

Glee

By Patricia Green

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Chapter 1

Istanbul, Turkey, 1852

As heat crept over her skin, Glee wondered if it was really possible to blush all over. She felt it undignified to look down to see if her toes were as red as she knew her face must be. Still, she was curious, and she wondered about that. Strange that she could be curious about such a silly thing when the situation was so serious. But that was her nature, insatiably curious, and at twenty-two she knew it and had stopped fighting herself. This time, however, her curiosity had really gotten her into a fix.

If she hadn't ventured into the *hamam* during the busiest bathing time, if she hadn't been so anxious to bathe early and be ready for her Uncle Martin's arrival, and if she hadn't been so damnably curious to see the two magnificent appaloosas that were to be her father's thank-you gifts to the sultan, she would have escaped his son's notice. As it was, the cursed boy had seen her and, of all things, chosen her to be his birthday gift.

It was warm in the palace, but her feet were cold nonetheless on the cerulean blue tiled floor. *Amazing that I'm not shivering*, she thought. It was so easy to slip into a detached objectivity when panic was the only other option. And she staunchly refused to panic. Montroses never panicked, even if standing naked in a room full of men who were looking her over like a side of well-hung beef.

Admittedly, they weren't all men. Not precisely anyway. Five of the six were eunuchs. *Hadimlar*. One was even her personal eunuch Erdögan, though he was nearly useless, prostrating himself on the floor before his masters.

Sultan Rajeem Mehmet's deep-set brown eyes were half-lidded as he assessed her attributes as a connoisseur examines a fine work of art.

"So this is his choice, eh, Sait?"

His chief eunuch, Sait Ok, nodded, the enormous ruby set in his tall turban winking at Glee ridiculously. "Yes, Your Eminence."

He sighed. "Another son who prefers red-haired concubines. Between Akmed and Hammud, there won't be any left for me to enjoy," he said with a petulant turn of his lips. The tall, spare ruler was staring at Glee now as if he was trying hard to recognize her. "Where did she come from anyway? A gift from someone?"

Glee opened her mouth but a glare from the larger of the two eunuchs who held her arms made her snap it closed. Hadn't she learned anything in the two years she'd been a guest in the harem? Women did not speak to men of rank unless spoken to.

The chief eunuch cleared his throat. "Actually, Majesty, she is not a member of your harem. She has been here as a guest."

Salt-and-pepper eyebrows shot upward. "Ah! Is she the daughter of my friend Eric Montrose?" He peered at her face more closely. "Her eyes are familiar, but I do not recall that she was so attractive."

"Yes, she is his daughter. For some reason, she is careful to keep her beauty hidden."

"Turn her around."

Glee ground her teeth together as she was turned in a tight circle until her back was to the sultan.

His voice was sharp. "What is this? Is it paint?"

"No, Sire. It is permanent. A tattoo."

"Why?"

"Er, Erdögan, explain to the sultan as you have to me," Sait Ok commanded.

Glee heard Erdogan's shaky voice repeating what she had told him two years earlier when he had exclaimed over the colorful tattoo winding its way from her right buttock to end in a bright green bud on the inside of her thigh. "She received it, majesty, as part of a ritual of womanhood in Africa. It is a pair of bird-of-paradise flowers. They are symbolic of beauty, youth and fertility. The stem of the flowers ends on the inside of her thigh as though this is where the blossoms sprouted from. A little mystery, sire, as it disappears from view around her leg. She was considered very brave to undergo the long process for such a complex design, and the people there--"

"Enough," the sultan interrupted. Glee didn't hear his soft footsteps, but could feel his presence at her back. His warm hand caressed the cool brightness of her tattooed flesh, and she jumped instinctively. His dark eyes met her glare as she twisted to see his face. The sultan did not flinch at the blue heat from her furious eyes, but continued to trace the orange, red, yellow, and green pattern down her round bottom and to the inside of her thigh, midway between her knee and her sex. Glee struggled, but refused to show the fear she felt. This was no longer an objective assessment; she could feel the increase of his breathing against her hair, the slow caress of his fingertips on her skin.

Almost as suddenly as it had begun, it ended, and she heard the brush of his clothing as he walked away. Glee couldn't help the quick escape of her breath. She hadn't realized she'd been holding it. The eunuchs turned her back to face the ruler.

"And now her father is dead." He pulled at his pointed beard as he smiled. "So, who must I speak to to purchase her? If Hammud wants her for his fifteenth birthday, then she shall be his. This mark makes no difference; her skin is still smooth and fresh."

Sait Ok's calm voice answered. "Her uncle is on a ship in the harbor, Sire. He has been waiting nearly half the day for permission to come to the palace and take her home to America. I understand he has also brought the gift Eric Montrose promised when you agreed to allow him to live in the palace and research his book."

"Ah, the horses." He clapped his age-veined hands. "Send him word that he may come to the palace." His dark eyes fell on Glee again. "Is she a virgin, Sait?"

"In all ways, Majesty."

Glee went crimson again. She almost wished her Turkish was poor; she would have preferred to be ignorant of this conversation. She would also have preferred to forget that humiliating examination undergone an hour earlier. Turquoise eyes, framed by long, dark auburn lashes, narrowed to slits as she contemplated showing that pompous panderer, Sait Ok, some of the more excruciating tortures she'd heard about in her travels.

The sultan snorted. "And yet Hammud wants her?"

The chief eunuch shrugged his narrow shoulders gracefully. "Who can explain the whims of boys? You told him that he could have any *kadin* in your harem and he chose this one. I tried to convince him that a more experienced woman would be more suitable to become his first concubine, but he was insistent."

"Why? She is lovely, I agree, but she is thin. Does she eat? And she is too tall. Would he not prefer someone like Yildiz? She at least knows how to please a man, how to serve his needs."

Sait tried not to smile, but the corners of his mouth turned upward anyway. "He wants a red-head with red -," he said a word which Glee didn't recognize.

The sultan chortled, and pointed to the red thatch of curls at the juncture of Glee's thighs. "That will have to be removed anyway; it is always so."

It was too much. It had been humiliating enough to be subjected to this inspection, frightening to consider that she might be kept in Turkey longer than she wished, but Glee's outrage could no longer be contained. Even fear of a promised beating would not hold her tongue.

"Don't you dare!" she shouted, tugging at the hands which held her. "If you touch one hair on my... if you harm me, so help me I'll make sure my uncle halts all trade with you, your majesty. You'll never see another dime of Montrose Shipping's money!"

Sait Ok made a gesture toward one of his assistants, who ran forward with a silk scarf, presumably to stuff in Glee's mouth, but Mehmet Rajeem stopped him with a look.

"What makes you think, *Aksamim*, that your uncle knows you are still here? Perhaps you died along with your father when his boat capsized in the Marmara. He has been dead for five months now. Perhaps you withered away and expired from grief."

Panic rendered Glee momentarily speechless, but her agile mind was not entirely hindered. "Have you no honor, Sultan, that you would abuse the daughter of a man you called friend?"

His frown should have frightened her, but Glee was beyond fright. "This is no abuse, *kadin*. You should know by now that my son honors you with his desire." He gestured dismissal of his lesson. "What you want matters little anyway. Your uncle will have his price. Every man has his price."

Sait Ok spoke a calm reminder. "Negotiations for her purchase will take long, sire, and Hammud's birthday is today. Shall I secure another for him?"

"There was a second choice?" the sultan answered sharply, as though he had been put through an aggravation for no real purpose.

"Yes, Sire. Nilüfer. I think she is more suitable as well. You may recall her, since you took her with you when you last went to visit the Pasha of Mersin. She is-"

"I have over 200 concubines and four wives, Sait. How am I to remember one out of so many? That trip was nearly six months ago. Bring her for my inspection."

"Yes, Sire. If I may presume to remind you, your second son Akmed will be graduating from that occidental university in only four months. You yourself have noticed that he has a preference for red-haired women. Perhaps *Aksamim* would make an appropriate graduation gift."

Glee stamped her bare feet in frustration. "I don't want to be given to anyone, do you hear? And stop calling me that! I am not *your sunset*, I am Glee Elizabeth Montrose and an American citizen! I demand to be allowed to leave as I wish!"

"Silence!" shouted the sultan. "Gag her, I wish to hear no more of her ranting."

It took another two eunuchs to do the deed, but soon Glee's protests were no more than muted grunts and growls. Her turquoise eyes should have seared the sultan's skin with their hot glare.

He adeptly ignored the blue heat of her gaze, and turned to take a seat on his elaborately jeweled and carved throne. "Can she be tamed, Sait? I would not care to put a tiger in Akmed's bed."

"We would have time, and there are ways, Sire."

Rajeem smiled, a white gleam in his dark beard speckled with gray. "Akmed at least knows enough of women to be prepared for her virgin's tantrums and screams. How many concubines has he now?"

"Only six, Sire."

The sultan shook his head. "And but one wife." He sighed. "Ah, Sait Ok, those were the days. Now I have so many women that I must give them away or have them in pairs to keep them happy."

Glee would have gladly told him that his women had their own ways of keeping themselves content, but the gag prevented her. And Sait Ok wasn't going to volunteer that kind of information. It was his duty to prevent such goings-on, to keep the women chaste until they went to the sultan. He tried. Punishments for unnatural acts between

women were severe. Only last year a pair had been sentenced to death. Since that incident, the other *sevici*, including one of Mehmet Rajeem's wives, had been far more careful and secretive. Oh, how Glee would have loved to burst the sultan's egotistical bubble with that little tidbit. She saved her revenge for later, when that fact, as well as many other minor embarrassments for His Highness, would be published in her book. *If* she ever got out of this mess.

"The girl's uncle will be arriving at the palace soon, sire. Have you decided to give her to Akmed?"

The sultan nodded, distracted by his reverie into the good-old-days. "Yes, yes. But see that she is prepared."

"It will begin at once, Your Majesty." The Chief Eunuch snapped his fingers and the eunuchs holding Glee removed her from the council chamber.

* * *

Glee was pacing, restless, feeling more like a caged tiger than she had over the two years she had been confined to the harem. When she had first come to Istanbul with her father, it had been exciting, a new experience, exploring the eastern mind for the first time. For Eric Montrose, it would be another research project, another novel of intrigue and adventure to be written. But for Glee, given her first chance to help her father substantively, not by editing and correcting his spelling as she had done since she was a teenager, but by actually studying the *harem*, the women's quarters, and learning the intricacies and politics therein. It was a true test of her abilities. Could she get to know these women, ask the right questions, draw honest and objective opinions?

During the first year, she had done her utmost to fit in. It had been difficult, not being allowed to leave the confines of the harem except to visit her father, and then completely shrouded in the *chador* which veiled her from eyebrow to toe. Being completely concealed wasn't so bad. In some ways it was much better than hiding herself in drab, ill-fitting dresses to disguise her figure, with mob caps, scarves and hats to cover her gaudy red hair. *That*, at least, was something she was used to. She'd been concealing her attractiveness since she turned sixteen.

That was the year her father had received four offers of marriage for her. He had been so disgusted that the men he had been set on interviewing had been more interested in his daughter than in his questions, that he had threatened to send Glee back to Boston to live with Aunt Ulalie and Uncle Martin. Although she loved her aunt and uncle, Glee had been living a gypsy's life with her father since the age of nine and couldn't imagine giving up her travels just because men were so foolishly attracted to her looks. So, she had adopted her disguise: ugly clothes and covered hair and, since they'd spent a year in Africa, a pair of dark, round spectacles to cover her vivid eyes when outdoors. It had worked; as the disguise had evolved, fewer and fewer men had given

her a second glance. In fact, it had been years since a male person had looked at her for more than a passing moment. Until today.

It was her own fault. After two years in the women's quarters, she had let down her guard. Men, other than the sultan and, rarely, his sons, were simply not allowed in this part of the palace. The entire facility was administrated by eunuchs. She no longer had to hide the smooth ivory of her complexion, the delicate bone structure of her face, the heavy length of her sunset-red hair, or the gentle swells of her breasts and hips. It had been a joy for both Glee and her attendants to array her in silks and spangles until she actually began to *feel* lovely again. Their sighs of admiration were a welcome change from the frowns she'd received from past maids.

Glee had been given a personal attendant, a eunuch called Erdögan, to serve her. Her mute African maid, Amina, didn't much care to have her place usurped, but a grudging kind of respect had been built between the two over time, and now they tolerated each other well enough. Going back to Boston would end those magnificent oil rubs that Erdögan was such an expert at, but after this morning's fright, Glee would simply be grateful to be gone.

If she was to be released.

Amina finished packing her mistress' mementos, and tidied up the little silk-hung room. It pained her to watch Glee pace back and forth in that old gray corduroy dress, when she had so many lovely silk and gauze pantaloons and negligees. But she had been with Glee since being befriended by the girl in Africa almost nine years ago. If the beautiful American wanted to dress like a dowd, then she would not question it. She supposed it was a habit too long formed to be forgotten even though the girl's self-centered and egotistical father was now dead.

Amina drew Glee's attention and signed that all was ready to go.

"Thank you, Amina. I only hope I have not presumed too much upon my uncle's ability to get us out of here. If the sultan is really determined to buy me for his son, then Uncle Martin will have to do some fast thinking." She rolled her eyes heavenward. "Which is rather frightening."

A squeaky kind of deep chuckle confirmed the maid's dubious opinion of Martin Montrose's brilliance. The small, ebony-skinned woman smiled and signed, "Don't worry. He is not a complete fool. After all, he's come this far."

Glee's lips twisted upward in a hesitant smile as she hugged her friend. "Of course, you are right." She walked toward the narrow rose-hued bed and sat down. "Did you remember my notebooks? My father's notes?"

Amina pointed to Glee's valise and nodded.

"Good. I want to finish his book for him." A tremor of pain crossed her face. "God, I miss him, Amina. If he were here I know this would never have happened."

Amina sat on the bed and put her arm around Glee's shoulders.

"I know you didn't like him much, but I loved him. Even though he was difficult at times and demanded so much of me. We laughed together too, you know. After he had

blustered and blown for a few minutes he was soft as a lamb. He just missed Mama. Every time he lost his temper, it was because he was frustrated and had no idea what to do. It couldn't have been easy for him, raising a daughter all alone. I'm so lucky that he chose to keep me with him during his travels rather than leaving me with Uncle Martin. How many girls can say that they've lived in Spain, France, China, Russia, Australia, Africa, Egypt and Turkey?"

Amina shook her head.

"The least I can do is finish his novel for him. I'm sure that he would have liked that."

The black girl nodded, and Glee rose to pace again.

"What do you suppose is taking so long? No, don't answer that. I know these things take time." She picked up a gray turban which fastened in the front with a simple silver brooch and wrapped it around her head, carefully concealing her red-gold chignon.

"Where's Erdögan?"

Amina shrugged.

The smell of lilies preceded Nilüfer's entrance through the arched portico of Glee's chamber. The young woman wafted in with a swirl of sea blue and green silk and the tinkle of silver bangles. "Oh, Glee! How can I ever thank you!" she gushed. Her lovely face beamed with a brilliant, dimpled smile from ear to ear, and her ice-blue eyes glittered with suppressed tears. She hugged her friend close.

Glee returned the embrace, but was still unsure of its reason. "What has happened, Nilüfer?"

The girl broke away and grinned at Glee while she swiped away tears from her cheeks. "I thought you knew! You must know. Are you teasing me?"

Glee frowned slightly. "No, no. What is going on?"

"I was chosen!" Dark hair swirled around the girl's shoulders as she twirled around the small room. "Prince Hammud has chosen me for his gift! And I owe it all to you!"

"To me?" Glee squeaked.

"Of course! If you had not refused the honor, I would never have been given the opportunity. Oh, Glee, was it not for your funny dislike of men, I would still be just another of the sultan's concubines. But now! Now I am Prince Hammud's *first* concubine! I shall try very, very hard to make him love me, and I know, someday, he will take me as his first wife! Oh, Glee, I am so happy!"

A little miffed at her friend's enthusiasm for a scheme which Glee found humiliating in the extreme, she grumbled, "I do not dislike men, Nilüfer. I simply don't wish to be *used*, that's all."

Nilüfer was too excited to notice Glee's ill-humor. "I will love to be used, as you say! I hope Prince Hammud uses me so much that I give him his first son. He'll surely want to marry me then!" Glee blushed, and Nilüfer giggled at her. "You are still so... so American, Glee. You read those books I brought you; I know you did." Glee turned

away, flushing more, and fussed with her turban. "Why are you still so shy about what goes on between men and women?"

"I don't know!" the redhead replied with exasperation. "I just haven't felt any great urgency to give myself up like that. I don't want to belong to someone else, Nilüfer. I like belonging to *me!*"

Nilüfer shook her head sadly. "You don't understand yet, my friend. It is not a surrender of yourself, it is a *sharing*. You still belong to yourself, but for one brief, heartbeat of time you and your lover are like one perfect person together. It is this harmony which draws men and women toward one another. They seek the sweetness of perfection in the union of their bodies and souls for that eternal pulse of time."

Glee felt a tug at her heart, at that secret, hidden part of herself that still enjoyed looking beautiful in silks and bangles. The girl she buried beneath over-sized dresses, ugly scarves and dark glasses, ached for a moment to pull out the trunk of beautiful dresses she saved for her most private times, ached to have a kindred spirit to share her joyful loveliness with in equal part with her clever mind. She hurt for someone who would cherish both parts of her, beauty and intellect, and accept the whole of her. But such a man did not exist. Even her father had rejected one part of her, her attractiveness, as other men rejected that other half, her mind.

A too-familiar disappointment brought sharp words to her lips. "That's nonsense, Nilüfer. Save it for a romance novel. There is nothing gained in coupling but a brief physical stimulation. It can hardly be worth all the trouble you go to to achieve it."

Nilüfer recognized Glee's pain, and accepted her friend's words without insult. She looked at Amina, who shook her head sadly, having heard Glee's opinion before. Nilüfer's smile was kind, and she patted Glee's shoulder. "Someday, my friend, you will see the foolishness of your words." She giggled. "I only wish I could be there when you discover it for yourself!"

Amina chortled as Glee blushed.

"Honestly, Nilüfer! Can we talk about something else? I've been in this harem for nearly two years now and it seems as though all anyone ever discusses is sex!"

Nilüfer stifled another laugh and sat down on a cushion on the floor. "You exaggerate, Glee." There was a pause. "Did you know that Gul is pregnant again?"

"The sultan's third wife? Er, no."

Nilüfer nodded. "Yes, it's true. They say the sultan is very pleased. This will be his sixty-seventh child."

"God. The man has no shame."

Nilüfer's brow furrowed with puzzlement. "Hm?"

Erdögan, burdened with a large bundle tied in a blue Turkish bath sheet, stumbled into Glee's chamber at that moment. His turban was askew and a tumble of thin, dark hair curled over one ear. "Hurry! Hurry, Mistress! Amina, don't just sit there, lazy girl! Gather her things, quick!"

"Erdögan!" Glee was frowning at the plain, little paunchy man. "Stop!" He looked at her with a mixture of exasperation and childish hurt as he delicately wiped sweat from his face. "What is this all about? Are we being released?"

"Yes! Yes, Mistress! Sait Ok is coming even now to escort us to the palace gates." He gestured with his foot toward her trunks and valises. "Hakki is just outside the chamber. He'll help carry those things, but we must hurry before the sultan changes his mind."

Glee nodded and helped Amina load her arms with parcels. "Hakki!"

A tall, ebony-skinned man, broad shouldered and leanly built, stepped into the room immediately, and bowed to Glee calmly. "*Aksamim*, I await your pleasure."

Rolling her eyes toward the ceiling, Glee bit back the retort she would have liked to level on his head for using the sultan's Turkish name for her. At the moment it was more important to hurry out of the palace. "Can you heft that large trunk?" He nodded and bent to the task. "I'll take the small one." She went to the little trunk and grasped its handles when Erdögan shrieked.

"The *chador*, Mistress, the *chador*! You cannot leave without wearing it!" He put his bundle down gently and fluttered toward the bed where Glee's black covering was waiting. Erdögan practically flung it over his mistress' head, and then arranged it over her form to cover her completely. Only her turquoise eyes were visible.

"Where are my spectacles?"

Erdögan frowned, but found them on her bedside table. "Can we not leave these ugly things behind, Mistress? Your eyes are like jewels, why do you hide them?"

Glee fitted the dark, round glasses over her face and went back to the small trunk, lifting it with effort. "You know why, Erdögan. I've explained it to you a hundred times."

"But-"

"Your pride in my looks is absurd, Erdögan! Now stop it." She followed Amina and Hakki out, and Erdögan followed her sulkily.

Sait Ok was waiting at the harem door. He bowed toward Glee and suppressed a smile as he looked over the odd group. "Your uncle awaits you, *Aksamim*, by the outer gates."

"Fine. Let's go," she snapped.

They made their way through the long corridor which separated the *harem* from the *selamlık* where the men lived. Guards opened an outer door and bright sunshine made them blink as they crossed an inner courtyard, past rows of multi-colored poppies and the sweet tinkle of small fountains. More guards opened a set of tall red doors, and the party went through another tiled building, this one smelling thickly of animals. Glee could hear the roar and bellow of the caged tigers, and caught a glimpse of an enormous predator behind the bars along the corridor. She had heard that the *kaplan ev* or tiger-house, was one of the main defenses of the palace. During a threat, the tall iron gates would be opened and the corridor would become a death trap for invaders as the tigers

were loosed upon them. It gave her a shiver to be so near the cats though she knew she was safe for the moment.

At the end of the narrow hall another set of red doors was opened and they exited the *kaplan ev* into another sunny courtyard. This one was lined with fruit trees, and fragrant with their blossoms and produce. Glee breathed deeply to clear her head of the pungent odor of the tigers. At last they came to the outer portico which was built into the fifteen-foot tall palace wall. Sait Ok stopped before the beaten brass doors.

"I will not say good-bye, *Aksamim*, but rather *adieu*. May Allah preserve you for His greater purpose." He turned toward the two eunuchs carrying her parcels. "These two are now yours. They will remain with you, as the sultan has commanded."

Glee hid her surprise quickly. "I hope the sultan will not think me ungrateful, Sait Ok, but I really cannot accept his... gifts."

"He insists," the Chief Eunuch said with finality.

"I see." She eyed him carefully from behind her dark spectacles. "There is more to this than I have been told, is there not?"

"Life is a mystery, *Aksamim*. The pleasure is in its discovery."

"Hm. And if I simply leave them on the dock when my ship departs?"

"They will be put to death for failing in their duty."

Glee heard Erdögan choke and saw him pale beneath his light olive complexion. "You leave me little choice, Sait Ok."

"Ah, but, my dear, you are wrong. You have many choices. You can stay here, and continue as before, treated well and pampered. You can go home to Boston with your uncle and leave these two servants behind to their fates. Or, you can go and take them with you. Has Erdögan not served you well? Has he not seen to your clothing, perfumed your skin with oil, bathed you, cared for your hair, instructed you in our ways?"

"Of course he has. But-"

"And Hakki, too, is very strong. He will see that you are unharmed through your travels."

Glee eyed the tall black man. It was easy to see that Hakki would indeed be very intimidating to any possible attacker. But what was she going to do with two eunuchs in Boston? Still, there was no use in arguing. There was no question of condemning them to death by leaving them behind.

"You have made your point, Sait Ok. May I leave now?"

The chief eunuch smiled and gestured toward the brass doors. They opened slowly, revealing the bustling city of Istanbul beyond and, anxiously pacing nearby, her Uncle Martin. Hot tears of relief stung Glee's shaded eyes and she ran, burdened by the trunk, toward her uncle. He took the trunk from her and tossed it to one of his men as he took her into his warm embrace.

"Oh, God, Uncle Martin. Get me out of here," she sobbed against his chest.