

1 Bernini's Academy

January, 1853, London

“You’re walking like a girl.”

In the glow of the gas lanterns outside the fencing academy, Lady Catherine Williams whipped around and scowled at her older brother. She felt the hood of her cloak fall back, but it didn’t matter, since the snug white head covering she wore hid her hair.

“Slouch your shoulders.” Charles’s critical gaze swept over her. “And lengthen your stride.”

She shot him a challenging look and then spit expertly into a pile of icy slush at the edge of the slick cobblestone road.

He closed his eyes and shook his head in mock despair. “Mother would be so proud.”

Catherine chuckled. “Spitting would be the least of my problems if Mother could see me now.”

She hurried up the stone stairs of Bernini’s Academy into its welcoming light with her brother trailing a step behind her. As she stepped through the doorway, contentment enveloped her. She was finally returning to her true home. She grinned at Charles with the sheer joy of the moment.

He shot her a quelling glare.

Mr. Winston, a secretary for the academy, sprang to his feet from behind a tall, gleaming front desk.

“Lord Spencer, how good to see you,” he said in the unctuous tones Catherine always found grating. “And young Master Gray,” he said, turning his gaze toward Catherine, “how wonderful to have you both back in London. If I may say, it’s been much too long since we’ve seen you.”

Catherine always found the small, balding man too effusive for her taste but had to grant that he was good at his job and kept the place running smoothly. She gave him a curt nod.

Winston peered at them through his round, wire-framed spectacles. “I’ll let Maestro Bernini know you’re here. He’ll be quite pleased.” He gave a small bow and departed through the office doorway with mincing footsteps.

“I hate this next part,” Catherine murmured.

“You can always go home,” Charles said. But he didn’t pause as he headed toward the dressing area. He knew her too well to think she’d actually leave.

Catherine followed closely on Charles’s heels and crossed the threshold into the dressing area. Her stomach knotted upon entering this purely male domain. The polished, wood-paneled walls and tall personal storage boxes gleamed from regular applications of lemon oil. The aroma lingered in the air, not quite masking the musky, male scent of perspiration.

She always avoided venturing far into this particular area and kept her eyes cast down, focusing on the floorboards. This was the only part of her visit she disliked. Long ago, she’d laid claim to a storage box near the entrance, so she didn’t need to go far to gather her fencing gear. With Charles by her side to shield her, she slipped in, snatched up her foil and other items, and then darted back out the door.

“*En garde.*” Charles’s traditional parting words trailed behind him as he entered the academy’s main salon without a backward glance.

As if she needed a reminder about how much she risked by being here.

With her foil in hand, Catherine followed him into the fencing salon. Charles had assured her that her disguise would still pass muster, so she didn't worry about being exposed as a fraud. By design, the pants fit tightly around her calves and were loose around her hips. She'd become a bit rounder in the past year or so, and the loose-fitting breeches helped hide her curves. The doublet, with its heavy padding across her chest and some additional padding she'd sewn around the waist, successfully hid all hints of femininity. The most important part of her disguise came from the careful application of collodion. The bit of theatrical makeup created a puckered scar on her cheek and at her hairline that completed her disguise.

She tugged at the snug white skullcap that covered her hair, assuring herself that no stray strands had escaped. The other fencers were used to seeing her wear it, and only newcomers looked twice at it these days. Years ago, Charles had let it slip that Gray had suffered a severe burn, leaving his head horribly scarred, and the fake burn mark she created with the collodion supported the story.

Catherine stopped to absorb the feel of the space, letting it soak into her bones. She bounced on her toes and then tilted her head back to look up at the glowing gas chandeliers. The glittering cut-glass shades caused the light illuminating the large, open room to sparkle. She breathed in deeply, pulling the various mingled scents of men's colognes and the slight undertone of perspiration into her lungs.

It was the smell of home. Her *true* home.

Catherine set her fencing mask on the floor along one of the walls. She wouldn't need it until they picked up their foils. The crisscrossing strands of wire protected her face from being injured by an accidental slashing motion, but the large, one-inch-wide mesh squares would never be able to deflect a direct thrust. At least she could see clearly through it. Papa had given it to her a number of years ago. He always insisted upon safety, and had ensured that both Catherine and Charles were well supplied with the necessary fencing gear.

Smiling faintly to herself, Catherine made a quick perusal of

the occupants in the large fencing salon. She spied only two faces she didn't recognize, so she paused to assess the newcomers' fencing abilities as they warmed up with some light sparring. After only a moment, it became obvious that the two men were friends.

"Look more lively, Huntley," one of them said over the sound of clashing steel that filled the room. "You're dragging. Is your search for a perfect wife wearing you down? It must be a demanding task to locate someone perfectly proper."

In response, the slightly taller man, Huntley, performed an envelopment, sweeping his friend's blade through a full circle and controlling the match. Then he lunged forward on his long, muscular legs to score a point. The other man scowled, clearly annoyed.

Huntley moved gracefully as he whipped his foil through the air. He looked lively enough to Catherine. The muscles in his extended rear leg bunched and moved under his tight-fitting breeches, reminding her of jungle cats she'd seen at the London Zoo. A panther, she decided, as he pulled off his mask, revealing his black hair. But his eyes seemed slightly incongruous with that image. They should have been golden brown rather than a clear, bright blue.

Huntley regarded his friend and raised his left eyebrow so high it disappeared behind a lock of his tousled hair. "I'm here tonight to escape all that, and thank you for bringing it up." He peered at his friend more closely. "What's bothering you? You're testy tonight. I'd hoped some light sparring would improve your mood, but I'm beginning to think the only thing that will knock some sense into you is a thrashing." Huntley slipped on his fencing mask and dropped into an "*en garde*" stance, raising his foil in a salute. "Maybe I can accommodate you." When his friend didn't follow suit, Huntley twitched his foil in a beckoning motion.

Clearly unable to resist the challenge, his friend broke into a fierce grin, slid his fencing mask back in place, and then settled across from Huntley in a similar stance. Soon they were engaged in a brisk, but friendly, duel.

They were both good fencers, but Catherine found her eyes drawn to Huntley. She admired his powerful stance as he moved through a series of lunges. Not only was he tall, but he was quick as well. He'd make a formidable opponent.

With an almost palpable intensity, his alert eyes seemed to notice everything taking place in the room, even as he maintained his focus on his fencing partner.

Just like a predator.

Huntley glanced at her, piercing her with his direct gaze, and he clenched his jaw. Catherine began to smile back, but caught herself and changed her smile to a smirk. Where on earth did she think she was, at some soiree? She fumbled with her foil as she realized she had nearly flirted with the man. How could she have been so careless? She turned away from him, her face flaming.

As she began stretching, feeling the pull of muscles releasing in her lower back, Catherine continued to watch them surreptitiously, glancing over her shoulder, not wanting to be caught staring again. As they sparred, she noticed that they held back, not putting too much force behind their attacks. Even so, Huntley's impressive combination of polished moves, strength, and power melded into a remarkable athletic display. She'd need to observe them both later during a real match.

With her attention focused on the newcomers, someone managed to slip behind her and rap her smartly on her shoulder with what felt like the handle of a foil. Catherine whipped around, but wasn't surprised to find herself staring up at Maestro Bernini. He loved sneaking up on his students that way, but he usually didn't manage to do it with Catherine.

His eyes sparkled at his rare victory. "*Buona sera*, Gray. It's good to see you. Don't you ever grow?" His gravelly voice held an Italian accent as the words rolled off his tongue. He shook his head and tut-tutted.

Catherine pressed her lips together at his gibe. Bernini was either unaware of the discomfort he'd caused or he simply didn't care. She tried to ignore her pang of anxiety.

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She wouldn't be able to pass herself off as Alexander Gray much longer.

"You're no taller than the last time I saw you six months ago." Bernini's brows furrowed together as he glared at her. "*Eat*, boy. We need to increase your reach." He clapped her hard on the back, almost causing her to stumble.

Catherine suppressed a grimace.

"*Attenzione*. Let's begin, shall we?" Bernini called out, his voice slicing through the commotion.

Maestro Bernini had everyone begin with a few simple drills to practice their footwork, but quickly moved on to having them practice more complex techniques. He observed and corrected his students as each honed his skills.

He gave Catherine a satisfied nod as he passed, and she covered her relief with a grimace. She hated having him annoyed with her. There was nothing she could do about his complaint except grow taller, and unfortunately, that was well beyond her abilities.

As was traditional for the last part of the evening, Bernini demonstrated a more advanced technique for them to learn. Catherine watched him carefully and then slid through the steps of the move, mastering it quickly and earning another nod of approval from the maestro.

She glanced at Huntley in time to see that he, too, earned a similar nod. She hid the small smile of satisfaction. She'd been right. The man had talent.

Excitement raced through her when, at last, the best part of the evening arrived. Catherine rolled forward on her toes as the maestro paired them off to duel.

Bernini assigned sparring partners based on both size and ability. With her small stature, Catherine tended to be the exception, and she normally found herself facing a much larger opponent.

He paired Charles with Huntley. Catherine was both relieved and annoyed that she wasn't going to fence him. But perhaps it was for the best. She found the man distracting, and the fact disturbed her.

When Bernini matched Catherine with the slightly shorter newcomer, she was intrigued. They approached each other with their fencing masks tucked under their arms, openly assessing one another. She tipped her head back and looked up at him. Shorter was a relative term, since at six feet tall, the man still towered over her.

He lifted his chin and looked down his nose at her with narrowed eyes, assessing her. Apparently, he found her lacking.

“Lord Wentworth,” said Maestro Bernini, “this is Alexander Gray.” He nodded toward Catherine. “Gray, you’ll be matched with one of our new guests this evening, the Earl of Wentworth.”

“You’re having me spar with a boy?” Wentworth curled his lip in a sneer.

Bernini’s smile became crafty. “Don’t let Gray’s size fool you, my lord. He may well be the best student I’ve ever had. His only drawback is his size, and I’m sure that he’ll eventually grow out of it.” Bernini grinned at his own joke, but Catherine had heard it repeated too many times to find it humorous. “He may well win the big tournament I’m holding in a couple of months.”

Wentworth shot her a look of increased interest and cocked an eyebrow. “High praise, indeed, young man. I must admit, you don’t look like much of a challenge. You barely reach my chin.”

Catherine raised one eyebrow to mimic him, and she felt her skin pull a bit where she’d used the collodion to cause it to pucker with the fake scar. She enjoyed being underestimated by newcomers. This should be fun. She didn’t say a word to him but instead turned her attention back to Bernini. “Maestro, did I hear you correctly? Are you holding a tournament?”

The man beamed at her. “The first annual Bernini’s Cup. I’ll explain more at the end of the evening.”

Bernini thought she could win a fencing tournament? A tingle of excitement ran through her. Could she really do

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something so daring? She imagined herself winning the tournament and then snatching off her white skullcap to show everyone what a woman could do when given a chance. But then the faces she imagined altered. Instead of admiration, they all held shock and rebuke. She shook her head to dismiss the image. Her family would face ostracism if everyone learned she'd been living such a duplicitous life. If anyone ever discovered that Lady Catherine had entered the gentlemen's changing room, she'd be denounced as a woman of loose morals and shunned by society. That would be too steep a price to pay for a brief moment of glory.

But it *was* a splendid dream.

Even though Wentworth angled his body away from her, Catherine still overheard what he murmured to Huntley. "After everything I heard about Bernini's, I expected more of a challenge."

Her fingers tightened on the wire rim of the face mask, feeling it dig into her flesh. If a challenge was what Wentworth desired, then she'd leave him feeling satisfied tonight.

"Don't be so cocky." Huntley glanced at her, but she avoided his gaze. "I watched him earlier. He's very good. He fences as well as a man twice his age."

His praise caught her off guard, and a rush of pride suffused her. He'd noticed her? She'd been aware of the man all night, assessing his abilities. How was it she'd missed noticing that he'd been doing the same?

"He's only a child." Wentworth spun on his heel and turned back to Catherine. His eyes glittered in anticipation as he donned his face mask.

They saluted, as was tradition, and then Wentworth made a tentative advance, toying with her, and Catherine easily parried the move. He lunged, slapping his foot hard against the boards with a bang, but Catherine danced backward, out of reach.

Wentworth tested her as he continued to search for any weakness in her defenses, but she remained guarded. When he intentionally left himself open to attack, she knew better than to fall for such a blatant ruse. Instead, she blithely slapped his

foil aside and grinned. He frowned, obviously irritated that she'd recognized the trap. They continued in this manner for a while, testing one another, but without scoring any points.

Two by two, the other fencers finished their mock duels and began to gather around Catherine and Wentworth until finally, they were the only pair still sparring.

Catherine caught sight of Huntley from the corner of her eye. The man's head was cocked to one side as he studied them. When she struck the first point directly in the center of Wentworth's chest, Huntley joined the others in applauding.

The moment he was hit, Wentworth jerked his head back in surprise and then glared at her. He let out a huff of frustration and immediately dropped into the "*en garde*" stance to continue the match.

Catherine saw a brief frisson of tension spark through Wentworth's body. Years of fencing had taught her to recognize an opponent's mood change, and she recognized the shift in Wentworth's temper through the small, subtle changes in his body.

"Mind yourself, Wentworth, he's just a boy," Huntley called out.

Catherine's eyes narrowed as she focused on Wentworth, shutting out everything else in the room. Rather than calming him, Huntley's comments seemed to have thrown fuel on Wentworth's already smoldering temper.

"It's time I taught this boy a *lesson*." Wentworth lunged at Catherine in what he probably hoped was a surprise attack. His anger, however, made him careless, and she easily parried his thrust.

The metal of their foils sang as she slid hers up along his, easily scoring another point as she pushed his foil aside and thrust the tip of hers at his right shoulder. She allowed the length of the foil to arch as she pressed the tip against his doublet, offering visible proof of her hit.

While standing frozen in her stance, she watched a deep flush suffuse Wentworth's face. It was obvious even through his mask. As she stepped back, he clenched his left hand into a

fist.

Anger made a person more dangerous and unpredictable, as well as more careless, and that combination in a fencer could be deadly. Judging by the startled faces of their audience, they too had noted Wentworth's growing rage. Catherine scraped her teeth against her bottom lip, tasting a hint of saltiness.

What would Wentworth do next?

Fortunately, the maestro was also focused on the duel. As the soaring tension between Catherine and Wentworth became palpable, Bernini stepped between them and raised his hands, putting an end to the match.

"Two points," Bernini announced. "And we are done." He grabbed Catherine by her free hand and Wentworth by the one holding his foil and raised them above his head. "That was excellent, gentlemen. I know we usually go to three points," he said, addressing the assemblage, "but I'm sorry to say, we have to cut this short." He dropped their hands as he paused and offered a salacious grin. "I have a most important engagement this evening and I must ask everyone to leave promptly." The twinkle in his eye left no one wondering about the type of engagement. Bernini was renowned for his insatiable appetite for women. "Wentworth, Gray... that was excellent. I look forward to hosting your rematch."

Wentworth gave Bernini a terse nod and backed away without even glancing at her.

Since Wentworth was new to the academy, Catherine didn't know him well enough to anticipate how he might have handled his anger, so with this abrupt disappearance of tension, she nearly sagged with relief.

"Before everyone leaves, I have an announcement to make." Bernini paused and glanced around the room, making sure he had everyone's attention. "The first annual Bernini's Fencing Tournament will be held on the second Saturday in March. The winner will be awarded a moderate purse and a traveling trophy." He smiled as a spark of interest flashed through the room. "The winner will have his name engraved

on a plaque and will be permitted to keep the trophy until he is beaten in a subsequent tournament. Anyone interested in registering can speak with Mr. Winston and provide him with your entry fee.”

The room began buzzing with conversation and Bernini quickly disappeared from view as members of the academy surrounded him, besieging him with questions. She wanted to speak with him, too, but it was obvious she wouldn't be able to get close to him. She'd just end up looking like a small dog trying to force its way into a pack of wolves.

Wentworth gripped his fencing mask and yanked it from his head. He locked gazes with Catherine for a moment, glaring at her, and then lifted his chin and closed his eyes. A moment later, his shoulders visibly relaxed as if his anger simply ebbed away. When he opened his eyes again, they appeared cool. He gave Catherine a quick nod of acknowledgment and then spun on his heel and strode toward the door at the end of the large fencing salon. He tossed his foil and mask to a servant before he passed through the door, apparently leaving the other fencers, and the incident, behind him.

That was quite the trick. Had his temper really abated just as quickly as it had spiked?

She peered at Huntley to gauge his reaction. He appeared relieved as he watched Wentworth stride from the room. And then his gaze turned toward her, almost as though he'd sensed her looking at him. He was halfway across the room, walking straight toward her, before she even realized he'd moved.

Did he mean to speak with her? Apparently so. She slid her mask under the crook of her arm.

“My compliments to you, Gray.” Huntley's voice held a faint, but pleasant, Scottish lilt. “You bested my friend on his first night at Bernini's. He'd planned to show off his finely honed skills, but instead he found himself beaten by a young pup barely out of clouts.” Huntley smiled more broadly as he handed his equipment to a waiting servant. When he glanced back at her, his gaze lingered on the scar on her cheek.

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Clouts? Catherine didn't know whether or not to take insult with his reference to diapering a baby. "I hope your friend will forgive the affront since none was intended. Lady Luck was with me tonight. Lord Wentworth is an excellent fencer. I look forward to our next match." She scratched her nose as she glanced at the empty doorway through which Wentworth had exited. How much of a problem would the man prove to be?

"You seem mature for a boy of your years," Huntley said, drawing her gaze back to him. The man's cool blue eyes seemed to focus on her with an uncomfortable intensity. She suddenly felt as exposed as a mouse spied by a hawk. "What are you, twelve... fourteen years old?" He narrowed his eyes, measuring every inch of her.

The question put her on her guard. Perhaps his last comment about clouts *had* been meant to rattle her. She cocked one eyebrow and shot back at him, "And you, sir, how old are you?"

Bernini, walking past, must have overheard at least part of their exchange, because he paused and said, "Lord Huntley, please allow me to introduce our star pupil, young Alexander Gray. Master Gray, you have the honor of meeting the Marquess of Huntley."

Catherine didn't snort. Barely. She wasn't surprised to learn of the man's exalted rank in the peerage. Huntley exuded an aura of superiority. Perhaps it would be wise to show him the expected amount of respect, despite his rudeness. "Lord Huntley, you do me great honor," she said with a graceful bow. She raised her head and met his gaze with serenity. "How long will we have the pleasure of your company in London? I look forward to many more matches with your friend."

"I plan to stay here for the season. Both Lord Wentworth and I have a number of interests in town, and I have a project that will require much of my time."

"Yes." Catherine nodded. "I believe I heard something about your 'project.' You're in search of a bride, am I correct?" Asking the question felt very much like poking a hornet's nest with a stick.

Huntley cocked a brow at her. "You are remarkably well-informed for your age." He narrowed his eyes. "I plan to be back here at the academy next week. Will I see you then?"

She glanced away. "I try to come often, but I don't have a set schedule."

"Yes, yes," Bernini interjected. "The boy would improve much more rapidly if I could get him here on a more frequent basis." He said this with a small frown. It was an ongoing point of contention between them. "I don't know how he expects to do well in the tournament in two months' time if he doesn't work harder."

That stung, especially since he'd already said she had a good chance of winning. Had his opinion changed that quickly? "I haven't decided if I'll take part in it yet," she said.

Bernini shot her a sharp glance, and then grinned. "Playing coy? I know you, *ragazzo*. You'll never be able to resist the challenge."

Huntley's eyes flickered toward the door, and Catherine followed his gaze to find Wentworth standing there, glowering at them. He already wore his cloak and was obviously impatient to leave.

Huntley gave Wentworth a nod and then turned back to them. "Maestro Bernini, Mr. Gray," he said, glancing back and forth between them, "I bid you both a good evening. I look forward to our paths crossing again." He took a step toward the door but then paused and turned back to Catherine. In a low voice he said, "I hope Wentworth's temper didn't offend you. He's both quick to anger and quick to forgive. He might indulge in a bit of posturing, but he's an honorable man. I've never had a truer friend." With a brief nod, Lord Huntley left and joined his companion.

She watched him for a moment and then frowned as she tried to parse his message. Was he trying to reassure her? Or perhaps to underscore his friendship with the other man? Perhaps he simply wanted to cast his friend in a better light.

With a shrug, Catherine gathered her things together and met her brother near the main doors. "I didn't get the

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opportunity to see your match with Lord Huntley,” she said. “How did you do?”

He grimaced. “Badly.” She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand, preempting her. “Don’t ask.” Turning his back, he hurried into the foyer.

Catherine caught up to him. “Wait,” she said, grabbing his forearm and pulling him to one side. “What do you think about the tournament? Should we enter?”

He twitched one shoulder. “Why? I don’t have a chance, and even if you manage to win, what would you do with the trophy? Hide it in the stables?”

She jutted out her chin. “Maybe. But first I’d have to win it. Where to put a trophy is the least of my concerns.”

He shrugged. “Enter. I’ll help you get here. It’ll probably be during the day, so I can help you slip away from the house.”

She squeezed his solid forearm by way of a thank you and then crossed the foyer to Mr. Winston’s tall desk. It didn’t take long to fill out the entry form and provide him with the fee.

It was a cold night, and Catherine tossed her black cloak over her shoulders. As she stepped onto the front steps, her breath trailed a puff of white smoke in her wake. She immediately spotted Huntley in the flickering gaslight. Even here, in the near darkness, the man commanded her attention.

Huntley and his friend climbed into a carriage, chatting amicably. When Wentworth spied her on the steps, he shot her a cold look.

She lifted her chin and stared back at him. She’d beaten him, and publicly, too. He clearly resented it. She kept her gaze locked on Wentworth’s eyes until the movement of his carriage carried him out of sight. She’d show him and all the others not to underestimate her.

She’d win that tournament.