the Ghost, are we?”

Pinkney blinked several times as if working through this logic; then she smiled. The child really was quite pretty. “Oh, yes, my lady.”

The lady’s maid sat back as if quite confident that they were all out of danger now that everything had been explained.

Isabel twitched aside the curtains to peer through the cracked glass. She wasn’t nearly as sanguine. Many of the streets in St. Giles were narrow and twisting—the reason that her carriage had been traveling so slowly earlier. A mob could move much faster afoot than they. But as she looked behind them, Isabel saw that the mob was beginning to fall away. John Coachman had found a straight stretch of road and was urging the horses into a trot.

Isabel let the curtain fall with a heartfelt sigh of relief. *Thank God.*

The carriage drew abruptly to a stop.

Pinkney shrieked.

“Steady on.” Isabel gave her maid a severe look. The last thing she needed was Pinkney having the vapors if they were about to be attacked.

Isabel peeked out the window and then hurriedly shoved the sword back under the carriage blanket.

And only just in time. The carriage door opened to reveal a stern-looking dragoon officer in scarlet uniform.

Isabel smiled sweetly. “Captain Trevillion. How good to see you—*after* we’ve outrun the mob.”

The captain’s craggy cheekbones darkened, but he still cast a sharp eye about the carriage. For a moment his gaze seemed to linger on the blanket.

Isabel kept her eyes on his face, her smile firmly in place. Casually she lifted her feet and rested them atop the robe.

The dragoon’s gaze snapped back to her. “Ma’am. I’m glad to see you and your party safe and sound. St. Giles isn’t a place to be loitering today.”

“Yes, well, we didn’t know that when we started out this morning.” Isabel raised her eyebrows in polite inquiry. “*Have* you caught that pirate yet?”

The captain’s thin lips tightened. “It’s only a matter of time. We’ll get him *and* the Ghost of St. Giles. The mob has them both on the run. Good day to you, my lady.”

She nodded, not daring to breathe until the dragoon had slammed shut the carriage door and given the word to John Coachman to move on.

Pinkney sniffed scornfully. “*Soldiers*. Their wigs are always terribly out of fashion.”

Isabel slumped back against the squabs and gave her lady’s maid a quick grin.

Half an hour later, the carriage was pulling up before her neat town house.

“Bring him inside,” she ordered Harold when he opened the doors.

He nodded wearily. “Yes, m’lady.”

“And, Harold?” Isabel descended the carriage, still clutching the sword.

“M’lady?”

“Well done. To both you and Will.” Isabel nodded to Will.

A shy grin split Harold’s broad, homely face. “Thank you, m’lady.”

Isabel permitted herself a small smile before she swept into her town house. Edmund, her dear, late husband, had bought Fairmont House for her shortly before he’d died and had gifted it to her on her twenty-eighth birthday. He’d known that the

title and estates would go to a distant cousin and had wanted her properly settled with her own property, free of the entail.

Isabel had immediately redecorated on moving in four years ago. Now the entry hall was lined in warm golden oak panels. A parquet wood floor was underfoot, and here and there were items that amused her: a dainty pink-marble-topped table with gilded legs, a laughing boy faun holding a hare in black marble, and a small oval mirror edged in mother-of-pearl. All items she loved more for their form than their worth.

“Thank you, Butterman,” Isabel said as she tucked the sword under her arm and pulled off her gloves and hat, handing them to the butler. “I need a bedroom readied immediately.”

Butterman, like all her servants, was impeccably trained. He didn’t even blink an eye at the abrupt order—or the sword she carelessly held. “Yes, my lady. Will the blue room do?”

“Quite.”

Butterman snapped his fingers and a maid went hurrying up the stairs.

Isabel turned and watched as Harold and Will came in, carrying the Ghost between them. The Ghost’s floppy hat lay on his chest.

Butterman raised his eyebrow a fraction of an inch at the sight of the unconscious man, but merely said, “The blue room, Harold, if you please.”

“Yes, sir,” Harold panted.

“If you don’t mind, my lady,” Butterman murmured, “I believe Mrs. Butterman may be of assistance.”

“Yes, thank you, Butterman. Please send Mrs. Butterman up as quickly as possible.” Isabel followed the footmen up the stairs.

The maids were still turning back the sheets on the bed in the blue room when the footmen arrived with their burden, but the fire on the grate was lit.

Harold hesitated, probably because the Ghost was quite dirty and bloody, but Isabel gestured to the bed. The Ghost groaned as the footmen laid him on the spotless counterpane.

Isabel propped his sword in a corner of the room and hurried to his side. They were out of danger, but her pulse hadn’t slowed. She realized she was a bit excited by this odd turn of events. She’d rescued the Ghost of St. Giles. What had started as an ordinary, almost dull day had become a curious adventure.

The Ghost’s eyes were closed. He still wore his mask, though it was askew on his face. Carefully she lifted the thing over his head and was surprised to find underneath a thin black silk scarf covering the upper part of his face, from the bridge of his strong nose to his forehead. Two eyeholes had been cut into the material to make a second, thinner mask. She examined the harlequin’s mask in her hand. It was leather and stained black. High arching eyebrows and the curving grotesque nose gave the mask a satyr-like leer. She set it on a table by the bed and looked back at the Ghost. He lay limp and heavy on the bed. Blood stained his motley leggings above his black jackboots. She bit her lip. Some of the blood looked quite fresh.

“Butterman said ’twas a man injured,” Mrs. Butterman said as she bustled into the room. She went to the bed and stared at the Ghost a moment, hands on hips, before nodding decisively. “Well, nothing for it. We’ll need to undress him, my lady, and find

out where the blood's coming from."

"Oh, of course," Isabel said. She reached for the buttons of the Ghost's fall as Mrs. Butterman began on the doublet.

Behind her, Isabel heard a gasp. "Oh, my lady!"

"What is it, Pinkney?" Isabel asked as she worked at a stubborn button. Blood had dried on the material, making it stiff.

" 'Tisn't proper for you to be doing such work." Pinkney sounded as scandalized as if Isabel had proposed walking naked in Westminster Cathedral. "He's a *man*."

"I assure you I have seen a nude man before," Isabel said mildly as she peeled back the man's leggings. Underneath, his smallclothes were soaked in blood. Good God. Could a man lose so much blood and survive? She frowned in worry as she began working at the ties to his smallclothes.

"He has bruising on his shoulder and ribs and a few scrapes, but nothing to cause this much blood," Mrs. Butterman reported as she spread the doublet wide and raised the Ghost's shirt to his armpits.

Isabel glanced up for a moment and froze. His chest was delineated with lean muscles, his nipples brown against his pale skin, with black, curling hair spreading between. His belly was hard and ridged, his navel entirely obscured by that same black, curling hair. Isabel blinked. She had seen a man—men, actually—naked, true, but Edmund had been in his sixth decade when he'd died and had certainly never looked like this. And the few, discreet lovers that she'd taken since Edmund's death had been aristocrats—men of leisure. They'd hardly had more muscles than she. Her eye caught on the line of hair trailing down from his navel. It disappeared into his smallclothes.

Where her hands were.

Isabel swallowed and untied the garment, a little surprised by the tremble of her fingers, and drew them down his legs. His genitals were revealed, his cock thick and long, even at rest, his bollocks heavy.

"Well," Mrs. Butterman said, "he certainly seems healthy enough *there*."

"Oh my, yes," Pinkney breathed.

Isabel looked around irritably. She'd not realized the maid had come close enough to see the Ghost. Isabel drew a corner of the counterpane over the Ghost's loins, feeling protective of the unconscious man.

"Help me take off his boots so we can bare his legs completely," Isabel told Mrs. Butterman. "If we can't find the wound there, we'll have to turn him over."

But as they stripped his breeches farther down his legs, a long gash was revealed on the man's muscled right thigh. Fresh blood oozed and trickled over his leg as the sodden material was pulled away.

"There 'tis," Mrs. Butterman said. "We can send for the doctor, my lady, but I've a fair hand with the needle and thread."

Isabel nodded. She glanced again at the wound, relieved it was not nearly as bad as she'd feared. "Fetch what you'll need, please, Mrs. Butterman, and take Pinkney with you to help. I have a feeling he won't be much pleased by a doctor."

Mrs. Butterman hurried out with Pinkney following behind.

Isabel waited, alone in the room save for the Ghost of St. Giles. Why had she rescued him? It'd been an action taken almost without thought—to leave a defenseless

man to be ravaged by a mob was an idea that instinctively repulsed her. But now that he was in her house, she found herself more curious about the man himself. What sort of man risked his life in the disguise of a harlequin? Was he a footpad or a sword for hire? Or was he merely a madman? Isabel looked at him. He was unconscious, but he was still a commanding presence, his big body sprawled upon the dainty bed. He was a man in the prime of his life, strong and athletic, nearly bare to her gaze.

All except his face.

Her hand moved, stretching toward the black silk mask still covering the upper part of his face. Was he handsome? Ugly? Merely ordinary-looking?

Her hand began to descend toward the mask.

His flashed up and caught her wrist.

His eyes opened, assessing and quite clearly brown. “Don’t.”

THIS DAY WAS not going as planned.

Winter Makepeace stared up into Lady Isabel Beckinhall’s clever blue eyes and wondered how, exactly, he was going to extricate himself from this situation without giving away his identity.

“Don’t,” he whispered again. Her wrist was warm and delicate, but he could feel the feminine strength beneath his fingers, and his own muscles were damnably weak at the moment.

“Very well,” she murmured. “How long have you been awake?”

She made no move to pull her wrist from his grasp.

“I woke when you took off my leggings.” *That* had certainly been an interesting way to regain consciousness.

“Then you’re not as badly off as we thought,” she drawled in her husky voice.

He grunted and turned his head to look about the room. A wave of nausea and dizziness nearly made him pass out again. “Where am I?”

He kept his voice to a low, barely audible rasp. Perhaps if he whispered, she wouldn’t recognize him.

“My home.” She cocked her head. “I won’t touch your mask if you don’t want me to.”

He watched her, calculating. He was naked, in a strange house, and wounded. The odds were not in his favor.

She raised one elegant eyebrow. “If you’d let go of my wrist?”

He opened his hand. “Your pardon.”

She rubbed her wrist, her eyes lowered demurely. “I saved your life earlier, and you’re quite at my mercy now”—her eyes flicked over his nude body—“yet I don’t think you truly ask my pardon.”

She raised her gaze to his, intelligent, humorous, and utterly seductive.

The danger was palpable.

Winter’s lips twitched. “Perhaps I’m just a rude fellow.”

“Rude, undoubtedly.” She flicked a finger over the small bit of material covering his pelvis, and his base flesh stirred in mindless response. “But ungrateful as well?” She shook her head sadly.

He raised his eyebrows. “I trust you do not blame me, madam, for my present state of undress. I do vow, I woke thus and know not who to blame but *you*.”

Her eyes widened just a fraction and she bit her lip as if to quell a tremor of laughter. “I assure you my, uh, curiosity was prompted merely by a desire to find out where you were wounded, sir.”

“Then I am honored by your *curiosity*.” Winter felt as if he had tumbled down a hill and landed upside down. He never bantered thus with women, and Lady Beckinhall had made it quite clear on their previous meetings—when he was merely Mr. Makepeace, the manager of the Home for Unfortunate Infants and Foundling Children—that she did not hold him in high regard.

Perhaps it was the mask and the intimacy of the quiet room.

Or perhaps it was the knock on the head he’d received earlier. “Did you discover that which you sought?”

Her lips, wide and delicate, curved into a secret smile. “Oh, yes, I found all that I could wish for.”

He inhaled, his pulse too fast, his head too light, and his cock too unruly, but the door to the room opened at that moment. Instantly, Winter closed his eyes. He instinctively knew it was best that the others not know he was awake and aware. He couldn’t logically explain this impulse, but since this type of instinct had saved his life countless times in the past, he no longer bothered to question the urge.

Carefully he peered from beneath his eyelashes.

His field of vision was limited, but at least two females entered the room.

“How is he?” one of the women—a servant, judging by her accent—asked.

“He hasn’t moved,” Lady Beckinhall replied.

She didn’t mention that she’d been talking to him only seconds before, he noticed. But then he’d always known Lady Beckinhall was quick-witted.

“Shouldn’t we take off his mask?” a different, younger, female voice asked eagerly.

“Do you think that wise?” Lady Beckinhall inquired. “He might decide he must kill us if we learn his identity.”

Winter almost cocked an eyebrow at this outrageous suggestion. The younger servant girl gave a muted scream. Obviously she hadn’t noticed how very solemn Lady Beckinhall’s voice was—the lady was hiding her amusement.

The first servant sighed. “I’ll sew his leg up quick and then we’ll get him comfortable.”

Which was when Winter realized that the next several minutes of his life were to be quite unpleasant.

His entire body ached, so he hadn’t really noticed until that moment that his right thigh throbbed in particular. Apparently that was the wound Lady Beckinhall had been searching for.

He closed his eyes fully then and waited, breathing in and out slowly, letting his arms and legs lie as if weighted on the bed.

It’s the shock that makes pain hard to bear, his mentor had said long ago. Expect it, welcome it, and pain becomes simply another sensation, easy enough to brush aside.

He thought of the home and the logistics of moving eight and twenty children into a new building. Fingers touched his wound, pinching the edges together with a sharp bite of agony as fresh, warm blood trickled over his leg. Winter was aware of the pain, but he set it aside, letting it flow through him and out again as he considered each

child at the home and how he or she would react to the move.

The new dormitories were spacious rooms, lit by large windows carefully barred. *The sharp dig of the needle as it pierced his flesh.* Most of the children would be happy with their new home. Joseph Tinbox, for instance, though already eleven years of age, would delight in running up and down the long hallways. *The draw and raw tug as the thread pulled through his skin.* But for a child such as Henry Putman, who had been recently left at the home and remembered the abandonment, the move might be troubling. *Another stab of the needle.* He would have to be especially aware of Henry Putman and others like him. *Fire burning over his leg as liquid was splashed on the wound.* Only Winter's many hours of training kept him from jerking from the searing pain. He breathed in. Breathed out. Let his mind drift as the stabbing began again...

Some time later, Winter realized that the poking of the needle had stopped. He surfaced from his internal musings to the feel of a cool hand on his forehead. He knew without opening his eyes that it was Lady Beckinhall who touched him.

"He doesn't feel feverish," Lady Beckinhall murmured.

Her voice was low for a woman and somewhat throaty. Winter seemed to feel her breath washing over his still-nude body and ruffling his nerve endings, but that was fancy. Perhaps the knock on the head was worse than he'd thought.

"I brought some water to bathe him," the older maidservant said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Butterman, but you've done enough for tonight," Lady Beckinhall said. "I'll see to it myself."

"But, my lady," the second, younger servant protested.

"Truly, you both have been the greatest help," Lady Beckinhall said. "Please. Leave the water here and remove the rest of the things."

There was a rustling, the sound of something metallic dropping into a tin basin, and then the door opened and shut again.

"Are you still awake?" Lady Beckinhall asked.

Winter opened his eyes to find her looking at him, a wet cloth in her hands.

His body tensed at the thought of her hands on him. "There's no need for that."

She pursed her lips and glanced at his leg. "The wound is still bloody. I think it best. That is"—her eyes flashed up at him in challenge—"unless you fear the pain?"

"I have no fear of pain or anything else you might inflict on me, my lady." His whisper came out as a rasp. "Do your worst."

ISABEL INHALED AT the flash of defiance she saw in the Ghost's brown eyes.

"You don't fear me or what I may do to you," she murmured as she approached the bed. He'd lain so still while Mrs. Butterman had sewn up his wound that she'd feared he'd fainted again, but now some color had returned to his cheeks, reassuring her. "You don't fear the wrath of the soldiers or a murderous mob. Tell me, Sir Ghost, what do you fear?"

He held her gaze as he whispered, "God, I suppose. Doesn't every man fear his creator?"

"Not all men." How strange to discuss philosophy with a naked, masked man. She carefully wiped at the dried blood upon his thigh. The warm muscle beneath her hand tensed at her touch. "Some care not at all for God or religion."

“True.” His dark eyes watched her every movement. “But most men fear their own mortality—the death that will eventually take them from this earth—and the God that will judge them in the afterlife.”

“And you?” she murmured as she squeezed out the cloth and wet it again. “Do you fear death?”

“No.” His statement was cool.

She raised her eyebrows, bending over the wound to examine it. It was jagged, but Mrs. Buttermann had stitched it very well. If it healed, there would be a long scar, but it wouldn’t be too wide or unsightly. It would’ve been a great pity to mar such a beautiful male limb. “I don’t believe you.”

A corner of his mouth curled suddenly as if his own amusement surprised him. “Why not? Why should I lie?”

She shrugged. “Out of bravado? You do go about in a mask and harlequin’s motley.”

“Exactly right,” he whispered. “I hunt the streets of St. Giles with my swords. Would I do such a thing if I feared death?”

“Perhaps. Some who fear death make a game of mocking it.” She stroked up his thigh, coming perilously near the sheet laid over his genitals.

He made no move, but she knew his entire attention was on her. “Only fools mock death.”

“Truly?” She inched her cloth under the wadded sheet. A tent was forming there. She straightened and plopped her cloth into the basin of water, rinsing it. “But mockery can be such an amusing game.”

She moved to lay the cloth low on his belly.

He grabbed her wrist. “I think the game you play is not to mock, but to tease.” There was a ragged edge to his whisper.

Isabel eyed the growing ridge beneath the bundled sheet. “Perhaps you’re right.” Her gaze flicked to his, her eyebrows raised. “Is it a game you like?”

“Would it matter?” His mouth twisted cynically.

Her eyebrows rose. “Of course. Why tease an unwilling man?”

“For the pure sport?”

She blinked at the twinge of hurt. “You wound me.”

He tensed his forearm and, without any visible sign of strain, pulled her closer, until she was forced to bend over his form, her bodice nearly touching his bare chest. This close she could see a ring of amber about his dark irises—and his pupils large with pain.

“If I wound you, madam, I am sorry,” he rasped. “But acquit me of stupidity. I am not a rag doll to be played with.”

She cocked her head, wishing he’d remove his mask so that she could truly see him, this man who had captured her interest as no other had in a very, very long time. He parried her flirtation with disconcertingly plainspoken answers. She simply wasn’t used to such frankness. All the gentlemen of her acquaintance knew to speak in elegant riddles that in the end meant nothing at all. Was he a common man, then, beneath his mask? But he didn’t address her as an inferior.

No, his speech was quite familiar. As if he were her equal or more.

She inhaled and let her eyes drift down his form. “No, you certainly are no limp

rag doll, sir. I beg your pardon.”

His eyes widened as if in surprise and he abruptly let her go. “ ’Tis I should beg pardon of you. You saved my life—don’t think I don’t know it well. Thank you.”

She felt heat moving up her neck. Dear God, she hadn’t blushed since she was a girl. She’d bantered with dukes, flirted with princes. Why, then, should this man’s simple words make her feel suddenly self-conscious?

“ ’Tis of no matter,” she said, much less graciously than her usual manner. She tossed the soiled cloth into the basin. “You’ve lost a lot of blood. You may rest here until we can move you in the morning.”

“You’re very kind.”

She shook her head. “We’ve already established that I’m not a kind woman.”

He smiled slightly as his eyes closed. “I think we’ve established just the opposite, actually. You’re kindness itself, Lady Beckinhall.”

For a moment she watched him, waiting to see if he’d add something more, but instead his breathing grew sonorous.

The Ghost of St. Giles had fallen asleep.

THE GRAY-PINK LIGHT of dawn was peeking through the window when Isabel next opened her eyes. For a moment she merely blinked, wondering fuzzily why her back ached and why she wasn’t in her own bed. Then her gaze flew to the bed beside her.

Empty.

She stood stiffly and looked down at the coverlet. It was neatly made, but blood smeared the center. He had been there last night at least. She placed her palm on the counterpane, but the cloth was cool. He’d left some time ago.

Isabel crossed to the door and called for a maid. She’d make inquiries, but she already knew in the pit of her stomach that he was gone and, besides the bloodstains, he’d left no trace.

She returned to stare moodily at the empty bed while she waited for the maid, and in that moment she remembered something that had nagged at her too-tired brain the night before: Lady Beckinhall. He’d called her by her name, though no one had uttered it in his presence.

She caught her breath. The Ghost of St. Giles knew her.

Chapter Two



Now you may not credit it, but once the Ghost of St. Giles was merely a mortal harlequin actor. He played with a traveling troupe that wandered from town to town. The Harlequin wore tattered red and black motley and when he swung his wooden sword at the villain of the play, it clacked: Clip! Clap! and made the children shout with glee...

—from *The Legend of the Harlequin Ghost of St. Giles*

Winter Makepeace, mild-mannered schoolmaster and manager of the Home for Unfortunate Infants and Foundling Children, crouched on the sloping roof shingles as the sun came up over London. His back was to the roof edge and the drop below. He gripped the eave with both hands before kicking out and letting his body fall over the edge. For a moment he hung, three stories up, his entire weight suspended only by his fingertips, and then he swung through the attic window below. He landed with a wince, not only because of the pain his injured thigh caused him, but also because of the soft thump he made as he hit the floor.

Usually he entered his room through the window without any sound at all.

He winced again when he sat on the bed and examined his motley hose. They were muddy and a large rip ran from his hip to nearly his knee on the right leg. His head pounded in a drumbeat rhythm as he peeled the filthy fabric from his bandaged wound. He bundled the torn hose with his jackboots, swords, mask, and the rest of his costume and shoved the whole mess under the bed. Providence only knew if he'd be able to repair the damage—his sewing skills were adequate but by no means accomplished. Winter sighed. He very much feared that he needed a new costume—one that he could ill afford.

Turning, he limped, nude, to the pitcher of water on his washstand and poured a bit into the basin. He splashed the cold water on his face and for the first time in his life regretted that he didn't own a looking glass. Were there bruises on his face? Telltale scratches? He could feel the scrape of his morning beard as he ran his palms over his jaw.

He grunted and for a moment leaned straight-armed on the shabby little washstand, letting the water drip from his face. He ached. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten, and his head was spinning in a slow, nauseating rhythm. He had to dress, had to appear normal for the coming day. Had to teach small, recalcitrant boys at the day school, had to prepare the home's children for the move to the new building, and had to find out if his youngest sister, Silence, was safe.

So much to do.

So many people who depended on him.

So very tired.

Winter collapsed onto his narrow bed. Just a moment's rest first. As he closed his eyes, he seemed to feel the touch of a soft yet strong feminine hand.

Seductive, husky laughter whispered in his mind...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Winter jolted upright, hissing as the sudden movement sent a stab of pain through his right thigh. Sunlight was streaming through his window now, illuminating every crack in the wall, every dusty beam in his attic bedroom. He squinted. It must be late morning, judging by the angle of the sun. He'd overslept.

The insistent knocking on his door began again, this time accompanied by a feminine voice. "Winter! Are you there, Brother?"

"A moment." He snatched his nightshirt from under his pillow and hastily threw it over his head. His breeches were nowhere in sight and he couldn't remember where he'd left them yesterday.

"Winter!"

Sighing, he draped the bedsheets around his shoulders like a banyan and stood to open his bedroom door.

Sherry-brown eyes narrowed in fear and concern met his. "Wherever have you *been?*"

Temperance Huntington, Baroness Caire, his elder sister, swept into Winter's room. Behind her was a girl of thirteen with black hair and rosy cheeks. Mary Whitsun was the eldest girl at the home and as such held the most responsibilities.

Temperance nodded at the girl. "You'd best go tell the others that we've found him."

"Yes, ma'am." Mary hesitated only long enough to say to Winter, "I'm so glad you're safe, sir." Then she was gone.

Temperance glanced about the room as if expecting to find an entire brothel hiding in the corner, then frowned up at him. "Dear Lord, Winter, we've spent half the night and all this morning searching for you! When you didn't come back yesterday and the riot spilled over into St. Giles, I quite feared the worst. And then we received word that you'd never made it to the new home."

Temperance plopped onto the bed. Winter eased back as well, careful to keep the covers over his lower limbs. He opened his mouth—

But Temperance evidently wasn't done. "And then Silence sent word that she has *married* Mickey O'Connor and has gone into some sort of hiding with him. We had to send the baby, Mary Darling, to her with two of O'Connor's more frightening-looking men." She added grudgingly, "Although, they did seem very fond of Mary Darling and she of them."

She inhaled for breath and Winter leaped into the breach. "Then our sister is safe?"

Temperance threw up her hands. "Presumably so. The soldiers were all over London yesterday—and still are today, for that matter—looking for Mickey O'Connor. Can you imagine? They say he was actually *dangling from the rope* when the Ghost of St. Giles cut him down. Of course, that's probably an exaggeration. You know how these rumors spread."

Winter kept his features impassive. Actually, it was no exaggeration at all—he'd barely made it in time to save O'Connor's neck from the hangman's noose. But obviously he couldn't tell Temperance that.

"And Mr. O'Connor's wretched *palace* burned last night," Temperance said in a lower voice. "They say a body was found in the smoldering ashes this morning, and everyone presumes it to be O'Connor's, but Silence's note arrived *after* the fire, so he must be still alive, mustn't he? Oh, Winter! Will Silence be safe with him, do you think?"

That was one question he could answer without hesitation.

"Yes." Winter looked into Temperance's eyes so that she could see the assurance in his. Mickey O'Connor might be a very dangerous river pirate and the most notorious man in London at the moment—and Winter might dislike the man quite intensely—but he did know one thing: "He loves Silence and Silence loves him. I watched the man's face as he gave Silence up to us when he knew he could no longer protect her. O'Connor cares for her deeply. Whatever else happens, he'll keep her safe with his life."

"Dear Lord, I hope so."

For a moment Temperance closed her eyes, losing her rigid posture as she slumped against his pillow. She was but nine and twenty—a mere three years older than he—but Winter was startled to realize that a few fine lines had imprinted themselves about her eyes. Had they always been there and he'd never noticed? Or were they new, brought on by the excitement of the last few weeks?

As he watched her, Temperance opened her eyes, as alert as ever. "You still haven't answered my question. Where have you been since yesterday afternoon?"

"I got caught in the riot." Winter winced and settled himself companionably on the narrow bed, shoulder to shoulder with his sister. "I'm afraid I was already late to my meeting with Lady Beckinhall. I was hurrying to get there when the crowd overwhelmed me. It was rather like getting caught in a herd of cows driven to market, I suppose, except they were noisier, fouler, and much more mean than any bovine mass."

"Oh, Winter," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "What happened?"

He shrugged. "I was too slow. I fell and was kicked about some and my leg was hurt." He gestured to his right leg. "It's not broken," he added hastily at her exclamation, "but it did slow me down. I ended up ducking into a tavern to wait out the worst of the riot. I suppose I got home quite late last night."

Temperance frowned. "No one saw you come in."

"As I said, it was quite late."

Strange how facile he had become at lying—even to those closest to him. It was a flaw within himself that he would have to examine later, for it did not speak well of his character.

He looked at the window. "And now it is already near noon, I think, and I need to be up and about my duties."

"Nonsense!" Temperance's brows drew together. "You're injured, Brother. One day abed will not bring the house down about your ears."

"Perhaps you're right..." he began, and then was startled when his sister leaned over to peer into his face. "What is wrong?"

“You’re not arguing with me,” she murmured. “You must really be hurt.”

He opened his mouth to deny her statement, but unfortunately she jostled his leg at that moment, turning his protest into a gasp of pain.

“Winter!” Temperance stared at the bedsheet-covered leg as if she could see through the material. “How bad is your leg, exactly?”

“It’s just a bump.” He swallowed. “Nothing to be concerned over.”

She narrowed her eyes, looking patently dubious of his claim.

“But I may take your advice and stay abed today,” he added hastily to appease her. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure he *could* stand for any length of time.

“Good,” she replied, gingerly rising from the bed. “I’m sending one of the maids up with some soup. And I should get a doctor to see you as well.”

“No need,” he said a bit too sharply. A doctor would immediately realize that his wound came from a knife. Besides, Lady Beckinshall’s maidservant had already sewed it up. “No, really,” he said in a quieter voice. “I just want to sleep for a bit.”

“Humph.” Temperance didn’t look at all convinced by his protest. “If I weren’t leaving this afternoon, I’d stay and make sure a doctor saw to you.”

“Where are you going?” he asked, hoping to change the topic of conversation.

“A house party in the country that Caire insists we attend.” Temperance’s face clouded. “There’ll be all sorts of aristocrats there, I suppose, and all of them looking down their horsey noses at me.”

He smiled—he couldn’t help it at her description—but his words were tender when he replied. “I doubt anyone will be sneering. Caire would cut off their noses, horsey or not, if they dared.”

A corner of her mouth tipped up at that. “He would, wouldn’t he?”

And Winter was glad, not for the first time, that his elder sister had found a man who adored her completely—even if he *was* an aristocrat.

For a moment he felt a pang. Both Temperance and Silence—the two people he was closest to in the world—were married now. They had husbands and, presumably, would soon have families of their own. They’d always be his sisters, but now they would always be apart from him as well.

It was a lonely thought.

But he didn’t let it show on his face. “You’ll do fine,” he told Temperance gently. “You have intelligence and moral dignity. Qualities I suspect very few of those aristocrats possess.”

She sighed as she opened his door. “You may be right, but I’m not entirely certain that intelligence and moral dignity are at all esteemed in aristocratic circles.”

“Ma’am?” Mary Whitsun peered around the doorjamb. “My lord Caire says as how he’s waiting for you in the carriage.”

“Thank you, Mary.” Temperance touched a finger to the girl’s cheek, her countenance clouded. “I’m sorry to leave again so soon. We haven’t had much time together lately, have we?”

For a moment Mary’s stoic little face wavered. Until her marriage, Temperance had lived at the home and had grown especially close to Mary Whitsun.

“No, ma’am,” the girl said. “But you’ll be coming back soon, won’t you?”

Temperance bit her lip. “Not for another month or more, I’m afraid. I have an extended house party to attend.”