

## Chapter One

London, May 1829

From beside the potted palm, Daniel Kerrington, Viscount Worthing, watched with his customary awareness as the girl's suitors flocked to her side. Even from this distance, he could view how her face lit with delight from all the attentions she received as the Duke of Thornhill's daughter.

"I understand Thornhill offered an outrageous dowry for the chit," Daniel's school acquaintance Olin Jansing murmured. "Makes a man wonder if the girl's possesses some sort of malady the duke wishes her future husband to overlook."

Lady Sonalí made her Come Out earlier in the Season, but Daniel avoided her until now because the Linworth household mourned for his grandfather, the previous earl.

"You mean beyond her dark complexion," Charles Rivers, the future Baron Rivers, said in bemusement.

Daniel always found Rivers' company less than appealing, but Jansing rarely went about Society without Charles Rivers at his side.

"I understand her mother was from India," Rivers whispered *sotto voce*.

Daniel scowled his disapproval.

"There are many types of beauty, Rivers," he said in a harsh chastisement. "The color of the lady's skin does not make it less appealing to a man's touch."

He directed his next remarks to Jansing.

"I assure you the size of the girl's dowry has more to do with the duke and duchess's consequence than Lady Sonalí's."

"Sounds as if you know something we do not," Rivers taunted.

Daniel offered the man a quelling glare.

"As my mother is the duke's sister, Thornhill remains my family."

Daniel's response was not the full truth. In fact, he was eight before he spent more than a few days with his father, who deserted Daniel when the then Viscount Worthing lost his first wife in childbirth. Although his father spent the last fifteen years attempting to erase his absence in Daniel's life, Daniel was sore to admit his father's initial rejection still stung. Things bettered when James Kerrington married Lady Eleanor Fowler, a woman who did not once criticize a boy starving for his father's affections. Even though she bore the current Earl of Linworth other children, the Countess of Linworth treated Daniel as her son. His stepmother's kindness proved a balm to Daniel's bruised soul.

Irritated with the company, he offered an abbreviated bow.

"If you will excuse me, my parents arrived, and I should make my addresses known to Thornhill and his duchess."

Daniel left the pair standing gapped mouth as he crossed the dance floor to intercept his father. He held little patience for most young men his age. His stepmother often said Daniel was of her nature: an old soul in a young person's body. Whenever Ella made such statements, Daniel's father inevitably frowned.

On balance, the Earl of Linworth was but a couple years short of his fiftieth birthday, while Eleanor Kerrington was but four and thirty. In truth, Daniel thought his time upon the Continent as part of his father's staff as an ambassador to first Spain and later to Germany

provided Daniel a different perspective. He learned more of the world than many of his former university chums.

“There you are, darling,” his mother said as she encircled his arm with her gloved fingers. She was taller than many of the women of the *ton*, and Daniel celebrated the day he realized he was taller than she. Now, he stood four inches her superior.

“I was simply waiting for the beautiful Countess of Linworth before I made my official appearance,” he teased, bending to kiss the cheek his stepmother offered.

Daniel appreciated how Ella always accepted his gestures of affection.

“You will save me a dance, Ma’am?” he asked before winking at her.

His mother’s gaze narrowed.

“Are you not previously engaged? I would think a future earl would be in high demand among the mamas seeking a fine match.”

Daniel grinned mischievously.

“The very reason I prefer my mother’s skirt tails.”

His father’s lips held a staid smile.

“Have you claimed a dance upon Lady Sonalí’s dance card? The duke will expect you to make your bow.”

Although Daniel attempted to disguise the hitch in his breathing and the quickening of his pulse, he was certain Ella noted his apprehension.

“I am not accustomed to vying for a young girl’s favor,” Daniel said baldly.

“Nonsense,” his father declared. “Sonalí is not just any girl. Thornhill is Ella’s brother and the duchess her cousin, and that is discounting the years the duke and I served together during the war.”

Ella interrupted her husband’s lecture.

“Daniel knows his duty, Linworth. More than likely, neither Thornhill nor the duchess took note of Daniel’s absence from Sonalí’s dance card. Look at them, glorying in the deference sent their way. Just because we know their most personal secrets does not mean others of the aristocracy see them as anything less than a duke and duchess.”

Eleanor patted his father’s arm to quell any of the earl’s objections.

“Come along, Daniel. We will clear the way to the duke’s side.”

“Thank you,” he whispered as they crossed to where the duke and duchess stood upon the first step of a raised dais.

“Your father means well,” she said softly. “But so many years in public service has Linworth always questioning propriety.”

“I remember when Linworth ignored propriety at every turn,” Daniel said in harsh tones.

His mother smiled grimly.

“So do I. With our history, your father’s attempts to censure often surprise me. I suspect Linworth is struggling in accepting his role as the earl. I believe, despite your grandfather’s declining health, Linworth always thought his father would live forever. Martin Kerrington’s passing speaks to your father’s mortality. Linworth is built for protection, and he will not accept aging gracefully.”

“I will consider your estimation,” Daniel dutifully said.

They took their place before her brother, and Daniel braced Ella in a curtsy of respect.

“Duke. Duchess,” Daniel murmured as he bowed low. “Lady Sonalí.”

He refused to look at the girl for fear he could not withdraw his eyes afterwards. Daniel held no name for when his obsession with Sonalí Fowler began. He suspected it was upon that

day long ago when his “Uncle Marcus,” the Earl of Berwick, another of the men who served with his father and Thornhill, taught Daniel and the girl to fish.

Berwick’s attentions upon that particular day were upon Cashémere Aldridge, the duchess’s sister and Sonalí’s aunt, and so the earl placed Sonalí’s hand into Daniel’s with instructions for Daniel to protect her. He considered Berwick’s words a solemn promise.

“Lord Worthing.” Daniel could hear the soft familiarity in her tone, and despite his best efforts, his eyes sought hers. In his opinion, Lady Sonalí was the most beautiful woman he ever beheld. Hair the color of midnight. Silky strains in which a man could lose his reason. A straight edged nose. Almond shaped chocolate eyes. Dark brows. Square chin. High cheek bones. Long black lashes resting upon her cheeks in a delightfully tempting manner. Delicately bronzed skin, which made Daniel’s fingers itch to touch her.

“Good to see you, boy,” the duke declared aristocratically. “Every day, you have more of the look of your father.”

Daniel knew those words an exaggeration. One of the reasons his father could not look upon the child he abandoned was because Daniel held his birth mother’s features.

“It would be an honor to be cut from the same cloth as my father, sir.” Daniel chose his words with care.

“If you mean to claim Sonalí’s hand for a dance, I fear you are too late,” the duchess noted.

In many ways Daniel’s heart fought against the disappointment; in others, he rejoiced at not being in the girl’s presence without the barrier of their parents. He did not trust the power Lady Sonalí possessed over him.

“There is the supper waltz,” Lady Sonalí suggested. “That is, if Papa holds no objections.”

Daniel thought he detected a bit of hope in her tone, but he would not place bets on Lady Sonalí’s returning his regard. More likely, the girl did not wish to dance with her father a second time.

Daniel looked on as the duke’s eyebrow rose in characteristic assessment.

“I suppose I could relinquish my daughter’s hand to another.”

“I would prefer your company, Thornhill, to that of Lord Sokoloft,” the duchess admitted.

“It is not as if Daniel is a stranger, Brantley,” Ella encouraged.

“I would not wish to deny the duke the honor of escorting his daughter through the supper waltz,” Daniel responded with appropriate politeness. “It is Lady Sonalí’s first Season and very much my fault in being tardy with paying my addresses.”

Daniel did not know whether he wished to win or to lose this particular battle.

“Standing upon propriety is not necessary among relations,” Lady Sonalí reasoned. “I would be pleased for Lord Worthing’s company; we have long since spent time in conversation. And it is not as if the duke shuns his duty: Papa will escort me through the opening set.”

A silence fell among their party as they awaited Thornhill’s decision.

“I suspect you should claim my daughter’s hand, Worthing, while I remain amenable,” Thornhill pronounced in the duke’s customary pomp.

Too polite to protest, Daniel felt an internal shrug of destiny’s hand when he accepted the card Lady Sonalí presented. How would it be to hold her in his arms throughout the set? Daniel scratched a line through Thornhill’s name before adding his initials and then returning the card to her.

“Thank you for the honor, Lady Sonalí.”

Daniel kept his eyes upon a spot just past her ear so as not to become lost in the pools of chocolate known as Sonalí’s eyes.

“I imagine our Sonalí would prefer to spend her time with the young people, Thornhill,” Daniel’s father observed.

“I am but one and forty,” the duke declared righteously.

Daniel’s mother soothed the egos of her husband and her brother, a task Daniel witnessed Lady Eleanor do on more than one occasion.

“Both you and Linworth are young for men of your station, Brantley; even so, time marches on without our permission. In truth, it pleases me no longer to claim the status of a debutant in English Society. I find aging is quite delightful. I never tolerated the strictures of Society well.”

Linworth nudged Ella closer to his side.

“That is because you and the duchess played foul with time. You two are more beautiful now than when the duke and I claimed your hands.”

Daniel would agree with his father regarding Eleanor, but he was not so certain time was kind to the Duchess of Thornhill. Lady Sonalí’s stepmother held the look of one who experimented with the ointments and compounds available to extend the softness of her skin. In Daniel’s opinion, the creams and salves did not enhance the duchess’s beauty; rather they made the woman appear pale and ghostlike, which was exceptional considering the Duchess of Thornhill was of darker tones and hair than was Eleanor, who was a golden blonde.

Before the banter could begin again, Daniel made his excuses and exited toward the card room. He did not intend to play, but it was a good excuse not to tarry in Sonalí Fowler’s presence. When the music began, he would ask several of the other ladies to dance in order to disguise the fact he only attended the Thornhill’s ball because it would be expected of him.

“If I pay my attentions only to one woman, it will set the gossips’ tongues wagging,” he reasoned privately.

Daniel paused outside the card room to glance to the dance floor filling with couples for the opening set. Quite of their own will, his eyes drifted to where Lady Sonalí stood up with Thornhill. Daniel’s breath came harder as he made himself look away.

“Dancing with a few ladies who cling to the wall and potted palms,” Daniel warned his foolish heart, “will provide the ladies recognition and me a means to pass the hours until I hold Lady Sonalí in my embrace.”

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Daniel danced once with Miss Wilburn and once with Miss Blackstone, but other than those sets, he simply waited for the moment he would claim Lady Sonalí’s hand. The girl had yet to sit through a set, and Daniel watched her joy with each step and each compliment presented by the girl’s dance partners. Despite experiencing a bit of jealousy, he could not wipe the smile from his lips. Lady Sonalí was magnificent.

Once upon the plains in Spain, he saw a black butterfly, and the color of its wings had him thinking upon the inky shade of Lady Sonalí’s hair. He watched the butterfly as it flitted from flower to flower, and a peace claimed his heart. Daniel knew the same contentment now as his eyes traced her steps.

“You should be dancing, Worthing.” Daniel turned his head to observe the wry smile upon Sir Carter Lowery’s lips.

By routine, Daniel bowed.

“I prefer to watch.”

The baronet nestled closer to Daniel’s shoulder where they might speak privately.

“The duchess must be pleased. Her second ball of the Season is as great a crush as was Sonalí’s Come Out.”

Daniel’s eyes returned to the dance floor.

“I lost the feeling in my toes,” he said as a distraction. “I did not move as quickly as I should when Lady Bond cleared the way for her three daughters.”

“The woman should simply accept a rich Cit. It is not so unfashionable to align one’s family with a wealthy man of trade as it once was. Her daughters are not likely to claim an aristocratic match.”

Daniel nodded his agreement.

“Especially now that there are three out at the same time. The first has yet to know a proposal,” he remarked.

“You have the right of it.” The baronet’s gaze followed Daniel’s. “Lady Lowery and I mean to escort Sonalí and Simon to see Jerrold’s *Black-Eyed Susan* on Friday. Perhaps you would care to join us. We mean to see the play one more time before we retreat to Kent. I am certain Lady Sonalí would enjoy your company.”

Daniel fought the panic rising to his throat. Was he too obvious in his regard for the girl?

“I doubt either the lady or Mr. Warren would approve of my interference into their plans.”

The baronet lowered his voice.

“Sonalí and Simon are merely friends. My wife’s ward is two years junior to the duke’s daughter and not a candidate for the girl’s hand. Simon must first finish his schooling and then an apprenticeship before he thinks of marrying.”

Daniel heard the slight squeak in his protest.

“Do you think I hold an interest in Thornhill’s daughter?”

He attempted to appear incredulous when in truth, Daniel felt nothing but humiliation at being found out.

Sir Carter drawled in sardonic appreciation.

“You could do worse. Your family and hers would rejoice in the connection.”

Daniel gazed at the baronet in baffled wonder.

“Is this Linworth’s idea?”

Lowery had the grace to shake off Daniel’s question.

“As it happens, I doubt Linworth placed your interest, but I am recognized for my keen eye. Yet, if you tell me I erred, I will keep my observations to myself.”

Daniel fought to maintain a calm countenance.

“You are mistaken, Sir.”

The baronet studied Daniel speculatively, but at length, Sir Carter shrugged off his conjectures.

“Very well. That being said, I pray you will join us for the play. It is a fine farce.”

“I will consider it, Sir.” Daniel appreciated Lowery’s candor. “Now, if you will excuse me, I mean to claim Miss Poplin’s hand for the next set.”

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At length, it was time for Daniel to escort Sonalí onto the dance floor.

“Lady Sonalí.”

Daniel bowed to her and the group of young bucks attempting to entertain her with their witty banter.

“I believe the next set is mine.”

“Certainly, my lord.”

Sonalí placed her gloved fingers in his outstretched palm.

“Please excuse me.”

She nodded her exit to the others as Daniel wrapped her hand about his elbow.

“Thank you for agreeing to replace Papa for the supper dance,” she whispered.

Despite Daniel’s best efforts, a hint of amusement colored his tone.

“You had no desire to dine with your father?”

Sonalí laughed lightly, a tinkling sound, which warmed Daniel’s heart.

“Fah. I dine with the duke and duchess every evening.”

“And I was a convenient alternative?”

Daniel prayed Sonalí would deny her manipulations.

Lady Sonalí’s chin rose in defiance, and her eyes met his. A flash of fire crossed her features.

“I did not realize you would feel put upon. There was a time we were friends.”

Daniel said with a sad smile.

“What date do you name for our friendship coming to an end?”

Daniel turned Sonalí so she nestled comfortably into his embrace. His fingers rested upon the small of her back, and he itched to permit his palm to slide over her hip and to nudge Sonalí closer. The music began, and they stepped into the pattern.

Although Daniel looked upon the other couples over Sonalí’s shoulder, he knew the exact moment when Sonalí’s regard settled upon his countenance. It was deuced annoying to feel her in every pore of his body.

“Explain to me why you quit writing to me,” Sonalí accused. “From the time you first traveled to the Continent with Linworth and Aunt Ella, we corresponded. Then suddenly, some two years past you no longer found me worthy of your recognition.”

Daniel earnestly studied her upturned face.

“I did write.”

It was true. Daniel wrote her long, detailed letters in which he described his days as his father’s assistant, adding particular gems of political intrigue of which he thought Sonalí would enjoy; yet, Daniel never posted them for in 1827, he returned to England with the hope of securing a promise from her, only to discover Sonalí keeping company with two naval officers. He later discovered the two men were the brother and a cousin of Lady Arlene Walker, one of Sonalí’s schoolgirl chums. When Daniel was once more in diplomatic service, he did all he could to forget her.

“The posts from Germany are exceedingly undependable.”

He spun Sonalí around a corner of the dance floor, adding a dipping counterclockwise turn, which he hoped would drive away her questions. Daniel always regretted his cowardice in the matter, but his heart could not bear her rejection.

“*Better to keep a private counsel than to know Sonalí’s rebuke,*” he told his heart.

“I suppose what you say is possible.”

Sonalí was silent for several minutes, and Daniel simply enjoyed the heat of her body along his front. She tipped her head to the side and studied him with care.

“Then you still think fondly of me? I could not abide it, Worthing, if we were not of a like mind.”

“I doubt I could ever turn from you,” Daniel admitted. “We are as we always were, my lady.”

He certainly wished for more, but Daniel knew he could not settle for less. Some day, they would both marry others, but Sonalí would always hold his regard.

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Daniel chose seats where Sonalí might chat with several of her stepmother’s guests. If Daniel had his preferences, they would dine upon the terrace where a cool night breeze would require Sonalí to snuggle into his side for warmth. Unfortunately, they attempted conversation in a too stuffy and too loud dining hall.

Sonalí conversed with Miss Gandy. Daniel, far enough from the girl to ignore the chit’s insipid remarks, instead entertained himself by watching the rise and fall of Sonalí’s breasts. Lady Sonalí filled out nicely since Daniel last spent any significant time with her. He realized he should know regret at seizing the opportunity to fantasize upon what delights rested beneath Sonalí’s very fashionable gown, but his body and his mind held two different senses of honor.

The faint scent of an exotic fragrance filled his nostrils as his eyes feasted at the swell of her breasts above the silver lace trimming her gown. Her skin appeared soft to the touch. Smooth as if bronzed. Firm and luminous. Daniel found himself swallowing hard and fisting his hands to keep from reaching for her. He shrugged internally. His obsession was quite hopeless.

“You spent many years upon the Continent?” Miss Gandy asked with a flirtatious dip of her lashes.

Daniel thought how poor the girl’s efforts were for Miss Gandy was but a far off dot of light in the night sky while Sonalí was the sun, which warmed Daniel’s heart.

“Yes. Some six years as part of my father’s ambassadorial staff; however, I am pleased to return to England.”

“Lady Sonalí says you knew each other for years,” the girl pressed.

Daniel shot a glance to Sonalí, who was smiling mischievously.

“I believe my lady was but five when I first took her acquaintance. Thornhill and my father are associates, and my mother is Lady Sonalí’s aunt.”

Daniel winked at Sonalí and was rewarded by a flush of her sun-kissed skin.

“When we were young, I taught Lady Sonalí to cast a line to fish and assisted her in gathering wild flowers to make a wreath for her head. At the time, my lady was quite into stories of princesses.”

“One of my most treasured memories,” she taunted, but Daniel heard the sincerity in her tone.

“And as for you, my lord...”

Sonalí pointed a finger at him in mock defiance.

“You should know, my Lord Worthing, that I possess tales of your childhood, which you might find equally embarrassing.”

Daniel leaned back in his chair.

“Do your worst, my lady. I fear you not.”

He enjoyed this playful Sonalí more than he did the social debutant.

Sonalí’s smile lit up her features.

“I warned you, my lord.”

Daniel wished with all his heart he were ‘her’ lord.

“What of your interest in the healing arts?” Sonalí accused.

“I hold an interest in many subjects, and I possess no shame in wishing to discover a potion to extend my grandfather’s life,” Daniel observed dryly. “My mother once held a similar hope to save her mother. Thankfully, Linworth and the countess always encouraged my varied studies. Those upon the Continent are not so strict regarding class lines as are the English.”

“I surrender. You speak with uncompromised intelligence and graciousness.”

Sonalí bowed her head in a mocking taunt.

“I shall never be as accomplished as my Aunt Ella. I know you value the countess’s opinions above all others, and I fall short of knowing your respect.”

Daniel frowned deeply.

“Perhaps not above all others, but I am fortunate to possess an intelligent mother and a father who permits his wife her due.”

Before Lady Sonalí could respond, a loud commotion drew their attention. An inebriated Charles Rivers swayed in place.

“I will speak to my father of the bloody debts! Now remove your hand from my person,” Rivers growled in a voice that brought the noisy supper hall to a silent tableau.

The man who caught Rivers’ arm glanced about the room to judge the scene the future baron created. Viscount Gilbert, a man twice Rivers’ age, brought himself up tall.

“You have until week’s end,” Gilbert warned. “Then I will call upon your father.”

Gilbert released Rivers’ arm after giving it a hard shake. Daniel studied the scene with piqued interest as Gilbert turned to make his exit, but as the viscount came close to where Daniel and Sonalí sat at the table’s end, Rivers caught his empty glass in his fist and hurled it at the back of Gilbert’s head.

Daniel’s reflexes responded as he jumped up to deflect the glass with an outstretched hand.

“Demme you, Worthing!” Rivers declared as the glass flipped over, turning in the air above Gilbert’s head to crash against the wall.

The supper hall erupted in chaos as several of Thornhill’s servants subdued Rivers, while others rushed to Gilbert’s aid. Daniel turned immediately to Sonalí, who remained behind him throughout the short encounter, to discover her surprisingly pale for a woman of a darker complexion.

“Are you unwell?” Daniel asked anxiously as he knelt before her.

Tears filled Sonalí’s eyes as she opened her palm to display a cut across her upper wrist, just above her short gloves. Blood seeped from the wound.

“Bloody hell,” Daniel groaned as he caught the serviette from Sonalí’s lap to wrap it tightly about her arm. “Come with me,” he demanded as he assisted her to her feet.

With all the commotion, no one seemed to notice Daniel ushered Sonalí through the servants’ entrance. As the door closed behind him, he scooped Sonalí into his arms.

“I have you,” he said as soothingly as he could muster with his heart racing.

She held the cloth to her arm, and Sonalí leaned her head against his shoulder.

As Daniel was as familiar with Briar House as the Fowler family, he rushed along the narrow corridor before exiting at the hall’s end. Using his shoulder to open the door to the duke’s study, Daniel carried Sonalí to the leather covered chaise before placing her gently upon the loose pillows.

Kneeling beside her, Daniel caught Sonalí’s arm. The serviette displayed the wound’s continued bleeding.

“Permit me to examine the cut for glass.”

It bothered Daniel that Sonalí had yet to speak to him, but he had no time for questions.

“I am grieved,” Daniel said as he dabbed at the cut to wipe away the blood, “that my heroics brought this upon you.”

He could not look upon her. Sonalí’s tears would rip the soul from Daniel’s body.

His hands trembled as his finger traced the cut searching for shards of glass.

“We must clean the wound and stanch the flow of blood,” he assessed.

Daniel looked about the room for water. Finding an ewer, he filled a large tumbler with water and turned to look upon her. Sonalí kept her eyes averted from the wound, but they met his in open assessment.

“Please say you will forgive me,” Daniel pleaded; yet, before Sonalí could answer, he returned to her side.

He soaked his handkerchief in the water and gently dabbed at the cut, which was much deeper than Daniel first thought.

“Does Thornhill keep more handkerchiefs in his desk?”

“Top drawer on the right,” Sonalí whispered.

Daniel scrambled to find the duke’s monogrammed cloths.

“I should summon a physician.”

He rushed to Sonalí’s side to wrap the large square about her wrist.

“Forgive me. I must tie this tight.”

Daniel’s fingers were never so stiff, and he silently cursed his ineptitude.

“Daniel.”

He lifted his eyes to meet hers.

“Yes?”

It was most inconvenient to feel his groin tighten, but that was the effect Sonalí’s closeness had on him.

“You were wonderfully masterful.”

The fingers of Sonalí’s free hand brushed an errant curl from Daniel’s forehead, and his breath caught in Daniel’s chest.

Forcibly clearing his throat, he spoke in irony.

“I brought tears to your eyes. I would not term such foolhardiness as masterful.”

“You prevented Lord Gilbert from knowing harm,” Sonalí argued.

“I would prefer the viscount injured than you,” Daniel admitted.

Her fingers brushed his cheek, and it was all Daniel could do to keep from catching her hand to plant a kiss upon her palm.

“You were my knight.” Sonalí’s gaze ran over him in what appeared to be a possessive manner. *If only*, Daniel thought.

His mind whirled with possibilities. What would Sonalí do if he claimed her lips in a declaration of his devotion? Uncertainty flickered over her features. Did Sonalí anticipate his intentions? Her lips parted in expectation, and Daniel felt himself leaning closer. He was within inches of heaven when a heavy tread outside the study had Daniel scrambling to his feet.

“My lord?” Thornhill’s most trusted footman eyed where Sonalí rested upon the chaise.

“Ah, Murray,” Daniel said with more enthusiasm than he felt. “I am pleased you came. Lady Sonalí knew an injury during the supper hall’s melee. Would you fetch Thornhill and Lady Linworth? Lady Sonalí’s maid should also be summoned, as well as the duke’s personal physician.”

The footman's eyebrow rose in curiosity, but he nodded his agreement before rushing off to do Daniel's bidding.

"Permit me to apply more pressure. I believe the blood slowed."

Daniel returned to tending her wound.

Sonalí sat forward.

"Murray has abominable timing."

Sonalí's breath warmed Daniel's ear, but he did not turn his head.

"It is for the best," he said grudgingly.

"I suppose."

A bit of what sounded of disappointment laced Sonalí's tone.

"Daniel?" his mother's voice called from the hall.

He shot a quick glance to Sonalí to make certain no tell tale signs of passion remained upon her countenance.

"In here!"

Daniel knew Eleanor Kerrington would see to Sonalí's wound, but he was sore to release Sonalí's hand.

Within seconds Daniel's mother knelt by his side.

"Tell me what occurred."

"The glass Rivers hurled at Gilbert broke against the wall behind Lady Sonalí. Somehow a fragment cut Sonalí's arm," Daniel explained.

His mother unwrapped the cloth to examine the wound.

"Did you wash it?"

"Only with water."

Ella lightly touched Daniel's arm.

"Ring for a servant to bring us warm water and some soap."

She smiled in appreciation at him.

"You acted with foresight. I am proud of you."

"I was no longer frightened once Daniel took control," Sonalí noted.

His mother's smile widened. Daniel had no doubt the countess knew of Daniel's infatuation. Thankfully, Eleanor never questioned him on his behavior.

"My son engenders protection. Daniel is very much his father in that respect."

In truth, Daniel thought Ella modeled the behavior he practiced, but he did not argue with his stepmother.

Instead, he rose to do as Ella bid. Daniel just reached for the cord when he heard Ella gasp. Spinning on his heels, his eyes followed his mother's steady gaze. The patio door to Thornhill's study stood ajar. A man with skin as darker than Sonalí's stood in the shadows of the open door, and the countess pulled Sonalí to her feet and shoved the girl behind her. When Daniel meant to place himself between the women and the intruder, a flick of his mother's wrist kept Daniel in place.

"What do you mean coming here on such a night?" Ella demanded frostily.

A wry smile graced the man's lips.

"It has been too long, my lady. I believe the last time we met we tussled over Lord Lexford's body."

The stranger glanced about the room as if assessing the situation.

"In case you wondered," he continued in a mocking tone, "I have a scar marking where you shot me."

Daniel knew immediately the man was the infamous Murhad Jamot, a man who once hunted each of the Realm members.

Ella's chin rose in defiance.

"You did not answer my question."

The Baloch warrior shrugged away her challenge.

"Let us call this a bit of goodwill upon the entrance into Society of Ashmita's daughter."

The intruder's gaze traveled over Sonalí's body, and Daniel instinctively took several steps in the man's direction before a slight shake of his mother's head again stilled his steps.

"The girl has the look of her mother," Jamot announced.

"You knew my mother?" Sonalí pleaded.

Daniel understood. Despite his deep regard for Eleanor Kerrington, he wished often to speak of his real mother. Daniel rarely encountered any of Elizabeth Morris's family, and he felt deprived of a part of his history because of it. He would not be whole until he knew more of his Morris ancestry.

"Aye, Child," the man said wistfully. "Long before you were born."

Ella edged Sonalí further behind her.

"This is not a social call," his stepmother declared. "State your business and be gone from this house."

Dark eyebrows drew together in exasperation.

"Tell Thornhill, Lowery, and Linworth I am no longer the threat. Mir has come in person for the emerald, and the peace of the past decade will be no more."

"Shaheed Mir?" Ella appeared paled, but no answer from the man was forthcoming.

As quickly as he appeared, the Baloch vanished into London's darkness.