

CHAPTER ONE

May, 1889

Rhiannon Moore wrinkled her nose as she entered the study, taking care not to knock lest her entry be summarily denied. Her lover of nine months, the only female consulting detective in England, had been sequestered in the room for nearly a fortnight, smoking Egyptian cigarettes by the dozens, barely eating and drinking. Lady Evangeline St. Claire sulked and snapped and occasionally snarled, creating an atmosphere of *sturm und drang* that had the entire household on tip-toe, hushed and wary of drawing the woman's surly attention. Rhiannon had no real fear for her safety or security — after rescuing her from a life of prostitution and poverty, Lina would never abandon her to the streets again — but she, too, was affected by her lover's ill temper, since it meant sleeping apart, among other things.

We feel as much affection towards one another as ever, even if she does fall into a fit of the blue devils from time to time. Well, Lina is quite highly strung. She can't help it, considering that she comes from such pedigreed stock, Rhiannon thought, smiling a little at the notion of comparing her blue-blooded lover's ancestry to that of a farmer's prized brood mare. *I suppose I can bear her misery as long as I know it will end sooner or later. At least she does not shout, although I must say this sullen silence is almost worse than abuse.*

Lina was brilliant but erratic; her mind craved stimulation and the excitement of the chase. This was something that Rhiannon had found out early in their relationship. She had come to understand that her partner's periodic depressions had nothing to do with their love-bond. When criminal and investigatory activity ebbed, leaving her without a challenge, Lina lapsed into the doldrums. At first, Rhiannon had been terrified; her lover's melancholy had seemed very much like that which had plagued her father, whose queer depressions had driven him to commit suicide. She had learned, however, that the lady's ennui-based immobility would eventually pass, leaving Lina unharmed and ready to face life once more.

Rhiannon had also learned that Sherrinford Pike, a fellow consulting detective and Lina's long-time mentor, suffered a similar condition. He had sought mental stimulation in a seven-percent solution of cocaine for years, although he had stopped now due to the influence of his lover, Dr. Ormond Sacker. Rhiannon was glad that Lina did not require such a dangerous crutch to lean upon. *The cigarette smoking is horrid enough,* she thought, squinting against the stinking, choking clouds that were trapped inside the study.

What a filthy mundungus! Rhiannon waved a hand in a vain attempt to dispel some of the smoke. *If Lina took to drugs, she'd be worse than impossible. As it is, she's been intolerably grumpy for far too long. I have had enough. It's time to beard the lioness in her den.* Rhiannon felt like a wild animal tamer. Lina would never hurt her physically...*but all the same, a whip and a chair might not go amiss.*

After smoothing the skirts of her unstructured Liberty silk gown — the burnished copper colour, called Congo by the *modiste*, complemented her strawberry blonde hair and lent a touch of gilt to an otherwise pale complexion — Rhiannon went briskly to a window and pulled aside the heavy velvet curtains. "Good Lord, love! You're going to suffocate if you don't get some fresh air," she said.

Lina did not look away from her contemplation of the flames in the fireplace grate. She was lounging indolently on the settee. A cigarette smouldered between her thumb and forefinger. Her black hair spilled over the shoulders and back of her loose willow-green dress; a matching bandeau held the tangled locks away from her face. Lina's feet were bare, tucked up beneath her in bohemian fashion.

Undaunted, Rhiannon chattered on, "I bought a new book yesterday from Grimsby's — *The Princess Daphne*. It's all about romance, and psychic experiments and mesmerism, soul exchanges, and even a thinly veiled sapphic liaison. It should be an excellent read." She did not wait for an answer but continued, "Lina, shall we go to the Turkish baths today? It's been a long while since we graced Mrs. Urquhart's establishment."

"My dear..." Lina paused to puff her cigarette, and blew out a stream of hazy smoke with a sigh. "I thank you most kindly for the invitation. Do not think me wholly ignorant or unappreciative of the efforts

you have made to boost my flagging spirits. I admit that I have behaved quite abominably. It is simply difficult for me to muster an interest in much of anything at the moment.”

“Can *nothing* tempt you?” Rhiannon asked softly. She flicked out her tongue, just enough to add a moist gleam to her lower lip, and let her gaze show a glimmer of desire. Lina had not touched her in nearly two weeks, going so far as to sleep in another bedchamber under the excuse of keeping irregular hours. Frustrated desire was beginning to make Rhiannon itch in a less-than-pleasant manner.

Lina quirked a brow and her lips curved in the tiniest smile. Rhiannon was thrilled. Could it be that the storm was finally passing? She held her breath, waiting for the other woman’s response.

“Again, I fear that I must decline, although it grieves me to do so,” Lina said at last. “Perhaps tonight, my dear, I shall attempt to emerge from my *sanctum sanctorum* and rejoin polite society. One cannot remain isolated forever. Do go to the baths and take every opportunity of enjoying yourself. Have Solange accompany you, if you wish. And forgive me, I beg, for my self-indulgence these last days.”

“Forgiven, of course.” Rhiannon went to the settee, leaned down and brushed her lips against Lina’s temple. “Just don’t let it go on too much longer, love. I miss you.”

“And I, you.” Lina lifted her face for a proper kiss. “I promise to make it up to you in every way that you could possibly desire.” The tiny smile broadened slightly.

Yes, the ill temper was passing! The end was near! Rhiannon wanted to cheer. Instead, she said, “I will certainly hold you to that,” then caressed Lina’s cheek and left the study, relieved that her lover would be returning to normal soon.

Their elderly butler, Jackson, was hovering in the hall just outside, his mournful features settling into even more melancholy folds when he perceived that she was alone. “Does Milady’s humour remain unbalanced?” he asked in funereal tones.

“The worst has passed,” Rhiannon told him, “and I believe that she may come to supper this evening.”

Jackson rarely smiled, but his watery gaze contained a spark of what might have been happiness. The servants did not relish working in the house when Lina was suffering from one of her foul tempers. “Wonderful news, Miss Moore. I shall instruct Cook at once.” He doddered off, looking old and feeble. Rhiannon knew the butler was not as frail as he acted.

She went upstairs to fetch hat and gloves, and met Solange on the landing. The French maid shot her a sidelong glance, making Rhiannon chuckle. “The lady of the house is on the mend,” she said to the maid. “As for me, I’m off to the Turkish bath on Goswell Road. Will you come, too?”

Solange shook her head. “*Non, je regrette*, for I am in the midst of the great Spring mending.” Her normally sharp Parisian accent was blurred with exhaustion and she looked harried. “Also, Madam Cromier’s shop has sent the wrong undergarments, which must be returned, and milady’s gentlemen’s hats must be blocked and pressed, and the servants’ uniforms must be ordered, the maids’ aprons and caps sent to the laundress, and a thousand other things that must be done. *Mon Dieu!* If only there were two of me!”

Since their home lacked a housekeeper who would have dealt with the servants’ needs, Solange had taken that responsibility even though she was a lady’s maid and therefore technically above such duties. Still, Rhiannon knew better than to offer help. Solange would have considered it an insult, an indication that she was incompetent and could not perform her duties adequately.

Therefore, Rhiannon merely nodded in commiseration and said, “Will you ask one of the footmen to summon a cab? I don’t want to wait for Henry to prepare the carriage and fetch the horses from the stable just to take me to the baths.”

“*Bien sûr*, mademoiselle. I shall go at once.” Solange minced away, her black satin skirts swaying enticingly. At the bottom of the staircase, one of the footmen awaited the pretty maid’s arrival. Rhiannon was not sure if it was Bob or Frank; both of the footmen were very tall and stoutly built and blond, almost impossible to tell apart at a distance. It made no difference, however. Both men had a passion for Solange, who played them against one another like the expert *coquette* that she was.

Once in the bedchamber, Rhiannon wasted no time choosing a bleached straw hat with a low flat crown that had a cluster of amber silk roses spilling over the curled brim. She tied the ribbons under her chin in a jaunty bow. A moment of rummaging in a drawer produced a pair of kidskin gloves. Warm weather meant that she did not need a jacket, but she did take a fringed shawl to wrap around her shoulders in case of draughts. By the time she was ready to leave the hansom cab had arrived and was waiting out on the street.

The ladies’ Turkish bath was an anonymous grey stone building set between two other nondescript structures, but the door had a stained glass window in it that was designed with a blue crescent moon and a scattering of silver stars. A brass plaque beside the door read, *Goswell Road Turkish Bath for Ladies*

Only, prop. Mrs. George Urquhart. Rhiannon paid the driver and ascended the steps, hesitating only a moment before pushing the door open. In the past, she had always visited the baths in Lina's company, so it felt strange entering alone.

The vestibule was tiled and spotlessly clean. A brass grill, like those found in banks, was set in one wall. Behind the grill sat a girl with an acne-spotted face who smiled when Rhiannon approached. "Welcome to the safest place for ladies in London. First class service for a crown. Second class, a half-crown. Third class, sixpence," she said. "Entrance for children under the age of three years is a half-penny. No spirits permitted in the building. No gentlemen allowed within the premises. Soap is provided at no extra charge, courtesy of the Goswell Road Evangelical Society. What is your requirement, miss?"

Rhiannon pulled off her gloves. "First class," she replied, digging into her reticule and producing the correct number of coins. The girl shoved a token through the grill — a tiny brass star on a loop of knotted string. Rhiannon slipped the token on her wrist; she had to wear it so that the bath attendants would know the level of service she had paid for. First class included use of the moist and dry vapour rooms, the cold plunge, massage, shower and cooling rooms.

She walked through the door that led to the changing room. As always, the first thing that struck her was the smell — steam and soap and carbolic, just like a laundry and just as warm and moist, almost uncomfortably humid. She began to sweat. Inside the room, a cheerful maid removed her hat, dress, shawl, and shoes. At the woman's direction, Rhiannon retired behind a rattan screen to peel out of her petticoat, camisole, and stockings. The clothing and her reticule were placed neatly in a wardrobe, which locked. The key on its string joined the token around Rhiannon's wrist. The maid also took her hair down and re-braided it, coiling the heavy red-gold length around her head like a coronet and pinning it securely.

Wrapped in a towel that covered her from armpits to ankles, Rhiannon was led to the dry vapour room, where a continual flow of hot air made the sweat run freely down her body. An effort had been made to give the large space a fashionable Oriental look. Pompeii red and gold and peacock blue tiles covered the floor, walls, and ceiling. The benches were olive-wood and stone, set around the room and in alcoves partially concealed behind plant stands bristling with ferns and aspidistras in Chinese blue-and-white pots.

There were other women here, some lounging in groups and talking, others sitting in solitary splendour, engrossed in magazines or books. A few had gurgling *nargileh*, the Eastern water-pipe, or were smoking cigarettes. One brave female puffed on an obscenely large cigar. Rhiannon chose an unoccupied spot and sat down, leaning against the wall. The heat was good, relaxing muscles that she had not known were tensed. She stayed until her bones felt melted to jelly, shamelessly luxuriating in the heat. After a while, Rhiannon licked salt from her upper lip and summoned the energy to plod into the moist vapour room, thick with swirling steam.

There were not many women here. She stretched out on a bench and closed her eyes as the languorous warmth drained more tension from her body. After a while, she ventured into the cold plunge and allowed an attendant to help her into the shockingly icy pool. Next, teeth chattering, Rhiannon was taken to a massage room, where a pale Swedish woman with meaty hands pummelled her body, stretched her limbs and rubbed her with oil until she was limp and glowing. A lukewarm shower with a bar of lavender-scented soap revived her somewhat. Rhiannon donned a robe given to her by an attendant and wandered into the cooling room.

This part of the establishment was bigger than the rest. The cooling room was composed of a large lounging area with couches and chairs; a corridor off the main space was filled with narrow curtained cubicles. The ceiling was ornamented with a stained glass dome that depicted the scantily-clad *houris* of the Mussulmen's Paradise. Sunlight slanted down through the dome in a blazing riot of colours, predominantly scarlet and yellow and an emerald green that reminded Rhiannon of Lina's eyes. A faience-tiled fountain splashed in the centre of the room. At the long mahogany counter, uniformed women busied themselves with samovars and teapots. The air smelled strongly of lemons and mint and sugar.

Rhiannon wanted to rest, so she chose a cubicle and went inside, closing the curtains for privacy. There was a narrow bed with a lumpy mattress, but the sheets were clean and the pillow plump. After a moment, an attendant brought mint tea, served hot and jarringly sweet in the Turkish style, along with a plate of lemony cakes. Rhiannon lay back, fingers laced over her stomach, and blew out a sigh, content.

Not more than a minute later, the sound of a lady-like cough came from the next cubicle. "Excuse me for intruding," said a feminine voice with a flat American accent. "It's very rude of me, I know, since we haven't been introduced, but I've seen you here before and I was wondering if you would care for some company? If it's not too much trouble, of course, and if you're not too offended by my presumption."

Curious to meet the American female who had recited this breathless litany, Rhiannon sat up and twitched aside the curtain. The woman on the other side was petite, fine-boned and possessing the fragile blonde beauty of a Dresden figurine. She looked as though she might break at a breath or a rough touch. Behind wire-rimmed spectacles, huge blue eyes regarded Rhiannon with a certain amount of anxiety. "I do apologize, really. I shouldn't have bothered you. Please excuse me."

"It's no trouble," Rhiannon replied, bemused by the woman's trepidation. "My name is Miss Rhiannon Moore. And you are...?"

"Miss Astrid Bracegirdle of the Boston Bracegirdles," came the reply, accompanied by a shy smile. "I'm visiting England with my father, Arthur Bracegirdle — he's a professor of art history at Harvard University." She pronounced the name *Hahvahd*. "He was called away to Scotland to assess and authenticate a Highland laird's collection of seventeenth century portraits, and I've been left in London all alone."

"Alone?" Rhiannon raised a coppery brow, unable to credit *that* assertion at all. No one left a respectable young female by herself without providing some sort of chaperonage.

Astrid giggled. "Well, except for my Aunt Diamanta, but she's poorly, so I'm often left to my own devices."

Rhiannon studied Astrid, noting faint lines around the woman's eyes and mouth, the merest hint of silver in the blonde curls above the temples. Rhiannon revised her estimate of the woman's age, nudging it upwards. Miss Bracegirdle was not a girl, but a mature woman who might be older than Rhiannon herself. She acted much younger, though, without the stolid demeanour and decorum one might expect from a spinster.

"You said that you've seen me at the baths before," Rhiannon said, sitting back against the iron bed frame. "I'm sorry, but I can't recall your face."

"You're the other woman's companion," Astrid said, not really answering the unspoken question, "that tall, dark-haired, handsome woman. Someone — one of the attendants, as I recall — told me that she's titled."

"You must mean Lady Evangeline St. Claire, daughter of the Duchess of Inishglen. I'm her ladyship's confidential secretary."

"Well, I've seen you two together at the baths because my Aunt Diamanta's house is close-by, and I can't stand being cooped up inside all day in the sickroom. I've come here often in the last few months." Astrid grinned, showing very large, very white teeth. "It's a pleasant place to make new acquaintances."

"Indeed it is." Rhiannon reached for her tea, which was served in a glass, Russian-style, rather than a cup. *It's not really a surprise that I haven't noticed her. When Lina and I are here together, we rarely have our attention focused on anyone other than ourselves.* "How have you found London, Miss Bracegirdle?" she asked, making polite conversation.

They passed some time in idle chit-chat, during which Rhiannon learned that Astrid was herself an art historian, that she came from an old moneyed family (a cadet branch of the Bracegirdles, respectable and comfortable though not spectacularly wealthy), had no siblings, and was not interested in marriage at all, being wedded to her career.

For her part, Rhiannon remained discreet. They had only just met and she did not want to give too much away.

Good Lord, Americans seem to have no reserve at all, Rhiannon thought as Astrid rattled on. *The people in their periodicals and novels are so brash and open, but I considered that a fictional exaggeration, not the depiction of a national character trait. One certainly couldn't criticize Miss Bracegirdle for being an unfriendly sort — quite the opposite, in fact. It's refreshing in a way but also a bit frightening. Can so much unbridled enthusiasm be healthy?* In spite of her reservations, Rhiannon was beginning to like the woman.

After ordering more tea and cakes, Astrid settled herself on the bed in a way which reminded Rhiannon of a broody hen getting cosy on her nest. "So, Miss Moore...someone also told me that your employer, Lady St. Claire, is a consulting detective. Is that true?" She sounded delightfully scandalized.

"Yes," Rhiannon answered warily. She hoped that Miss Bracegirdle was not expecting her to relay gossip about her "employer".

Astrid clapped her hands together and squealed, "How wonderful! I'm sure she's an excellent detective. Tell me, have you heard about the curious murder in Cheapside? I read an account in the newspaper and have wondered about the crime ever since."

Rhiannon shook her head. She did not care to follow the newspapers, preferring to read sensational novels and periodicals like *Strand Magazine*.

“It seems there is a small Catholic church called St. Laurent’s, located in Cheapside near the Mercers’ Hall on Ironmonger Lane,” Astrid said, adjusting her spectacles. “The priest was murdered a month ago — his head was bashed to pieces — and a painting was stolen. The curious part is that the painting isn’t that valuable. There was a fifteenth century gold chalice which would probably fetch more for a thief than a minor work by Guillaume Boisvert, and the vessel wasn’t even touched.”

“It sounds...well, I admit that the theft of a valueless painting is odd, but perhaps the thief didn’t know how little it was worth.”

Astrid leaned forward, obviously thrilled, and gestured with her hands. “The painting was nailed to the inside of the church door, Miss Moore, where it has been since Boisvert donated it to St. Laurent’s over fifty years ago. Whoever stole the painting had to have brought the necessary tools with him. What I don’t understand is why anyone would want to steal that particular artwork, much less commit murder for it. It wasn’t even Boisvert’s best.”

“The affair does seem strange on the face of it,” Rhiannon said, becoming intrigued.

“Strange enough to interest the infamous Lady St. Claire?” Astrid asked.

The curtain rings on the other side of Rhiannon’s cubicle rattled as the fabric was swept abruptly back. Rhiannon gasped, startled. The tea glass fell from her hand and shattered on the tiled floor.

“Perhaps that could be arranged,” Lina said, looking from Astrid to Rhiannon with a smile and more than a hint of amusement in her emerald eyes.