



CHAMELEON
BY AUTHOR JILLIAN KENT

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Chapter One

We should come home from adventures, and perils, and discoveries every day with new experience and character. —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

London, 29 March 1818

St. James Park loomed in front of them, shrouded in a heavy mist that created difficulty for horse and driver as the coach and four maneuvered its way into the park.

Inside the vehicle, Victoria leaned toward the window, straining to see the outline of trees. “Such a disappointment,” she sighed. “This is not what I expected my very first morning in London. I’d so hoped to see more on the ride through the park, something exciting to tell Devlin when we get to his home.”

“Don’t despair, my lady.” Nora, her maid, pulled a heavy shawl tighter about her shoulders. “’Tis sure to be the same mist that abounds in Yorkshire. This nuisance will lift eventually. It always does.”

Victoria patted the sleek head of her dog. “Even Lazarus grows bored.” She marveled at her best friend, a behemoth of a mastiff, as he lowered his bulk to the floor of the coach with a loud groan and laid his head across her slipper-covered feet, creating comfortable warmth. He’d been with her for years, and she couldn’t leave him behind. The poor dear would cry himself to sleep every night.

Victoria allowed the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves and Nora’s penchant for humming songs to lull her into a light sleep. Nora’s humming had comforted her all those years she’d been sick at Ravensmoore. While everyone else lived their busy lives out around her, she’d done little but survive, taking comfort in the small things that brought her joy.

A sudden crash caused the coach door to vibrate. Victoria screamed and bolted upright as Lazarus pressed his nose and giant paws against the carriage window. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

She grabbed Lazarus by the collar. Heart pounding, she turned to Nora. “What was that?” “Highwaymen!” Nora’s hand crept to her neck, and fear filled her eyes.

The coachman drew the horses to a halt and opened the top hatch. “I fear I may have run someone down, my lady, but in this fog I can’t tell.”

“We must find out at once. Someone may be hurt.” Victoria threw open the door, and Lazarus bounded into the mist. “Lazarus! Find!” She called after him, but he was already well on his way. She stepped from the coach, nearly tripping in her haste.

“Wait, my lady,” Nora cried. “Tis not safe. Come back!”

The driver’s voice echoed through the mist. “You’ll lose your way, my lady. Stop where you are.”

But the warning wasn’t necessary. Victoria could hear Lazarus snuffling the ground someplace nearby. She bit her lip and told herself to be brave, even as her heart pounded.

At the same time Lazarus let out a warning bark, the mist shifted.

Victoria’s hand clamped over her mouth.

A man lay on his side only a few feet in front of her.

She shouted back to the coach. “I’ve found him! I need help.” She dropped to her knees and touched his shoulder. He didn’t move.

She touched his arm and gently shook it. “Sir, are you conscious? Are you injured?” But before she could investigate further, strong arms lifted her and turned her away from the sight. She assumed it was Mr. Smythe, the carriage driver.

“This is not something a lady should see,” the man said.

But as he turned her from the body, she caught a glimpse of the man’s head. She gasped. There was just enough light to see streaks of blood upon one deathly pale cheek.

“We hit him,” she cried. “The coach—” She lifted her head expecting to see the kind eyes of Mr. Smythe and met the warm, brilliant, grey eyes of a stranger. “Who . . . who are you? Who is he? Did we kill him?” She buried her face in her rescuer’s shoulder to rid her mind of the sight.

“It does not appear so, my lady,” he said, his voice low and comforting.

He deposited her inside the coach. Before she could speak, Lazarus bounded in next to her, rocking the vehicle precariously. She patted his head to calm him, and when she looked up at the man again, she saw only icy grey eyes and a rigid jaw line.

She studied those eyes momentarily and heard Nora say, “You poor dear. What is it that you saw?”

“Not the sight any young woman should witness, miss,” the stranger said. “But I believe I prevented her from viewing the worst of the man’s injuries.” He hesitated, then added, “This was no fault of the driver. Take care of this young woman. I’ll get help for the gentleman. Carlton House is nearby.”

“Nonsense,” Victoria whispered. “Use the coach. Our driver will take you.”

He nodded and bowed. “You’re very kind.”

She wondered if it had been her imagination or if his eyes frequently switched from warmth to coolness in only a moment. She wondered what this meeting might have been like under different circumstances.

“Be still,” Nora said. “You’ve had a shock.”

She heard the stranger and Mr. Smythe lifting the injured man to the driver’s seat. “God have mercy,” the driver said.

“I’ll show you to Carlton House through this heavy fog. He can get the help he needs there. Who am I indebted to?”

“I’m taking Lady Victoria Grayson and her maid to the lady’s brother.”

“And that would be?”

“Lord Ravensmoore, sir.”

They approached Carlton House a few minutes later. Victoria clutched the edge of the seat, attempting to recover from what had happened and what she’d witnessed. As if he understood, Lazarus licked her hand. The coach came to a halt.

The fog still lay heavy on the ground. Victoria could barely make out the two figures moving toward the door and into the palace. But even as their images faded, her thoughts returned to the stranger who’d lifted her away from the bleeding man and carried her back to the coach. The stranger with strong arms and fascinating grey eyes.

Victoria found her strength as the fog lifted and patches of sunlight appeared through the trees, dappling the ground with their shadows. London came alive. Though her curiosity remained keen, she turned her thoughts to her brother and kept her mind on the joy it would be to see him again. He’d only been absent from their home at Ravensmoore for two months, but it seemed far longer.

She stared in unabashed awe at the sea of activity that surrounded them as their coach merged with others, making its way through the muddy, rutted streets. The crowded sidewalks teemed with people of all classes. Women in brilliant gowns of color swirled past street urchins and beggars, meshing into an ever-shifting tapestry of humanity.

She'd stepped into a world bigger than York, a world she'd only dreamed about. Victoria leaned back against the banquette and sighed. "Now that I can see it properly, London is magnificent."

"I think it best if you have your brother examine you when we arrive, my lady Victoria. You know how he worries. You know how I worry. 'Tis a blessing to have a brother who is both a lord and physician."

Victoria turned away from the window and assessed her maid. "I am no longer an invalid, Nora, and well you know it." She lifted her chin a notch. "I'm stronger than either you or my brother realize." Nora met her gaze, her brow furrowed with worry. Victoria lifted her hand to dismiss the words of warning she knew were sure to come. But Nora, having been her constant companion the past eleven years and knowing her so well, caught Victoria's hand.

"Child, you're pale and weary from our travels and that horrid incident in the park. 'Tis a good thing we've made this journey, but I think your brother will agree with me that you need to rest."

"I've been resting my entire life. It's time to live and catch up on the adventures that God has in store for me. How many times did you read Jeremiah twenty-nine, eleven to me throughout the years? Did you not believe those words yourself?"

Nora nodded, keeping her lips firmly pressed together in an obvious effort to curb her tongue. A difficult feat, Victoria understood and appreciated.

As if sensing the tension and hoping to break up an ensuing argument, Lazarus nuzzled and nudged Victoria's attention away from her maid and back toward the window to watch a group of young boys chasing each other down the street. He barked and strained against the coach door. Victoria couldn't move him from his place of entertainment if she'd tried.

"Such a window hound you are, Lazarus." Victoria rubbed her hand over his big, sleek head, ruffling his ears. "If you wanted my attention, you would more readily share your window." She smiled and turned her gaze toward the window on the opposite side. Men and women hawked their wares and called to them in hopes of making a profit. "You can do no wrong in my eyes, Lazarus. If you hadn't been with us earlier, that poor man might still be lying in the park." She tried to shake off the sense of dread that seeped through her pores. She refused to allow the upset of the morning to ruin her reunion with her brother.

“I’m sorry, Nora.” She studied the dark-haired, blue-eyed woman who was eleven years her senior. Nora had always seemed more of an aunt to her than a maid and companion.

“You’re forgiven.” A smile quirked the corners of her mouth.

“You really are too pretty to continue caring for me much longer. Why is it you haven’t yet married?”

Now Nora chose to gaze out the window to escape further inquiry. “I will when the time and the suitor are right.”

Victoria ended that line of questioning, and they rode in companionable silence the rest of the way, each lost in thought.

The busy streets gave way to quieter and more prestigious avenues as they made their way to Grosvenor Square and her brother’s London townhome. The quality of the air improved as they moved farther from the central streets and into the areas of the upper crust. The coach slowed and then pulled to a halt in front of number three, Devlin’s home.

“I cannot wait another moment.” Grabbing the handle of the coach door, Victoria stepped out onto the curb. Lazarus bounded out after her and onto the street.

“Good heavens! It’s a bear,” an elderly woman said, clinging to her husband.

Victoria smothered a grin. “He’s quite harmless.”

The couple hurried away from the dog.

Nora bolted from the coach and grabbed Lazarus by the collar, holding him fast as he strained to make chase.

“Thank you, Nora. Just in time.”

Victoria gathered her blue velvet traveling skirts and ran up the five steps to the entrance. She reached for the gilded knocker, hesitated, and then, after adjusting her gloves, started to grab the handle instead. But the door opened before her hand reached it.

Devlin’s butler appeared. A smile lit his face when he saw Victoria. “Lady Victoria,” he said, and then executed a most noble bow. When he straightened, his pleasure at seeing her was still apparent. “Welcome to London.”

“Henry!” Victoria said. “It is good to see you. Do you mind taking Lazarus? He adores you almost as much as I do.”

“For you, I would take Lazarus on a walk to the ends of the earth,” he said with cheerful amiability.

“Who is it that you are taking for a walk, Henry?” Devlin appeared in the doorway, tall and handsome with that brotherly smile of his and assessing green-eyed gaze. “Ah, there she is. My favorite imp. What took you so long? I expected you yesterday.” He held out his arms. “Are you well?”

“I believe so. We stopped at a nearby inn last evening. The rain made travel a bit difficult.” Victoria burrowed deep into her brother’s warm, comforting embrace. “I’ve missed you, Dev,” she whispered into his chest and squeezed him tight. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“And I, you.” Devlin held her at arm’s length. “It’s good to see you. Now, come in and tell me all about your journey and how my wife is doing at home without me.” He looked up at Nora. “Has she behaved herself on this trip, Nora?”

Her companion grinned. “Nothing out of the ordinary for Lady Victoria, yer lordship.”

“That speaks volumes.” Devlin gently pinched his sister’s cheek. “Henry, I believe Nora would love to hear about town.”

“Of course, yer lordship. Welcome to London, Nora. Would you care to accompany me? And allow me to take Lazarus off your hands.”

“Bless you for that, Henry. He wears me down too quickly.”

“Come along, Lazarus.” He accepted the leash from Nora and quickly fastened it to the dog’s collar.

Nora nodded. “It will help me find my balance again after a long, bumpy, and perilous ride in the coach. I’ll catch you up with all that’s happened back at Ravensmoore.”

Devlin started to enter the house with Victoria and then turned back to Henry. “And Henry,” he called, “don’t forget to feed the beast before you return him to Victoria.”

“Feed him, sir? And just who should be the sacrifice? Lazarus has a shine to his eyes, and I’m thinking it is for me.”

“Get creative, man. Start with Cook.”

“Now, there’s a right smart answer,” Henry said and laughed. “Mrs. Miller will faint dead away.”

Devlin grinned, a wicked glint in his green eyes. “If Cook has the nerve to faint, let Lazarus nibble at her.”

“Devlin!” Victoria feigned horror. “What an outlandish thing to say.” She covered a grin. “That would bring her around faster than smelling salts.”

She turned to watch Lazarus leading Henry and Nora down the street. Her thoughts fled to what might be happening at Carlton House. A shudder crept up her spine. She decided to wait to tell Devlin of her experience in the park. Guilt niggled, but she just wasn’t ready to divulge that bit of information. After all, her freedom was at stake. One thought of her in danger, and Devlin would ship her back to York before she got settled in. No doubt Nora would reveal all if she didn’t stop her maid when she returned from the walk.

“Are you cold?” Devlin asked, assessing her carefully. “Come in. You must be exhausted.”

“Not really. The ride was but a couple of hours.”

“No adventures during your journey, Snoop?”

She loved his pet name for her. She was more than a bit curious about everything life had to offer, and Devlin used her nickname more often than her given name. “Adventures? What could possibly happen on a two-hour ride into town?” She swallowed hard, hoping her expression didn’t give her away. She would tell him when the time was right.

“Knowing you, just about anything.”

“I promise to give you a full report.” Eventually. And as she stepped into her brother’s townhome, she wondered how she could discover more about her grey-eyed stranger and the bloodied man he’d taken to Carlton House.

Jonathon Denning, Lord Witt, nearly collided with the guard on duty while carrying Lord Stone into Carlton House.

“Send for the regent and his physician immediately,” he ordered. “There’s been an accident. I need a place where Lord Stone can be treated, and privacy is a must. Not a word of this leaves your lips. Do you understand?”

The guard nodded and headed toward one of the pages standing nearby. “You heard Lord Witt. Be off with you, and hurry, Thomas.”

Witt watched as the page fled down a long corridor.

“Follow me, Lord Witt. We’ll take him upstairs to the guest lodgings. Allow me to carry him.”

“I can manage,” Witt muttered. “Go, man. Lead the way, and make sure you choose a room that is not easily found.”

The guard wasted no time, and after climbing to the second floor, Witt lay Stone on a four-poster bed surrounded by green drapes. Out of breath, Witt collapsed into a chair, mentally taking stock of all that had happened in the period of a mere half hour.

The guard paled when he saw the severity of Lord Stone’s wounds.

“Not a word. Remember that, or I’ll have your post. Now draw those drapes and leave. Send a decanter of brandy. I need a drink. Better yet, send two.”

Witt sat in a chair near the bed and tried to think about what to do next, as the regent was sure to ask his opinion. He’d been a valued spy during the war, and the regent frequently asked his advice. He sat forward and rested his head in his hands. He’d simply gone out for an early morning walk before Parliament, heard the coach approaching, and scrambled to get out of the way before he was run down.

The muffled sounds of an obviously disturbed dog had fired him to action. He ran a short distance through the mist and then had come upon a well-dressed lady, her massive dog, and Lord Stone. One look at the huge dog had almost caused him to retreat, but he couldn’t leave a young woman to deal with what he’d seen of Stone’s face.

The driver had said the woman was Ravensmoore’s sister. Ironic, since he’d been keeping an eye on the “Lord Doctor” at Prinny’s request.

Prinny, as the regent was known amongst the ton, didn’t know if he liked the idea of one of his lords working as a physician. A nobleman working a trade drew suspicion. What was the point? Although Ravensmoore’s reputation had been spotless when he’d come into his title, it was anticipated that he would leave the study of medicine to manage his estate. Instead, he’d pursued this obsession that he referred to as a calling and allowed his man of affairs to run his estate when he was forced to be absent. Prinny wanted to know if there was more to it or if Ravensmoore was simply eccentric.

He heard the unhappy growling of the regent and his doctor as they neared the suite of rooms. Witt steeled himself.

“What in the name of all that is reasonable has caused this inconvenience?” roared Prinny when he burst through the outer sitting room. He was still steaming as he entered the bedroom with his physician in tow.

Witt stood. “Your Royal Highness.” He bowed. “Lord Stone has been attacked. I found him in the park. He needs your physician’s immediate attention.”

The overstuffed physician huffed. “I’ll decide what necessitates immediate attention, Lord Witt.”

“Then I suggest you make the determination.” Witt nodded toward the bed. The physician hesitated.

The regent said, “Get on with it. I’m busy today. For the love of good food, Parliament reconvenes this afternoon.”

The physician huffed again and went to the bed, grabbing the drapes and pulling them back. “Great heavens. What’s happened to the man?” He opened the black bag he carried with him. “I’ll need a nursemaid.”

Prinny then stepped closer to evaluate Stone’s condition himself. He sucked in a breath. “The poor devil! Get on with it, doctor. Do everything you can to save him.” The regent, visibly shaken, looked at Witt. “Tell me everything. What happened? We must find out who did this to Stone.”

“Your Majesty.” The physician turned from the bed with a bloody missive in his shaking hand. “I found this pinned to his waistcoat. A warning.”

“Who dares?” He snatched the paper away and read it. “Lord Witt, today’s session of Parliament must be cancelled.”

Witt arched a brow.

Prinny handed him the blood-stained parchment.

Witt read the note aloud. “‘You have been found guilty of conspiring with sinful men for sinful purposes. I will now handle the situation as I see fit. Stone is only the first. Repent, you lords of parliament.’ And it’s signed, ‘Lord Talon.’”

“Curse this Lord Talon.” Prinny looked to Witt for direction. “We must decide the best course of action, and soon. No one has dared attack a member of Parliament since Bellingham assassinated our prime minister, and that was six years ago.”

Ravensmoore came to mind, but Witt faltered for just a moment. No doubt, the man was the best there was, and his skills badly needed. But his sister had only just arrived in London, and this situation could put her and her brother in danger. An edge of uneasiness rippled down his back.

“Witt,” the regent said. “What is your recommendation?”

Witt took charge. “We must proceed with caution. Tell no one about the note. Not yet. And don’t say anything to anyone about the signature of this Lord Talon. I suggest we ask Lord Ravensmoore to join us immediately. Having a physician who is a peer can prove most helpful.”

The regent paced and mumbled to himself, seemingly in a struggle to make a decision. Finally he said, “Send for him.”

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