

The Forgotten Bride

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Chapter One

Early October, 1805:

Today could either be the best or the worst day of my life, Mary Blackmore thought as she put on her best sprigged muslin gown. It all depended on how she looked at it. In her young life she had already known great happiness, and equally vivid periods of despair. Her instincts told her that today might very well be the day Sir John Addington asked her to be his wife.

Marriage to the baronet would mean no more scraping to make ends meet for her father and little Marguerite. No more sleepless nights, worrying about having enough **money** for food, fuel, candles and all the other necessities her household required. Hard experience had made her a sensible woman, and she knew a marriage prospect such as the one before her was a great opportunity.

If only she wasn't still in love with her husband.

Mary sighed, and continued dressing for **today's** trip to the village market. Searching through her scanty wardrobe, she selected her best chip straw bonnet and pinned a nosegay of violets to its crown. She'd been told the violets heightened the green color of her eyes, and hoped the delicate flowers would also divert Sir John's attention away from the tiny brown spots sprinkled like nutmeg across her face.

She put her hand to her cheek, as if to erase those unfashionable marks. Ever since she had moved to Rose Cottage, Mary had tried to keep her fair skin shielded. But she couldn't avoid the sun altogether as she toiled in her garden, tended her animals, or walked to the village.

Mary could only imagine the horror her aristocratic mother would have expressed, had she lived to see her daughter's delicate skin **freckled**. Mary couldn't remember her mother ever venturing out **into** the rare Scottish sunlight without at least a parasol for protection.

Putting her memories of her past life firmly aside, Mary tied a simple brown mantle over her muslin gown. Though it had stopped raining it was still muddy out, so she strapped on **pattens** onto her shoes to keep her worn slippers off the ground,

In a large basket she packed a few farm goods she planned to deliver to some regular customers while she was in the village. As she did so, mentally she reviewed the events leading her to believe today would be momentous.

For months now Sir John Addington, a baronet who lived in a fine stone **manor house on a cliff overlooking the ocean, had been paying marked attention to her.**

In July, he purchased tea and a plate of raspberry scones for her in the refreshment tent at the village fair.

In August, after the opening of the grouse season, he sent a brace of the birds to her cottage.

In September, he had begun offering her a ride home in his carriage following the Sunday service at the village church.

And earlier this week, Sir John pointedly asked Mary if she would be attending the market today. When she assented, he told her he particularly wished to speak with her on a matter of some importance. They agreed to meet in the inn-yard this very afternoon.

The evidence was **overwhelming**. Her hopes high, Mary covered the short distance to the village and headed for the inn. Admittedly, it was not the place she would have picked **as** an ideal site for a marriage proposal.

Dreamily she closed her eyes. Perhaps she would have chosen a secluded corner of a candlelit ballroom, or a moonlight walk in a fragrant garden, or a field of heather on a misty autumn morning.

A clink of glassware and a **woman's** raucous laugh broke her reverie. Certainly she would not have chosen the bustling yard of the Crown and Anchor Inn on market day.

Mary stifled a sigh. Romantic daydreams were foolish in the face of such serious business. She needed this marriage. She had dependents to support.

Sir John did not keep her waiting. She spotted him as soon as she entered the yard. A tall, spare man of some forty-odd years, he made his way through the crowd with the assurance of someone accustomed to deference.

"My dear Miss Blackmore. Lovely as always. May I order you some refreshment?"

"A glass of lemonade would be most welcome, Sir John."

"Innkeeper! Lemonade, here, at once! And another glass of your best ale. Look lively, man!"

He turned back to her. "Do you wish to sit down? There seems to be a shortage of chairs, but I can roust these fellows from their seats –"

"Oh, really, there is no need." Mary hated it when Sir John pulled rank. He never seemed to see, or care, about the resentment he created, "I much prefer standing."

"As you **wish**, my dear."

Sir John cleared his throat. He started to speak, then balled his left hand into a fist, held it up to his mouth and coughed. His thin chest rattled, like the rustle of dry leaves.

If only he would get on with it! Mary hid her impatience by cataloguing the contents of the wicker basket she held. Bunches of lavender, tied together at the stems. Fresh brown eggs, a jar of soothing ointment. All products of the little farm Mary ran, and all providing needed money to supplement a meager income.

"My dear Miss **Blackmore**--"

At last,

"--if indeed **I** may take the liberty to so address **you**."

Sir John bestowed on her a thin smile that looked more like a self-satisfied smirk to Mary. She felt the corners of her mouth curl downward in response, and she quickly re-schooled her expression.

"You must be aware that I have singled you out, among all the local misses, for the most particular attentions, And I flatter myself those attentions have not been unwelcome."

"No, Sir John." Mary cast her eyes downward in a display of maidenly modesty. As she looked at her basket, she wondered if the afternoon had grown too **warm** for the eggs to retain their best quality.

Sir John coughed again, sending a thin spittle of phlegm spiraling down towards his boots. He wiped the back of his hand on his breeches.

Mary stifled a quick stab of distaste. If he asked her, she would strive to make him a good wife. if gratitude could become love, than perhaps she could even learn to love Sir John.

A familiar ache mocked her resolution. There was no use trying to deceive herself. No matter how much time passed, her heart would always belong to Sebastian.

Not that it mattered. Sebastian was gone. She had not received one word from him since he went to join Colonel Wellesley's regiment in India, nearly seven years ago. Seven long years of unexpected hardship and privation.

All that was left now was to have her dear husband declared **officially** dead, so she could legally remarry.

Sir John clasped her small hand in his clammy one, and Mary squirmed just a bit. The baronet was well known for being a high stickler. Mary wasn't sure how he'd react if he knew she'd been married **at** seventeen to a soldier who'd vanished and whose family subsequently all **but** disowned her. She would, of course, have to explain it to him.

Someday.

"Miss Blackmore, is there any chance a young lady such as yourself could consider the suit of a crotchety old man?" He said it lightly, as if to suggest his supposed unworthiness was a private joke **between them**.

Mary tossed her chin, causing a lock of her auburn hair to tumble out of her bonnet. **With** her free hand she tucked the rebellious strand back in.

"Fie, Sir John? You are being unjust to describe yourself as old," she responded dutifully. "For aught **I** can observe, you **are** entering your prime. A man of your experience is so much more attractive than a younger man whose talents are yet unproved,"

She paused, and gazed at him earnestly. She saw **not** a man, but **a** potential savior. Her next words were quite sincere.

"Indeed, if pressed, I would have to pronounce most younger men quite tedious. They have little social grace to recommend them, and are **often** appallingly **self-absorbed**."

Sir John was visibly gratified by her words. He preened, just like the rooster that sat on the fence outside her little cottage.

A single qualm disturbed the calm **certainty** of her conviction. She meant what she said. Every man she had encountered since Sebastian bored her. But Sebastian had always enthralled her. And she had loved his wild and reckless spirit as much as she loved his strong young body.

So much emotion. And all **it** had garnered her was a broken heart and a belly that all **too** frequently rumbled with hunger. For Mary always made sure her father and Marguerite were fed before she filled her plate.

Sir John reached for Mary's other hand, and clasped both her hands together tightly in his.

"Miss Blackmore, I would consider it a great honor, nay, an unexpected privilege if you would..."

There was a loud crash in the yard behind them. A woman screamed and a man swore. Sir John jumped, and turned his head.

"What the devil? Oh, beg pardon, Miss Blackmore, for my language."

She nodded her acceptance of his apology. "It is quite all right. You were saying, Sir John?"

"Eh, what?"

"Something about an honor and a privilege?"

"Yes, yes, my dear. Might as well do this thing properly."

Carefully he lowered his body to kneel on one knee. Some part of his skeleton emitted an audible crack. He removed his hat and after looking around awkwardly for a moment, placed it gingerly on a flagstone next to him.

He reached again for her hand, steadying himself with it.

"My dear Miss Blackmore, would you do me the inestimable honor of—"

"Hold, my good fellow! If you need a hand, I'll help you to your feet. That lass with the basket doesn't look as though she could haul a newborn foal upright without keeling over herself."

A young man, outrageously attired in a peacock blue waistcoat, bounded across the inn-yard. His sandy hair was pomaded to ridiculous perfection, and there was even a spot of rouge on his cheeks. His blue eyes held a devilish gleam, and he had a mischievous smile that died on his lips when he came face to face with Mary.

A roaring filled Mary's ears, As if from a distance, she watched the young man's face pale. For a moment his mobile features froze. Then he cocked one eyebrow and gave her a crooked smile.

A smile she remembered only too well.

No, it was impossible. It couldn't be. But it was. The silly clothes, the affected style, none of it could contradict what every fiber of Mary's being knew. This was Sebastian, her supposedly dead husband, come back to life.

Her heart leapt. She wanted to rush into his arms, but his strange appearance made her hesitate. Could she possibly be mistaken?

He gave her an insolent wink.

"Do I know you, my good woman? Or do you stare so boldly at every handsome young blade who crosses your path?"

His voice clinched it. Unmistakably Sebastian's. Here he stood before her, pretending not to recognize her. He was grinning, unrepentant, and seemingly unconcerned about the years of pain his desertion caused her.

Conflicting emotions tumbled inside her. Astonishment, joy, confusion, and finally, a dawning fury. "You?" She couldn't quite bring herself to utter his name aloud. "What are you doing here, after all this time?"

Sir John, goggle-eyed, struggled to his feet, knocking Mary's basket out of her hands. Her eggs splattered on the flagstones, making a sticky yellow mess,

The young man clicked his tongue. "Now look what you've done. Some poor hen went to a lot of trouble for nothing."

That insensitive comment spurred her to action. She ran towards him, stumbling in her haste. He had to catch her to keep her from falling.

"I know I'm irresistible," he drawled, "But please, dear woman, try to contain yourself."

"Oh, you, you popinjay!"

"Yes, I am rather fine, aren't I," he replied complacently, still holding her in his arms. "No wonder you're so drawn to me."

She struggled to disengage herself, and laughing he held on a moment longer. Impulsively, she kicked him in the shins, hoping the iron rings on her pattens would convince him to let go. With a howl he released her, and she took a step back and slapped him. She almost burst into tears.

"How dare you come back like this? I don't understand at all?"

Sir John was aghast. "Miss Blackmore, do you know this person?"

The innkeeper's voice cut through the confusion.

"Don't let that man get away. He owes me money, he does. He threw a bottle of my best beer through my window and broke it. Then I discovers he has no blunt, not for the drink nor the damage. I'm going to call the constable."

"If anyone has committed an offense, it is you, innkeeper. That beer you served me was a crime against drinkers everywhere. I would only aid and abet you were I to pay for it." **Sebastian** shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

With a war cry the portly innkeeper rushed up behind him and pinned Sebastian's **arms** back in a strong grip.

Expending a **minimum** of energy, Sebastian rotated his shoulder blades **forward** sharply, easily breaking the older man's grip and flicking him off like a **bothersome** insect. Sir John pulled Mary away just in time to keep her from being knocked to one side.

"You're a real wit, aren't you, my young buck?" Hands on his knees, the innkeeper puffed with exertion. 'We'll see how **funny** the magistrate finds your jests."

"Take me where you please," said Sebastian, examining the cuticles on his long slender fingers. "But do have a care for my waistcoat. It would be a tragedy if it got soiled by your brutish handling of my person."

Mary's confusion receded, replaced by embarrassment. How could time have changed Sebastian so much? She remembered a dashing soldier, not a ridiculous, painted fop. A chiseling, penniless fop, **to** boot.

She allowed Sir John to **lead** her away from the inn-yard. Though Sir John tried to conceal it, Mary could tell he was deeply shocked.

Mary knew she'd acted badly. She would have to explain her actions to Sir John, **But** at the moment her thoughts were in too much of **a** whirl.

"Thank you, Sir John," she managed to say. "I have no explanation for my behavior. I really do not know what occurred back there."

"Hysteria, brought on by **a** strange humor. Must have temporarily **affected** your brain. Nothing lasting, I'll be bound."

He seemed to be talking more to himself than to her.

"Let me take you back to your cottage, Miss Blackmore. **What** you need now is a cup of tea and a lie-down. We can stop at the apothecary's for a calming remedy, if you wish. Yes, I believe that would be best."

Mary almost wept with frustration as Sir John handed her into his elegant carriage. By now she should have been Sir John's **affianced** bride, with the prospect of security before her.

An hour ago her only problem had been when and where to tell Sir John about her late husband.

Now she'd have to explain a live husband, a decided obstacle to contracting an advantageous marriage,

Mary lay back against the squabs, holding her suddenly aching head, while Sir John watched her apprehensively.

Everything was ruined, All her plans and dreams for the future lay in ashes.

Oh, why couldn't Sebastian have simply stayed dead?

* * *

It was as if he'd seen a ghost, Sebastian hadn't set eyes on Mary Blackmore since the morning after their wedding night, almost seven years back and a whole lifetime ago. Now here she was, the girl become **a** glorious woman, standing before **him**, hurt and confusion on her lovely face. It took all his self-control to pretend not to know her, to deny the physical recognition **that** tore through him when he touched her. If he'd known this would be a part of his job, he'd have refused.

She'd been so shy once, and so very young! Pink and white is how he remembered her. Pink skin, and yards and yards of white linen and lace. She'd been swathed in white linen up to her neck when he'd seen her waiting for him on the big canopied bed her father had installed in their wedding chamber.

Slightly tipsy from endless wedding toasts, he felt as though he was unwrapping an elaborately trimmed present when he tried to take her out of her night rail. She was as scared as a snared rabbit, and he was exhausted from the excitement of the wedding and the preparations for his departure the following day.

He didn't remember much of what followed, even if or how well he had **performed** his conjugal duty. He remembered dragging himself out of his **bed** at dawn the next morning with a blistering headache and **setting** out on his horse. He'd kissed his bride, who was still asleep, on her creamy white forehead. **In** the early morning

light, once more swathed in all that white linen and lace, shed **looked** like a fairy-tale maiden. Sleeping Beauty.

Little Mary Blackmore. She was his ticket into the army, for it was by his agreeing to marry her that his father had finally consented to Sebastian's joining **Wellesley's** forces in India, Sebastian hadn't thought about Mary for some time. Years even.

He'd had other things on his mind. Like how to survive prison, and then make his escape.

Now he'd have to deal with her, an unexpected complication. But first he had an angry innkeeper to placate.

Following the altercation in the yard, the innkeeper had dragged Sebastian back to a corner of the tap room. The innkeeper hadn't called for the constable, as he threatened, and Sebastian sensed the man hadn't quite decided just what he was going to do.

So Sebastian decided to be charming. It was his most potent weapon,

"My dear fellow, I pray you reconsider your actions. No good will come of your summoning the constable. My London friends would take it highly amiss when they come here only to discover I have been sadly used by the locals. Famous drinking fellows, they are, but such a circumstance would put them right off the bottle, I fear. **Hammie** could scarcely swallow his usual three bottles of port, and as for the Friar —"

"Hammie? The Friar? Just who are these friends of yours?"

"I beg your pardon. Perhaps you would know them better as Lord **Hammersmith**, and St. **Clair**, the Duke of—no, I'd better not say. His Grace does so prefer to travel incognito, to spare everyone the fuss. So humble he is, we call him the Friar."

"Are you telling me there are members of the quality traveling to our village?" The innkeeper's tone was a shade less belligerent.

"Why, certainly. Haven't I already said so? And they'll be needing lodging, of course. Unless you'd like me to spare you the trouble and direct them to the next hamlet?"

"Ho, now, there's no call for you to do that. I've plenty of room here at the inn." Sebastian could see the careful calculation in the innkeeper's beady black eyes. Then those eyes sharpened.

"How do I know you're telling me the truth? You don't look as though you have two shillings to rub together. How could the likes of you be friends with the quality?"

"I'm in disguise, of course," said Sebastian with a brilliant smile. "I made a bet in London that I could travel to any fishing village and learn enough in two weeks to pass as a fisherman. Maybe even get taken on as a crewman on a fishing boat."

"That's a rum sort of bet."

"Of course. That's the whole point, isn't it? It's even been entered in the betting book at White's, by the Du—, I mean, the Friar. But I am sure that you, as a man of the world, know about such things."

"Humph."

Sebastian hoped the man had heard something of the infamous belting book, where all sorts of frivolous wagers were recorded. Nothing was too trivial to bet on—club members had even bet on which of two raindrops would reach the bottom of a windowpane first, impending deaths, marriages, the outcome of sporting events, anything which caught **someone's** fancy was fair game.

Either the innkeeper had indeed heard of White's betting book, or Sebastian's appeal to his vanity worked, for the innkeeper nodded knowledgeably.

"Well, well, perhaps you be quality after all."

"I'm gratified that's finally become apparent to you."

"And you'll be paying for the beer and my window?"

"How can you doubt it? Naturally I have no money on me, for it would destroy my purpose here to appear plump in the pocket. But when my friends come, they will gladly see to all **my** expenses."

"Humph," the innkeeper said again, this time a shade more positively. "So you'll be staying then, till they arrive?"

"That is my plan. I don't suppose you have a room available?"

"No, I do not, unless I sees the color of your coin."

"But I just explained—"

"I cannot pay my bills with words, Mr.—"

"Mallory. Sebastian Mallory." The first name was correct, though the last name was an invention. Sebastian believed in using as much truth as possible in his deceptions. More times than he cared to recall that policy had saved him from embarrassment, or worse.

"I'll be awaiting the arrival of your friends, Mr. Mallory."

"And you won't be calling the constable?"

"Don't see as I need to now. I'm willing to wait for your friends to help you settle your affairs. Till then, I wouldn't try to leave the area, if I were you."

"I have not the slightest intention of leaving, not till I win my bet. You won't mention our little wager to anyone, will you? Hammie and the Friar will be most disappointed if you do. Even more disappointed than I was by your beer."

"I can keep mum. For a price."

"You are a clever one, aren't you? We will settle our accounts later."

Sebastian got up, brushed the tails of his jacket, and donned his hat. He extended a gloved hand,

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr.--"

"Bucket. Charlie Bucket."

"At your service, Mr. Bucket." Sebastian bowed. "By the way, that woman who was here, with the eggs. What is her name?"

"You mean Miss Mary Blackmore?"

The landlord looked suddenly wary, and Sebastian was bemused to note, protective.

"What would the likes of you be wanting with her? She's a virtuous girl, she is. Not the sort of companion a London dandy such as yourself would trifle with. Keeps half the village supplied with eggs, and vegetables, and other concoctions from her garden. Works hard to support her ailing father and her ward. Besides, everyone knows Sir John Addington is interested in our Miss Blackmore. Wouldn't be surprised to hear the banns called on those two."

"Is that a fact? Miss Blackmore, you say?"

So his long-ago bride wanted to keep their marriage a secret, too. He fought down the surprising irritation that knowledge prompted, while wondering what her motives were.

"Could you tell me where this paragon of virtue lives?"

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I believe Miss Blackmore and I are related."

Deep lines of suspicion etched Bucket's face. "She didn't seem to take very well to you just now. Kicked you, she did."

"Yes, she did." Sebastian resisted the urge to rub the burgeoning bruise on his shin. "But you must have remarked the affectionate way she did so. After all, a lady like Miss Blackmore would only kick her close friends or kinfolk."

Bucket crossed his arms over his barrel-shaped chest. "If you and Mary are kin, why didn't you know who she is? You treated her like a complete stranger."

"To tell you the truth, good Mr. Bucket, I haven't seen Mary in quite a while. I wasn't sure that was her. Last time I saw her, she was surrounded by servants and dressed in lace. I hardly recognized her in that brown cloak she wore."

Bucket emitted a low whistle. "Is that so? Can't say I'm surprised. I always thought she might have come down in the world. She's a different sort than most around here. Still, she's a good girl, and I won't have you bothering her."

"I wouldn't harass Mary for the world, She's like a sister to me." Sebastian struck his breast with his fist for added sincerity. "I just want to visit her, and apologize for my recent behavior. Especially since I recognize her now as one of the family."

"I suppose that's fair enough. You'll find Mary at Rose Cottage, at the west end of the village, near the cliffs."

"Thank you, Mr. Bucket. You have been most accommodating."

With a bow and a flourish, Sebastian headed for the threshold.

"Oy, now, Mr. Mallory, you never said what relation you are to Mary. Are you a first or second cousin, or what? My wife will be asking."

"Definitely the latter," Sebastian called over his shoulder. He was out the door before the puzzled innkeeper could ask him to explain,

Chapter Two

"Tante **Marie!** Are you going to lie down all afternoon?"

"No, my angel. I feel much better now."

"Good, The musty man has gone now, and he's the one who said you had to rest, so you can get up now, n'est-ce pas?"

Mary laughed. "Yes, indeed. But Marguerite, haven't I told you not to call Sir John 'the musty **man?**'"

Marguerite wrinkled her little nose. "But he is musty, Tante. He smells like tobacco, and stale wine. **Bah!**"

"**Enough!** Sir John has been a good friend to us. And in the future..." Mary paused, searching for the words to explain her hopes to the little girl. "...in the future, I hope he may become an even better friend."

"To you, Tante?"

"To all of us," Mary replied firmly.

Marguerite skipped in a circle, "Well, you can play with him if you wish, I will play with someone else."

"You will play with **no** one, young lady, until you have fed the chickens. Now, go outside, and be careful not to wake **Grand-père.**"

"Wake me? Who said **I** was asleep?" The old man by the stone hearth stirred. He was seated in a wooden rocking chair, with a heavy blanket across his legs,

"There's no need for you to rouse yourself, Father. Marguerite is feeding the chickens, and dinner is in the kettle."

Mary's father, Angus Blackmore, looked at her with **rheumy** eyes. "You know very well, Mary, that I must ride out on the estate today. The tenants are expecting me."

He struggled to get up. **With** an inward sigh, Mary hastened to **settle** him back in his chair. Her father's increasing periods of disorientation worried her. He **often** forgot they now lived in a little cottage on the coast of Somerset. In his mind the bankruptcy never happened, and he **was** still lord of a grand estate.

Mary had tried connecting him to their current reality, but sometimes found it easier, and **better** for him, to let him dwell in the past,

"Your steward has attended to all your business, Father. The tenants are well satisfied. They want you to recover your health, so you must rest."

"A man must see to his own business. Stewards cannot do everything." Despite his words, **Blackmore** allowed his daughter to resettle him in the chair. "Tomorrow I shall set out."

"Yes, Father. I hope tomorrow is a better day for all of us."

But I don't see how it **can** be, she thought bitterly, now that Sebastian was alive and back in their lives. It was just a matter of time **before** he showed up at her cottage, wanting something. Or perhaps he would just disappear again. He **was** amazingly good at disappearing.

"Tante **Marie**! There is a man to see you. He is so funny, Tante! He can make the chickens dance with him!"

Sebastian. Just as she had **predicted**.

"Eh? Who is here?" **Blackmore** began to get agitated.

"Probably just the tinker, Father. You know how easily Marguerite is delighted. Do not concern yourself, I shall see what he wants." **And send him on his way** if I can, she added to herself. She would do everything in her power to keep him from turning her life upside down once again.

The afternoon light was waning as she stepped out among the herbs and flowers of her **cottage** garden. Sebastian was on his haunches, talking to the little girl.

Mary bit her lip. It made her nervous to see him so close to Marguerite. She hung back for a moment to observe the pair of them. Marguerite held a ladybug in her hand, and Sebastian was discussing it gravely with her. After a few moments, Marguerite opened **her** hand reluctantly, and allowed the bug to fly away.

Then Sebastian glanced up and saw Mary observing them. Straightening up, he gave her his heart-stopping grin. **Mary's** own heart lurched, and she had to stifle the impulse to run and throw herself in his arms.

She shook her head in disgust. How is it Sebastian could still affect her, after so much time and betrayal? Up until today she had remembered her husband with love and longing. Now she was profoundly hurt, and angry with him.

Her attitude towards Sebastian had changed. Once-tender feelings for him had hardened. Yes, her mind was made up.

But still her pulse raced and her breath came in short, shallow gasps. Apparently no one had informed her treacherous body of the change of policy.

"Go into the house, Marguerite, and keep **Grand-père** company."

"But **Tante--**"

"Now."

Responding to Mary's firmness, Marguerite scampered back into the cottage. Sebastian stood up and dusted off the knees of his breeches.

"Where did you find such a charming little girl, Mary? And why does she address you as "Aunt Mary" in French?"

"So, now you remember me? Do you also recall a small event you attended some years back? Our wedding?"

"I seem to remember something of the sort, It was quite a while ago, and far away." He smiled his charming smile, the one that had always made her heart melt, "And you were quite different, Mary, my lass."

He said it casually, but his words still stung her unexpectedly. Her hands began to shake.

"I seem different, do I? Perhaps it's **because** I must work for my living now. No longer do I have maids to wait on me, a cook to prepare my meals, and dressmakers crowding round me with their bolts of fine cloth and papers of straight pins. I go to market instead of routs and assemblies, and I am up early **to** milk the cow instead of sleeping late after attending the theater."

He winced, as if she had struck him, and his eyes looked pained. But his next words made her think she had misinterpreted his expression.

"Sounds like good healthy exercise to **me.**"

She drew a sharp breath.

"You **bas--**"

"I prefer Sebastian," he interjected smoothly. "Now, Mary, I know you were surprised to see me today, but I was surprised to see you, too. I thought you were in Scotland. ~~You~~ were supposed to wait for ~~me~~ there."

"I did wait, Sebastian. For almost a year. Then my father lost his estates."

"Lost them? Sounds deuced careless of him. How did he lose them?"

He sounded so nonchalant, Mary struggled to keep a rein on her temper.

"Gambling. How else? My mother always said he would bankrupt us someday. She was right. He couldn't help himself, At least she wasn't alive to see it."

Sebastian's bored ~~façade~~ slipped.

"But Mary, why didn't you go to Foxborough Hall? My father would surely have helped you. Why aren't you there now?"

She stared at him.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"Your father is dead, Sebastian. So is your brother, Gerard, Your father died following a fit of apoplexy, and Gerard was thrown from his horse when he bungled a jump during a hunt. I suppose that makes you the new **Earl** of Foxborough. That will be sorry news to your cousin Rupert. He's all but taken over."

Sebastian blinked. Once. That was his only reaction to news that she suspected must have been a terrible shock. Unless he was faking his reaction, and he knew all along, and just ~~hadn't~~ cared enough to do anything about it, Her heart hardened again at the thought.

"I don't understand," Sebastian finally said. "Why are you here?"

"Your cousin Rupert threw us out. ~~What~~ with one delay and another--" Mary gulped "~~--due~~ to illness and other circumstances, it took us over a year to journey down from Scotland. Winter overtook us, and my faithful servant Yvette died, leaving me with her child."

"Marguerite."

"Yes, Marguerite. Rupert didn't believe I was your wife when I came to Foxborough Hall, He asked for proof."

"Did he, by Jove," said Sebastian softly.

"Yes, he even said, well, I suppose it does not matter what he **said--**"

"What did he say, Mary? I'm persuaded it must have been compelling. Even as an **unlicked** cub, Rupert fancied himself a wit."

Mary took a breath. "He said he doubted I was your wife because he doubted whether you, like your brother, had ever done an honorable thing in your entire life. What did he mean by that, Sebastian? I have wondered for years."

For a moment Mary saw something cold and terrible in his eyes, but in a flash it was gone. "It means he's always been envious of Gerard and me. Nothing more. But if it will set your mind at ease, I will be certain to require **a** fuller explanation of that comment from my dear cousin if I ever clap eyes on him again."

"I could **offer** him no proof of our union, Sebastian," Mary said simply. "If you remember, we married hastily, because your ship was leaving sooner than you thought, and I didn't think to bring the marriage lines with me when we fled the bailiffs in Scotland,"

She lowered her gaze. "I was responsible for a child, and an old man, my father, whose fragile wits, already strained by his terrible loss, were shattered by the news of your father's death. **Rupert** Edmunds treated me like an adventuress. He grudgingly granted us **a** small allowance, and this cottage, on the condition we importune him no further."

Instinctively she crossed her arms and wrapped them tightly around her shoulders. She willed herself not to cry, or show any weakness in front of this man.

Sebastian tentatively extended his hand, then allowed it drop and hang by his side. Mary couldn't read his expression. Was he moved by her story, or did he simply want her to change the subject? She rushed to finish her explanation.

"I had no choice, Sebastian. I couldn't go back to Scotland. There was nothing for us there. We knew no one else here in England. Only your family. They were gone. And you were dead. **Or** so I believed,"

"You've been fending for yourself. Is that it?" His voice was rough, his words abrupt.

"Yes, I managed to make some profit off this little farm. Not much, but we get by. And for a while it looked as though our **fortunes** would improve."

"So I heard from the innkeeper. Sir John Addington. A local worthy. No doubt keeps hounds and horses and loves a good hunt."

"Mock him if you want, Sebastian, but he's here, **he's** alive, and he would have taken good care of us."

At that Sebastian took a step closer to her. His blue eyes burned intensely. "'Did you tell him about me?' He was inches from her face.

"There was no need to. And I did not want to scare him off with my unusual past." She sighed. "All that is over now. You have **returned** from the dead, and I am once more your wife."

Gently, he tipped her chin in his hand,

"Is that so bad, Mary?"

"Yes, I fear it is." She sighed. "Look at you. You left a soldier, and have become an irresponsible dandy. You know nothing of what's become of your family, and you **care** even less. Where have you been all these years, Sebastian?"

He seemed to struggle for words. "Here and there, Mary. Wherever the wind took me. Bermuda. Jamaica. The things I have seen..."

"You broke your father's heart. And mine."

He had nothing to say to that. For a few moments he was silent. **Idly** he plucked the petals off a cabbage rose, **twining** along a low stone wall in front of the cottage.

"Walk with me, Mary," he said suddenly. "I may have a solution to this dilemma."

"But, Marguerite, **dinner**..."

"Just a few minutes. No one will miss us. I must talk to you."

He was so compelling. Mary wanted to refuse, just on principle, but found she couldn't. Besides, she was **curious** about what he had to say.

"I suppose I can spare you just a few minutes. We can walk along the cliff path. But we **must** be back before sundown."

She led him to the path behind the cottage. He stayed a few paces behind her, which she did nothing to correct. She didn't have to see him to be thoroughly

aware of his presence. She kept her eyes fixed ahead, out to where an orange sun was melting into the blue horizon.

Mary felt as though she was moving in a dream. Sebastian, the love of her youth, and she once thought, her life, was walking, breathing, not two steps away. She didn't have to imagine the timbre of his voice, the luster of his skin, as she had for so many lonely days and nights, She could see him, feel him, right Beside her.

For almost seven years she had only been able to see Sebastian in her dreams. Now he was tangible. Did he still have that little knot of golden hair at his throat? She stopped, and reached out her hand to touch him. His long slender fingers closed over hers. The distant roar of the ocean echoed the turmoil in her heart.

Sebastian cupped his mouth and leaned close to her ear. "Do you truly want to marry the local squire, Mary? He seems a dry old **stick**."

His breath warmed her neck. She had to close her eyes to focus on a response.

"He's a good man, who will take—would have taken--good care of us. He has no wish to join the army, or see the world."

"Which is fortunate, since I doubt he'd survive either experience."

"Jest if you must, Sebastian. You have no idea how desperate these **last** seven years have been."

"Desperate, indeed." For a moment his eyes held a faraway look which puzzled her. Then he grinned.

"Mary, it's true I do not remember much about our wedding, but I remember where it took place. Do you?"

"Scotland, of course. At my father's **manor**."

"And if I recall correctly, divorce is acceptable under Scottish marriage law, under certain circumstances."

Mary caught her breath. "**Divorce!** Are you serious?"

"Completely. So, you say you want to leg shackle yourself to this Sir John Addington. **Can't** see it myself. But I know I haven't been much of a husband, and if your heart is set on marrying the local squire, we can get divorced, on grounds of my desertion. Under Scottish law, you'll be free to marry again."

"But, what will Sir John say? The scandal..."

"Don't see ~~how~~ there'd have to be much of ~~a~~ scandal. I disappear for a while, you get yourself betrothed, and then I contact you, the dead husband come back to life. I let it be known I deserted you, and you ~~become~~ the injured party. Do it prettily enough, and Sir John will become your Knight Gallant. Even such as he could not resist such a romantic role. Sir John will never even have to see me. My solicitor can handle everything."

"I don't understand, Sebastian. Why would you do this for me?"

"It's the least I can do after making a pig's dinner of your life these past seven years. Besides, in return you can do something for me."

"I can?"

"Yes, I'm here to win a bet."

"A bet?" Surely she hadn't heard him correctly.

"A few of my nearest and dearest bet me I couldn't come to a seaside village and be taken seriously enough to apprentice as a seaman on a fishing vessel. Naturally, I disagreed, and a bet was entered at White's,"

"You came here to learn how to fish?" She shook her head. "I don't: understand you, Sebastian. Your life used to have meaning. You were serious once, full of enthusiasm and purpose."

"Haven't you heard, my dear? Life has no purpose. The most serious occupation we can undertake is to be frivolous." His words were light, but his tone was hard.

"I realize I can have little meaning to you, since our acquaintance was so brief. But what of your family? Have you no care for them?"

"From what you told me, they are beyond my care."

She had to fight the urge to shake him.

"And Rupert? Does ~~it~~ not anger you that he has usurped your rightful place? Or that he says such awful things about you? He's besmirched your honor. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Sebastian yawned.

"I'm afraid so, my dear. Oh, I suppose I shall have to deal with Rupert eventually. The money I made shipping rum in Barbados is almost gone, and perhaps one

day I shall want a share of the family fortune. But jousting with Rupert is bound to be a tedious business, one best put off as long as possible."

He examined his cuticles. "Frankly, I haven't the stomach for the House of Lords, much less any boring duties to my illustrious name. Rupert is much more taken by it all. Let him play at being heir for the time being. When I am done here, I shall go in search of more adventures."

Mary held her hand to her mouth. "It isn't true, is it, Sebastian, what your cousin implied? You aren't a, a--"

"Coward? Is that the word you seek, Mary? Or are you referring to my elder brother's supposed misdeeds?"

"I always thought the reason you were willing to do anything to join the army, even marry me, a girl you hardly knew, was to uphold the Foxborough family honor."

"To redeem my brother Gerard's supposed cowardice on the field? Ancient history, my dear. The army wasn't for me, either. And I didn't spend much time there, as it happened. In truth, I have kept very much to myself. But people will talk. I pay them no heed. Foremost on my mind now is winning my bet."

"Your bet is that important to you?"

Mary was incredulous. She searched his face, trying to find a remnant of the man she once thought she knew. His eyes gave nothing away. They were loch-blue in their depths, and just as unfathomable.

"Of course it is important to me. My reputation is at stake." He seemed oblivious to any irony in his statement. "My bet is as important to me as marriage to your squire is to you. All you have to do, Mary, is help me win the wager, and the divorce is yours."

He must be mad, She'd heard dissolution and degeneracy could bring madness on. But Sebastian seemed serious enough, and he was offering her a tempting alternative to a life where she'd be dependent on such an irresponsible fop as he'd become.

"How can I help you win your bet?"

"By not revealing my true identity," Sebastian replied promptly. "Here people are to know me as Sebastian Mallory, not Edmunds. Oh, and I also told the innkeeper we are kin. I'm sure it's all over the village by now. I think we should be cousins, don't you?"

"Cousins!"

"Yes, and I will need to stay with you at your cottage, since Mr. Bucket is being disobliging enough not to extend me any credit at his inn."

"You cannot stay with me!"

He turned limpid eyes to her. "Why not?"

"Because, because..." She tried to form a coherent reason why the very thought of it panicked her so. "Because it's indecent, that's why."

"Don't see that, myself. We're married, aren't we?"

"Nobody's supposed to know that. We tell them we're cousins, and then what will people say later when they discover you're really my husband?"

"No one will see me later, Mary. Remember? I shall leave, and only after an interval will you let everyone know your missing husband has reappeared, You do plan on observing a reasonable engagement period, do you not?"

She nodded numbly.

"Six months should be plenty of time for people around here to forget the eccentric dandy who passed their way, don't you think?"

He paused, as another thought seemed to strike him.

"The villagers, and Sir John, do know you have a husband, don't they? No, that's right, the innkeeper called you Miss Blackmore. Well, that is another forceful reason for you to cooperate with my plan."

"**Sebastian!** You wouldn't tell anyone about our marriage, would you?"

"Of course not. I want to keep my identity a secret as much as you do. For my bet, of course. And as long as you are willing to help me, you have nothing to worry about."

"That's blackmail, you know."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Add it to my list of crimes."

He paused for a moment, and Mary could tell his nimble mind was working.

"There is the problem of your father, though, **What** if he **recognizes** me?"

"My father does not go out much, And no one pays much heed to him anymore. There are days he does not even recognize me, and on others he greets me as his own long-dead mother."

Sebastian's expression softened. "Life has not been kind to you, has it, Mary?"

"I do not want your pity, Sebastian. The best gift you can give me is the divorce you mentioned."

"Then you agree to my plan?"

"It seems it is my best chance for a better life." **As** / once **thought you were**, she added silently. "Come, let us go back. The sun is almost down."

She set off, back down the path towards the cottage, at a rapid pace. She needed to put a little distance between herself and him while she sorted out her thoughts.

Was **she** crazy? Could she bear to live with this man who was once her husband, in her tiny cottage, pretending to be his cousin? It would work only if her feelings for him were as dead as she thought he was just a few hours ago.

She turned around to look at him. He was following her at a slower pace. Was he limping? She stopped still in shock. Sebastian never had a limp before. When had that happened?

He halted when he saw her **observing** him. He struck a pose, one leg jutting out in front of the other, his left arm crooked with one hand on his hip. The **other** hand was turned upward, palm open, his fingers looking in need of **a** lace handkerchief to dangle.

The very picture of an **affected** dandy. All he needed was a snuff box and a quizzing glass,

"Go on ahead, Mary. Prepare your little family to accept a visit from your long-lost cousin."

"And what shall I say your name is?"

"Sebastian, of course. Sebastian **Mallory**. That's the name the innkeeper's wife has broadcast throughout the village by now, no doubt. I shall linger here, drinking in the evening, for a while longer. So very picturesque."

Shadows were beginning to pool around him. Sebastian stood unmoving, his profile silhouetted against the turbulent sea. **Instinctively** Mary understood he would stay there until she **left**.

Mary's uneasiness grew. She realized she didn't really know Sebastian. He was either very frivolous or quite complicated, Really, it was easier when he was just dead. Then she could imagine him any way she liked, and there was no living presence to contradict her.

Sebastian's plan could be brilliant, or merely hare-brained, Yet a Scottish divorce was a powerful inducement for her to cooperate with him. It put her dream of marrying the responsible Sir John still within her grasp.

True, if Sebastian was sane, and willing to make the effort, he could be the new Earl of Foxborough, and she could be his Countess. But his motivation to exert himself in that direction, along with his sanity, appeared doubtful.

Worse, he didn't seem to want her.

Let Sebastian win his bet. She had her whole future, and the future of those she loved, to **worry** about.

Sebastian could pretend **to** be the King of Egypt for all she cared. He had given her another chance at a solid, secure future, and she wasn't going to let this one slip through her fingers.

Marguerite met her at the door of the cottage.

"Tante **Marie**! Where were you?"

"Talking to that man who was here, Marguerite." She led the little girl back into the house.

"The funny man?"

"Yes, the funny man. He is my cousin, whom I haven't seen in a great while. He is going to be staying here with us."

Marguerite was fascinated.

"Where shall he sleep?"

"On a pallet by the hearth."

"Will he eat with **us**?"

"I suppose. I shall have to cook extra, now."

"What shall I call him?"

"So many questions, little one! You may call him Sebastian."

"Sebastian?" Mary's father stirred in his seat by the fire. "Sebastian's here?"

Mary held her breath. She had been counting on her father's not being able to remember him.

"Did he come back, Mary? Or is he a ghost?"

"I'm no ghost, Angus." Sebastian strode into the room, filling the cottage with his presence.

Blackmore started at the sound of his voice. He struggled among his blankets to sit up and get a closer look.

After a few moments' inspection, Angus sank back in his chair. "You're not Sebastian Edmunds. You're not the man who married my daughter."

Mary let out a sigh of relief. "This is not that Sebastian, Father. This is Sebastian Mallory. A cousin who's been out of our lives for a long time."

She swallowed hard. How she hated lying to her father, and resented Sebastian for making her do so! If it would help get Sebastian out of their lives, and herself safely married to Sir John, it just might be worth it, though.

Blackmore shook his head, his expression sad. "I don't remember. Like so many other things."

Sebastian walked over to lay a comforting hand on the old man's shoulder. "Don't fret, Angus, I remember you, You will remember me in time, Things are going to get better from now on. Trust me."

Sebastian's blue eyes twinkled as he grasped the old man's hand in a firm grip. Sebastian looked up from Angus to give Mary a wink, which Marguerite caught, causing the little girl to gasp with delight.

Blackmore smiled in response, the first smile Mary had seen from her father in many a month. A deep misgiving assailed her. What had she done, letting Sebastian back into their lives?

Trust him, indeed.

She'd have to be mad herself to trust him.

Chapter Three

Sebastian shifted his weight and made himself comfortable on his pallet by the hearth. Used to the stone floor of his prison cell, he found the pallet no hardship, Mary's cottage was quiet now, save for the snoring of old Angus upstairs.

The warmth of the fire, and a full stomach, had a lulling effect. Supper had been a simple, nourishing stew, enriched with fresh vegetables Mary had grown in her garden. A loaf of whole meal bread and freshly churned butter accompanied the stew, and an apple tart finished the meal.

Sebastian knew this menu would be deemed humble fare in the London society he had once frequented, but in contrast to the thin, watery gruel that had passed for food during his long years of confinement, it was a sumptuous repast.

He watched the embers die in the grate. His life had certainly changed over the past seven years. He could scarcely remember the young man he was, so eager for his father's permission to join the Army that he was willing to marry a girl he scarcely knew to satisfy the old Earl.

Sebastian's fight was as much as for the family honor as for England. He had to do something to stop the slander being spread about his brother Gerard, who'd joined Colonel Wellesley in India in 1796.

Leading a scouting party, Gerard missed a fatal ambush of the soldiers behind him. As soon as he got back to camp the rumors began, that he'd cheated death by deserting his men. Though no formal accusations were made, Gerard returned to England in disgrace. Sebastian was determined to fight bravely and prove the Foxboroughs were no cowards.

But, as it happened, Sebastian never made it to India, Instead he was diverted to the Continent on a highly secret mission.

His job was to pose as an English gentleman making a Grand Tour of Europe with his supposed "tutor," another government agent Sebastian knew only as Mr. Davies. in reality, they were observing French troop movements in Italy. The English generals did not trust France's First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, and wanted to keep a close eye on him and his "Grande Armée" as they swept through Europe.

Sebastian was initially very successful at gathering information. But one evening in Rome his luck changed. He was arrested, charged with espionage, and eventually hauled to a prison high in the Pyrenees. Davies, his fellow spy, had miraculously eluded capture.

Because Sebastian's mission on the Continent had never been **officially authorized**, none of his superiors were willing to acknowledge his capture, much less negotiate his release. Sebastian had been entirely on his own.

Sebastian absentmindedly rubbed his sore **leg**. A prison guard's rough shove down a flight of stone steps had snapped the bone, and without proper medical attention it hadn't healed properly. Now **it** was a permanent souvenir.

He remembered the white-hot anger that had burned in him during his first days in prison. He was outraged by the brutish handling he received from the abusive guards, and their callous indifference to his requests for better treatment.

Sebastian was sure his commanding **officers**, or his father, or someone, anyone, would discover what had happened to him, and effect his release.

But days turned into months, and then into years. Gradually Sebastian realized no one knew or cared whether he lived or died. **Self-pity** became despair, as he had endless time to contemplate what had befallen **him**.

In his freezing, filthy cell, Sebastian grappled with how he had come to such a pass. He tried to discover what had happened to his tutor Davies, but his inquiries were met with jeers and **cuffing** by the guards.

Sebastian had ample time to think, and his reasoning led him to believe Davies had betrayed him. The revelation, though bitter, proved to be **a** blessing, for it gave him a reason to live.

Sebastian vowed to survive this hellish experience, find Davies and make him suffer for his treachery. Davies would pay for robbing Sebastian of his freedom and the prime years of his life.

These grim thoughts so occupied Sebastian that he almost didn't hear the soft **footfall** sounded behind him. With the quick instinct of a trapped animal, he whirled and grabbed the intruder by the throat,

"Sebastian, what are you doing?" Mary managed to choke out between gasps for air.

He released her instantly. Damn his prison-honed reflexes.

"You startled me. I was asleep, and halfway to dreaming."

"What dreams you must have." Mary rubbed her throat, her eyes wide.

He said nothing, staring instead at the woman who was once his wife. Any other woman would have given way to hysterics by his sudden attack, Sebastian **realized**, but Mary stood her ground, refusing to show any fear.

Her auburn hair glinted in the flickering firelight. A silver chain encircled her neck, tapering to a point on her bosom intriguingly out of his view.

Sebastian saw the rise and fall of her chest as her breath began to race. She glowed in the room's shadows, her skin radiating light and warmth.

She smelled of fresh flowers, reminding him of the heather-covered hillsides of his innocent youth. **The** thin dressing gown Mary belatedly pulled close around her did little to conceal her womanly form. Sebastian felt his groin tighten,

"Come, Mary," he extended his arms to her. "You've yet to give me a proper wifely welcome. Why don't you give us a kiss?"

Her green eyes darkened to an emerald velvet. Sebastian knew he was toying with danger, risking emotions that could defeat his mission.

But Mary looked so irresistible in the firelight. He wanted to taste her lips, feel her body against his, and see if he could resurrect the passion he must have felt on his wedding night. He had to know what he might have missed during his **long** years of bitter solitude,

Mary was staring fixedly at him, almost as if she were **hypnotized**. She took a **small step forward**, and that was all the encouragement Sebastian needed. He pulled her into his arms, and covered her mouth with his in a kiss.

God, but it felt: good to hold a woman **again**! He pressed her closer, kissing her even more deeply.

She seemed to melt in his arms. He felt: her response, the quickening of her desire, and it nearly drove him wild. She parted her lips slightly, and he tasted her deeply with his tongue. For a brief moment they were almost as one, their bodies fusing.

Then Sebastian felt Mary tense, and she pulled away from him.

Eyes wide, she put the back of her hand against her lips.

"What are you doing, Sebastian?" she whispered. "What do you want from me?"

There was no girlish coyness or hesitation about her. What had the years of absence done to transform the spoiled princess he remembered **to** this superbly controlled woman?

He struggled to refocus his thoughts. He had a part to play, and he'd better remember it.

"Just trying to collect a few of my conjugal rights," he said flippantly, with great effort, "They're long overdue, don't you agree?"

Mary took a step backwards, away from him.

"I cannot believe you have become so cruel."

"Believe it, my dear." He sighed theatrically. "All men are beasts. But tell me, why did you venture out of your chamber in the still of night to come to me, if not for lusty pursuits?!"

"I came to see if you were comfortable." Her voice dripped with disdain. "I remembered that you seemed to experience some difficulty walking this afternoon, and thought perhaps your leg required an extra pillow."

So she had seen his limp **after** all. Now he'd have to explain it. He was strangely reluctant to do so. Lying to Mary was proving to be stressful. It was getting increasingly **difficult** to look into those clear green eyes and let her think the worst of him.

He was too tired to make the effort to lie to her now, but he **couldn't** bear the concern in her eyes, either. It reminded him of emotions **better** suppressed. He had to deflect her concern, and he knew just how to do it.

"This **pallet** will do nicely. I have no need **of** an extra pillow. Though I confess I'm curious as to whether you still have any of those ridiculously embroidered things that littered our marriage bed."

"How dare you bring that up, sir." Her words were emphatic, though she kept her voice low. "I wonder you would risk reminding me of the dishonor you've brought to your family. I vow, I much preferred to believe you nobly died in battle than to be certain of your safety through cowardice."

She might as well have struck him. He schooled himself to betray no effect from her scorn.

"I see you are in **a** serious mood, so perhaps I should allow you to return to your chamber and sleep your way to a better disposifsn. Unless, of course, I am correct in assuming your real purpose in corning to me was to gain some company in your bed?"

Her expressive eyes were filled with loathing.

"I **came** to you because I pitied your affliction, and because once I thought I loved you. Now I merely despise you. Oh, why did you have to pick this village to play your idiotic games?!"

She was so angry sparks seemed to shoot out of her green eyes. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, her chest rising up and down so rapidly the tattered lace at the throat of her dressing gown trembled.

It took all of Sebastian's self-control not to crush her once more into an embrace, so he could feel the wild beating of her heart against his. He had never seen her look more desirable. Lord, but she was magnificent when she was on fire!

Mary seemed to be waiting for some response to her outrage. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"You're a heartless rogue, Sebastian **Edmunds**."

"**Mallory**, my dear. Let us not forget our roles."

She gasped. "Oh, if you knew how I mourned you, Sebastian. And you weren't **worth** it." She turned on her heel and left.

If they'd been dueling, her hit would have struck him right in the heart. He steeled himself to remain detached. She had spirit, **he'd** give her that.

Despite his efforts, a sharp sense of loss assailed him. He almost raised his hand to stop her; it took every ounce of discipline he possessed to leave it at his side. Desperately he fought the impulse to call her back and tell her everything, reveal his true purpose in coming to this particular coastal village.

But he couldn't do that, not without jeopardizing his mission. His duty was painful, but oh, so clear. All because he'd gone to Whitehall as soon as he landed at Dover.

Always the good soldier, he mocked himself. Report to your officers first, then attend to your own needs. He'd planned to go home after **London**. **But** his officers wouldn't let him **off duty**. They gave him one last assignment, to travel to this Somerset village to find a traitor.

The England Sebastian returned to was in a state of high alarm. Defenses were frantically being built all along the coast, against a French invasion widely believed to be imminent.

The grim-faced men in Whitehall believed this stretch of coast was especially vulnerable to attack. They also had intelligence that at least one of the traitors passing information to the French about coastal defenses was a local who had a link to Sebastian's prison. Sebastian was their best hope to identify the traitor and halt the flow of information.

He wanted to say no, He knew his father must be frantic for news of his whereabouts. Then he was offered a special incentive. When his mission was successfully completed, they told him, the Secretary of State for War would issue an official recognition, not only of Sebastian's contribution to England's defense, but an exoneration of Gerard's behavior in India as well. The Foxborough family honor would be reestablished.

Sebastian accepted the mission. How could he refuse?

Sebastian had never expected to see his forgotten bride in this village. Her face and form had faded from his memory during those long years in prison, and when he thought of her at all, He thought of her safe in Scotland with her family.

If Mary revealed who he was, and how he'd been gone for so many years, questions would be asked, and suspicions about him would be raised in the village. He wanted people to believe he was an idle London dandy, not a military man.

But in order for his charade to be convincing, Mary had to believe he was an irresponsible fribble, too. That unexpected development bothered him more than he counted on. He clenched the fist of the arm held rigid at his side.

It wasn't as if he had any real attachment to her, despite the physical attraction he'd just experienced. His wife or not, he barely knew her. Prison had killed any tender feelings in him. And Lord knows Mary hadn't been pining for him. She had his replacement already lined up. And he couldn't find it in his heart to blame her for it,

Undoubtedly, Mary was better off without him. He certainly wasn't the same man she had married. Even if he wasn't pretending to be a damned dandy, he was irrevocably altered by his prison experience. He was unfit to be anyone's husband now, much less the spouse of a sweet, sensitive woman like Mary.

Sebastian looked around at the humble furnishings of Mary's cottage. Poor girl, she must have had a rough time of it, too, these past seven years. Would it have been any easier for her to know her husband was alive and in prison?

Certainly not. With her husband gone, Mary had courageously made a life for herself, with prospects his miraculous reappearance was bound to threaten. For all

Mary could see, her long-lost husband was a shiftless dandy, with nary a responsible thought in his brain.

Their bargain was good for both of them. Mary would get her freedom from her ill-fated marriage, in return for her silence regarding Sebastian's true identity. As Mary's "cousin," Sebastian could move freely around the village, with Mary and everyone else unaware of his true mission.

He would find the traitor the men in Whitehall sought so desperately, and restore honor to the Foxborough name. Then he would find Davies, his own personal demon.

Maybe then the nightmares would stop. Playing the fool in this little village, and lying to the woman who had been his wife a lifetime ago, was a **small** price to pay for the promise of such peace.

Besides, he'd make it up to Mary. He'd help her marry her dependable country squire. Though he was beginning to think marriage to a dull fellow like Sir John Addington was a sad waste of a remarkable woman.



Mary woke up the next morning with an aching head, She knew she had to rise, milk the cow, and start all her daily chores. But her limbs felt heavy and she didn't want to stir.

She clutched the heavy silver locket that she kept around her neck, its weight reassuringly nestled between her breasts. It held a tiny miniature of Sebastian, the way she liked to remember him: young, enthusiastic, with the whole world before him.

She'd first fastened that miniature around her neck on her wedding day. It was a present from Sebastian, though it was casually given and she doubted he'd **remember** it.

She really should remove it. Unhook it and toss it in the sea, The man in the miniature bore little resemblance to the irresponsible dandy who had swept back into her life. Or the brooding man she visited last night, whose touch set her skin aflame.

Her cheeks burned at the memory. She should not allow him to affect her so. The romantic Sebastian of her youth was dead. What had been resurrected was a vain, shallow man who cared nothing for his responsibilities.

He had been so accommodating, suggesting they get a Scottish divorce so she could marry Sir John. No man who **loved** his wife would countenance such a thing.

Sebastian didn't love her now, and probably never had. She was a means to an end for him. Oh yes, she knew his marriage to her was a condition of his father's allowing him to join the **army**. And now Sebastian needed her to help him win a bet.

Her stomach churned with humiliation. But she could not afford fine sensibilities. She would keep her side of the bargain, and earn her freedom from this disgraceful man.

In the meantime, she would not allow him to upset her. She would have to keep a safe distance from him and the disturbing effect he had on her.

Her future depended on it.

Sebastian was up and out of the cottage by the time she had returned from the barn and went back into the cottage to make breakfast. His pallet was tucked neatly along the wall, his blanket folded **on** top.

She was grateful she wouldn't have to face him this morning. The memory of last night's encounter was still too vivid for her to act casually around him.

As the day wore on, however, **Mary's** thoughts kept drifting to Sebastian. Where was he, anyway? Probably down at the sea front, trying to win his bet. That was just fine with her, because she didn't care a **tuppence** if she saw him or **not**.

But when the front gate creaked open, her heart began to race and she hurried to the door.

It was just Sir John. **It** was absurd to feel so disappointed. He was exactly who she wanted to see.

Sir John stooped to enter the low **doorway**.

"Miss **Blackmore**! How fortunate I am to find you at home, Your father is here as well, is he not?" He looked around anxiously. "I would not care for even **a** whisper of impropriety to taint my visit."

Mary nearly flinched as the impropriety that occurred in this very room the night before replayed itself in her mind with startling clarity. She hurried to usher Sir John into the room.

"My father is here, by the hearth. Though I fear he is **dozing**."

"That's all right, then. The purpose of my call is to ascertain whether you have recovered from yesterday's ordeal."

"Yesterday's ordeal? Oh, you refer to the scene at the inn-yard."

"Yes, I could see that young coxcomb upset you with his vulgarity. I should horsewhip the fellow and make him apologize to you."

For a moment Mary allowed herself to dwell on the pleasant prospect Sir John painted. Then she recollected what she needed to do.

"You are so kind to be concerned. But you must not trouble yourself any further, for I discovered after you left here yesterday that the man at the inn-yard is actually my cousin. Quite distant." She put extra emphasis on the **last** word.

"That is amazing." Sir John removed his gloves, and handed them to Mary along with his hat and cane. "**And** you did not recognize him?"

"Not at first."

"Not even when you kicked him, my dear?"

Mary gave Sir John a sharp look to see if he was mocking her. But his face was all earnestness.

"It had been so long since I'd seen him," she tried to explain. "I thought he was just being insufferably rude. **But** he came by later to apologize, and that is when I **recollected** our connection."

"How very odd. Oh well, if he is as distant as you say, at least you don't have to put **up** with him all the time."

"Please sit down, Sir John," said Mary quickly. He accepted the chair she indicated. "Would you care for **a cup** of tea?"

"If it's no trouble--"

"I'd love some," said Sebastian, strolling through the door. He was resplendent once more today in fawn-colored breeches, a bottle green jacket and cherry striped waistcoat. Marguerite, who had been playing outside, trailed in behind him.

"Chatting up the locals is thirsty work. Though I wouldn't say no to a drop of something stronger, if you have it, Mary." He gave her a wink.

Sir John puffed his chest out, like a pigeon on **a** window ledge.

"You?~~What~~ are you doing here?"

Sebastian put one mirror-polished booted foot up on a chair, and grabbed an apple out of a bowl on the table.

"Me? I live here." He took a large, succulent bite of the apple.

Sir John sprang to his feet, sending the wooden chair skittering across the floor. "The devil you ~~say~~! Begging your pardon, Miss Blackmore," he added as an afterthought.

"No need to apologize to our Mary," Sebastian retaliated, munching on his apple. "She's a right game 'un. Has been since she was just a wee thing, no bigger than little Maggie."

Marguerite clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, is that my new name? Tante Marie, can I have it, please?"

"It's not very French, Marguerite, ~~What~~ would your mother have thought?"

The little girl's expression sobered for a moment. "But I am in England now, no? I will still learn French from you, to honor my dear *maman*. But with Monsieur Sebastian, I can be Maggie, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Mary hesitated. "Well..."

Sir John looked as though he was about to explode.

"Do you mind staying with the topic under discussion? This man has no right to be renaming anyone, much less staying with you. How do you even know he's your cousin? You yourself didn't recognize him at first. It's my opinion he's nothing but a mountebank?"

"Steady on, old man," said Sebastian. "~~It's~~ not healthy for you to be so upset. A chap your age needs to be careful, conserve his strength."

Sir John moved to stand directly in front of Sebastian. "How dare you refer to my age, you insolent puppy!"

"Now who's bringing age into it?"

"Gentlemen, please?" Mary inserted herself between the two of them. "I do not appreciate your arguing, and neither does Marguerite."

"Oh please, Tante Marie, call me Maggie."

"All right." Mary capitulated with a sigh. "Maggie. So please cease your brangling."

"I tell **you**, Miss Blackmore, it is not suitable for this man to be staying under your roof. It is not safe. And I do not like the idea of my future **wi--**, that is, of you, being submitted to his vulgarity."

If only Sir John knew how dangerous having Sebastian under her roof really was, he'd be doubly upset. For just a moment Mary had the rebellious thought that the squire was being stiflingly possessive. Yet, Sir John had almost declared his intentions to wed her just now, and Mary wouldn't jeopardize that turn of events for anything,

"He has no other place to stay, Sir John," she said **almost** pleadingly.

"Nonsense. The vicar has a spare room. I shall call on him today and make the necessary arrangements."

"Hold on," said Sebastian. "No one has consulted me. I do not wish to bunk with a mealy-mouthed parson. You said I could stay with you, Cousin Mary."

"Perhaps Sir John is right," she answered him meekly. "I do not wish anyone in the village to get the wrong idea."

"Indeed," said Sir John, "A woman's reputation is her most **prized** possession, I knew you would make the right decision, Miss Blackmore. Now if you will excuse me, I will warn the vicar to expect this person in **a** short while."

"You are too kind," Mary murmured.

Sir John left.

"Too kind, indeed," said Sebastian. "He's a nosy, interfering old woman."

"He is right, though. Gossip **could** ruin both of our plans. The vicar won't **trouble** you. **He's** a bit scholarly and keeps to himself. He may encourage you to pray at every meal, but I don't see how that will hurt you."

"I **don't** believe in prayer." Sebastian's voice was **curt**.

Marguerite drew a **scandalized** breath.

"Just a jest, little one," Sebastian assured the little girl **half-heartedly**.

He turned to Mary.

"All right, I will go to this vicar of yours. **But** do not be deceived into thinking it will be that easy to get rid of me."

"I have no illusions on that score, Sebastian. **I am** sure you will continue to pop up when I least expect: it."

Chapter Four

George Beecham, the village vicar, ate much better than Mary, Sebastian observed. The table was laid with two courses, including an assortment of nuts and cheeses, a fillet of sole, a macaroni dish and a fine joint of beef for the vicar to carve.

On the sideboard sat a golden apricot tart. Sebastian couldn't remember the last time he had tasted apricot tart, and just seeing it made his mouth water.

The vicar didn't stint in the wine department, either. Sebastian swirled a deep red French burgundy in his glass before swallowing another mouthful.

In all, it would have been a wonderful meal if it weren't for the vicar himself.

A middle-aged man of medium height, with thinning grey hair, the vicar had a soft, rounded form verging on plumpness,

He also had a lugubrious disposition and often felt compelled to quote Scripture, much to Sebastian's dismay.

It made for an uncomfortable evening.

"That was a fine meal." Sebastian pushed back his chair and set his napkin on the table. "Decent of you to take me in on such short notice."

"Let brotherly love continue," the vicar intoned, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares," He paused, and added as an afterthought, "Book of Hebrews."

"Just so," said Sebastian. "Though I can't say anyone's ever taken me for an angel. Quite the opposite is more like it."

Sebastian laughed. The vicar regarded him owlishly through his round eyeglasses, and didn't crack a smile,

"Well, then," said Sebastian. "Perhaps I should call it a night."

"Sir." The maid bobbed her head in at the door. "You have a visitor. Sir John Addington."

"Show him into the study, Martha." The vicar turned to Sebastian. "Sir John is here, no doubt, to inquire after you. Why don't you join us in the study for a drop of brandy?"

Sebastian followed the vicar into the study. Sir John was standing by the window.

"I hope I didn't interrupt your meal, **George**."

"Not at all. We had just finished the moment you called. Would you care for a brandy, Sir John?"

Sir John **rubbed** his hands together. "I **wouldn't** say no. You have some of the best brandy in all of **Somersetshire**."

"Thanks to you, cousin."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. "Cousin?"

"Why, yes. George is my cousin, which was a factor, I believe, in his obtaining this living. My name does carry a certain weight around here."

Sir John looked so self-satisfied, Sebastian longed **to** punch him. "But speaking of cousins, Mr. **Mallory**, I trust you left yours in good health?"

"Mary? She's fit as a fiddle, as always. Indeed, she's as hearty as a horse."

Sir John's expression stiffened. "Miss **Blackmore** is a delicate lady, and I will thank you not to describe her in such **vulgar** terms." He accepted a small glass of deep amber liquid from the vicar.

"Think the world of her, do you?" said Sebastian, also accepting a glass that was **proffered**, a shade more reluctantly, by his host.

"Indeed." Sir John's tone was still frosty. "You may as well know I intend to make your cousin my wife. Not that I would need any permission from you. I will speak directly to her father."

"Hope you catch him on a good day, then," said Sebastian, "Otherwise he may confuse you with a hedgehog, Though come to think of it, it would be an understandable mistake."

"Gentlemen, please," said the vicar. "Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one **another**." Another portentous pause. "Galatians."

"**Envy**?" Sir John looked down his long thin nose at Sebastian, his gaze lingering on the primrose waistcoat and black and yellow polka-dotted neck cloth Sebastian was sporting. "I do not envy this fellow in the least."

Sebastian raised his wineglass in a salute. "My thoughts exactly. No offense, Sir John, but you dress like an undertaker."

Sir John started to sputter, but, ignoring him, Sebastian turned to the vicar.

"However, I do envy you this excellent brandy. Where would a man of God find such a thing?"

Beecham removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "It was a gift." His eyes didn't meet Sebastian's. "It may seem extravagant for a poor parson, but I did not wish to appear ungracious. As the Good Book says—"

"Oh, please don't," Sebastian interrupted him hastily. "My poor brain cannot take in so many edifying quotations in one evening. But I believe I can guess your drift. Accepting gifts is good. Refusing them is churlish. The fact that the gift is a rare and excellent port has nothing to say to the matter. Let us move on to other matters."

The vicar visibly squirmed, Sir John took another sip of his wine.

"As you say, Mallory, let us move on. I confess to being curious about why you came to our little village."

"To see my cousin, of course."

"Whom you not only did not know was here, but by all accounts, didn't even recognize."

"What defense can I offer?" Sebastian shrugged. "I have been enjoying the pleasures of the metropolis, and thoughts of my family have been far from my mind."

"Yet you journeyed from London all the way to the coast of Somerset. Hardly a fashionable spot for a young buck like you. Why did you come here of all places?"

Sebastian raised one eyebrow. "Is this an inquisition?"

The vicar piped up. "People have been talking. You don't pass unnoticed."

"Perhaps you are right." Sebastian regarded his bright clothing ruefully. "I forget that London styles can be overwhelming too provincials. I will try to tone down my splendor. Will that appease the locals?"

"I doubt it," said Sir John. "They still wonder why you are here. In this time of national alarm, anything out of the way makes people nervous."

"Ho, now! You don't think I'm a ssp for Napoleon, do you? No, but that is a rich jest! As much as I love French wines—" he held up his glass again "—and French women, I don't think I'd fancy a French government. And by the way," he added pleasantly, "I'll gladly take my sword and run any man through who suggests otherwise."

"Now, now," said the vicar. "There's no need for violence."

Sebastian ignored him and addressed Sir John. "Tell your people I am here to escape the pressures of London. I may even take up fishing while I'm here. Such a wholesome activity, out in the fresh air, don't you agree?"

"You know, I don't believe you're as big a fool as you'd like me to think," said Sir John softly. "I'd advise you to watch your step, Mallory. Miss Blackmore's cousin or not, you will not be permitted to upset the apple cart in our little village. Do not cross me, or you will live to regret it. This village is my territory, and my word is law around here."

Sebastian whistled, "Is that so? I had no idea. Do you agree, Beechum?"

The vicar sat silently.

"Apparently you do, for you have nothing to say. Thankfully, not even a scriptural quotation. Well, I will take your words to heart, Sir John. And now, I confess our conversation has fatigued me so greatly I must retire."

Sebastian made an elaborate bow and left the vicar and Sir John gaping. Taking a candle from the hall table, he made his way up the dark staircase to his tiny room.

He sat on his narrow bed, and began to pull off his boots.

It was obvious Sir John hated him. His cousin, the vicar, was indebted to Sir John for his living, and would do anything Sir John wished,

The two of them were deeply suspicious of Sebastian. Yet they had given him some valuable information that furthered his mission in the village.

The brandy the vicar sipped was a rare vintage, made only in France and available in England through the tireless efforts of smugglers.

Sebastian was certain he had tasted that brandy once before. It was when he was in prison, when the warden had offered him a small glass before a vicious beating, in a grotesque parody of hospitality.

As his henchman unfurled his long braided whip, the warden had proudly informed Sebastian that this drink was a specialty of the region,

Sebastian had never forgotten the taste of the brandy or the cruel smile on the warden's face. Both were as indelible in his memory as the scars were on his back.

But what did the brandy signify? The vicar had betrayed discomfort when Sebastian questioned him about the brandy, but that could be insignificant. Undoubtedly the brandy had been smuggled into England, and that could be the source of the cleric's embarrassment.

The fact that the vicar possessed smuggled goods, and that Sir John undoubtedly knew about it, and perhaps even supplied them, was not in itself too shocking. Practically every landowner in England had in his possession brandy or other contraband, such as lace or tea, which he'd received courtesy of a "free trader."

But this liquor was special. It was Sebastian's first discovery connecting the village to the French prison he knew so well.

That excellent brandy could well be a link in a chain of treachery. And it was sitting in a decanter amid the sermons in the vicar's study.

* * *

This could be the day that seals her fate, Mary **realized** as she set out for the village. Sir John had invited her to a late-afternoon tea at the manor house, and graciously included her father and Marguerite in the invitation.

It was such a mark of favor that Mary was certain a marriage proposal must be forthcoming. She wanted to **look** her best, so she came to the village to buy new ribbons to trim her muslin gown. She'd raided the jar that held her egg money, and decided to splurge and buy some ribbons for Marguerite as well. After all, this could be the most important occasion of their lives.

At the linen **draper's** Mary selected a length of blue ribbon for Marguerite, enough for a bow on her white muslin dress with an extra yard for her blonde hair. For herself, Mary selected green ribbons, the color of the embroidery she had painstakingly applied to her best willow green muslin gown.

Yes, they would look fine at the manor house, Mary thought as she stood on the cobblestones outside the shop, her purchase gripped in her hand. But there **was** a heaviness in her heart that no bright ribbons could dispel. While she desperately craved the security of marriage to Sir John, there was a tiny, traitorous part of her that recoiled at the bleak prospect: of such a loveless confinement.

It was all **Sebastian's** fault. Ever since he had come back into her life, she had grown discontent with her goals. It was not as if he had anything better to offer.

A fop and a wastrel, Sebastian had nothing to match the stability Sir John Addington had to offer. So why, then, was it Sebastian's face Mary saw when she closed her eyes at night?

And yet Sebastian had betrayed her profoundly. How could he leave her after their marriage without any explanation, or the least attempt at communication? Had she meant so little to him that he could forget her so easily?

She didn't forget him. For almost seven long, lonely years she'd dreamed of him, prayed he'd come back to her.

Be careful what you pray for, she thought bitterly. It just might come true.

She was at the top of a steep street, and she could see the ocean in the distance. She always felt calmed by the rhythm of the waves, and instinctively she headed down to the sea front.

White fluffy clouds scudded across the blue sky as she walked. A salty breeze caressed her cheeks and fluttered the hem of her skirt.

She had clutched at the bargain Sebastian offered as though it were a lifeline. His proposal solved all her problems; it was the next best thing to his being declared dead. A Scottish divorce would grant her the freedom she needed to marry Sir John. Surely the baronet would understand her predicament once she explained it to him--after they were safely betrothed.

And she would then be free of the worst mistake of her life. She had been so blinded by Sebastian, thinking him a hero when he was really a coward, and a man unable to face up to his responsibilities. He had seemed so different when she married him...

She stopped suddenly, right outside the Crown and Anchor, as a realization struck her. That's what was really bothering her. Despite the hurt she felt, and her instinct to withdraw and blame, she couldn't quite accept that she'd been so wrong about Sebastian.

He couldn't have changed that much in seven years, and she couldn't have misread him so completely when she fell in love with him. Even now, she occasionally glimpsed something in his eyes that gave the lie to his portrayal of himself as a useless dandy.

This wasn't the man her heart knew so well seven years ago. Or was it? Was Sebastian pretending to be something he wasn't? If so, why?

Mary had the sudden conviction that she had to know the answer to those questions before she could accept Sir John's proposal.

"Cousin **Mary!**"

Mary's heart lurched at the sound of Sebastian's voice.

"What an unexpected treat to see you. You are no doubt consumed with concern as to how I am doing at the vicar's, Tolerably well, so set your mind at ease. It's sermons and shortbread at every meal, salted with regular admonitions from the Good Book. I haven't had such lessons drilled into me since I was a boy."

Mary smiled in spite of herself. Having endured the vicar's company herself, she had a good idea of what Sebastian was experiencing.

"**I'm** sure it is doing you a world of good, cousin. Vicar **Beechum** will show you a better path than the one you've been travelling."

"Do you really think so?" He flicked a microscopic speck of dust from his sleeve.

"There's already an improvement. I noticed you have toned down your customary splendor today, Sebastian. Your drab colored coat and breeches are quite unlike what we've become accustomed to."

"Been fishing, **m'dear**," he answered with a drawl. "Those fish are dashed slimy creatures. **Wouldn't** want them spoiling **my** waistcoat,"

"So you honestly intend to try and win this bet?"

"I don't honestly intend anything." He added an insolent wink to his words.

"As I well know." She was silent, letting her words sink in. "Was it so very easy to forget me, Sebastian?"

For a moment his expression became unreadable. Mary thought she glimpsed regret, and a **profound** pain in his deep blue eyes.

Then his expression vanished, replaced by his usual casual insouciance.

"I was young. And my life became crowded with new experiences. I'm afraid, my dear, that you were **part** of the past I left **behind**."

His words should have stung, but Mary found herself disbelieving him. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking on her part, but her intuition told her Sebastian was keeping something **from** her.

"What did you really do all those years, since our marriage, Sebastian? You can't have been travelling the whole time."

"My dear, do you have any idea how long it takes to sail anywhere from this foggy isle? I assure you, I barely had time to get off the boat **between** my trips all over the world, Not that I wanted to. Nothing like travelling by ship."

"I seem to recall you hated being at sea, Your father told us once of a trip you made to Dublin. He said you were in your cabin or hanging over the rails the whole time."

"A minor difficulty I outgrew."

"And it didn't bother you that England has been locked in conflict with the French all this **time**? You, who were so eager to join the army?"

"I never did get to **India** to fight with **Col.** Wellesley, my dear." His voice had an unmistakable ring of truth. "Which is just as well. The uniforms proved to be quite hideous for a **man** of my coloring. And I have little interest in what that upstart First Consul is up to."

"You mean the Emperor Napoleon, I presume."

"Of course."

Was she mistaken, or did the unflappable Sebastian seem flustered?

"I forgot the Little Corporal's self-elevated status for a moment," he continued, a shade **too** hastily.

"Forgot? Have you really been in the Caribbean, Sebastian, or hiding under a rock all these years?"

Looking startled, he gave her a searching look, and stumbled on a cobblestone.

"The devil!" He bent down and grabbed his **leg**. When he straightened and started to walk again, it was with **a** pronounced limp. Mary stifled an urge to reach out to him, **comfort** him in his injury.

"How did your leg get hurt, Sebastian? You never answered me when I asked you before."

"On some rickety stairs in a brothel in Jamaica, near St. **Jago** de la Vega, to be exact." His cruel words slashed through her like knives, whose only purpose was to cut and sever. "**Afraid** I wasn't quite sober."

He stopped at the stricken look she knew was on her face. "Oh, do forgive me, cousin. Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken so plainly. But we do have an understanding, do we not?"

"Yes, of course we do." Mary clutched her reticule, with its bright ribbons inside, to her chest. She held her head up.

"You help me, and I will help you. And when it's all over, we'll never have to see each other again. And now, I've taken up enough of your valuable time. If you'll excuse me, I have an afternoon engagement I must get ready for."

She turned around, and stepped briskly up the street to the road that led out of the village. The ocean and Sebastian were behind her. This road, if she followed it far enough, led to Sir John's manor house. And that, she decided, is where her future lay.

* * *

Sir John sent his carriage for Mary and her little family for his afternoon tea party. Mary had brushed Marguerite's gold hair till it shone, and laced the blue ribbon through it. She had pressed her own willow green gown, and thought the new trim made it look very fine.

Even old Angus had taken special care with his appearance. He'd **resurrected** his old horsehair wig, which he powdered with some of her precious household flour, and donned it, along with a well-worn blue velvet suit, a slightly frayed lace ruffle and shoes adorned with jeweled buckles. The jewels, alas, were paste, but still, her father looked **almost** like his old self,

But no amount of finery could ease the ache in Mary's **heart**, or remove the sting in her eyes from unshed tears. Talking to Sebastian had been a mistake. Whatever he was once, he was an idle, dissolute rake now. She had been very wrong **about** him seven years ago, and **she was** lucky she had a chance now to rectify her mistake.

"What is it, Mary my girl?" said her father, sitting across from her on the squabs in Sir John's fine barouche. "Why so glum?"

"I was just thinking, Father, how easy it is to misjudge people. Someone you once thought a hero, for example, can so easily turn out to have feet of clay."

Her father pondered that for minute. "Sir John's feet ain't that bad, my gel, Not that I've seen them bare, of course. But he walks around on them well enough."

"I'm not speaking of Sir John, Father. I was thinking of, well, Sebastian."

Marguerite piped up. "Oh, Tante Marie, is he going to be at the tea party as well? I would like to see him. I do miss him so."

"Not that Sebastian, Marguerite."

"Are you thinking of your husband, then, daughter? Put your mind at ease. Sebastian is a hero. And I know he will come back to us soon."

Angus began to wring his hands in his lap. "I'll have to tell the housekeeper to lay on a great feast when he comes. I shall want to hear all about his adventures in India."

Oh, dear, her father's mind was wandering again. Mary had to resettle him before they got to Sir John's.

"I don't believe Sebastian is returning to us, Father. I believe he was lost in India."

"No, no, you must be mistaken, Mary. Sebastian is coming back. He told me so. He's a fine boy, and far too honorable to lie. Just like his father. Where is the Earl? I haven't seen him this age, and I must talk to him."

"We must accept the facts," Mary struggled to continue, "and be grateful that Sir John has taken such an interest in us. He is our friend."

"Bah," said Marguerite. "He is not a very nice man. I don't like the way he looks at you, Tante. Like you're a big blanc mange he wants to eat for supper."

"Marguerite?"

"Sir John is fine in his way," said Angus, "but he is nothing to compare to Sebastian. You will see when Sebastian comes home."

"Oh, Father," said Mary, giving up the attempt to reason with him.

The carriage pulled right up to the front door of the manor house, and Sir John came down from the house to greet them.

"You look lovely, Miss Blackmore," he said, helping her down the carriage steps. "Your presence graces my humble abode."

Mary couldn't help noticing the baronet's self-satisfied smile belied any humility he professed.

Marguerite scampered down the stairs after her mother.

"And how do I look, Sir John? Pretty, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"Charming," Sir John answered, a shade impatiently. "Mr. Blackmore. Welcome to my home. Come, let us go in. Tea should be ready in the parlor."

Sir John led the way through the oak entry door into the hallway. Marguerite's laughter echoed along the marble floors and up the sweeping stairway that led to a second floor.

Over the **stairwell** hung a chandelier, its crystal beads catching the rays of the late afternoon sun and sending **them** dancing on the ceiling. Marguerite stopped to look in open-mouthed wonder.

"Tante Marie, did you ever see such **a** thing?"

Sir John laughed indulgently. "Yes, my child, it is magnificent, is it not?"

Marguerite turned her big blue eyes on him. "Would you lift me so I can touch it, please?"

Sir John looked horrified. "Certainly not. You would mar the crystal with your fingerprints. Whatever would be next? I suppose you would like to swing on it, as well."

Marguerite clapped her hands, "Yes, **please!**"

"Miss Blackmore," said Sir John faintly, "I realize your ward has had, out of necessity, a fairly informal upbringing, but would you be so kind as to explain to her what constitutes proper behavior in a civilized household?"

Mary started to bristle at his tone. Then she recalled all the advantages Marguerite would have if Sir John took them under his wing.

"I apologize for her behavior, Sir John. She is naturally **overwhelmed** by the grandeur of your home. She has never seen anything resembling such a wonder as your chandelier."

"Of course," said Sir John, somewhat mollified. "Perhaps it was a mistake to invite such a young child here. I can ask our maid to come and fetch her, and take her to the kitchens. Yes, that might be best."

Mary was to protest the banishment of Marguerite when her father spoke up.

"Nonsense," said Angus **robustly**. "She can stay with me. I'll keep her out of trouble."

Marguerite, whose eyes had been very wide at Sir John's tone of voice, slipped next to Angus and slid her small hand into his. "Please. I will be good if you let me stay with **Grand-père**."

"**Grand-père**?" said Sir John, confused.

"It is her name for him," **explained** Mary. Surely Sir John had heard Marguerite use the term before. Perhaps he had never paid **attention**. "They are very close."

"I see," said Sir John, looking disapproving. "Well, then, let us go in to tea. I have invited my cousin George to drop by."

"Delightful," murmured Mary.

Sir John led them into a high-ceilinged room, crammed with sofas, and tables littered with porcelain vases, silver **snuffboxes**, china figurines, and all manner of costly ornaments. Mary was terrified that Marguerite would touch something and break it, thus further irritating Sir John. She almost wished she had let Sir John's maid take Marguerite away.

In the center of the room sat a table with a silver tea service laid out. A seed cake lay on a **platter** nearby.

"Would you pour for us, Miss Blackmore?" asked Sir John.

Mary went to the head of the table and lifted a delicate cup and saucer.

"Tea, Sir John? Would you care for milk or lemon?"

"Just the tea, Miss Blackmore. And perhaps a slice of seed cake."

Mary began to serve him. Sir John watched her with approval.

"It well becomes you, this role of hostess," said Sir John. "How would you like to preside permanently at my tea table?"

Mary's hands went suddenly nerveless. Shakily she put the cup and saucer down on the table.

"What do you mean, Sir John?"

"Mary, and Mr. Blackmore, sir, I cannot dissemble. I invited you both here today with a specific purpose in mind. Mr. **Blackmore**, if you **would** allow me to ask your daughter—Mary, would you consent to--"

There was a clatter in the hallway. Sir John's eyebrows knit together in a fierce frown.

"What is that racket?"

The vicar came trundling in. "So sorry to be late, Sir John, We were stopped on the way. Unavoidable, I'm afraid."

He looked around. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"I am in the process of proposing to Miss Blackmore," said Sir John through gritted teeth. "However, I wish to do it properly. So, if you don't mind—hold a minute, what did you mean by 'we'?"

"By 'we' he meant me," said Sebastian, entering the room.

With a cry of delight, Marguerite ran to his side, He ruffled her hair.

"Nice ribbon, Maggie. Matches the color of your eyes."

Marguerite sighed in adoration.

"But don't let me stop you, Sir John. Continue with your proposal. I confess I'm curious to see how you go about it."

"It's a family matter," said Sir John, tight-lipped.

"Well, that's all right then," Sebastian replied, "I'm family." He gave Mary a wink.

Mary could have cheerfully killed him on the spot.

Chapter Five

Mary rushed to try and save the situation.

"Please forgive my cousin, Sir John. He's lived abroad for so many years he's quite forgotten how to behave in polite company."

"Oh, I say, cousin, that is harsh," Sebastian protested.

"But true, by all appearances," said Sir John. "You, sir, are quite rude. But for Mary's sake, I ~~am~~ willing to **overlook** your behavior."

Sebastian crossed the room and slapped him heartily on the back.

"I say, that's awfully decent of you. Everyone knows I'm a diamond in the rough, but my cousin, Mary, here, she's a polished gem. She deserves the best, and I guess around here, you're as close to that as it comes."

Sir John flinched. Mary wasn't sure if his reaction was prompted by Sebastian's touch or his words. She hastened to **intervene**.

"Sebastian, cousin, won't: you please sit down? Sir John is being patient, but you did interrupt him."

"Of course, Mary. I'll just have a cup of that tea you're sewing. No milk, no sugar, no lemon. I like it strong and potent."

Suddenly breathless, Mary poured him a cup. **With** a rakish grin he took it from her. Her hands tingled where his fingers brushed hers.

She cupped her other hand and cradled her fingers as though they'd been burnt. Drat the man. His presence filled the room and her mind, even when he was sitting quietly with his tea on the settee. She tried to ignore him, but it was like trying not to notice the sun on a hot day.

Sir John cleared his throat, and Mary struggled to refocus her concentration on him. Sir John was her salvation—Sebastian would surely be her downfall if she allowed it.

"Well, my dear Miss Blackmore, as I was saying before we were interrupted, I would like to publicly declare my affection for you. But before I ask your father for your hand, I would like to know if my suit will meet with your approval."

"Now that's rigging the game," observed Sebastian. "Getting her consent before you even pop the question. Poor spirited, in my opinion. Just ask her and take your chances. Take a risk, man."

Angus guffawed, Marguerite giggled and Mary had to hide her own smile at Sebastian's words. Only the vicar uttered a protest,

"I say, Mr. Mallory, you can't expect an important personage like Sir John to expose himself to uncertainty and possible humiliation. Why, think of the consequences to his reputation if Miss **Blackmore**--"

"There's no need to dignify this man's flippancy with rational explanation, George." Sir John shot Sebastian a look of pure loathing. "We must forgive him his gaucherie. I can withstand it, but I regret Miss Blackmore must **suffer**."

"Miss Blackmore doesn't have to suffer," said Sebastian. "I'll gladly take her away from all this."

He laughed as he spoke, and Sir John looked confused. Mary's heart seemed to stop in her breast. No doubt Sir John was wondering what **Mary's** cousin meant. Mary's pulse started to pound. Her mind toyed with the idea of letting Sebastian take her away, and all that it implied.

Was he serious? He seemed so confident and assured, his blue eyes unfathomable, focussed on her as though she were the only person in the room. His gaze was caressing, and boldly promised delights she'd barely glimpsed with him.

For a second she was tempted to forget her responsibilities and his transgressions, and give in to the powerful pull exerted by the force of his personality.

Sir John could be a pompous prig – there was no use denying it. Sebastian's attraction was magnetic. She yearned, despite her better judgment, to cross the room, and simply put her hand in his, touch him, and explore the possibilities his words had just opened up.

Had she lost her wits? Clearly, Sir John was angry and offended. If she wasn't careful, he could withdraw his proposal, That could mean years, if not the rest of her life, struggling to eke out an existence on her meager farm income and the grudging charity of Sebastian's cousin.

Attraction was one thing. Survival was another. She must never forget Sebastian abandoned her for seven long years without a word of explanation. If she were the wife of dull Sir John, he would never dream of forsaking his duty to her.

But who knew what the mercurial Sebastian would do? Would he claim his earldom and his rightful place at Foxborough Hall? Or would he dally with her as long as it amused him, and then leave once more for parts unknown?

He'd **already** proven his **irresponsibility**. Mary couldn't risk another abandonment. She remembered Sebastian's leg, broken at a brothel.

Mary hardened her heart against her errant husband's seductive charms. She briefly closed her eyes, and prayed for strength.

"You take no risk, Sir John," she said firmly. "I can assure you, you will not meet with disappointment in your suit."

Relief and self-satisfaction shone in Sir John's eyes.

"Then, Miss Blackmore, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

"Yes, Sir John." Her stomach suddenly felt hollow.

"Oh, no," Marguerite cried in dismay.

Mary gave her a warning look. "Marguerite, that is no way to speak to Sir John. You should thank him, and be happy. He will be like a papa to you."

"Indeed," echoed Sir John, with a thin smile. Mary wished he could show his affection more easily.

"Father, you haven't said **a** word. May we have your blessing?"

"**Isn't** that what the vicar is here for?" Angus grumbled.

Beechum puffed out his chest. "As it is written—"

"**I'm** sure many wise and holy things are," Mary interjected, "but I wish to know your opinion, Father."

"Well, since you asked, I think it's all wrong. What will Sebastian say?"

"Sebastian?" Mary was at a loss. Trust her father to remember she was married, when he forgot nearly everything else. "Sebastian is right here." Turning to Sebastian, Mary pleaded for help with her eyes.

Sebastian put a comforting hand on the old man's shoulder. "Angus, I think it's a wonderful idea."

"You do?" The old man regarded him with confusion. "Mary says you're not Sebastian, but I believe you are. How can you permit this?"

"Don't worry, sir." Sebastian winked. "I have it all worked out. You just do what your daughter says."

"If you say so." Angus visibly relaxed. "I'll be guided by you, then."

"Then I take it I have your approval?" Sir John barely restrained his impatience.

"If Sebastian thinks I should," Angus replied.

"Of all the cork-brained—" Sir John **started** to sputter.

"Please be patient with my **father**," said Mary in a low voice. "He is not always **well**."

Sir John checked himself. He reached for Mary's hand and patted it. "Of course, my dear. I will treat him as though he were my own father."

With an effort, Mary resisted pulling her hand out of Sir John's damp one. "Thank you, Sir **John**."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" said Sebastian, "Angus said his approval was contingent on mine."

"Why you insolent, **unprincipled--**"

"Please, Sir John. He is my cousin."

This time, Mary saw, it seemed harder for Sir John to recollect himself.

"Certainly, my dear. So, Mr. Mallory, do we have your approval?" The words seemed dragged out of him.

"By Jove, I believe **you** do. Our Mary has done well for herself. I'm going to enjoy having **a** baronet in the family. In **fact**, I believe a new waistcoat is in order. There's a bolt of puce fabric I have my eye on at the linen draper's, You don't mind if I put it on your bill, do you, cousin-in-law?"

Mary tried to be indignant, but she had **to** stifle a laugh. The expression on her new **fiancé's** face could have curdled milk.

Sebastian did her a favor, in his own way. She was now safely betrothed to Sir John. It was exactly what she **wanted**.

If only she could shake the feeling **she'd** given her hand to the wrong man.



Sebastian shivered in the damp, dripping fog that blanketed the village and blurred the morning into afternoon. He stood outside the tavern at the Crown and Anchor, waiting to meet **Jemmy Platte**.

Mary had told him about Jemmy. **Platte** was a local fisherman who'd been short-handed ever since his son joined His Majesty's Navy. What had really piqued Sebastian's interest in **Jemmy**, though, was Mary's casual mention that **Platte** was the leader of an enthusiastic group of volunteers who had taken it upon themselves to patrol the coast and be on alert for a possible French invasion.

Mary was keeping her part of the bargain. She had told Sebastian about **Jemmy** so Sebastian could work on winning his bet. And now Sebastian's job was to help Mary secure her marriage to Sir **John** Addington.

Sebastian brought his clasped hands up to his face and blew into them, trying to **warm** his cold fingers. He'd be willing to bet Addington's hands were cold all the **time**, not just in a chilly fog.

Sour bile threatened to rise in his throat. The thought of Mary being touched intimately by that pompous prig up at the manor nauseated Sebastian. **It** wasn't that Sebastian harbored any lingering affections for his erstwhile bride. His capacity for tender emotions was well--crushed in prison. Now the only devotion he **felt** was for unmasking traitors, and one traitor in particular, the one who had put him in that foul French prison cell.

Mary may smell of roses and lavender, and remind him of his young manhood. The other night, in her cottage, he'd felt his body quicken in response to hers. But any man who'd been in prison for seven years was bound to respond to the first woman he encountered. It didn't signify anything.

But just because he didn't love Mary Blackmore, didn't mean he could complacently turn her over to Addington. For all his wealth and status, Sir John seemed like a poor sort of a man to Sebastian.

The baronet had a cold, disapproving disposition. A woman of Mary's beauty and passionate nature deserved better than that.

And then there was Mary's **ward**, little Maggie, to consider. Sebastian was willing to bet his last groat that Sir John disliked the child, and would try to send her away somewhere at the first opportunity.

What's more, Sebastian distrusted Addington. There was something about the man Sebastian could not name, but knew he didn't like. It had nothing to do with Mary, of course. It was just his intuition.

Under the circumstances, how could Sebastian not have reservations about Mary's betrothal? When she said yes to Addington yesterday afternoon, Sebastian felt as though the hard end of a musket had butted him right in his gut—an experience he was well familiar with.

Yet Sebastian was honor-bound to fulfill his side of the bargain. One word from him and the engagement would be null and void. And Mary would be furious.

So he wouldn't say anything--yet, But he would keep a close eye on the baronet.

Sebastian spied a short, wiry man in the clothes of a laborer ambling up the street. The **s**mill of fish preceded the man by at least fifty paces.

Sebastian approached him.

"Excuse me, my good man. Are you Jemmy Platte?"

"Who wants to know?" Jemmy eyed Sebastian suspiciously. Sebastian figured the bright peacock-blue neck cloth he was wearing had a lot to do with **Jemmy's** distrust.

"My cousin, Mary Blackmore, told me you would be the man to talk to about fishing. I need a job, and you need the help."

"You? Fish? In that rig-out you've got on?" Platte guffawed in obvious disbelief.

"Why don't we step into the tavern and discuss it over a pint? I may know **more** about fishing than you suppose."

The expression of distrust on **Platte's** face quickly changed to cheerful acceptance.

"I won't say no to a pint. I've been up since dawn, **out** on my boat. Fishing's thirsty work."

"Most work is." Sebastian ushered the fisherman into the tavern, and led him to a table in a corner. There were only a few people in the tavern at mid-afternoon, and the patrons that were there sat at the bar.

"So," said Platte as Sebastian placed a pint before him, "you want to work for me."

"In a manner of speaking," Sebastian replied. "I want to learn about the fish in these **waters**."

"Is that so?" Jemmy looked wary.

"Indeed. I'm especially interested in foreign fish. Big French ones who can swim long distances."

Jemmy sat up straight, his pint forgotten for a moment,

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"People around here know me as Sebastian **Mallory**, cousin of **Mary Blackmore**."

"And how should I know you?"

Sebastian fixed the honest fisherman's face with an intense blue stare. "As a friend of good old King George. But perhaps the better question is, how should I know *you*?"

Jemmy broke the tension by taking a long draught of ale. "I swear before God **you**'ll never find me wanting in that department, God save the King."

"I believe you, **Platte**. My friends in London suggested I contact you. I understand you are connected with the Severn District Sea **Fencibles** up in Bristol?"

"Aye. Me and my mates watch the coast pretty closely here. If Boney tries to slip through, we'll **catch him**."

"Well, I have a letter of reference, shall we say, from Captain Thomas Wolsey, the commander up there."

Sebastian slipped a letter from his breast coat pocket and slid it across the table.

Sebastian watched as Platte unfolded the letter.

"I recognize the seal," said the fisherman in a gruff voice, refolding the letter and handing it back to Sebastian. "That's enough for me. What can I do for you?"

"Let me work with your crew."

"Won't that look odd? No offense, sir, but you stick out in the village like a whale in a school of minnows."

Sebastian shrugged. "No matter. I'm not taken seriously here. The villagers assume I'm a town idler amusing himself by playing fisherman. I want them to think that. Makes it easier for me to poke my nose into things."

"And just what are you looking for?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't need to look so hard, now would I?"

Platte digested that for a moment, "You mentioned Miss Blackmore. Is she part of this?"

"No. She knows nothing. And that's how I wish it to remain."

"So she's really your cousin?"

Sebastian winced. "We have a close connection."

Platte eyed him assessingly. "Word around the village is she's betrothed to Sir John Addington."

"One problem at a time, Mr. Platte," he murmured. "One problem at a time." Sebastian's gaze sharpened. "But what do you know of Sir John?"

Platte snorted. "He never comes down to the harbor. We're beneath his touch."

Sebastian nodded, "That sounded like the baronet, all right."

"I currently have the dubious pleasure of boarding with Addington's cousin, the vicar. As his guest, I **couldn't** help but notice the vicar's supply of very fine French wines. Now, where would he get such a thing?"

Platte leaned closer and lowered his voice. "From Sir John, who gets his wares at the same place as all the nobs. Tax-free, you might say."

"So, the baronet **participates** in the smuggling trade. No surprise, there. I wonder, though, if French goods are all he **trafficks** in?"

"There's no love lost between the villagers and Addington, and that's the **truth**. But make no mistake, Sir John is a powerful man. He's the magistrate, and the largest landowner. His word is law around here."

"Do not concern yourself, Mr. Platte. I am well used to dealing with dangerous men, or men who fancy themselves dangerous. Sir John cannot **hurt** me."

Mary's sweet face and bright eyes flashed through his mind, and Sebastian knew he had lied.

"Tante Marie, must we attend church this morning?"

"Why, certainly, Marguerite. It is Sunday."

The little girl pouted, "But **Grand-père** does not have to go."

Mary tied the two ends of pink ribbon in a pretty bow under the child's chin, fastening a straw bonnet over her golden curls.

"**Grand-père** is an old man. He needs his rest. But you are a naughty young girl who needs to go to church. Now, go fetch your cloak. The carriage Sir **John** sent for us should be here shortly."

What luxury, Mary thought, as she and Marguerite climbed into the carriage with the coachman's assistance. The sky drizzled, but they kept dry in the closed vehicle. They did not have to contend with the muddy track that led through the fields to the church, or worry **about** their clothing getting soaked.

Mary leaned back against the squabs. It reminded her of her privileged girlhood in Scotland, when she took such things as carriages for granted.

This morning's ride to church in Sir John's barouche was but a taste of what her future as Lady Addington would hold. Security and comfort, for herself and those she **loved**.

It was the only sensible course of action. She was **extremely** lucky Sir John wanted her. Lucky...the last time she'd felt lucky was standing at the altar with Sebastian. She'd felt even luckier later that night, when he came to her chamber and lay with her. Strong, handsome Sebastian, holding her in his arms, loving her. Or so she thought.

Even at the age of seventeen, she understood she was more in love with Sebastian than he was with her. She knew he was marrying her to please his father. But he was oh, so gentle and sweet with her then. She believed that with time he would come to love her as much as she loved **him**.

But there hadn't been enough time, or indeed any time for them. Sebastian left, and didn't return for nearly seven **long**, lonely years. Now he was more than willing to free her from the **vows** they'd once made, so she could become the wife of Sir John.

It was what she wanted. She thought about being Sir John's wife, and lying with him in the big baronial bed he undoubtedly owned. Suddenly her mood was as grey as the sky.

Summoning the faithful to the service, the church bell rang as they approached the church. The villagers gawked as she and Marguerite stepped down from the carriage. Sir John was waiting at the entrance of the church door.

He extended his hand to her as he walked up the steps. Upon reaching her side, he took her arm and tucked it under his possessively. Sir John didn't even glance at Marguerite, who trailed behind them.

The baronet led Mary to the front, into the Addington family pew. Marguerite scooted in beside her. Mary was aware of every eye in the old village church upon her as she joined in the opening hymn. She felt uncomfortably on display. Sir John seemed oblivious to the attention.

After the second lesson the vicar intoned:

"I publish the Banns of Marriage between Sir John Addington, Bachelor, and Miss Mary Blackmore, Spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy Matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is the first time of asking."

The pulpit swam before Mary's eyes, and she had to clutch the rail in front of her for support.

Sir John, standing ramrod straight beside her, frowned,

"Excuse me, Sir John," she whispered. "I am feeling a bit light-headed, I believe I need some fresh air."

"You cannot leave now," he admonished her in a low voice. "The service isn't over."

"But I feel faint. I need some air," she pleaded.

"Highly irregular. What will people think?"

The congregation reached for their hymnals for another song. The organist settled herself at the elaborate pipe organ, the pride of the church and a behest from Sir John's father. Mary took advantage of the disruption to slip down to the end of the pew and out the side door of the church. Marguerite shadowed her like a ghost,

Once outside, Mary walked out into the churchyard. She sank down on the wet grass, leaning against a gravestone.

"I know the vicar can be a dreadful bore, but was it really that bad?" a familiar voice said gently behind her.

"Sebastian" squeaked Marguerite. "We sneaked out. No one noticed because they're all singing."

"So I hear." **Sebastian** cocked his head in the direction of the church. "Amazing Grace," backed up with the organ pipes in full throat, emanated from the stone walls.

"It was stifling," said Mary, rising to her feet. "I was overcome. I am **much** recovered **now**."

"Do not feel compelled to explain anything to me," Sebastian replied. "I myself cannot abide stone rooms of any size. Too confining."

"You do not go to church?" Marguerite's eyes were wide. "Aren't you afraid of God?"

"God and I have not been on the best of terms of late, little one." Sebastian reached down and gently pulled a curl out from under her bonnet. "But that is no reason for you to quarrel with Him."

Sebastian was smiling at Marguerite, but his blue eyes held that **hard**, distant look **Mary** had glimpsed before, a cynical expression she had never seen in him when they were in Scotland.

What had happened to Sebastian since then? Once again Mary's intuition suggested she did not have the whole **story**.

Well, she wasn't going to waste time exploring that quandary. She was a betrothed woman now, and she was determined not to allow herself to warm up to Sebastian.

"Why are you here if you do not attend **services**, Sebastian?" She used the same tone she reserved for Marguerite when the child did something illogical.

"**It's** a nice morning for a walk." He moved his head, and the rain rolled in a little channel off the brim of his tall beaver hat.

"No, it's not, silly." Marguerite laughed, "We came in a carriage so we wouldn't get wet."

"Then coming out to the yard rather defeated your purpose, wouldn't you say?"

He bestowed his most charming grin on Mary. She smiled back in spite of herself. Sebastian's grin could melt the snow in the Alps, and her heart was certainly no proof against it.

He reached for her hand, "I came to see you, Mary. I had to see for myself if this engagement is really what you want."

No, it's not, she wanted to tell him. *I want you, the way you were before you went to India, when I thought you were mine. I don't want to settle for security when I once had love.*

But her pride kept her mute. She just looked at him, wondering if everything she couldn't say was somehow reflected in her eyes.

Her hand lay unresisting in his grasp, Even Marguerite was uncharacteristically silent.

People began to pour out of the church doors. The service had to be over. Mary saw Sir John round the corner from the front of the church. His eyes scanned the yard, and settled on her. She saw his brows snap together. Even at this distance she felt his disapprobation.

"Your intended approaches," said Sebastian.

He released her hand, and Mary felt suddenly bereft.

"I would stay, but I don't think he is overjoyed to see me. It is Sir John's custom to have the vicar over to the manor to dine after the service. Unless I am much mistaken, you will be invited to attend today. I will tag along with the vicar, and see you there."

Sebastian lifted her hand and kissed it theatrically. Then he turned to face Sir John, and made a mocking bow before strolling off. Marguerite scampered away, too, no doubt scared by the thunderous look on Sir John's face.

Mary was still staring after Sebastian when Sir John reached her side.

"What were you doing talking to that man?" he began without preamble.

"I tried to tell you inside, I needed to step out for some air. Sebastian happened along. That is all."

Sir John's grey eyes were black with anger.

"That fellow is not a gentleman. He is a scoundrel, and an insolent one at that. I do not want you speaking to him."

Mary looked at her betrothed in amazement. "Sebastian is my cousin."

Sir John's nostrils flared. "I do not care. He is most disrespectful of me, and I am your future husband. You will soon belong to me, and when he insults me he insults you."

Mary's **dizziness** returned. She felt the same way she had in the church a short while earlier, as if the church's stone walls were closing in on her.

"I believe you are mistaken, Sir John. Sebastian would never--"

"I am not mistaken!" he almost shouted the **words**. Mary froze. People turned in their direction, and Sir John lowered his voice.

"You must be guided by me in this, Miss **Blackmore**."

He captured her hand in his,

"I know what is best in this circumstance, **You** have yet to learn what is properly due you in your newly-elevated situation."

"I will have a word with my cousin," she said, fighting the wave of panic that threatened to engulf her. "I will explain to him how his behavior affects you,"

"That is precisely what you will not do." Sir John's smile didn't light his face, or even reach his eyes. "If you wish to be my wife, you will not talk to your cousin again unless you are in my presence."

Mary's mind reeled,

"But, Sir John—"

"I forbid it. It is the only request I have made of you, Miss Blackmore. It's a small enough **service** you can do for me, when you consider what I am offering in return."

Mary closed her eyes, feeling as trapped as she would have been if the church really had collapsed on her.

Chapter Six

As Sebastian predicted, Mary was invited to the manor for a post-sevice luncheon. Marguerite clung to Mary's skirts as they entered the grand house.

Sir John was all graciousness as he ushered them into his dining room.

"Do sit down, my dear Miss Blackmore. And you, too, child," he added as an afterthought. "Cook has prepared a delicious repast, We await only the vicar."

He turned to Marguerite. "Perhaps you would be more **comfortable** in the manor kitchen."

It was more of a command than a query. Marguerite shook her head.

"Very well, then. You may stay with your guardian."

His manner was curt, and Marguerite scooted her chair closer to Mary.

Mary's heart sank. She had never seen the normally ebullient Marguerite so cowed. Sir John must not be aware how much his manner intimidated the child, But perhaps the situation could be rectified,

"Sir John, I fear you almost terrify Marguerite." She kept her tone light despite the heaviness she felt. "She is but a child, and your authority overwhelms her."

He preened visibly. "I do have a commanding presence. It may be too much for a young girl," His tone became severe. "But the child **must** realize she cannot behave like a hoyden here at the manor."

Mary dared to disagree. "That is a trifle harsh, wouldn't you say? She is only a child, and children can be high spirited."

"Not well-brought-up children. I myself never **indulged** in a single high spirit during my entire youth. My father would never have permitted it. Now, my dear Miss Blackmore, please do not think I am criticizing you. I know you have been unable to devote a proper amount of attention to child rearing. You have had far too many responsibilities heaped upon your slender shoulders."

"What's this?" Sebastian drawled. He stood in the doorway, with the vicar, who was wringing his hands, behind him. Mary had been so involved in her contention with Sir John she hadn't heard their arrival.

Relief coursed through her, and she didn't stop to question it. She felt Marguerite's little body relax, too, though the child didn't say a word.

"Seems we arrived in the nick of time, **Beechum**. The conversation was verging on the improper. All this talk of Mary's shoulders." Sebastian winked at Sir John. "Didn't know you had it in you, Addington. Still, wait for the wedding, man."

Sir John's eyes narrowed. "I refuse to dignify your comments by acknowledging them. You are inexpressibly vulgar, sir, and what's more, you arrive uninvited,"

"I brought him along." The vicar was so **nervous** in the face of Sir John's wrath that he almost squeaked. "It seemed the Christian thing to do, especially on the Sabbath."

"Addington is a good Christian, **aren't you?**" Sebastian crossed over and thumped him on the back. Sir John recoiled.

"Oh, Cousin Mary, how good it is to see you. And Miss Maggie, you're awfully quiet. Perhaps I should sit next to you and jolly you up,"

Marguerite turned adoring eyes up to him. "Oh, yes, please."

Mary noticed that Sebastian's blue eyes, their expression so hard and mocking when he spoke with Sir John, and unfathomable with her, always softened when he was with Marguerite.

Well, she knew Sebastian could be a **charmer**: he'd charmed her once, hadn't he? She must focus on Sir John. He might not know how to ingratiate himself to a child, but he could make sure Marguerite was well-fed, clothed and sheltered. Whereas Sebastian could vanish again, leaving **Mary** and her little family once more to their own devices.

Mary only hoped that Marguerite's childish heart wouldn't be broken, as Mary's once was, by Sebastian's leaving.

Sir John harrumphed.

"I will allow you to stay, out of deference to the lady. But I trust you will not bother her unduly with your presence in the future."

Sebastian shot Mary an inquiring look.

She squirmed. "My cousin is no bother, Sir John."

"We spoke of this earlier, Miss Blackmore. If you would like, I will explain it to him."

Sebastian affected a sigh. "This conversation is becoming almost too fatiguing to follow. Explain what, exactly?"

Sir John turned to him. "Miss Blackmore has agreed with me that it would be more seemly for you and her not to meet unless I am present."

"Did you agree to that, Mary?" Sebastian's blue eyes held her **gaze**, and for a moment their surroundings dissolved and it was just the two of them. She had trouble meeting the challenge in his eyes. She wanted to **affirm** it wasn't her idea, not at all, that she wanted and needed to keep seeing Sebastian. But **other** thoughts intruded, thoughts of her father's increasing frailty, and Marguerite's needs as a growing child, which **Sir** John could attend to so well.

Mary stayed silent.

"Ah. So that's how it is." **Sebastian's** voice was flat. He extracted an ornate **quizzing** glass from his waistcoat pocket, and held it up to his right eye by its thin stem. He studied Mary as though she was an oddity he'd never seen **before**.

"What a strange thing for you to consent to, dear cousin. Am I to believe the understanding you have with your **fiancé** supersedes ours? I can scarcely credit it."

Reaching under his lace cuff, he withdrew an embroidered handkerchief and waved it under his nose.

Marguerite laughed, "You are so funny, **Sebastian**."

"Yes, isn't he," said Sir John grimly. "Most amusing. Shall we go into the dining room?"

Sebastian tucked his handkerchief back into his **cuff**. "My dear baronet, I was hoping for an aperitif first. Perhaps some of that excellent brandy we had at the vicar's the other evening. **Beechum** tells me it's your favorite."

"It's right enough," said Sir John.

"You are a master of understatement. It was superb. **Wherever** does it come from? Not England, I'll vow. France, Spain, Portugal? Do we owe this felicitous drink to the tireless efforts of the local smuggling trade? You can tell me, you know. I've trafficked with some pretty low company, myself."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least."

The distaste on Sir John's face was evident.

"As far as the wine goes, you'll have to ask my steward. I do not trouble myself with household matters. I can assure you, however, that I am a law-abiding subject of His Majesty, King George, and I highly resent any inference to the contrary.!"

"Do you, by George. Why, that's positively uplifting. So few of us can be counted upon in these turbulent times to do the right thing. Sir John, you are an inspiration to us all."

Sebastian had to know he was goading the baronet, Mary wondered why he did it, She could see it was more than just devilishness on Sebastian's part. There was a coldness behind his eyes as he provoked Sir John. Sebastian's quizzing glass and embroidered handkerchief couldn't disguise the pure male animosity he displayed.

Marguerite hung on to the tails of Sebastian's jacket as they entered the dining room.

"Marguerite, come here," Mary urged.

The little girl shook her head, "I want to stay with Sebastian."

"Do as you're told," said Sir John. "Disobedience is not a pretty quality in a girl, No one will want to marry you when you grow up, Marguerite, if you are a headstrong girl who will not do as she's told. You should be grateful to your guardian; if Miss **Blackmore** hadn't kindly taken you in, you'd be a poor, penniless orphan right now."

Marguerite looked stricken at his words, her china blue eyes welling up. Mary rushed to her side.

She dared to speak up. "Really, Sir John, there's no need to frighten the girl," She reached for Marguerite as she spoke. Marguerite stumbled backward, right into a **small ormolu** pedestal table that held a tall porcelain vase.

Mary watched in horror as the table rocked, making the vase tip and sway dangerously. Sounding like a volley of pistol cracks, the vase hit the marble floor and shattered into a **mass** of shards.

Marguerite's **little** body stiffened, and she buried her face in Mary's sprigged muslin gown.

"Blast?" Sir John's eyebrows shot up to an alarming height. "Clumsy girl! That was a priceless **Ming!**"

"A hunk of clay," said Sebastian raising his voice to drown out the baronet. "And an ugly one at that. The child did you a favor."

Sebastian's voice and manner gentled as he addressed the sobbing girl, "Come, Maggie, don't cry. We're not angry with you."

"The devil we're not! Take this child to the scullery," Sir John ordered a maid who had scurried in. "Then you can come back and clean this mess up,"

Mary held fast to Marguerite's hand.

"I implore you, Sir John. For my sake, do not be harsh with the child."

She saw a vein throb in Addington's temple as he strove to control his emotions,

"I'm sorry, my dear. But you must admit the girl is wild. She has much to learn after we are wed. Now, let us go in to eat. Marguerite can compose herself and eat her meal in the kitchen. She will be fine."

The maid had a kind face, and when she extended her hand to Marguerite both Mary and the little girl decided it would be all right to go with her. For a moment Mary thought: Sebastian would object. But he said nothing, merely regarding Sir John with an inscrutable expression.

The meal was strained, despite the vicar's efforts to make conversation. Sir John was excessively polite to Mary, and Sebastian took every opportunity to be subtly rude.

Mary felt as if she'd been given a glimpse of her future, and it was not attractive. **Would** she have to spend her time protecting Marguerite from Sir John? Were his expectations for the girl's behavior unreasonably high, or had Mary neglected to develop Marguerite's social skills?

Mary remembered being indulged and much loved during her childhood. Didn't Marguerite deserve the same experience, or was that another privilege of the rich? To **Mary**, the delicate veal might as well have been leather, and the sweets she was served were as bitter as gall.

The meal dragged on miserably. Mary decided she could endure it no longer.

"Thank you for the fine meal, Sir John. **It** is time for us to leave. My father has been alone long enough back at our cottage."

Sir John addressed the butler standing by the sideboard.

"Higgins, have one of the maids fetch the child. Her **guardian** is leaving." Sir John rose from his place and took both of **Mary's** hands in his.

"Soon, my dear, when this is your home, travelling will be unnecessary."

"Yes, indeed."

"You don't intend to lock her up in the house, do you?" said Sebastian. "How very Gothic."

"This conversation doesn't concern you," Sir John spoke through gritted teeth. "Aren't you leaving the area soon?"

"I was planning on departing, but now I think I should stay for the wedding. Now, Mary, you don't have to insist. I wouldn't miss your special day for the world. Someone needs to be there to defend your honor, in case the baronet develops cold feet."

Sir John's eyes bulged, and his face turned red. He drew in a sharp breath that sounded like a hiss. "Of all the impertinent--"

He stopped as a maid rushed in and took the butler aside for an urgent whisper. The butler cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, sir, but the staff is having trouble locating the young person you sent for. There is a fear she has left the premises."

Mary's heart seemed to stop. "Marguerite has run away?"

"Nonsense," said Sir John. "The girl probably went to the stables, or is out in the garden."

"We checked everywhere, sir, throughout the house and the grounds. They have been looking for her since before your summons. She is nowhere to be found."

"We must find her," said Mary, clutching Sir John's arm. "She is just a little girl, and it is wet out. Soon it will be dark. She will be afraid. Indeed, I am growing terrified myself."

"Now, now, Miss Blackmore, compose yourself," Addington said, patting her arm as he spoke. "You'll discover this is but a tempest in a teapot. Mark my words, your ward will turn up soon. Let nature take its course. Children often--"

Mary turned at the sound of a chair scraping the floor. Sebastian stood and threw down his napkin.

"Delightful lunch, but I fear I must leave. Urgent business."

"You? Business?" Sir John said in bald disbelief.

"There's a little girl wandering around in the cold, and I intend to find her. Unlike you, Sir John, I don't have **much** confidence in nature and its courses. Nature, in my experience, is all too **often** cruel. I believe it is our job to correct nature's courses whenever the opportunity **affords** itself. So if you will excuse me—"

Sebastian bowed, and left the room.

"Arrogant popinjay," said Sir John. "Despite his fine words, **he**'ll head to the nearest pub as soon as his satin slippers get wet."

"Vainglorious," said the vicar. "And quite possibly sacrilegious. As it is written in the Book of Job, 'Surely God will not hear vanity, nor the Almighty regard it,'"

Torn between hope and fear, Mary said nothing. She had no reason to trust Sebastian. But he seemed so confident and determined, so like the Sebastian she once knew.

Against all evidence to the contrary, she believed Sebastian could find Marguerite and bring her back safely.

Pompous ass. How could Mary contemplate marrying such a man? Sebastian longed to plant the supercilious baronet a facer as the man pontificated in his comfortable home, doing nothing while little Maggie was wandering around lost and scared. Poor mite. She wouldn't have to spend an extra second lost if Sebastian had anything to say about it,

It had been **drizzling** all afternoon, but now **it** was raining in earnest. Sebastian looked at his light-colored stockings and thin-soled slippers. It was a ridiculous get-up, entirely unsuited to hikes through the countryside. **He'd** have to find another way.

A few long strides took him to the stable, where he ordered the groom to saddle a horse for him. The groom eyed him with suspicion.

"Sir John didn't say anything about taking his horses out."

"Events are proceeding beyond Sir John's ability to react. **There's** a lost little girl, and I intend to find her. I require a horse for that purpose, and—ah, that white stallion appears fit. **What's** his name?"

"Aladdin."

"Aladdin will do nicely. Be a good fellow and saddle him up."

"But, Sir John—"

"Sir John will thank any man who assists in the finding of his fiancée's ward, don't you think? Now, let's go, man. There are only a couple of hours of daylight left."

Sebastian guided his horse down the path that led to the cliffs. The ocean roared in the distance. As he rode, he tried to imagine being a scared child like Maggie. Where would he go?

He'd heard there were caves along the cliffs. Since Marguerite had grown up in the area, she probably knew all about them. A cave **would** be a perfect place for a little girl to hide, especially if she thought the world had come crashing down on her because she'd broken a stupid vase.

He brought his horse to the edge of the cliff. The drop was sharp as far as he could see. He rode further, till he spied a gorse bush. It appeared to be the start of a path.

Some yards behind him was a tree, and he rode over to it and dismounted. He tied the horse to a **branch**.

"Stay here, Aladdin, out of the rain, while I investigate. **With** any luck, I'll be bringing a little girl up with me in a little while, and you **can** take us both back to Addington Manor."

Rain slashed at his face as he negotiated his way down the path. Too cloudy for a sunset, the sky was merely darkening over the ocean. Despite the wind and uncertain footing of the path, Sebastian picked up his pace. He didn't want to be searching in the dark.

When he got to the base of the cliff the first pang of serious doubt assailed him. Hundreds of caves could be tucked in the folds of these cliffs. How would he ever find Marguerite, even if he were correct in assuming she'd taken shelter in one?

He cupped his mouth with his hand and yelled,

"Maggie? Are you here? It's Sebastian. Come on out. I want to see you."

Just a few yards away waves crashed on the shore. How could she ever hear him? Mentally marking the path he'd **taken** down the cliff, he walked along the base of the cliffs, calling as he did so.

"**Maggie!** Maggie, can you hear me?"

He almost missed it, A blue ribbon, caught on a bush. Maggie had been wearing a blue ribbon in her hair.

"Maggie?Maggie?"His throat was raw.

He saw a head pop up among the rocks a distance away. Maggie. It had to be her. He ran, and in a few seconds he had her in his arms,

"Are you all right, my dear? Are you cold?"

She nodded. Her dress was torn and wet.

"Why did you run away, Maggie?" He kept his voice gentle, as he removed his jacket and draped it across her shoulders.

"The musty man scared me. He was so angry with me. I can never go back there."

"But your Tante Marie is very upset. You **don't wish** to worry her, do you?"

Marguerite's lower lip trembled. "No, I love her. But I do not want Tante Marie to marry that musty man. **He** hates me. I know he does. And he will make Tante Marie unhappy. Can't you stop him, Sebastian?"

Yes, he could. Very easily. But stopping him would mean revealing who he was. And that could easily endanger not only Mary, but her whole little **family** as well.

What a coil. He **didn't** want Mary to marry Sir John any more than Maggie did. But he'd given Mary his word **he'd** help her achieve that aim in return for her cooperation. What had he agreed to?

"Come, little one. Let us go back. Things have a way of righting themselves, given time."

He hoped he was right.

They walked along the beach back to the path up the side of the cliff.

"**I'm** curious, Maggie. What made you choose to come here?"

"This is my special place. But I don't mind you seeing it."

"Do you come here often?"

"No. Tante Marie always wants to know where I am. But once, when she sent me to the village on an errand, I saw the vicar come to the edge of the cliff and disappear. I followed him."

"Did he come to your cave?"

"No. He went to another one. There are many here. I chose my cave because it is just my size, and the Frenchmen never come there."

Sebastian stopped and crouched in front of the girl.

"You've seen Frenchmen here, Maggie?"

"Yes, But they do not see me. I can make myself vanish, *pouf--*" she snapped her fingers--"just like that."

"Like you did today, at Sir John's."

"*Exactement.*"

"Maggie, you speak French, don't you?"

"Yes, Tante Marie taught me, so everyone would know my mother is French."

That seemed like an odd reason. "Perhaps she meant you must learn French so you would not forget your mother."

The little girl shrugged, "I do not remember my mother. She died when I was born, and left me **with Tante Marie.**" Her lip started to tremble again. "**Without** Tante Marie, and Grand-pere, I would be an orphan, just like Sir John said."

"Sir John is an idiot," said Sebastian before he could stop himself.

"Oh!" Marguerite, her eyes opening wide, looked **scandalized**. Then she grinned. "So you agree with me, *n'est-ce pas?* Tante Marie must not marry that horrible man."

Sebastian needed to change the subject. "Maggie, did you hear what those Frenchmen said? Could you repeat any of it?"

Marguerite frowned, her little forehead creased in thought.

"They spoke of *la mer*, and how rough it was, and how one of them, Jacques, I think, got quite sick."

Sebastian had no interest in the Frenchman's weak stomach. "Anything else?"

"One of them did say something about *l'invasion*, but his friend told him to '*fais-toi.*'"

"To 'be quiet,' Yes, they were wise not to speak of the invasion too freely on the English coast. Did you notice what they had with **them**?"

"Bottles, and big wooden boxes. Heavy boxes."

"How did you know the boxes were heavy?"

She shrugged. "The men could not **lift** them. They shoved them across the beach. The men were smugglers, no? Everyone knows about the smugglers along the coast,"

"**Is** that so? You are a precocious child, Maggie, But those men may have been smugglers indeed, or something much worse. I want you to show me, tomorrow when it is more light, where you saw them. And then I want you to promise me you will never come down here alone again."

"But Sebastian, this is my secret hiding place." She started to pout,

"I am afraid it is no longer safe, little one."

"Tante Marie doesn't **know** I come down here. She will not allow me to come here with **you**."

"You let me take care of your guardian, Maggie. She will not refuse **me**."

"And if she does?"

"She won't," Sebastian insisted. "But if she does, we will just have to find a way around it. And Maggie," he said as they trudged up the path to his waiting horse, "do not tell Tante Marie **about** the smugglers you saw, or what you're going to show me. **It** will Justgive her **cause** to worry."

"And the musty man? Can you take care of him, too?"

"Your guardian wishes to marry Sir John, little one. You must make the best of it."

"**No!**" Her cry blended with a sea gull's call overhead, "I do not wish her to marry him. I wish her to marry you. **If** you try, I know you could make her love you. She watches you when you aren't looking, and she has a special smile I only see when you are present. You could marry her, and then you could take care of me. I would be no trouble, Sebastian, I promise. So ask her. I'll make her say yes,"

Anguish tore at **Sebastian's** heart.

"Oh, my dear child."

He took Marguerite in his arms, and lifted her over the bush at the top of the path.

"Life is not that simple. Your Tante Marie doesn't want me, and I could not give her the things she needs."

"Bah. I do not believe you. You are just a coward."

Sebastian gave a hollow laugh. "Just so you know, Maggie, I have killed men for less insult than that."

She **jutted** out her small chin. "I am not afraid of you."

"Nor should you be, for I would never harm you. I regret your opinion of me is so low. Can't be helped, though. Now, let us return to Addington Manor before your guardian frets herself any further."

Chapter Seven

Mary **couldn't** sit still. She paced the floor of Sir John's spacious parlor.

"What are we to do? If Sebastian cannot find her, what will we do? Will you not send out a **search** party for Marguerite, Sir John?"

"Completely unnecessary, my dear. The chit will return on her own. She either lost track of the time, or she's merely being stubborn. When her belly starts to rumble, she'll come back, here or to Rose Cottage."

"Of course. Perhaps I should return home, to see if she's there."

"There's no need. I sent a groom to your cottage to inform your father why you are so tardy returning. My groom has orders to check to see if the child has returned to the cottage, and report back to me. I sent him **two** hours ago, so he should return at any time."

"You are **too** good."

Sir John smiled and leaned back in his well-upholstered armchair. He took another sip **of** brandy.

A surge of mixed feelings suffused Mary's mind. Sir John was doing everything he thought appropriate **to** find Marguerite. In his opinion Marguerite was just a naughty child who would learn a good lesson from being lost for a while.

But Mary was almost **crazed** with worry. She'd already been through the house, calling for Marguerite, though Sir John's displeasure was tangible. He wanted her to compose herself, and talk **with** him in the parlor.

But it was impossible for Mary to sit and have a calm discussion while Marguerite was missing.

"It is almost completely dark now. If you will provide me with a lantern, I can search outside. Marguerite may well be trying to find her way back."

"I will not hear of it. You will catch your death of cold."

Mary screwed up her courage. "Sir John, I must insist--"

"You what?" Sir John beetled his brows, a forbidding expression on his face. "My dear Miss Blackmore, **are** you questioning my **judgement**?"

The butler glided silently into the room. He waited for Sir John to acknowledge him.

"What is it, Watkins?"

"The groom has returned, sir. He **reports** the young miss was not at the cottage."

"Oh, no." Dread pooled inside Mary, making her feel almost faint with fear. "Sir John, I do not wish to anger you. But I absolutely must leave now to look for my ward. She is but a child, lost and alone in the dark."

"Do not be so melodramatic. It does not become you. The child will surely turn up by morning."

Mary clutched the edge of the nearest side table so hard her knuckles whitened. "By morning is not soon enough. I implore you, for my sake, allow me to leave and begin a search. Watkins, fetch my cloak."

Sir John hoisted himself out of his chair. "You are being quite ridiculous. But I suppose, to prevent any further hysterics, I can send a servant out with a lantern. Will **that** satisfy you?"

"I won't rest until Marguerite has been found."

"Then feel free to rest now," said Sebastian, entering the room with Marguerite in his arms,

With a cry Mary **rushed** towards them, and pulled the little girl into her embrace. She kissed the child's face, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Oh, Marguerite, I am so happy you are returned. Do not ever do anything like that again, or I shall punish you **most** dreadfully."

"I was perfectly safe, Tante. I was lost, but I wasn't scared. Sebastian found me. I **knew** he would."

Mary looked at Marguerite's savior. He was in his shirtsleeves, and those sleeves were torn, the lace **cuffs** in tatters. His mud-stained stockings were ripped and bramble-studded, and his shoes were ruined. He was completely wet and bedraggled, and seemed **not** to care in the least.

She thought he'd never looked so handsome.

"Thank you, Sebastian," said Mary softly. "I owe you everything."

"Did you ever doubt I would return? You should not have, Mary."

Was he still talking about finding Marguerite? Mary felt her breath constrict,

"Yes, yes, thank you," said Sir John impatiently. "Good job, well done, and all that. Now, please leave. You're dripping on my carpet."

"A thousand apologies," said Sebastian with a bow. "And thank you for the loan of your horse. **Aladdin** is a fine beast, though he does require a skilled horseman to handle him. Do you know of any? If not, I would happy to come back and take him out for a ride once in a while."

Sir John started to sputter. "Of all the insolent, insufferable--"

"Well, cheerio, for now." Sebastian started to leave. "By the way, Cousin Mary, Maggie wanted to show me one of her special places this afternoon, but I told here we needed to hurry back. She made me promise to do it another time. Can I take her out tomorrow, or does the prohibition concerning my company extend to your ward?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea. Marguerite **may** need to recover from her ordeal."

"Of course it's not a good idea," said Sir John. "I wouldn't **allow** one of my dogs to be out gallivanting with this fellow."

"Please, Tante Marie?" Not venturing to even **look** in Sir John's direction, Marguerite turned her big blue eyes towards Mary. "Sebastian did find me. Aren't you glad he did?"

Sebastian quirked the corner of his mouth into a smile. Mary relented,

"I suppose it would be all right. But Sebastian, I can only spare her for a few hours in the afternoon. In the morning we have chores and lessons."

"A few hours it is, then." He **patted** the child's head, making her soggy curls shake. "Till tomorrow, Maggie." **Another** smile, aimed straight at Mary, and he was gone.

Mary reached for a chair to sit down. That man did the most disturbing things to her equilibrium.

"Watkins, send the maid in **to** clean up the puddle that fellow made on my carpet, Miss Blackmore, I am most disappointed in you. I realize you feel indebted to your cousin, but that is no reason to suspend your judgement, I will permit it this time, but in the **future**, you will be guided by me."

Marguerite sniffled and climbed onto Mary's lap. Mary looked around at the maid busily cleaning the floor, the sumptuous furnishings and the fire burning brightly in

the grate. *In the future*. Somehow, despite the comfort surrounding her, those words struck her with an ominous ring,

It rained steadily all day Monday, but Tuesday dawned clear and remained so throughout the morning. At noon Sebastian went to Rose Cottage to claim Marguerite's company for their planned excursion.

Mary was in her garden.

"Hello, Sebastian," she said, almost shyly. "With the cold nights and wet days, my garden is in a sad state."

"Change of the season. It's always difficult to adapt to change, even when it's expected. Yet I notice a rose still abloom."

He pointed to a deep red rose, which had unfurled despite its bedraggled bush. "It looks as though some flowers won't give up, even in the face of approaching hardship. And flowers are supposed to be delicate."

"Perhaps it just doesn't know any better." Abruptly she changed the subject. "Are you looking for Marguerite?"

"Yes, I promised her that outing, and you agreed. Or was that pending Addington's approval?"

Mary flushed a dusky pink. "Sir John does not control me."

"Oho, that's not what I saw. Still, I am grateful for your allowing me to fulfill my promise to the child. Telling her we would go back to see the cliffs was the only way I could persuade her to leave on Sunday."

"Sebastian, you will be careful, won't you? Keep her safe."

Now why the devil had she said that? Did Mary suspect he had a more dangerous purpose in the village than learning how to fish?

Or did she think him so irresponsible he needed admonition? How deflating.

"Have no fear, Cousin Mary. Maggie will be fine with me."

The weather held steady, so Sebastian and Marguerite walked to the cliff path. Marguerite scampered down the path to the pebbly beach below, and headed straight for a cave folded almost imperceptibly into the base of the cliffs.

The cave was deep, but not very tall. Sebastian had to stoop to enter, but there was plenty of depth to conceal the full length of a rowboat,

It was a perfect hiding place for all sorts of purposes,

"How clever of you, Maggie, to have found this cave. Tell me again about the time you saw the Frenchmen."

As Marguerite spoke, Sebastian examined the dank space. He found nothing. But her tale, which had alarmed him the first time she told him, alarmed him even further now.

"And I was very quiet, and they didn't even know I was here," she finished.

"Very brave of you, little one, but now I must ask you to do something even more difficult."

"Oh, I know I am capable of very great things?What is it you wish me to do, Sebastian?"

"I want you to promise that now you have shown me your secret place, you will never come here alone again."

Her little face fell. "You sound like Tante Marie."

"Did you tell your guardian you've been here?"

"*Mais non*. But she knows I like to come down to the beach. And she has forbidden me to do so. She said if I continue to run around the village by myself the musty man will think me a hoy-, hoy-"

"Hoyden."

"*Oui*. Hoyden. And he will send me to a school to learn to act like a lady. I do not want to go to school, Sebastian. I do not want to leave my Tante, and Grand-père, and--you."

Her blue eyes filled with tears and one spilled down her cheek. Sebastian gathered her in a bear **hug**.

"Come Maggie, turn off the **waterworks**. It's damp enough in here. No one is sending you away."

"You will not leave me?"

He wanted to say yes. He'd grown very fond of the little girl, though he'd never before given much thought to children. But he had a purpose. It was up to him to clear his family name, by finding a traitor that threatened the **security** of all England. He could not allow himself to be sidetracked by unanticipated complications; too **much** was at stake.

A vivid image of Mary's face, and her bright eyes, came before him. How is it he could go almost seven years without thinking too often of her, and now he could not get her out of his mind?

Complications, indeed,

Sebastian walked **further** down the beach with Marguerite, till at last they reached the village harbor. Jemmy Platte hailed him.

"Whoa, there, **Mallory**. I see you've signed on a new crew member."

"Maggie's my first mate. She's been showing me around the beaches."

"I know Miss Marguerite right enough. **She's** brightened the whole village, just like her guardian, Miss **Blackmore**. There's a pair now. Old Angus is as proud as a peacock of them."

"You see Angus down here?"

Jemmy spit a wad of tobacco on the pebbly ground. "On his better days. He comes down to the harbor or into the village. He's full of tales about when he was **a** grand Scottish **lord**. Don't know as anyone believes him, but he tells a good story. And he does **love** a dram or two to wash the words down."

"**Is** that so? Is there any chance that Angus has dealings with any of the, er, sea-faring businessmen?"

Sebastian gave Jemmy a warning nod in Marguerite's direction. Jemmy nodded in comprehension.

"Wouldn't be astonishing if he did. Most everyone around here does. If it's the finer things in life you enjoy, sooner or later you deal with the traders."

Sebastian nodded,

"And if you've been **a** Scottish lord, you're definitely accustomed to the finer things."

This was a twist. Angus dealing with smugglers? It made sense. But he and his daughter were as poor as church mice. What could he possibly have of any value to trade with?

"Marguerite! **Sebastian!** Up here."

That lovely voice. Raising his head, Sebastian saw Mary, bonnet in hand, waving as she headed down to the harbor. Her glorious hair, which had come undone in the breeze, fanned out behind her head like a dark red halo.

Rational thought fled his brain for a moment. Mary was a vision of natural beauty. It was difficult to remember she had once been his wife.

Or that now he was honor bound to turn her over to Sir John Addington.

"I thought you two were headed down to the beach," she said as she approached,

"Good afternoon, Mr. Platte," she added with a smile.

Jemmy turned pink with pleasure at her attention.

"We did go to the beach," said Sebastian. "But after a while, our wandering steps brought us here."

"**It's** a good thing I found you. It will take you ever so **long** now to return to Rose Cottage, and had I been waiting there I would have worried most dreadfully."

"What are you doing in the village, Cousin Mary?"

"Delivering eggs."

"This looks like **no** egg I have ever seen." Sebastian pulled a sealed letter from the basket she had draped over one arm.

"Put that back, Sebastian. That is a piece of private correspondence."

"A love letter, Mary? From the lusty baronet, no doubt?"

Mary blushed. "No such thing, Cousin Sebastian. I am doing a favor for Watkins, Sir John's butler."

"A favor for a butler? How very odd. And not at all appropriate, I fear. I cannot imagine Addington permitting it,"

"Sir John knows nothing about it. I ran into Watkins in the village. The poor man twisted his ankle on the cobblestones, and was in the most terrible pain. He was

on his way down here, to the harbor, to deliver this message for Sir John. I insisted he take my pony cart back to Addington Manor, and promised to run his errand for him."

"And how did he take your suggestion?"

"Frankly, he didn't like it above half. He kept insisting he was quite recovered, even when he couldn't so much as stand on his leg without nearly fainting from pain. I had to take the letter almost forcibly from him. He was in no condition to stop me."

"Ah, Mary, you are killing the poor man with your kindness. I imagine his employer will be most upset with him for passing his task on to you."

"Oh, I promised Watkins I would not tell Sir John anything about this. That relieved him."

Sebastian thought for a moment. "The harbor is no place for a gently-bred woman, Mary. Allow me to complete your mission."

"But I promised Watkins..."

"You promised to deliver the letter. It will be delivered. I plan on spending the rest of the afternoon here, continuing my fishing lessons, Why don't you take Maggie and go back to Rose Cottage."

"Well..." Mary looked around doubtfully at the clusters of fishermen.

"Let me do you this small thing. As a favor."

She was standing near him, and he couldn't resist reaching out to brush her smooth cheek gently with his thumb. As soon as he touched her he felt a jolt, a sharp physical awareness of her body that was almost painful. She must have felt it, too. She opened her green eyes wide, and backed up a step,

Jemmy watched them with interest. Mary walked a few steps further, out of range of the fisherman's hearing. Sebastian followed her.

"I shouldn't be down here, even talking with you, Sebastian," she said in a low voice. "I promised Sir John I wouldn't."

"There's plenty of time for you to make promises to that man. We're still partners in a deal, remember?"

"It's not gentlemanly to bring that up."

"I have no patience with conventions, Mary. If I did, you'd still be my wife."

He said it low enough he was sure no one could overhear his words against the backdrop of sea gull cries and the fishermen's rough banter as they hauled their heavy nets out of their boats. But Mary's cheeks flamed anyway.

"**Sebastian**, you are a heartless cad."

"Indeed I am. So allow me to redeem **myself** just a bit by doing this small favor for

Mary handed him the **letter**. "It is for a fisherman named Finley."

"And do you have any idea what it is?"

"Watkins said it had something to do with an order for some fish." She blushed again. "He hinted it was for our wedding banquet,"

"So very conscientious of the baronet," said Sebastian. "Most men would leave such details to their housekeepers."

"Sir John thinks of everything," Mary replied, Sebastian thought her voice sounded rather hollow.

As soon as Mary and Marguerite were out of sight, on the path rising from the harbor into the village, Sebastian worked the seal on the letter and opened it.

"Ho, now," said Jemmy Platte. "That's private correspondence."

"Nothing is private when it comes to treason," answered Sebastian. He quickly scanned the contents of the page, which were brief.

"Wot's it say?" asked Jemmy.

Sebastian showed him the letter.

"Won't to do me a bit of good to see it, guv'nor," the fisherman cheerfully responded. "Looks like chicken scratches to me."

Stupid of him to assume Platte could read. He flashed back to when he'd first met the fisherman at the Crown and Anchor. Platte had looked only at the seal of the letter Sebastian showed him,

"Sorry, Jemmy."

"No call for that. Been working on a fishing boat since I was a lad. I can read the sea better'n any man."

"Well, according to this, tonight's tide will bring more than the usual assortment of sea creatures. Sailors from La *Belle Mer*, a fishing boat I presume, will row to the shore at **Larkin's** Point to meet this Finley. I wonder why?"

"Ah, now, I can find that out for you. I know Finley. He's new around here, keeps to himself. I'll get him aside, and make him talk."

"I think not, Platte. Let's allow **Finley** to make his rendezvous. He's merely a small fry; we're after a larger fish. Where's **Larkin's** Point?"

"Just north of here. Best time to approach it is at high tide."

"And when is that tonight?"

Platte scratched his chin. "Let's see. That would be about ten."

"I'd like you to get me to **Larkin's** Point about half an hour before that."

"Then meet me here at nine. We'll take my boat,"

"No word of this to anyone, **Jemmy**."

"You can trust me."

"I know." Sebastian refolded the letter, pressing the seal in its original position, which it didn't hold. "Go ahead and give this to Finley. Tell him the lady told you the seal broke when Watkins fell. Whatever you do, don't let him think anybody suspects him of anything. We don't want him to get the wind up."

"**Finley** has no worries now," Platte agreed. "But when this is over, I'll see to it he pays the piper."

"Jemmy, my man, when this is over it will be like Judgement Day all around. Or, as the vicar might say, 'Let judgment run down as waters.'"

Platte shuddered. "Have pity, man. I'd liefer face the devil himself than bear the vicar's platitudes."

Sebastian smiled, "I'll see you at nine, then, **Jemmy**."

"Be sure to wear something dark," Jemmy rejoined, "That yellow waistcoat alone could light up the night, and then what's the use of secrecy?"

Sebastian grinned, "Do not concern yourself, **Platte**. I know **better** than to wear bright colors when I am on a hunt. Fashion can wait,"

"Please, Tante, read the story again! I love the part: where the handsome prince finds Cinderella and takes her away from her wicked step-maman."

Mary kissed the child on her forehead and tucked the quilt around her small body in the bed. "It's time for you to go to sleep, Marguerite. I've read this to you twice already tonight. You don't even need me to read it—by now, you know *Cinderella* by heart."

"It is such a beautiful book," said Marguerite, sleepy in spite of herself.

"I'll read it again tomorrow," Mary promised, as the child's eyes closed.

Mary smiled and placed the well-worn book on the chest of drawers. The book was one of the few possessions she had from her former life. When she was Marguerite's age, Mary had loved *Cinderella*, too. Little did she know her life would come to resemble the story.

Mary had done her fair share of sweeping ashes since she'd moved into Rose Cottage. That part of her life matched the tale. But try as she might, she couldn't quite place Sir John as the handsome prince who rescues her from her life of drudgery. Against her will it was another man entirely, a man with sandy hair and laughing blue eyes, who came to mind for that role.

When would she ever stop pining after Sebastian? She thought she had laid him to rest. Then he came back into her life, and now she was the one who could find no rest.

"Moooo."

What was that noise? It had to be the cow. Marguerite must have not latched the door properly, and the cow had escaped the barn,

"Papa, I must get the cow in." She may as well have saved her breath. Her father was sound asleep in his chair by the fire.

Lifting her cloak off the hook by the door, Mary went into the yard. By the light of the full moon, shining in the starry sky, she spied the animal, munching contentedly some distance away. Silly cow. Now she'd have to coax it into the barn.

It took some work, a persuasive tone of voice and a rope, but she got the cow back in the barn, and the door latched. She paused before going back in the cottage. It was a lovely night, warm for October. Her father and Marguerite were both asleep. What harm could there be in a short walk to the cliff, to see the moon on the ocean, lighting the foamy crests of the waves? None that she could see.

Clutching her cloak, she took the short path to the cliffs. The night air felt good, and she needed to clear her head. It was time she put Sebastian out of her mind. Soon now he would accomplish his goal of winning his silly bet, and he'd leave and arrange for their divorce so she could marry Sir John. That was what she wanted, wasn't it?

With little conscious thought, she allowed her steps to lead her to the base of her favorite tree, which sat at the top of the cliff. Winding her way under the branches, she circled the narrow trunk with one arm and stared out to sea. From here, she could see all up and down the coast, and far out to the moonlit horizon.

A lovely still night. She stood, mesmerized, watching the rhythmic ebbing and flowing of the water on the beach.

A rumbling sound of voices rose over the waves and caught her ear. Fishermen, no doubt. But what would they be doing all the way up here? She wasn't at the harbor. She was standing just above Larkin's Point, north of the harbor.

The pinpoint light of a lantern bobbed on the waves and Mary could see it was tied to the mast of a small boat.

She took a step further, to get a clearer view. Her cloak caught on a branch of the tree, and when she moved, the branch snapped off with a loud crack. The voices below stopped. Mary held her breath and ducked down into the brush. Instinctively she knew not to risk being seen.

After what seemed like ages, the voices resumed. Either no one heard her, or the sailors dismissed the noise as inconsequential. She strained her ears to hear their conversation. It didn't make any sense to her. Could it be they speaking French? Surely at least one of the voices sounded English, even if the words didn't.

Curious now, she moved forward to the very edge of the cliff.

"Mais, si l'invasion peut-etre..."

She gasped. Did she hear that right? What could possibly be going on down there? She had to find out. She'd go down to get a better look.

She took one step. Then an arm like an iron band around her chest cut off her breath. A hand clamped her mouth shut.

"Don't say a word." Lips directly on her ear issued the low warning.

Paralyzed with fright, Mary didn't faint, as many another woman in her circumstances might **have** done. Instead she bit. Hard. Her captor yelped as she whirled on him.

"Sebastian!"

She should have been surprised, but in a flash she realized she wasn't. That hard embrace and the warm breath against her ear were as familiar as the many dreams she'd had over the past seven years.

"What are you doing here?"

"Bleeding," he whispered. "And it'll get worse if those ruffians down there hear us."

"How did you know I was here?" she whispered back.

"I didn't know it was you. But I knew it was someone. You were about as quiet as a crazed sheep, rummaging around up here. It's a miracle those French sailors didn't send up a scouting party. Be thankful they're too preoccupied,"

"Are they smugglers?"

She knew as soon as she uttered the words those men were more than just smugglers. Why would smugglers toss a word like "*invasion*" around?

"Go back to your cottage, Mary. This is no place for you."

He sounded tired, He was dressed in rough, dark workman's clothes. He even had a brown knit cap pulled down low over his forehead. His appearance was completely different than the dandified look he'd taken such pains to present lately.

Come to think of it, Sebastian was more striking dressed this way than he ever was as a dandy. He exuded too much of a dangerous masculine air for the gaudy silks and jewelry he usually affected.

"Who are you really, Sebastian?" Her whisper was urgent. "What are you doing here? Don't lie to me this time."

She could barely see him, but she could feel him. He took her by the shoulders, and the moonlight picked up the blue intensity of his gaze.

"This doesn't concern you, Mary. Go home, and forget what you saw. I must go back down there."

His eyes had a shuttered look. His face was serious, grim even. This was a Sebastian she'd never encountered before. He was a stranger to her, and she couldn't begin to understand him.

What could make him so distant? Why did he have to go back down to those French sailors?

A horrible thought occurred to her, and took instant hold of her imagination.

She pulled out of his grip.

"Sebastian, you don't have anything to do with the French invasion we all fear, do you? My God, Sebastian, are you a traitor?"

He stared at her, neither confirming nor denying her accusation. To Mary, his lack of response was damning. For a brief instant she wished she could faint and find respite for a moment in unconsciousness,

Reality was far too overwhelming.

Chapter Eight

Sebastian shook her by the shoulders. "Mary, do you really think I'm a traitor?"

"Are you?" she whispered back. "I don't know you anymore. I sometimes think I never did."

"And if I am indeed working for the French...?"

She struggled to break free of his hold. "I'll inform the magistrate. I'll tell Sir John. He'll know what to do."

"I am sure he will. The first thing he will do is have me arrested, You do know what the penalty for treason is, I presume?"

Mary felt the blood drain from her cheeks.

"Hanging. Oh Sebastian, I don't want you to die, no matter how despicable your actions. Why don't you just leave this place? Go back to Jamaica, or wherever else it is you've been all these years."

"So, you'd knowingly let a traitor escape? Why is that, Mary? That would make you nearly as culpable."

She looked down at her feet. "Just go, Sebastian. Before anyone else realizes who you are."

He cupped her chin in his hand, and tilted her face so she'd have to look him the eye. "You still love me just a little, don't you, Mary? Even after all this time, even thinking I'm a criminal. I'm touched. Really."

"I'm the one who's touched," she said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Touched in the head. I should do my patriotic duty and turn you in. But I couldn't bear to see you hang."

"I'm no traitor, Mary."

He kept his hand on her chin, a light touch that nevertheless kept her riveted.

"I think you know that deep down. You know you couldn't have been so wrong about me all those years ago. Or so wrong about this."

He bent his head and claimed her lips. Spirals of sensation coursed through her, igniting a passion that threatened to overwhelm her. Her own eager response

surprised her, and she found herself momentarily unable to resist as his lips seared a path down her neck.

With the last shred of reason she possessed, she placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed out of his embrace.

"Who are you then, Sebastian? What are you doing here? Did you come just to torment me?"

"No, of course not, Mary. I barely remembered you. And now I see I never really knew you."

The humble honesty in his expression robbed his words of any sting.

"What happened to you, Sebastian?"

"I cannot explain now." He shook his head slowly, as if to clear it, "Indeed, I must reposition myself to hear what is happening down there. Platte can tell me what I missed, I hope."

"**Platte**, the fisherman? What is he doing down there instead of being at home with his wife and children?"

"He's doing the same thing I am. Trying to foil a traitorous plot. Ah, I spoke too rashly, Mary. **Under** your influence I fear I've done a lot of rash things tonight."

He smiled ruefully.

"And now I must depend on you not to say a word of any of this, or you will put my life and Platte's in danger, as well as your own and **that** of your family."

"Oh." Mary let out **a** long breath. Rather than fear, she actually felt relief, "So you are not the frivolous dandy you would have us believe."

"No. But wasn't I convincing?"

Mary laughed. "Somewhat. But not overwhelmingly so, You had Sir John fooled, I vow."

"Ah, yes, Sir John...Mary, be careful around Addington. I suspect he is involved in what is going on down there."

"No, Sebastian. You cannot be serious."

"I am deadly serious. I do not trust the man. He is hiding something, of that I am sure. I want you to watch yourself around **him**."

"Sebastian, I am betrothed to Sir John."

"Only as long as I allow it."

Mary felt as though she'd been **struck**. "I thought we had a bargain. I keep quiet about your identity, and you stay silent about our marriage, at least until Sir John proposes, for which contingency you agreed you would arrange our divorce."

"Treason alters the terms."

"I do not believe for one moment Sir John is a traitor."

Sebastian's mouth **quirked** in a grimace of a smile. "And yet you were so quick to believe me one."

Mary felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"You have behaved in a disreputable manner since you arrived here, and tonight I find you skulking around while French sailors congregate on the beach. What else was I to think? Sir John is a respected landowner. What would he have to gain from betraying the king?"

"I do not know, but I intend to find out. It was Addington's servant who was carrying his message I intercepted. That's why **Platte** and I are here tonight."

"Message?" Mary felt her heart pound,

"Yes, So heed my warning. And in the meantime, Mary, do not breathe a word of any of this. Our very lives depend on your discretion."

Before she could reply he startled her with a quick, hard kiss on her mouth. His lips lingered for a moment, giving her a fleeting promise of further, unimaginable delights.

She struggled, but couldn't avoid inhaling the sweet spicy odor that was distinctly his. Her knees buckled, and she was a **seventeen-year-old** girl again, swooning in the arms of her beloved.

Once **more** his lips pressed hers, and then he melted into the darkness. Mary rubbed her burning mouth, and clutched her cloak tightly around her body. The silver locket with Sebastian's image dug into the soft flesh between her breasts. The wind had come up, and she stood cold and bereft.

Stealthily Sebastian edged his way down the cliff. He tried not **to** let himself think about his exchange with Mary, but that proved to be impossible. He wasn't easily

given to remorse, but he wondered what made him kiss her. Twice. Oh, he knew he was powerfully attracted to her. But he thought he was in better control of his urges.

This was no time for lovemaking. He was so close to finding the traitor he sought, and redeeming his family. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with that. Especially the complications that would ensue if he gave **way** to the wild attraction of **a** certain pair of green eyes set in a heart-shaped face, framed by a riot of auburn hair.

He crouched down in the darkness, and strained to hear what was happening on the beach below the cliff.

"**Bon.** Finley, this information is good. The captain will be pleased. But we have yet to arrange a safe place to rendezvous, And we still do not know the full extent of the patrols, or the details of coastal defenses."

"My master is working on it. He should have that information soon. We will be in contact."

"How? **It** is too risky for you to come down here again. If anyone had seen this note--"

Sebastian heard the sound of stiff paper crumple, and he could almost see the battered note in the French sailor's clenched fist.

"No need to put yourself in a pucker, you bloody Frog. No one knows I'm here. You'll get your information. My master will make sure of that."

"**Mais comment?**" A different voice piped up. "How will you pass us the information we seek?"

"The usual way. The old Scotsman. Look for him down at the harbor. **He**'ll tell you what you need to know."

"How do we know which old Scotsman? What if there is more than one?"

"There isn't, not in this village. Only Angus Blackmore. You can't miss him. He acts like he's dicked in the nob most of the time, but he's sound enough for our **purposes.**"

"And can we trust this **Angoose?**" The Frenchman's Gallic tongue dragged out the last syllable.

"Oh, yes. My master says he'd been useful in this way for years. No doubt he's a clever spy, since few would suspect him. Who knows what feats he's accomplished while playing the fool."

A cold rage swept through Sebastian. For a moment his vision even blacked out. The cliff vanished, and he was once more sitting on the stone floor of his cell, misery and hopelessness seeping into every pore of his body as surely as the dank prison chill.

He checked himself with effort. That Angus Blackmore, his father's best friend, and his own father-in-law, could be a traitor and thus be implicated, even indirectly, in what happened to Sebastian seemed inconceivable.

Yet Angus was well known to that band of smugglers below. And if Angus had been working with them for years, then he was a traitor. A traitor with a British government agent for a son-in-law.

Sebastian had lots of time to think in his miserable cell. He knew his capture was no coincidence. Someone had given him away. Sebastian had always thought it was his tutor, Mr. Davies. But what if Angus had been involved?

Sebastian's duty was clear. He would have to turn Angus over to the authorities once he had this whole plot unraveled. Indeed, everyone responsible would have to face justice. And arresting the traitors would be sure to result in the reestablishment of the Foxborough family honor.

Even if it destroyed the **Blackmore's**.

* * *

Mary walked slowly back to Rose Cottage, trying to absorb the information she'd just received. Despite her slow gait, her heart was running wildly in her breast. Her lips still stung from where Sebastian had kissed her so roughly. This was the man she **remembered** marrying, and yet it wasn't. The Sebastian she'd married had been but little beyond his boyhood. His lovemaking on their wedding night, as she recalled, had been brisk and **efficient**.

The Sebastian **she'd** encountered tonight was a full-blooded man, complex, demanding, and very aware of her as a woman. She found him almost unbearably exciting. What's more, he had recaptured his place in her esteem.

Looking back to **Sebastian's** arrival in the village, Mary realized **she'd always** known there was more to him than the dandy image he projected. That he was working for the government, trying to uncover traitors and stop Napoleon's invasion of England, confirmed what she had known about Sebastian in her heart all along.

He was a man of honor.

Rose Cottage was in sight now. She could see the light of the lantern burning in the window. Mary didn't want to go in just yet. Her thoughts were still tumbling about in her head. The more she learned about Sebastian, the less she seemed to know.

Just what had he been doing these past seven years? She no longer believed his tale of leaving the army and sailing to Jamaica. There was a bigger story there, one she needed to hear.

Sebastian was still a mystery to her, but he was a mystery she now felt compelled to solve.

The next day Mary took Marguerite into the village. She went down to the harbor, hoping to see Sebastian. She saw **Jemmy** Platte instead.

"Good morning, Mr. **Platte**."

Platte set down the net he was mending and tipped his battered hat,

"Good day to you, Miss Blackmore. And you, too, Miss Marguerite," he added, spying the child hanging back behind Mary's skirts.

"What do you say to Mr. Platte?" prompted Mary.

Marguerite inched **forward**. "Good morning, Mr. Platte," Marguerite dutifully responded. She peered into his boat, "**Did** you catch any fish today?"

"Lor' love you, miss, I had a fish in me net that was bigger than **you**."

Marguerite's eyes grew as round as saucers.

"Where is it?"

"It got away," said Platte **sorrowfully**. "He had sharp fins, like knives they were, and he sawed his way out. Swam away, quick as you please, leaving me with no dinner and a net to mend. And I'd swear on a stack of Bibles that fish was laughing, same as you and me."

"Oh, Tante Marie, did you hear that?" Marguerite tugged on Mary's arm. "**Can** I see the laughing fish, please? Mr. Platte will let us borrow his boat."

A chuckle escaped Mary. "That, Marguerite, is a fish story, or what I would call a fanciful tale. **And** I suspect Mr. Platte tells many of them."

"Aye, Miss," said **Platte**, grinning unrepentantly. "I'm known for them, I **am**."

"I'm not surprised. But I was hoping you **could** give me Sebastian's, er, my cousin's, whereabouts. I would like to speak with him."

Platte whistled. "He was just here. You missed him, not above ten minutes ago."

"Do you know where he went?"

"Let me think."

Platte scratched his chin.

"Saw him head down along the beach. He may have gone up the cliff path."

Mary shielded her eyes with her hand. "We'll go that way, and perhaps we'll meet up with him."

Taking the little girl's hand, Mary set off along the pebbled shore. Nearby, the sea rolled in great waves, the sea foam looking cold and **glittery** in the crisp autumn air.

"Oh, Tante Marie, we are near the caves Sebastian and I played in. We are looking for Sebastian, **non?** I'll bet he is in my special cave."

"Your special cave? Marguerite, you are not supposed to play down here. Especially not alone."

Marguerite pulled a face.

"You sound just like Sebastian. You and Sebastian are so strict. Strider than Ellen **Glenby's** parents. They may not allow her to play on Sunday, but at least she can come down to the beach **sometimes**."

Mary felt a sharp pang. Parents. Parents were something Marguerite had never really experienced. Better not to think about it.

"Hush, Marguerite. I believe I see Sebastian. Let us hurry."

His sandy hair glinted in the sunlight. At first he didn't see them. Even at this distance Mary could tell he was intent on something he saw at the base of the cliffs, Marguerite ran ahead, calling to him.

Waving in reply, he started ~~towards~~ them.

Pulled like a magnet towards him, Mary couldn't have turned away even if she wanted to. She wished she could be as uninhibited as Marguerite, who ran and threw herself into his outstretched arms. Sebastian lifted the child high in the air, and Marguerite's laughter merged with the cries of the gulls overhead.

It was a perfect moment, Marguerite's golden curls spilling over Sebastian's sandy hair, two laughing figures in the sunlight.

Mary's heart caught in her throat at the sight of the little tableau. It seemed so right. She brushed a tear from her eye, and schooled herself to a noncommittal smile.

"What brings you here, Mary?" said Sebastian when he got within speaking distance. Marguerite was perched on his shoulders, looking like a queen of all she surveyed.

"I had a notion to take a walk." **And** see **you** again she added silently to herself. "What brings you to the beach?"

"Curiosity. Little Maggie's caves intrigue me." He took a deep breath. "And I must confess, I love the air here. So free and wild. It makes me wish I could soar like those birds, I've often dreamed of it, spending many an hour watching them revel in their freedom."

Mary was puzzled by the wistfulness in his expressive blue eyes.

"But come, Mary, you should not be seen with me. I thought the good Sir John had expressly forbidden these private tête-à-têtes."

Mary bristled. "He does not own me."

"Not yet, at any rate," murmured Sebastian.

"Not ever! Besides, we are not alone. Marguerite is with us."

Sebastian laughed. "I'm sure Maggie is not his idea of a chaperone. But I am not complaining. I am pleased to have your company. Let us walk. We can head down to the path that leads up to your cottage."

Sebastian set down Marguerite, who scampered ahead of them. Mary and Sebastian walked companionably, side by side.

Mary registered out of the corner of her eye that Sebastian was limping again slightly. She wondered how he'd really acquired that limp. Sebastian's account of

falling down the stairs of a Jamaican brothel sounded a lot like **Platte's** fish story. The truth, she suspected, was quite a bit different.

"Why did **you** really seek me out, Mary? If it's about my disgraceful behavior last night—" he broke off **with** a heart-stopping grin.

She took a deep breath and steadied herself. Sebastian lightly touched her arm. He might as well have seared it **with** branding iron. She jumped at his touch.

"Sebastian, about that divorce you mentioned--"

"Ah. So you do have an ulterior motive for being with me."

"Are you sure that **such a** divorce is possible? Or were you just saying that to ensure my **cooperation** with your plan?"

He looked tired suddenly, the crinkles around his eyes deeper than she remembered. Surely he looked too old for **a** man in his late twenties.

"I can arrange the divorce, Mary. Then you'll be free to marry Sir John. You may have a bit of explaining to do, however. He seems like a stickler for propriety."

"I agree. I was thinking that perhaps he wouldn't understand. He may not want a wife **with such** a complicated past."

Sebastian stopped and fixed a mocking gaze on her.

"You wouldn't let that stop you, would you, Mary? Not a clever, ambitious **lass** like you? I **don't** suppose you'd wish to give up your chance at the manor house so easily."

Mary felt the blood drain from her cheeks,

"**Is** that what you think of me? That all I'm interested in is a big house?"

Sebastian's mocking smile faded.

"**I'm** not judging you, Mary, my dear. I haven't been much of a husband. I don't blame you for wanting to trade up."

"But that's just it."

Mary tried not to stumble over her words.

"**If** Sir John objects...if a divorce cannot be arranged...would you mind so very much?"

Sebastian stood stock-still and faced her.

"Would you?"

His eyes were penetrating, and Mary was not sure if he was deadly serious or on the verge of making another jest.

"I..."

"Tante Marie, Sebastian?"

Marguerite came running towards them. "Look who I found in my special cave?"

Angus came stumbling out of an opening in the rocky face of the cliff. He blinked his eyes in the sunlight, and looked confused.

"Father, what are you doing here? I left you sleeping in your chair."

"I went for a walk," he mumbled. "Can't a man go for walk?" he added in a more distinct, plaintive tone. "Must he stay cooped up all day in the house, just because he's old?"

"No, of course not, Father."

Mary took his hand.

"I just worry about you making your way down here. The path is so steep. If you told me you wanted to take a walk, I would have come with you."

"Didn't: want to bother you."

He raised sad eyes to her.

"You are always so busy, daughter. I feel quite useless."

Angus looked over her shoulder to Sebastian.

"Never thought I would live to see the day where I'd be helpless as a child, and my own daughter would give me direction."

Mary looked for Sebastian for support, and was surprised to see a cold look had come into his eyes. The intensity of it made her falter.

Did he find her father repulsive in his dependency? She would never have guessed Sebastian could feel that way.

She hoped she was wrong. But what other explanation could there be? The man was such an enigma to her.

"Marguerite, walk with **Grand-père** back to the cottage. Sebastian and I will follow."

Mary knew the child would not be happy with her task. She didn't want to leave Sebastian. Marguerite began to pout. "But, **Tante--**"

"**Vite**, Marguerite."

Mary's tone brooked no nonsense.

"Go at once. It is getting cold, and **Grand-père** must not get chilled."

The child took Angus' hand, and they walked towards the path. Mary waited to start walking with Sebastian till the little girl and the old man were a distant speck ahead.

"What is it, Sebastian? You looked so fierce just now, when my father spoke to you."

"I'd like to know what he was doing down here," said Sebastian in a low, tight voice.

"I would, too. **It's** quite unlike him to wander away from the cottage like that, Poor dear, I believe he must somehow recall the days when he was lord of a vast estate. The cage that poverty and illness has put him in now must seem so confining by comparison."

"Mary--" Sebastian seemed to be struggling to say something.

"What? What is it, Sebastian? I know I do not know you that well, but I do not believe I have ever seen you so discomfited."

"I cannot, no, I should not say anything to you. Not yet. Mary, don't **look** at me like that, as if I were some sort of hero. **You** really do not know all that is in me. You wouldn't like what you knew if you did."

"Sebastian, for some time now I have been at a loss to distinguish the real you from the man you show the rest of the world. But I have seen enough lately to know you **are** the same brave, honorable man I fell in love with seven years ago."

"Mary--"

"Shh."

She laid a finger on his lips.

"I don't expect you to tell me what you're involved in. It's enough I know you're acting for a good cause. I trust you, Sebastian. I know you must have been prevented somehow from contacting me all these years, You are a man of honor, who **would** not abandon his wife and family without good cause."

"Oh, Mary."

Sebastian's shoulders sagged.

"How can you forgive, without an explanation?"

"I don't need one. All I need, all I've ever needed, is you. And you're here now, and **that's** all that matters. Everything else is meaningless detail."

Sebastian turned away sharply

"I can give you no reason to trust me, Mary. I could **still** hurt you, even more than you've been hurt already."

"I'm willing to take the risk."

He groaned, turned towards her and crushed her in his **arms**. His lips were on her face, her neck, and her hair.

"Mary, my lassie, my one true love. I am so sorry I ever left you. I want you, but I do not deserve you. I am not the same man I was."

Reaching up, she took his head in her hands, and drew his lips down to hers.

"I'll always love you, Sebastian," she murmured against his mouth. "Nothing can ever change that. You are my first, my last, my always."

As she spoke, she lifted the silver locket from the bodice of her dress, and opened it for him. Sebastian's jaw worked when he saw the framed miniature the locket held, but no sound came from his lips. Instead, he gathered Mary in his arms.

He kissed her, pressing her so close the breath was nearly squeezed from her body.

She didn't mind. Indeed, she felt as if she were light as air, floating high with Sebastian above the rock solid cliffs, the roaring waves with their spraying foam, **and** up among the feathery clouds that raced across the sky.

"Don't ever **leave** me again, Sebastian, I could not bear it."

"I don't think I **could**," he said, almost in wonder. "Not now that I've really found you."

Tears stung her eyes,

"Mary, what have I done now?" said Sebastian, tenderly brushing them away.

"I'm just so very happy. Sebastian, I don't want there to be any more secrets **between** us. **One** day, soon, will you tell me all that has happened to you since our wedding?"

"But I told **you**--"

"The truth, Sebastian. I have to see **it** in your eyes, and I haven't yet."

"**One** day. Mary. **Soon**. I'll tell you everything, and there will be no more secrets **between** us."

She squeezed his hand, and took a deep breath.

"Then, I, too, need to tell you something, Sebastian. I haven't wanted to, because I did not know if I could trust you. But I know **now** I can."

Sebastian smiled, Mary **marveled** at how much younger an unguarded smile, innocent of irony, **made** him look.

"I know you **almost** married another man, Mary. I'm willing to overlook that, **What** else could there be?"

"Well, there is one other thing. I hope, no, I trust, you will be equally understanding. **Sebastian**--"

"Tante Marie, come quick?"

Marguerite's voice made **them** both raise their eyes, and Mary saw the child running to them.

"**Grand-père** has fallen, and now he's sleeping. I cannot get him to wake up."

"We'll be right there, Marguerite."

Before Mary could finish the sentence, Sebastian was running towards the **little** girl. **Mary's** dress prevented her from moving quite so quickly. But that was no matter. Mary had confidence that Sebastian would do all that needed to **be** done,

Despite her concern for her father's condition, Mary felt a peace she hadn't known in years,

Her Sebastian was back.

Chapter Nine

Her father wasn't seriously hurt, Mary was relieved to discover. He had merely knocked his head and lost consciousness briefly back on the cliff frail. Sebastian helped her get Angus back to Rose Cottage despite the old man's blustery protests that he was fine and **had** no need of assistance.

"Thank you," she said almost shyly, **after** Sebastian had settled Angus in his chair and covered his knees with a red wool blanket. "I **don't** know how Marguerite and I would have managed without you. We never could have carried him up the trail the way you did."

"It was nothing, that is, nothing my military training didn't prepare me for."

"But your leg...I noticed your limp is more pronounced now. I fear my father's weight was too much of a burden."

"I tell you, it was nothing." He brushed **off** her concern, clearly not wishing to discuss his weak leg, Mary was more determined than ever to discover the **truth** behind Sebastian's leg injury, but perhaps now **wasn't** the time.

"Keep a close eye on your father, Mary. Send for me if he seems unduly sleepy, or if his eyes don't focus correctly. I don't believe he's suffered a serious blow to the head. I've seen those, and your father isn't displaying any symptoms I am familiar with."

"My father owes you much, Sebastian, for your care and concern. And so do I."

Sebastian appeared discomfited by her words,

"I did for him what I would do for anyone. Angus owes me nothing."

"Angus can hear you, you know," said the old man plaintively. "And I do thank you, son, for helping me just now. I'm in your debt."

"Do not call me son." Sebastian's blue eyes glittered.

"He means nothing by it," Mary hastened to intervene. "He calls all men your age and younger 'son.'"

"I had a son named Sebastian once," Angus went on, a far-away look in his eyes.

"And what happened to him?" Sebastian's voice was low and intense.

"They tell me he died, but I'm not so certain. I think he'll come back one day."

"To see me, Father?" said Mary softly

"Why no, daughter. To settle the score."

"Oh, Father." Mary laid her hand on the old man's forehead, hoping to keep him from becoming too agitated. "You must forgive him," she addressed Sebastian, though she was still facing Angus. "His mind does wander so."

When Sebastian didn't answer, she turned around, The room was empty. He had slipped silently away.



Mary stayed with her father, and monitored his condition the rest of that afternoon and evening. The next morning he told her in plain terms to quit fussing.

"Can you not see I am well, daughter? Go about your business, and do your errands. I will stay with Marguerite."

"Well, I did promise Mrs. Nash I'd stop by with a dozen eggs, and some rosemary balm." Mary hesitated, "And I also thought to pay a call on the vicar."

"The vicar, you say?" Your father's eyes twinkled. "Isn't that where my handsome young rescuer resides?"

Really, her father had the most disconcerting way of being vague one moment and extremely acute the next. "I did think I should perhaps thank him once again."

"By all means," her father agreed. "He is a handsome devil. So like our Sebastian, don't you think?"

This was far too confusing. Soon she would have to tell him the man she swore wasn't Sebastian really was, Who could blame her father for being muddled under these circumstances?



Mary did her errand at the Nash cottage as quickly as she could within the bounds of politeness. All the while she thought of Sebastian, yearning to see his face again, to feel his touch.

It was so hard when he left the day before. Perhaps it was good he had slipped out without saying anything to her. She would never have had the will or the strength to ask him to leave,

Vicar **Beechum** was in his study when she got to the vicarage.

"Good day, Mr. **Beechum**. I wonder if perchance Mr. Mallory is in?"

"Mallory? **Oh**, that tiresome young man. Excuse me, my dear, I forgot for a moment he is a relation of yours. I feel duty-bound to report, nonetheless, that his manner is often impious. I know Sir John finds him a sad trial."

His owlsh eyes sharpened behind his round eyeglasses.

"In fact, I understood Sir John asked you not to see this Sebastian Mallory alone."

Mary **stiffened** in dislike. Immediately she felt contrite and tried to alter her emotions, **After** all, the vicar was a man of God. Still, she disdained to discuss her **fiancé's** wishes with this man.

"I fear you misunderstand my cousin. He has an easy manner, and takes a light approach to most topics. Indeed, I believe that is the custom among his friends in London."

"That **Sodom and Gomorrah**," the vicar replied. 'Yes, well, I suppose it is the custom there to make light of religion. Yet, we must remember what Isaiah promises us in the Old Testament: 'Behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come **and** save you.'"

Mary wasn't sure if the vicar was promising to save her from Sebastian **or** the excesses of London in general, She **wasn't** about to question the vicar, though, Religious fervor all but shone in the **man's** eyes, and it made her uncomfortable.

"Sebastian--is he here?"

"He's gone out for the day."

Mary stifled the sharp stab of disappointment she felt.

"But don't be downcast, Miss Blackmore," the vicar went on. "I see my **worthy** cousin approaches."

Mary looked out the window in the vicar's study, and saw Sir John's carriage. Her stomach knotted, She knew she would have to talk to him soon, though, and it may as well be now.

"Mary, my dear, what are you doing here?" said Sir John when he entered the room a few moments later.

"Looking for her cousin," said the vicar before Mary had a chance to respond.

Sir John furrowed his brows. "I thought we had agreed you would not see that man alone."

"That was your notion, Sir John, not mine. I did not think it fair for you to ask it of me."

Mary was surprised by her own boldness. Sir John's displeased expression, on the other hand, grew thunderous.

"What did you say?"

Mary stood a little straighter. "You had no right to tell me I could not see **Sebastian**. He is my *cousin*—" she almost choked on the word —"after all."

"Mary--Miss **Blackmore**--I cannot be hearing you correctly."

Sir John struggled to rein in his temper.

"Soon you will be my wife, before man and God."

Almost absent-mindedly, Sir John nodded toward the vicar, who gave him a self-satisfied smile in return.

"You will be guided by me in this, as in all things. That will be your legal, and may I say God-given, responsibility as Lady **Addington**."

"Now that you've brought it up, Sir John, I believe we need to discuss our arrangement."

"Discuss it?"

The thin blue veins in **Addington's** forehead began to plump alarmingly.

"Discuss what, pray tell?"

Mary glanced at the vicar, who was watching avidly. "Perhaps we should continue this in private."

Sir John drew himself up. "I have no secrets from Mr. **Beecham**. He is my cousin, and my confessor. Yours, too, I believe."

Mary surprised herself with the sacrilegious thought that she'd sooner share her transgressions with her cow than Mr. **Beechum**.

Mary took a deep breath, and schooled herself to **meet** her **fiancé's** eyes. "If that is what you wish, than so be it, Sir John, I believe our betrothal was a mistake."

"A mistake? I am not in the habit of making mistakes, Miss Blackmore. I fail to comprehend what you mean."

He looked haughty, but Mary thought she divined hurt in his eyes, Whether she had hurt his feelings or merely his consequence made little difference to her; Mary hated giving others pain.

"Sir John, I am fully aware of the great honor you did me by asking me to be your wife. My fear is that deep down we do not suit, I would be doing you an injustice to marry you if I could not be a credit to you and Addington Manor."

The baronet's expression lightened.

"Your qualms do you credit, my dear. It is not every woman who could fully appreciate the responsibilities that will be hers as my wife. But do not fear. I will be at your side to assist you as you learn your new duties."

"You are very generous, but there is more."

Mary's words tumbled from her in desperation.

"My greatest resenration is that I will not be able to appreciate my new position, or even you, the way I should,"

She looked away, so she wouldn't have to witness the pain in his face that her next words were sure to inflict.

"I do not love you the way a good wife should love her husband, Sir John."

At last. She'd said it. She didn't know how she could be any more plain.

She stole a glance at his face, and to her **amazement** saw a tender smile on his normally dour features. He reached for her hand and patted it.

"There, there, Mary. Do not be embarrassed, Of course you are apprehensive. Any modest, delicately bred woman would be. I do not expect you to understand the mysteries that go on between a husband and wife, but I can reassure you nonetheless. I will be a patient and gentle teacher. You have nothing to fear. Indeed, Mary, these reservations of yours have only raised you in my esteem."

She stared at him, open-mouthed. "But, Sir John, you do not understand—"

"Of course I do. And I **am** confident that you will do your duty, the way my mother did, and indeed, all the Addington woman have throughout our illustrious family history."

"But--"

"Now, now, not another word. Do not worry that pretty head of yours any further. I'll tell you what—you go the milliner's in the village, and pick **out** a new bonnet for yourself. Tell them to **put** it on my account, That should cheer you up, my dear. And now, I must take my leave. I have business down at the harbor."

"An important land owner such as yourself has many responsibilities," intoned the vicar.

"Yes, but soon I'll have a helpmate, to lighten my burden and bring pleasure to my days."

"Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thy house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table." said the vicar. "Psalms, of course."

Addington nodded.

"Of course. Well, I must be off. Goodbye, my dear." He wagged his finger at her. "I'll be waiting to see that new bonnet."

"Such generosity," murmured the vicar as Addington left.

He looked for Mary for **confirmation**. She managed to nod, but it was **difficult**.

She wanted to scream.

Mary left, as the vicar eyed her curiously. That whole conversation with Sir John had gone badly. There was nothing to do but try again.

Somehow she had to make it clear to Sir John that she wanted to break their engagement, She knew now she could never **marry** him. Her heart still belonged to Sebastian.

Before she could reach the iron gate at the end of the vicarage's front walk, she saw Sebastian.

Hinges creaking, the gate opened and he was walking toward her.

She could scarcely breathe.

"Hello, Sebastian."

"Mary. How good to see you." His smile was warm and sincere.

She turned slightly, and out of the corner of her eye she could see the vicar, standing at his study window, watching her.

"Sebastian, I must talk to you. Would you like to have supper with us tonight?"

"Won't that displease your betrothed?"

"That is among the topics we must discuss. Please say you'll come. Seven o'clock."

"I'll be there."

He lifted her hand, turning her palm up, and kissed it lightly. The touch of his lips to her skin sent shivers through her body.

She knew she was shaking, and she knew the vicar was watching.

"I must go."

Sebastian nodded, his amused glance indicating his awareness of the vicar's supervision.

"I comprehend perfectly. Till tonight then, Mary, my dear."

How she liked the sound of the **endearment** in his deep voice!

"Till tonight." When at last she hoped to get the air **between** them finally cleared of all misunderstandings and deceptions.

Never had the berries on the trees and shrubs shone more brightly in the autumn sun. As she approached her little home, it seemed to glow with warmth. She nearly skipped up her front walk, as the hens scratching in the yard darted out of her way.

There were chores left to do, of course, and she could hear the querulous voice of her father inside the cottage complaining his tea had gone cold, But Mary only smiled. Nothing could spoil her good mood today.



It was dark when Sebastian approached Rose Cottage, but another clear night gave him the full benefit of the still-full moon.

He had barely knocked on the door when it was flung open, and an excited Marguerite launched herself into his arms.

"Tante Marie, he is here. *Voilà!*"

"Marguerite, let the poor man enter!" Mary appeared, ladle in hand, a gingham apron covering her calico gown. Her cheeks were flushed, her green eyes alive with laughter.

Sebastian drank in the sight of her.

She looked so beautiful, silhouetted against the glowing firelight in the hearth, as the sweet aroma of baked bread, pudding and a simmering chicken stew wafted around the room. A wispy tendril of auburn hair escaped her topknot and brushed against her cheek. It was all Sebastian could do to stop himself from kissing it back into place.

Looking up, she intercepted his gaze, and faltered at its intensity.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Oh, yes."

She seemed unable to reply to that. Marguerite, however, was oblivious to the emotional currents in the room. She took Sebastian by the hand and led him to the rough plank table.

"Then come and sit down. Supper is almost ready. I set the table," she added proudly, indicating the chipped china plates and pewter utensils neatly laid out, "Everything is in its proper place, *n'est-ce pas?* I did it all by myself."

"You did an excellent job, Maggie." The little girl beamed. Sebastian noticed the deep blue of her eyes. They reminded him of his mother's eyes, which gave him an unaccustomed pang. He tried to brush it aside.

That was the trouble with all this domesticity--it brought back too much of his childhood. With both of his parents gone now, and so much that had happened to him, it was almost painful to recollect happier times.

"Father, it is time to eat. Come to the table now."

Gently Mary shook Angus, who was dozing by the fire, awake. The four of them joined hands and said a simple blessing over the food. Sebastian surprised himself by joining in.

The fare was simple, but Sebastian found it delicious. They formed quite a little family, the four of them around the table.

Sebastian allowed himself to dream, just for a moment, of what could have happened if he hadn't left Mary all these years ago for the army. Would he now be presiding over his own family in the familiar dining room of his ancestral home?

He could almost picture it, Mary in a far grander gown, a brace of sons, perhaps, up in the nursery, to be duly presented in the drawing room after the meal.

That idyllic vision could have been his reality, even with his stint in the army. If he hadn't been imprisoned, he would have come back to Mary. That dream family could have been his, .

The sharp teeth of regret bit deeply in his stomach. Another dream destroyed by his betrayal and imprisonment. He struggled to calm himself, and feel the contentment of the moment, as he had before he let his thoughts wander. All because of little Maggie's eyes.

"Sebastian, you're not eating." Mary's voice was filled with concern.

"But you must eat the pudding I made," complained Margerite. "I stirred and stirred it over the fire, didn't I, Tante?"

"Indeed, you did. But perhaps Sebastian is full."

"Never too full for pudding." Sebastian rallied. "Especially if it's been well-stirred."

That satisfied Marguerite.

After dinner, Sebastian helped Mary and Marguerite clean up, and again a bittersweet feeling of what could have been stole over him. He played cards with Angus as Mary put Marguerite to bed, but the old man was nodding over his hand when Mary rejoined them.

Mary loosened the cards from her father's unresisting grip, and tucked his blanket over his knees. Soon Angus was asleep once more in his rocking chair.

"Now, Mary, perhaps you'll tell me why you risked Addington's wrath to invite me over tonight," said Sebastian softly, so as not to wake Angus.

"Come, Sebastian, let us withdraw to the far corner. There's something I want to tell you."

Mary's spoke rapidly, and her breath was fluttering. He could see her bosom moving up and down beneath the bodice of her high-waisted dress,

He had the insane urge to pull her close and kiss her till her breathing steadied in his arms, Instead he followed her to the settee by the front door, and sat beside her.

"What is it, Mary? Some dreadful confession? Did you kill someone?"

He tried to speak lightly, but he had a hard time concentrating with her so near. He reached for her hand, and held it firmly.

Her eyes widened, then she laughed.

"You are joking. But we must be **serious**."

She took a deep breath.

"Sebastian, I want to renege on our bargain."

"What?"

All sorts of implications whirled in his head. Had she changed her mind, was she going to report his suspicious activities in the neighborhood after all?

"I'm sorry, but I cannot go through with it. I will not allow you to arrange a divorce so I can marry Sir John."

Hope, pure and sweet, bloomed unexpectedly in his heart. He tried to keep his voice noncommittal.

"And why is that, Mary?"

"I cannot marry Sir John. It would be wrong."

"Because he is a pompous prig?"

She smiled. "I suppose that's one reason. But mainly it's because I know for certain now I do not **love** him. I am already married, Sebastian, to you. And that's the way I'd like things to remain, that is, if you wouldn't mind too much."

She pulled her hand out of his, and twisted it in her lap with her other hand.

"Do you mind, Sebastian, if we just keep our marital status the way it is?"

She searched his face with her lovely green eyes.

Sebastian felt as if he was nearing a cliff, after a **long** and arduous journey down a lonely trail, He couldn't go back, but to proceed was perilous.

"Do you really want to stay married to a ne'er-do-well, Mary?"

"You are not a ne'er-do-well, Sebastian. I am certain of it. But even if you were, the answer would have to be yes."

One step closer to the edge. "Why, Mary?"

"Because I love you, Sebastian. I always have, and I always will."

And **with** those words Sebastian plunged into free-fall, He pulled Mary close, and lowered his **mouth** to hers, His body surged in response to her sweet surrender, as she became limp and pliant in his arms.

But before he could kiss her, she drew back.

"Sebastian, distance no longer separates us, and for that I am glad. But I cannot allow anything else to separate us, either."

"What do you mean?"

"**It's** important that we be completely honest with each other now. No secrets should come between us."

Her breath was quick again, and she was visibly agitated.

"I told you what I was doing here in the village, Mary. You know I'm working for the government. I cannot tell you much more than that."

"You can tell me how your leg was really injured."

"I told **you**, I--"

"Please don't insult me by repeating that story about falling down the brothel stairs. I do not believe a word of it. Honor me with the truth."

She held her head high, but her eyes pleaded with him. He thought about telling another lie. It was so difficult for him to trust anyone. He opened his mouth **to** speak, but discovered he couldn't lie to her. Not **after** her declaration of love.

He paused to glance to where Angus sat **dozing** in his chair by the fire. When he heard the sound of the old man snoring, he decided to proceed.

"I've spent the past seven years in prison, Mary. In France. I was caught trying to pass information about French troop strength to the commander of the British garrison. I believe I was betrayed by the **man** travelling with **me**."

All the color drained out of Mary's face. "Oh, Sebastian, I wish I had known."

He shrugged. "What could you have done? The British government wouldn't acknowledge me, and my captors weren't about to let me communicate with anyone. I was as good as dead. Indeed, I expected to die there. My escape was pure luck. I took advantage of **a** rare moment of negligence by my guards to secrete myself in the back of a delivery wagon leaving the prison. I hid for a few weeks, and then with the help of **a** sympathetic fisherman I made it across the Channel back to **merry** old England,"

"Why didn't you come to me right away, Sebastian?"

"I thought you were in Scotland, remember? Besides, I made the mistake of reporting to Whitehall first. That's when I got this little assignment. The ministers believe what's going on here has some connection to the prison where I was held. That's why I'm the man for the job."

He smiled, but it was a cold smile tinged with **bitterness**.

"In addition, I've been assured by Whitehall that at the completion of my mission here, my brother Gerard will be **officially** exonerated of misconduct in **India**, and our family honor will be restored. So, you see, Mary, I had to take this assignment. Honor demanded no **less** from me."

"And I would expect no less of you, either," said Mary, her tone warm and sympathetic. Then she faltered. "And your leg?"

"A souvenir of my prison days. We got frequent beatings, and on one occasion the guard was drunker than usual, and shoved **me** too roughly down the stone stairs. Medical care in prison is sadly lacking, so my leg never did heal correctly. So you see, my dear, the part about the stairs, at least, was true,"

Mary's emerald eyes filled with tears,

"I'm sorry, Mary, I shouldn't have told you all that at once. Please don't distress yourself. **It's** all in the past now."

Even as he said it, Sebastian knew he didn't believe it, but he didn't know how else to reassure her.

"How you must have suffered." Mary's voice broke. "None of us knew. You must have **felt** so utterly alone. I'm so sorry, Sebastian."

Gently he brushed a tear from the corner of her eye with his thumb, and allowed his hand to linger on her soft face.

"It's all in the past," he repeated, "What matters is you're here with me now."

She took a deep breath, and reached for his hand framing her face. She pulled his hand into her lap and held it.

"You've honored me by telling me the truth, Sebastian, and I can do no less. For nearly seven years I, too, have kept a secret, from you and everyone else. It is ~~time~~ for me to let go of that burden. Now that I know you, and know that our love never really died, I believe I can trust you fully. I can, ~~can't~~ I?"

"Of course you can, Mary."

His tone was steady, but Sebastian's mind filled with speculation, He couldn't imagine what could be so bad that Mary was afraid to tell him.

Unless--unless Mary knew, conclusively, that her father was abetting the French with their invasion schemes. Maybe she was trying to protect the dotty old man, even if she couldn't stop his traitorous activities.

Sebastian braced himself for her appeal to shield her father from prosecution. He didn't know how he could fulfill that request and still ~~perform~~ his duty.

"Sebastian, there's something you should know, that indeed you have every right to know, that concerns my family and yours."

The poor girl was shaking, and her eyes didn't quite meet his.

"You've got to understand, Sebastian, everything I've done I've done to protect: my family. Please ~~do~~ not judge me too harshly. You were gone, and I felt so alone. I did what I thought I had to do,"

"Mary, look at me. I am convinced whatever you did was out of the purest of motives. You have nothing to fear. I will not judge you. Just tell me the truth, and we will proceed from there."

At his words her body relaxed. She smiled, tremulously, and looked ~~him~~ full in the face.

"Oh, Sebastian, I'm being so silly. I have witnessed your courage. How can I ~~doubt~~ the strength of your love for a member of your family?"

Here it comes. Sebastian prepared himself to have his worst suspicions about Angus confirmed.

"Besides," Mary continued, "you seem to like her already, almost as if you knew."

"Her? Don't you mean he?"

"He? ~~What~~ are you talking about?"

"Aren't you going to tell me about your father?"

"My father? What about my father? He has nothing to do with what I'm trying to say. It's Marguerite we're talking about. She's your daughter."

Sebastian reeled back in disbelief. Then an image of Maggie swam before him. He saw her face with her deep blue eyes, and then, unbidden came the image of his mother, and her equally blue eyes, so like Maggie's. Identical, even.

That's when he knew it was true. Maggie was his daughter. His daughter, no doubt conceived on that distant wedding night. How could he have been so blind, such a trusting fool?

An anger more powerful than he'd ever known coursed through him. Mary sat before him, looking puzzled,

"How dare you keep this from me." His eyes burned through her, and he saw fear leap into her eyes.

"Sebastian, I thought you'd understand. At least allow me to explain."

He didn't trust himself to respond. With every shred of discipline he could command he made himself leave. He didn't even turn around when he caught the sound of Mary's muffled sob.

Chapter Ten

Mary couldn't sleep. She lay awake in her bed, wondering what would happen next. Never in a thousand years would she have anticipated Sebastian **reacting** that way to her news. She berated herself for not telling him more slowly. It was bound to be a shock for him to learn he was a father.

She went over and over the scene in her mind, but was unable to resolve anything. Her most 'lasting impression was the cold fury she'd glimpsed on Sebastian's face before he stalked out of her cottage,

The depth of his anger frightened her. She believed if she could just talk to him, though, **he'd** understand the **motive** for her deception. Surely he would return to the cottage to see her, **to** give her a fair hearing. He owed her that much.

But she spent the day doing her chores, and giving Marguerite her lessons. A note arrived by page from the Addington Manor house, inviting Mary to lunch after the Sunday services again.

She hesitated to respond. Her last meeting with Sir John hadn't gone well. He'd refused to take her seriously when she told him she wanted to end their engagement.

Sunday would be another opportunity for her to explain her feelings to **him**, and **hopefully** extricate herself from her engagement to the baronet without going into scandalous detail.

The thought of that conversation gave her a headache. Still, jilting Sir John was the only honorable thing for her to do, something he would understand much better if only he knew she was already married.

Replying to the invitation in the **affirmative**, Mary decided she'd better at least speak again with Sebastian before her Sunday lunch with Sir John.

Early the next morning her father surprised her by being fully dressed, with the fire going in the hearth, by the time she came in from milking the cow.

"**Father!** What are you doing up so early?"

"I have a mind to take a walk. **It is a** fine morning."

"Fine? It's drizzling, and may well be pouring soon. Why don't you wait till later? Perhaps the skies will **clear**."

"I must go now. The tide is high." He walked over to the door, and took his coat and hat off the hook.

"Then I will go with you. Let me wake Marguerite, and dress her for a walk."

"Now, daughter, there's no need for all this fuss, I can do very well on my own. You treat me as though I were a child."

Mary bit her lip. Perhaps she should ease up. This did seem to be one of her father's better days. He was lucid, and walked with a firm step. And it was **not** uncommon for him to take a stroll, especially down to the harbor to chat with his fishermen friends.

But after Angus' fall on the cliff trail the other day, she worried about him more than usual.

"Father, I really don't think a walk in this weather is such a good idea."

Coat buttoned up to his chin, and hat squarely on his head, Angus walked over to his daughter and gave her a peck on the forehead.

"Stop your worrying, lassie, and keep the kettle on the boil. I'll be back before you know it for a spot of tea."

She watched her father go through the gate in front of Rose Cottage and set out on the path that led to the village. She kept watching till his familiar figure was a tiny speck in the distance, and then disappeared.

She turned her attention, and what she saw made her breath catch in her throat. Approaching the cottage from the opposite direction was Sebastian, his figure looming larger with his every step.

She opened the door as he unlatched the gate.

"Sebastian! I'm so glad you came."

For a moment, her hopes of reconciliation bloomed. Then she got a good look at his face, the way his nostrils flared, and the blue vein at his temple throbbed.

He was still angry.

"Madam," he said coldly. "I have come to see my daughter."

"Marguerite is not up yet."

"Then you will kindly wake her. And stop calling her by that ridiculous French name. From now on she will be known as Margaret, a fine English name, or Maggie, which suits her well."

"**Sebastian**, please listen to me for a moment."

Mary stepped out onto the cottage's stone threshold, and closed the door behind her. She did not want their discussion overheard by Marguerite. The overcast sky had ceased its steady drizzle, and Mary walked over to the wooden bench under the apple tree and sat down.

Protected by the tree, the bench was fairly dry, and Mary patted the space next to her. Sebastian ignored her invitation, and instead folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the tree trunk.

"Sebastian, I know **you're** angry with me, but I would like a chance to explain what happened."

He didn't say a word, merely watched her with hooded eyes. She took his silence for the scant encouragement it was, and plunged ahead.

"Three months after you left, three months after our wedding night, I realized I was with child, and not suffering from a persistent ague. I was happy, but scared as well. My dear maid Yvette was also with child, and she was a great comfort."

Mary's voice started to shake, but she willed herself to tell her tale as unemotionally as she could. She didn't want to damage her **case** by having Sebastian think she was being theatrical.

"As you know, my father gambled and lost his estate at that time. I knew he gamed, but I had no idea how deeply in debt we were. When it came time to pay his debts, there was nothing to do but sell the house and all the lands. We were nearly destitute, and to make matters worse, my father's illness progressed to where he often lost touch with reality."

Mary gulped hard, and continued.

"I made the decision to travel to England and seek your father's assistance, Sebastian. The Earl was so very kind to me at our wedding, I was sure he would come to our aid. Especially with his grandchild's welfare to consider."

A flicker of emotion Mary could not decipher flashed across Sebastian's face. Then he re-schooled his features to their former blank mask.

"The trip south to England was more arduous than I expected. Both Yvette and I were more indisposed, due to our conditions, than I had planned on. When we

traveled through Northumberland we were robbed of what little money we had left. At that point I felt almost defeated, Sebastian. And I was so very tired. I was by then nearing my confinement. Both Yvette and her good husband Sean-Paul persuaded me to stop our journey. They found an abandoned cottage, and made it as comfortable as possible for our little party."

Sebastian spoke up abruptly. "You still have not explained why you felt the need to deceive me, Mary."

"Be patient, and you will understand, I hope, Yvette helped me when my time came. She was so kind, Sebastian! I was near frantic with fear and pain, But our daughter was born squalling and healthy."

Mary smiled in reminiscence. Then her smile faded.

"Yvette was not so fortunate when her time came a week later. Her child, a son, was pale and sickly. He did not live long. Then Yvette contracted a fever. She did not linger long, either. Jean-Paul was wild with grief. He buried his wife and son, and went out for a long walk. His body was found floating in the River Tyne the next day. I was alone, with an infant and an ailing father."

Still no visible reaction from Sebastian. Mary went on.

"Much of the rest I have told you. We journeyed to your father's home, Foxborough Hall, to find the Earl was deceased, along with your brother. Your cousin Rupert patently disbelieved my story."

Mary gulped.

"I do not fully blame him; he'd heard nothing of our hasty wedding, and, as I told you before, I had no marriage lines with me. By that point I looked the veriest gypsy, with a babe at my breast. Rupert seemed unwontedly hostile at the bare suggestion that there could be another claimant to his inheritance. He has cold eyes, Sebastian, much like a snake's."

She shuddered at the memory.

"I saw him look at the baby in my arms, and I feared what he might do if he believed Marguerite posed any kind of threat. So I made up the story about her being Yvette's child, whom I was caring for due to her mother's death. I thought it clever of me, for when we left Scotland it was well known Yvette was with child, while I had kept my condition a secret."

Sebastian straightened out of his slouch against the tree.

"So you made up this story to protect Marguerite."

"Yes."

Mary tried to read his expression, looking for any signs of compassion.

"When I came to this village, I thought it wiser to continue to pose as Marguerite's guardian, rather than her mother. Fewer questions, and less danger, especially if Rupert were to come around."

"I see. And that is why you maintained the fiction of her being French. You gave her a French name, and even let Marguerite believe herself born of a Frenchwoman, so she would not give the game away."

"Yes! I am so glad you understand, Sebastian."

She reached out her hand to touch his sleeve.

"I understand, all right."

He flicked her hand away.

"I understand you did not wish to queer your chances with the rich baronet by appearing to be anything but a virgin."

Mary recoiled as if she'd been struck.

"Sebastian, that is a dreadful thing to say. I cannot believe you could be so cruel."

"Cruel, am I? What about those long years in prison, Mary, when I was beaten like a dog and may as well have been dead? Did you spare me any thoughts then?"

"You know I did," she said in a low voice.

"Is that why you tried to deny me my own child? If I hadn't come back, Mary, what then? Would Marguerite have continued to believe herself the child of a French maid? Would I have died, for all the world, without issue, my family line dead, as well?"

"Sebastian, I was trying to survive the best way I could while protecting our daughter. I never thought—"

"Oh, so it's our daughter now? I don't think so, Mary. Now Maggie is my daughter."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it's time she knows who her father is, and her true heritage."

"Such news, if not carefully delivered, may prove far too confusing for her to accept or understand."

"That is no longer your concern."

Mary looked into his implacable face, his hard blue eyes like chips of ice. The Sebastian **who** had held her so close was gone, leaving no trace behind.

This was a Sebastian consumed by bitterness and resentment. She couldn't turn her daughter over to him the way he was now.

"Sebastian, you have no **right--**"

"Oh, but that is where you are wrong. I have every right. You are the one with no rights. Here is how it will be, Mary. Divorce is now out of the question. As soon as my mission here is completed, I will claim Maggie as my o m , and take her to Foxborough **Hall.**"

"What of Rupert?"

"Rupert will regret the day he was born by the time I have finished with him. You need not concern yourself with him any longer."

"And what of me, Sebastian?"

He gave her a **joyless** smile.

"You will remain my wife, of course. To do **otherwise** might reflect badly on Maggie. But you will **not** be allowed to see my daughter. We will be civil, but distant, maintaining separate residences. In other words, a fashionable marriage."

His **words** were like weapons, slashing at her heart, intending to wound her as deeply as possible. Yet she could see the pulse at the base of **Sebastian's** throat throb, his hands shaking though he had balled his hands into tight fists and kept them at his side.

Why, he was hurting as much as she.

"**Sebastian**, try to understand..." she reached once more for him.

He flinched at her touch.

"You said you **loved** me, Mary, that you always had and always would. And yet you were so quick to betray me."

"But you knew about Addington's proposal when you first came here. You voiced no objections then. **You** seemed relieved to rid yourself of a forgotten bride."

"And do you really think I would have agreed to help you marry Addington had I known my child was part of the bargain? When were you going to tell **me** about her, **Mary**? Before or after the wedding?"

She stared right back into his angry blue eyes.

"Perhaps never. Perhaps I would have carried that secret to my grave. I had to see for myself whether you were worthy of being her father."

At that his **legs** seemed to buckle, and he sat heavily on the wooden bench as far away from Mary as possible. His gaze distant, he seemed lost in thought as he rubbed his sore leg. The drizzle started up again in earnest, though the tree partially shielded them.

A large **plop** of rain falling through the branches onto Mary's face distracted her.

"Oh, dear. My father will certainly get soaked in this weather, and may even catch **a** chill, I wish he hadn't gone to the harbor."

Sebastian stood up, his gaze suddenly sharpened.

"Your father walked to the harbor? I thought he rarely left the house. A semi-invalid."

"Well, yes, he is."

Mary felt defensive, but didn't know why.

"But he does have good days occasionally. And when he does, he likes to go down to see his friends."

"The fishermen."

"Yes, What's **wrong** with that?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with that. Your father may well be one of the traitors I seek."

Mary rose in alarm.

"Sebastian, how can you even think that? My father is a loyal **subject**."

"To what? **He's** a Scotsman, I believe, and many of his countrymen are not noted for their fond feelings towards **England**."

Mary drew in her breath.

"What you are suggesting is preposterous."

"**Is** it? What reason did he give for rushing off so early?"

"He said he had to go because the tide was high."

Even as she spoke, she was aware of how damning her father's explanation was.

"There you have it. A high tide brings our French friends close to shore, doesn't it?"

Mary tried one more time.

"Sebastian, my father was your father's best friend. You cannot believe Angus **Blackmore** capable of treachery."

"Why not?" Sebastian shrugged, a **hard** gleam in his eye. "Betrayal seems to run in the family. Now I must go, and **catch** him in the act."

"What will you do with him?"

"**If** he is indeed a traitor, he **will** deservedly hang. Maybe if **he's** lucky **he'll** be transported."

Fear almost paralyzed Mary.

"But what of Marguerite," she pleaded. "She loves her **Grand-père**. You don't want to hurt your daughter. Have pity on a poor, sick old man for her sake."

"Pity, Mary? Mercy, too, perhaps? I'm sorry, but those are hollow words to me now. I forgot what they **meant** while I was in prison. That: brutal place to which I was condemned by people such as your father."

He turned on his heel and left. Mary watched him go, her hand at her throat.



Sebastian's leg hurt as he walked to the village, but he ignored the pain. His goal was to catch Angus in the act of delivering or receiving information regarding coastal defenses. It felt good to have a goal, and feel justified in his quest for vengeance. Traitors should not be **suffered** to live,

The **fact** that Sebastian felt deeply betrayed by Mary, and Angus was Mary's **father**, had nothing to do with his **zeal**. Nothing at all.

Yet even as Sebastian congratulated himself on discovering the traitor, something nagged at him. Angus didn't seem capable of any sustained, or truly dangerous, intrigue. He wasn't reliable. And there were too many days he seemed lost in a mental fog.

Unless it was all an act, and Angus was a brilliant mastermind masquerading as a dotty old man. Sebastian was disinclined to trust anyone, and his experience had taught him always to expect the worst. Still, his instinct told him he could be wrong about Angus, even if he didn't want to be.

A red leaf fluttered from a tree onto his path. The autumnal color was a forcible reminder of Mary's bright hair. How he'd once loved to run his fingers through those silken **strands**! Ruthlessly he suppressed the memory.

An involuntary shiver shook his frame. The chill that accompanied that leaf-tugging **breeze** prompted a different sort of recollection, memories of his dank prison cell.

There were altogether **too** many memories competing for space in his brain. He needed to shut them out before they either made him soft or drove him mad.

Sebastian had the uncomfortable suspicion he wasn't being entirely fair to Mary. She had been in dire straits, and she had coped the best way she could,

But he couldn't: reconcile his long, hopeless years in prison with the knowledge that all the while he'd been missing the birth of his daughter, and so many years of her childhood.

To think he may never have known about Maggie--missed out entirely on their connection--filled him once more with a desperate **fury**. How could Mary say she loved him and still perpetuate such a hurtful deception?

As Sebastian approached the harbor, he saw Angus walking towards him. Blast it, **Sebastian** was too late.

Angus squinted at Sebastian's face.

"Don't **I** know you, young man?"

Sebastian answered automatically.

"Sebastian Mallory. Your daughter Mary's cousin."

Angus scratched his chin. "No, that can't be right. You ain't my newwy. I know my brother's children, and Mary doesn't have any other cousins."

The old man's face cleared.

"Hey ho, I've got it! You're Sebastian Edmunds, the man my gel married. But," Angus looked confused again, "you can't be him. He's dead. Mary told me so."

Sebastian couldn't repress his curiosity.

"What if I am Sebastian Edmunds and I'm not dead?"

"Then I ought to draw your cork right now! You abandoned my Mary in her hour of need, and you better have a good reason for it."

"What do you mean, her hour of need?"

"Why, when she had the baby, you sapskull."

"So you know the baby is hers?"

"Whose else would it be? She didn't find it in a cabbage patch, you know."

"Listen, old man, have you told anyone else Marguerite is Mary's baby?"

"Of course not. And I didn't tell you, either. Mary asked me once never to talk about it. I'm supposed to believe the child belonged to her maid."

Angus shook his head. "Mary thinks I'm daft most of time. But I tell you, man, I was there, and I remember." Angus laid his finger aside his nose. "Between you and me, I know what really happened."

"Just what else do you know, I wonder?"

"Are you Sebastian, or aren't you?"

"What do you think?"

The old man searched the younger man's face.

"I cannot be sure, come to think on it. You don't smile like he did. And you look so much older, especially around your eyes."

Angus looked baffled and forlorn. Pity welled up in Sebastian, but he ruthlessly quelled it. He hadn't felt anything close to compassion in a long while, and he couldn't afford to start now.

Sebastian put his arm around the old man's shoulders.

"Angus, I can tell you this much. I know this Sebastian Edmunds pretty well. I know he'd be angry if you told anyone else Marguerite was Mary's child. Sebastian will let everyone know when the time is right. In the meantime, Sebastian would want to know more about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, What you do all day when you come into the village, and whether you have any friends, For example, what were you doing down at the harbor just now?"

Angus looked wary. "Why would Sebastian want to know that?"

"He'd want to make sure you weren't getting into any trouble."

"What a man wants to do with his own time and his own money is his business."

Sebastian answered gently, "But you don't have money. You lost it all, remember? Mary told me."

"I get an allowance from Mary." Angus looked mulish. "She gives me some of her egg money, she does. She's a good girl, And I have it right here."

Angus pulled some coins from his pocket. Sebastian eyed them dispassionately.

"Those are *sous*, Angus. French coins. How do you explain that?"

Angus jabbed the money back in his pocket,

"I don't have to. Not to you or Sebastian, or anyone if it comes to it. I'm not even sure **who** you are, anyway. But if you do see Sebastian **Edmunds**, give him this message from me."

Angus drove his fist into Sebastian's side, in a gesture that was amazingly quick and hard for an old man.

Sebastian grunted in surprise and pain.

"Tell **him** that's for leaving my little girl."

And with that Angus walked off down the lane.

Sebastian smiled in spite of himself. He couldn't **blame** Angus for defending his daughter, and he admired **the** old man's spirit. Even if he was more convinced than ever that Angus Blackmore was involved in treason.

Chapter Eleven

Mary's eyes were leaden and her heart heavy as Sunday morning dawned. She lay in her bed without rest. Sleep had eluded her the night before; worry about her father and Marguerite **tormented** her. Sebastian was deadly serious about turning Angus over to the authorities for treason. And he was equally determined to wrest his daughter from 'her.

Anxiety wasn't the only cause of her restlessness, Kneading the edge of the blanket with her fingers, Mary realized she was angry, too. She was so weary of being buffeted by circumstances, her fate **determined** by the decisions of others,

We'll, it was about to end. She was not going to allow Sebastian or anyone else to break up the family she'd worked so hard to maintain. In the wee hours of the morning she'd devised a plan.

All she needed now was the strength to carry it out,

Rising from her bed, she went to the wash stand and splashed her face with cold water from the basin, hoping the icy liquid would clear her brain and help firm her resolution.

Appealing to Sebastian was out of the question. She had tried that once; her pride would not allow her to do so again. Her heart ached, but she couldn't trust him.

Where once Sebastian was warm and ardent, he was now cold and implacable. That he was hurting she suspected; that he could hurt her far worse she was certain. Once more it fell to her to protect her family.

Rubbing her eyes, Marguerite rolled out of her little trundle bed in the corner of the room bed and came to her.

"Tante Marie, must I go to church this morning?"

"**No**, Marguerite, you may stay home."

Clearly not anticipating that answer, the little girl widened her eyes.

"I may stay home?"

"Yes, I want you to watch **Grand-père**. I have told him to stay home this morning, as well. I will go to church in the carriage Sir John is sending, and then **afterwards** I am invited to the manor **house**."

Mary bent down till she was eye-level with her daughter.

"While I am gone, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, Tante Marie. If I can stay home I will be glad to do anything for you."

"I am happy to hear that. There is a game I want you to play. I want you to get your clothes and all your favorite things and put them on the coverlet of your bed. And then I want you to gather up the corners of the blanket and tie it into a knot, making a bundle. Deposit the whole bundle by the front door. If you like, you can watch me as I do the same thing with my clothes and Grand-pere's before I leave for church."

A frown of concentration crinkled the little girl's forehead.

"That is a queer sort of game."

"Yes, I know. But there's more. If anyone knocks on the door, I want you to pretend no one is home. Do not wake Grand-pere. I will be back as soon as I can."

"Even Sebastian?"

"Especially Sebastian."

"But Tante Marie —"

"No questions, little one. Just do this for me. I will explain later."

Mary bent down and kissed Marguerite on the forehead.

"Now, I must get dressed. I want to be ready when Sir John's carriage arrives,"

Sir John was unconcerned by the absence of Marguerite and Angus at the Sunday service. Indeed, he seemed relieved not to have to deal with either of them.

"This is pleasant, my dear, just the two of us," Addington whispered as they walked down the aisle to his family pew.

Strains from the pipe organ bellowing the bars of the opening hymn prevented Mary's response. She stood next to Sir John, an open hymnal in her hands, mouthing words on which she couldn't focus.

Heart racing, Mary felt imprisoned once more by the cold stone walls, and Sir John's imposing presence beside her.

Mechanically she stood and sat at the proper times as the service continued. Queasiness assailed her so strongly she almost doubled over as the banns of her forthcoming marriage to Sir John were read a second time.

Without a doubt it was time to put a stop to this charade now.

When she and Addington were in his carriage after the service, Mary spoke up.

"There is something I must tell you, Sir John. About our marriage."

She took a deep, fortifying breath.

"I cannot marry you."

Addington smiled indulgently.

"Now, now, Miss Blackmore, my dear Mary, we have discussed this already. You must not allow your newes to get the better of you."

"It's not my nerves that form the basis of my resistance. It's my marriage."

With a dry chuckle, Sir John grasped her hand.

"You are indeed nervous, Mary, and just proved how much. You refer to our forthcoming marriage as though it were already accomplished."

Mary pulled her hand out of his.

"That is no mistake, Sir John. That is the point. I am already a married woman."

Even in the semi-darkness of the carriage interior, Mary could see Addington pale.

"That is not possible. You are a maiden."

Mary sighed. "I never actually claimed to be a maiden, Sir John."

"But you indicated—"

"Nothing. I indicated only that I was interested in your suit."

He looked at her in horror. "How could you be so duplicitous?"

So now two men accused her of deception. Mary's head began to ache, just as she knew it would.

"You must believe me, Sir John. When you began to pay your attentions to me, I was **convinced** I had been widowed. I only saw my husband one brief night, and then he left me to join the army. Almost seven long years passed since that night, and I truly believed him dead."

"What changed your mind?"

"I saw him, I'm afraid. Though he was much altered."

"You saw him here, in this village? When?"

"Nearly two weeks ago."

"Why did you not say something then?"

Mary was silent for a moment.

"I was not sure what to do. I thought perhaps a Scottish divorce would be possible..."

"Divorce?"

Addington's voice became shrill.

"Did you sincerely believe I would ally my name and noble heritage to a divorced woman?"

An idea, like a puzzle piece dropping into place, formed in Mary's brain. She knew she had a lever now to ensure Sir John's cooperation with her desperately conceived plan. It wouldn't be ladylike to use it, perhaps, but to keep her daughter and protect her father Mary was willing to do anything.

Sir John went on, oblivious to her mental tumult.

"Just who is this man, this husband with whom you would have made a fool of me? Who has come into the village recently? I cannot think, unless it's—" his voice dropped several octaves, into a deep sibilant hiss "--**Sebastian Mallory**." Addington sucked in his breath. "I should have known."

"Believe me, Sir John, I now regret the deception, for more reasons than you can imagine. When Sebastian came into the village, I regarded it as a disaster. I wished to be your wife, and pretend my first marriage never existed."

Addington looked a shade mollified.

"Perfectly understandable, that **you** would prefer me to that conceited **rakehell**."

Mary plunged ahead,

"But **I** see clearly that **I** was **naïve**. **I** cannot implicate you in my problems, especially now, when things have taken a dire turn. Your reputation would be quite ruined if the whole story got out."

"Eh? What do you mean?" He **squirmed among** the squab cushions of his elegant carriage.

Mary wrung her hands.

"Sebastian is convinced my father has been consorting with traitors. All nonsense, of course, but he is determined to raise a furor. **I** do believe he will stop at nothing, even revealing our marriage, and possibly claiming Marguerite as his daughter."

As soon as she said it, Mary wished she hadn't let that last bit slip out. Protecting Marguerite was a deeply ingrained habit.

Addington looked like a man besieged, "**Is** she?"

"That is of no import now. What matters is the scandal that will ensue. There will be no way to keep your name out of it, **I** fear, what with our betrothal so well known. Why, the banns were read again just now in church."

"You are right," said Addington with a shudder. "I will be a laughing stock, from here to London."

Like a snake, he turned on her.

"You wretched woman, what am **I** to do?"

"**I** have an idea."

Looking out the window, Mary saw they were nearing the manor house.

"Instruct your driver to take us back to Rose Cottage, and **I** will tell you about it."

"**I** have no objection to that. **With** this unpleasant turn of events, **I** could not swallow a morsel of the meal that awaits us."

Addington gave the necessary orders to his coachman, and turned once more to Mary. He was careful to keep as much distance from her as the narrow confines of the carriage would allow, as if she were contagious.

"Here is my plan," said Mary. "I have decided to take my father and Marguerite to the plantations in America. My father has a cousin, Davy Blackmore, in Virginia, whom Sebastian has no knowledge of. We can start a new life there, in peace and safety."

"You want to leave the country." Addington was taking it in, and as he did so Mary could see his muscles relax.

"Yes, And I want you to secure our passage on a ship. Hopefully an Indiaman, so we can have some small degree of comfort on our journey."

He started to bluster. "You expect me to pay..."

"Think of the scandal you'll be avoiding, Sir John," Mary reminded him gently. "I do not have time to raise the money myself, but you are welcome to whatever you can find in the cottage after we leave. The cow should be worth something, at least, and the chickens as well."

"We'll..."

"If you ever had the tiniest scrap of affection for me, Sir John, you will grant me this last favor."

"I suppose it could be arranged," he admitted. "When do you want to leave?"

"Today. Marguerite is helping me pack right now. I thought we could travel up to Bristol, and start from there."

"Won't your disappearance cause comment?"

"Not today. Tomorrow, on market day, people may begin to notice we're gone, By then I hope to have at least begun our journey."

Addington leaned back heavily.

"This is all too much, Miss Blackmore, or whoever you are. I have the nagging feeling I am abetting a crime."

Mary met his eyes squarely

"You are protecting an innocent old man from an unfounded accusation, from which, if we stayed in England, he might never recover. You are also helping me,

more than you know. I beg you to do this, Sir John, and tell no one, especially Sebastian."

"If he is indeed your husband, as you admit, he has rights," Addington said uneasily.

"He forfeited his rights a long time ago," Mary responded. "When he first came to the village, I thought he had changed, I was right, though I did not realize what form that change had taken. He is neither fop nor soldier now. He is much more dangerous—a man bent on revenge, insensible to all other considerations."

"Did you say soldier?"

"Why, yes. I mentioned his army service earlier. He left me after our wedding to fight under Colonel Wellesley."

"And did he come to our village on a military matter?"

A stab of panic shot through Mary. Had she made a serious blunder?

"I didn't say that. His coming here was coincidence as far as I know."

"We'll, then." Addington shifted his gaze to the countryside beyond the carriage window, his eyes filled with speculation. "We must get you and your family out of the country as quickly and as quietly as possible. It won't be easy, with the coast so heavily guarded at the moment. But I'll be demmed—pardon my language, Miss Blackmore—if I'll invite any trouble with one of old Hook Nose's boys. If you're the lure that brought Mallory here, then the sooner you're gone, the better."

Addington's line of thinking disturbed Mary. But she decided to focus on her objective. She would give him no more information, though. This was not the time to correct him as to Sebastian's true identity.

"So you'll help me?"

"Yes, Miss Blackmore, I will. It will be necessary to bring Vicar Beechum into our confidence, however. I can assure you, he will be the only other living soul who knows about this matter. You can expect him at your cottage shortly. I will endeavor to write the necessary introductions with all due speed. It would be best, however, if I were not seen with you again. Fewer questions will come back to me that way."

They were at Rose Cottage. The carriage stopped. The coachman let down the steps, and discreetly moved out of earshot.

"Thank you, Sir John. You had every right to refuse me aid, after I used you so abominably. I deeply regret what happened. It was never my intention to deceive you."

"You did use me abominably, and I may never forgive you," he said fretfully. "But you did right to come to me for aid. This is the best way out of a bad situation."

Mary lifted the hem of her skirt and raised one slippered foot towards the steps. Then she turned to Addington once more.

"And if Sebastian should inquire after me?"

"I will not give you away. Indeed, it will afford me tremendous satisfaction to see him thwarted."

There was something in his eyes that alarmed Mary. But it was too late to alter her course now.

"I am in your debt, Sir John."

She started down the stairs, as the coachman rushed to offer his assistance.

"You can expect a visitor later." Sir John tipped his hat. "I wish you good fortune."

The coachman jumped back on his box and the coach rattled away, its wheels crunching on the rocks and leaves of the lane.

Mary stared at the receding coach. Now she was committed. She prayed she'd made the right decision.

And that someday Sebastian would forgive her.

Mary went back into the cottage and gathered her little family around her.

"Father, Marguerite, I have made a decision. We are going on a journey. To America."

"America!" Her father dropped his pipe, the tobacco spilling out of the bowl. "Why are we going to America? That is a long sea voyage away."

"We are going to visit your cousin Davy, in Virginia."

Mary turned to Marguerite, who was staring at her wide-eyed.

"We will get to see a new country. It will be fun."

"*Mais*, Tante Marie, in America there are bloodthirsty savages. They will want our scalps to hang on their belts."

"Marguerite, where have you heard such nonsense?"

"Bertie Jones, in the village, told me. His uncle was a soldier there. Bertie has lots of stories,"

"I am sure he does, and I am equally certain few of **them** are true. This will be a grand adventure, Marguerite. We will travel in a big ship across the ocean. You will see things few little girls your age ever get to see."

Marguerite's lower lip trembled, "I do not want to leave Rose Cottage."

"We cannot stay any longer. I have already told Sir John we are leaving."

"Is he coming?" Marguerite's expression was wary.

"No. But Sir John is helping us with our plans."

"So, the musty man is not to be your husband?"

"No, my dear, he is not."

Marguerite's face brightened, "Then I am not so sad about leaving."

"I am glad to hear it. Now, go check the back of the cottage, and make sure you have tucked everything you want to bring with you into your coverlet, We will be leaving soon."

The little girl skipped off. Angus was refilling the bowl of his pipe with shaking fingers.

"I do not understand, daughter. We are we fleeing England like criminals?"

Mary knelt by his side.

"Trust me, Father. It is the best thing to do."

"Has Sir John used you roughly? Is that why we must leave? Why, if I were a younger man he would not dare lay a finger on you. Wait till Sebastian hears of this. **He** should be coming back to us any day now."

Mary sighed. This was going to be **difficult** to explain without upsetting him.

"Sir John has been a perfect gentleman. In fact, he is arranging our passage. We are leaving because of Sebastian, the one who came into our village recently. He believes..."

Mary couldn't look into her father's clouded eyes and tell him the truth. So she made something up.

"Sebastian believes it would be safest for us to go. He thinks the French will invade soon, and he does not want us to be here then."

Angus settled back in his chair.

"Those Frogs will never get past our defenses. Trust me, I know. I may seem like a silly old man to you, my dear, but I have been keeping a close eye on what's been happening off shore. Important people have asked me for help, and it has been my task to keep them informed. I know all about our defense strategy, as well as our plans in case of invasion. There is nothing for you to worry about."

Mary heard him with a sinking heart. So it was true. Her father had been involved with traitors, no doubt as an unwitting dupe. Now it was imperative they leave as soon as possible.

She took one of her father's gnarled hands into her own.

"This is for the best, Father. For all of us. Do you remember, years ago, when Cousin Davy visited us in Scotland and begged us to visit his tobacco plantation? This is the time. We will come back to this island when there is no more talk of war."

Angus sighed heavily.

"I see you have made up your mind, Mary. There is no dissuading you when you are determined."

"No indeed. Now, let us get you packed. Sir John is sending a carriage for us in a short while."

She stood up, and her father grabbed her arm.

"What of Sebastian, Mary? Is he coming with us?"

Mary bit back the quick, unexpected tears.

"No, Father, he isn't. In fact, I doubt we will ever see him again."

Her voice shook, so she turned her head before she could betray any more emotion.

A scant hour later Mary was waiting in the front room of the **cottage** when a **carriage** pulled up. The coachman clambered down from his box and came to the door.

"It is time to go," she announced, "Marguerite, show the coachman where our trunk is, and help me with these bundles."

As the coachman struggled with the trunk, Mary took Marguerite's hand and went to the door of the carriage. Her father was lagging behind them. A cloud of gloom seemed to hang over the little family, slowing their steps. Even Marguerite was uncharacteristically silent.

"And so our adventure begins," Mary said to encourage herself as **much** as Marguerite and Angus.

The carriage door opened, and in the darkened recesses of the interior Mary saw Vicar **Beechum**.

"Good evening, Miss Blackmore. I am at your **service**."

He extended a gloved hand. Mary accepted it, surprising herself with a sudden hesitation.

She allowed the vicar to assist her into the carriage, along with her father and Marguerite. The door closed, and Mary caught her last glimpse of Rose Cottage as the carriage wheeled around and headed down the lane.

She didn't see the cottage, though, with its stone walls, thatched roof and dying garden. In her mind she saw only Sebastian—Sebastian sitting on the bench with her, inside the cottage, kissing her, Sebastian's strong **arms** around her, the planes of his face shadowed in the firelight,

She yearned for his nearness, even as every rotation of the carriage wheels took her further away.

She couldn't believe she was leaving Sebastian, in an uncanny parallel to the way he left her seven years ago.

Sebastian **left** her then because of duty to his family and his country. Mary was fleeing him now out of duty to her family.

She and Sebastian seemed destined never to be in the same carriage headed in the same direction.

Once, when she was much younger, Mary had faith that love could conquer all. She believed **fervently** that if Sebastian ever returned to her, she would be happy. But that had proved false. Sebastian did come back, and no one was happy.

In the confines of the carriage her father was confused and downcast, and Marguerite subdued. Mary herself had never felt so alone and low in spirits,

Yet, surveying her little party more closely, Mary saw the dejection was not as universal as she thought. At least one occupant of the carriage seemed content.

Sitting in the corner of the carriage, gazing out the window, the vicar was smiling.

Chapter Twelve

Sebastian woke up late Sunday morning to the crunch of carriage wheels and the stomp and neigh of a team of horses. His head, aching abominably, felt as though it **was** stuffed with cotton.

He got up to shut his window and realized he wasn't in his chamber at the vicarage. He was in a tiny room at the Crown and Anchor, situated right over the coaching yard.

Outside, a dog exercised its lungs in a volley of staccato barks, piercing Sebastian's aching skull like repeated sword thrusts,

"Would someone stop that miserable cur's mouth?" He yelled out the window

"Now then, Mr. **Mallory**, there be no need to be taking your foul temper out on **Hounslow**," said Charlie Bucket, the innkeeper entering the room.

"He's not the one who drank two bottles of brandy last night. He may be a dog, but he has more sense than that."

Sebastian winced, and held his head. "So that's why I'm here. It's coming back to me with a terrible clarity."

"You begged me for a room, you did, so you wouldn't have to go back to that prosy vicar's house. Can't say I blame you. Beechum's moralizing would drive any man mad. My good wife warned me not to let you take the room, since you still haven't paid for the damages you caused a fortnight ago, But you assured me you have the blunt for it."

"Ah, I said that, did I?"

Bucket folded his arms across his ample belly and blocked the doorway. "You do have the blunt, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Let me see here..."

Sebastian went to his coat hanging on the bedpost and searched the pockets,

"I must have left my money back at the vicarage. I shall retrieve the necessary funds and return tomorrow."

"Oh, no, you don't. I want it today--all of it. I won't be gamroned by the likes of you, **Mallory**."

Sebastian straightened to his full height, and assumed his best aristocratic air, which was exceedingly difficult due to his pounding head.

"I assure you, my good man, you are not being **gammoned**, as you so quaintly put it. You shall be paid in good time."

"I have no doubt of that, my fine young buck. We'll just take a trip to the vicarage together, so as I can get me blunt. Saves you the return trip."

"Don't you go to church on Sunday morning? I'd hate to keep you from your devotions."

"Church? Didn't you hear the bells? The service must be well nigh over by now. Even if it wasn't," he added, "you'd never catch me in the village church. I'm a Dissenter."

"I'm not surprised," murmured Sebastian.

"How's that?"

"I said, I've got something in my eye," Sebastian answered loudly. "Now, my dear Mr. Bucket, if you will excuse me, I shall dress, I'll have to ask you to leave, unless you wish to **serve** as my valet. I am persuaded neither of us would enjoy that experience."

"I'll be waiting in the corridor. And don't try to do a bunk out the window. My stable lads will nab you quicker than you can say Jack Sprat."

"I appreciate your minute attention to detail. Have no fear, I shall not do a bunk. We shall progress to the vicarage like old friends."

Sebastian dressed quickly, in the gaudy waistcoat he had come to despise. His head throbbed painfully, yet he was almost glad of it. How stupid to yield to the temptation to use brandy to erase the last look he'd seen on Mary's face!

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to block out the panic he could still see so clearly on her lovely features. He'd vowed to take both her father and her daughter away from her. Angus would wind up in prison or worse, and Maggie would be lost to her mother if he put his plan into action.

Sebastian had every right to carry out his scheme. Mary might suffer, but then so had he, for seven long years. Angus deserved to be punished if he was consorting with traitors. And Maggie...

Maggie deserved to know who her father was. And who her mother was, for that matter. **Mary** had lied to their child, and to him. Injured pride and a powerful sense of loss made Sebastian want to seek his revenge on Mary, her father, and the whole world.

Resolutely he pulled on his boots, and adjusted the lace cuffs on his sleeves. If only he could forget the feel of Mary in his arms, the ~~smell~~ of her hair and the way her mouth crooked up at the corners when she smiled. If he could forget the cozy dinners in Rose Cottage, with Mary at the **hearth**, Maggie on his lap and old Angus dozing in his chair by the fire.

If only he could forget those things his duty, as a soldier and a wronged husband, would be so much easier to perform.

A sharp rap at the door jarred his head anew.

"Are ye coming out, Mallory, or do I need to come in again?"

Sebastian opened the door with a flourish.

"As you can see, I am quite prepared to leave now. A cup of your excellent coffee, and we'll be on our way."

A short time later Sebastian and Charlie Bucket were on the path to the vicarage. As the innkeeper had pointed out, the morning service was over by now. Perhaps the vicar was entertaining guests.

Would Mary be there with Addington beside her? Sebastian ground his teeth.

"We should have come earlier. That way there'd be no chance of seeing the vicar," said Bucket conversationally. "**Beechum** would have been at the church if we'd come earlier."

"A brilliant deduction, considering he leads the **service**."

Bucket ignored his sarcasm. "And about half the village would have been cooped up in there with him as well. Though I can tell you, many of the villagers ain't too fond of our vicar's popish ways."

"Popish ways? Vicar **Beechum**? He seems like a pillar of the Church of England."

"Maybe the Church of England the way it was before Henry VIII. **Beechum** loves the old ways, Get enough sherry in him and he won't stop talking about his brother's trip to Rome. Our good vicar turns almost green with envy when he tells us of his brother's visit to the Vatican. Now that's just unseemly in a good Protestant, don't: you think?"

Sebastian was silent, recalling his own trip to Rome, and how it was cut short by his arrest. Bucket tried to restart the conversation.

"Have you ever been abroad, Mallory?"

"I've been rather confined for the past several years. Haven't been able to venture out much."

Bucket gave him a friendly slap on the back. "Nose to the grindstone, eh? Same with me. Besides, who needs to travel? Everything a man needs for his happiness is right here in England. No need to look any farther."

Sebastian froze as Bucket's words struck him **unexpectedly**. In a moment of penetrating insight, he realized the innkeeper could be wiser than he seemed. Perhaps everything Sebastian needed for happiness was right here in this tiny village on the coast of England.

And he was on the verge of destroying it.

"Coming, Mallory?" Bucket opened the iron gate in front of the vicarage.

"Give me a moment."

"Eh?" Bucket squinted at him. "You look pale, man. Have you taken a turn, or is this a ruse to cheat me?"

"I'm all right," said Sebastian, though he still felt dazed. "I must find Mary, and Angus..."

"If you're talking about Blackmore, you don't have to look beyond the harbor. Always pretends to be feeling poorly when his daughter goes to church on Sundays, so he can toss the dice with the fishermen."

"Are you saying Blackmore still gambles? I don't believe you. The man lost everything he had on a dice roll once."

Bucket whistled, "Did he now? Can't say I'm all that surprised, come to think of it. That's how it is with gamblers. My own father was one. Played all the **time**. Win or lose, it made no matter to him. **My** mother took to emptying his pockets **before** he left the house. Still didn't **stop** him, come to think of it. It's like a sickness, it is."

In a few steps Sebastian caught **up** to the innkeeper and held the man by the lapel of his worn coat.

"Would you happen to know if Blackmore gambled with any French seamen on these Sunday mornings? I found French coins in his pocket."

Bucket shrugged. "Perhaps he does, or maybe he just plays with those who do. Those Frenchies stop by often enough."

Bucket took Sebastian's hand off his jacket.

"For years now the village has engaged in a regular trade that's not exactly legal, if you catch my meaning. Who doesn't? **Look** around, man, at the tea, spirits and lace that abound in this village. Where do you think it all comes from?"

Sebastian uttered a short, precise oath.

"I may have made a terrible mistake."

"Well, I'm not about to do the same," said Bucket. "Take me to your chamber and get me my money."

The innkeeper pushed **on** the unlocked front door of the vicarage. At the sound of the opening door, a young maid came into the hall, holding a broom.

"If you're looking for the vicar, Charlie Bucket, he's not here," she said **pertly**. "And he won't be back till tomorrow."

She saw Sebastian behind the innkeeper, and her manner changed,

"Oh, it's you Mr. **Mallory**." Her voice took on a simper. "**It's** a relief to see you this morning, sir, if I may say so. We were that worried when you didn't come in last night."

"Were you, indeed? Somehow I cannot picture the vicar losing a moment's **sleep**."

"Enough jabber," said Bucket. "Let's go to your chamber."

"In due time, Bucket." Sebastian turned back to the maid. "**Where** is **Beechum**?"

"I can't say." She gave her head a toss. "He doesn't tell me his plans,"

Sebastian moved closer to her. "Oh, but I'd wager a smart girl like yourself picks things up. There's not much that goes in this house that you don't know about, I would imagine."

Bucket tapped his foot. "Mr. **Mallory**--"

"Grant me a minute, Bucket. I'm speaking to the lovely—Martha, isn't it?"

"Oh," she breathed. "You remembered my name. Even the vicar forgets my name."

"He's making a dreadful error, then, to overlook such a treasure in his own home. Where did the vicar go, Martha?"

She looked at Sebastian with doe eyes, "He said he has to escort a lady to **Bristol**. We're not to expect him home this evening."

She frowned for a moment.

"Sir John sent the big carriage, so maybe there's more passengers than just the vicar and the lady."

Sebastian sucked in his breath. "Indeed, You must be right, What an intelligent girl you are."

"Oh, Mr. **Mallory**," she giggled.

"Now can we go to your room and get my money?" said Bucket.

"There's no money in your room," Martha objected. Then she blushed a deep pink. "That is, I didn't see any when I dusted in there this morning."

Bucket's face crimsoned, too, but with anger instead of embarrassment.

"I swear, **Mallory**, if you've sent me on a fool's errand I'll make you pay dearly."

He **seized** a small plaster statue lying on a hall table.

"I'll crown you with this, I will. I don't care if it does belong to Beechum!"

Sebastian straightened his sleeves with supreme indifference.

"Do him a favor and break it over my head. It's an ugly object: that doesn't deserve to remain intact."

Bucket raised it threateningly. Martha squealed and covered her eyes. Sebastian glanced at the innkeeper's weapon, to see if it was heavy enough to warrant evasion.

"Hold on, Bucket. Let me examine that."

"You'll be seeing it real close in a minute."

Sebastian sighed, walked up to Bucket and grabbed the object out of his hand.

"Enough of this foolishness."

Bucket sputtered. "You'll pay me, Mallory. One way or the other, you'll pay me."

Sebastian ignored him, his attention held rapt by the object in his hand. It was a crude plaster rendition of the Roman Coliseum.

"I can't believe I've never noticed this before," Sebastian murmured, half to himself. He raised his voice. "Martha, **do** you know where the **vicar** got this statue?"

"He told me his brother gave it to him, as **a** souvenir."

"Ah." Sebastian turned it over, and read the inscription on the bottom. His heart started to race, though he tried to remain outwardly calm.

"I believe I've visited the place this was purchased. You wouldn't happen to know the vicar's brother's name, would you, Martha?"

"It's **Beechum**, of course," said Bucket sullenly. "It doesn't take an **Isaac** Newton to figure that out."

"Actually," said Martha, "I heard the vicar call him Mr. Davies once. It must have been **a** joke between them, because they both laughed."

"Did they, by **Jove**."

"Mr. Mallory, are you all right?" the maid inquired, concerned. "The way you're holding that statue, you look as though you're about to crush it to a powder."

"Oh, excuse **me**." Sebastian handed it back to her. "Bucket, how would you like to be a hero?"

"I'd rather have me money."

"You'll get your money as well, But first, I need your assistance. And a horse from your stables."

"A horse?If you think I'm going to lend you a horse – "

"You'll be paid, of course. In guineas."

Bucket stopped mid-rant.

"Guineas," he said reverently, and was silent for moment. "If this is another one of your tricks—"

"I assure you, it isn't. But we must make haste. Unless I'm mistaken, I've unwittingly put a great treasure at risk."

"A treasure? Gold? A fortune in guineas?"

"No, I'm speaking about another type of fortune, infinitely more precious. I'm determined not to let it slip away, not this time. Hurry, man!"

Sebastian strode out the door. He heard the innkeeper following him, grumbling.



"Tante Marie, when will we get there?" A plaintive note crept into Marguerite's voice. "We've been travelling ever so long."

Angus, propped up in the corner of the carriage next to the vicar, dozed in his seat. Mary, sitting opposite the vicar, looked to the cleric for help,

"I did not realize Bristol was quite so far. It has been dark for some time now. Are we near the city?"

"I do not believe we will be going all the way to Bristol tonight," Beechum replied.

"But Sir John led me to believe we would stay the night at an inn, and depart with the tide tomorrow. He left instructions to that effect: in this note." She extended a folded piece of parchment to the vicar.

Beechum took the letter and read it carefully. Then he slowly crumpled it in his hand.

"Pray, do not ruin it! I need to show Sir John's letter to the harbormaster."

"You won't be needing this. There has been a change of plans."

His words made Mary feel uneasy. "Sir John said nothing to me about a change of plans,"

"Perhaps he is unaware of it. More likely, he did not wish to concern you."

"He promised to help get us out of the country."

"I shall make it my **object** for you to achieve your aim. Sailing from England can be **hazardous**, you understand, because of our resumed hostilities with France and the ever-present threat of invasion."

"I know, but—"

"Trust me, Miss Blackmore. Sir John put you in my keeping, and I shall endeavor, as always, to follow my calling and do my duty."

"Of course."

Mary subsided. She could barely see the vicar's face in the darkness of the carriage and the gathering dusk. He radiated a firm resolve, however, and she would have to be content **with** that.

She pulled her daughter closer to her on the seat they shared.

A short time later the carriage turned down a lane. Breeze-borne salt air told Mary the ocean was near. They traveled downhill, into a forested dell.

Looking out the window, Mary could barely make out the outline of a cottage in the leafy darkness.

"We'll stop here for the night," the vicar announced,

"What about Bristol?"

"All in due time, Miss Blackmore. I thought it best, given the very young and old ages of our passengers, that we break our journey."

"To continue in the morning," Mary added, but **Beechum** didn't: answer.

The **cottage** was dank, and quite obviously little used, but Mary was able to get a fire going in the hearth. **Beechum** had the coachman bring their bundles in, and they settled on those for want of furniture.

Sir John had provided a hamper of food for their journey, and **Beechum** directed the coachman to bring it inside as well. Soon they were dining on cold meat, bread and cheese, with a pear **tartlet** and some jugs of cider.

Mary tried not to think of Sebastian, and his reaction when he found her gone. Undoubtedly he would suffer a sense of fresh betrayal.

And yet, she had little choice but to leave if she wanted to keep her family whole. So much for her dream of Sebastian being a part of her family. Instead he had become her family's biggest threat.

Mary stared at the fire's embers long after everyone else had fallen asleep.

Cold gray light flooded the cottage with the dawn. Mary awoke from a fitful sleep to see the vicar preparing to leave.

"I must have overslept. Forgive me, Mr. **Beechum**. I will rouse the others, and we will be ready to depart shortly."

"Do not bother, Miss Blackmore. You are to stay here for the present. I have an appointment I must keep."

"But the tide...Bristol...our ship..."

"Do not distress yourself."

The vicar placed his felt hat squarely on his head. "Our coachman will stay with you till I return."

Beechum left, shutting the door behind him. Mary heard him take one of the horses, mount it and ride away.

Reluctantly the coachman rose from his place by the hearth and dragged a chair in front of the door. He slouched in the chair, stretching his long legs out and folding his beefy arms over his chest. He gave Mary an insolent smile and a wink before lightly shutting his eyes.

Mary noticed the man's ham-size fists with a pang of unease. She also noticed his coattails hung heavily over his crossed legs. Looking more closely, she saw the handle of a pistol peeking out of his right pocket.

The coachman was armed.

At that moment Sebastian was shaking Sir John by his lapels on the Bristol Bridge, over the River **Avon**. St. Peter's Church loomed in the background, as if to give benediction to the scene.

"Where are they, Addington? **We've** been to every outbound ship in the harbor, and **there's** no trace of them."

"I tell you, man, I don't know. They are supposed to be here."

"Your answer leaves a lot to be desired."

Sebastian removed one hand from Addington's coat and formed a fist with it, right in the man's face.

"Why don't you try again?"

"Listen, **Mallory**, much as I love a good scrap, you can't get blood from a turnip."

Momentarily distracted, Sebastian turned to Charlie Bucket, who was standing beside them.

"What on God's earth do you mean?"

"It's obvious, ain't it?" said Bucket, cleaning his teeth with a straw. "**Addington** can't tell you what he don't know. Look at the man. He's so scared he'd sell his own mother out if he thought that would satisfy you. You might as well rest that set of fives of yours."

Sebastian dropped his hands.

"You're right, Bucket. Though I would enjoy drawing his cork, this is a waste of time."

"I'll say it is," Bucket agreed,

"You **didn't** have to come along," Sebastian added.

"And watch you abscond with my best horse? Ho, now, I'm not that green. Though come to think of it, he's rather green right now."

Bucket jerked his head towards Addington, who was leaning over the edge of the bridge.

"I'm quite all right," said Addington, looking ghastly. "I'm just not accustomed to being handled so roughly."

Sebastian raked his fingers through his sandy hair. "See here, Addington, I'm desperate. You may not know where Mary and her **family** is, but you must know something."

"I've told you all I know."

Color was returning to Addington's thin face.

"When I saw you and Bucket at the inn, preparing to set off on this wild goose chase, I even offered to go with **you**."

"Insisted is more like," said Bucket.

Addington ignored him, warming to his recitation of events.

"I rode through the night, which is most uncomfortable, just so the **two** of you wouldn't terrorize the ship's captain, or end up getting thrown in the ship's brig for your boorish behavior."

"And to excuse yourself should any harm have befallen Miss Blackmore or her part, through your negligence," added Sebastian cynically, his mouth set in a grim line.

"I tell you, man, Miss Blackmore was supposed to be here, at the dock ready to board the Queen of the Seas this morning with the tide, I don't know why she's not here, or where else she could possibly be."

"And you 'let Vicar **Beechum** escort her." **Sebastian's** lip curled in a snarl.

"Yes, and why not? What better escort: than a man of God?"

"Whose brother is a **suspected** traitor."

Addington shook his head,

"I cannot believe anything so dastardly of **Beechum**, or my other cousin, either."

Bucket shook his head, too.

"Bit far-fetched, **Mallory**. Now, you know I don't like the vicar overmuch myself, begging your pardon, Sir John, what **with** him being your cousin and all, but I have to **ask** myself, what reason could he have to harm Miss Blackmore or hers? More like they had an accident, or stopped to pick flowers, or some such, and that's the reason for the **delay**."

"That's extraordinarily comforting," said Sebastian. "And well-conceived. I do believe if Britain had more men like you two, we'd all be French in a fortnight?"

Both Addington and Bucket looked affronted.

"How dare **you**," Addington sputtered.

"Jackanapes," said Bucket.

"Enough," said Sebastian. "This is getting us nowhere. Think, Addington. Where could they be?"

Addington frowned mightily in thought for a moment, then shook his head,

"It's hopeless,"

Sebastian growled in frustration.

"Hang on," said Bucket, slowly. "I remember when I was getting the horses from the stable, talking to one of me lads, He said he saw a barouche heading over to the south road, along the coast. It had a yellow stripe along the bottom, he said, **and** rode heavy, like it had a full load."

"That sounds like my carriage," said Addington. "But there must be some mistake. The quickest route to Bristol from the village is the one we took, which runs northeast,"

He scratched his chin. "I wonder what it means?"

Sebastian grabbed the bridle of his horse and swung his leg over the saddle.

"By the time you two finish thinking about it, I'll be halfway there."

"No, you don't," said Bucket, grabbing his own mount. "**I'm** not letting that horse get out of my sight."

"**I'm** not staying here by myself," said Addington. "Wait for **me**."

With Sebastian in the lead, the three of them left Bristol harbor faster than a man-of-war at full sail in a stiff breeze.

Chapter Thirteen

It's **certainly** not unusual for a coachman to be armed, Mary told herself. Most coachmen were, due to the highwaymen and other **ruffians** who plagued travelers on the road. It was the coachman's sinister aspect, more than his weapon, that disturbed **Mary** and kept her wide awake while he slept in his chair by the door.

A few hours later a weak October sun was beginning to penetrate through the thick tree branches that hid the cottage in the dell. Angus mumbled in his sleep and turned his head away from the window's light. Mary readjusted the blanket over his supine form. She turned to see Marguerite's eyes wide open, regarding her gravely.

"You said we were going to get on a big ship, **Tante**."

"We are, but not just yet. The vicar still **hasn't returned**, so we must stay here a while. Help me build a fire in the hearth, Marguerite. There's a stack of wood just outside the door."

"Where are you going?" asked the coachman, the legs of his chair scraping the floor as he sat up.

"To get wood to build a fire."

"**Beechum** said nothing about a fire. You just stay put."

"But it's cold in here."

The big man leered horribly, revealing broken and blackened teeth. "I can keep you **warm**."

Mary shrank back from the door, pulling Marguerite close against her. Not deigning to reply, she went back to her father's side and **sat** on the floor beside him, with her arm around Marguerite. The coachman shrugged and resumed his position by the **door**.

Mary felt the little girl tremble in her arms. Gradually Marguerite relaxed. Another hour went by, and then she whispered in **Mary's** ear.

"**I'm** hungry, Tante Marie."

Mary heard the little girl's stomach growl. That galvanized her. Mary stood up. She would not let that awful man intimidate her, or keep her from meeting her daughter's needs.

She went over to the hamper of food, left in the middle of the room the previous night.

"What are you doing?" The coachman's tone was sharp.

"Feeding the child," The expression in her eyes dared him to try and stop her.

The coachman folded his arms across his chest, and chuckled, "You **won't** find much in there. I ate what was **left** before anyone else woke up."

"Why, you horrible man."

"Eh," said Angus, stirring at last. "Who's a horrible man?"

"The coachman, Father. He ate **a**ll the food, and now we must all go hungry."

"Fire him," said Angus succinctly, turning over **onto** his side and closing his eyes once more. "We have plenty of servants. We don't need a coachman with a pig's appetite."

In two steps the coachman had crossed the room. He grabbed Angus under his throat and lifted his upper body in the air. He raised his fist to strike him. Angus looked at him with wide, terrified eyes.

"**Crazy** old man. You dare to make sport of me? I could queer the daylights out of you with one bunch of my fives,"

"Put your fist down, **Harding**," said the vicar's voice from the doorway. "If you must fight, heed the words of Timothy in the Bible, and 'fight the good fight of faith.'"

Never had Mary been so glad to see the vicar, even if he was spouting scripture. The coachman dropped Angus, and Mary cushioned the fall of her father's frail frame with her lap.

"Wait outside," **Beechum** commanded the coachman. "We shall call you if we need

Beechum stepped all the way into the cottage to allow the coachman to pass. **Mary** saw another man behind the vicar.

"Miss **Blackmore**, allow me to introduce to you my brother, William Beechurn. He lives in the area."

William **Beechum** was stouter than his brother, and looked a few years younger. Slung across his shoulder was a leather saddlebag. His black, beady eyes surveyed Mary before he swept off his hat and made an exaggerated bow to her.

"Your servant, ma'am."

"Pleased to meet you, sir. But, I must ask you, Mr. Beechum," Mary turned to the vicar, "why are we not on our way to Bristol? Do we not have a ship to board? I fear we will be too late."

"Ah, there's the rub, Miss Blackmore," said the vicar. "We are indeed too late. We shall have to wait till Thursday, till the next ship bound for the New World sails."

"Thursday? We cannot wait till Thursday. Where shall we stay?"

The vicar spread his hands. "Here, of course. Going back to the village would not be wise, But do not concern yourself. My brother has pledged to aid me in making you and your little party **comfortable**."

"I bagged a rabbit," said William, reaching into his saddlebag and pulling out a dead brown hare. Holding the unfortunate animal by its ears, he offered it to Mary.

Marguerite whimpered slightly.

"What do you wish me to do with it?" said Mary.

"Why, cook it, of course," said the vicar, apparently surprised by her question. "You're the **woman** here. There's a pot by the fire."

This was no time to be missish, Mary told herself, or take umbrage at being treated like a servant. Still, her brief satisfaction at seeing the vicar had fled. Instead she had a fleeting, pleasant vision of **stuffing** the vicar in the pot instead of the rabbit and slowly stewing him.

"I'll need a fire," She removed her brown cloak, and rolled up the sleeves of her muslin gown as far as **she** could. "And I also require water. A carrot would be nice, too, if one can be found."

Mary went over to the hearth, picked up the cast iron pan and brought it to the table. "The rabbit will need to be skinned. If I may have a knife--"

"Allow me," said William **Beechum**. "This job is perhaps too delicate for a lady." His face split into a patronizing grin as he spoke. "Give me that rabbit and I'll make mincemeat of him in short order."

Mary realized she disliked this man. The conviction that something was terribly wrong swelled inside her.

The vicar's brother reached once more into his saddlebag and pulled out a long, thin knife with a wicked-looking blade.

"Oh, do take the poor creature outside," said Mary. "I do not want to upset Marguerite."

"Nonsense," said William Beechum. "It's a mistake to shield the child from the grim realities of life. She needs to understand the way things are."

That ghastly smile again. And Mary began to understand her own grim reality. Rather than fleeing from danger, she may have run right into it.



Sebastian and his companions stopped under an apple tree that was busily shedding its leaves in the autumn wind. The sweet smell of rotting, fermenting apples assailed him as his horse nosed for the fruit among the leaves.

"We can't seem to find hide nor hair of old Blackmore, much less his daughter and the little girl," said Addington. "We've covered every inch of the south road. They couldn't have gotten any farther than this, not leaving as late as they did. Let's face it, we're on a wild goose chase. We may as well return to our homes,"

"We shall remain," Sebastian answered evenly, "until we have asked every man, woman and child in the county if they've seen that carriage on the road. We'll interrogate the very rocks themselves if necessary. I shall not concede defeat, and neither shall you."

"I'll interrogate the rocks, indeed," groused Bucket. "The man has windmills in the head. What's a rock going to tell us?"

Sebastian slid off his horse, neatly avoiding a pile of rotten apples.

"It's a metaphor, you sapskull, Yet I doubt a rock could be any less forthcoming than that last farmer we passed."

Sebastian picked up a smooth round rock, feeling its heft for a moment.

"That Johnny Raw wouldn't even give us so much as the time of day," agreed Addington. "Even if he'd had the wits to figure it out."

With a sigh of disgust, Sebastian pitched the rock across the road. An indignant "Ow" issued from a clump of bushes.

Sprinting across the road, Sebastian dove into the **shrubs** and emerged with a very dirty boy, whom he held by his collar.

"Spying on us?"

"No, sir, I swear."

"Just happened to be taking a nap in the bushes, I suppose?"

The boy's cheeks flushed a dusky red.

"Didn't want us to see you, did you?"

The boy nodded.

"**Hmm.**" **Sebastian** considered him for a moment, while the boy squirmed in his grasp. "You seem like a smart, observant young man. I believe I shall let you go."

Sebastian loosened his fingers, while the boy, kicking his legs, prepared to run.

"Of course, if you'd like to stay a moment and perhaps earn yourself a shiny new **shilling**..."

Sebastian pulled a coin out of his pocket and twirled it in his fingers.

The boy stilled, eyeing him warily.

"Wot do I 'ave to do?"

"You are a **smart** boy. Just as I suspected. All you have to do is tell me if you have seen any unusual vehicles on this road lately."

The boy kept his eye on the shilling. "There was a big carriage yesterday. It had a top that folded back, an' **two** 'orses, and a coachman."

"Anything else you can tell me about it?" Sebastian tried to conceal his growing excitement.

The boy frowned in concentration. "It had a yellow stripe."

Addington inhaled sharply.

"And did you see where this carriage went?" Sebastian continued,

The boy pointed a dirty finger towards a lane that was nearly obscured by the low-hanging branches of a spreading oak. Sebastian could see the lane wended down towards a stand of trees in the distance.

"It went down there. Now, where's my shilling?"

"Here you go, lad," said Sebastian. The boy grabbed the coin and took to his heels.

"Well, gentlemen," said Sebastian, going back to his horse and grabbing it by the bridle, "I do believe we may know where we are headed at last."

Despite the fact that it was the middle of the day, the world seemed to get colder and darker as they traveled deeper into the tree-shrouded lane.

It felt like a trap, or at least a hideout. Sebastian fought his growing dread at the thought of Mary and Maggie's descent into this darkness. Did his former bride really fear him so much, that she would go to these lengths to escape him?

Guilt, and a much deeper emotion he dared not dwell on, spurred him onward. God help whomever was responsible if so much as a hair of their heads was harmed.

Ahead of them a plume of smoke curled above the trees. Sebastian raised his hand.

"Hold," he said softly. "That's smoke from a chimney. We must be near. Let's tie up the horses and travel on by foot as quietly as possible."

"Why?" asked Addington. "Why should we mind if my cousin hears our approach?"

"I wish to preserve the element of surprise," Sebastian answered. "There's something havey-cavey about all of this, I don't like it. I sense the Blackmores are in danger."

"You can't be serious, man," Addington objected. "You're talking about the village vicar. He's absolutely harmless."

"Much as it pains me to say it, I agree with Mallory," said Bucket. "This strikes me as a rum sort of set up. Who knows what we'll stumble into down the road? Might as well be careful. As me mum used to say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Addington shook his head but made no further protest. The men led their horses off the path and tied them to trees. Then they set off on foot,

After another quarter mile Sebastian **could** smell the smoke of damp wood burning. He motioned his companions to walk just out of sight, parallel to the path but not on it. A few more yards, then he halted and pointed ahead. A small, thatched **cottage** loomed into view. Off to the side, about fifty yards, was the yellow-striped barouche.

Sebastian's skin prickled. This was it. Mary and Maggie had to be inside. His task was to get them out.

Outside the cottage a burly man lolled against a wall, idly picking his teeth.

"Stay here," Sebastian whispered. "I'm going to try to get closer and see if I can determine who's inside and what we **may** be up against,"

"What if you run into trouble?" asked Addington in an anxious undertone. "What should we do?"

"You'll have to use your wits," answered Sebastian. "Though I do wish you had more effective weapons. Oh well, wish me **luck**." He melted into the underbrush.

Carefully Sebastian picked his way across the uneven ground through the trees to get closer to the cottage. He gritted his teeth as his leg began to ache in earnest. The ache, and the **limp** it caused, was a persistent reminder of what he had lost in prison. He'd be damned if he'd compound that loss by losing **Mary** and Maggie now.

Dragging his leg slightly, Sebastian shuffled over a pile of leaves, accidentally kicking **a** nut, which ricocheted **off a** tree trunk.

The burly man jerked his head up, and felt for his coat pocket,

"Who goes there?"

Sebastian froze in a semi-crouch. Through the trees he could detect the outline of a pistol in the man's pocket.

"Must be a **bleedin'** bird," Sebastian heard the man mutter.

Silently Sebastian passed **from** the shelter of one trunk to another, as he tried to **get** nearer to the cottage without being seen. Could he overpower the big man standing outside the cottage door?

Mentally, Sebastian sized up his opponent. The man was a monster. Sebastian knew the odds would be against **him** in a flat-out fight. But perhaps if he could surprise **him**, strike before the big man knew what hit him, he'd have a chance.

The cool, dispassionate side of him, the soldier, clicked into gear. He concentrated on his objective. Shunting his feelings aside, he would distract the man, make him come into the trees to investigate. At that point Sebastian **would** get around the big man somehow, and bring him down.

Then his **next** task would be to storm the cottage. Perhaps Addington and Bucket could help at that point. How difficult could it possibly be to overwhelm the vicar? **Sebastian** smiled at the thought.

Mary would be happy to see him, and grateful for being rescued. She would throw herself in his arms, kiss his face, her expression glowing with love. He indulged the thought for a second, **then** thrust it aside. Nothing must **distract** him from his objective.

Picking up a rock, he got ready to throw it. He leaned forward, then drew back sharply when he heard the hinges of the cottage door squeak as it opened.

In the open doorway Sebastian saw Mary. Her face looked strained. Behind Mary, Sebastian could see the top of Maggie's head and the little girl's hand clutching **Mary's skirt**. She took a step forward, but something restrained her. By Jove, she must be a captive, just as he suspected.

As Sebastian continued to watch, he saw the gleam of a knife blade. His plan changed in an instant. He'd throw himself on that knife before **he'd let** it penetrate **Mary's** delicate skin,

But who held the knife? All Sebastian needed was a clear shot at him. He hunkered down in the brush, like a cat ready to spring, his weight on his good leg.

The holder of the knife appeared in the **doorway**, his head turned to face those who were inside. A dead rabbit dangled from his other hand. Good. With both hands occupied, the man would be **at** a disadvantage when Sebastian attacked him.

"**I'll** be back in a moment," Sebastian heard the man say. "You be ready with the pan."

That voice? Sebastian faltered. The man turned, and Sebastian got an **unobstructed** look at his face.

It took all of Sebastian's iron discipline to keep from rushing forward. The man's voice, his beady eyes, the way he carried himself--it was all unmistakable, despite the effects of **time** and age.

He'd seen him before, this man whom Sebastian cursed by day and who haunted his prison dreams, causing Sebastian to wake up night after night in a cold sweat.

This was the man Sebastian vowed he would meet again. But not now, not here. He wasn't ready.

But when would he be ready to face Mr. Davies, his fellow spy, and his betrayer?

Rage boiled through Sebastian, heating his blood, making his vision blacken around the edges. Here, standing not twenty years away, was the man who had put him in prison, stealing his youth and separating him from Mary and his daughter. While Sebastian had languished, forgotten by the world, this man had enjoyed freedom.

Davies had managed to take everything precious away from Sebastian. And now he had Mary and Maggie.

Sebastian could no longer think straight. Abandoning caution, he emerged from his hiding place.

"Davies, you bastard? I'll kill you with my bare hands?"

Chapter Fourteen

In horror, **Mary** looked out the cottage door to see Sebastian emerge from the trees and run towards William **Beechum** in a murderous rage.

He never got close, The coachman knocked him down with a single blow to the chin. Sebastian staggered, and the coachman held him fast in a cruel arm-lock.

"Sebastian," she cried, rushing **forward**, dropping the pan she held.

The vicar's brother held her back. He addressed Sebastian, while Mary struggled in his arms.

"Well, well, this is a surprise. I never thought I'd see you again. You seem to not only have escaped from prison, but picked up an admirer." He turned towards Mary. "Tell me, my dear, how do you know this man?"

"He is my, my..."

"Cousin," said the Crown and Anchor innkeeper, Charlie Bucket, emerging from the trees. "He's her cousin, he is. Sebastian Mallory, that's his name."

"Well, actually, Bucket, you don't **know** the whole of it, But I believe I can clear up this whole **misunderstanding**."

Sir John Addington was right behind the innkeeper, to Mary's astonishment.

"Miss Blackmore told me, in the strictest confidence of course, that this fellow is really—Harding, is that you?" Sir John interrupted himself, walking up to the coachman. "Stayed with the carriage, I see. Good man. Release this Sebastian fellow. He's with me."

The coachman, keeping his grip on Sebastian's arms vise-tight, looked to the vicar, who had walked past his brother out into the yard.

"Harding, I am speaking to you." Addington's tone was sharp. "Release that man at once."

"I regret to say, Sir John, that Harding is in my service now. He will not countermand my orders, and I have told him in the event of Mr. Edmunds' appearance to detain him. Forcibly, if necessary."

"**Edmunds?**" said Bucket, puzzlement in his voice. "What happened to **Mallory?**"

"Yes, what did happen to Mallory? I knew Sebastian was **Mary's** husband, but I know nothing about a different name," added Sir John.

"Oh, dear," said the vicar. "I suspected Mr. Edmunds was not entirely truthful with you, either, but I had no idea his lies were so pervasive. Indeed, I did not know his true identity **myself** until my dear brother informed **me**. This is distressing. I must agree with the passage in the Psalms, to the effect that 'I hate and abhor **lying**.'"

Sebastian maneuvered his hand out of Harding's grip to rub his jaw.

"An odd sentiment from you, Vicar **Beechum**, considering your pose as a simple country vicar when you are in truth a traitor to your country."

"How dare you accuse of me that, sir? Or should I say, Lord Foxborough, as you rightly should be styled?"

Addington and Bucket gasped in unison. Sebastian ignored them.

"**Call** me what you will. It makes no matter to me now. But if you can judge a man by the company he keeps, then you are indeed a traitor, vicar, for the man you stand next to is a traitor certain sure. He betrayed me seven years ago, and he betrays **his** country today."

"You speak of my brother, sir."

"I speak the truth."

"George, this cannot be right," said Addington, walking closer. "I cannot believe you or **William** are involved in any treacherous dealings. Release this **Mallory** or **Edmunds** fellow, or whoever he is, and let's all go inside."

"I think not, Sir John."

The vicar's hand moved, and Mary saw **a** pistol in it. The vicar pointed his gun at Addington and the innkeeper, who **froze** in response.

"It is unfortunate that you stumbled upon this scene, Sir John. You, **too**, Bucket. Now you will have to meet with a tragic accident, set upon by ruffians, who attacked you viciously in the course of a **robbery**."

Bucket licked his lips **nervously**. "How vicious?"

"Murderously vicious," answered the vicar. "They had pistols, much like Harding and I do, and even a knife."

The vicar nodded his head towards his brother, who raised the knife that he'd brought out to skin the rabbit.

Addington started **forward**. The vicar lifted his pistol.

"Do not move, Sir John, or I will endeavor to put a bullet through your heart this instant."

"But I am your cousin."

A fine sheen of sweat glistened on Addington's high forehead,

1. "Why are you doing this, George?" echoed Sebastian, "I'm sure we'd all be fascinated by your explanation."

The vicar faltered. "My preference was not to harm the Blackmores. But it is imperative that I go abroad at once. My leader has **summoned** me. When Sir John ordered the carriage to Bristol for Miss Blackmore, it gave me the excuse I needed to leave the village without comment. My plan was to meet my brother here and wait until everyone assumed the Blackmores had sailed to America. Then we would proceed in secrecy down to Southampton, where a ship awaits us."

"By 'we' and 'us' I assume you mean yourself and your brother," said Sebastian. What did you plan to do with your other traveling companions?"

Beechum shifted uncomfortably. "You must appreciate our dilemma. We really couldn't take them with us. And we dare not be seen in Bristol—we have word that the authorities **there** have been put on **alert** for William." He sighed piously. "Sometimes in **a** righteous conflict sacrifices must be made. I rest assured knowing God will put all things right in the end,"

"Allow me to spare Him the trouble."

Sebastian winced as Harding tightened his painful grip.

"Leave him alone!" Mary burst out. "Haven't you hurt him enough?"

"Touching display of affection, my dear, truly," said the vicar. "Makes one almost forget you were harlot enough to try to marry another man while your husband lived."

"You will **apologize** to the lady for those words, or I will ram them down your throat," said Sebastian.

He didn't move a muscle when Harding responded by loosing his hold for a moment to **slam a** fist into Sebastian's rib cage.

"Barbaric **beast!**" Mary surged forward, freeing herself from Davies' slackened grip. But the man merely stepped forward to block her path, grinning and flashing his knife.

They were going to kill Sebastian, Mary realized. Most likely the vicar and his brother were going to kill all of them. Mary's heart was pounding so hard it was painful, and her insides **seemed** to liquefy.

Mary couldn't stop shaking. Then she felt Marguerite's hand steal into hers. Mary looked back at Angus, still on the floor, frightened and dazed.

It wasn't going to end like this, not here in this place. Resolve gave her an artificial calm. She didn't know what she would do, but she knew the vicar loved to talk. She would keep him talking till she had a plan.

She held her head up, and met Sebastian's eyes. In spite of his pain, he gave her **a** steady look. Then he smiled.

It was better than a shot of brandy.

"So, are you a traitor?" Mary addressed the vicar. "Have you been supplying the French with **information?**"

"I am no traitor, and neither is my brother."

The vicar drew himself up to as much height as he could command.

"We are both soldiers in a higher cause. Vive Napoleon!"

Incredulity overcame Bucket's fear.

"Napoleon is your higher cause? That ridiculous Corsican? I don't believe it. You're an Englishman."

"Or are you? **I** wonder," said Sebastian. "'Beechum--isn't that a corruption of Beauchamps? Your family is **French**, isn't it, vicar?"

"Oh, I say, that's going too far," said Addington. "We Addingtons have never allied ourselves with the French."

"I would not be **so** sure of that if I were you, Addington," said Sebastian. "I believe the vicar and his brother are your second cousins, once removed. Do you really know that much about a distant family branch?"

"Enough of this," said the vicar. "Our heritage is of no importance. My brother and I are English through and through, as our family has been for generations."

"Hah!" said Addington. "I knew you weren't Frenchies."

"But I can no longer sit by quietly while England strays farther and farther from the one true religion."

"That tears it," said Bucket,

The vicar ignored him. "Ever since Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in 1533 England has fallen into grievous error. At last a leader has emerged who can restore the true faith to our country."

"I presume you mean Napoleon," said Sebastian.

"Say what you will about him, he has had the courage to restore Catholicism to France **after** overthrowing the godless Directory, that misbegotten offspring of the Revolution. When Napoleon conquers England, a sad but necessary step, we will be reunited with the faith of our fathers,"

Addington shook his head in stunned disbelief.

"You bloody fool. Has your fanaticism blinded you to treason? Napoleon wishes to subjugate England, make our island part of his empire. Every loyal Englishman will fight to the death to prevent such a catastrophe."

An unholy light gleamed in the vicar's eyes. He raised his pistol higher.

"My cause supersedes the claims of mere nationality. As it says in the Book of Ephesians, 'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism...'"

"Yes, yes, that's all very well," said Sebastian, sounding bored, "but I prefer this passage from Proverbs: 'The transgressors shall be rooted out.' **Much** more apt, don't you think?"

"Good one, Mallory, er, Edrnunds," said Bucket. "Answer him in kind. Wish I'd thought of it,"

"**It's** well known the devil can quote scripture for his own purposes," said the vicar. "As for you, Bucket, you're naught but an insolent fool. I shall enjoy dispatching you to hell."

Sebastian **twisted** in the coachman's grip to face the vicar's brother.

"And what's your excuse, Davies? Are you a misguided religious **zealot** as well? Or have you a more worldly reason for your treachery?"

"I do not know what you mean," William **Beechum** replied.

"Oh, now that's a clanker, if I ever heard one, There's good money in treachery, or so I'm told, How much did you get for turning me over to the French authorities?"

The vicar's hand shook.

"My brother is motivated by the purest feelings, as am I. We are equally committed to our great Cause."

Sebastian laughed without humor.

"The only cause your brother is committed to is his own enrichment. For an educated man, you can be quite the simpleton, **Beechum**. Your brother would betray you, your cause, **and** the saints themselves for the right sum of money."

"You lie," shouted the vicar.

His voice shook, his face was beet-red, and for a moment, in the throes of his agitation, **Beechum** lowered his gun.

Mary made a split-second decision. It was now or never. She spied the pan she'd dropped outside the cottage earlier. The vicar was focused on Sebastian, and didn't see her edge towards the door. in one fluid motion she picked up the heavy iron pan and crashed it down **on** the vicar's skull with as much force as she could muster.

The vicar fell like a stone. Meanwhile, Marguerite slipped past her and ran over to Sebastian.

"Marguerite, no," Mary cried.

Without even a second's hesitation the little girl grabbed the coachman's leg with both hands and bit down hard.

With a howl of pain, the coachman let go of Sebastian and tried to backhand the girl. Sebastian aimed a deadly, well-aimed blow to the coachman's midsection, and brought the big **man** down as quickly and neatly as a poacher bagging a hare.

Addington removed the vicar's gun from his lifeless hand, while the innkeeper tackled the vicar's brother and relieved him of his knife.

"Well now," said Bucket, holding the knife to William Beechurn's throat, "Maybe I should save the King's men the trouble and kill you now. Or maybe I shouldn't. The people love to see a good hanging."

Sebastian rubbed his newly freed arms.

"Addington, Bucket, tie these men up and throw them in the carriage. We'll take them to the nearest magistrate's office. I know some men in Whitehall who will be very interested in hearing what they have to say."

He crossed the yard to Mary, who was still holding the pan she'd hit the vicar with.

"You were magnificent, my dear. The vicar underestimated you. That's **a** mistake you may be assured I will never make. **Now** come here, my darling, and give your conquering hero a kiss. I know you must be eager to thank me for rescuing you."

Mary experienced another split-second decision, made and acted upon in an impulse, almost without thought. She lifted the pan once more, and crowned Sebastian with it.

Lightly, but enough to make him wince.

"You want me to thank you for rescuing me? After abandoning me for seven years, threatening to take my child away, and then bursting in here and nearly getting yourself and the rest of us killed because of your rash **actions**? I rescued you, you big ninny!"

Blinking back tears, Mary threw the pan down. It bounced off a rock.

Rubbing the lump rapidly forming on his head, Sebastian looked at Bucket and Addington, who shook their heads in commiseration. Mary thought she even glimpsed the **Beechum** brothers and the coachman bestow sympathetic glances on Sebastian.

"Women," said Bucket, shaking his head, "There's no figuring them. Might as well try to reason with the moon."

And the moon is exactly where Mary mentally consigned all men everywhere at that moment,

Chapter Fifteen

"Mary," said Sebastian, wincing as he held his head, "why did you do that?"

He advanced a step towards her

"I'm warning you, stand back, Sebastian?"

She scooped the pan once more off the ground and brandished it.

"If you think I'm going to allow you to arrest my father, or take Marguerite away from me--"

"Oh, Mary, my love, I have no intention of doing either."

Mary lowered the pan a fraction. "You don't?"

"No, I don't, on my honor as a soldier and gentleman. I've been such a blind fool, Mary. To have left you in the first place, and then nearly to have lost you again--"

Looking up, Sebastian noticed Addington and Bucket had stopped in the middle of tying up the Beechum brothers and Harding. All five men, captors and captives alike, were straining forward to hear.

"Get those men tied up and in the carriage now," said Sebastian, in his best military manner. "And quit eavesdropping!"

"Aw," said Bucket. "Just when it was getting interesting, too."

"Come, Mary," said Sebastian. "Let us withdraw a little, for privacy's sake."

Mary hesitated.

"Bring the pan if you like," Sebastian added with a grin. "Upon reflection, I have no doubt I deserve your blows."

That coaxed a reluctant laugh from Mary's lips. She motioned to Marguerite, who had been watching the scene avidly, to go to Angus, Mary set the pan down and followed Sebastian into the trees.

They stopped under a spreading oak. Its nearly bare branches formed a canopy around them.

Sebastian was silent for a moment. And then he spoke.

"For nearly seven long years, thoughts of avenging the family honor and **survival** have been foremost on my mind. And to be honest, revenge as well. Revenge on those who put me in prison and made me **suffer**. I lost sight of you, my father, my heritage, and everything else I once held dear. Revenge gave me strength to survive my ordeal. Revenge, much more than honor, duty, or love of country, brought me to this village to root out traitors,"

Sebastian cleared his throat. "Revenge is a powerful emotion, Mary. But, as I have learned, it is a life-sapping force. In its own way, it's as much a thief as betrayal, I wanted revenge, because I believed my youth had been stolen, my future **maimed** much the way my walk is permanently affected by the injury I sustained.

"But, oh, Mary, my thirst for vengeance has almost cost me any hope of future happiness. I nearly extended my need for vengeance on you, because you had our child and I never knew it. I blamed you for the overpowering loss I felt."

"**Sebastian**, I thought you were dead..."

"I was dead, Mary, in every way that counts. I realize that you are my only avenue back to life. I love you, Mary, in a way I was not capable of when we were married, a lifetime ago. It is my fervent prayer that whatever love you may have had for me at that time has not been entirely extinguished by my actions."

Mary **couldn't** speak for a moment. She saw the hopeful light in Sebastian's eyes dim.

"I see. Too much to hope for. Let me offer you this, then. I will allow you to divorce me, as I promised, on grounds of desertion. God knows it's true enough. All I ask is that I be allowed to see Maggie occasionally. And you may rest easy concerning **Angus**. He's no traitor. Merely a sick old man with a weakness for gaming. If I had not been so **crazed**, I would have realized that a long time ago."

He looked away, into the distance, his blue eyes deeply shadowed

Frustration and uncertainty subsided in Mary. In their place, a warm glow of happiness **started** to radiate within her.

"You make me a generous offer, Sebastian, I'm sorry I cannot agree to it."

"**What?**" Sebastian raised his head sharply.

"Your proposal of seeing Marguerite **occasionally**—I cannot possibly agree to that. You are her father. You need to see her as much as possible. As for me—"

"Yes?" His gaze held her eyes, mesmerized. The pulse at the base of this throat throbbed, Mary longed to place her fingertip on it and feel his life force.

"I could not bear to see you only occasionally, either, Sebastian. We have been apart forever, and when we were together we did not know each other. I do not want a divorce, Sebastian. I want a marriage."

He crushed her in his embrace.

"Mary, my love, my bride. We shall marry all over again, a lovely wedding at Foxborough Hall, with Maggie as our flower girl, and feasting for days. Now that I've found you, I shall never leave you again, my only love, my cherished bride."

"What about your revenge?" asked Mary softly.

Sebastian shook his head. "From now on, I leave thoughts of violence and despair behind. That is a sort of death, a death of the soul. And I choose life, with you, Mary, over death."

She lifted her mouth to his, and he claimed it in a kiss full of promise. Minutes passed, but they may as well have been months or years. Time seemed to stop for Mary, as seven years dissolved in the sweetness of one moment.

At last Sebastian pulled away, reluctantly.

"There is but one thing left to do, my love."

"Tell my father?" said Mary.

"All right, two things. We must tell Maggie who her parents are. Do you think she will be appalled?"

Mary nestled back in Sebastian's arms.

"Not a bit of it. She will be delighted, She may believe me now to be her aunt, but I am the only mother she has ever known. And she is absolutely enchanted by you. Trust me, her happiness will know no bounds,"

"Then let us tell her at once. For in truth, I can scarcely wait another moment to claim her as my beloved daughter."

Arm and arm, they strolled back to the cottage. Bucket had taken the coachman's box and the carriage, with Addington inside guarding the prisoners. Next to Bucket sat Angus, who waved merrily at his daughter.

"We got 'em," he said with satisfaction. "I helped truss the big one up like a **Christmas** goose. I'll show him what it means to threaten me. He wasn't so tough with his hands bound, I'll tell you."

"I'm glad you were here," said Sebastian. "Why don't you go into town with Bucket and Addington? I'm sure they could use your assistance."

Angus puffed out his chest.

"Only doing my duty, like any God-fearing Englishman."

"Oh, and by the way," added Sebastian. "Any objection to me marrying your daughter?"

Angus laughed, "Don't see why you need my permission. You already married her once!"

Sebastian grinned, "I'll see you in town, then."

Bucket waved his whip, and the carriage climbed back up the lane.

As the carriage disappeared from sight, Sebastian drew Mary in his arms for another kiss.

"Shouldn't we find Marguerite?" **murmured** Mary.

"I saw her go into the cottage. We'll call her in a moment. First, I need another taste of your sweet lips,"

Once more he bent his head to hers, and Mary surrendered. A childish gasp and clap of hands interrupted their bliss.

Mary pulled apart from Sebastian to see Marguerite, **amazement** an her heart-shaped face.

"Tante Marie, Sebastian? You are kissing? You are in love, yes?"

"Yes, Marguerite, we are. Do you mind?"

"**Mais non**. I am so happy. Sebastian can be like a papa to me now."

Sebastian crouched down to her level.

"I'm glad you are happy for us, Maggie. You will be even happier when I tell you the rest of our news. You see, 'Maggie, your aunt and I are not like your parents. We are more than that. We are your parents."

Marguerite's smile wavered. "Quoi?"

"It's like this, Marguerite," said Mary, joining Sebastian in a crouch before the little girl.

"When you were born I was in a desperate situation. I thought your papa, Sebastian, was dead, because he went away and I had not heard from him. I was afraid that no one would believe I was married to him and you were his child. I felt it was safer to pretend you were my ward instead of my daughter."

"So, there was no French maid, Yvette?" The little girl struggled to comprehend.

"Oh, Yvette was real, She left Scotland with me. She and I had babies at the same time. Only neither Yvette nor her baby survived. You did—you were a fine, healthy baby."

"Oh." Marguerite was silent for a moment.

"So you see, Maggie, everything is different now," said Sebastian. "You're my little girl, and Mary is your real mama. Isn't that wonderful? How does that make you feel?"

In reply, Marguerite burst into tears.

Epilogue

Two months later:

"What a beautiful wedding," said Mary snuggling deeper into the soft swans-down coverlet. "I'm so glad we didn't wait until Christmas."

"I do not think I could have waited another minute," said Sebastian, pulling her close against him.

"Umm," said Mary, content as a cat. "I suppose we should leave our chamber eventually."

"I'm in no hurry. The wedding festivities exhausted me, and I haven't had much rest since."

Mary laughed. "Are you complaining, sir?"

"Not a bit of it. You, here with me at Foxborough Hall—T never dreamed I could be so happy."

"I'll never forget the look on Rupert's face when we paid him that first visit here. I thought he'd choke the first time he addressed you as 'my lord.' And when he looked beyond you and saw me..."

"Yes, he did have the look of a man who was seeing his entire life pass before his eyes. I should have thrashed him for the way he treated you when you first came here. All I did was send him back to Yorkshire, from whence he came."

Mary laughed. "And that's punishment enough, I'll wager. You should have seen his face when he left the Hall! He had become quite accustomed to being lord of a grand household."

"As I have grown quite accustomed to you, my lady, and this new life. No soldiering, just farming."

Mary snuggled deeper in her beloved's arms.

"And no longer need we worry about a French invasion since Trafalgar, and the glorious victory that was Admiral Nelson's," Mary added. "God rest his brave soul."

"If only little Maggie were happy, I'd have no concerns at all," said Sebastian. "I confess, I just never imagined she would be so upset to discover you and I are her true parents."

"Well, that information did completely upend her life as she knew it," said Mary. "We were naïve to think she would not be affected. However, lately I've suspected her protests are a bit forced. I believe she is trying to manipulate the situation for her own gain."

"Mary, Maggie is just a little girl. She wouldn't know how to do that,"

Just then the door opened and Maggie came running in the room. She halted at the sight of her parents in bed together.

"Aren't you ever going to get up," she said putting her hands on her hips. "Christmas is coming, and we have bunches and bunches of fir boughs to hang? Plus, the pond has frozen over, and you said you'd take me skating, Papa Sebastian."

"I've told you to call me simply 'Papa,' Maggie. No need to add Sebastian."

"Oui, Papa."

"And for the last time, you are not really French."

She jutted her little chin out. "You cannot expect me to make all these changes at once."

"I'm sorry, Maggie. Are you ever going to forgive us for not telling you your true identity sooner?"

Marguerite regarded him gravely. "Most likely not, *mes parents*. This has been most upsetting."

"Is there nothing we can do?" asked Mary.

"Well, perhaps there is one thing you can give me, something I've always wanted..."

"Ha? I knew you wanted something, you little minx," said Mary. "What is it? A kitten, perhaps? Or one of those little pug dogs you so admire?"

Marguerite brightened for a moment then shook her head. "No, Not a kitten or a pug."

"A pony, then?" Sebastian suggested

The little girl considered that for another moment then shook her head once more.

"Really, Marguerite, you shouldn't tease your papa," chided Mary.

"But I don't want a pony. Not most of **all**. There is something I want more. Something you can give me that may help me forgive you."

"And what is that?" said Mary.

"A baby brother. Or, if you can't manage that, a baby sister would be fine, as well. Someone I can play with."

Mary felt her cheeks grow hot. "We can't just give you a baby brother or sister."

"Why not?"

Sebastian grinned, "Yes, Mary, why not? It seems like a good idea to me."

"Because it takes time, **that's why**."

Marguerite shrugged. "I can wait."

Sebastian laughed unabashedly. "If I have my way, you **won't** have to wait long, Maggie, my dear. Now leave your mother and me alone, so we can discuss your very interesting suggestion."

And discuss it they did, with energy and enthusiasm, for the rest of the morning.

~The End~

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