

# **THE LOVE TALKER**

By  
**Devin Leigh**

**Advanced Readers Copy for Reviewers**

## CHAPTER ONE

Honor slipped from the ballroom with its smoking candles and suffocating press of sweating bodies in taffeta, wool and silk into the garden terrace. Although chillier out there in the early spring evening, it was far more preferable than continuing to smile inanely when forced to dance with yet another young man of the peerage. Beside which, she had an assignation to keep, and an escape to make.

Glancing quickly around Lady Winterbourne's garden, she was satisfied that the immaculately manicured gardens were empty and no one had witnessed her flight from the fashionable townhouse. She hurried down the steps, lifting her skirts in her flight, intending to steal out through the side of the garden to meet the nondescript carriage waiting just down the street to make good her escape from London.

Running to the western edge of the garden and tall hedges, she found a brick wall where she had thought there would be an opening. "Damn!" she cursed under her breath, looking up to gauge the height of the wall.

Judging the wall to be surmountable, she gave a cursory glance at the light blue silk gown she wore with a twinge of sorrow. Consoling herself that its sacrifice was for the greater good as she reached up and gripped the edge of the wall with her hands, she felt the sharper points of the brick bite through her white kid gloves. Stubbornly holding on, she tried to swing her left leg up and over the barrier.

Cursing under her breath in gutter French as she swung one long leg wildly in an attempt to throw it over the wall, her shoe slipped and went sailing off her foot. Watching the pale slipper disappear in a wide arc over the hedge, she gave another heated curse that ended in a small, triumphant cry as she finally managed to get her leg over the wall.

Giving herself a mental pat on the back, she was about to finish her rather unorthodox escape when a deep voice came from the shadows near the hedge. "Excuse me Miss, did you happen to drop this?"

She instinctively froze, hoping she was imagining the voice as she hesitated on the wall, loath to bring her other leg up onto the ledge and call attention to herself.

It was no good. The voice was persistent. She was found out. "Miss?"

Gritting her teeth, Honor looked at the silhouette of a tall man who still stood in the shadows near the hedge. "Yes?" she asked tightly, her lips pulled upward into what she hoped was a semblance of a smile while she tried to look nonchalant about scaling a garden wall in an evening gown.

The man chuckled. The timbre of his voice was deep and he sounded genuinely amused at finding a young woman straddling a garden wall, her skirts up around her knees as she tried to pretend it was the most natural thing in the world. "I believe you lost this?" He held up her slipper, the errant piece of footwear catching some of the dim spring moonlight.

She hoped her face was masked in darkness, like the man's, as she debated the merits of just disappearing on the other side of the garden wall, letting him keep the slipper. She cleared the tightness in her throat, deciding she could not very well run through the street with one shoe on. "Yes, that is my slipper." She held out her hand for it. "Thank you for finding it."

Stepping out of the shadows of the hedge and into the softly shifting darkness of a nearby tree which left his face still hidden in darkness, the man put the slipper into her hand. Honor took the slipper

and replaced it on her left foot, which was now dangling on the other side of the garden wall. “If I might be so bold as to make an inquiry of you?” His voice was laced with an amusement Honor found disconcerting.

Fighting down a sigh of impatience, Honor dipped her head in permission. “Yes?”

He was trying very hard not to laugh outwardly at her. She could clearly see by the subtle tremor in his broad shoulders he was fighting to keep the laughter that twisted his lips into a smile from exploding from his mouth. She frowned at him, trying to discern the source of his amusement, other than the obvious fact she was straddling a wall. With her legs dangling on either side, her body was pressed tight to the top of the wall in an attempt to avoid notice, which she failed at when her slipper went sailing over the hedge.

Honor glanced at the hedge where her slipper had disappeared then back to the gentleman, who was smoothing back hairs on the side of his head which had come free of his queue. She instantly came to the conclusion that her slipper must have struck him on the spot he was smoothing down. Fighting back a blush and trying to find a suitable apology for her errant slipper, she was saved from having to speak by his next question.

His voice even, all trace of laughter hidden, he asked, “Why are you trying to steal into my garden?”

She glanced at the scenery on the other side of the wall for a moment before turning her attention back to him, determined to answer his question with one of her own—the better to stall for time in order to contrive an answer. “Your garden?”

The man nodded, pointing casually to the wall. “Yes, my home is just over there. This is the wall between my garden and this one.” He cocked his head at her, making Honor wish she could see his face. “Being that it is my garden, I am in a position to assure you that this one is much nicer than my own.”

Honor pursed her lips, trying to think of a logical excuse of why she would be lying on top of his garden wall. None was forthcoming... Taking a deep breath, she opted for the truth.

“I beg your forgiveness Sir, but I am in the process of running away from an overzealous cousin. The scoundrel has been trying to kidnap me and hie me off to Gretna Green with the intention of marrying me for my money. He’s been dogging my every step. I made a promise to my father that I must keep, something I would much rather *not* have my cousin privy to,” she said in a rush, a tiny hint of her French accent discernible in her speech. “I would appreciate it if you would not raise the alarm until I am well and truly gone.”

The man visibly jerked, apparently expecting something much different in the way of explanation by his reaction. There was a long pause as he considered her reply, stroking his lip in contemplation. The silence stretching out between them made Honor fidget a little on the wall. Anxious to be on her way, she felt a morbid curiosity for the thoughts of the man, whose face was still hidden in shadow, making her stay.

“A terrible predicament I am sure,” he replied. “Before I agree to your request, you must tell me where you plan on running.”

Honor sighed. She had neither the time nor the inclination to provide this man with answers, but she had no choice. “Devonshire.” She squinted into the dark, trying to make out some detail of her inquisitor.

“Oh. Isn’t that rather far?” he pressed, his voice now more interested than amused. The tone reminded Honor she had already revealed too much to this stranger.

Honor heaved another sigh. “Yes, but the promise to my father requires me to go to Devon. He had an acquaintance there to whom I am to deliver some paperwork.”

“Important papers I take it?” the man persisted.

Honor sighed impatiently. The man had a rich deep baritone that made her want to see if his face

was as handsome as his voice, but he was really beginning to irritate her now. “Yes, very important papers. Information that he has required for some time but my father had been unable to deliver it to him,” she said, dragging her leg nearest the man to the top of the wall to ease in to her escape before he began to pry further.

The man appeared to be genuinely intrigued. “How will this acquaintance of your father’s know who you are?”

Honor paused, one leg dangling over the wall, the other lying atop it. She frowned hard. The man was insufferably nosey. “I’ve a ring the man will recognize and a letter from my father.”

The man crossed his arms over his chest, leaning toward her to show his increasing interest. “Indeed?” He was obviously in no hurry to end the unusual conversation taking place between them under such exceptional circumstances. “How terribly mysterious your circumstances, although I am surprised your father did not take this duty upon himself, or at least had made the request of your fiancé or husband rather than his daughter.”

“My father died before a match could be arranged. There was no male relation that could be trusted with such important and sensitive papers.” Honor felt her heart twist in her chest, blinking back sudden tears that sprang to her eyes with the confession. “I am certain he would not have wished for his only daughter to go skulking about his friend’s gardens had he any other choice in the matter.”

The man was silent for a moment after her outburst, making her face flame red in both shame and anger that she had divulged so much to a stranger in the dark confessional of the garden. “I admit, I am surprised your father did not make a match for you before he passed, leaving you to the tender mercies of his family as he did.” He leaned on one long leg. Honor caught a flash of leather from his dark boots in the moonlight as it made its way through the leaves of the tree he stood under. “My condolences on your father Miss,” he added softly, in such a tone that Honor felt tears prickling her eyelids again.

“My father would have a love match for me sir, much as his marriage was to my mother. I am sure he did not know the sort of behavior his nephew was capable of displaying.” Sniffing and blinking to keep the tears at bay from the mere mention of her father. “Thank you for your sympathies, but I had really better go now before my accomplice becomes worried.” In a rush to leave the company of the stranger before she made any more damning confessions, she slipped her leg over the wall so quickly that the equilibrium took Honor off balance, making her slip off the top of the wall and fall unceremoniously onto her backside in the man’s garden with a muffled ‘oomph’ on impact.

The sound of rich male laughter echoed through the night as her face burned in embarrassment. “Shh!” Honor whispered from the ground where she fell.

“I apologize Miss,” the man replied, his voice strained with pent up laughter. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Honor replied tersely, picking a chunk of errant brick from her cleavage.

“I’m glad to hear it,” the man replied as she stood and brushed off the back of her dress.

She was in the process of looking about the garden for an exit when the man’s voice once again came from the other side of the wall. “The garden door to my house is unlocked Miss. Please feel free to use it and make good your escape.”

Honor paused, unsure of the man’s motives for being so generous. “Why would you assist me?”

A few chuckles trickled over the wall to Honor. “I would hate for you to try and scale the other wall—it is over seven feet high.”

“Thank you,” Honor stiffly replied, turning and making out the classical lines of the larger town home. Spying the door, she turned toward the wall. “It was a pleasure meeting you Sir,” she said, turning and sprinting across the lawn toward the door and her freedom.

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“The pleasure was mine,” he muttered, shaking his head, chuckling to himself as he moved away from the garden wall toward Lady Winterbourne’s home, giving himself up to the glares of the anxious mothers who were trying to make a match for their daughters this season.

## CHAPTER TWO

Oblivious to the clandestine escape of one of her guests, Lady Winterbourne spied Reid as soon as he stepped into the ballroom. Weaving her way through the crush of people with smiles and nods of her head to greetings, Elisa noted that several other women noticed Reid's arrival as well. It was difficult not to notice Reid Ormond. Standing well over six feet, he had a well defined muscular body that strained under well cut but somber dark clothes. Hooded dark eyes were framed by long dark lashes, and his thick mane of deep auburn hair offset a face that was as handsome as his body. He was the very image of his father, a man who had been very good friends with Elisa and her husband James, making them godparents to his wild son.

Elisa gave him a small smile, lifting an eyebrow when he glanced at a young lady gliding past him, who returned his smile and the question in his dark eyes with a smile of her own. The young lady was jerked away by her horrified mother as Lady Winterbourne finally reached Reid.

Elisa glanced at the older woman who was none-too-subtly towing her daughter away. "Your reputation precedes you as always Reid," she said, amused.

Elisa continued when Reid didn't reply, unconcerned with Reid's typical silence when chastised about his reputation. "You really ought to try and behave you know. One of these days you may decide to take a wife, and when you do, it will be a formidable task. None of these respectable mamas want you near their daughters for fear of their reputations being soiled by merely breathing the same air as you."

"Then you shouldn't have invited me," he growled without sparing her a glance.

Giving him a sharp rap with her fan on his waistcoat, she paused only long enough to notice what he was wearing. He wore a black waistcoat embroidered with oriental dragons in shades of green, gold and red, his coat, breeches and knee length boots all unrelieved black. "This is a ball to help open the Season Reid, not a funeral," she whispered in a chastising tone.

"May as well be a funeral," he said, looking over her powdered head at the women in the room. "What is so urgent James would call me to this soiree, Elisa?" Reid's dark gaze swept the room for a sign of her husband. "He could have walked next door to see me."

"Well Reid, one never knows when you are in town. The house is so often dark...with women coming and going at all hours," she said, chastising him again for his rapsallion behavior as she stood at his side, surveying the room as well. "I do believe it has something to do with a ship's captain of yours, and James' acquaintance. You know...Downforth."

Reid had glanced down his nose at Elisa at her comment regarding his late night guests, but the cool look in his eye was immediately replaced by one of interest when she mentioned Downforth's name. "Edward Downforth? What about him?"

Elisa just shrugged prettily. "He passed away recently." She frowned, scanning the crowd for a particular young lady. "His daughter was in attendance a short while ago—very popular with the young gents—a very striking young woman. She was the belle of the ball, having been newly arrived from France." Sighing, she opened her fan with an irritated snap, waving it so hard that the little love curls at her temples danced. "I wonder where she's disappeared to. I do hope none of these young men have tried to get her alone somewhere. She's such a lovely young girl, but a bit of a bore when it comes to conversation. Several guests were a bit put off by her vehemence regarding George's ascension to the throne." Sniffing disdainfully, she affected a gentle shudder to demonstrate her distaste.

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Reid was hard pressed not to laugh. *So that's the escapee!* A small smile played about his lips that had a few young women who were interestedly watching him give titters of approval. Glancing at the source of the noise, Reid was very tempted to follow the Captains daughter's example and attempt an escape.

"What does this have to do with me?" he asked, clasping his hands behind his back as he continued to look for James.

"She's in possession of some documentation she's been directed to deliver to your father, God rest his soul," Elisa replied. A sudden frown of concentration replaced the sorrow on her face. "Though she would be delivering the papers to your stepfather now, wouldn't she? Seeing how your mother remarried after your father's death."

Reid shook his head, fighting a sigh for patience at the mercurial thought processes of Elisa.

Finally his patience was rewarded when his godmother waved her hand airily, as if dismissing the sudden thought regarding Reid's stepfather. "At any rate, it appears she is in a bit of a tangle. Her cousin has unsuccessfully tried to kidnap her twice already, since her arrival in England, in order to get his hands on her fortune. Pity she's no one to defend her, but she's the only one to blame for that misfortune. James asked twice if she needed assistance in any way and she refused him both times." Elisa snapped her fan shut. "I believe you know her cousin. James does," she said, not elaborating further as once again her attention was distracted by a couple dancing past them, rather like an errant thought.

Looking down at his godmother, Reid felt the urge to shake her. He knew Elisa was privy to gossip of all types, but it was damnably difficult to get any information out of her. "And his name would be?"

"Percival Harrow, Hartlow, something like that," she said, her brow furrowing lightly as she struggled to recall the name.

Reid jerked. *Harlowe? Percival Harlowe, the gambler?* The man who succeeded in losing his entire estate in one evening at White's? "Good God. No wonder she was running away!" he said under his breath, his gaze finally falling on James. The elder man gave a small jerk of his graying head toward the hall.

"Oh! There he is!" Elisa said, giving a tiny wave to James. "It looks like he wants to speak with you privately."

Blowing out an exasperated sigh, Reid bowed to her, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it. "My thanks Elisa," he said as he made his leave, executing his bow with elegance.

"If I see Downforth's daughter, shall I send her to the library?" Elisa asked.

Reid grinned, knowing the little minx was well on her way to Devon and his stepfather's home by now. "Yes, of course."

James was pacing back in forth in front of the blazing fire in the otherwise dark library when Reid entered. He looked much older than his sixty years at that moment. His face was lined with worry, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders hunched forward, so intent on his thoughts he did not notice Reid had entered the room until the younger man cleared his throat. When he looked up and spotted his godson, he stopped to pour them both a brandy, only to resume his pacing once again. Reid lounged in a club chair near the fireplace, silently watching his godfather for a while.

"You look terribly distracted James." Reid took a long draught of the brandy, enjoying the warmth as it spread through the hard planes of his stomach from within.

James stopped in front of the fireplace, one arm bent, his elbow resting on the mantle. "You look awfully calm."

Reid shrugged, giving James a smile. He asked, his deep voice slipping easily into a thick brogue, "And why wouldn't I be?"

James pulled a face at the accent in Reid's voice. "For God's sake Reid, don't let your guard down here. I know it's my home, but we've over a dozen tattle-mongers here right now that would be very interested in your speech."

Taking another long drink and emptying his glass, Reid gave James a level look. "It's most unnatural, talking in that manner," he enunciated in perfect English. "I could do myself a grave injury speaking that way when I've no reason to do so."

James chuckled and shook his head. "It'd hurt you a great deal more if your father could hear the way you speak. He spent a lot of money to school that accent from your speech on your return from Ireland." James glanced upward toward the ceiling. "Ah Robert, how I miss you right now!" he said, holding a one-sided conversation with Reid's father, who had long ago passed away.

Reid shrugged again, reverting back to his Irish brogue. "He'll not be answering you. I talk to him often and he hasn't had the courtesy to answer me." His dark eyes twinkled at the irritation on James' face. "What I'm wanting to know is why you pulled me away from my evening's entertainments? Surely your concern over my manner of speech is not the reason."

James grimaced and raised his shoulders as if protecting his ears. "I needed to speak to you regarding Downforth."

Reid nodded. "Aye, Elisa told me of the Captain's passing. It's a sad thing when a good man passes, but I would still like to be knowing how this sorrowful event effects me."

James began stalking back and forth again, the threads of silver in the dark hair catching the firelight and twinkling. "He had a daughter—did you know?"

Reid nodded slowly, rolling his glass between his palms as he watched the drops of brandy chase themselves. "Aye, I did."

James jerked. "You did? How? I've only found out myself!"

Reid gave James that predatory smile he was infamous for. "I had the pleasure of making the lass' acquaintance in the gardens a few moments past."

James' face fell. "Oh Lord, please Reid, tell me you didn't try to seduce her."

Reid frowned at James. "You've a very poor opinion of me James, and I'm letting you know it sorely injures me to hear you ask such a question."

"What do you expect me to think?" James hissed at him. "Brawling around the countryside, robbing coaches, seducing young women. You've become so much of a romantic legend that the dragoons have been quite actively searching for you Reid!" James snorted. "You'll end up hanged yet. You'll be no closer to reclaiming Glenrose if you are hanging from the end of a rope, you know." He shook his head. "If your father knew how I'd failed so terribly in trying to keep you safe..."

Reid rubbed the end of his nose. "I'll not say that I'm doomed just yet, Jamie me lad." He gave James a broad wink before sobering at the expression of worry and concern etched into James' face. "I didn't try to seduce her," he sighed, fluidly switching back to his English accent. "She was somewhat pre-occupied." His mouth curved in a small smile at the memory of a long shapely leg exposed to the tops of her garter ribbon, and the spill of black curls that fell inelegantly over one eye. "Now what does this daughter to do with us?"

James, his previous tirade forgotten, collapsed into a chair near Reid. "She's in possession of her father's papers—both legal and personal."

"Surely you don't mean...?" Reid blinked as if he had been slapped.

James nodded solemnly, his eyes distant. "Yes."

His stomach tightening, he asked, "Has she read them?"

"No, I don't think she has. She's a very moral little thing. Must come from growing up in a convent school." James sighed. Reid lifted his head to watch a faraway look seep into his godfather's



eyes. “To her credit, she reminds me of her father in that she has a strong sense of duty where those papers are concerned. “She’s just as determined to bring them to her father’s friend, as per his last request, as he had been in protecting those friends,” James said softly, defeated. “Namely myself and your father.” James sighed, rubbing his finger between his eyes. “I cannot be certain she knows your father has died and it is your stepfather who is now in residence at Glenrose.”

Reid felt his breath exit his lungs in a hard gasp. “Why didn’t you inform her of my father’s death? Surely she doesn’t know she’ll be delivering the papers to the wrong man?”

James pulled his head back, surprised at the ice in Reid’s voice. “How do you suggest I broach such a subject when no one is supposed to have known that your father and I had aught to do with that small—” He paused, licking his lips nervously as his eyes darted toward the door. Reid waited until James felt comfortable enough to continue, his heart in his throat at the thought of what Honor carried on her person. “—that small fiasco in Scotland?” James face paled even more, settling the weight of guilt Reid felt at speaking so harshly to his godfather firmly on his shoulders. “Reid, if anyone knew, or was to find out how deeply involved your father and I were, I could still be hanged as a traitor to the crown.”

Reid blinked hard at the implication, his mind racing with thoughts of what could still happen if the documents Honor carried were to fall in to the wrong hands—namely, his stepfather’s.

Trying to chase away the horrendous thoughts, he sighed loudly to clear his head then rubbed his chin in thought. “Surely there are no legal papers in there.” He felt the bloom of dread blossom in his chest as he waited for the answer to his question.

James glanced up at Reid. “I’ve been given to believe that there are.”

“Damn!” Reid exploded from the chair. “That means she has my father’s title to Glenrose as well as the letters regarding our involvement with the Jacobites in Scotland.”

“Exactly.” James slumped in his chair. “I’ve no doubt the location of the jewels we acquired in our attempt to gain the crown for James Edward is in one of the letters as well.”

“And not only will my stepfather—the old bastard—keep the money, but he’ll be more than happy to hand us both over to the crown, as well as destroy the deed to Glenrose so he can keep it in his hands!” Needing to vent some of the tension and anger in his tensed muscles, Reid took up where James left off, pacing the room, his long legs eating up the distance between the windows and the wall. “Damn! That money could be spent buying O’Rourke land back in Ireland,” he growled, referring to his mother’s family and the land they lost after devilling too many English troops one too many times. It was the land he had grown up on, the land he was so determined to get back that he was robbing coaches with the aid of his Irish uncles. “What was Downforth thinking, keeping those letters? We could be hung for treason!”

James lifted a dark eyebrow. “Now you’re worried about being hung?” he said in amusement.

Reid paused, giving James a long level look. “There’s no hope for it. I’ll have to get those papers.”

James leaned forward, curiosity wreathing his face. “How will you manage it? She’s terribly cautious because of her cousin—Percival Harlowe,” he said, watching Reid’s face intently. “Damn it man! Don’t tell me you knew that as well!” he almost shouted when Reid didn’t express the least bit of surprise.

Reid chuckled in spite of the situation they found themselves in. “Aye, Elisa told me.” He paused, looking into the fire. “I suppose I’ll have to involve Duncan and Ian in this adventure.”

James sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “I wish I could help in some way.”

Reid glanced up at James. “Don’t worry yourself over it James. We’ll manage.”

James nodded. Both men knew that Reid was the only man more than capable of completing the task successfully. “You will let me know once the deed is done?”

“Aye. And when I’ve got my hands on those papers, I’ll burn them.” Reid stalked to the liquor

cart to refill his glass.

Reid turned to find James had buried his face in his hands. He watched his godfather until James lifted his head and met Reid's level gaze. Reid could clearly see the worry over the documents was now replaced by guilt at what he was asking Reid to do. A task that could possibly cost Reid his life. Feeling a shudder of superstitious caution steal up his spine, Reid shook his head when James opened his mouth, knowing his godfather was about to put words to his worry. "I'll not be listening to you talk about capture James," he said quietly, his gaze direct and unwavering as he met and held the older man's gaze.

James nodded, his shoulder slumping even further. "I understand," he whispered, shaking his head. "I can't help but wonder at the reasons why didn't she send along a solicitor to clear up her father's affairs. Why didn't she go to her mother's people in Normandy, or stay at school? I've had it from a reliable source her parents left her enough to live quite comfortably on—not to mention in France she is a marquise from her mother's line." James narrowed his eyes. "Though I'll wager Elisa has some information that I haven't been privy to yet," he said suspiciously.

"Aye. Although I'm not of the opinion that titles are as important as the English make out, still the Irishman in me knows that while titles are not important, land and legacy from your family is." Reid cast a disgruntled look at James, his face dark with anger over his stepfather successfully robbing him of his father's title. "Lucky for us that she didn't hire a solicitor, James. Keep in mind what the man would have been privy to if she had." He took a swallow of his brandy, his strong throat muscles working mechanically. "I do wonder though, what made her so eager to return to England. I am assuming she knows her cousin and his less than noble behavior." He shrugged nonchalantly. "But then, perhaps she didn't realize Percival Harlowe was a cad of the lowest order."

James steepled his fingers together, smiling at Reid over them. "Is this characterization coming from a cad of the higher order?"

Reid didn't respond to James' baiting. The silence quickly stretched into long minutes as the men became lost to their own thoughts of their old mentor's daughter, and their traitorous behavior against the crown.

## CHAPTER THREE

The object of the two men's consideration was safely hidden in a coach that was rumbling its way out of London at that very moment. Honor could swear it was her overactive imagination, but she felt her body relaxing by degrees with every league that was put between her and Percy.

Given a respite from the specter of abduction hanging over her head, her thoughts turned to the gentleman in the garden. His deep, amused voice and the chuckle of laughter seemed to stroke her skin as if he had actually touched her. She felt her nipples push against the constraining stays and blushed, pushing her thoughts away from the stranger in the garden.

Purposefully avoiding all thoughts of her father, her future, her reason for running and the errand she was now on, she gifted her accomplice, Agnes, with a smile instead.

"You seem pleased," Agnes said, her eyes disappearing into the round folds of her cheeks as she returned the smile.

Honor nodded. "I am." She sighed and glanced out the window of the coach. "I shall be even more pleased when we've reached Glenrose Hall, returned to London and finished settling father's affairs." She spared the old maid a look before turning back to the window. "I will be pleased when this business is finished and I am able to focus on my future instead of my father's past."

Her large bosom bouncing as the coach jostled over the rutted road, Agnes asked, "Will we return to France?"

Honor thought for a moment. "I suppose I could."

"What will you do about Louis?" Agnes cocked her head like an inquisitive little bird, her gaze a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

Honor gave a groan at the sound of her distant relation's name. He was the last remaining male in the Saint Claire line, but born on the wrong side of the blanket. At the time the Saint Claire's had received their titles, the then King had set a precedent which decreed that all properties and accompanying wealth would be handed down through the males of the line, legitimate or not.

Louis inherited the land and the manor she didn't even remember well enough to call home, so few times did she visit. Although this precedent had effectively left her a pauper under French rule, she did not begrudge him his inheritance. She had left France, content to have her mother's title of 'Marquise', her only link to her mother.

Having no love for the land or the home in Normandy, it was with understanding and sympathy when she conceded it would only be natural for Louis to attempt to combine her title with his newly acquired wealth. It would effectively give him the status of a title without having to buy one, wiping away the stain of illegitimacy clinging to him. However, even bereft of family as she was, having lost both her father and mother and keenly feeling the loss of kin, she was not tempted to marry him simply from loneliness.

"I'll hand him the title. I've no need of it," Honor said softly, loath to relinquish the last link to the mother she barely knew, but also knowing this was the only way to be rid of Louis' unwelcome advances.

Agnes nodded, pulling her cloak closed more tightly. "Once we've delivered the papers to the Duke of Munrossie, perhaps then we can return to France and live in relative peace and quiet?" Agnes pressed. "Will your appetite for adventure be satisfied then, Milady?"

Honor thought of all the things she had been doing since she set foot on English soil, the least of

which being the wall climb. "I should hope so," Honor replied noncommittally, having enjoyed the last few days of adventure

Agnes shot Honor a suspicious look. It was obvious the older maid didn't believe for a minute Honor was done dealing in intrigue. Before they were called to England and Downforth's side during his illness, Honor had struck up a correspondence with one of her mother's court friends. Agnes had been appalled to learn the letters that were being exchanged had been with the Young Pretender. Honor had been trying to help him get an invitation to the French court. She was following in the footsteps laid down by her mother and father before her, aiding the Jacobites.

Seeing the look on the older woman's face, Honor let out a tinkling laugh. "Ease your mind Agnes. I'd not have you come along with me if I were to become involved in any other intrigues."

"I promised your mother I would care for you!" Agnes fixed her charge with a glare. "You'll not be going anywhere without me!"

Honor nodded, not wanting to argue with Agnes. The maid had been with her since she first arrived in Normandy at the age of ten. The older woman took her responsibility very seriously where she was concerned, even doing the lecturing for her boyish behavior, outlandish escapades and outspoken opinions after her mother passed.

There was a long silence in the coach as Honor thought of her mother and father. Licking dry lips, she felt a lump of fear rising to her throat again. Her father was a traitor to the English crown, the confession coming from his lips as he lay dying. A traitor to the very country where he had run his shipping business for years. If she were found to have these papers on her person, papers her father advised her outlined all the acts of treason he had been involved in, she could very well be hung as a traitor, her father's property confiscated and his name dragged through the mud.

Both her parents had been traitors, but with her mother being French, she was doing more of what was expected. Her father, on the other hand, was English, so his treachery was punishable by death.

When Queen Anne died and George I all but ascended the throne, her father, like many Englishmen, looked across the water to France and the Old Pretender. His sentiments at the time hadn't been all that unusual. Many Englishmen preferred a Stuart king, namely James Edward, to Hanoverian George. When he had been crowned in Edinburgh, he did little to placate the Tories, publicly snubbing them in favor of the Whigs who had helped him ascend the English throne. He had little interest in his new subjects, not even bothering to learn English.

During this tumultuous time, her father's ships were instrumental during the uprising that followed, the seeds of which had begun in Scotland. Being in correspondence at the time with the Earl of Mar, Edward Downforth brought many supplies and arms that the Scots needed on his ships, along with reinforcements in the wild Irishmen who were keen to add to anything that upset the English.

The entire enterprise looked as if it might be successful, but Mar had dallied in pressing his advantage after his victory at Perth with the battle of Sherriffmuir ending indecisively. It did, however, buy the English time to have troops transported to Scotland, ending the revolt. James Edward landed on English soil after the revolt had failed, and seeing there was naught he could do, fled back to France. The men left in England scrambled to save their families before any trace of conspiracy could be traced back to them.

It was during this time that Edward had sent his wife and daughter to his in-laws in Normandy. Her mother, being the daughter of minor nobility, was welcomed home, finding courtly French life much more to her liking than being the wife of a respectable shipping captain.

In the end, Honor was left behind at school in Normandy, not hearing from or seeing her father for months at a time. Her mother she saw even more rarely. It was her father she clung to while her mother spent months at court, Honor seemingly forgotten in the countryside. Feeling the bitter sting of her mother's absence, she found comfort in the exchange of letters and gifts with her father, even

managing to meet him for Christmas in Normandy every year. Her father never forgot her birthday, and always made sure he saw her at least once every three months, no matter what business dealings he had or what danger he was in. He always made time for Honor, letting her know she was important to at least one of her parents. The final proof of his regard for his daughter was his last testament, which placed his entire property and monies in her hands. It was an act which guaranteed she would not be left without means to support herself.

Honor pursed her lips, thinking of her father's closest accomplice during the years he spent as a traitor. The old Duke of Munrossie, her father's childhood friend and a man who had political leanings in a similar direction. Munrossie provided safe harbor in a secret cove on the northwest coast of Devon for her father's more notorious ships, the ones that could not set anchor in Portsmouth for fear of being recognized as the property of the traitor who allowed their use in the uprising.

In the end, her father and his accomplices were safe. They had not been discovered. Their monetary support of the minor uprising was kept a secret because Edward made sure no one could ever link either Munrossie or himself to the ships that delivered money and supplies to the rebels. Her father's ability on the sea, and the Duke's strategic mind had kept them both safe from imprisonment.

Honor's hand hovered over her skirts thinking of the parchments she and Agnes had painstakingly sewn into the material. Instead of being a hero, her father was forced to remain forever in the shadows of history. No one would ever know about Captain Edward Downforth, the man who risked his life and even his family to try and help restore the Stuarts.

All her efforts thus far had been focused on delivering the papers and successfully making it out of England before anyone found out her father had been a traitor. She needed to be quick, yet take precautions and be as secretive as possible about her business here. The King her father and Munrossie had tried to depose was still on the throne. There were still enough unkind sentiments regarding the old absentee Hanoverian king that Parliament and the Whigs were trying to stamp out, so she could quickly be accused and imprisoned if she were to be discovered.

Which was why she needed to exercise urgency in getting away from London with these documents before Percy—who had been poking around in her father's study recently—found them. She would be at his mercy then. She also knew he wasn't above blackmailing Munrossie to further his ends if he had to.

She would keep herself and the other traitors safe until she could hand the entire lot of evidence, titles and land shares over to the last remaining conspirator, Munrossie—along with the bag of jewels she kept ensconced in her bodice. Let him dispose of it. Let him worry about what should be done. Her father was dead, her mother was dead; this was the very last thing she would have to do for them before setting her own course for the future.

Honor glanced down at the bulge of her breasts over the top of her corset. Within the constricting stays was a bag of jewels she had found among her father's private papers. The heavy bag of jewels nestled under her breasts provided an uncomfortable but interesting lift to her bosom, making it appear much fuller than what it was. She smirked. Much like the cloth rags some of the young ladies in France used.

She adjusted the bag slightly, plumping her breasts a little higher. She wondered yet again how her father came into possession of such beautiful gems. Why had he secreted them with such damning papers?

Her thoughts didn't distract her long. She could hear the coach's wheels rattle on cobblestones, heralding their arrival at the inn they would be staying at for the evening. Whatever the mystery of the jewels, she would not leave them behind to fall in to Percy's greedy hands.

A couple of shouts in greeting were exchanged by the hostler and the driver of the coach as the door to the carriage was flung open. The freckled smiling face of a young man bobbed above the light of a lantern. "Milady," the young man said, a little girl dancing from foot to foot behind him, obviously

curious to see the fashionable people who would alight from the coach.

Honor was sorry to disappoint her. She was looking anything but fashionable, her cloak pulled tightly closed, the frog closures locked and firmly in place so no one would see the sorry state of her gown from climbing garden walls.

*At least I have both of my slippers.* She concentrated on listening to the conversation taking place between the innkeeper and the driver regarding their late arrival.

"We took a more circuitous route Sir," Honor said, lifting her nose, trying to appear as regal and superior as possible when every bone in her body screamed in agony as a result of her sprinting and climbing.

The innkeeper bobbed a bow. "Of course, Milady," he replied, gesturing to a boy to lead her indoors. "You'll perhaps want to sup in a private room, Milady. There are some gentlemen present in the taproom who are not fit to be in your company. My son will show you the way," the burly man said as she passed.

Honor gave him a curt nod, but it was the young man who provided her with more information as they moved into a pool of light from the opened taproom door. "They're in their cups Milady; they're paddies from across the water. Sailors me mam thinks, but she's no reason why they'd be so far from the coast," he said, his face alight with curiosity.

Honor frowned. "Whatever is the matter with Irishmen?" She fairly bristled, angry at the prejudice being shown by someone so young. Her father admired these people for their bravery and willingness to join the fray in Scotland when so many Scots would not risk their titles or lands to do so. Honor personally thought it was the love of a fight and tweaking the nose of England that prompted the Irish to offer their services to the Scots during their uprising, rather than any sense of duty. She never argued the point with her father, respecting the people for who they were rather than treat them with disdain.

The boy shrugged as he led her over the high threshold. "Papa thinks they are here to rob the gentry."

Honor frowned and was about to deliver a scathing comment when she stepped into the taproom and spied the two men in question. *Good God! It's only two men! They made it sound like an entire clan was here!*

Passing through the taproom, going towards a door near the bar where a harried-looking woman was eyeing the Irishmen with a jaundiced glare, the young man opened the door and gestured for Honor and Agnes to enter.

Giving a last look over her shoulder at the two men who had gone very quiet and were now interestedly watching her, she stepped into the cozy private dining room.

Once she and Agnes were inside, the young man shut the door and hurried over to the fireplace, coaxing the fire that had been banked into a roaring blaze as he added still more logs.

Bobbing a quick bow, he turned toward the door in time for the woman from the taproom to come in, hastily pushing stray hairs up under her cap. "Milady," the woman said, giving her son a soft smile as he passed. "You'll be wanting a bit to eat after your journey?"

Honor nodded, pulling off her fancy white kid gloves, noting one of the larger paste jewels along the cuff had been lost, probably in the garden. "Yes please," she replied, tossing the gloves onto a nearby chair. "I do apologize for discommoding you by arriving so late, or should I say so early in the morning? We took a longer route from London," she explained, treating the woman to the courtesy her father had taught her to treat everyone with. She unbuttoned the frog fastenings while Agnes dusted off a chair before sitting on it. "I do appreciate your kindness," she finished, giving the woman a beatific smile.

Executing a quick curtsy, the woman gave Honor a smile in return that let her know her frank speech, as well as consideration given to the woman and her family, was appreciated. Bobbing one final

curtsy near the door, the woman exited. If she were the recipient of any special treatment doled out by the innkeeper's wife, Honor had no one to thank but the strict dictates handed down to her by her father.

Honor glanced around the room and choosing a chair that had its back to the fire, she flung her cloak over it, sitting in the shadows of the deep back of the chair to hide her stained and damaged dress. She allowed her eyes to close for a moment in respite, listening to the soothing silence punctuated by the occasional pop of a log on the fire, until the noise from the two drunken Irishmen in the taproom rose in volume before it broke off into a raucous song sung by a very off-key voice.

Honor opened her eyes at the disturbance that seeped through the door of the private dining room to find Agnes' eyes rounded in surprise as she looked at her charge. "You've ruined that gown," she admonished. "It took me two days to remake that gown of your mother's and now you've ruined it."

Honor gave a half-hearted shrug as she pulled up the hem of her gown, dragging it higher and higher until Agnes was afforded a view of the long, slender legs and the lacey edge of Honor's modesty skirt. "The papers are just fine," Agnes grumbled sulkily, lighting a candle on the mantle. "Pull your skirts down before someone comes in."

Ignoring her, Honor examined the seams of the secret pockets in her petticoat. The papers puffed out Honor's skirts considerably, leaving no need for underskirts. It was an ingenious method of secreting the documents and providing her with a fashionable silhouette. She mentally congratulated herself as Agnes moved around the room like a guard dog, checking the windows, rattling them to test their locks.

The noise in the taproom rose to a new level, this time the broad Irish accents were joined by shouts and protests from the family which ran the inn. Ignoring the commotion in the relative safety of her private room, Honor was thoroughly examining each pocket, making sure there were no loose seams and no documents had escaped during her flight from London.

She was just assuring herself by checking the pocket at the back of her dress when the door to her private room banged open and slammed against the wall. "And what is it that we are having here, I'm asking myself?" a thick, slurred voice asked in broad Irish brogue. "A fine wee pigeon, begging to be devoured!"

Agnes let out a shout of surprise as Honor hastily pushed down her skirts, giving the men standing in her doorway a dark glare. "Get you gone!" she shouted, reaching for her reticule beside the chair with her right hand.

"Now lovey, is that any way of talking to the man that will be taking you to his bed and beyond, to the gates of heaven itself?" the larger and bulkier of the men said, his black beard bristling with each word, the dark eyes twinkling above it.

"You're in your cups, and are distressing the fine family that runs this establishment," Honor said, her hand closing around her reticule, drawing open the strings with long, deft fingers. "Not to mention you are giving all Irishmen a poor reputation in the process!" she finished, her fingers slipping inside the delicate satin bag and closing around the handle of an ancient pistol she found in her father's study. "I suggest you go and sleep off that false courage the drink has provided you and return on the morrow to apologize for your foul behavior!"

The first man, much skinnier and shorter than the second, his head topped by a riot of brown hair, gave a guffaw of laughter. "Well now lass! I've the mind to thank you for making an old man feel like a lad again. I haven't had my ears burned with a scoldin' since I was a wee babe still in leading strings!" He laughed, slapping his skinny thigh as he bent over. "You've put me in mind of my own dear mam, and because of that, I'll be leaving you to the tender mercies of Duncan here!" he said, shaking his head as he hiccupped with laughter and moved from the doorway back into the taproom.

Duncan, the bear-like man with the black beard, was not about to be put off by being scolded as Honor had sincerely hoped he would. She had no desire to shoot the man. It would complicate matters considerably, but if he tried anything untoward, she certainly would do just that—shoot him—and run

like the devil was at her heels.

Duncan took a menacing step into the room and weaving considerably, he paused to get a grip on the door to regain his balance. Honor sighed loudly. She would shoot to injure, not kill. She had seen men in their cups before, having spent time on her father's ships when he was alive and in good health. She had plenty of insight into the behavior whisky elicited. Although not pretty, it was oftentimes not remembered the next day.

She was watching his slow approach into the room when a figure, much taller than Duncan, much more muscular than the innkeeper, came up from behind the threatening Irishman. Honor divided her attention between the man who was now interestedly watching Duncan and Duncan himself. *Good God! What now?* She slipped her finger onto the trigger of the pistol.

"Is there a problem?" the man asked, sweeping off his hat to reveal a handsome face and a thick queue of deep red hair.

Hearing the deep voice behind him, Duncan swung one meaty fist, the wide arc missing the man who neatly ducked, spinning the bear-like Duncan around before he fell to his knees, landing further in the room. Chuckling at the broad backside presented to him, the man put a booted foot on the rump of the big Irishman and pushed, sending Duncan face first onto the hard plank flooring.

Agnes sighed in relief and it was then that Honor realized the maid knew what she had been about to do before the gentleman arrived. Agnes' relief, though, came too soon.

Down, but not out of the fight, Duncan quickly rolled over and caught the taller, muscular stranger with a foot aimed low, kicking the feet out from under the man who had come to Honor's rescue, sending him sprawling on top of Duncan.

Honor jumped up as the two men wrestled on the floor, Duncan sounding like a dog growling, and the man responding in kind, although his tones were lower and more clipped. Her shaking hand still on the gun, she watched the progress of the battle on the floor as the innkeeper and his wife held the other scrawny Irishman back, preventing him from joining the brawl.

It looked as if Duncan had the upper hand when he quickly rolled and straddled the younger man's stomach, the smoothly executed move making the stranger's ribbon come loose from his hair, the thick mane glimmering copper and nutmeg as it spilled over the floor. Making a quick decision as Duncan raised his meaty fist, Honor was about to pull the gun from her reticule when the gentleman beneath Duncan quickly and simultaneously sat up and punched the darker man squarely on the nose, making blood blossom on his face as a cry of pain exploded from Duncan's mouth.

The fight was over. The gentleman pushed Duncan off him and then leant down, about to lift Duncan over his shoulder when the bear of a man made one flailing movement with his free hand, the other pressed to his bleeding nose. The movement caught the other man on the jaw, sending him flat on his rump on the floor, long, muscular legs splayed out before him, managing to kick Duncan in the groin with a booted foot as he went down.

Duncan scissored into an upright position to clutch his groin with the hand that struck the gentleman. The movement was so fast for such a large man and Honor was so jumpy, her finger instinctively tightened on the trigger, sending a ball tearing through the delicate silk of her reticule to lodge in the floor near her foot.

She was waving away the black smoke from the powder, coughing, when she realized that the room had gone silent.

Peering through teary eyes, she saw everyone staring at her, shock, horror and surprise clearly etched on each face as they fixed her in their sights.

Long seconds ticked by before the gentleman on the floor moved first, seeming to break the spell that had fallen over the room. He rubbed his jaw with a dark look on his face before leaning down and lifting the big Irishman onto his shoulder as if he were a sack of meal.

Without another word, the tall gentleman with the deep auburn hair stepped out of the private



dining room, the innkeeper and his wife following him with cautious glances over their shoulders at Honor, leaving the smaller Irishman staring in drunken disbelief at Honor.

Ignoring the pointed and amused stare of the remaining Irishman, Honor heard the stranger pause in the taproom where he exchanged a few words with the innkeeper and the frightened-looking wife. He stepped in to the frame of the doorway and grabbed the scrawnier Irishman by the scruff of his neck, dragging both burdens out of the taproom.

Honor was still shaking at the abrupt and violent escalation of events when the innkeeper's wife came into the room, slowly and calmly taking the reticule from her hand, tutting about the safety of women on the highways and now in the taprooms of the countryside. She gently pushed Honor back into her chair, slipping the ancient gun from the ruined reticule as she did. "The gentleman would like to sup with you."

Honor, still in shock at discharging the weapon, blinked without comment. Agnes, however, considered the tall handsome man their personal savior. "Tell him we would be pleased if he would join us."

The innkeeper's wife nodded curtly, slipping the gun into her apron before she quickly left the room.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Reid tossed Duncan off his shoulder onto the hard cobbles of the courtyard, giving Ian a glare of disgust. "What the devil are you two about?" he hissed angrily.

Ian quickly rose to their defense as Duncan struggled to his feet, trying to simultaneously cup his injured groin and stem the flow of blood from his nose, all the while chuckling. "I'd not known it was you lad, else I would have tried harder to pummel you!" Duncan said good-naturedly. Reid knew his uncle enjoyed nothing more than a good brawl or a good humping from a bawd, so it didn't surprise him to find the two of them in the midst of trying to amuse themselves when he arrived.

"Be glad I knew who you were else you'd be sporting a great deal more than a banged nose and sore bollocks!" Reid gave Duncan a dark look before turning toward Ian again. "Now what did you two think you were about?"

"How's a man to occupy his time with naught to do but drink while you're off in London where there are fine coaches and lasses to chase!" Ian glanced around nervously, his brogue thick from the drink. "There's naught for us to do this far inland save wait for your summons. You cannot fault us for trying to amuse ourselves while we wait!" His Adam's apple rapidly bobbed in his skinny neck as he spoke.

Reid frowned. "But with a woman of some obvious means! And in public?"

"We thought her skirts were rustling louder than usual for these high born English ladies Reid. Being observant if not inquiring men, we meant to see what that could be about, but she had her skirts lifted when we came in to her private room," Ian replied, his voice slurred and almost unintelligible now between the alcohol and his brogue. "Wasn't she looking in the pockets she had sewn into her skirts adding to our curiosity?" Ian asked the question in a typical Irish manner, defending his and Duncan's actions. "If she hadn't been showing a fair bit of leg when we were about to make our enquiries, we wouldn't have been troubling her further than to satisfy ourselves as to the contents of the pockets. But seeing she did have her skirts lifted, and wonderin' what a young miss like her would be doin' with her skirts up around her waist, examinin' them with such a look of determination, we thought perhaps she had gold or notes sewn into them," Ian explained in a rush of words. "There's been stranger places we have found it!" Having finished his defense, Reid bit back a laugh at the earnest expression on his uncle's face.

Reid sighed, trying to get his emotions under control. Emotions which had run the gamut of surprised elation, finding he had chosen the exact same inn to meet his uncles as Honor had chosen to rest in; outrage, finding those same uncles attempting to assault the woman he sought; and amusement at Ian's explanation for their actions.

His anger returned when he thought of how close his uncles had been to ruining their chances of stealing the documentation from Honor. A task he needed to accomplish before she became interested in the contents of those papers, or delivered them to his stepfather.

"You thought incorrectly," Reid fairly growled at him. He tried as best he could to explain who the young woman they were about to accost was, and what she had on her person. The two older men visibly paled when Reid finished, not afraid for themselves so much as they were for the man in front of them they had helped raise for the old Duke of Munrossie.

"She'll be giving the title and papers for Glenrose to you lad?" Ian unconsciously twisted his hat with nervous hands.

Reid glanced back at the closed taproom door. “No. She won’t,” he said, momentarily lost in deep thought before turning again to Ian. “You mentioned something about her skirts?”

Ian’s face lighted. “Aye, long pockets sewn in the inside of her petticoat. Her skirts rustled something fierce when she walked past us in the taproom and again when she shoved them down.”

Reid clenched his jaw. “She’s a bold piece of baggage,” he said softly, stroking his jaw where Duncan had hit him. “I’ll wager she’s sewn them into her skirts. The ingenious little minx must have the jewels somewhere on her person as well.”

Duncan grumbled. “Well now lad, and shouldn’t we be worrying less about the jewels and more about those papers?” He pinched the bridge of his nose, using his sleeve to stem the flow of blood before Reid handed him a square of linen. “What I’m wanting to know is how will we get them? Unless you are of the mind to seduce the lass under the nose of her maid?” A sly grin peaked from behind his hand and blood.

Reid tightened his lips. It was a thought, but he had the instinctive feeling Honor wasn’t the type of lass to be swept off her feet by pretty words. He grudgingly admired her tenaciousness. *What type of fainting dove carries a weapon on her person? A dove with something she desires to keep safe and hidden. She’s not the type of woman to have her head turned away from her goals by the promise of a pleasurable evening spent in any man’s arms.*

Seeing no way out of his predicament, he made a firm decision, scratching the burgeoning whiskers along his chin. “No, I’ll not seduce her. But we need to make sure she is not robbed or accosted again, aye?” He winked broadly at the other two men, a mischievous smile lighting his face.

Duncan returned the smile. “Oh aye, we’ll have to be sure the little thing doesn’t get set upon by highwaymen,” he replied gleefully.

At Ian’s curt nod in silent agreement, Reid told them both to hie off to sleep away the effects of too much drink, too much time and not enough activity—something which would soon be remedied.

He re-entered the taproom after straightening his waistcoat and brushing off his breeches. The innkeeper and his wife’s face lit up when he bowed his head to step under the low lintel of the door. “Oh, thank you Milord!” the woman gushed, pressing the gun into his hand. “I’ve taken it from her so she’d not feel the need to use it again.”

“What’s a young lady like that carrying a gun?” the innkeeper grumbled as he wiped a rag over the table where the two men had been drinking away the evening.

Reid looked at the ancient pistol, barely making out the initials engraved elegantly into the handle. ‘RO’. A shock went through his body as he finally recognized the pistol, its grip and lines.

It had belonged to his father, its mate nestled in the library of Rosegate Hall, his mother’s ancestral home on the border in Cornwall. “I don’t believe she is of English stock Sir. I believe she’s recently arrived from France. Perhaps she’s heard tales of the highwaymen in England,” Reid whispered in Honor’s defense, finally pulling his eyes away from the gun.

“You’re probably aright Milord; after all, there has been tales of the *Glanconer*—the Love Talker,” he elaborated, “this far east in recent weeks.” The woman nodded sagely, giving her husband a glare. “You can go in to the lady Milord; I’ve brought a proper meal for the three of you to share.”

Reid gave her a smile that had her blushing. Dividing a bow between the innkeeper and his wife, he strode to the door of the room where Honor and her maid were quietly sitting. Knocking once, he entered the room, noting how quiet and subdued Honor had become after the debacle with the pistol.

“You are well Miss?” he asked softly, watching her head jerk up and her eyes go wide in recognition of the familiar, clipped tone from the garden earlier that night.

Watching the emotions flit across her beautiful face, he let out a chuckle of laughter and pulled a chair up to sit across from her. “You remember me then?” he asked. “I most certainly remember you.”

Honor’s opened mouth moved, but no sound came out. He took the moment of silence to better look at the young woman. Black hair that was tightly curled exploded around her face and down her

shoulders, one errant curl enticingly curved around one breast. Long of limb and slender of build, she had a fine-boned face and a full, luscious mouth. But it was her eyes that had Reid undone. Green as the emeralds at her throat and tilted upward on the outsides to follow the high cheekbones, they glittered just as brightly as the gems.

Chuckling at her discomfiture and the elderly maid's confusion, he buttered a thick slice of bread, putting a slice of hard cheese on it along with a pickle before handing it to Honor. "You should eat. I know you didn't take any sustenance from the Wentworth's while you were there." His eyes twinkled in merriment as she took the bread. "I am in a position to know since Elisa, Lady Winterbourne, was worried about your abrupt disappearance."

Honor groaned. "Oh Sir, do not say so! I had no desire to worry Lady Winterbourne, but I had heard my cousin Percy—the man I had told you about in the garden—was due to arrive shortly for a game of cards. I had to make good my escape!"

Agnes, unable to contain her curiosity, pulled up a chair. "What is this about?" She looked at Honor disbelievingly. "You told him about Percy?"

Honor took a bite of her bread, stemming her reply. Reid arched his copper brow questioningly, her small nod in return the silent permission he needed to answer Agnes.

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When he was done, Agnes was laughing so hard tears flowed down her face. Chuckling, she gently dabbed tears from her eyes as Honor glowered at the both of them—especially Reid and his description of her slipper smacking him in the head as he 'innocently passed by a high hedge in the garden'.

"Well sir..." Honor said loftily, her little chin raised in indignation. "I believe introductions are in order."

Reid nodded, still chuckling as he poured a goblet of wine for the elderly maid and Honor. "I'm Reid Ormond, the fourth Duke of Munrossie of Glenrose in Devon and the fifth Marquess of Rosegate in Cornwall." He snorted. "Though I am not supposed to be using the title of fourth Duke of Munrossie until my stepfather dies."

Honor's mouth dropped open again but this time she quickly recovered. "Are you able to prove that Milord?" she asked softly, turning the ring on her middle finger inward so the gem and signet was hidden. Her heart tripped when she thought that the man whom she could deliver the documents to was sitting directly across from her, thus saving her an extra two days spent traveling to Devon.

Even as she had the thought, several things didn't add up. How could this man be her father's co-conspirator. He was much too young to be the man her father had regaled her with stories about.

Reid shook his head. "Sadly, I cannot. I do not know where the family signet ring is. It has been missing these many years past," he replied, his face dark as he picked up his goblet to drain the wine from it. "I had thought my stepfather had acquired it."

Honor frowned. "Your stepfather?" she echoed.

Reid nodded as he refilled his glass. "Yes, my father passed away some years ago. My mother remarried, and I am sad to say that her second husband was more interested in the titles and land than he was my mother. She followed my father to the grave two years ago, leaving my stepfather in charge of Glenrose." Reid took a swallow of the wine. "A man that has been successfully bleeding my father's estate dry since her death."

Agnes gasped. "How dreadful!"

Honor leaned forward in her chair. "But why don't you hold the title and lands if you are your mother and father's sole heir?"

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Reid didn't want to get this far into the tangled legalities of the title of Earl of Munrossie, but he could tell that Honor was not going to let the matter rest. "Stipulations were placed in my father's will. It was at the behest of one of my father's friends in order to save Glenrose for me. Stipulations that state I will not be able to take over Glenrose for quite some time, and only then under strict conditions."

Agnes put a hand to her chest in surprise. "You poor, poor thing! Why would they feel the need to safeguard your inheritance for you in such a manner? Were you not present to reassure your father?"

Reid took a deep breath and fixed Honor's eyes with his own. Slowly, he ran a tongue over dry lips, about to jump into very deep and very dangerous waters. "I was away at the time, doing something very dangerous and illegal." He let out a long breath as the pupils of Honor's eyes dilated in surprise. "I had been thought dead by my mother. The only people who had faith in my abilities were my father and his old friend—the man who owned the ship I captained."

Other than the darkness of her eyes, Honor didn't twitch a muscle. She merely sipped at her wine, careful not to meet his gaze again. "How terrible," she echoed Agnes. "Why ever would you take part in something dangerous and illegal?"

Reid sighed. He had hoped she would trust him after he made that confession, but she wasn't a woman who easily gave up her secrets. "Because I once had delusions of grandeur. Because I had believed in the purpose of the war—just as my father did." He sighed again. "Because I had a strong urge to prove myself, to make my own fortune in the world."

Honor nodded. "I understand Sir, and although the mention of a 'war' intrigues me, I will not press you because I, too, am a child of rebels and would prefer not to divulge exactly what type." She paused and gave him a sad smile. "They have a way of setting your own soul to flame with their convictions, instilling a sense of secretiveness in a person as well as their high morals."

Reid glanced at Agnes, who, being replete with food and wine, had begun to doze in her chair. "You use an interesting term. Rebel..." he said softly, leaning toward her over the little table laden with food. "A very nice word to use in place of traitor."

Honor quickly glanced up and then away. He thought he glimpsed a glimmer of panic in her eyes as she studiously avoided looking at him. "It's a matter of one's personal opinion, is it not? If you feel the reason for any treachery was just and for a good cause, then I suppose you would use the term 'rebel'," she said casually. "If you are of the mind that any activities that contradict the government are wrong and unjust, then you could use the word 'traitor'." She gave a shrug. "It all depends on where you stand, and if you are sorrowful for having strong convictions on what is and what is not just."

Reid's eyebrows lifted at the fire in Honor's voice, in her spirit when she spoke. "I hadn't thought they taught such esoteric matters in French schools," he commented. "You are French, are you not? I thought I detected a tiny trace of accent in your speech."

"I have spent the last ten years in France, although I was born in England," she replied.

Reid nodded. "France, eh? What would bring you here to England if you've made your home there for so long?"

"I had told you in the garden. I am carrying out my father's last wishes." Before he could comment further, she changed the subject. A maneuver which was not lost on him. "You say there are stipulations in your father's will? What type of stipulations?" she asked, taking another drink of her wine.

Reid watched her drain her goblet, refilling it for her once she placed it back on the table. He saw the sky beginning to lighten outside as he glanced toward the window, casting the environment with a deep gray instead of the inky darkness it had been. "I have no idea. My father sent the legal testament to a friend before he died, in order to be assured it would be safe in the instance my mother remarried, which she did." He leveled a look at Honor, noting the otherwise creamy color of her chest was flushed

from the effects of the wine. "I had only just learned the name of the man my father entrusted with the document this evening, thus I am relegated to living on my mother's estate, Rosegate, on the Cornwall coast until I am in a position to retrieve what is mine."

"Cornwall? Your mother's family comes from Cornwall?" she asked, sipping again at her wine. Reid felt a smile tug at his lips at the slightly distracted look on Honor's face from imbibing too much wine.

"Her maternal line comes from Ireland; her paternal line from Cornwall. The match was made between her great grandsires in an attempt to cement an alliance between Ireland and England long ago, during the time of Grace O'Malley when Irish pirates raided English ships." His eyes twinkled. "Every male in that line had been fostered by my great grandmother's family in Ireland as part of the contract. The estate of Rosegate stayed firmly in the hands of my mother's line." He leaned back in his chair, gesturing grandly with his hands. "Which would be myself, the last living child of her line. I was sent to live with her family for six months out of every year."

"So you've spent time in Ireland as well as been involved in a war." Honor narrowed her eyes at him. "Ireland, Cornwall, Devon," she slurred, the amount of alcohol she consumed finally taking effect. "It explains the romanticism—taking part of dangerous and illegal activities, Milord. You've the heritage for heroism and tragedy, no matter how far back or tangled the roots."

Reid chuckled at the apt assessment. "Yes, I suppose that is true." Smiling he stood up, the sound of the legs of his chair scraping against the wood floor waking Agnes. "I should let you go to your rest, Milady. I dare hope we might meet again." His dark gaze swept up from the toes of her dainty slippers to the top of her head in a long, lazy assessment that left Honor blushing fiercely. "Be careful on your travels, Miss. I hear there are brigands about the roads these days."

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Honor nodded sleepily, stifling a yawn. "I will take your advice to heart, Milord, and bid you good morning," she said, watching dimly as Reid affected a bow to her and then Agnes in turn, before turning on his heel toward the door. Her brain was muddled by wine, but not so confused that she didn't remember the question she wished to ask him. She called out, "Milord?"

Reid paused by the door, turning to regard her. "Yes?"

Honor cocked her head at him, her green eyes twinkling in curiosity and the effects of too much wine. "How did you come to be in the Winterbourne garden if you did not come through the front door?" she asked, frowning. "If you had walked through the ballroom, surely I would have remembered you, seeing such a striking man of your coloring."

Reid smiled at the confession the wine she was drinking provided. "I had walked through the gate between the two gardens, only ten feet from where you were climbing," he replied, bowing again and leaving Honor sputtering.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Percival Harlowe stood trembling in ineffectual rage as he glimpsed the destruction caused by his fury. He had just discovered his cousin, Honor, had succeeded in escaping him for the fourth time.

“Damn her!” he finally shouted, his fleshy face mottled red. Turning with one hand outstretched, he slapped the old housemaid in the face, having vented part of his anger on the ornaments and furnishings in the room. “When did she leave?”

The old woman pressed a wrinkled hand to her cheek, tears silently streaming down her face. “I don’t know sir! I saw her maid taking trunks and a valise out of the house. I had thought Agnes had been sacked because of the terrible row the two of them had earlier in the evening!”

The old woman cowered as Percy raised his hand again. Thinking better of striking the old woman again, he let his hand drop, gesturing with his head toward the door. “Get you gone from my sight! I’d have a better spy in a mouse than you have been!”

The old woman, weeping freely, hurried from the room and Percy’s wrath. When all was quiet and he was assured privacy, he turned towards the man lurking in the shadows of the library. “You’ll need to find her before she reaches Munrossie. If she tries to create an alliance with the old cad and he realizes the extent of everything she’s inherited, then my fortune will be truly lost!” Percy spat, turning his back on the man. “We must pursue this course of action until the gel is wedded and bedded.”

The giant of a man hesitated in the shadows for a moment, his beefy hands clasped in front of his body, patiently waiting. Percy glanced over his shoulder at him. “Naturally, your fee will be increased once I’ve managed to secure the Saint Claire title and Downforth fortune.”

The man nodded curtly and slipped out the opened window of the library without a sound.

Percy glanced around the library, cursing under his breath at the wiliness of a woman he had originally thought was a mere bit of French fluff. He thought he had the extraordinary luck of being in the office of his late uncle’s shipping business when she had arrived there less than a week ago.

Normally, he would have already been at a gaming hell, but his recent losses required him to make a short trip to the shipping offices to replenish the monies—her father’s—from the strongbox that Downforth had kept in his offices. When he introduced himself to her, giving her his most charming smile he could muster for a woman of such an obviously stubborn set, she merely looked down her nose at him.

He saw her standing over the strongbox, looking quizzically at a long column of numbers she had recorded on a sheet of foolscap. He quickly realized she was taking an accounting of the monies, no doubt discovering a great deal of it was missing.

After he had introduced himself and exclaimed his joy at having met her in person, he clearly saw her eyes narrow in suspicion as her eyes darted once again to the long line of numbers, then the strongbox. Knowing she could call for his arrest based on her suspicion and the fact he had the only other key to the offices, he quickly reminded her that he was her last living relation in England, subtly pressing for a sense of familial connection. He hoped it would save him not only from prosecution for stealing her money, but from debtor’s prison if she took pity on him and gave him the funds he so desperately needed to settle his debts. In truth, she had been so long in coming to settle her father’s London affairs, he had managed to convince himself she would be an absentee employer, but did not reveal that thought to her as he continued to try and wheedle his way into her affections. He had begun to believe the pilfering of company funds could continue unabated when her eyes softened toward him

as he spoke, pausing now and then to wipe away the sheen of nervous sweat from his forehead.

She had said nothing to his dissertation on family connections, nor reacted to his effusive words of pleasure at meeting her. Nor had she blinked as he flattered her, all the while keeping a false smile plastered to his lips. To his horror and discredit, he had lost control and shouted at her, berating her when she had called the employees into the office, letting them know she was closing the business down.

He could clearly remember her slowly turning toward him, that miserable old wretch of a maid watching him closely. With a cool reserve, she informed him that she had been at her father's Kent estates; keeping vigil at his dying side. She had gone over his records after his passing—records that included this business and the steady loss of income which had no logical reasoning. She stayed only long enough to sell the belongings and home before turning her attention to her father's holdings in London.

Percy's body trembled in muted rage, his earlier anger renewed when he remembered how Honor softly smiled at him, telling him that the familial connection he had gone on about for so long was the only thing keeping her from having him arrested for embezzlement.

Percy had been struck dumb at the woman's audacity and could merely stand in shock as she continued to advise all the clerks that the business was being moved. If they wished, she would help them relocate to the new base of operations.

In a last ditch effort to save himself from ruin, he offered to buy the business from her. She laughed, telling him that her father wished for the shipping business to be moved, not to exchange hands. She would not sell.

She had been stubborn and unrelenting. Seeing his livelihood and the tills, from which he freely dipped his hand in, disappearing, he had tried to soothe her. But she wouldn't have any of it. He tried to reason with her, but she wouldn't have any of that either. Finally, out of desperation, he had proposed to her. To add insult to injury, not only did she refuse him, but she had the gall to laugh at him as well.

The first time he had tried to kidnap her, she elbowed him in the jaw and kicked him in the bollocks. While he was writhing around on her bedroom floor in agony, she gave him the sharp side of her tongue. "I fail to see any familial resemblance between us Percival. Need I remind you that your employment in my father's business was conditional on you stopping gambling and running up debt? He thought that was the least he could do for his only nephew, even though you lacked the courage and strength your mother possessed!" Standing over him, her face blazing with rage, her green eyes flashing, she continued to chastise him even as her maid rushed into the room. "Fie on you Sir for being a coward, for living a dissolute life when my father tried to help you!"

Percy's pride still stung. After that, he hired a spy within the house. But the old housemaid wasn't privy to enough information—or rather, accurate enough information—regarding Honor's doings.

Deciding to not stain his hands with any further attempts on Honor's person, he hired a man to do it for him. The second time, Honor had made her escape from a moving coach. The third time, her old maid clocked the man over the head with a chamber pot, rousing the guard patrolling the fashionable part of London where Edward Downforth had his town home.

This time, Percy hired a man known for his ability and dogged determination when given an assignment. He was certain the man would not fail.

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Honor and Agnes took off as soon as the sun set the next evening. Preferring to travel by night, she ignored the warnings of highwaymen issued by the innkeeper's wife, more frightened of Percy catching her than being robbed.



Her thoughts though, lingered on the tavern and the room next to hers where she was sure Reid slept peacefully. She wondered how he slept; if he wore a nightshirt; if he slept in the nude as most of the girls at her school in France claimed young handsome gentlemen did. She felt her face burn with the thought, but it didn't stop her from trying to imagine what his tall, muscular body with broad shoulders and strong torso would look like without any clothing on. She had itched to weave her fingers through his glorious mane of thick hair last night, just to see if it was as soft to the touch as it looked.

"Milady?" The brusque voice of her maid intruded on her thoughts. "Milady, is aught amiss?"

Honor turned her face from the window to look at her maid. "Hmm?"

"You've been worrying your gloves, Milady, and I wondered..." Agnes hesitantly said, motioning to the gloves in Honor's hands which had been twisted in her sweaty palms while she worried about her very uncertain future. "It's nerves I expect. First your father's death, trying to set his affairs to rights, and then the uncertainty of your own future..."

Before Honor could respond the coach jolted to a sudden stop, sending Agnes toppling over onto her mistress, the momentum taking them both to the floor with muffled grunts of pain. "Oh, now what?" she moaned in frustration.

The two women were busy disentangling themselves from their skirts and the splay of each other's limbs when a gunshot rang out through the dark woods, a man's sharp voice sounding every traveler's feared phrase.

"Stand and deliver!"

Agnes, on hearing the command, gave a small squeak and flattened herself on Honor again. "Shh Milady! Don't make a sound. Perhaps they will be content with the trunks and leave us alone!"

Chewing on her lip, Honor thought about the jewels secreted in the bodice of her gown, the papers in her skirts. She had caught Percy rooting through her father's study for anything of value, an act he said was forced upon him when she refused to marry him or pay off his gambling debts. The incident made her realize how unsafe the jewels were in her father's home, so she carried them hidden on her person until she could unravel the mystery surrounding them. Those same jewels were now digging into her soft skin through a layer of velvet, inside a delicate purse made specifically for their storage. The weight of Agnes pressing on top of her had her feeling the facets of every single jewel.

"Damn!" Honor managed to mutter, a look of surprise crossing her maid's face at the oath.

She waited for Agnes to chastise her, but anything that was about to be said was cut off by the activity outside the coach. The door to the carriage was wrenched open so quickly it bounced back before being held open again by a very large hand encased in a black glove.

"Well now, what have we here I am asking myself?" A voice so muffled from the thick collar of his greatcoat that Honor could barely understand it greeted them.

When neither woman replied he repeated the question. His voice was deep and lightly accented, immediately putting her in mind of the two Irish sailors from the tavern the previous evening. But this was neither man. Taller and stouter, his voice was lightly burred instead of the thick brogue spoken by the two Irishmen.

"Two maids! Nothing more! We have nothing for you in here!" Agnes spit out as she tried to cover more of Honor's body under her on the floor.

"I'm not a man who would call a mistress false, but it does appear that there is something of grand interest happening in here, though what it is exactly, I'm not able to say without investigatin' further," the voice replied as the sky opened up and began to pelt the ground with cold, fat raindrops.

Honor bent her neck and risked a peek upward from behind the skewed bonnet on her head.

The highwayman was enormous, filling up the doorway of the coach, though from her view upward, it looked as if most of his bulk was made of an inordinate amount of clothing rather than flesh.

She could almost hear a smile in his voice although she couldn't see anything of his face, the lower half covered by a scarf, the upper by a slouching black hat with a wide brim that had water

cascading down over it, onto the coach's floor.

"If you will excuse me for being so bold lass?" he said, reaching out quickly and grabbing her around the wrist as he leaned into the carriage.

Her heart hammered in her chest as soon as she felt the cold wet leather of his glove grip her arm. She could taste her fear. *He could snap me like a twig!*

All too quickly, the bracelet around her wrist was unfastened and in the thief's hand. He dangled it in front of her. "Nice little bauble for a maid," he drawled, humor evident in his voice. "Let's see what other bits you have of interest in here, shall we?" Again he gripped her arm, sliding her out from under Agnes towards the open coach door.

"No!" Agnes shrieked as she grabbed Honor by the ankle.

Being pulled through the door of the coach and into the strong arms of the highwayman, Honor briefly visualized herself as a child's doll in the midst of a tug-of-war for possession. If she hadn't been so terrified, she'd have probably burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation.

The thief chuckled and gripped Honor more firmly around the ribs, just under her breasts, pushing them up higher over the bodice of her gown, dislodging the bag of jewels.

"Oh God!" Honor whispered as she felt the bag settle between her boned stays and smooth stomach. As the sky continued its deluge upon both her and the highwayman, her clothing became drenched, the sodden weight making any attempt to move cumbersome.

She felt Agnes renew her grip on her foot, making the slipper slide off and snap the ribbon garter. The highwayman chuckled as her stocking puddled around her ankle. The sound, deep and rumbling in his chest, vibrated along her spine, effecting a tingling sensation as she felt Agnes grab her other ankle.

The highwayman tugged and Agnes pulled back. Honor felt like she was drowning from the rain that was falling in her face from the brim of the man's hat.

She spluttered around the steady stream of water, blinking it out of her eyes in time to see the pistol come up toward her head in the highwayman's hand.

"If you will not let the lass go, her death will be on your conscience mistress."

With a cry Agnes released her ankles, dropping them out of the carriage. A stocking hung limply from one delicately turned ankle as the slipper slid off her other foot, coming to rest in the muddy road.

The highwayman bowed his head. "I thank you mistress. I might be a man in a violent profession, but I've not the stomach for painting the insides of carriages with a mere lass' brains," he said, chuckling. "Now, you will understand if I take the little lass with me a bit a ways from all this to-do," he said.

Kicking and screaming, Honor was dropped on the muddy ground near the side of the road, sheltered from view by trees which dumped rivers of water from their limp leaves and branches onto her head.

Despite her fear, she was dimly aware of the feel of mud seeping through the feet of her expensive silk stockings, her hair and hat wilting around her in the rain.

With deft fingers and a grace belying the man's stature, he neatly unclasped the ribbon from around Honor's neck, hefting the emerald her mother had given her briefly in his palm before it was secreted into the confines of his costume.

"Now for the earbobs and ring lass," he said very calmly, pointing with his gun at the emerald earrings and ring her father had given her, with instructions to return them to the Duke of Munrossie.

Angrily, Honor took the gems from her ears and thrust them into his open hand, wanting to kick him with every breath she took.

The man glanced down at the earrings he held. "Now the ring if you please."

“No.” She clenched her fists stubbornly, her chin raised in defiance.

The man inclined his head toward her. “Your pardon? Did you just say ‘no’ to me?” he asked, his voice as dark as the sky above them.

Honor’s nostrils flared as she readied herself to be struck. “I said no,” she replied as she felt a stray drop of rain snake its way down her spine, making her tremble even harder.

The man shook his head and laughed, the deep bass sound sending a tremor all the way through Honor down to the muddy toes of her feet. “Now, let’s be reasonable lass. You just cannot say ‘no’ to me. In the instance you haven’t noticed, I’ve a pistol and you’ve nothin’ but God’s own courage,” he said softly, his voice almost gentle. “Give me the ring.”

“No,” Honor said again, steeling her courage and her body. Faced by a pistol and a very large man, both were quickly melting in the rain.

“Why will you not give me the ring lass? Does it mean so much to you that you would risk your life to keep it?” he asked, glancing at her clenched fists at her side.

“Yes!” she bit out at him. “My intended sent it to me!” she growled the lie, bristling at the thought of this thief touching anything that was even vaguely related to Reid.

“Your intended? Your intended?” The man gave a bark of laughter that dismissed the solemnity of his previous question. “You are as skinny as a rail, though aye, you are a tall sapling for a young lass. I’m thinking that perhaps you are naught but fifteen summers. How can you have an intended?”

Honor angrily pushed her bonnet and straggling hair out of her face to glare at him in the general direction of his eyes. She could not see his face due to the shadows afforded him by the combined brim, trees overhead and the darkness of the stormy evening.

“I’m twenty you great hulking brute! And you will not get my ring!” she shouted. Against her better judgment, she found her hand coming up to strike his face.

His reaction was so quick he completely took her by surprise. He caught her arm, twisting her around until her back was pressed tightly against his front.

He leaned over her shoulder as he tightened his grip on her wrist, grabbed a fistful of her wet hair and bent her head back to the bulging muscle of his upper arm.

Surprised and shocked to find herself in such a position—head cushioned by his arm, face into the rain that splattered from overhead—she rapidly blinked away the drops that fell in her eyes. Unused to being manhandled, she realized too late what the highwayman was about until she felt the soft warm pressure of his lips on hers, a sharp contrast to the cold of the spring evening which had left her shivering as it seeped through her wet clothing.

Giving a little groan, she felt his lips move and hers move with them, opening her mouth to the assault of his silky tongue as it swept inside, dueling with her own and teasing hers to dance.

Lost in the sensation of his kiss, she was doubly surprised to feel his free hand steal upward to cup one breast through the soaked silk of her bodice. The heat from his large hand warmed the cloth, causing another little moan of pleasure escape her throat.

Her reaction to his expert assault on her senses was rewarded by a deep chuckle that rumbled along her back as it echoed in his chest.

He quickly released her; her face burnt with stunned embarrassment.

“Appears you were aright, Mistress. You are a young woman...in spite of appearances,” he said, chuckling as she opened her eyes. She blinked dazedly at the sudden harsh reality she had been swept away from for a few brief moments. “A young woman with enough passion to sear a man’s insides,” he said as he gave her breast another gentle squeeze.

“I’m wondering how I did not see the gifts of such beautiful breasts before?” he said with another chuckle, his brogue thickening even more with emotion. Honor could feel his eyes burning through her gown, making her shiver in a mixture of excitement and fear.

“My intended will kill you,” she whispered, sticking with her original lie even as she hated

herself and him for enjoying the kiss.

“Ah...and what name will I be giving my murderer?” he asked, stressing the last word as it rolled off his tongue in such a way her knees went weak again in remembrance of what that tongue had done—namely, ruin everything that had been drummed into her as a young lady.

He chuckled as he produced a knife from somewhere on his costume, neatly slicing the ribbon which held her skirt up, despite her struggle to escape.

She gave a cry as the sodden material fell to the ground. Just as quick he swept it up into his arms, cutting the skirt all the way down the seam. “Give me back my skirt!” she shrieked, her heart hammering as she thought about the damning evidence the thief held.

He laughed. “Give me the name of your intended,” he challenged, easily catching her up against him again.

“I’ll not tell the likes of you his name,” she hissed, struggling to be free of him.

He idly stroked his thumb over her breast again as he appeared to consider what she had just told him, her struggles dying away as her desire rose. “You were quite adverse to my attentions just a moment ago lass, so much so that you promised to have your intended see me dead. And yet now you won’t give me his name?” He chuckled as he spoke, his thick accent and thumb making her knees go weak again. “Give me his name lass and I’ll see that he’ll not trouble you.” The highwayman paused and she could feel his eyes burning into hers without seeing them. “Unless you’ve no wish to have him done away with, so we can finish what we’ve started here?” His voice was thoughtful, as if he were actually considering it.

Rage rose up fresh and hot in Honor, burning away her desire. Her struggles became more feverish. “Not in your wildest dreams would I ever betray him!”

“Ah lass, too late. Your body already has!” he said with a laugh. He unexpectedly released her, leaving her bemused, stumbling until she fell against a tree and hugged it for support.

“I’m thinking you can keep your ring Milady Firebrand, but I’m takin the other jewels and your skirt so you’ll not be tempted to run to the dragoons. And I hope you remember me fondly,”—she felt him come up behind her, pinning her to the tree until she could feel the rough bark scrape her cheek and chest—“in the chapel, when your ‘intended’ gives you the kiss to seal your fate to his.” He roughly gripped her hips and pulled her lower body back against his, his meaning evident. “You’ll let him know the only thing that saved your maidenhead for him was your flashing emerald-colored eyes. You let him know you were kissed and almost defiled by the Glanconer, aye love?” he whispered as he let go of her waist and stepped away from her.

Letting out a shriek of anger, Honor raised her fingers into claws and flung herself around to rake them down the highwayman’s face, but when she turned, he was gone.

Glancing around the abandoned woods, she heard nothing except the steady fall of rain and then the faint, keen wailing of Agnes from the road.

Honor shuddered, suddenly ice cold as she realized she had just lost the only thing keeping her father’s name respectable and her from prison.

## CHAPTER SIX

There was no hope for it. Without the parchments—the legal documents—she had no reason to seek out the protection of the Duke, and every reason to leave the country as soon as possible. Wet and shaking, trying to stem the tears that threatened, she stumbled back to the coach and told the terrified driver to return to the inn. She and Agnes would have to work doubly hard to sell off the rest of her father's property so they could leave before the highwayman realized what he had in his possession.

Thoughts of a criminal trying to blackmail her as long as she resided in this country littered her thoughts. They were accompanied by the deep-seated guilt of enjoying the very same criminal's attentions while he robbed her, leaving her breathless and shaking, but not with fear.

They returned to the inn they had spent the previous evening, the landlady crying out in dismay over the state of wet and bedraggled state of her lodgers, sending a hot bath up to their room.

Soaking in a hot tub to get rid of the mud was exactly what Honor needed to restore herself. She scrubbed at the mud and muck that clung to her face and arms, using a basin of water while waiting for her bath to be filled, trying to wash away not only the stain of the robbery, but the disturbing memory of the Glanconer's touch as well.

She huffed angrily at herself and the state of her confused and mingled emotions, hating the highwayman for robbing her, yet longing for his touch again, for the soft, deep whisper of his brogue in her ear. As she rubbed her hands together in the basin, she paused momentarily when her eyes fell on the Duke of Munrossie's ring. She mentally congratulated herself for managing to keep that at least, even though her presence of mind was sadly lacking since her close encounter with the Glanconer.

Sighing in dejection over the small victory in the face of what she had lost, she turned toward the warmth of the room provided by a fire merrily crackling as it shared its heat from the wall-length fireplace opposite her.

The stingy, dark room of the inn, with its soot-blackened beams high above, the rough boards of the floor and the sounds of revelers in the tap room below seemed like heaven to Honor when she glanced out of the leaded glass of the window, the rain still slashing against it.

Agnes, however, was worse for wear. Her nerves were so frazzled she was proving to be more of a hindrance than a help as Honor tried to bathe the remnants of the adventure away when the water for her bath arrived. "I'll be fine as soon as I wash away this mud," she said softly to Agnes, watching her maid fumble with a clean chemise and dressing gown. "You should go to bed Agnes. It's been a long day," she said, sinking further into the steaming wooden tub in front of the fireplace.

Agnes sniffled and, producing a handkerchief from her sleeve, gave Honor a sad look. "We were so very close."

Honor nodded, thoughtful as she soaped up a cloth. "I know," she replied softly. "This upsets our plans little though Agnes. I had no intention of living in England, remember?" she said, trying to soothe her old maid's nerves. "It just means we have to step up our efforts. We will return to London, quickly dispose of the remainder of father's goods and set sail on his flagship, Liberty, when she sails for France and more provisions."

Agnes jerked in surprise. "If that rogue realizes what is in the papers he's stolen, he could send you to prison!" she cried, blowing her nose with a loud honk.

Honor glanced at Agnes. "I know Agnes. I am very aware of that possibility."

"But what will you do?" Agnes' face melted into fresh tears, shaking her head. "Why did he

take your skirt? Why would he take that when there were jewels in your stays?"

The very same question had been plaguing Honor since she stumbled from the woods back onto the road. "I don't know. He said something about not wanting me to contact the authorities, and I know he was not aware of the jewels." Honor's face blushed as her voice faded into the memory of how close the highwayman's hand had been to the velvet bag, but his attention had been focused elsewhere.

Agnes quickly changed the subject. "Did you hear the chambermaids when they were bringing up the water, Milady?" Agnes asked, fussing with the chemise as she laid it across the bed. "They said the Glanconer is notorious for taking as many maidenheads as he has money. That he has been deviling these parts for a little over three years." She furrowed her brow at the same time Honor felt a sick, unaccountable jolt of jealousy in her stomach. "Though they did admit most of the women were married. Respectable, proper women—flipping up their skirts for a criminal!" Agnes shook her head. "Makes me sick to my stomach thinking of the debauchery of the peerage these days. That Ladies would toss up their skirts for a highwayman," she said, busying herself now with laying out a drying cloth near the fire. "I heard from them that the name he's given himself comes from Ireland, not England or Scotland at all." She sniffed again, her disdain evident. "It's supposed to be a creature of legend. The name means the Love Talker—which is nonsense. It just means that the ladies of the peerage cannot keep their skirts down, and he cannot keep his—" Agnes abruptly broke off, coloring at what she almost said. "Well, keep him to himself," she finished on a lame note. Honor, not noticing the maid's embarrassed look, had gone suddenly quiet, thinking of the Glanconer's kiss.

Still soaping the washcloth as she stared at the wall in front of her, she was only too glad that Agnes didn't realize how close Honor had been to doing the same thing.

Honor murmured some acknowledgment, her face heating. "If you don't mind Agnes, I'd like to finish bathing alone," she said quietly. She glanced at the bed, trying to avoid the old maid's eyes. "I can manage from here, thank you."

"If you are certain?" Agnes asked, twisting her apron.

Honor gave a wordless nod, scrubbing her legs until she heard the door softly click behind the maid.

Sighing in relief, free to be alone with her thoughts, she rested her head against the back of the tub and let her eyes slip shut, recalling the image of the dangerous, dark figure with the slouching hat in her mind. All too easily his image swam in her brain, the memory of his words and touch readily remembered by her body, making her tingle, making her flesh pucker at just the thought of his kiss.

She ran her hands over her breasts, the flat of her palms lightly brushing her nipples, feeling them tighten in response as they had earlier for him. Sighing, she continued to explore the rounded globes, thinking of how he had complimented them, of how much she wanted his mouth on them. She was lost to this fantasy when the gem of the ring on her middle finger scratched one sensitive peak, making her gasp and her eyes fly open.

"Ouch!" she muttered, examining the rosy peak for any sign of injury until her eyes fell on the ring. It had twisted on her finger until the gem of the signet ring sat inside her palm.

She blushed furiously, suddenly feeling very guilty for not returning the ring to its owner last night when Reid had told her of his dilemma. But having provided her with no solid proof that he was indeed the late Duke's son, she did what she felt prudent at that time. Even though he had practically bared his soul and past to her, she was not prepared to divulge anything of her mission. There was just too much at stake.

*At least I managed to keep his father's ring for him.* She dunked herself under the water as she remembered how the highwayman had tried to coax the ring from her, scrubbing at her hair and body until she was pink from her efforts, until she felt she had cleansed herself of the phantom touch of the highwayman.

She had just slipped her dressing robe on when a sharp knock at the door sounded. "Enter."

Agnes quickly came through the door, a wad of cloth in her hand. “Milady, this was left for you in the tavern below,” she said, handing the damp package to Honor.

Confused, Honor opened the wrapping only to find her necklace, bracelet and one lonely emerald earbob within.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Having delivered the package to Honor at the Beef Head Inn, the Irishman rode his horse hard to the Bracknell Forest tavern, where he and his accomplices would spend the night before journeying into London.

Both Duncan and Reid looked up, temporarily distracted from their task of extracting documents from Honor's skirt, courteously supplied by the Glanconer, when Ian stumbled into the private dining room, bone-weary from the ride and wet from the angry downpour.

Duncan was carefully pulling the seams of thread from the long pockets with his knife, shaking his head at the ingenuity the young woman displayed. "I wouldn't ever thought to check her skirts if she had been a simple traveler on the road."

"You would have thought to check under her skirts," Ian said, chuckling softly as he poured a mug of ale after shaking the rain off his hat and cloak before hanging them in front of the fire to dry.

Reid chuckled in response. He was in good spirits now he had the papers which could send he and James to prison, not to mention name several other people, his late father included, who had been involved in the Jacobite uprising ten years ago. Finally possessing the papers, being able to destroy them, had him feeling an expansive goodwill that was only overshadowed by the hope that his father's will would be discovered among the skirt's hidden treasures. Finding them would restore him as the legal owner of Glenrose, making him the Fourth Duke of Munrossie.

Ian sat down near the men, and extracting his own knife, they set to work carefully retrieving papers and documents hidden in the skirt. Each time they lifted a damning piece of paper that implicated the Duke or Downforth's activities or support during the Uprising, it was meticulously fed into the fire, poked at it until it was nothing but ashes.

An hour later, Duncan gave a triumphant shout as he held up a sheaf of parchment, a wide smile on his face. "Here it is m'boy! Glenrose!" He handed Reid the papers, grinning widely at Ian who returned the beaming smile.

Reid quickly leafed through the papers, his expression growing lighter and lighter as he quickly scanned the papers. "And here boys! Father has given his land in the colonies over to the remaining O'Rourke's of Ireland!" He barked a laugh, his eyes twinkling. "You've a home now lads! A home!"

The three men gave a simultaneous cry of joy and laughter, Duncan and Ian pounding each other on their backs in happiness as Reid's dark eyes continued to scan through the document. "Ah m'lad, no more brawling about the countryside for us! No more riskin' a hangman's noose for coin to buy back our land in Ireland!" Ian said happily, raising his mug. "Here's to our grand brother-in-law, may he rest in peace! *Slainte!*"

"Let the damn crown have the land—it's filled with rocks anyhow!" Duncan chortled in agreement. "We'll have fine fertile land to farm in the colonies!" He laughed, lifting his mug to Ian's. "*Slainte!*"

Reid had gone silent, his smile of happiness fading quickly as his eyes continued to read the parchment, the others oblivious to his change of mood. His brain refused to accept anything he was reading.

Finally, reaching the end of the document as Duncan and Ian offered another toast to the late Duke, Reid let out an angry shout, tossing the papers onto a nearby table.

Duncan and Ian paused in their celebrations, dividing a look between Reid and the source of his



anger. "What's upset you lad?" Ian asked, his skinny neck craning to look at the document. "Do you not get Glenrose?"

Reid fairly growled in anger. "No. I get Glenrose, but I also get a wife in the bargain!"

Duncan guffawed, spilling ale down the front of his ratty shirt. "A wife! Well now, that's grand! It's nothing to be makin' heavy weather over boy-o! You're well past the age to be taking a wife anyhow. She can keep you warm at night and run your house for you." Duncan gave Reid a broad wink. "Pick you a fine wench, with wide hips and a comely face to breed you plenty of babes."

Reid glared at Duncan. "The wife has already been picked for me, Duncan." He gestured with disgust at the papers littering the tabletop. "She is Honor Downforth!"

The two Irishmen looked at the papers, at Reid and his dark glowering expression, and then each other before bursting out laughing. "Oh that's a foine moil you are in laddie!" Duncan laughed, bending over and slapping his beefy thighs.

"Aye, she's not so much to look at, with those flashing green eyes, dark hair and comely shape," Ian replied, chortling. "'tis a fine thing that you're not interest in her beyond the documents, aye?"

Both Irishmen collapsed into a fresh fit of laughter, knowing Reid took more than Honor's skirts. He took liberties with her that he swore he wouldn't.

Glaring at the two men who were gleefully relishing his predicament, he let out a grumble of frustration.

The truth was he was very interested in Honor. She fascinated him in a way no other woman ever had. Her spirit, quick mind and definite athletic leanings, plus her ability to maintain secrecy, was something that stirred a sort of morbid fascination in him. In fact, no other woman of his acquaintance was quite like Honor, who indeed typified her name with her very nature.

Given other circumstances, he might have been tempted to seduce her—as James accused him of doing—but now that he knew the young woman better... Indeed, having sampled the delight of sparring with her fiery personality and opinions, he was a little surprised that she could inflame his passions. He was intrigued, but having no idea how to pursue such a unique woman, he left her alone.

Now he had no choice but to pursue her—if he wanted Glenrose back—and he most certainly wanted Glenrose back.

"I've no idea how I am to go about proposing to her, let alone how a proper husband behaves!" Reid almost shouted at the two men who were still laughing at his expense.

"Oh, that's easy enough lad. You woo her to win her," Ian said, his face red with laughter. "You treat her as you would expect to be treated."

Duncan guffawed at Ian's advice. "You don't do that lad! You take what you want and damn the consequences or her wishes in the matter. It's Glenrose at stake here!"

Reid stroked his chin, considering the two very different methods of approach until a new problem arose. He knew how one made love to a mistress, or hell, even a highborn lady on the side of a road.

He found himself smiling slightly. As long as the lady was willing, all one had to do was find a tree, ruck up her skirts, unlace your flies and tell her to hold tightly to the tree. The hardest part was not having the rhythm thrown off when the lady reached her peak. But that wasn't how one made love to a woman such as Honor. "How does one make love to a wife?" he asked, the question voiced so low that it was almost a whisper.

He came out of his reverie to find the two men looking at each other in confusion. "Oh-ho! So there is something you two criminals don't know, is there?"

Duncan blushed around the bristling whiskers of his beard. "I've never had a wife, let alone a wife that was a lady."

Ian shrugged one skinny shoulder. "I'm thinking you would make love to a wife the same as you'd make love to any other woman," he supplied.

Reid turned away in disgust. One did not use foul language with a wife, describing how she felt, what she tasted like, what he wanted to do to her.

Nor did he pound into her until they were both sweating, shifting positions to heighten her pleasure and prevent his own climax, lick her body and tweak her nipples, or throw up her skirts for a bit of relief wherever and whenever the urge took him.

In short, bedding a wife was for the genteel practice of getting children and heirs, not for the pure sport and pleasure.

Reid thought of his own experiences with wives, instantly changing the thought since the wives that sprang immediately to mind were women who had been his mistresses.

Never having needed of a wife of his own, the thought now rattled him to his very core. He believed a wife should be a paragon of virtue; the wives he had known intimately were anything but.

Firmly deciding in his mind that his wife would not cuckold him with another man, he vowed he would give his wife no reason to seek attention outside of their marriage. He would be kind, considerate and would converse with her frequently, thus assisting his wife in attaining the goal of what he thought she should be. In essence, he would treat his wife as James treated Elisa, or how his father had treated his mother.

In response to these thoughts came the memory of his mother and Elisa, the only two respectable wives in his circle of acquaintances. He shuddered with distaste, trying to imagine Elisa and James playing as he did with his mistresses.

He broke away from his thoughts only to see both men watching him very closely. “Will you not do it? Will you give up Glenrose so you will not have to take the lass for a wife?” Duncan asked, tension clearly etched on his face as he waited for a response. “It’s an adventure that will last forever Reid—or ‘til one o’ you dies.”

Reid clenched his jaw. “I will take the lady to wife. Whether she wills it or no,” he replied in even tones.

Ian’s Adam’s apple bobbed excitedly up and down for a few seconds before he spoke his mind. “I’m still thinking you should woo and win her Reid. I think you should bring this other matter to James Wentworth, and let him coach you on how one makes love to his lady.”

“What about making love to her lad? Will you be able to do that as well once you have taken her to wife?” Ian asked, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

Reid shrugged. “I will. I suppose I can take a mistress to slake my more baser instincts after we’ve married,” he said with finality.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

When Reid delivered the news to James, his godfather's lined, good natured face had tears of laughter streaking down it. The dark wood-paneled library rang with the sound of hilarity as the older man tried to assimilate the information, unable reconcile the image of a married, settled man with the one of his roguish, libertine godson.

Reid poured himself a large glass of James' best brandy while unceasing laughter rang around the room. Anything he might have growled in retaliation was suppressed when Elisa glided in to the room, her face creased in a smile upon seeing her husband.

Turning to Reid, she gifted him with a smile as well. "I'm glad to see you've managed to restore James' good humor Reid," she said, pressing a kiss on his cheek that smelled like the lilac powder she used on her hair. "He's been in a high dungeon these past days, missing a great many of the soirees this season as he preferred to share his ill humor with the brandy decanter rather than others." She sailed across the room, still lovely, still elegant in spite of her formidable years, and gave her husband a kiss on the cheek as well.

"What is it, love that you find so amusing?" she asked, sitting next to him and smiling, apparently sharing his happiness.

"We've found the deed and title to Glenrose," James managed to impart, dabbing politely at the tears still streaming down his face.

Elisa glanced over her shoulder at Reid, who was lounging against the fireplace mantle. "Indeed? This is good news!" she said, smiling wider. "When will Reid be able to take back Glenrose from that awful Octavius?" she asked. She had never cared for the man Reid's mother married to replace his father, though she was circumspect about who knew it.

"After he marries!" James blurted before bursting into fresh laughter. "Robert's will even states whom he is to marry. It is an arranged marriage."

Elisa was silent for a long moment, her face clearly registering surprise as she looked at Reid cautiously. "What lady will you have the honor of marrying?" she asked. It was obvious by her tone that she clearly expected one of the more questionable women, who visited Reid's home late at night, to be announced as the future Lady Munrossie.

"Surely not Anne? She's still married," she said, referring to one of Reid's more notorious mistresses. A woman of the peerage who was married to a Viscount, she made no effort to hide her affair with Reid, preferring instead to flaunt her ability to maintain the attention of the most handsome and exciting man in the realm to being discreet. Anne's husband, a diminutive little man by the name of Pemberly, knew of the affair, but was loath to call Reid out. Reid's reputation as an excellent duelist was unparalleled, especially since he had already injured several men over his flights of fancy. Before Pemberly could work up the courage to challenge Reid, Anne was discarded when she began to display jealousy over his other mistresses.

Elisa's face suddenly paled. "Unless you've shot her husband!"

Reid opened his mouth to reply when James let out another loud bark of laughter. "No! No! He's not shot anyone!"

Reid sneered at his godfather, who ignored the dark look. "Well, thank you for defending me! But this is no laughing matter!"

"If not one of Reid's...um...less acceptable young ladies, who then?" Elisa asked her husband,

her eyes glittering with curiosity. "I vow I do not know one single mama this season that would let him anywhere their daughters, though their daughters do pant like bitches in heat when he's near."

Reid gasped at the foul description of the noble born young ladies. Seeing Reid's shocked face, she waved her hand at him. "La Reid, don't give me that glare. I'm too old to care what you think of me, and too old to pretend the ninnies being paraded about this year are women who can match your temperament or appetite—even if their mothers did allow you to court them."

James was trying to catch his breath now. "It's Honor. Honor Downforth, the Marquise of Saint Claire and the last in an old and ancient Norman line." Reid jerked his head around in surprise to look at James. "Ah, finally. Something you didn't know," he said, stemming a fit of giggles before they could start.

Elisa sniffed. "Well, another foreigner in a fine old English house," she said, shrugging a delicate shoulder. "I suppose there's no help for it, though, if the English nobles keep rearing silly girls with fluff for brains." She leaned toward James, winking at him. "Although I had thought he would look to Ireland for a wife. After all, no one there knows of his reputation, and it did provide his family with his great grandmother. A more intelligent, brave woman I've not met yet."

James nodded in agreement before soberly taking both of Elisa's hands in his. "Reid will need our help, pet," he said, his face sincere. "He's no idea how to court a lady."

Elisa shot Reid a superior look. "Not a great surprise considering the types of women he's acquainted with." She looked back at her husband, worry creasing her face. "I told you we should have stopped his sojourns to Ireland long ago James. Those uncles of his have provided him with naught but a dangerous taste for adventure."

James tried not to start laughing again as he remembered Reid's account of Duncan and Ian's ideas on how to court Honor. How to make love to her once they were wed. "Yes m'dear, but that is all in the past. We must do the memory of our dear friends, his departed parents, honor by—" James started giggling, and Elisa joined in. "—doing Honor honor."

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Horried, Reid watched as the two people who he held high in his esteem and respect break down in laughter. Their seemingly lack of sensitivity was appalling. He was disgusted.

Elisa was the first to recover. "Does Honor know about this? That her marriage was pre-arranged by her father and yours?"

Reid could clearly remember the episode in the garden. He was sure she did not know. "No." He furrowed his smooth brow. "Why do you ask though?"

Elisa paused a moment, her gaze focused on the copper lights in Reid's dark auburn hair. "I thought that would perhaps explain why she was selling off her father's belongings and putting the warehouse up for sale." Elisa shrugged. "It certainly appears to me that she is getting ready to run."

"When the hell were you going to tell me this James?" Reid almost shouted. "After she set sail back to France?"

James looked surprised by his wife's information. "I had no idea what she was doing!"

"She's been acting as if the devil were at her heels." Elisa shrugged, nonchalant at having taken her husband by surprise. "At least that is what I am given to believe hearing what Adelaide Blackthorne has to say about it. She lives in the town home next to Downforth, and is privy to all sorts of information regarding the gel." Elisa's face suddenly lighted. "As a matter of fact Reid, I believe Adelaide advised me Honor had agreed to attend her ball this evening. Adding a marquise to the party has a certain romanticism to it, doesn't it? Not to mention she is the only thing the young men have been bleating about this season."

Reid felt jealousy bloom across his chest. "They had better keep away from sniffing at her

skirts!” he fairly growled, surprising both Elisa and James.

Elisa though, gave Reid a sly smile. “The best way to insure that, dear, is to attend the soiree with me this evening,” she said, patting her husband’s hand and rising from the settee. “Shall we say eight o’clock? We will take your carriage. It will do it some good to get out and be ridden in again,” she said, breezing toward Reid and giving him a quick peck before heading for the opened library door. “I’ll leave you two alone now. I must get ready.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Ten o'clock had come and gone and there was still no sign of Honor. He had gone to the windows at the west of the house several times, trying to get a peek at the home which was supposed to be Downforth's, but each time he looked it was dark and silent.

The evening was a terrible bore. Most of his time was spent inanely smiling and bowing to Elisa's friends, who, although advanced in years, still preened prettily for him when he flirted. Which he had been doing all evening. Outrageously.

Elisa assured him it was necessary to make sure the older women of the set liked him and held him in high regard in order to ease Honor's way into the inner circles once they were wed. He did want her to have outside interests, didn't he? Unfortunately, the only way Reid knew how to impress women was to use his smile and flirt. It was the only useful skill he had at his disposal, having no ability for courtly, inane chatter the other dandies at the gathering seemed to have.

Reid voiced his concerns to Elisa as they stood near the windows to the Blackthorne's garden. "I'm doing my utmost to impress them Elisa," he whispered from the corner of his mouth. "But it appears they are taking it a tad too seriously." He managed a weak smile for a portly widow who waved her fingers at him from behind her fan while batting her eyelashes furiously at him.

Elisa smiled at Reid as if he were a particularly lack-witted student and rested her hand on his arm. "You are not at fault for lacking any social graces Reid. I could hardly expect you to learn all this overnight." She glanced around the room, both her and Reid watching as the other gentlemen successfully socialized with the older women to garner their approval. "These gents were introduced into society while you were harassing English ships during the—" she paused, her brow furrowing in concentration—"the unfortunate events in Scotland." She glanced up quickly at Reid and he thought he saw a faint glimmer of pride in her eyes. "I would not trade your bravery and strength of character for their foolishness at any time Reid." She smiled and the glimmer disappeared. "You are doing quite well without being as foolish as these dandies."

Reid gave her an arch look, lifting one ruddy brow to emphasize the effect. "I'll take you at your word." He sighed, resisting the urge to yank the restraining ribbon from his hair. "You are certain this will help ease Honor into society?" He paused, suddenly remembering Elisa had said something about Honor having outside interests after he wedded her. "Elisa, why would you be so concerned Honor have interests outside of our marriage?" He felt his knees jerk as another thought struck him. "How did you know what I was doing during those 'unfortunate events in Scotland'?" he whispered, echoing her words.

His godmother jerked, a long silence stretching between them as the gaiety surrounding them rose in volume when the orchestra began to play. Turning toward him, he watched her face as her eyes tightened, almost as if she were afraid. "I don't wish you to feel ill will toward your godfather Reid, but I had devilled him terribly after you left us this afternoon. Devilled him until he divulged a few of your secrets to me."

Reid's visage immediately went dark with anger and Elisa tried to stem it by tightening her hand on his arm. "Listen to me before you lose that temper of yours!" she hissed, her stern voice low and steady. "James had no choice! I wanted to know and threatened to clock him if he did not tell me." Her lips pursed together tightly as she paused for effect, making Reid feel as if he were a child again. "And it is a good thing he did! You two have little hope of catching Honor Downforth—in spite of your

charm and good looks. It is a job for a woman who knows how another woman's mind works." She glanced over her shoulder, moving him away from bystanders who could possibly eavesdrop before turning back to him. "As for impressing these women with your charm and what good can possibly come of it, I need to advise you that if a husband intended hiding certain...aspects...of his past from his new wife, she would need to be kept too busy to pry, wouldn't she?" She flicked her fan at him, her brows drawn tightly over her eyes in a frown. "James only told me about Scotland and your father's involvement in it—along with his." She cast a quick, sidelong glance at him, nervously licking her lips as she did so. "As for the rest... Well, I may be old and I may be a woman, but I am certainly not addlebrained, in spite of the illusion I foster!" She sighed deeply, meeting his eyes with her own. "You are not the only individual who has to wear a mask. Women do it on a daily basis."

Reid was slightly shocked by the look in Elisa's eyes, the words that spilled from her mouth. It was a distinctly different one than the one used for chastising him on his mistresses. It was a frightened one, one that was afraid for him. It made him wonder how much Elisa did know while she pretended to be a flighty old woman.

It was the second time that evening Elisa had managed to discompose him. In addition to the confessions she had just made to him, she had provided him with sage pieces of advice regarding how to treat a wife. He had hastily committed these 'rules' to memory as she gave them to him in the darkness of his carriage as it rumbled toward the Blackthorne house.

'Do not grab at her.'

'Do not overwhelm her with your affections.'

'Be restrained as a gentleman should be.'

'Compliment her, but not in a common way.'

'Never force your attentions on her.'

'Above all, do not treat her as if she were one of your common bawds!'

He had exited the coach thinking that he needed to treat Honor as he would any respectable married woman, instead of a woman he intended on bedding. He needed to be cool and reserved toward her instead of displaying the raging passion that built up whenever he thought of her.

Reid smiled and bowed to a passing marchioness as he backed toward the garden doors, electing not to dance this evening. To do so would have meant he had to dance with every single young woman in the room. It was a side effect of his reputation. If he danced with only a few young ladies, it would leave everyone wondering which one he set his sights on as his next lover. If he danced with all of them, Elisa assured him everyone would only think he was being polite. Being that there were over fifty women who were looking hopefully in his direction, he chose not to dance.

Slipping into the shadows of the terrace outside, he heaved a huge sigh of relief. It was worse then being chased by dragoons, and far more dangerous, being in that lion's den. He much preferred highway robbery.

Glancing around for a safe place to recover his nerves, he found a tree near a high garden wall, instantly conjuring up pleasurable images of Honor splayed over a garden fence, her buttocks high as she tried to make herself as small as possible when he noticed her. Realizing that his breeches were getting a trifle tight in the groin, he quickly turned his thoughts elsewhere.

His long legs brought him quickly to a stone bench hidden in the shadows of the tree. From this spot, he found he could see inside the ballroom, thus not needing his physical presence to alert him to Honor's arrival. He'd be able to make out that dark-colored head of curls easily from this vantage point.

Relaxing on the bench, his back against the tree trunk, he idly watched the colorful young men and women as they danced past the windows when his ear caught the familiar sounds of struggle from over the garden wall.

Curious, he cocked his head, trying to ascertain whether his ears deceived him or not. Another muffled exclamation and the sound of shuffling feet had him turning his head toward the wall, squinting

at the ornate brickwork as if he could will himself to see through it.

Another muffled shriek and Reid realized he was looking at the wall which separated this garden from Honor's.

Springing to his feet and easily lifting his upper body up the wall, he spotted a figure clothed in black, dragging the slender form of a young woman through the garden, toward the back gate. Her head was covered with a burlap sack and her hands were tied behind her body. Reid hauled the rest of his tall body up onto the ledge of the fence, hunkering down to stay in the shadows as he followed their progress on his perch high above. His eyes trained on the stranger as the woman he accosted fought and struggled like a hellcat, making the getaway much more difficult.

Crouching along the wall as he moved, Reid followed them, his hand itching for a sword or gun, his heart pounding with a mixture of fear for Honor and excitement for the impending fight.

The man pushed the floppy brim of his hat up, trying to maintain his grip on the struggling bundle. There was no mistaking the wriggling figure for Reid. He had been too closely acquainted with it to ever forget it.

Squinting into the darkness, silently damning the dim light afforded him, Reid's body tensed as the kidnapper struggled closer to his hiding spot on top of the wall. The muscles in his long legs bunched up under the black velvet of his breeches, his boots providing him with enough traction on the surface of the wall to allow him to launch himself onto the man, knocking both himself and the stranger to the ground when he did.

The fight didn't last long enough for Reid, whose body began to sing with excitement and bloodlust. The stranger managed to stumble to his feet after one sound blow to the side of his head and another to his kidneys. Reid was just getting warmed to the idea of hand-to-hand combat, his white teeth bared in a grimace, when the stranger pulled a long, wicked-looking knife from his cloak, swinging it wildly at Reid's midsection as he backed away.

Reid pursued him to the back of the garden, jumping back from each wide arc of the knife, laughing and calling the man a coward. It ended all too quickly when the man burst through the back gate and onto a waiting horse's back, galloping down the narrow street in his escape.

Snorting at the cowardice of the man, Reid decided the would-be kidnapper was much too tall to have been Percival. Vaguely wondering who this newest adversary could be, he momentarily paused to puzzle over this newest development. He pulled himself abruptly from his thoughts and turned his attention to Honor, who was bumping into shrubbery and trees as her muffled screams sounded under the burlap sack.

Feeling a bubble of laughter in his chest at the unusual situations he often found this woman, he managed to still her with his hands on her shoulders, pulling the sack off her head. He was untying her hands as the sound of frenzied, agitated voices came running through Honor's house, windows being lit with candles and lanterns, flooding the house with light as well as activity.

Her breath coming in great gasps of air, she spared Reid a small smile and muttered '*merci*' before collapsing against him in a faint.



## CHAPTER TEN

She woke slowly, in stages, aware of certain things even before she opened her eyes. She heard Agnes sniffing somewhere in the background, expounding Reid's bravery. Her exclamations were met by another female voice, vaguely familiar, and then a third, which was not familiar at all.

She felt a cool cloth being pressed to her forehead, a hand rapidly though gently patting her own. Gathering her courage, she opened her eyes to find her parlor jammed with people.

Lady Winterbourne gave an exclamation of delight when she saw Honor's eyes flutter open, turning to gift Honor's neighbor, Lady Blackthorne, with a beaming smile. "See? I knew she'd no need of a blood-letter." She gave a prim nod. "A burnt feather under the nose always does the trick."

Honor looked down her nose to find Agnes' worried face, a smoking feather held in her hand. Behind her stood Reid, his hand clasped behind his back, his hair cascading down over his shoulders in a mane of copper and cinnamon. "You are well?" His deep voice always sent her heart racing.

"I am," she replied, struggling to sit up before Reid reached over and assisted her. "It appears I must thank you again," she muttered, pushing a stray curl from her face as she tried to tuck her escaped curls back into her chignon.

Reid chuckled and sat next to her on the settee. "I am only grateful that I was there," he said softly, glancing meaningfully at Lady Winterbourne. Before she could puzzle over the heavy look Reid had exchanged with the older woman, Elisa jerked her head toward Adelaide. "Why ever are all these people here instead of your ball?" she crowed. "Goodness! Such excitement! Let us adjourn to the Blackthorne's and continue this exciting evening!" she said happily, in what seemed like a too loud voice, all the while shooing people toward the door.

Once the last straggler had left, Elisa shut the door, locking herself, Reid, Agnes and Honor in the tiny parlor. Watching the smug expression on Lady Winterbourne's face, and the hesitancy on Reid's, Honor suddenly felt very frightened. Even more frightened than she had been when her would-be kidnapper had accosted her on her way out the door to the Blackthorne's ball.

Swallowing hard around the lump of fear in her throat, she looked at Agnes. "What were all those people doing here?" she asked softly.

Agnes gave Honor a sorrowful look. "I wasn't able to stop that brute, so I ran next door for help as he dragged you through the garden door." She gave Reid a look that bordered on idolatry before continuing. "I didn't know that your own personal knight was in the garden."

Honor directed a narrow look at Reid. "Yes, he seems to spend a great deal of time lurking about in gardens."

Reid smiled fleetingly at her. Watching as he opened his mouth once then snap it shut, as if he were about to say something very important, she felt the lump of fear in her belly suddenly grow.

"Speak Reid!" Elisa said impatiently, pulling up a chair as if she were about to watch an opera. "We haven't got all evening!"

Reid cast a baleful glare at Elisa, but it didn't seem to stem the bubble of excitement that burst from her in waves. Sighing loudly, he took Honor's hand in his and looked down at her thin fingers. If Honor didn't know him better, if she hadn't seen him meet adversity with bravery, she would have thought he was afraid to voice what was on his mind.

"Honor Downforth?" he began, his voice echoing the unease that emanated from his body. "Will you do me the honor of marrying me?" His voice sounded far away and choked, not at all like an ardent

suitors.

Up until then Honor had been enjoying the feel of his touch, the warmth of his hand—lightly calloused from riding—when he spoke. Jumping when the realization of what he had just said sunk in, she jerked her hand out of his as her mouth fell open. “I beg your pardon?”

He looked up at her sheepishly. “Will you marry me?”

Honor’s eyes widened. “Marry you?” she echoed breathlessly. “*Non!* I don’t even know you!” she said vehemently, ignorant of the fact that she was the first woman to turn down a man of his reputation.

Elisa huffed in indignation. “What do you need to know? He’s a man of title—of wealth. He will be able to provide for you in a grand style. From what I understand, this is the second time he’s come to your rescue in as little as a week! Your reputation will not be able to withstand many more outrageous attacks on your person! “

Furrowing her brow, Honor directed her anger at Elisa. “Is that the only requirement for marriage, Milady? That he have a title? Wealth?” She fairly fumed with temper. “*Non! Non!* I will marry out of love, not because of a title and land! And my reputation be damned!” She didn’t see the look of silent approval cross Reid’s face as she fought to keep her rage down.

Elisa bristled in the face of refusal. “What is this silly nonsense about marrying for love? You could do worse m’dear! You’ve a title in France but no land of your own!” Elisa gave a smug grin at the look of astonishment on Honor’s face. “Maids talk to each other and gossip makes the rounds.” She glanced around the sparse furnishings of the parlor. “I can see that you will return to France with a very pretty fortune, but it won’t stop the likes of Percival Harlowe from following you.” She gestured to Reid, as if he had absolutely no say in the matter. “He can keep you safe from your cousin. His titles are old and respected, which would keep you safe in any other matter,” she said, her eyes glittering. Honor gasped in surprise, wondering exactly what secrets Elisa was privy to.

“What do you know of any other difficulties I might have, Milady?” she asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Elisa glanced over at the old maid before looking Honor in the eye. “I know that Percy isn’t the only male relation you’ve had to run from m’dear.”

Honor’s mouth dropped open in shock. She looked at Reid, but he didn’t seem the least bit surprised. Had he known about this information all along?

She turned toward Agnes. Quickly delivered French filled with invective burnt the old maid’s ears, who loudly protested her innocence over the soft accusations. Honor turned toward Elisa, her cheeks flaming, her eyes sparkling. “How do you know this?” she demanded.

Elisa shrugged. “Not from this maid. There’s another in your house that loves to gossip.” She shrugged. “I daresay that is how Percival has been receiving information.”

Honor groaned. She gave one last effort to escape the coil she found herself in. “I appreciate what Milord Ormond is doing, but he does not love me. I do not love him,” she finished, collapsing onto the settee near Reid.

Elisa’s eyes narrowed. “But you do admit that the two of you are quite possibly friends?”

Honor glanced at Reid, feeling her heart hammer harder in her chest. “*Oui*,” she said grudgingly.

Reid lifted one copper brow, his arms now folded over his chest as he lounged back in the settee. “That’s all you’ll give me? We could possibly be friends?” He sat up, leaning so close to Honor that she leaned backward. “You’ll not admit to finding me attractive?”

“Reid!” Elisa whispered in a hushed tone as Honor’s heart pounded in her chest with excitement.

A cool reserve came over Honor’s face, masking the thoughts whirling inside her head, but it didn’t fool Reid. He instantly recognized it as a plan hatching in her head, and she saw it in his eyes. Whether or not he would allow her to make this last attempt at freedom for them both remained to be

seen. "You make this a difficult offer to refuse," she said softly. "Indeed, you have even brought reinforcements with you." She shot Elisa a grudging but admiring look. "I will marry you," she said firmly, lifting her little chin in a stubborn set.

"Marvelous!" Elisa crowed, rising from her seat. "Absolutely marvelous! We'll puzzle out the details of the arrangement tomorrow! I confess I am exhausted after all this activity!" she said, gliding toward the door, pausing to glance at her godson. "Reid? Come along. We must let James know."

As Reid stood, Honor averted her gaze. Knowing she had no intention of marrying him, she could not bear to look at him, even when he lifted her hand in his own to press a gentle kiss on the back of it. "I will call on you tomorrow evening," he said softly.

Honor waited until she heard the front door shut and Elisa's voice, listing the numerous things which must be done, faded away. She gave Agnes an agitated glance and exploded from the chair, running up the stairs, the old maid on her heels. "What are you doing?" Agnes asked as Honor pulled out a valise and began stuffing clothes into it.

Honor paused from her hasty packing to glance up at Agnes. "Running!" she whispered hotly. "I cannot marry him!"

Agnes frowned. "Why not Honor? He is a handsome man—a chivalrous man. You could learn to love him in time!"

Honor couldn't begin to explain to Agnes what she herself did not understand. She stood twitching inside; her heart hammered against her chest, threatening to explode. Yes, Reid was handsome. Yes, Reid was chivalrous. He was easy on her eyes and she found herself enjoying the look of him, the feel of him when he was near. But then what woman wouldn't? She admired him, found him handsome. These things were true, yet she felt if she were to marry him, she would be playing him false in her heart. She felt he deserved so much better than that, being as kind to her as he had been. And yet, there had been that one moment in the parlor when Reid leaned in to her. She felt the restrained power he held in check, only stopped from flowing out of him by Elisa's clipped whisper of his name.

Even that little peek inside Reid didn't help stem the thoughts of the highwayman who accosted her over a week ago. Her dreams were filled with him, her every thought revolved around him. If she closed her eyes and fantasized long enough, she could conjure the scent of him. Her eyes slipping shut, a vague smile playing about her lips, she again relived the moments by the side of the road. An unknown man bringing her body to life, inflaming her senses with heated kisses and whispered words in a thick brogue. She sighed, bringing the fantasy much further along than she should have, the Glanconer not stopping with a whispered warning once he cut her skirt away. Images flashed behind closed eyelids of him awakening her body, laying her in the spongy grass beside the road, flipping up her skirts, pulling down her bodice and fastening those hot lips on one nipple.

"Honor!" Agnes' voice interrupted her thoughts, sounding as if it came from a great distance.

Honor jerked out of her reverie to find her nipples pushing hard against the stays of her gown, begging to be freed. "What?" She was slightly agitated she had not been able to finish the love scene in her head.

"There's someone pounding on the door downstairs," Agnes said, giving a look of exasperation as she brushed past. "Goodness child! You have been acting so strangely lately!"

Honor watched over her shoulder until the hem of Agnes' dark skirt disappeared around the corner of the door. Giving a little smile at being left alone with her imagination, she let her eyes slide shut again, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she tried to call the Glanconer to mind again, but she could not grasp the fantasy again with any strength.

Voices drifted up the stairs to the room where she stood. Voices she recognized. Angry and frustrated at not being left alone with her thoughts and her phantom lover, she stormed out of the bedroom to the top of the stairs. "What is amiss?" she almost shouted down the stairs like a harpy,

remembering at the last minute to school her voice into a calm melodious tone, hiding the raging emotions in her body.

Elisa was standing in the hallway with a few other people from the ball next door. Reid stood at the foot of the stairs, his dark eyes meeting hers, a small, apologetic smile playing about his lips. "My apologies Miss"—he glanced over his shoulder at Elisa—"but they insist we marry right now."

Honor frowned, her heart now hammering again as she was faced with this new development. "Impossible! There are customs to be recognized. We cannot be married this very minute!"

Elisa gave Honor a smug little smile. Lady Blackthorne mirrored it, like two scheming girls fresh from the nursery. "Canon law m'dear. You can be married now. We've the witnesses present; all you have to do is speak your vows to one another—unless there is a reason why you cannot marry at this very time?" Elisa smiled magnanimously. "We will have a gathering to celebrate the union after the Season. You can be married again in the church at Reid's Rosegate estate."

Lady Blackthorne agreed, her head bobbing on her skinny neck. "Yes, yes! It's a delightful idea!"

Reid had mounted the steps as the two old women spoke and the others in the hall nodded and murmured agreement. Honor found herself looking to Reid for strength and to anchor her when the events seemed to be spiraling out of her control, something she found she did not like at all.

Smiling sympathetically, he reached out and took her trembling hand. "I understand this is all very overwhelming, Honor," he said softly. "It's frightening for me as well. I've never been married either." She found herself returning his smile. "We can be married by canon law, Honor, not by church. If it does not suit you, you can always cry off at a later time, but I do think the old gels are correct in this matter," he said. "You will be protected from Percy, and as long as you have my name, you will be protected by my family and relations." He gave her hand a little squeeze. "Come, let us have done with this nonsense and let me take you to my home, where you will be safe."

Honor felt the tension leave her body at Reid's heartfelt speech. It would be good not to worry for once. It would be nice to have a place she could call home. And Reid was offering to release her from the marriage if she found they were unsuited. The final argument of her being unavailable to Percy, with Reid as her protector and guardian angel as he had been since she first met him, was what made her finally agree.

Pushing aside the foolish, childish notions of being swept off her feet as the Glanconer had done, Honor gave a firm nod and let Reid lead her down the stairs to her impromptu wedding party.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reid glanced at the candle that Agnes had thoughtfully lit in the Spartan room. All of Honor's belongings were contained in four trunks and three valises, stacked neatly against one wall. Feeling as nervous as his new bride who was cowering under the blankets, looking at him with wide apprehensive eyes, he sat in a chair by the window, looking out over the garden where only five hours ago he had rescued her from her kidnapper.

Sighing loudly and raking fingers through his hair, he felt the black ribbon holding his hair back come loose. It felt good having his hair loose. He hated having it clubbed back into a queue, and he absolutely loathed the powder so fashionable nowadays.

Bringing his concentration back to the room and the tension which had grown thick during his musing, he cleared his throat, casting about for some topic of conversation to ease the both of them as he relaxed in the chair. "I had expected something more momentous, didn't you?" He glanced in her direction as he propped his boots up on the window's low sill.

A soft chuckle emanated from the shadows of the bed. "I did. I had thought perhaps there would be harps and flower petals would suddenly descend upon my head after we spoke the words to each other."

Reid lifted his eyebrows, a smile curving his lips that had many a woman's belly fluttering. "Aye? Instead we get the moans of half a dozen people."

Honor furrowed her smooth brow, the momentary silence deafening as they both remembered how the young ladies sighed in disappointment when Reid had plighted his troth. "Did you leave behind many broken hearts Milord?" Her tone had developed a suspicious quality to it.

Reid gazed out the window, oblivious to narrowing of his bride's eyes. "No more than you did, I suppose." He smiled fleetingly at her before looking over at the trunks lined up on the far wall. "It appears you were ready to hie off Milady," he said with a sly smile before looking back at her. "Did I arrive just in time again?"

Honor blushed, pausing long enough to fluff the pillows and sit upright in the bed before offering an answer. "It is how I have lived since my father's death, always moving about," she said, glancing at the trunks before returning her attention to her groom. "They are rarely unpacked. Though I had no need of them at school, I find myself needing them a great deal now." She shrugged. "It's not by choice, but necessity."

"You did not live with your mother in France?" He was curious to know more about the woman he found himself married to.

Honor's lower lip thrust out as she shook her head, setting the long curls of ebony to bouncing. "*Non*. Mama spent a great deal of time at court; I spent my time at school."

Reid frowned. "Not even on holidays did you join your mother at home?"

Honor shook her head again, her gaze focused on her trunks. "*Non*. I spent holidays with my father in rooms he rented near a port in Normandy."

She looked back at Reid candidly, her shyness toward him seeming to evaporate. "He was a ship's captain. He spent a good deal of time away else I would have gone home to him." She shrugged again. "If I was not so young, perhaps he would have let me stay on his estate in Kent while he was gone. But I never asked."

Reid leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands dangling between

them. "Why didn't you ask?"

Honor blinked rapidly. "I suppose because I was frightened he'd say no." She lifted her chin in that little gesture Reid now recognized as more bravery than stubbornness. "Silly I know, but I was a young girl and afraid to press either of my parents." She looked past Reid out the window. The sky was slowly turning pale gray with the encroaching dawn. "I felt more loyalty to my father than my mother, so when he became ill I came to his side as soon as he wrote." She nodded her head at him. "You will understand why it was so important for me to sneak away from the Wentworth's the first time we met." She averted her eyes, but not before Reid saw a suspicious sheen to them, smoothing the blankets over her lap. "And you will perhaps understand why I allow Agnes to speak so freely to me, and why I have a fierce loyalty to her as well." She met his gaze with a defiant look. "She is the only family I have left, the only person who cares."

Reid nodded slowly, gaining a new respect for her. She had spilled the truth of her family life to him. She did not come from a close family; the only real parent she ever had was her father. For someone like Reid, who had grown up around numerous aunts, uncles and relations—including the Wentworth's—it was a foreign idea to him. At times he cursed the meddling of his relations in his affairs, but hearing Honor speak, feeling her loneliness and unspoken desire for someone other than her elderly maid to care about her, he had a renewed respect for his own family.

One of the few times in his life, Reid was moved by tenderness and rose from his chair to sit next to Honor on the bed. Careful not to frighten her, he gathered her into his arms and held her. He felt her tears spill over onto his white ruffled shirt, soaking the fine linen with her silent weeping. Letting her cry, he smoothed his hand over her hair, pleased to find that it was indeed as soft as it looked. "It will all be right now, Honor," he whispered, feeling her weeping begin to ease. "You have me now," he said, handing her a linen square to dry her eyes.

She took the proffered handkerchief and sat up facing him, giving him a watery smile. "*Oui*, but look what you got in the bargain! A wife who climbs garden walls and ruins fine gowns, and who always seems to need rescuing!" She laughed self-effacingly.

Reid settled himself onto the pillows more comfortably. "Ah yes, but you've my family to contend with. I bring a whole country of them with me, not to mention my godparents here who are always meddling in my affairs."

Honor frowned. "Your godparents?"

Reid nodded, smiling. "I believe you know one already...Elisa Wentworth, the Lady Winterbourne." He chuckled at the shocked expression on her face. "Expect her to be meddling in your affairs from now as well."

Honor shook her head, making the dark curls bounce. "She'll have to fight Agnes for the privilege," she said ruefully.

He grew quiet, thoughtful, the silence stretching enough to make Honor fidget. He stared at his bride, his expression not giving a clue of what he was thinking. "Honor? I've the need to ask you something," he said, his gaze growing in intensity. "Is there anything you wish to confess; a secret or burden you may need my assistance in resolving?" he asked. He hoped she would confide in him regarding her father, the papers she had been carrying, and the robbery by the Glanconer. He hoped she trusted him enough, in spite of their brief acquaintance, to be honest with him.

"*Non*," Honor said softly, looking away before responding. Reid glanced at the ring on her middle finger. His signet ring. The one she had twisted on her finger when he had told her who he was. The ring she had fought the Glanconer to keep.

He heard her talking, whispering something under her breath, but he didn't comprehend any of it. He was mesmerized by her dark curls. Reaching out, he took one that lay along her chest between his thumb and forefinger, unaware that Honor's breathing had become more rapid when the back of his hand touched her breast. He slowly pulled the curl out then let it go, watching it spring back to its

original position. “You have the most beautiful hair,” he whispered in awe as he repeated the gesture, watching the curl bounce back again.

Licking her lips, Honor reached out and took a section of his own hair in between her fingers. She watched the way his hair caught the light, turning the deep brownish red to copper and cinnamon. “I’ve thought the same about your hair,” she admitted, letting the silken strands drop from her fingers, tickling the pads before lifting it again to repeat the action.

Reid’s eyes met hers. He gently ran his knuckles over her cheek. “You’ve fine skin as well, the color of fresh milk.”

Honor smiled at the compliment and rubbed her hand over his cheek, his strong jaw and then around to his chin, the stubble of his whiskers rough against her palm. “You as well,” she said as she gifted him with a shy smile. “You remind me of a pagan sun god.” She slanted a sidelong look at him as she wove her fingers through his thick hair. “Gold, copper, bronze—” She chuckled. “—or a sweet to be gobbled up. Chocolate, cinnamon, nutmeg.” She grinned widely at him and he couldn’t help but return her smile.

His eyes flicked briefly to her lips then back to her eyes, holding them. “I want very much to kiss you, Honor,” he said softly, feeling his groin tighten at the mere thought of touching those lips again. “May I?”

He heard her breath hitch as she silently nodded her assent. He leaned into her, one strong hand cradling the nape of her neck, his thumb tilting her head back slightly as he lowered his face to hers. “I will try to be as gentle with you as possible, Honor. Let me know if I am too rough, or if I do something which offends you,” he whispered against her lips, remembering the impromptu lesson he received from Elisa earlier that evening.

Honor nodded. It was all the permission Reid needed. He closed the space between their lips, placing tender pecks against them until he pressed his lips more firmly against hers and opened his mouth, making her lips part with his. He swept his tongue inside, tasting the wine that had been offered to them in toast after toast throughout the early morning hours, and rolled his tongue lazily against hers, eager to taste more.

She equaled his passion, little soft moans of pleasure passing from her mouth to his until he found he could not take it any longer. He slowly moved his lips away, holding her up against him as he leaned over her; one strong arm locked around her back now, the other helping to hold him up from the bed. He placed soft, butterfly-like kisses along her jaw and neck, his tongue darting out to lick one little earlobe and felt her shudder in response.

Lifting his head, he met her eyes then looked down at her perfect little breasts, the rosy nipples poking through the thin linen of her chemise. Lowering her onto the bed, he pulled the tie at her throat until it lay parted, the whisper of material framing the breasts he longed to take in his mouth ever since he first touched them at the side of the road.

*Mine now.* With a ripple of possession his lips trailed the same tiny, butterfly-like kisses along one side of her right breast, feeling her body tremble, hearing her gasp of breath. He continued the torture, kissing the underside, coming up until he kissed along one areola before running his hot wet tongue over the hard peak, earning him a strangled cry from Honor. Her fingers were now woven into his hair, her fingers digging into his scalp. He sucked the nipple into his mouth, fighting against the urge to maul her and shove his hard erection inside of her even now.

He repeated the action to her other breast: gentle kisses along the side, underside, and along the top until he reached the rosy tip and ran his tongue over it. Finally closing his lips around it, he flicked his tongue over the hard tip as Honor began to squirm on the bed, moaning ‘please’ over and over again.

Feeling a little reckless in spite of all Elisa’s advice, Reid began to trail kisses down her belly, lifting the chemise up until the dark curls covering her mons were exposed. He heard her give a little exclamation of surprise when the cool air in the room hit her pale legs but he ignored it, focusing instead

on opening her thighs to accommodate his wide shoulders. He watched as her legs parted, the pale pink of her quim slowly unfolding, opening like a flower for his inspection.

Feeling his cock pressing into the edge of the bed as it grew even harder, he watched as a tiny bead of dew pearled at her opening. With a barely repressed growl, he buried his face into her, breathing in her sweet musk and holding her hips still as his mouth ravaged her. Licking, sucking, nibbling and, finally, stabbing his tongue up inside of her, he curled it in her passage to lick up as much of her juices as possible.

Her hips were lifted to meet his mouth, her long legs bent at the knee, straining as they held her up. He consumed her offering like she was his last meal, rooting into her cunny and ravaging it with greedy slurps and licks until she was gasping for breath as an orgasm broke over her, rewarding him for his efforts with more of the sweet nectar.

Pleased by the little sounds she kept making, encouraged by her cries as she reached her climax, Reid continued his attentions on her little cunny, slipping his finger up inside of her as his mouth found her nub. Gently pulling back the hood, he kissed it, using his mouth on it as if the nub were a little tongue, stroking it as his finger stroked her channel until her body was covered with a fine sheen of sweat to match the heavy drips that ran down his spine under his shirt.

Leaving her only to undress himself as she lay on the bed, trying to recover, he stripped himself down, his erection bobbing in eagerness to breach her tight channel.

Kneeling between her opened legs, he looked down at the young woman whose lips were still parted as she slowly came back to herself, only to be met by Reid, gripping his thick cock firmly about its base as he rubbed the head of it up and down her slippery cleft.

She groaned again and opened her legs wider. Reid steeled himself and pushed the head of his cock into the heat of her slippery passage. The snug fit of her around him peeled the foreskin back from the head of his cock. He felt a tremble go through his body as the heat of her pussy bathed him in wetness. He pushed in a little further and this time his groan of pleasure was met with hers.

With each small advance he felt her channel grow tighter and tighter until he finally came to her maidenhead. Licking lips gone dry with his ragged breath, he paused, trying to think of how to best breach it. His head dipped down to the sensitive peaks of her breasts, lathing his tongue over each one until she was wiggling and whining beneath him. He pushed his hips forward, his buttock muscles clenching with the effort, the muscles along the backs of his thighs singing with tension, and he felt the hymen slowly tear. Honor froze beneath him, her eyes blinking in wonderment.

Lifting his head, he captured her lips with his own, wanting to pound into her, to slake his desires and give her pleasure in return, but he held himself firmly in check, giving her long, even strokes that lacked the passion he normally possessed. After a few minutes of this continual in and out sawing of his cock in her tight clenching channel, he felt his body tighten up as his orgasm approached. He resolutely gritted his teeth, trying to will it away from him until Honor reached her peak.

Kissing along her neck, holding his weight off her with one elbow digging into the soft feather mattress beneath them, he heard her breathing come more rapid as her nails dug into his shoulder blades. He bit back a cry of pain. He could feel the muscles of her passage clench, unclench, tighten and squeeze. Her head pushed back into the feather mattress, the long line of her pale throat bared and arching as she pushed her hips up against his, helping him stroke her to fulfillment as her legs came up and locked around him. Little soft breaths were escaping her mouth laced with words being whispered that he couldn't hear to understand. It was getting to be too much for even his senses.

Being wrapped up in the sweat-sheened, glistening, long limbs of her body and feeling her orgasm around him pushed Reid over the edge. He increased his pace, only giving a few fast thrusts before he erupted into her with a groan of pleasure.

He buried himself in as far as he could, his cock twitching his orgasm as he felt the muscles of his back and buttocks clench tightly from his position. He shuddered and she matched it with one of her



own. Closing his eyes he savored the feeling of her hot channel, a moan rumbling in his chest that was met with a matching one from her.

He held himself there, waiting until his seed finished spilling, his eyes slowly opening to look down at Honor, whose own eyes were shut, a dreamy sort of expression playing about her face. It was the same look she had given the Glanconer when he kissed her.

*Damn!* How he wanted to punish both their bodies with hard, driving thrusts, send her screaming and quaking into her climax instead of those little moans and groans. He looked down at where their bodies met with a grim smile, remembering the passion she had shown him, wondering how much more there was in her. That little whispered plea she had given when he tasted her. He wanted to hear her beg for release. He wanted to hear those words shouted in French, wanted her to growl at him and meet his raging passion with her own.

He felt himself grow hard again and he tried to turn his thoughts into another direction. Slowly, he pulled himself free of her, feeling her passage close around his exit, wanting to push his weighty cock up inside her again to feel it open.

He collapsed on the bed next to her, rolling onto his side to sweep one palm possessively over her slender form, pausing to stroke one nipple idly before reaching down to cup her wet sex.

He watched her face as she dozed, saw the little smile of acknowledgement when he cupped her in his palm. He had all the evidence he needed of her virginity, but damn if she wasn't full of passion. 'Do not tire your wife out with your affections,' Elisa's voice reprimanded him in his head. He hated the thought of keeping a mistress. He found himself rather fond of Honor and loath to offend her, which a mistress surely would. He tried to imagine how Honor would react if she found out, hypothetically, he kept a mistress in town. He grimaced. Given his past experience with married women who sought to repay their husbands for their infidelities, she would probably react in kind. And that was something he was not willing to do—share Honor with anyone.

But he did have to allow his passion free rein at some point in time. He grinned evilly, thinking of all the things he would like to do to Honor. The smile quickly disappeared. He couldn't. He had to treat her genteelly.

Sighing in defeat, he gave Honor a kiss on her sweaty forehead then reached over to bring the coverlet up over her, so she did not catch a chill. Watching Honor sleep for a few moments before he slipped away into the land of dreams, he heard an echo of Elisa's prim advice ring through his head. 'You cannot act the rogue with her Reid. You have left behind all your decadence and libertine ways now. You are a husband, not that foul Glanconer!'

Reid felt shock run through him. He opened his eyes to consider his new wife more carefully, an evil and foul idea hatching in his brain.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Honor came slowly to consciousness, delighting in the weariness of every muscle in her body, remembering the night of lovemaking with a faint smile. She liked it a great deal. Reid was an excellent lover. Tender, affectionate, gentle—everything a woman could ask from the man who had taken her virginity.

Her eyes popped open to the early afternoon sun that drifted into the room. *Why then, did it feel like something was missing?*

She sat up, heedless of her breasts being bared to the interested eye of the late afternoon sun. *Why did it feel like he was holding back?* She narrowed her eyes as she absently pulled together the neck of her chemise, remembering the shudder and tense muscles when he slowed down his rhythm to a sedate, almost sleepy stroke. *Why did he hold back that part of himself?* She felt her stomach flip over. If she had felt so wonderful with his tentative, coddling strokes, surely she would be shattered by the full impact of his passion. She felt a fleeting moment of thankfulness for Reid's thoughtful treatment, but it was quickly replaced by the adventurous side of her that wanted to feel that part of him. *Wanted to feel it and see if she could equal it. Unless he did not feel the same as she did. Did he feel like his world was about to explode? Did his body tingle just from the nearness of mine? Or was that why he was restrained? Because he did not feel as passionate?* She dropped her hands to her lap, dejected at the thoughts.

Busily trying to answer her own questions, the cause of her concern came strolling into the room, wishing her a good day when he saw she was awake.

She saw he had changed when he came around the other side of the bed. He now wore a plain white linen shirt, black waistcoat and a dove gray coat, which matched the breeches that clung to his muscular legs and cupped his groin. Honor bit her lip against the temptation to do the same. Instead she purposefully shifted, feeling the linen of her chemise catch on one long nipple before it fell open to expose her breast again.

She surreptitiously looked up at Reid through her eyelashes, hoping he would rise to the bait she offered him. She wanted him to let down his guard, to witness his surprise at seeing one of her bared breasts.

She saw his dark eyes flick toward her breast then quickly away as he set a tray of food down on the table near her bed. She almost sagged in disappointment. Her eyes again strayed to his crotch while he poured the tea, satisfied to see the bulge there had indeed become a little larger. *So the sight of my body does arouse him.* A smug smile lifted her lips as he shut the bedroom door. *Why, then, did he not act on it? Why hasn't he knocked me to the bed and ravaged me?*

The memory of the Glanconer instantly slipped into her head. *He would. He would have not even let me sleep!* She angrily glared at her husband's back.

He was looking out the window now. "It looks like it will be a clear evening," he said. He turned and gestured toward the table laden with food. "You slept late so I had Agnes make up a tray for you." He stalked to the door, not looking at her. "I will be leaving shortly for Rosegate in order to ready the estate for your arrival." He glanced over at her, his face going slightly pink when she twisted and exposed her other breast to him. "You and Agnes will follow in my coach after nightfall. I've heard there are highwaymen in the area, but it appears they have chosen daylight hours to attack. In any instance, you will be following Elisa and James' coach, so there should be no problems." His hand was

clenched on the doorknob, his knuckles white as he turned it. “I will have a man come to load your trunks into the carriage. I suggest you take what you will need out, and pack what you may need tomorrow in a valise.”

“Reid!” Honor cried out, feeling put aside.

He turned toward her. “Yes?” he asked, his eyes meeting hers. “Is there something I’ve forgotten?”

Honor fought hard against the urge to pout. “You’ve not kissed me good morning.”

Giving her a little smile of indulgence, he stepped toward the bed, keeping as much space as possible between the two of them before giving her a chaste peck on the top of her head. Stepping away and turning again for the door, he gave her one small smile before shutting it again.

Anger that her ploy did not work surged through Honor. She grabbed one pillow and flung it at the door in frustration.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Honor was sitting in front of her bedroom window, looking out at the setting sun while she nibbled absently on her toast, sipping her tea. She wore a fine woolen green bed gown over her chemise now, her hair still in disarray when Agnes entered the room.

"You've a note," Agnes said, slipping it onto the table before turning her attention to Honor's hair, tutting at the state it was in.

Honor pursed her lips together. Putting down her toast and lifting the letter, she did not recognize the handwriting as she turned it over in her hand. It was sealed with a blob of black wax. Agnes had come up from behind her with a brush as she puzzled over the letter's contents gently schooling the curls back into long ringlets rather than the disheveled, medusa-like waves it had erupted in to during her sleep. Agnes asked absently, humming under her breath as she worked, "Who's it from?"

"I don't know. There's no seal," Honor replied, slipping a finger into the folds and breaking the wax seal. Agnes moved away for a moment then came back to finish Honor's hair. The scent of the lilac oil wafted through the room as the older woman uncorked the bottle.

Honor, long used to having her hair brushed and the snarls painfully removed, ignored Agnes and opened the letter. Her emerald eyes skimming the first few lines, she was hard pressed not to gasp in horror and drop the note. Instead, she finished reading it, trying to control the shaking in her hands.

*Milady,*

*My felicitations on your recent exchange of vows. Now I know who your betrothed was.*

*Not only am I in possession of your name, I have a few interesting bits of paper that were found within your skirts upon our last meeting.*

*I suggest you do not try and flee the country at this time. I have yet to ascertain what it is exactly I shall do with these interesting pieces of parchment. I do not need to tell you that I know how to find you. Your husband cannot dance attendance upon you at all times.*

*I look forward to renewing our acquaintance where we can decide what arrangement would suit us both in relation to these papers.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Glanconer.*

Honor dropped the letter onto the table, her eyes rounded, staring but not focused, as her mind raced with the possible implications.

She distantly heard Agnes' muffled cry of distress, even though the maid had leant over her shoulder to read the note, so great was her shock. She looked over her shoulder dispassionately at woman whom she regarded, until recently, her only family. Feeling the fear rolling off Agnes in waves, she knew she had no choice. "I shall have to tell Reid," she simply said.

Agnes' eyes bulged. "He'll be killed!"

Honor looked down at the note with a distant eye, trying to think which 'he' Agnes could mean. If she had to wager on either man, she wouldn't know who to choose. They were evenly matched in height and weight. She knew Reid's ability, but she did not know what damage the Glanconer was capable of doing.

She bit her lip in indecision. She didn't want Reid hurt in any way. Still, he had promised her the protection of his name and family. Wasn't he in a like position, being the child of a rebel? She

jerked. Good god! There really was no way around it. Those papers contained evidence against his father that he needed to be privy to. She mentally damned herself. *Why did I not tell him last evening? Why did I ignore the opportunity he gave me to do so?*

She began to feel faint at the prospect of having to tell Reid everything. The whole sordid truth of what was in the papers she had tried to deliver to Devon. The activities her father had been involved in—that he had been a traitor. Just as Reid suggested. The fact that she had been in possession of his father's signet ring the very evening he had told her he feared it lost and she hadn't returned it. Everything. All the little bits and pieces she wouldn't have otherwise mentioned. Even her encounter with the Glanconer. The thought of everything she could possibly lose made her head spin.

Gripping the table tightly, tears sprang into her eyes. She realized with a small gasp of surprise that she had feelings for Reid. She cared about what he thought, how he would react.

A fat tear rolled slowly down her cheek as she thought about running again, leaving Reid to face the firestorm of blackmail and mud raking that was sure to follow. But as quickly as she had the thought, she knew she wouldn't do it—couldn't do it. Not out of the same loyalty that had sent her fleeing toward Devon, working day and night to sell off her father's possessions, but with an emotion she feared was quickly blooming into love for the man she respected and had come to rely on.

Struck by the horror of what the letter implied—loss of home, family, husband, and someday, God willing, children—she felt her world tilt impossibly to the side, upsetting everything she had finally come to terms with.

*"Oh mon dieu!"* she cried, burying her face in her hands, the stress and tension of the past month draining away with every tear that spilled from her eyes.

Agnes tutted and wept simultaneously as she pressed a handkerchief into Honor's hand, clearly torn between consoling her charge and bemoaning what Fate had dealt them. Honor just erupted into a fresh torrent of tears when she saw the linen proffered by her maid was the same one Reid had given her the previous evening to dry her eyes.

So caught up in their own emotions, they did not hear the sharp rap on the door, nor notice Lady Winterbourne enter the room until she loudly made her presence known. "Come, come, it's not all that terrible being a wife, is it?"

Both women turned toward Elisa, who stood at the door clutching a roll of parchment in her hand. Honor's sobs hiccupped to a stop, her brow lightly furrowed as she tried to make sense of what Elisa was talking about.

"I don't understand," she whispered, dabbing at her tears as she saw Agnes stealthily slip the note from the tea tray into her apron pocket.

Elisa glided over to the table where Honor sat and unrolled the parchment. "This is the wedding contract," she said softly. "It is based on the last wishes of Reid's father." She pointed to the bottom of the paper. "You may read it if you wish; it's only a piece of paper acknowledging that you are Reid's wife." Honor just stared blankly at the parchment as Elisa rummaged in the desk against the wall for a quill and inkpot. "James needs you to sign the bottom of it so he might leave it with our solicitor before we depart for Rosegate."

Sniffling, Honor signed the paper without bothering to read it, positive Reid would want the marriage dissolved if he knew she had been keeping secrets from him. As soon as the thought of Reid leaving her crossed her mind, she began weeping fresh tears.

Elisa tutted soothingly at Honor. "Was it terrible for you? I know many women of my acquaintance do not appreciate the activities in the marriage bed, and if Reid has injured you, I will see that he does not plague you again with his attentions."

Horried that her tears were misconstrued for some vile act on Reid's part, Honor looked up at Elisa with red rimmed, but confused, eyes. "I do not understand. Reid did not injure me," she whispered.

In response, Elisa gestured at the sheets which were exposed by the coverlet Honor had carelessly tossed back when she had exploded from the bed in anger earlier. There, smeared on the pristine white sheet, was the evidence of their consummation. The sight of her blood mingled with their dried climax, and the memory of Reid's tenderness in taking her maidenhead, made her erupt into fresh tears.

"Oh!" Elisa cried. "You poor pet!" she said as she pulled her seat closer to Honor, catching both her hands with her own. "It will be better, I promise you. I shall scold Reid for being a beast and he will be a much better husband, I promise!"

Honor barely heard what Elisa was saying, but when she did finally make out the words, she looked up at Elisa in confusion. "But—but...he was gentleness itself with me. What are you saying?" she asked, confused.

Elisa pulled back, surprised. "If he was kind toward you, then why are you crying?"

Honor paused for a moment to wipe her eyes with the linen, but it was Agnes who finally provided the answer as she moved about, readying Honor's clothes. "We were just remembering the Captain," she said with a finality that brooked no argument.

Elisa's face softened as she turned back to Honor. "Oh dear, I hope you will let James and I be like parents to you as well," she said, a smile on her face. To Honor's surprise, the old formidable lady's eyes were also growing wet. "We so love children; we were not blessed with any of our own. It was a joy and pleasure to count Reid as our godson. We look forward to treating you as we would a daughter of our own flesh and blood." A single tear trailed down the woman's wrinkled cheek, leaving behind a glimpse of the rosy skin beneath the powder. "I cannot tell you how pleased I am that Reid has taken you to wife." She gave Honor a little smile. "I had pressed him to exchange vows last night because I was afraid one of you would change your mind. I can think of no other people who are as finely matched as you two!"

Honor's face crumbled and she erupted into fresh tears, hugging Elisa tightly to her as she wept.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The evening had become chilly. Although Honor was slightly disappointed she did not get the opportunity to have one more turn around her father's home before being bundled into the carriage Reid had sent for her, she was excited at the prospect of seeing Reid's—her new home.

Honor settled into the comfort of her coach, all of which was provided by Lord and Lady Winterbourne. Elisa had admonished Agnes to let her charge sleep if need be while James supplied them with a bottle of brandy, giving them both a broad wink and smile. "To keep the chill at bay and help pass the time," he said before ushering his wife into their own coach.

The roads of London quickly gave way to the more rutted dirt-packed thoroughfare outside the city as she and Agnes passed the time and bottle between them, sharing both spirits and careful conversation that skirted around the note delivered earlier in the day. Whether due to the brandy or her excitement over seeing the place Reid called home, Honor eventually forgot about the Glanconer's ominous note as the miles passed. Instead of thinking of the potentially fatal situation she was now in, her attention was divided between the thick fog that had fallen over the countryside and the bottle of brandy.

Having finished half of the bottle between them, Agnes dozed off and Honor felt her own eyelids getting heavy. The effects of the strong spirit and the gentle swaying of the coach finally worked their magic. She fell asleep.

It felt like only five minutes had passed. She was jerked awake at the same time as Agnes, both their eyes wide and gleaming in the darkness as they held their breath, anxious to find the cause of their abrupt awakening.

The coach had stopped; that must have been what wakened them—the absence of gentle rocking. Honor was about to question why they had stopped when shouts of rage came from the Wentworth's coach in front of them. Her eyes met Agnes' just before their coach door was thrown open, the dark silhouette of the Glanconer framed by the tiny opening.

"Remember me lass?" he growled as he reached into the carriage, making Honor jump back in fright.

But it wasn't her he was after this time. His hand had fastened around Agnes' wrist; the old maid let out screams of terror the like which Honor had never heard before.

"Hsst you old crone!" he growled at her, pulling her from the coach. "You'll just be goin' to wait for the lass in the other coach," he tried to reassure the struggling woman. The Glanconer had the old woman thrown over his shoulder, the familiar broad brimmed hat hiding his face in shadow as he paused before the door. "You'll wait for me here, aye? I believe we have business that needs to be settled between us."

Honor, her heart thumping painfully in her chest, found every single sense heightened to a level that left her as tightly strung as a bowstring. She could hear Lord Winterbourne's protests met with grumbles of a lower tone in a broader accent, similar to the Glanconer's.

"Have you lost your damned mind?" James demanded, his shouts of outrage cut off by a grumbling laughter.

"We only do as he wishes, Milord. No use tearin' us a new arsehole!" came the reply.

Honor's eyes flicked to the opened door as the thick fog rolled in from the trees beyond a small clearing beside the road. Long moments ticked by as she thought how easily it would be to sprint the

distance between the coach and the trees, disappearing in the fog and leaving the Glanconer no choice but to let Lord and Lady Winterbourne go.

She could feel her body making the decision for her as another long moment moved past, and then the world seemed to move in slow motion.

She heard the Glanconer shout out that he and ‘the young lass’ had something to discuss. His voice was near but she had already made her decision. She sprung from the carriage and hit the grassy slope beside the road, her legs churning and kicking up clumps of dirt as she ran for the woods.

Shouts and laughter erupted from behind her. She could feel the Glanconer bearing down on her as she sprinted for the woods. She bunched her skirts in tight fists, lifting them above her knees, the gentle slope of the clearing urging her legs to carry her faster.

Her hat had flown off her head but she didn’t care. She flung herself into the thick fog, only slowing down when she reached the woods, but still running fast enough to keep the distance between her and her pursuer.

She stumbled over a root that jutted from the ground, quickly catching her footing before she fell. She gasped again and gathered her skirts higher about her knees, never once breaking her stride.

When she could no longer hear sounds from the coaches stopped along the road, of a horse, of angry shouts from James, she paused beside an immense tree. She braced herself with one palm against the rough trunk and pressed the other into the stitch that had begun to ache at her side.

Her nerves tightly wound, her ears so highly attuned to the sounds of the fog-shrouded woods around her as she strained to make out the noises surrounding her, she jumped, uttering a sharp cry when an owl hooted somewhere nearby.

“Where are you lass?” The Glanconer’s voice was far enough away that she risked snapping a twig to flatten herself against the tree.

“Oh, come now. I’ll not exact that large a fine for your petty treachery against King George!” he cooed, his voice low, the sound stroking along her flesh, making it tighten in excitement.

“I’ll be gentle lass, I’ll not injure your person,” he said softly, his voice getting closer, making her hold her breath. “Unless you’d like me to...then that might be arranged as well.” She shivered as he chuckled.

“Don’t you wish to be taken up against a tree by a savage Irishman such as myself?” She heard him chuckle again and she quivered in response. “I’m thinking that perhaps a genteely raised young lass such as yourself might be wanting a wee bit of the wild, a man that would make you forget those fine notions and grand ideas of restraint that have been drummed into your head since you were old enough to hold a thought.” His voice was soft, cajoling in the fog-shrouded darkness of the woods. “You’ll not be the first woman who has wanted to be taken by a man who will unleash you from the chains society put about your neck. Do you not want that lass?”

She found herself nodding silently in agreement. *Yes. That would be nice.* Her brain quickly conjured the image of Reid in her mind. “Admit it lass, you want to feel me fillin’ you up inside with my cock,” he said, closer now, his voice almost a whisper, the words making a tremor race through her body. “And I would surely love to feel you stretching around me, taking it up inside you until you cannot take anymore.” She felt her nipples push against the tight stays. Closing her eyes, she tried not to imagine the pictures he was drawing with his words.

“I want to hear you scream in pleasure lass. I want to feel you reach your satisfaction around me, your little cunny gripping me till I cannot take the sweet torture and have to explode, buried deep inside you.” His voice was now on the other side of the tree where she stood. She held her breath again, even though it had been coming in sharp little pants of excitement. “Now doesn’t that sound like a grand way to be passing an hour instead of hiding from the inevitable?”

Her eyes popped open to find him standing in front of her. She opened her mouth to scream only to have her mouth covered with his. She struggled against him but it was like trying to beat down the



trees that surrounded them.

She could have bit him, but she didn't. She should have fought harder, but she didn't. She relaxed into the kiss and kissed him back as wildly as she had wanted to kiss Reid, as wantonly as she had wanted to be with her husband.

He broke the kiss and gave her little nips along her neck, pausing at the base of her throat where her neck met her shoulder. He sucked in some of her tender skin, giving it gentle bites until she cried out and arched against him, weaving her arms round his neck and holding him close to her.

To her horror, she found her skirts were up around her waist. The Glanconer held thick fistfuls of material as he slowly rucked them up, leaving her bare and trembling in the cold. One hand came around to grip her buttock. A growl escaped his throat before he ripped his mouth away from hers and roughly spun her around, her backside exposed to him. "Such a fine piece of flesh, so pale and smooth," he said softly, gently skimming one hand over the trembling skin of her lower back, all the way down to the tops of her stockings. "Grab the tree lass; we are about to finish what we started," he growled, leaning into her, his heat cloaking her nakedness.

Having the choice of either hold onto the tree or fall into it, she reached out and braced her hands against it, her mind distant. She watched the events as they unfolded, an active participant but at the same time not, her body firmly in the struggle to finish what they had both started, to ease the ache that had started as a slow throbbing in her groin.

Suddenly her mind snapped back into her body. She realized with horror what she was about to do. "No," she whispered. Even though her mind wanted him to stop, her body didn't. "I cannot do this to my husband." She noticed she spoke so softly it was as though she was afraid they would be discovered, forcing him to run before the act could be completed.

He chuckled in her ear, making the flesh along the backs of her thighs tremble in excitement as one large hand reached up and caught a hank of her hair. "Well then, you'll know what to expect, aye?"

"But my husband!" she cried out in a little voice, her body begging him to finish, shocking her brain to realize she could want this man and not love him. Not have any feelings for him at all outside the strong desire to feel his body exerting a mastery over hers.

"Damn your husband," he whispered as he reached around her and pulled down her bodice. A small gasp escaped her mouth as her breasts bounced free of their confines, her nipples already hard and begging for his mouth. "I've wanted to take you like this since we first met," he growled in her ear. A frisson of excitement raced through her as he tightened his grip on her hair, making her arch her back and lift her ass invitingly towards him.

The bark of the tree dug into her breasts as he stroked his cock between her ass cheeks. His mouth was hot on her neck. He alternately bit and kissed along her throat, forcing a long low moan from her throat.

She felt the chuckle in his chest, his breath hot on her throat. "Aye, I knew you'd like it a little rough as well as sweet," he said, his hand moving from her mouth to grab one round breast in a tight grip.

Taking her by surprise, he roughly spun her around, catching her in his arms before she stumbled and fell. He pushed her up against the tree trunk, lifting one leg with a strong grip on her thigh, forcing her up off her feet and making her wrap her legs around his waist.

He bowed his forehead against hers and she strained to see his eyes beneath the shadow of the floppy hat brim. "I'm about to swive you Milady. Hard and rough. If you've need of screaming, then you'd best bite something," he advised. A devilish grin exposed white teeth in the darkness and then he forced his thick cock into her.

The slippery wetness that encased his cock surprised both of them. His grin widened as he began to move, pushing her roughly up against the tree with each thrust, jarring and pushing her past the threshold of pleasure into slight pain as he struck her cervix hard with each thrust.

Her grunts of pleasure matched his rough assault on her: mauling her breasts, biting her neck, scraping her nipples with his teeth until she finally sunk her own teeth into the thick muscle of his neck. She groaned past an orgasm that caught her by surprise as he continued thrusting, whispering nasty words into her ear. "Your little quim tightens around my shaft, Milady," he whispered into her ear, sending her racing towards her peak. "Will you reach your peak for me? Will your tight little cunny get wetter, hotter? Will it milk the seed from my cock?" She could only toss her head back and forth against the tree trunk, not trusting her voice to whisper when her body was building up to a scream.

His hips moved faster, the strokes becoming a little harder, a little rougher as he pushed her further and further until she teetered on the brink of another orgasm. Her fingers dug into the cloak on his shoulders as his words fueled the fire inside of her. "Aye," he hissed. "Aye, that's good. Come for me lass, let me spill into you as you do," he said. He forced his hips forward at blinding speed, making her senseless with need.

Completely oblivious to anything but the sensations chasing themselves through her body, the heated words whispered in her ear and the feeling of the Glanconer's powerful body between her thighs as he roughly stabbed his thick cock into her, she hissed senseless words in French as her body orgasmed again, stirring him to move faster. "Ah you sweet, foul-mouthed little Frenchie!" He chuckled, pummeling her again and again with his cock until he let out a low groan. He gave one last final thrust before quickly withdrawing his cock completely, spilling himself on her skirts as he stroked the immense organ. He let go of her so she landed on her feet, her legs shaking with the aftermath of her own climax.

Honor slowly came back to earth, still pinned between the tree and the Glanconer's hard body, her breath slowing, becoming more even. The woods around them seemed to be stirring to life, the feeling of being suspended in space and time now gone.

"Reid!" She heard James calling out in the forest, his voice sounding heavier, thicker through the fog somehow. "Reid! Where are you man?"

Honor froze, hearing her husband's name being called. Was he here? Was he searching for her? She stiffened and pushed at the Glanconer's shoulders, pushing him away from her as she tried to find her balance. "My husband!" she said in a frightened whisper.

Looking around the Glanconer's wide, broad shoulders, she saw a lantern light bobbing in the distance as she heard James call out her husband's name again. Honor stepped around him, feeling the flame of guilt over what she had done flare brightly within her. How could she love Reid and yet desire another man? It didn't make any sense. She should desire her husband, not an outlaw.

"Go!" she said forcefully, trying to forget the things his body had driven hers to, his touch on her body as every nerve-ending begged for more.

He ignored her whispered command and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her up against him. She was shocked and little excited to find he had another erection. Not trusting herself, she began to fight him. "Go! Leave! You've got what you wanted, now you have to swear you will burn those papers!" she hissed, struggling against both his grip on her and her own treacherous body which was beginning to respond to him again. "I'll have no stain touching my husband's name! Burn everything with his name on it and you can send me to the gallows if you wish. But you must swear not to reveal my husband's name!" She knew she was trying to bargain with a criminal, but it was the only way she could think of keeping Reid safe. She would die inside if the Glanconer were to shoot him—which he surely would if Reid found them together. Her husband would rise to defend her, he had done so before. This situation was of her own doing; her own heedless actions had put her in this situation once the Glanconer had set her aflame. She had to take measures to keep Reid safe from the highwayman, and so she renewed her struggles.

"Shh lass," he whispered hotly against her cold cheek. "Another kick and you'll unman me," he said with a chuckle.

Honor pulled away and spun around, her eyes searching out the familiar, husky voice of the Glanconer in the dark. "You have to go! Leave before Reid finds you!" she begged, not wanting her husband to come to harm.

"Ah, are you so worried for me m'love?" he asked. His hand reached out unerringly to cup her cheek.

"Yes!" she hissed in the dark, feeling her body give in to his touch even as she lied. "You have to go! Now!" She felt her face heat in anger at both the Glanconer and her traitorous body.

The Glanconer chuckled in the dark. He pulled her closer to him until her body was pressed along the length of his. "You are genuinely worried for my welfare?"

Honor sobbed as his lips brushed her temple. "Yes!" she whispered. "Now go!"

"I'll go if you come with me."

"No! I cannot!" Honor said, pushing against his chest even as she gripped his shirt tightly in her hands. "I do not love you! I love my husband. I intend on being a good wife!"

"A little late for that, isn't it lass?" The Glanconer pulled her closer still and she felt his erection dig into her. "Then give me something to remind me of you when I am gone from here."

"What? What is it you want?" She gasped as his lips grazed her temple again. "What more can I give you that would satisfy you?"

"This," he whispered. He captured her lips with his and kissed her until she opened her mouth in welcome for his tongue.

She let out a whimper, her arms going around his neck, cupping his head with her hand as she returned his burning kiss. She shivered in his embrace as his tongue slipped along hers, trembled when he let out a long, low groan of pleasure.

His kiss was making her melt into his arms. She strained against him, toward that piece inside of her that was crying out for fulfillment.

He tore his mouth from hers and kissed her along her neck, her shoulder, and finally, down her chest which heaved under ragged, panting breaths.

Why did her body want this even as her heart ached for deceiving Reid? Her brain screamed abuse at her as one of his long, calloused fingers slipped into her bodice and cupped her breast. He yanked the cloth down, exposing both her breasts to his hot mouth, teasing them with wet kisses on top and under each firm rounded globe. *I'm a wicked woman—a brazen whore! No better than the Glanconer's other conquests!* Thoughts flew wildly through her mind before she let out a low groan of pleasure. His mouth captured one long nipple in his mouth, temporarily silencing her inner critic.

Her hand came up to cup his head as her body bowed backward to give him greater access to her swollen breast. "Lord, but these foine globes are lovely," he whispered hotly against her ear, his hand massaging and rubbing her breasts. "Hard and swollen—just like you make me lass!" he said. He took her hand and guided it to his groin, pressing her palm against the immense erection straining against his breeches. "D'you want me to push into you again lass?" His light accent and softly whispered question pushed her beyond all sensible reason. "I want to bury myself inside of you once more, feel you tremble beneath me in pleasure."

Honor trembled. Of course she wanted him again! But she couldn't! She couldn't do this again! Her brain screamed reason at her and she slowly pulled away from him. "I cannot!" she wailed, hurriedly pulling her bodice up to cover her breasts.

His chuckle sounded disembodied as it reached her through the darkness of the forest. "You cannot, but you want to, aye?"

Honor bit her lip before responding. "Yes," she said, her voice shaking with the admission. "But you need to go! Go before it's too late!" she hissed, straightening her bodice.

She heard the highwayman move away from her and the sharp scratch of a match before a lantern was lit. She watched as the man raised it high above his head, casting him in a circle of pale

gold light.

“It is too late,” Reid said as he tilted up his chin, allowing the lantern to illuminate his face beneath the brim of the floppy hat, casting them in a semicircle of pale yellow light.

Stunned, she barely heard James’ voice as he burst into the little bubble of light that hung thickly in the fog. The added glow of his own lantern made her feel as if it were the light of judgment that encircled her, and she had been found wanting. “Ah! You’ve found her!” James said happily as Reid’s dark, angry eyes bored into her flushed face.

“Aye, I’ve found her,” Reid said in his thick brogue, making Honor tremble in recognition. “I’ve found her,” he repeated, his lips twisted in a sneer.

James, brimming with concern, gently put a cloak around her bared shoulders. “You had us so worried when you ran off like the devil was at your heels!” he gently chastised as he slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her from the fog-shrouded forest.

She looked over her shoulder at Reid and the hard mask that had fallen over his handsome face, unable to believe what happened...happened. Dazed, confused, but most of all, so ashamed of what she had done, she felt her heart break, blinking back the tears as she slowly realized what she had lost.

*What have I done?*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The remainder of the trip should have been a happy one, but it was not. Reid rode outside the carriage alongside the two outriders he had brought along. The little wedding party stayed the evening at the Beef Head Inn, where Honor and Reid had enjoyed their first conversation. What should have been a happy gathering was solemn and quiet except for the chatter of Lady Winterbourne and Agnes. Noting their gaiety was received by the bride with teary eyes and monosyllabic grunts from the groom, Elisa quit trying to be merry, instead spending her time dividing glares between the two.

As the evening grew late, Reid abandoned his card game with James and stood over Honor, extending his hand to her. "I'm to bed, Milady," he announced stiffly. "You should come as well."

Elisa opened her mouth to protest, having finally succeeded in engaging Honor in conversation, but said nothing when Honor stood without a word. She put her hand in Reid's, quietly following him from the private dining room to their sleeping quarters above stairs.

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The door to the private room had barely shut behind the two figures before Elisa turned her head toward her husband for an explanation as to the subdued mood of the otherwise lively individuals. James merely shrugged at the inquiring look she gave him. "He's been as silent as the grave since the little adventure in the woods."

Elisa merely shook her head. "Well, no wonder for goodness sake!" she snapped irritably. "What a way to find out your husband lived a former life as a highwayman—by him robbing you and scaring you senseless!" She settled herself in a chair by the fire, warming herself to her diatribe regarding Reid's behavior. "Honestly James, I think perhaps we should have done something sooner about his behavior."

Elisa saw James cast a nervous look at Agnes, who stood and mumbled a 'good evening' to the room in general before hastily making her exit. Watching the door as the old maid shut it, Elisa barely suppressed a chuckle at the look on Agnes' face when she had left the room.

She turned back to her husband with a smug smile. "It seems Agnes is familiar with a married couple about to have a discussion." She looked at the ceiling above her head, as if she could see into the rooms beyond, revealing the argument she expected to happen between the newly wedded couple. "Of course, the old gel should need to become comfortable with arguments. I daresay Reid is in a foul mood, and I don't expect Honor to be much pleased either." She glanced at her husband. "Should we perhaps send the innkeeper's lad for Duncan and Ian? Mayhap position one at the door of the room and the other at the window, in case she tries to escape?"

"We have to give the girl some credit, Elisa." He brushed off the lapels of his coat as he settled himself in a chair across from his wife. "She's proven that once she takes on a project, she does what she can to see it through to the end."

Elisa narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Are you implying Reid is 'a project'?"

James chuckled and gave her a curt nod. "Yes, I am." He smiled widely at her, making her heart warm. Even after all these years, James could still set her heart to fluttering with his rakish grins. "You always thought he was." He grinned wider. "Do you deny I saw joy in your eyes when he finally agreed to go to the Blackthorne ball with you, to submit to your learning regarding young ladies?"

She found herself returning the smile, but could not deny his insight. “La James!”

James stroked his upper lip thoughtfully as he stared in to the firelight. “The thing of it is, Elisa, I don’t know how easily married life will come to Reid.” He glanced at his wife quickly and Elisa recognized the worry that creased his brow so often of late. “Although I love him as I would my own child, he is still a rogue.”

“I’ve always found rogues to be wonderfully distracting people. They make the best husbands, James,” she said with a little grin. “After all, were you not one yourself?”

James chuckled again, the line creasing the skin between his eyes disappearing. “Yes, but I seem to recollect you’d a great appetite for a rogue’s attentions in the bedroom.” His eyes glimmered suggestively at her and she felt her face heating in response. “Not all women are so inclined.”

She waved her hand at him, the rings on her fingers sparkling in the firelight. “I’ve always thought rakehells and rogues were projects!” Her smile was mischievous. “After all, you were once a project of mine, and you’ve turned out very nicely.”

James glanced up at the ceiling, following his wife’s train of thought. “Do you suppose Honor is of the same mind as you?”

Elisa looked into the firelight for a moment, thinking about the advice she had given Reid in regards to wooing his new wife, as well as Honor’s confession that afternoon about how gentle Reid had been with her during her bedding. A smile stole on to her lips again. “She’s a very passionate nature, that much we can tell from her actions, can’t we? Escaping the garden; running off to Devon; managing to keep Percy at bay.” Elisa’s eyes met her husband’s. “Yes, I daresay she is of the same mind.” She nodded, thinking again about the depth and range of emotion Honor had shown Elisa that afternoon in her room. “Indeed, I am certain of it.”

James leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as the line of worry creased the skin between his eyes again. “So then why, may I ask, did you give Reid such foolish advice?” He referred to the conversation she had with her husband in their coach that afternoon, when she had told him the rules to wooing a wife successfully. All of which, Elisa realized, her husband thought were contrary to the advice Elisa should have given Reid.

Elisa smiled wider, mimicking her husband’s pose so they were but scant inches from each other’s face. “Because my dear, I have personal experience of a rogue’s charms in the bedroom, and the lessons he is able to teach a woman regarding pleasure. “She reached out and smoothed back a few hairs that had come loose from her husband’s queue as he blushed. “If Reid does not love Honor, how terrible it would be for her to become addicted to such lovemaking when he had no intention of repeating the process, hmm?” One brow lifted as her eyes willed him to remember the three long days and nights the two of them spent exploring each other after their wedding, not having left their room once during the entire period. The memory made Elisa’s heart flutter again in her chest.

James was trying to suppress a smile but gave up as he nodded. “I do recall our wedding night. I was as hungry for you as you were for me.”

Elisa nodded sagely. “And if Reid were to display such ardor when he does not have any intention of returning the love I am certain Honor feels for him—” She paused, sitting back in the chair. “—then the young thing would be crushed.” She looked into the fireplace, the thought of how she would have felt if James did not return the love she had felt for him twisting her heart in sympathy for Honor. “After all, Reid had no choice but to marry if he wanted his birthright returned to him. If he has no plans on making this marriage between himself and Honor a love match...”

James nodded. “Yes, yes. I see your point.” He looked at his scheming wife. “But what if Reid does love her and she does not return the sentiment?”

Elisa arched her brow again in inquiry. “After the display of emotion I witnessed from her this morning, I know that she has feelings for him. Feelings which I am certain are quickly blossoming in to love.” She looked up at the ceiling again, noting the ominous quiet when she had expected the opposite.

“I do hope they are arguing.” She sighed, wanting the two young people to be together finally. “A good argument is what is sometimes needed to clear the air between two people, to bring secrets out into the light.”

James gave a mirthless chuckle. “Indeed? Such as the one you intended having with me?” He referred to her earlier sharp tone directed at him which had sent the old maid scurrying for cover.

Elisa looked at her husband with surprise. “I hadn’t thought to argue with you James dearest,” she replied.

“Well, you certainly sounded as if you were ready for a brawl!” he said, his face dark and angry.

Elisa smiled widely and waved her hand at him again. “La, James! I needed to have privacy in order to speak with you and had thought it best Agnes think we were arguing in order to get her gone quickly.”

James gave her a sour look. “No need to have behaved so high-handedly while she was present Elisa. You’ll have the old gel thinking we do nothing but argue when we’re alone.”

Elisa shrugged, waving her hand airily. “It’s of no import. We must foster the illusion, mustn’t we?” She gave him a sly smile. “Besides which, my rogue husband, I’ve always found the reconciliation after our arguments of great amusement,” she replied, giving him a broad wink that made him laugh aloud.

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Upstairs, the atmosphere was as cold as the evening outside. Agnes, who had followed Honor from the room after a few seconds, was turned away at the door by Reid. “She’ll have no need of you this evening,” he brusquely informed her, shutting the door in the old maid’s surprised face.

Honor struggled with her skirts and gown, but to no avail. She had no choice but to ask her husband for his help with her stays. He flatly refused, his dark eyes straying to the stain of his rough lovemaking in the forest. He snorted derogatorily at the evidence on Honor’s dark skirt. “Sleep in them,” he said, lifting his angry eyes to hers as he picked up a brandy bottle on the bed stand. “It will remind you of your little adventure with a criminal.” He collapsed into a chair by the fire to sort through his thoughts.

When he first accosted Honor, he expected her to fight—to genuinely fight him, even though his evil heart hoped she would not. He needed to slake his desire on her in the manner which he wanted.

He had every intention of revealing himself after the fact, to be honest with her, what he had been doing and why. But when James called his name and she had incorrectly thought that her husband was in the woods looking for her, she had thought only of the safety of her faceless lover, urging him to leave before her husband could find them together.

His jaw clenched. She hadn’t known her husband and her lover were one and the same. He looked over to the bedside where she struggled to catch the end of the tie that held her stays. *Inconstant woman!* He watched angrily as she caught the tie between two fingers and pulled, loosening the knot and stays until she could turn it around on her body and finishing unlacing it.

*Faithless!* He took a long swallow of the liquid, feeling it burn his anger into his throat and gut as it slowly made its way into his belly. He closed his eyes in despair. Had she enjoyed the act of coupling, the thought of cuckolding a husband she had for less than a day? Or was it the excitement of a criminal molesting her that had her panting like a bitch in heat? He cast another glance at her only to find her eyes watching him.

In reply to the silent question he saw reflected in the green depths, he took another long swallow of brandy, feeling it work its way into his head this time instead of his belly. He looked away from her, feeling his heart clench tightly in his chest just from the sight of her. He turned his attention toward the fire that happily blazed in the hearth.

His eyes slipped shut after his third helping of brandy. The images of her, the sounds she made—even the scent of her as she willingly gave herself to the Glanconer—played through his head, assaulting his senses. It fueled his anger when his eyes opened only to see her sitting in the chair across from him, those damned beautiful eyes asking him questions he had no desire or need to answer.

She sat on the edge of the chair as if poised for flight. The glow from the fire highlighted the tip of one breast that quivered with every breath she took. His eyes moved downward to her thighs, which were closed tightly together, hands with long fingers folded primly in her lap. He wanted to laugh. He knew what kind of a she-devil lurked beneath that innocent facade. His cock grew thick as he remembered the whispers of French that escaped her mouth between little pants of breath as she reached her peak.

“I am your wife,” she whispered, her green eyes now swimming in tears. “What I have done, I have done only to protect you.”

Reid felt a sneer come to his lips, twisting the beautiful mouth into something lecherous looking. “What you have done, you have done because your little cunny desired it,” he replied, turning his head away from her toward the fire, taking another long swallow of brandy.

He heard her gasp at his crudeness and then there was silence, save for the crackling of the logs in the fire. “I did it for fear he would expose you.”

Reid rolled his head against the back of the chair to look at her again. “Instead, you were the one exposed, weren’t you?” he said, giving her a devilish smile. “Exposed quite a bit as I recall.”

He watched as she stifled a sob, fighting for control before she continued on. “I am your wife; your welfare and safety mean the utmost to me.”

Making a decision, he set the brandy bottle down on the floor and leaned toward her. “You are my wife.”

Honor nodded vigorously. “Yes, and I love you.”

His eyes narrowed. “You love me?” he asked, mocking the words she spoke. “You barely admitted to finding me attractive before we spoke our vows, and now you love me?” he snarled, incredulous that she would dare speak such words to him. “Could it be you are confusing love for the fear of being put aside when we reach Rosegate?”

She flinched, unconsciously raising her chin in unspoken defiance. “You lied to me as well, Milord,” she replied stiffly. He arched one brow at her, a smile playing about his lips, but he said nothing, waiting for her to continue. “You lied to me when you posed as the Glanconer, when you ‘saved’ me from those two Irishmen I noticed you employ as outriders.” She paused. “Is that how you knew about the papers? Because of those two beasts?”

Reid sighed. “Those two beasts are now your kin as well as mine. Uncles, to be more exact. And no, I did not find out about the papers from them. I found out from James,” he said, returning her glare with one of his own. “If he hadn’t told me, and you had delivered those papers to my stepfather as you intended, we would both, by now, be dancing on the end of a rope.”

Quick as a striking snake, Reid reached out and clasped her right hand she held clenched in a fist on her lap. He squeezed the tiny wrist until her fingers opened and she gave a soft cry. With a mirthless smile, he twisted the ring on the finger around. “And what was this?” he asked, recognizing the signet ring she wore since the first evening they had met. “The truth? Honesty?” He released her hand so roughly she fell backward into the chair.

Honor looked down at the ring, twisting it around her finger. “I kept it because it was yours,” she whispered.

“You kept it because you thought it would further your ends,” he argued. “When I had told you who I was, you should have confessed to me then.” His eyes strayed to the ring, its facets glinting in the firelight. “You should have returned my property.”

“You shouldn’t have robbed me!” Honor riposted.



Reid laughed at her, lifting his eyebrows. “Which wouldn’t have been necessary if you had told me the truth. If you had made a confession.” He leaned back in his chair, enjoying the verbal sparring. “Is it so hard to trust someone else, Honor? To share the burden?” He draped his arms on either side of the chair, letting them hang over the high sides, his hands dangling loosely. “Didn’t I prove myself trustworthy? Did I raise the alarm during your escape? I rescued you from two rogues and made a confession of my own regarding my past.” His eyes were hooded now as they skimmed over her body. “I married you and offered you protection, and asked before we consummated our marriage if you had anything you wished for me to assist you with. Anything that I could provide for you.”

Honor nodded silently, a single tear spilling over onto her cheek. “You did, but I could not then accept what my heart was telling me. I could not believe that I was no longer alone, that you meant what you said.” She looked up at him, her eyes beseeching. “You must understand. I have been alone for so long, fought all my own battles. When the offer of assistance was given, I did not know how to accept it.”

Reid barely listened, his eyes fastened on the swell of one breast that peeked out from the deep vee of her chemise. “You are my wife?” His hand reached for the brandy bottle and he took another long swallow to fortify himself, to strengthen his crumbling resolve against her words, her excuses.

“I am,” she whispered.

Reid took another long swallow, the brandy now making his limbs heavy. “Then service me,” he simply said, his free hand going to the buttons of his breeches and freeing his erection. He grinned as it sprang free, thumping his belly as her eyes widened.

Time seemed to crawl as he watched her reaction to the sight of his uncut cock. Her eyes dilated, her lips parted slightly and her color heightened, making him grow even thicker. “You seem to enjoy feasting your eyes upon it,” he said, his voice a little slurred, lazy, his eyelids which drooped over dark eyes gave him a heavy lidded, sexual expression.

“It is...immense, Milord,” she whispered, shocked.

“It fills you quite well. Very snug,” he said, giving her a licentious smile. “Come to your knees before me wife. Prove your sorrow at cuckolding your husband with—” he chuckled and took another swallow “—your husband.”

Honor’s eyes flicked up at his face, a blush staining her face crimson. “My knees?” she whispered, her eyes going back to his groin.

“Aye,” he said, all trace of his English accent falling away to expose the wild criminal that lurked just beneath the surface. He held out his hand and was surprised to find it very steady.

“Isn’t this activity a little coarse for two people to engage in?” She licked her lips. Whether the action was intentional or not, Reid did not know, but it was having the damndest effect on him.

He grinned wickedly at her. “I’ve done it to you,” he said softly, stroking his fist up and down his length as he spoke. “And I think that anything shared between two adults who are consenting is natural. Not obscene.” He looked down at his lap. “Do it Honor. Kiss it.”

She took it timidly in her hand. He drew her towards him, on her knees, before his cock. “Take it in your mouth Honor,” he said softly, his voice almost a plea.

“I don’t know how!” She gasped when he reached down to stroke the skin back from its head, exposing the tiny pearl of moisture as it dewed the tip.

“Kiss it. Use your tongue on it as you do when we kiss,” he ordered, his voice breathy and distant.

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Feeling the slow burn in her belly move much lower at being asked to do something so—obscene, she tentatively licked her lips, hearing Reid groan at the action. “Hold it as I am doing,” he

commanded. Her hand automatically came up and obeyed before she realized what she was doing.

Leaning over, she kissed the tip of it, wetting her lips with the dew that crowned the bulbous head. Her kiss was rewarded by a low groan from Reid's chest. She kissed it again, along its length, reaching out with her tongue to swirl over the head, gauging her success at pleasing him by the noises he made.

Learning quickly what pleased him by the noises he made during her exploration, she found herself becoming more excited.

"Take it in your mouth Honor." His voice was almost a plea and she felt her heart surge at the control she had over him. She covered the head with her lips, opening them little by little before she covered the head completely with her mouth. In response, Reid's hand wove through the back of her head, holding her still and moaning in pleasure before rocking another inch into the moist depths with his hips. "Ah! Your mouth is so hot!" he groaned in his thick brogue, making her tremble. "That feels so good sweet. Try and take a wee bit more in that hot mouth of yours!"

Honor felt herself grow wet as her body heated at the delicious, tingling sensations that swept through her. She grew bolder in her explorations, using one hand to hold his throbbing shaft steady while the other reached up to cup his heavy sac. "Aye, take my bollocks into your hand. Feel the seed in them burning to spill inside of you."

At her touch, he groaned again. His fingers tightened in her hair, hips jerked up to meet her mouth, burying a few more inches of his great length into her until she felt him at the back of her throat. Her spirit was soaring knowing she could make him feel as senseless as he did her. "Aye lovey, that's it. Use that beautiful mouth on my hard cock." He groaned, all pretense at trying to keep his voice in that smooth, modulated English accent gone. "Suck it deep into your throat," he whispered hoarsely, obviously enjoying what she was doing.

Honor began bobbing her head in earnest, up and down his length, each time taking a little more into her mouth, her throat, until she found with dismay she could not fit all of his bulging cock in. She gently cupped the furred sac of his testicles, feeling the weight of them in her hand, relishing the tiny hairs that prickled her sensitive palm. "Kiss my bollocks," he whispered to her as his hand closed over hers.

She lifted her head then leaned down to do as instructed, feeling the hairs tickle her nose as he guided her hand in stroking his cock. "Gently take one in your mouth love," he coaxed, his hand using hers to pump up and down his saliva-slickened shaft. He groaned again when she sucked one gently into her mouth, using her tongue to massage it.

"Here love, try some brandy," he said, a smile in his voice. She sat back on her heels, watching as he poured a few drops on the shaft of his cock. He released her hand and leaned back into his chair. The fact that he watched her greedily lap up the alcohol didn't embarrass her all. She didn't know which excited her more—knowing he was enjoying her ministrations or obeying his softly-voiced commands.

After a while Reid gently pried her mouth from him and turned her around on her knees so her back faced him, leaning her over the opposite chair. She felt him toss the hem of her chemise up to her waist, exposing her for his viewing pleasure.

The heat from the fireplace warming her already hot skin, she felt his hand slowly move over her back, down her rounded buttocks, then up and under until his finger delved into the slippery cleft between her legs. When his finger slipped and slid along her clitoris, a chuckle escaped his mouth as she writhed, begging him in French to fill her. "A wife that loves pleasure as much as me. How fortuitous I am," he whispered. He slipped his middle finger into her wet channel, giving it a few strokes before pulling it free. She could hear him taste her desire, lick his finger coated with her fluid, and it made her even more excited.

"Aye lassie, I'll be feeding that tight little cunny my cock," he said. Gripping her hips he slid

onto his knees behind her and positioned himself at her entrance. "Arch your back for me love," he whispered hotly. She responded to his command immediately, eagerly.

The sleeves of her chemise were pushed down her shoulders, exposing creamy skin. She shuddered, a ripple of pleasure breaking over her skin. Reid growled and thrust forward without restraint, impaling her on his cock in one smooth motion. She cried out in pleasure, her back arching again as he chuckled in her ear, the sound sending tremors of delight through her. He was bracing himself over her with one hand on the seat she was bent over, his head even with hers, curtaining them both with the spill of his copper hair and the scent of brandy as he hung his head, his breathing unsteady.

Then he moved; withdrawing torturously slow as more and more of his cock came free of Honor's tight sheath. He brushed aside the thick weight of her hair and licked along the back of her neck, sucking at the skin on her shoulder. He turned his head slightly, his lips gently brushing her ear as he whispered, the vibrations sending more shivers of excitement through her body. "You have such a grand cunny Honor," he said as his hand reached under her to the top of her slit. He rolled her clit under the pad of his finger, matching his slow, torturous thrusts with a gentle tap.

"Yes! Yes!" Honor breathed heavily, her nipples rasping the edge of the chair seat as he pushed her forward with each push.

"Honor!" Reid whispered and she gave a little shriek in passion. "You are so tight, so wet and so tight!" he hissed. He pushed harder inside of her, bottoming out against her cervix and making Honor expel a loud hiss of breath. "Your sweet little quim is heaven love," he said, moving his hips in earnest now. As he moved within her, he twisted his hips, thrusting and withdrawing as his finger continued the slow roll over her clitoris.

"That's it love, fuck me back. Push that sweet little cunny onto my cock. Stretch it out, let me feel it," Reid encouraged. Her hips rose to meet his thrusts, his voice a deep rumble in her ear as he licked and teased the sensitive tissue, setting her body aflame. "Stretch it out on my cock," he encouraged again. He nuzzled against her ear, his finger still buried in the top of her cleft, in the thick dark triangle of hair. "I mean to make you scream Honor."

"Scream in pleasure as I take mine from you," he commanded in a low tone. She felt him rub the rough stubble of his whiskers on the back of her neck.

"Oh!" She screamed into the chair cushion as he ruthlessly pounded into her, bruising her sensitive thighs. "Oh! Reid!" she cried out, pressing herself against him. She heard him groan and gasp as her hips came up to meet his. Her fingers dug into the arms of the chair as she thrust upward, her pussy muscles milking his cock as she came.

"Aye, that's it love. Now it's my turn," he whispered. She felt him pull his cock out, leaving the head firmly embedded in her passage as he showered kisses on her neck, shoulders and back. Again he pushed his cock in, his voice a low groan as her wet channel slowly opened for the thick shaft.

"Such a quim!" Reid said, appreciation in his voice. He pressed more inside her, his thumb still teasing the hard nub of her clit.

She felt Reid's hand come up under her body, cupping her breast in his hand, catching the nipple between two fingers. The pressure inside her sex built to such a high pitch it made every muscle along her legs and arms seize up, tighter and tighter, until she screamed her release into the cushion again.

She could feel Reid's orgasm growing inside him, clamoring for release. With her slick pussy hungrily clenching at his cock, he slammed himself deep inside of her, anchoring her with both his hands on her hips as she felt him spill himself into her hungry channel.

Relaxing finally, her body slowly releasing all its tension, Reid kissed her neck and sucked at her shoulder. He stayed there for a long moment, each of them trying to catch their breath, before he slowly pulled away from her, pulling his still thick cock from her cunt. He chuckled at her groan of dismay when he finally pulled himself free.

He stood up and then leaned over her again. She could feel his long member slap wetly against

the outside of her thigh as he lifted her into his arms, carrying her to the bed.

"It appears Elisa was wrong," she heard him say softly. As her eyes drowsily came open, he gave her a quick kiss on the tip of her nose.

"Hmm?" Replete with his lovemaking, she struggled to stay awake.

"She said that one did not force his affections on his wife," he recited. A smile played about his lips.

"Hmmp." Honor rolled toward his side of the bed where he was quickly undressing. "Any way you wish to make love to me is perfectly fine Reid," she said sleepily, watching as each part of his finely muscled and beautiful body was revealed. "As long as you make love to me."

Reid slid between the blankets, lifting his arm so she could cuddle next to him. "You have no preference, Milady?" Honor liked how fitted together nicely. Her head cradled on his chest, one long leg slung over his, she played her fingers on his chest before answering.

She grinned. "I like the way the Glanconer makes love, Milord. I will not lie to you. He is brutal and rough and makes me want things I hadn't known I wanted."

"Has nothing to do with his nasty mouth, aye?" he asked, his voice laden with humor.

Honor lifted her head to look him in the eye, her own glittering with mirth. "Well, he is the Love Talker, is he not?"

Reid grunted and pushed her head back down onto his chest. "Aye, well...I don't think love has much to do with what he's thinkin' when he's talking that way," he replied, the lilt his brogue gave sending another sleepy shiver of delight through her.

Honor felt herself slowly drifting off to sleep, safe and warm in the comfort of Reid's arms. "I love you Reid," she whispered, finally falling asleep.

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Reid lay awake for a long time after her breathing had become deep and even, an indication that she slept.

A strange feeling swelled in his chest as he thought of what she had said. Yes, she did love him, but did he love her? Or was it merely a sense of not wanting another man to have her, know her secret appetite for sex? *Am I so greedy that I would keep her without love, slake my appetite with a woman who is also my wife?* No matter what he wanted to do to her, with her, in the bedroom, it was a sacrament...of marriage. He would not be able to claim the same for any mistress. He puzzled over the twisted reasoning in his head. So the question was: did he keep her because he loved her, or because she had proved to be a willing bed partner in whatever form of sport he had chosen at that particular moment? *Surely one did not feel this way about their wife!*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Honor woke late the next morning to the soft tickling of butterfly-light touches along the insides of her sore thighs. She moaned and slowly opened her eyes to find Reid sitting between her knees, his fingers lightly touching her as his eyes hungrily drank in the sight of her, spread open for him.

Still softly skimming his fingers along the insides of her thighs, he gripped her hip tightly, stilling her squirming body. He smiled as his hand went higher, watching as her face flushed with desire. Finding the top of her slit, he dragged his finger down her damp channel, rewarding her gasp with another devilish grin.

He grabbed her ankle, propping her foot flat on the feather mattress, and then gripped the thin ankle tightly to prevent her from closing her legs to his scrutiny. His finger slipped along her crevice, teasing the hard nub of her clitoris until it peeked out from under its hood.

Gasping and wiggling under the expertise of his hand, she reached up behind her head with both hands and tightly grabbed the pillows behind her head.

Looking satisfied at the results of his finger, he bowed his body, ducking his coppery head under her chemise to plaster his mouth to her clitoris, gently flicking it with his tongue.

Her legs came together and almost smashed his head as she let out a shriek of mingled surprise and pleasure. Chuckling, Reid lifted her ankle higher so the heel touched the rounded curve of her butt, then he grabbed her other ankle and positioned it likewise, pulling them further apart, completely exposing her to his mouth and tongue.

Honor was about to come out of her skin. She could feel every muscle in her body quivering as her heartbeat began to thrum in her crotch, directly under Reid's attentive mouth, where his tongue was wreaking such passion on her body.

Her heartbeat grew stronger and harder as Reid's tongue darted inside of her, wiggling and dancing as he pressed his nose against her clitoris. Her body drew tighter and tighter and her hips thrust forward reflexively as her heart seemed to explode. Blood rushed through her body in a tidal wave as she let out a shuddering gasp, ending in a low moan as her body collapsed against the mattress.

Reid wasn't through with her though. Coming out from under her chemise, he smiled wickedly as he released one ankle, only to guide the head of his cock to her wet channel. "Would you like this Milady?" he asked. Not waiting for her reply he thrust his finger back inside her tight pussy.

As his lips captured hers again he let a groan slip into her mouth, which she matched as he pulled his finger free. He guided his hard cock toward her, his hands slipping under her buttocks to grab her and hold her still.

He lifted his mouth from hers and pressed his forehead against hers. Breathing in short gasps, he thrust his hips forward, splitting her open with the thick head of his cock.

She gasped and arched upward as she was filled with a blinding pressure. He pressed forward further. "Sweet Christ!" he hissed. Pushing her chemise up higher, he met her fevered eyes with his own.

"More," she whispered urgently. Without a word he pushed his hips forward, thrusting more of his thick shaft into her. The sensation was so erotic that she gasped and fell against the bed again.

Her knees spread, her body prone, she opened herself to him. He leaned over her and buried himself fully inside of her, his mouth greedily covering one breast.

Again, she gasped out in pleasure, her hand cradling his head as he lathed his tongue over the

peak. “Oh, yes... Reid! Yes!” she moaned, her long legs coming up around his hips, her feet locking behind his ass as she trapped him within her. A pressure she had quickly become familiar with from their previous lovemaking began to slowly build inside her.

Reid moved in earnest now, slow long strokes slowly bringing her to the edge of an orgasm. He watched her face as he rhythmically pumped his hips. She clamped her legs tightly around him, the walls of her hot pussy clenching his cock, her body willing him to orgasm.

“You have such a tight sheath!” he ground hoarsely. “Oh, sweet Jesus. You feel so soft, so wet around my cock.” The pounding of body against body increased in intensity.

Her tiny pussy clenched and unclenched around him, in time with his own motions, making them both rush towards an orgasm faster than a shooting star could streak across the night sky, or so it seemed.

The skin of her chest and face deepened in tone, her lower lip caught between pearly teeth as she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts again and again, her breasts bouncing in rhythm to his strokes. He thrust deeply into her, the head of his cock tapping her cervix. She let out a low groan of pleasure. He withdrew and then thrust deeply into her again, letting out a groan of his own as her cunt clamped onto his cock, inflaming the already swollen muscle as he pulled himself out before thrusting in again.

The pressure had built beyond anything she had ever felt, and the first time the fat head of his long cock bottomed out, she felt blood surge to her groin as she bit her lip to keep from screaming in pleasure. When again he did it, she felt herself get closer to the orgasm she sought. The third time and her fingers dug into his bare shoulders as her hips lifted to meet his ravaging cock.

Her world exploded in bright pinpoints of light behind her eyelids. From far away she heard a whimper that built into a loud shout of pleasure as she climaxed around his cock, which he had, thankfully, buried deep inside of her.

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“Damn!” he bit out, his face clenched in passion as he felt his balls pull up tight against his body. His legs began to shake as the first stirrings of his orgasm came upon him. He felt Honor begin to tremble again beneath him, her back arching, raising her pointed pink nipples into the air as she moaned through another climax.

It was more than he could take. He plunged deeply within her one last time as she hugged him tightly with her legs and arms, spilling himself within her deeply, groaning out his satisfaction as he twitched and throbbed within her clenching sex.

He dropped his head onto her pale heaving breasts as they both urgently sought to regain their breath. He gently rubbed the whiskers of his chin over her long nipples and gave her a smile as he rocked his hips forward into her again.

“Ooh,” she groaned, her eyebrows knitting together, making him smile.

Reid smiled as their heartbeats began to assume their natural rhythm again. “Aye lass, you make me feel much the same way,” he said softly, kissing one breast and then the other as he slowly moved his hips back, pulling his cock from her warm depths.

Honor sighed as he came free and adjusted her chemise to some semblance of order. He gave her a devilish grin—a look she quickly learnt was an indication of trouble—as he motioned to the deep neckline of her linen chemise. “You might want to tuck those away for the time being,” he said then rolled off the bed and onto his feet in one fluid movement before turning toward her. He smiled mischievously. “They’ve a way of makin’ me forget what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said as pulled his breeches on and bent over to pull his shirt on over his head. “I’ll go and get us something to eat,” he said, turning toward the door. “Shall I have Agnes come in and help you dress?”

“Yes, please,” she replied. She watched with appreciation as he tucked the shirttails into the

waist band of his snug breeches. He slowly looked over her, enjoying the sparkle that emanated from her entire body—the sparkle he had put there. He turned and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

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Honor waited until Reid had left the room before giving way to the giggle of delight that slipped up her belly and out her throat.

Her head filled with events that had quickly escalated, culminating to this point in time, until she felt as if she would explode from joy. She hadn't dreamed during the long weeks spent at her father's side that she could ever be this happy. She hadn't dared imagine she would ever feel joy again while she mourned him during the weeks after his death.

And yet she did. The love she felt for Reid gave her so much joy and happiness that she didn't think she ever really felt the two emotions before.

She glanced at the door where Reid had exited. Who would have thought that one brief meeting, under very unusual circumstances, would have led to this? She could clearly remember how distraught and anxious she had been when she was straddling the garden wall, how much sorrow had weighted her belly as she sought to complete the task her father had laid before her.

She felt her face heat in shame over the nearsightedness she had displayed. The man who could have solved all her problems, the man who had proven to be her savior—indeed, he had rescued her from herself and the twin demons of fear and secrecy—had been standing in the shadows of that garden, had been near her all along.

The pain on his face last night, when he thought she had played him false, and indeed, even the manner in which they had reconciled, had her heart pounding in her chest. Her face blushed in memory of the reconciliation and how very much she enjoyed it.

She grabbed the pillow next to her and clutched it to her chest in an embrace she wished she could give Reid right at that moment. Smiling widely, she nuzzled her face into the pillow, drinking in his scent that still clung to it. She felt for the first time in her life that nothing bad could ever happen to her again as long as Reid stayed by her side.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the end, it had taken him much longer below stairs than Reid thought it would. He had every intention of repeating the morning's exercise with his wife, telling Agnes to see to her in a half hour after they had broken their fast, but the landlord had stiffly informed him that James and two other men were waiting to speak with him in the private dining room.

Furrowing his brow in confusion, he entered the room only to find James, Duncan and Ian gobbling up the remnants of what looked like a very large meal.

"What's this about?" he asked, irritated that his coupling with Honor was put off by a few minutes.

James quickly chewed the mouthful of food in his mouth, swallowing before replying. "I thought you should know that Percival Harlowe arrived at the inn last night after you'd gone to bed," he said, wiping his mouth on a cloth. "I sent the landlord's son to retrieve Duncan and Ian, in case we may need them."

Duncan responded to James' gesture by grinning widely around the food packed into his mouth. Reid pulled a face. "What the devil is Percy doing here?"

"No doubt word of Honor's vows under canon law have reached him. My guess is he intends to steal her away before the wedding is consummated," James said briefly, frowning at Ian as the skinny man snatched a biscuit away from under James' reaching hand.

Reid snorted. "It's a little late for that!" he replied softly. His comment drew a bigger grin from Duncan and a guffaw of laughter from Ian.

James, ignoring the hilarity at the comment, shrugged. "He doesn't know that though, does he?" He quickly snatched up a chunk of cheese from Ian's questing fingers. "And as we all know, marriage by canon law is easily argued."

Reid felt his temper rising. "We had over twenty witnesses!" he almost shouted, angry at how the situation was slowly going out of his control.

James again shrugged as he popped a piece of cheese in his mouth. "Yes, well...witnesses can be bought, can't they?" He chewed industriously for a moment. "And if Percy has Honor, then he has control of her money. Money that can easily buy off witnesses."

Reid trembled in impotent rage for a moment, knowing that James was right. If the Blackthorne's and other witnesses were bought off—which they could easily be, having no loyalty to anyone but themselves—with Honor's money in Percy's control, it would be as if her marriage to him never existed. He only had Elisa as a witness. It was an easy enough argument to call into light that she was his godmother, acting in his best interests.

Reid glowered, his face taking on a dark and dangerous look. "The nobles should be trying to do something about legally recognizing marriages than spending their time with nonsense," he growled, remembering the dandies at Blackthorne's ball dancing attendance upon the ladies of the ton while the lord and dukes spent the evening gambling.

Ian, watching James' cheese with a greedy eye, spoke up. "They could say you wed her for her money. Especially if they see the state of Rosegate." James looked up in question at Ian, who gave the older man a shrug in return. "There's not much time to be spending on making a home grand if you are busy being a highwayman, is there?"

Reid glowered at Ian after receiving a condemning glare from James. "Please, do not try and



help me from this predicament!” His voice dripped with sarcasm, making Ian blush.

Duncan spoke up now, chasing down his meal with a swig of ale from a pewter goblet. “I’m thinking that if you don’t mean to stay wed boy, then this is a foine state of affairs. Let Percy hie off with her!” He exchanged a meaningful glance with James. “I believe you have said that you were willing to do anything for Glenrose and the restoration of your titles.” He shrugged with one massive shoulder. “Well now, you’ve got the titles and you have Glenrose. What does it matter if Percy has the wench? You have your witness and the contract is signed.”

Reid’s fists clenched at his sides, itching to pummel Duncan. “Watch your tongue Duncan,” he growled. “The woman is mine and mine alone!”

Duncan’s eyes fastened on Reid. “Well boy-o, seems to me you’ve settled into wedded bliss quite contently.”

Reid, his look thunderous, turned on Duncan. “What the devil are you talking about?”

Duncan leaned back in his chair, completely unconcerned by the angry light in Reid’s black eyes. “I’m thinking you love the lass.”

Reid narrowed his eyes in response. “I’d sooner be in hell than be in love.”

Duncan shrugged. “Well now, most would think they are the one and the same, but there is no denyin’ you love the lass.”

Reid opened his mouth to reply but Agnes’ shrill scream pierced through every wall and door in the small building. The cry propelled Reid into action. He was out the door and halfway up the stairs to his chamber before the other men were out of their chairs.

He burst through the door to find the elderly maid staring at the opened window, the room empty of any other person save the freely weeping old woman. “She’s gone!”

Reid stormed through the room, his eyes searching for some sign of Honor. There were signs a struggle had taken place: the ewer was knocked over onto its side, its contents spilt over the shattered remains of the wash basin; a chair had been kicked to the floor; but most importantly, Honor’s cloak was missing.

Sneering, he disregarded the facts strewn in front of him. Instead, he chose to believe the worst of his wife, reverting back to his opinion of her last evening. “She’s run off,” he stated flatly, trying to ignore the ache that had settled in the region of his chest at the thought.

Duncan guffawed behind him. “Ah Reid. God love you lad, but she’s been stolen, not run off!”

Agnes turned on her heel and glared at Reid. “You are a foul man to believe she would be capable of running away!”

Reid gestured around the room as Ian wandered toward the open window and James peered at the bed. “Why then did she not scream? Why did she not make a noise to alert the house if she was taken against her will?”

James cleared his throat, a noise of discovery, as he came to the far side of the bed. Ian followed the older man’s gaze to the wooden plank floor, his Adam’s apple bobbing, alarm painting his face. Curious, Reid came around to the other side of the bed and looked down at the floor as well. A small puddle of blood stained the floor. The sight of it was so incongruous to the scene, to the memory of what he and Honor had done less than an hour ago, that it took a moment for his brain to register what it was.

Duncan had come up beside him by the bed. The rough, black head of the Irishman followed the fat drops of blood to the side of the window, softly speaking as he did so, words Reid didn’t even want to imagine. “Mayhap she didn’t scream because she was fighting for her life.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Honor stared holes through Percy as the coach bounced along the country road back toward London. She watched as he pressed a linen to his nose, whispering curses under his breath at her as he did.

“Be thankful that is all you received,” she hissed. Stemming a shudder, she remembered in vivid detail the feeling of his nose crumbling under her foot when he tried to drag her from the bed. “Your nose presents a large target Percy. You should try to keep it far from other people’s business else risk injury to it again.”

When he had told her he had an accomplice who held the Wentworth’s and Reid at gunpoint, ready to fire at his command, she had gone with him quietly, not wanting to do anything that could possibly injure either the new family she gained on her marriage, or the man she loved. “Did you even have an accomplice besides the brute driving this coach?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

Percy gave a smile that made her skin crawl. “No,” he said simply, dabbing at the flow of blood.

“How do you intend on making me marry you when I am already wed?” she asked, her voice light and curious.

Percy glared at her from behind the large linen neck cloth he was using to stem the red flow from his nose. “With enough money, anything can be purchased m’dear. Including accomplices.”

Honor sneered at him. “You’ve no money.”

Percy lifted his pale eyebrows. “But you do. And once we are wed, I will have your money.”

“You are a criminal!” she whispered. Her eyes slightly rounded as she really saw her cousin for the first time, disgusted at what he was and a little afraid of what he was capable of.

Running to fat around the middle, Percy was the spoilt brat of an only son. Reaching higher than his birth placed him, he found at an early age he enjoyed gambling with the peerage; they had enjoyed taking the small inheritance left to him by his mother. His eyes were small and beady, almost lost in the folds of flesh that rounded his cheeks and face. His face, which glistened sickly with an over-abundance of perspiration and oil, practically disappeared into the neck of a greasy looking shirt the points were that high, the current fashion doing him no favors at all. He had a shock of white blonde hair atop his head, his face so pink right now it gave Honor the impression of an angry piglet. An angry piglet that was now returning her glare.

“If you had given me money in the first place, I would have never done this,” he whined in defense.

“It wasn’t your money,” she simply said. “You had opportunity while my father employed you to cease your habits, but you did not. How long was I to go on supporting you? Until my money ran out as well?”

He pursed his fleshy lips together in a pout. “Until I was able to overcome my gambling.”

Honor snorted in disgust and glanced out the window at the late morning sun. The grass that grew beside the road looked greener than she had ever seen it. She looked at her captor again, sorrow in her eyes. “You would have never overcome it. My money would have only aided you.”

Percy leaned forward, his voice a plaintive cry. “Have you never loved anything, Honor? Has nothing stirred you where you can think of only it and the satisfaction it brings?” He flopped back onto the squabs of the coach. “Gambling makes me feel whole...good...satisfied. When I have a winning hand, it makes me feel as if I am God. As if I can overcome anything!” He watched her with watery

eyes and Honor was shocked to find he was weeping. "As if all I need is one more good draw of the cards and everything will be set to rights."

Until that last statement, Honor had thought about Reid. If love was to be defined in the terms Percy gave it, then she did indeed love Reid. He made her feel whole, good and satisfied. He made her feel safe as well. Honor glanced out the window again. He made her feel loved.

Slowly bringing her mind back to the present, the memory of Reid's hands on her body still replaying in her head, she felt a secretive smile steal to her lips. When she looked at Percy again, it was to find his eyes greedily taking in her breasts that bounced with each rut and hole the coach hit.

He licked his lips. One tentative hand reached out, stopping just inches from her breast. "You know, I could have you right now. Take your maidenhead and claim you as my own. You'd have to marry me then. You might be carrying my babe."

Disgusted, Honor slapped his hand away from her. "Again, you arrived too late. I'm already bedded. If I carry a babe, it's Reid's, not yours."

Percy pursed his lips together angrily as he cradled the hand she slapped against his chest. "You've no proof of that," he said loudly as the sound of riders came from behind them on the road. "I could kill him and then you'd have to marry me, or the child will be fatherless."

"Better a fatherless child of someone like Reid than the stepson of a coward." Honor shook her head at him like she would a small child. "You're being childish." The sound of approaching horses grew louder. "If you tried to kill Reid, he would beat you to death. Think with reason Percy."

"I've a guard! My guard would kill him!" Percy shouted over the horses and riders that were overtaking them.

Honor lifted one dark eyebrow at him. "Ah, the same guard that ran from my garden?"

Percy pouted. "That wasn't fair at all. Reid ambushed him."

Honor chuckled. "Much in the way your guard ambushed me?"

Percy fell silent, which was a good thing; she knew he couldn't win the argument. The guard drove the horses hard; Honor could hear the whip sailing through the air whenever they slowed to a trot instead of an all out run.

She busied herself thinking about Reid, having no doubt he would come for her. She only wondered when, and how long before he realized she was missing.

The memory of him disguised as the Glanconer came to mind: the floppy-brimmed black hat that immediately had her blood racing; the strange accent he spoke with while in that guise or in the throes of heated passion made her heart flutter. She felt herself smile again, hoping he would come for her as the Glanconer. But she quickly realized if he did come for her as the highwayman while the sun was up, he could be endangering his life.

As soon as she had the thought, the coach swerved around a bend in the road, almost tipping over at the speed with which the guard had taken the curve. Giving a shriek that sounded vaguely like laughter, she wound up on the floor of the coach as she had the first time the Glanconer had robbed her. The coach barely had time to slow down when shouted words rang through the late afternoon. "Stand and deliver!" Her heart surged at the sound of the voice, instantly recognizing the faint burr and deep tone.

The guard at the top of the coach did not stop. Instead, he whipped the horses harder, clods of dirt flying up from the hooves and through the window as the carriage sped past a mounted rider, clothed in black, a floppy-brimmed hat pulled low over his face.

A shot rang out and the rider again shouted for the coach to stop as something hard and solid landed on the top of the carriage roof. On hearing the gunshot, the thought of how much danger he was in leached every vestige of color in her face. Realizing her hope of Reid rescuing her as the Glanconer had come true, she faced the unpalatable truth that he could very likely be caught if not killed.

Honor's heart began to pound in a slow sort of ominous beat as the driver again whipped the

horses. Percy stuck his head out the window to encourage his guard to go faster. “They’re catching up, damn you!” Percy shouted. His eyes were widened in fright as he pulled back inside the coach.

Honor climbed back into her seat, watching Percy as his eyes cast wildly about, obviously searching for some sort of escape. “Slow the horses down Percy!” she shouted above the cracks of gunfire and the pounding of hooves. Concern for not only the possibility of the coach tipping if the driver took another sharp turn, but for Reid’s safety as well, had her begging Percy for the first time ever. “They are faster than we are! We will be caught! Slow the horses down and give them your valuables!” she pleaded.

Percy’s face twisted into a mask of fear. “D’you even know what these criminals are capable of?” he shouted, spittle flying from his mouth.

“A few coin is not worth your life Percy!” she tried to reason with him. “Stop and give them what they want!” she encouraged.

“I’ve no coin! I’ve nothing Honor! They will kill me!” Percy shouted back into her face. “I’ve nothing to give them and they will kill me for it!”

Honor sat back against the cushions of the coach, shocked at the vehemence in his tone, his fear. And most of all, his cowardice.

Steeling herself against the smile that threatened, she looked at Percy kindly, putting one smooth hand over his. “Give them me,” she said calmly.

Percy jerked his eyes toward her. “You?” His eyes bulged in surprise as they were jostled inside the coach.

Pushing the smile down inside of her, she nodded wisely. “It is the least I can do for my kin,” she said sadly. “I am willing to be handed over to the criminals, and when—” she paused dramatically “—if they choose to release me for ransom, you can find a box of gold buried in the southwest corner of my father’s garden in London. You can buy my release with that,” she replied, knowing he wouldn’t buy her release. Knowing any money he found would be spent on his gambling habit.

Percy’s eyes searched hers for a moment, as if trying to read her thoughts, to see if there was another purpose in her self sacrifice. Finally, deciding her course of action was the wisest, he leaned his head out the window to shout for the driver to stop. But it was already slowing down, as if the driver had read Percy’s thoughts.

Percy pulled his head back into the coach window, his eyes wider and more frightened than before as the carriage bumped along to a slower pace, finally rolling to a stop. Before the coach was at a complete stand still, the carriage door was ripped open and Reid stood there, his face a murderous mask.

Percy opened his mouth slightly in shock as Reid reached in and grabbed Honor around the waist with one arm, the other quickly striking out and slamming a heavy fist against Percy’s jaw. He slumped unconsciously in his seat.

“Damnable bastard,” Reid muttered, turning his attention to the men who had ridden up beside them in the road.

Duncan pulled the floppy hat from his head, his eyes fixed on Reid. “Are you all right lad?”

Reid nodded, stumbling a bit against Honor. She let out a small cry and wrapped her arms about his waist to help hold him up. Duncan quickly slid out of his saddle as Ian joined them. The burly, black-haired Irishman caught Reid as the tall, auburn-haired man began to fall forward in a faint, crumbling into Duncan’s strong grip very gracefully for a man of his height.

“What’s amiss?” Ian asked anxiously as he slid from the saddle to stand alongside Honor.

Assuring herself that Duncan had a grip on Reid, she looked into Reid’s face, now gone deathly pale. Lifting her hand to stroke his cheek and gently call his name, she saw with horror her hand was covered in blood up to her elbow.

Looking quickly from her arm to Reid’s side, she let out a small cry of anguish as Duncan and Ian growled an exchange of words. “He’s been poked in the belly by that fiend atop the coach,” Duncan

growled at Ian, who glanced up with a murderous look of rage on his face.

"I thought I saw steel as they fought, but wasn't certain," Ian mumbled in reply, his eyes focused on the top of the carriage. "Not till I caught a better look at it when the lad returned the favor. Though I'll admit I thought it was Reid who had the dagger."

Honor followed his gaze to the man draped over the top of the coach, his sightless eyes opened to the sky above, a dagger hilt protruding from the coat on his chest. "I didn't see a weapon when Reid jumped on the coach!" Ian said in a breathy whisper, helping Duncan to hold up the taller man. "Else I would have shot the bastard rather than have our nephew hurt."

"Nor did I until it was too late," Duncan replied, gesturing with his head at the coach. "Let's get him in the coach. We'll drive it back to the inn." He hefted Reid easily up onto his shoulder, easing his burden into the coach and onto the seat Honor had been lifted from only moments ago. "You ride with Reid and the lass in case the boar there thinks he's sprouted a pair of bollocks," Duncan said to Ian, who nodded assent and handed Honor up into the coach.

Having secured their own horses to the carriage, Duncan pushed the body of Percy's nameless accomplice into the road while Ian shoved Percy from the cushioned squabs of the coach to the floor. Once the coach took off again, the ride back to the inn smooth under Duncan's gentle guidance of the lathered horses, Ian offered Honor a seat next to him. She firmly refused, preferring to cradle Reid's head in her lap while stemming the flow of blood from his wound.

Honor whispered sweet endearments in French to Reid, stroking his brow and weeping freely, ignoring the man opposite her as she tried to will her husband back to consciousness. When there were no signs of revival, she turned her attention to her new kin. "How did this happen?" she asked Ian, her eyes swimming in tears.

Ian shrugged, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing furiously as his hands twisted the familiar black, floppy-brimmed hat the Glanconer wore. "When the coach would not stop and almost toppled over, Reid jumped onto the back of it, meaning to take the reins," he said softly, his eyes trained on his nephew. "Duncan'll be able to tell us more, but it is my guess that when Reid landed on the roof, the blackguard driving turned with a knife and stuck it in Reid's belly. A favor Reid quickly returned with the same dagger once he'd pulled it out."

Honor looked down at Reid, softly stroking his brow. "Why?" she asked, awed by the extent of Reid's courage.

"Because he thought you were hurt," Ian said simply. "Because he loves you."

Honor caught the sob that rose in her throat and let the fresh tears spill freely from her eyes. Closing her eyes and trying to mentally will him to live, a fat tear drop splashed onto Reid's cheek, making his eyes flutter open.

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He watched her weep silently for a moment, relishing the feel of her soft touch on his forehead, the tears that fell for him, the softly whispered prayer in French for his wellbeing.

Sniffling loudly, Honor finally opened her eyes and met Reid's dark, inquisitive ones. Letting out a small cry, she hugged him to her, making him wince in pain.

"Oh! Your side!" she cried, opening his coat to reveal the blood-soaked linen shirt.

Reid gave her a smile. "Tis nothing lass. He but barely pricked me," he said, lifting his head to look at the wound.

"But there is so much blood!" she said in a whisper, her eyes straying to the shirt again.

"D'you still trust me lass?" He moved his head so her green eyes met his deep brown ones, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Y-y-yes," she admitted finally.

He gave her a grin, feeling his heart swell. “Then believe me—I’ve suffered far worse. I’ll not be leaving you.”

Ian had knelt on the cramped floor of the coach, rolling Percy onto his side so he could take a better look at the wound. “Bled so much because you were in a high temper,” he said, casually examining Reid’s side before giving a encouraging nod to Honor. “He’ll heal. He’ll not be dancing soon, but he’ll live.”

Ian glanced over his shoulder at the blob of flesh behind him that was Percy. “What will we do with him, Reid?”

Reid rolled his head in Honor’s lap to get a look at the lump on the floor. “Give him over to the watch,” he said. “Perhaps we’ll dress him as the Glanconer so the highwayman will be given an end, instead of disappearing.” Reid gave his uncle a wicked grin. “With Percy’s the taste for cards, it would make sense he turned to highway robbery to pay his debts, aye?”

“It’s a thought,” Ian replied, giving his nephew a wink and a smile. He balanced the Glanconer’s black hat on Reid’s flat stomach, away from the sticky, stained shirt.

Reid chuckled as he watched Honor stare at the hat, her turmoil flitting across her eyes. He winced as his side jolted in suppressed mirth. “Ah lass, you look as if you are not wanting the Glanconer to make another appearance,” he said wistfully. “He had to retrieve what was his. ‘tis the only reason he came out of hiding.”

Honor pursed her lips. “You could have been killed if you were seen by the dragoons.”

Reid gave a little shrug. “Aye. And I’d have gladly gone to the devil and come back with all the demons in hell to take back what is mine.”

Honor’s eyes were moist again as she stroked the damp copper hair at his temples. “You will retire the Glanconer?”

Reid gave her a little grin, seeing the blush beginning to stain her face. “D’you wish me to?”

Honor looked at the hat with a twinkle in her green eyes. “Perhaps we should keep the hat...for the times when we are alone?”

Reid’s response was the sound of his deep, rich laughter as it echoed through the coach.

## EPILOGUE

James cringed, unable to help but overhear the argument taking place in the next room. He glanced over at his wife who was humming under her breath as she idly flipped through a book left on a gleaming side table, completely unconcerned.

"I think it is lovely they have asked us to be godparents to their child," Elisa said, closing the book. "Don't you?" She turned toward him with a smile, completely ignoring the raised voices in the hall. "It was also very romantic of Reid to gift her with the emerald earring he took from her when he was..." Elisa paused to wave her hand as she turned toward the windows. "Well, during his more dangerous activities."

The voices in the next room rose even more but Elisa apparently didn't notice, surprising James since she had taken Honor under her wing and treated her like a daughter.

The two women spent a great deal of time together while Reid was managing Honor's shipping business. Sometimes Honor would even spend the night at their home when Reid was at the office particularly late, trying to determine the depth of Percy's light fingers from the accounts.

James fully expected Elisa to be incensed over the shouting Reid was doing, especially considering Honor's present state of health.

"You're very calm about this entire matter m'dear," James noted. "I don't suppose you might have known about Honor's investment?"

Elisa looked up at him with such a shocked and innocent expression, James cringed further into his cravat. Of course Elisa knew. Elisa knew almost everything she wasn't supposed to know.

His wife glided across the room to his chair, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder as the voices rose in volume, coming closer to the parlor where they had been visiting the young couple before a special letter had arrived for Honor from the Colonies.

*It could have been such a nice visit.* James smiled slightly at the memory of the telltale bulge under the bodice of Honor's gown.

"He wanted her to have outside interests, didn't he?" Elisa smiled at him as she took the chair across from him.

James glowered. "Yes, but I am certain he didn't think his wife would consider financially backing his two uncles in this mad enterprise as being a hobby."

Elisa smiled wider and waved her hand at him. "La, James," she said softly. She cocked her head for a moment, listening to the heated argument outside the parlor doors, which was now punctuated with French and Gaelic phrases as the combatants resorted to their native languages. "I don't think it is a mad enterprise at all," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "I think Honor has foresight, is able to see the future."

"Pah!" James exclaimed. "Whoever thinks there is aught to be grown in that swampland the French foisted off on the Spanish is insane."

Elisa smiled. "I hear the soil in and around the colony of New Orleans is perfect for growing indigo." She tilted her head. "It is also going to be a large shipping hub, very close to the islands of Tortuga and Jamaica." She shrugged. "Closer than England in any case."

James conceded the point to his wife, but felt a shiver at the knowledge Elisa possessed of the geography. "Elisa?" His brow furrowed in worry. "How do you know so much about the trade, agriculture and such of the colonies?"

Elisa looked at him with wary eyes. "I don't my love. I only know about that particular area."

James frowned as Elisa offered nothing else in reply. Sensing something afoot, he was about to press her for an answer when the parlor door banged open and Honor came sailing in, Reid at her heels.

If Honor had been pretty before, she was beautiful now. Being with child made her glow from the inside out, though James suspected the high color in her cheeks right now was more due to her husband than the child she carried.

"I'm thinking you've not the right to use those jewels for this mad scheme!" Reid argued, his brogue thick from anger. "What could you have been thinking of to give them over to Ian and Duncan?"

James watched as Honor exchanged a small smile with Elisa before turning on Reid. "The jewels were of no use to us Reid. It is for our children that I invested it." Honor stomped her foot at her husband in emphasis. "There was more than enough after refurbishing Rosegate. You told me I could do with it as I wished!"

Reid looked utterly flummoxed for a moment, his mouth opening and closing as if he were a fish out of water. James felt a chuckle rise up to his lips at the expression on his godson's face. "Aye! But I thought you'd buy a dress or some such with it, not a ship and a parcel of land in a swamp!"

Honor's lips tightened. "A dress?" Honor huffed, looking to Elisa. "My husband apparently thinks I fill my head with foolish nonsense!" Elisa lifted her brows and gave Honor a shrug, to which Honor turned back to Reid. "I will have something of value for our children! Not just jewels!"

"It's two ships," Elisa added quietly, making James snap his head around to look at her in shock. "Two ships Reid."

James groaned and buried his face in his hand as Reid turned toward Honor. "Two ships? Two ships?"

Raising his head, James could clearly see Honor fighting back a smile. "Yes. Two ships and a plantation to grow indigo, as well as a shipping business at the port of New Orleans." She turned toward Elisa. "And I believe we were discussing buying a plantation near Port Royale as well for sugar?"

Elisa nodded in agreement. "Yes, I do believe that is what you were planning."

"Not my wife!" Reid roared in anger. "I'll not have my wife involved in any schemes those two old fools have thought up!"

James tried to think of a way to extricate himself from the argument or keeping Elisa from letting anymore secrets 'slip' when his wife once again spoke up.

"Of course your wife wouldn't be involved in any schemes Ian and Duncan thought up Reid," Elisa said with a laugh. "Really!" She shook her head, smiling.

Thoughts of abandoning his wife to whatever fate awaited her were dispelled by morbid curiosity.

James frowned. "Then whose mad scheme was it?" He looked round at the three people in the room.

"Mine," Honor said, stubbornly sticking out her chin as she met her husband's angry eyes.

James had to give the young woman credit. She faced the Glanconer's anger straight on, which is more than many men had done.

James, however, was not Honor, and had no intention of being dragged into an argument between two passionate people, such as the ones who were bristling in anger at each other in the room at that moment.

Slowly rising from his seat to avoid attracting notice of the two younger people who were fuming at each other, he snatched up his wife's hand and towed her from her chair.

Silencing Elisa's protests with a sharp eye, he glanced over at Reid and Honor as he skirted out of the parlor, shutting the door behind them once they had reached the relative safety of the hall.

Turning, he found himself face to face with Elisa's wide smile as the argument in the parlor began again, the soft click of the closing door seeming to be a signal for the attack to begin anew.

"What the devil are you smiling at?"



Elisa looked up at her husband as Reid shouted down Honor's French invectives in Gaelic. "Love."

James shook his head. Being married to Elisa for as long as he had, he would never understand her. "I don't see how that row could be described as love."

Elisa chuckled, the sound a merry tinkle. "Of course you don't m'dear," she said as he helped her on with her cloak. "Honor had been feeling quite out of sorts of late, claiming she was fat and ugly." She glanced over her shoulder at James. "A good deal of women apparently feel that way once they are with child." She fastened the cloak at her throat as James gathered up his greatcoat. "And Reid has been so occupied with the shipping business..." She shrugged.

James frowned. "I still don't see how that argument has anything to do with love."

Elisa softly cupped James face with her hand. "Reid will be keeping a close eye on his wife's outside interests from now on, don't you think?"

James frowned. "Well, of course he will!"

Elisa smiled wider. "And would you say he will be spending more evenings at home rather than the shipping offices?"

James nodded. "I would say so, yes."

Elisa looked back at the parlor door and the eerie silence behind it. "Remember m'dear, reconciliation is the best part of an argument," she finished, giving him a bawdy wink.