

Stolen Promise



Lisa Marie Wilkinson

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Stolen Promise

Lisa Marie Wilkinson



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DEDICATION:

To my mom, Maxine Stock.

To my sister, Chris Wilkinson.

To my two dads, John Wilkinson and Clyde Stock.

To the two muses, Dante and Sevilla. You broke my heart.

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*The Lowara Gypsy Camp
Outside Windsor, England, 1806*

If she ran away again, her father would beat her. Jade's heart pounded as she threaded her way through the caravan toward the red wagon trimmed in gold. The bittersweet lament of a violin followed her, mingling with the whine of hungry dogs attracted by the scent of rabbits roasting over glowing campfires. Why had her father summoned her?

A blast of wind cooled her flushed cheeks as she stepped onto the porch board of the wagon. The varnished white doors gleamed like moon faces. Jade took a deep breath and

entered, pulling the doors closed behind her.

“Sit down, Jade,” her father’s deep voice rumbled.

Jade remained standing, waiting for him to speak. There would be no good news for a *Roma* woman who despised the ways of her people and had asked to live apart from them. She yearned to exchange her life in the traveling caravan for the existence of a house-dweller. She had glimpsed and tasted the *Gadjo* life and wanted to know it again.

“Dimitri’s father visited my wagon this morning, carrying the silver walking stick.”

Her father sat before a table suspended from hinges near the cookstove. The acrid tang of pipe smoke clung to the air. Jade’s eyes watered and her throat burned. A formal proposal of marriage had been made. Would her father bind her to Dimitri to punish her for running away? Jade stiffened and turned away to hide her apprehension, warming her hands over the grate.

“Dimitri is the reason I ran away. He’s a brute. No woman in camp wants him.” She fought to keep her voice low and level, despite the accelerated pounding of her heart.

Her father’s square jaw tightened. “I will not force you to marry Dimitri. Yesterday I met with Culvato of the Wood tribe. They are camped near Runnymede. His tribe is small, but peaceable and wealthy. He offered a generous *darro* for you, and I accepted.”

“You accepted my bride-price?” Her words came in gasps as the walls of the white-curtained wagon squeezed

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in on her. *This was the form her punishment would take.*

“There is a young man from Culvato’s tribe who is half Gypsy and has lived among the *Gadjos*, as you have. It is a good match. When Dimitri learns I have allowed you to reject him, he will be angry. I want you to be safe.”

“You sold me to a stranger.”

“I protected you.” His meaty fist banged the tabletop in emphasis. “No one will question a decision where a profit was made, not even Dimitri’s father.”

“What if the man you sold me to is worse than Dimitri?”

“Culvato says he is a good man.”

“You trust him? Would Culvato tell his buyer the horse is lame? You will not be there to protect me.”

Frustration and fear gripped Jade. Her mother and younger brother had died of fever because the Gypsies had no medicine and the *Gadjo* doctor wouldn’t come. Her younger sister, Liberina, was a frail young woman. Liberina would be bartered in marriage and die before her time if Jade could not find a way to create a better life for them both.

Jade lifted her chin. “The elders could send Dimitri away, or I could live again among the *Gadjos*.”

Milosh growled an oath and rose from his seat. His face turned crimson, in contrast with the green and blue peacocks embroidered on his shirt.

A wall-mounted tambourine jingled as his heavy steps crossed the red carpet. A *Roma* woman didn’t challenge the decisions of the elders. As close to a beating as she had ever come, Jade cringed when he seized her by



the front of her blouse and hauled her toward the front of the wagon.

"If you hadn't run away, there might be a man in this tribe other than Dimitri who would still marry you." He flung open the double doors and shoved her outside.

The dull thunder of her father's raised voice followed Jade into the darkness as he continued to berate her. The wind keened like a soul in torment. Rain began to fall as she wandered through the camp. Jade rubbed the gooseflesh on her arms as Gypsies ran in all directions around her, pulling down canvas tarps to secure the wagons against the oncoming storm as the thunder rumbled.

The thin fabric of her loose yellow blouse provided little protection against the cold. A feeble trail of tears stung her eyes and slid down her cheeks, mixing with the pelting rain.

Her sister Liberina stepped from the deep shadows between two wagons, her own eyes glittering with tears.

"*Phei*," Liberina said softly. *Sister*. She wrapped Jade in a green woolen shawl and urged her toward the nearest wagon, out of the rain.

"Liberina, Father has sold me."

Liberina made hushing noises as they hurried toward the shelter of the wagon. "Don't be afraid, Sister."

"I'm not afraid. I'm angry." Jade fought to keep her voice steady. What would happen to Liberina if their father sent Jade to live with another tribe?

"You must marry Dimitri or the *diddikai* from Cul-

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vato's tribe." Liberina paused, then whispered, "Better to marry the stranger. Dimitri frightens me."

"I will not marry Dimitri or the half-breed from the Wood tribe. I will run away." She could not return to the kind elderly couple in Dorset who had sheltered her the last time. It was the first place her father's men would look. Where could she go? How long would it be before she could send for her sister?

Liberina coughed and quickly looked around. "Not again. You will be punished this time."

"I will not be found this time. I still have my *Gadji* clothes." Jade fingered her *galbé*, the heavy necklace of gold coin at her throat. "And I have this to sell when I need money. I will find a place for us, and I will come back for you."

"You may have need of this as well." Sighing, Liberina removed her own *galbé*, pressing it into Jade's hand. "I will say I lost it."

Jade felt her eyes fill with tears at the gesture. "Father would not believe you lost it. I will not leave you to be punished for helping me." Jade gently arranged the necklace around her sister's slender throat. She hugged Liberina tightly. "I'll come back for you, little sister."



Jade hugged the bulky shawl around her as she bent



to extinguish the flame burning in the hollowed-out potato half. Closing the wagon door behind her, she dropped to the ground, peering into the darkness. She stood near the end of the caravan line. A dozen restless, shaggy-maned horses were tethered nearby.

Her fingers sought her *galbé* lying flat against her neck. The tips of her fingers slid over smooth, cool gold.

A solitary figure stood in her path to the horses. He appeared to observe the approach of the storm from beneath the protection of an overhanging wagon roof, but after a moment, he disappeared into the shadows.

I must go now. Hurry.

Jade took a deep breath and plunged headlong into the rain, hugging the parcel of *Gadji* finery beneath her shawl. A strong gust of wind lifted her hair as lightning seared the sky in a jagged arc. The air filled with the smell of sulfur. Someone stood beside the wagon she was about to pass.

She froze. "Who is there?"

"Your beloved." The gruff voice was edged with sarcasm.

Dimitri drew on his pipe as he stepped out of the shadows. The red glow from the carved bowl illuminated his dark eyes as his gaze raked over her. Six feet tall and solidly built, Dimitri would often lift a wagon in a show of brute strength. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and the palms of her hands suddenly felt clammy.

"Why do you creep about in the dark?" he demanded.

"I promised my father I would look after his horse,"

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she lied. “He has been in a meeting with the elders.”

“I know.”

His smug tone rankled.

“Nothing escapes you, Dimitri.”

His lips curled around the pipe stem as he smiled. “You are right, *chav* Jade. Nothing escapes me, including you.”

Jade stared at him. *No one has told him my father sold me to someone else?* Dimitri stepped closer and she flinched as he gathered her hair back from her face, his rough hand lingering against her cheek. His skin smelled like tobacco, leather, sweat, and horse.

“My father has been to see yours, carrying the silver walking stick. Milosh does not dare refuse. I will own you.”

His expression soured when Jade turned her face away from his hand and tried to step back. He grabbed her chin in one huge palm. When she seized his hand and tried to break his grip, Dimitri’s fingers tightened, grinding against her jawbone.

“Do not anger me. As your husband, I will have the right to beat you.”

He tossed the pipe into a nearby barrel. Water hissed, and a faint plume of steam rose from the water as he stepped forward and jerked her to him. His free arm closed around her, imprisoning her. Jade struggled to keep the parcel concealed beneath her shawl from dropping to the ground. Dimitri tilted her chin upward, his dark eyes cold. He ground his mouth against hers in a wet, bruising

kiss. She tasted stale wine and tobacco. Gaggling, she struggled to break free.

Jade dragged the back of her hand across her mouth, as if the action could remove his touch. Dimitri smirked at her and cast her away from him with a violent shove. When he turned to retrieve his pipe from the barrel, Jade quickly stowed the small parcel containing clothing beneath the wheel of the nearby wagon.

"Pig," Jade muttered. "I will never be yours. My father won't allow it."

Dimitri pivoted toward her. "What?" Closing the distance between them with two long strides, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"What do you mean?" He cursed and raised his arm when she didn't reply.

"You do not dare strike me, Dimitri." *God help the woman forced to marry you.* Wrenching out of his grip, she turned to flee.

Dimitri lunged and grabbed the edge of Jade's shawl, spinning her back toward him. Catching her under the arms, he hurled her toward a nearby wagon with such force she collided with the porch board. She slumped to the ground, moaning. When she tried to breathe, sharp pain pierced her midsection.

Gripping the wheel of the wagon, she pulled herself to her feet and uttered a strangled gasp of surprise when Dimitri rushed forward and lifted her into the air. The wagon doors exploded inward as he kicked them open,

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propelling Jade headlong into the wagon. He climbed in after her.

Heart pounding, she drew a painful breath to scream. He stepped forward with his arm raised. She inhaled and flinched. He paused, a glimmer of malice passing over his features. His gold eyetooth glinted as he leered at her.

“Culvato paid for a virgin, didn’t he?”

Jade stared at him in outrage. He had known all along. He had stalked her, made sport of her, and now intended to dishonor her so she wouldn’t be suitable for marriage to anyone else.

Dimitri dropped his hand to the front of his breeches and began to rub himself, his breathing harsh as he advanced on her. Jade uttered a disgust-filled cry and crawled backward, coming up hard against the wagon wall. Reaching toward the grate, she groped wildly for a weapon. She found nothing.

As Dimitri sprang toward her, Jade screamed for help. Her desperate outcry mixed with the bellow of her cousin Roibin, the returning wagon owner. Roibin took one look at the damaged wagon doors and began shouting at Dimitri. Jade struggled to her knees, dodging Dimitri’s sharp-toed boot as he kicked out to impede her flight.

She sobbed with relief as Roibin jerked her to her feet and thrust her behind him. Dimitri’s face darkened in a thundercloud of rage.

“*Chavaia!*” Roibin shouted as Dimitri attempted to push past him. When Dimitri did not heed Roibin’s order to stop, Roibin pulled a knife from the leather sheath bound to his thigh. Dimitri froze.

Jade scrambled toward the open doors of the wagon and leapt from the porch board onto the ground, crying out in agony as the impact jolted her ribs. Snagging the parcel she had concealed under the wagon during the struggle with Dimitri, she dashed toward the tethered horses. *And freedom.*



Chapter Two

Not a bad disguise.” Evan inspected his reflection in the tavern window. The dark blue captain’s uniform had been tailored for the figure of the man from whom he had stolen it, although the fawn-colored suit underneath filled it out well enough. Measured to end above the backs of the knees, the coattail didn’t reach as far on his tall frame. The fit was convincing enough if one didn’t look too closely.

He tucked his hair beneath a black cocked hat and entered the tavern. The men searching for him wouldn’t expect him to be wearing a British military uniform. On the other hand, if the British authorities discovered him

masquerading as one of their own, he would be hanged.

Situated by the London docks, the smoke-filled tavern sat near a ship ready to sail for the Carolinas. Evan could dispense with his disguise once he and his Uncle Joseph were safely aboard ship. If he never saw England again, it would be too soon. The six months following his mother's death had been filled with revelation. Everything he had believed to be true about his heritage and his life had faded like the ink on the pages of his mother's diary. Learning her secret had shattered his world.

The pub interior smelled like rancid fish and bilge water. It was still preferable to being outside. A torrential downpour had driven many to seek shelter in the pub. Conversation swelled around Evan as he chose one of the knotty maple tables near the entrance. He scanned a wall filled with posted notices while he waited for Joseph to arrive.

He glanced toward the entrance as a young woman in a dark, hooded cloak slipped inside the pub. Tall and slender, she carried herself with fluid grace, brushing rain from the garment as she crossed the room. She shook her head when the barkeep nodded toward the row of bottles and decanters behind him as he polished a tankard.

She drew back the hood of her cloak yet didn't remove it, despite the clammy, crowded atmosphere. Was she among the many who sought temporary shelter from the storm? The murky light lent her an exotic appearance. Her long, inky hair shimmered with seductive

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blue highlights, the contrast rendering her creamy olive skin flawless. In daylight, she would either fulfill her promise of beauty or be exposed as a maid whose features were softened by shadows.

Evan forced his gaze back to the doorway but couldn't keep his attention from returning to the woman. A drunken sailor staggered toward her, dragging a well-worn chair. He placed the chair in front of her and made a sweeping gesture toward it.

"Rest yerself in me chair, bonnie."

He placed a dirty hand on her shoulder and shoved her into the chair. She frowned at the man's greasy, shoulder-length hair, and at his crumpled, filthy cotton shirt, threadbare breeches, and mud-caked boots.

The sailor's gaze sharpened, and he reached out and tugged at the collar of her cloak, revealing a necklace of gold coin. "Thass a Gyppie purse." He snagged the necklace from around her throat, swiftly levering it over her head.

She lunged for the necklace, but the sailor dangled the treasure out of her reach. The coins fluttered with a soft metallic jingle.

Evan bolted from his seat, then froze and looked on in astonishment when the woman shrieked in outrage and dropped her ladylike demeanor with the speed of a ship dropping anchor. She dove at the sailor, her gaze fixed on the coin-studded strands of gold in his hand.

"No, bonnie, it be mine." The sailor chuckled at her attempts to grab the treasure he held aloft.

He continued to make sport of her until she kicked him in the shin. He howled and stomped in outrage as the necklace fell to the floor with a noisy jangle. She launched herself after it and pocketed the gold within the folds of her cloak.

The sailor lunged at her, sucking in air and gasping as he grabbed her by the hair and hauled her up to face him. Evan kicked the chair aside and moved toward them.

“Ye’ll pay fer tha’, Gyppie. Ye’ll ’ang by a long rope,” the sailor warned.

She paled and went still. The intensity of her wide green eyes stunned Evan, and his jaw clenched at the image of her hanging from a rope at Tyburn or caged in a gibbet along the roadside.

“No, bonnie, dinna be afrighted. I be yer friend.” The sailor chuckled, and a number of the men in the room joined in, their laughter ugly, lewd, and tense.

She attempted to twist from the sailor’s grasp, but he jerked her back. She bit down on her lower lip. Evan couldn’t decide whether her eyes sparkled with fear or defiance. Most women of Evan’s acquaintance would have succumbed to an acute case of the vapors by now.

“Let her go.” Evan’s voice was loud, even in the din.

The sailor scoured him with a look of contempt. “Yer lordship,” he sneered, spitting out the title as though it were a morsel of an inedible meal, “ye best leave.”

Evan’s gaze swept the room and settled upon a posted sign banning Gypsies, among others, from the establishment.

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“Not without my prisoner,” he said, flattening his tone to conceal his Southern drawl. To his own ears, his words still sounded like *nah withou’ mah pris’ner*.

“What law have I broken?” she asked.

Evan frowned at her. He couldn’t rescue her if she wasn’t going to cooperate.

“That one.” He pointed to the curling yellowed parchment as he stepped forward and tugged her out of the sailor’s slackened grip. He urged her toward the door when she looked askance at him, her expression wary.

“No. The Gyppie will go wi’ me.” The sailor drew a stiletto from beneath the sagging waistband of his filthy breeches.

Evan grunted in surprise and stumbled forward when the woman shoved him toward the sailor. The sailor lunged, slicing the air with the knife blade as other men joined in the fight, blocking his path to Evan. Knocked off balance, Evan staggered into the boisterous crowd, catching glimpses of the woman as she fought to avoid grasping hands on her way to the door.

Skirting the common room, he made his way toward the entrance. When he suddenly found himself face-to-face with her again, he seized her wrist and pulled her toward the exit as the skirmish deteriorated into a drunken brawl.

Her fingernails bit into his forearms as she struggled to be free of his grip.

“I’m trying to help you, foolish woman. I won’t hurt you.”

"I know, but you won't be helping me if they hang me, *Gadjo*."

If I'm caught wearing this uniform, it's likely I'll hang beside you. He pulled her closer, locked an arm around her waist, and dragged her toward the door. He'd see her safely outside; then the ungrateful chit could go her own way.

She gasped and stopped struggling. Evan followed her gaze to two men blocking their path. Dressed in vibrant shades of blue and green festooned with red and orange ribbons, the men stood out like peacocks in the coarse, drab pub. The gaze of the shorter, heavier man rested on the woman at Evan's side.

"You will come with us, Jade."

"I will not go back, Uncle." The quaver in her voice undermined her show of defiance.

The man's eyes flickered. The Gypsy's callused hand swept toward her face, missing her cheek by inches when Evan caught the man's hand in his own. The hand he gripped shook as the man wrenched it from his grasp. The gold earring looped through the Gypsy's right ear swung in echo of the movement.

"Don't try that again," Evan growled.

"Who is this *Gadjo*?"

Jade glanced at Evan and bit her lower lip. Apprehension shafted through him when she grimaced, then stared at the rough plank floor.

"He is my lover. I ran away to be with him."

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The Gypsy's gaze turned flinty, and his jaw tightened. His attention shifted to Evan's hand around her waist. He dragged her from Evan's grasp and pushed her toward his companion.

Evan nodded toward the posted notice banning Gypsies. "Leave now, or risk arrest," he said in the most authoritative, British-accented voice he could manage.

When the Gypsy hesitated, eyeing the uniform Evan wore, the woman elbowed his companion in the stomach and bolted for the door.

"*'Chavaia!* Stop!"

Shouting and gesturing, the Gypsies abandoned Evan to chase after the woman. They split up to search for their quarry, and quickly disappeared from sight.

Evan stepped outside and gulped in the salty tang of the chill night air. She hadn't wanted his aid. He should not be concerned over her fate. Still, he couldn't abide a man who would hit a woman. He would not have abandoned her to those men.

Scanning the area, Evan saw his horse, Raven, tethered to a post nearby. His Uncle Joseph had arrived. Evan drew a sigh of relief and forgot to exhale when he spotted the woman from the tavern slipping through the shadows in a crouch, creeping toward Raven. She'd refused his help yet evidently intended to avail herself of his horse. Under different circumstances, he might have found her audacity amusing.

"So, you're a horse thief as well as a liar?"

She stopped, turning to face him. Her chin lifted. "I'm not a thief," she said. She swiftly changed direction, moving away from the horse.

She walked for a short distance before rounding a corner leading into an alley. A sudden volley of raised voices rang out in confrontation. Evan cursed under his breath and slipped deeper into the shadows when he recognized the voice of the Gypsy man. He moved with stealth, edging closer to the woman and the two men.

"I will not go back!" she said, her voice breaking. "I have taken a lover. Not even Dimitri will accept me now."

"You will return to camp, even if we have to drag you."

"I will scream for the law, and then we shall see," she threatened.

If she made good on her threat, he did not want to be found impersonating a British officer. Evan stripped off the outer uniform, stashing it behind a wooden barrel.

He overheard a few muffled words followed by the sounds of a scuffle, then a loud, angry curse. Groping about in the dark for a weapon, his hand closed over a rock. Evan plunged the rock into his pocket and straightened just as she rounded the corner and crashed into him.

The force of the impact jarred him, and his arms came around her, muffling her yelp of surprise as he pulled her into the shadows and gathered her to him. Her heart pounded beneath his, and she trembled.

Evan made a soft, hushing noise, suspecting her behavior owed more to bravado than bravery. He felt an

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inexplicable need to comfort her. Warm and vital, her curves molded against him in a manner capable of distracting him from any peril. She clutched his forearms to steady herself as she glanced up at him. The precise moment she registered his change of clothing was evident when her expression darkened with suspicion.

“You.”

“Me,” Evan agreed.

“Let me go.” When he didn’t immediately release her, she brought her foot down on his instep.

Evan mumbled a curse and shifted his hands to her shoulders, hooking his thumbs into the folds of her cloak. He jerked her forward with such force she stumbled into him.

“What do those men want with you?”

As the Gypsies drew near, she tugged frantically to escape Evan’s grip. She glanced in the direction of the voices, her face growing pinched with alarm.

“Please,” she whispered. “I cannot stay here.”

The plea in her luminous eyes made Evan swallow hard. Every gallant instinct within him fought common sense as he looked down at her. *I am going to regret this.*

“I’ll take you someplace safe.” He started to guide her through the shadows.

“No, *Gadjo*, just let me go. This is not your fight. They will hurt you.”

She hung back, and Evan squeezed her wrist. “Do you want to escape or not? I’d be just as happy to tie a

ribbon around your neck and hand you over to them.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get my horse.” The Gypsies emerged from the alley. Evan sprinted into action, pulling the woman along with him. “Run!”

With his gaze locked on the horse, Evan concentrated on the slap of shoe leather against stone, the shouts of the men chasing them, and the soft, warm hand tucked into his as they ran.

When they reached the horse, he tossed the reins free of the tether and hoisted the woman onto the beast’s broad back. She made a noise, as if his touch had hurt her, and the men pursuing them spun in unison at the sound. Two men had joined the Gypsies. Evan’s mouth felt stuffed with cotton, and his pulse pounded in his temples as he recognized the familiar face of one of their new pursuers.

He climbed onto Raven’s back, the musty smells of straw and leather filling his nostrils. The woman’s arms settled around his waist, and he tensed when she plunged her hand into his pocket and withdrew the chunk of rock. He glanced back at her warily.

“It was the only weapon I could find.”

She nodded, hefting the rock in her hand. “Clever *Gadjo*.”

The horse suddenly reared as men ran toward them, shouting and gesturing as they approached. The woman clutched Evan’s middle to keep from falling. As he fought to control the spooked animal, she used the rock

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to lash out at the short, heavy Gypsy who tried to drag her from the horse's back.

"Evan?"

Startled by the sound of Joseph's voice, Evan nearly tumbled from the horse. His uncle stared up at him and stumbled back in surprise. The woman hurled the rock at the Gypsy as he tried again to wrestle her from the horse.

"This man is stealing my niece," the Gypsy accused.

"He's lying!" Evan cringed at the expression on his uncle's face, but before he could offer further explanation, the woman slapped Raven's hindquarter.

The horse uttered a shrill scream and sprang forward, nearly unseating them both. The woman's shout of triumph rang out as distance separated them from their pursuers. Cursing, Evan fought to gain control of the panicked animal.

They sped past the docks with dizzying speed and sprinted onto the open road. The shadows of buildings gave way to tall trees until Raven slowed from an invigorated gallop into a trot, snorting as vapor rose from his flanks.

Evan pulled on the reins and spoke in a low voice until the horse came to a rambling halt. He dismounted and glowered up at the woman still seated on the horse. "I'd offer to help you down, but I'm afraid if I touch you right now, I'll wring your neck."

She stared at him for a moment before sliding to the ground. She straightened her cloak, tucked the edges of

her blouse into the waistband of her skirt, and tapped pebbles from her thin leather shoes. Sweeping her waist-length hair over her shoulder with a flick of her wrist, she marched toward the road.

"Where do you think you're going?" Evan demanded.

"Thank you for your help. I am sorry I frightened your horse." She glanced down the length of highway, then up at the canopy of stars above them.

She's lost, too. "I asked where you're going."

"I will go on alone now."

"No, you won't, *lover*." His tightly clenched jaw ached. "You have some unfinished business here. I'm owed something for my trouble."

Her eyes widened and she took a step back, away from him.

"An explanation was what I had in mind," Evan said, his tone softening.

"I do not understand you." She canted her head, frowning at him.

"I think you understand me well enough," Evan said.

"No, your speech is strange. You sound like music."

She means my accent. Evan sighed. "What are you running away from?"

"You cannot help me." She folded her arms across her chest. "Why do you want to know?"

"I can't go back to town because of you." *Not with Gypsies and the authorities looking for me.* "You're not safe alone."

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"I did not ask for your help." Her chin lifted, as if in defense of her lie.

"As I recall, you did." His voice tightened with anger. "I have no idea what you sought to accomplish by claiming we are lovers." And what must be going through Joseph's mind, after the Gypsy claimed Evan had kidnapped the woman?

"I did not mean to cause you trouble, *Gadjo*. Truly. It was good of you to help me."

Although she sounded sincere, Evan continued to glare at her as he waited for an explanation. She looked down at the ground.

"Only two of those men were after me," she said. "My uncle and my cousin. I do not know the others; I swear it."

Her chin lifted. Her expressive face revealed the workings of her mind. "You shed those clothes like a snake sheds its skin. The other men were after you."

Fear animated her expression. Did she believe he would hurt her? If she had come to expect abuse from men, he pitied her.

Evan pushed the hair back from his brow with the heel of his hand. There was no point in badgering her for an explanation. What did it matter anyway? He would find a way to rejoin Joseph and leave England.

"Yes, I'm trying to avoid certain people," Evan admitted, thinking of his grandfather's unrelenting determination. His grandfather's man had almost had Evan

outside the tavern. “We have that much in common. I’ll be leaving England as soon as possible. You needn’t worry about enduring my company for long.”

He extended his hand to her. “Evan Dark, of Charleston, South Carolina,” he said, his drawl suddenly more pronounced.

“Jade.” Her voice was almost a whisper. She stared at his offered hand, but did not take it.

“The light is poor for safe travel,” he said. “We should rest and get a fresh start in the daylight.”

“I can find my way at night by looking above me.” She made a sweeping motion with her hand inclusive of all the heavenly bodies scattered in the sky.

He wasn’t certain whether she had challenged him, or was simply proud of her skill. “My horse is tired. We’ll rest and consider our options in the morning. We’ll be safe enough here for the night.”

As the heir to a plantation, Evan was used to giving orders. He opened the pack tethered to Raven’s side and tossed a blanket at her. She caught it with a grunt of surprise. Her expression changed from indecisive to mutinous.

He shrugged. “Stay or go, it makes no difference to me. You were the one who asked for my help, whether you will admit it or not. I haven’t harmed you, nor do I intend to. I’m not sure you can say the same about your uncle. Where I come from, we don’t abandon our women on the road.”

She frowned at his tone and stood stiffly holding the

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blanket as he turned his back to her and bent to examine Raven's hooves for stones.

"Good night, *lover*," he said over his shoulder.



The off-key song of starlings disturbed by the restless nickering of a horse woke her. The scratchy blanket smelled like road dust. Jade sneezed and slowly opened her eyes. She sat up quickly, watching as the *Gadjo* rolled up a blanket and placed it in the pack. He continued to move around the makeshift camp.

He was a tall man; his broad shoulders and toned muscles complemented his large frame. He carried himself with the proud, easy grace of a jungle cat. Dark, wavy brown hair splashed with gold by the sun framed his face. She could not tell whether his eyes were blue or gray, their light color framed by dark lashes and heavy, expressive brows.

Her pulse skipped and heat flooded her cheeks when she realized he had turned and was calmly returning her stare. She could no longer hear the birdsong or the horse. Something in the intensity of his gaze pushed the rest of the world out of focus.

Tingling with a curious heat, she blinked and drew air into her lungs. Panthers were handsome animals, too, but dangerous, despite their beauty. She didn't

know this *Gadjo*. She didn't *want* to know him.

"We should move before it gets much lighter," he said. Even, white teeth flashed as he spoke. His oddly nuanced speech was strangely musical to her ears.

Jade got to her feet and carefully rolled the blanket into a small bundle. He took it from her without comment. Gray. His eyes were the silver gray of campfire smoke. Finely etched lines bracketed them as he squinted against the dawn brightness. *A handsome devil, and no doubt aware of it.*

To make certain he hadn't stolen her *galbé* while she dozed, Jade furtively checked the pocket of her layered blue and purple skirts. He quirked a brow at her and his lips curved upward in a sardonic smile, as if he had guessed her concern. Feeling the slide of metal against her fingers, she released her breath in a relieved sigh.

Sleep had not come easily. Jade felt uneasy in the company of a strange man, and her bruised ribs had made the cold, hard ground even more uncomfortable. She stretched, groaning softly when her sore body protested the movement.

She picked up the cloak, a memento from her brief time among the *Gadjos*, and folded it, smoothing the velvet fabric with reverent fingers.

After running away the first time, Jade had found shelter in the home of an affluent couple in Dorset. She was sixteen, and had offered to work as a scullery maid in exchange for shelter. Instead, the childless couple had

treated her like a daughter. The mistress of the house undertook the challenge of schooling Jade, opening the door to a world of books, lessons, and the possibility of a life vastly different from the one she would live as a *Roma* woman. The experience had only reinforced Jade's dissatisfaction with the Gypsy life and made her yearn to share her good fortune with her sister.

Jade had nearly worked up the courage to ask if Liberina might join her adopted family when Dimitri had found her. He had waited to find Jade alone one afternoon and forced her to return to the Gypsy camp with him. After her return to camp, Jade earned a reputation as defiant and disobedient, making the elders of the tribe even more determined to bring her to heel.

"You would have been warmer if you had kept that on." Evan nodded toward the cloak she held.

"I did not want to get it dirty." How could a *Gadjo* possibly understand she would rather suffer the cold than sleep on the ground in one of the few fine things she owned?

Evan's gaze wandered over her worn tapestry bodice and faded skirts, and came to rest on the cloak.

"Which is it? Lady or Gypsy?"

Jade shrugged. "Can't I be both?" She might have resisted the urge to question him about his own attire if he had not chosen to comment on the inconsistencies in her clothing. "What happened to your other clothes, *Gadjo*?"

"The uniform was borrowed."

She canted her head and raised an eyebrow at him. "Would the owner say you had borrowed it?"

"Would he say it was borrowed or stolen, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Stolen," Evan replied, without hesitation.

She had not expected an honest reply. His guarded expression warned her not to pursue the subject.

"I plan to head north, keeping to smaller towns until it is safe to arrange for passage home." He paused. "It might be best if we go together. It's not safe for an attractive young woman to travel alone."

She frowned at the compliment and the way his musical speech made her feel warm and anxious inside. Why should she feel foolishly pleased he had called her attractive when she wasn't certain she could trust him?

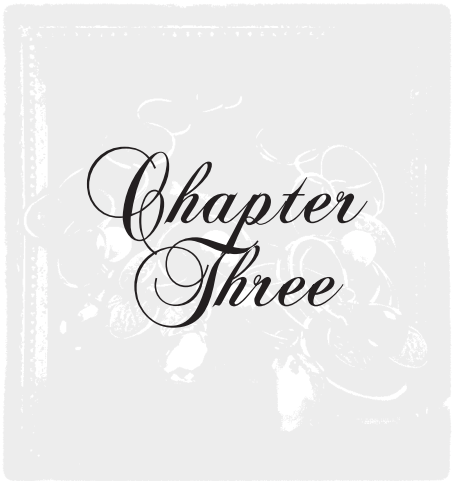
She had no means of transportation. It was inappropriate for a *Roma* woman to travel with a man who was not her husband. Once her uncle had time to think about it, he'd realize the *Gadjo* could not be her lover. Her father and Dimitri kept too close a rein on her. Her uncle might not be searching for a man and woman together.

Although the *Gadjo* hadn't harmed her, he was obviously in some sort of trouble. He might be dangerous, even more dangerous than Dimitri. Still, it might be more difficult for her uncle to force her to return to camp if she were with Evan. If necessary, she

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could steal the *Gadjo's* horse and abandon him on the highway if he gave her any trouble.

“I have always wanted to travel north,” she said, smiling.



Chapter Three

A cold, steady rain saturated every article of clothing Jade wore, spangled her eyelashes, and trickled in a maddening river down the bridge of her nose. They had paused in their travels only long enough to toss a dry blanket across the horse's broad back. She yearned for the warmth of a fire and a hot meal. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food, and she shivered.

After Jade spend hours struggling to keep her balance without leaning against the *Gadjo* for support, her aching back and thigh muscles had finally given out. She rested against Evan's chest, keenly aware of him behind her on the horse. There was comfort in the strength of his arms. His pleasant scent of bay leaves, cedar, and

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orange had grown musky with the damp but had not been dissipated by the rain.

As they turned down the road, she pushed back strands of sodden hair from her face and peered at two tar-dipped, gibbeted corpses suspended from irons in the overhanging trees. She glanced back toward Evan when he jerked and his arms tightened around her. He twisted to gawk at the display, his face the color of almond meat.

“They do not hang criminals in your country?”

“I’ve never had to wonder what the experience might be like from the criminal’s perspective.”

What have you done, Gadjo? He had been candid about the stolen uniform but had given no reason for the impersonation. Was he a petty criminal, or a dangerous one? The theft of the uniform would merit a hanging, if he were caught.

Evan struggled to rein in the horse and Jade grabbed his forearms to keep from being thrown as a man suddenly emerged from the undergrowth along the roadside.

“My coach was attacked by a highwayman!”

The splintered remains of a four-wheeled open carriage rested a short distance away, its green silk velvet upholstery marred by spreading swaths of rain-saturated bloodstains.

Evan dismounted and trudged the short distance through the mud to where the carriage rested on its side.

Jade leaned forward, grabbed hold of the horse’s neck, and slid to the ground. She moved to join Evan,

but he stepped forward to halt her approach, steering her away from the wreckage.

“Are you injured?” Evan asked the man.

“Cuts and bruises.”

The stranger was perhaps thirty-five, bandy legged, with a stocky build. A slow smile formed deep craters in his pocked, ruddy cheeks as his gaze traveled over Jade. Straight auburn hair fell like a drawn curtain over his eyes, and when he moved to sweep the hair back from his brow, his fingers flashed with the sparkle of gold and gemstones.

“He still has his jewelry.” Jade whispered the warning, and the stranger’s gaze darted toward her as if she had shouted it.

“How is it you were not robbed?” Evan asked.

“The thief held a pistol in one hand and passed his hat with the other, tellin’ us to put our valuables in the hat. The bandit shot Mr. Shaughnessy when he refused to part with his wedding ring. The horses bolted, and Mr. Shaughnessy was trampled beneath the carriage while Mrs. Shaughnessy and I were trapped inside. Her neck was broken in the crash, poor darling.”

Evan’s glance swept the area. “What happened to the highwayman?”

“The blackguard thought I was dead. He collected his hat, Mr. Shaughnessy’s ring, and the one horse that wasn’t lame or dead.”

His companions are dead, yet he has only cuts and bruises and all his jewelry? Jade’s attention returned to

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the rings mounted on his grimy hands. “Why didn’t—”
“You’re fortunate the thief didn’t notice your jewelry,”
Evan said.

“Indeed,” the man agreed.

Dinili. Stupid Gadjo. Jade opened her mouth to object but closed it again when Evan’s gaze fastened on her, a warning couched in the smoky silver of his eyes.

“When we reach the next town, we’ll arrange to have them brought back for burial,” Evan said. “We have only the one horse, and he’s showing signs of tiring. You and I will have to walk while the lady rides.”

The man nodded in eager agreement. “I have no wish to travel these roads alone. I welcome your company.”

I hope we fare better than your last companions. Jade met the man’s smile with a stony stare.

He extended his hand to Evan. “Jackman Hinds. Friends call me Jack.”

Evan clasped Hinds’s hand briefly, but did not offer his own name. The omission was not lost on Jade. She raised a brow as Evan lagged behind rather than present his back to Hinds. *Perhaps you’re not stupid after all, eh, Gadjo?*



The small hamlet of Golders Green boasted the Bull and Bush coaching inn and public house. Hinds surged ahead in the direction of the stables to inquire whether a

horse was available for purchase.

Jade picked up her skirts to keep pace with Evan, who trudged along in weary silence.

“Do you believe his story about the highwayman?”

“No.” He glanced at her as they passed through the courtyard. “I’m not carrying a weapon. Only a fool would imply he didn’t believe Hinde’s story under those circumstances.”

“Are you calling me a fool?”

“No, you seem to know when to keep your mouth shut.” A wry smile twisted his lips. “Most of the time.”

The reflected glow of Argand lamps upon lime-washed walls lent a gloomy charm to the interior of the public house. The small dining room was modestly appointed with rough-hewn oak tables and benches. The scent of cinnamon from hot-spiced ale mingled with clouds of swirling tobacco smoke.

Jade swept bread crumbs from the hemp sack tablecloth as she slid across the bench. Her stomach growled in anticipation when a servant girl came into view bearing a tray piled with meat, cheese, and bread.

Hinde and Evan entered the room. Evan claimed a spot next to Jade while Hinde took a place on the bench opposite them.

“Fetch me a pint,” Hinde called to the serving girl. He observed the sway of her hips as she moved to fulfill his request. “I’d like to have her for dessert,” he quipped.

Evan grunted at the remark but said nothing. The

piece of cheese Jade was about to swallow lodged in her throat when Hinde's gaze drifted to her. The way Hinde's looked at her made her feel uneasy, like a field mouse spotted by a hawk.

A grizzled man whose smile revealed shiny gums and few teeth lifted his tankard in a palsied salute, eyeing their food with interest.

"Evenin'," he said. "You folks want company?"

"We're dining with a gentleman we met on the road today," Evan replied. "You're welcome to share our meal."

"Ain't wise to throw in with a stranger you met on the road," the old man said. "There's a footpad about."

"I was attacked by a highwayman," Hinde's said. "My companions were killed. These folks stopped to assist me."

"You weren't attacked by a footpad, then," the man said, helping himself to a thick wedge of yellow cheese. "They rob on foot. Usually kill their victims."

Jade fidgeted on the bench. Her thigh accidentally brushed against Evan's hard, muscular leg. Evan paused in chewing and turned his head toward her, a quizzical expression on his face. She slid away, her cheeks warm with embarrassment.

The gaudy rings on Hinde's fingers sparkled as he tore a hunk of bread from the loaf. Jade studied the tear-shaped diamond nestled in a bed of gold on his index finger as she downed a swallow of ale to dislodge the cheese.

"The diamond interests you?" Hinde's asked.

She shrugged. There was something familiar about the ring, and the question she wanted to ask—from whom had he stolen it?—would only vex him.

“There isn’t another ring like it in the world. It was a gift from the king,” he boasted.

“Why would the king give you such a gift?” Jade asked.

Evan pushed his wooden plate aside. His gaze traveled from Jade to Hindes, then dropped to the ring.

“I foiled an attempt on his life as His Majesty was entering his box at Drury Lane one evening several years ago. George insisted I accept the ring as a token of his gratitude.”

“Quite an honor, Mr.—” Evan paused, a look of confusion crossing his face. “I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Hindes.”

Jade doubted Evan had forgotten the man’s name. The *Gadjo* was clever. If Hindes used more than one name, sooner or later he might trip over one of them.



Long accustomed to the creak and sway of a Gypsy wagon, Jade reveled in the solid feel of the polished plank floor beneath her feet as she roamed the small bedchamber.

The room smelled like sun-dried linens and the faint olive-orange tang of furniture oil. Candles mounted on brass wall sconces cast a golden glow over a bed covered

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in gaily flowered yellow and blue chintz. A bowfront chest of drawers topped by an oval box mirror stood on splayed feet nearby, flanked by a chaise lounge upholstered in fabric to match the bedding.

A small alcove adjacent to the entry housed a large copper tub, a corner washstand, and a mahogany pot cupboard containing a white porcelain chamber pot. After a search of the room revealed no loose floorboards, Jade hid the coin necklace in a cubbyhole within the washstand.

A sharp rap at the door startled her. She turned in surprise as a red-faced woman, struggling under the burden of two large pails of steaming water, entered the room. Jade rushed to assist the heavyset, middle-aged woman as she emptied the buckets into the copper tub.

"No, miss, you're the guest," the woman protested with a friendly smile. Hands on hips, she surveyed the water level in the tub. "One more trip to the kettle should fill 'er nicely."

The woman returned a few moments later bearing two more buckets full of steaming water. A young girl carrying a paper-wrapped parcel tied with string trailed after her. After the tub was filled, the woman patted the girl on the head and took the parcel from her.

"The gent requested a sleeping gown and a change of clothing for you," she said, handing the bundle to Jade. "I hope these will do."

"He what?" Jade's jaw dropped. A man who presumed to buy a woman clothing might make other presumptions as well. "I cannot accept them," Jade said, handing the parcel

back with a firm shake of her head.

"I'm to take the clothes you're wearin' to the washer-woman. The gent said he didn't think you'd favor sleepin' in the raw."

Jade felt a curious flush of heat course through her at the thought that Evan had given *any* consideration to what she might sleep in. She reluctantly accepted the parcel.

"Your gentleman seems as generous as he is handsome," the woman said with a wink. "Just leave the soiled clothes outside the door and I'll collect 'em after your bath."

As the maid retreated down the hallway, Jade glanced down at the bundle in her arms. *Your gentleman*. The woman assumed Jade was Evan's woman. It would take a lady to attract a man like Evan. A cultured, educated, *Gadji* lady. Jade sighed as she closed the door.

The elegant white silk nightgown was finer than anything she had ever owned. The few articles of clothing she had salvaged from her brief stay among the house-dwellers paled in comparison to the filmy, lace-edged garment.

A green velvet wrapper bisected by a column of lustrous pearl fastenings completed the ensemble. She spread the gown and wrapper carefully on the bed, wondering uneasily how much the fine things had cost.

Water lapped over the edges of the copper tub as she eased into the warm, lavender-scented bath. The *Gadjos* might be too fastidious about bathing, but she sighed

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with relief as heat seeped into her tired muscles like a balm. The arduous journey had only added to the soreness left by Dimitri's abuse.

Exhausted, she rested her head against the edge of the tub as her mind began to wander over the images of the day, beginning with her first sight of Evan in the daylight. *Evan*. When had she stopped thinking of him as *Gadjo* and started thinking of him as *Evan*? The realization disturbed her.

She found him intriguing; she could not deny it. But she might as well wish for the moon as allow herself to become infatuated with him. He came from a world to which she had only briefly belonged, and she was no longer a sixteen-year-old girl who could rely upon the charity of strangers.

The sweet-scented water cooled, and Jade climbed out of the tub, dried herself, and donned the shimmering ivory cloud of a gown. She stood in front of the chest of drawers, smoothing her hands over the soft cloth as she studied her reflection in the oval mirror.

Picking up the tortoiseshell brush from the vanity, she began to pull the bristles through her hair as she recalled the chance meeting with Hinder. The odds were slim Hinder was the sole survivor of an attack by a highwayman. Something about the man was oilier than the grease from a dozen hedgehogs.

While she still had a few qualms about traveling in Evan's company, she didn't trust Hinder one whit. She

stopped brushing midstroke and uttered a sound of dismay when she pictured the tear-shaped diamond Hinde wore and suddenly realized why the ring seemed familiar.

Two years earlier, a Gypsy was hanged for the theft of a ring matching the description of the one Hinde sported on his finger. A close friend of the king had been relieved of the ring by a thief, and suspicion had fallen upon Gypsies camped in the area. Swift *Gadjo* justice had followed, sparking fear and outrage in the *Roma* community. The ring was never recovered, but its description was notorious among both Gypsies and the English gentry alike.

Tension spread through Jade's limbs at the thought of Hinde joining them when they resumed their travels the following morning. The hairbrush dropped from her outstretched hand and hit the plank floor with a clatter. Hinde no doubt intended to rob them, or worse.

Jade pulled on the green velvet wrapper and hastily secured a pearl fastening at her throat. She ran down the hallway to Evan's room, intent upon sharing her suspicions with Evan.

She knocked on the door, tapping her foot impatiently. No answer. She banged harder. Still nothing. She muttered under her breath and pounded furiously on the door.

The door was suddenly wrenched open.

"Is the damned place on fire? What the—"

Evan's eyes widened at the sight of her, and his

mouth snapped shut. He had removed his waistcoat and neckcloth, and his once-crisp white linen shirt gaped, revealing an expanse of tanned, well-muscled chest. She stared at the golden patch of exposed skin. Heat slowly suffused her face and her breath snagged in her throat.

"I must speak with you," she said.

"You've come to my room at this hour to talk?"

He leaned against the doorjamb, his long fingers folded around a decanter of rum. His gaze slid over her in a slow perusal. His smoky eyes burned with molten fire, and she had the curious sensation of being physically touched by his gaze. The hallway, which had seemed chilly only moments before, was suddenly stifling.

He smelled like rum and his own unique scent of bay leaves, cedar, and orange. Despite being road weary, grimy, and probably intoxicated, he was still attractive in his overwhelming, wholly masculine way.

Had the *Phuri Dae* cast a charm over her as punishment for running away? That must be it. There could be no other explanation for the hastening of her heartbeat and the vague ache pooling within her core as she looked at him. *I must guard myself. This is powerful magic.*

"Come in," Evan offered. He continued to lounge in the doorway, his indolent gaze lingering on her lips. His expression made her feel self-conscious and acutely aware of herself as a woman. She met his heated stare with a look of reproach.

"I have no wish to be seen entering your room. I

only want to *talk* to you, *Gadjo*.”

“I don’t engage in discussions in public hallways,” he replied. “Good night.” He started to close the door.

“*Wait!*”

He paused before silently pushing the door open wider. She swept past him into the room. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye as Evan executed an exaggerated bow as she entered. She hissed through her teeth at the mocking gesture.

He closed the door and placed the container of rum on the bedside table, then perched on the edge of the bed amid the squeaking hinges of the cast-iron bed frame and the faint rustle of linens. Jade glanced in his direction and quickly looked away, finding the image of him half reclining upon the bed somehow unsettling.

She studied the carved wall panel in front of her with feigned interest, but all she could think of was Evan seated on the bed with his long legs stretched out before him, his silver eyes stealing the light the way a cat’s eyes glowed in defiance of the dark.

“There’s a desk with a chair to your right,” he said, sounding amused. “Or, if you’d prefer to sit here on the bed—”

“No. The chair will do.”

She dragged the chair as far away from him as possible, and sat down. The silence stretched her already taut nerves. She glanced at Evan and concluded he was waiting for her to speak.

She quickly related the story of the ring, flushing

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and stammering as Evan's gaze wandered over her as she spoke. It was difficult to focus on the details with him sprawled comfortably on the bed, watching her. She was keenly aware of her state of undress and the fact she was alone with him.

"We must go to the constable," she said.

"We can't risk going to the authorities," Evan said. "But we've got to rid ourselves of Hindes."

"How?"

"By convincing him he's in dangerous company."

Shadows etched by candlelight flickered across his face. Had she been too impulsive in trusting him? He hadn't attempted to harm her. In fact, he had treated her kindly. He had even placed himself in danger to come to her aid in the tavern.

In a single lithe movement, Evan pushed himself off the bed and approached her. "Are you afraid of me, Jade?"

I'm afraid of how you make me feel, like I've swallowed a butterfly. "Is Hindes in dangerous company?" she asked.

"You tell me."

His piercing, unnerving gaze swept over her as the insinuation struck home. Jade shot to her feet, outraged by the implication that *she* was the one who might be dangerous and should not be trusted.

"I was not the one wearing a stolen uniform. I am not the one who cannot go to the authorities."

"But you *did* engage in deception," Evan reminded

her. “You claimed we were lovers when it suited your purpose. In fact, I’m wondering what role you’re playing now.”

His soft, oddly cadenced speech did not lessen the impact of his words. From where Jade stood, she glimpsed her reflection in the dresser mirror and cringed with sudden understanding.

The green wrapper had parted to reveal the gauzy, gossamer gown beneath it. Her body was outlined in revealing silhouette. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders, falling past her hips. She looked like a seductress and felt like a fool.

“What role?” she muttered, buttoning the wrapper as she spoke. “You provided the costume.”

She started toward the door, and Evan sprang after her. The floorboards creaked beneath his barefoot, muffled steps. She turned the brass knob, yanked open the door, and caught a glimpse of Hinder standing in the hallway outside her room. Evan slammed the door shut.

He rested his palms flat against the door on either side of her, trapping her with his body. She twisted around to face him, her body brushing against him intimately in the confined space. A pleasant heat emanated from him.

“I want to return to my room now.” Her blood thrummed in her ears. Her heart pounded in an odd rhythm, as if it might suddenly stop beating.

“Didn’t you see Hinder prowling the hall? I think you’re safer here.”

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She could not seem to catch her breath with Evan so close. His eyes smoldered with warmth as he gazed down at her. Oh, he was too handsome, this *Gadjo*. She should insist upon leaving the room, but she didn't want to leave.

He slowly lowered his arms without stepping away from her. Her knees felt weak. She leaned back against the door for support as he lifted his hand and touched the line of her jaw. The pad of his thumb brushed against her lower lip with a feathery touch, as if to memorize its contours.

Her breath caught in her throat. "I only came to warn you about Hindes," she said. Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I know. But you're safer here with me."

His touch was gentle as his hands dropped to her waist. Jade swayed, and his arms encircled her, molding her to him. She leaned into him, savoring his masculine scent and the strength of his arms around her.

She lifted her face as he bowed his head toward her, tentatively meeting his lips with her own. His kiss was soft, and its light graze gradually deepened until she felt the rasp of his beard against her cheek.

He tasted chiefly of rum, and faintly of tobacco. She lifted her hands to cup the back of his head, weaving her fingers through his soft, wavy hair. Evan's manner was a sharp contrast to Dimitri's brutal treatment. She did not want the kiss to end, yet she was afraid of where it might lead. What had prompted him to kiss her? She ached

with wanting . . . more.

Evan pulled back, a flush staining his cheeks. His unusual eyes sparkled in the candlelight.

It was the rum. Drink made men like Dimitri cruel and violent. It enticed a man like Evan to kiss a woman he would not kiss when sober. Many beautiful *Gadji* women would vie for Evan's attention. She could not hope to compete with them. The thought filled her with an overwhelming sense of disappointment.

"You are drunk, *Gadjo*." She should push him away. She should leave. Instead, she reveled in his desire for her, and the exquisite gentleness of his touch.

"I was weaned on mint juleps. I assure you, I'm not impaired in the least."

He grasped the pearl button at the throat of the green wrapper and deftly unfastened it, his striking gray eyes paralyzing her. She sighed as two more buttons yielded to the workings of his long, nimble fingers.

Cool air fanned across her shoulders and was replaced by the warmth of his breath as he leaned forward and nuzzled her throat, his lips following a hot trail beginning at her earlobe and tracing across her bared right shoulder.

Jade shivered with pleasure, her heart racing as her blood heated. Evan's warm hands caressed her skin as he divested her of the wrapper, revealing the sheer white gown beneath it.

His gaze swept over her, lingering on the form clearly outlined beneath the delicate fabric.

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“You’re beautiful,” he said.

As Evan’s expression sharpened with hunger, Jade’s breath quickened. Dimitri had viewed her with lust. Evan looked at her with desire. Evan made her feel beautiful.

Her first time would not be with Dimitri. She had fled to escape intimacy with Dimitri, and she had found Evan. Evan may not love her, but he would not abuse her.

All coherent thought became a jumble as Evan moved her away from the door and guided her toward the bed, kissing her and murmuring endearments in a low voice.

His touch flowed through her like molten fire as he swept her up into his arms and placed her on the bed, bending down to kiss her again as his fingers worked at the ties of her gown.

Jade arched into him, instinctively opening her mouth in response to his deepening kiss. His tongue slid into the warm cavity of her mouth, tasting her.

She moaned as his warm hands cupped her breasts, her nipples hardening to eager peaks beneath his fingertips. A subtle ache sprang into the pit of her stomach and spread lower, making her yearn for a fuller possession. All her senses stirred to vibrant life. She burned with restless need.

Evan stroked her heated flesh, his hands gliding in a smooth caress as the gown slid upward, baring her thighs. His touch remained gentle, unhurried. Jade gasped with pleasure. Evan’s breathing became ragged and his heart

pounded beneath her fingers as she explored the tanned expanse of his chest.

When Evan's hands lightly grazed her ribs where she had collided with the wagon, an involuntary moan of discomfort escaped her. Evan paused, looking down at her questioningly.

He levered himself upright on the bed beside her, and groped for the candle on the nightstand. Evan slowly moved the light down the length of Jade's body, illuminating her bare flesh. His gaze slowly followed the path his hands had taken, the edge of passion abruptly vanishing from his features.

Jade glanced down and saw the purple smudges mottling the skin of her rib cage. Similar bruises marred her upper arms and legs. Embarrassed, she sought to stop Evan's examination by turning away. He held her, murmuring in a hushed, soothing tone as he traced the livid marks with the tips of his fingers. His face shuttered.

He swung his long legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, facing away from her. He ran his hand through his hair as he stared at the wall. The intimacy had been shattered. The silence was excruciating.

"Who did that to you?" Evan asked. "What did you hope to gain by seeking a stranger's bed?"

Jade sat up, yanking the gown over her exposed limbs.

"I did not seek your bed," she said icily.

"Perhaps I misread your intention." He seized the robe and wagged it at her.

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“You had my clothing taken away.” She snatched the robe from him, leaving him clutching a solitary pearl button. “The price of your gift of clothing is too high, even for this Gypsy.”

His eyes flared with anger. “I didn’t ask you to prostitute yourself in payment.”

Jade heard only the word *prostitute*. It rang in her ears and tore at her heart. Her cheeks hot with humiliation, she donned the robe and quickly crossed the floor.

“Bolt your door!” Evan shouted as Jade slammed the door behind her.



Chapter Four

Are you going to leave those fine things behind?” The woman who had brought Jade the bathwater the night before eyed the folded gown and wrapper at the foot of the bed.

“They do not belong to me.” Jade smoothed her freshly laundered faded blue and purple skirts.

“Had a fight, did you?” the woman said, smiling. “Your gentleman waited up all night to make amends, I hear. He slept on a chair in the hallway outside your door.”

“He is not my gentleman.” Why would Evan have slept outside her door? “Where is he now?”

“Searching for a tonic to cure a hangover. I suggested

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tripe for breakfast, but he turned green and asked if the village had a chemist.”

So, he had been drunk. She hoped Evan had been too drunk to remember what had happened between them in his room. The memory of it filled her with renewed shame.

Hindes joined Jade and Evan as they reached the tavern gatepost, riding a chestnut mare he purchased from the blacksmith. He waved in greeting and rode abreast of them, the mare easily matching Raven’s canter.

“I’ll ride with you today,” Hindes said. “In the morning, I’m headed west toward Lancashire.”

Jade sat in front of Evan on the horse, her back rigid as Hindes attempted to engage them in conversation. Evan uttered a terse reply and urged Raven into a gallop, creating distance between the two mounts. They continued on in silence with Hindes trailing them.

They stopped after nightfall. Hindes helped Evan build a fire, and the trio shared a meal of bread and hard cheese from Evan’s saddlebag. The fire crackled and spewed embers, filling the air with the sweet smell of burning pine.

After Hindes bedded down beneath a tall black birch, Jade accepted a blanket from Evan and made a pallet a distance away. The damp ground made her bones ache as she tried to drift off to sleep. Evan had said little to her all day, and she longed to hear his unusual, musical speech.



"You're beautiful," Evan whispered.

He guided her toward a silk-canopied bed, kissing her and murmuring endearments in a low voice as he swept her up into his arms and laid her down upon warm, soft linens. He bent to kiss her again.

"Could you love a Gypsy, Evan?"

"I could love you."

Jade awoke with a start as the pointed toe of a boot prodded her hip. A hand clamped over her mouth, and she tasted metal as a ring dug painfully into her upper lip.

Pale streamers of daylight filtered through the copse of trees. Hinder hauled her to her feet. His arm encircled her waist and pressed into her sore ribs. Her mouth worked as she tried to scream past the barrier of his sweaty hand. He dragged her through the ashes of the campfire toward the horses.

Her heart thundered in her ears, mixing with the sound of his labored breathing and her own shallow cries. Birds fluttered in the bushes, disturbed by their passing. The horses shied from them, nickering shrilly when Hinder shoved Jade into their path. He pushed her to the ground, covering her body with his.

For a small man, he had a wiry strength, and her fury spun into terror as she fought him, trying to bite his hand as he grappled with her. Where was Evan? How

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could he let this happen? When she tried to call out, her lungs burned with the effort to breathe.

Hindes grabbed her arms and pinned them to her sides. “Quiet,” he said.

She glared at him, trying to summon saliva to speak. He grinned and slid his hand over her breast. Jade dry-heaved, her mouth as dry as cloth.

“Something tells me you and your companion had a falling out,” Hindes said. “Leave with me now, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

When he used his arms to lever himself above her, Jade bucked, thrusting her knee upward in a savage movement. Hindes grunted, losing his balance and falling sideways as he moved to avoid the blow. Jade rolled to her knees, scrabbling on all fours in the dirt, crawling blindly in the direction of the trees.

A pair of scuffed brown leather boots blocked her path.

“Am I interrupting?” Evan asked. He casually reached down and pulled Jade to her feet, drawing her up against his body.

Hindes scrambled to his feet, a rictus of a smile on his pitted, red face.

“She offered to trade me a tumble for one of my rings,” he said. “We were arguing over which ring.”

Jade gasped and lunged to slap the leer from Hindes’s face. Evan placed a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“Liar,” Jade hissed at Hindes.

The hand on her shoulder tightened. “Hush,” Evan

growled. The indolent drawl changed to sharp directive.

Jade twisted to look at Evan. His mouth was drawn in a harsh line, and his gray eyes glittered. Was he angry with her?

"That's the way to handle a woman," Hindes said.

"You were trying a different method a moment ago."

"She's fetching, but I don't pay prime for Gypsy."

The hand on her shoulder went rigid. Jade heard Evan's measured intake of breath.

"Is that so?" Evan said.

"The women in the fancy houses along the Strand are worth the coin. A Gypsy's just a bit of sport."

"If you can afford a fancy house," Evan said smoothly, "then why deny a working girl her due?"

Alarmed by his cocky manner and suggestive tone, Jade tried to wrench out of Evan's grip as Hindes's speculative gaze swept over them.

Hindes laughed. "Ah, forgive me. I didn't recognize the pair of you for what you are. It's a matter of gold then?"

Evan inclined his head in a subtle nod. As he kept his gaze fixed on Hindes, his hands idly massaged Jade's shoulders. *We'll have to convince Hindes he's in dangerous company.* A groan of dismay escaped her. Just how far did Evan intend to go to convince Hindes he'd be better off traveling alone?

"She's expensive, I warn you," Evan said. "I couldn't afford her favors last night."

So, he did remember. Jade flinched and stiffened beneath Evan's touch. When she tried to angle her neck to

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see his expression, he held her facing forward. His hands moved over her shoulders lightly, as if to reassure her.

"I think we can come to terms," Hindes said. "You'll want the gold first?"

"That's our custom."

Jade quailed at the cold detachment in Evan's voice. What if he wasn't bluffing? She didn't know him well enough to be certain he wouldn't actually sell her to Hindes.

Hindes reached into his vest and withdrew a silk-lined pouch. "How much?"

"The amount in your hand should be sufficient."

A snort of derision escaped Hindes. His hold on the pouch tightened. "This pouch carries gold, not coppers!"

Evan released Jade and spun toward the chestnut mare. With fluid grace, he extracted the pistol from Hindes's open pack and swiftly trained the pistol on the man's chest.

"We speak of different things," Evan said. "You refer to the price of pleasure." Evan's voice and aim were steady. "I, however, am wondering how you will compensate my companion for the abuse she suffered at your hands. I'm thinking gold isn't enough."

Hindes stared at Evan, and suddenly tossed the pouch. "Take it." The pouch landed with a heavy jangle at Evan's feet.

When Evan did not move, Jade bent to retrieve the small purse.

"Get out of here," Evan told Hindes.

Hindes walked toward the chestnut mare.

“Leave the horse.”

Hindes twisted to look at Evan. “That’s my horse, bought and paid for.” His face was splotted with hectic color.

“It’s mine now.”

“It may take me days to reach the next town on foot. I’ll be among wild animals.”

“They have my sympathy. If you’re not out of my sight in ten seconds, I’ll give your pistol to the lady,” Evan warned. “You can take your chances with the forest creatures or with her. She’s an excellent shot.”

Jade smiled as Hindes plunged into the underbrush, cursing as he went. A cloud of angry blackbirds rushed the sky, chattering in ringing alarm as Hindes disturbed their nest. Evan’s gaze followed their flight, his brow furrowed as he watched them drop back into the safety of the dense trees.

His buff-colored suit was rumpled, and shadows cradled his eyes as if he had not slept for days. He had outwitted Hindes, deftly relieving the man of his gold and his horse. Of the two, Evan appeared to be the more masterful criminal. It was not a comforting thought.

Evan glanced at Jade. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t like being used as bait.”

His mouth quirked in a half smile. “I had no intention of selling you.”

“You cannot sell what you do not own,” Jade huffed. Her gaze shifted to his hand, which still gripped the

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pistol. Evan's hands were beautiful, with long fingers and well-tended nails. His hands were not rough and dirty like Dimitri's. Jade vividly recalled the sensation of those smooth, warm hands on her body and how pleasurable it had been.

Her face flamed when she realized she yearned to be caressed by his strong hands again, even after they had aimed a pistol at a man's heart.

Evan silently lowered the weapon. He turned his back to her and added the pistol to the pack on Raven's back, murmuring to the horse in a low, soothing tone.

The honeyed way he spoke only heightened her sense of yearning for something she could not have. The *Gadjo* might prove more dangerous than she could imagine. She might lose her heart to him. She would not stay and entertain that risk.

Jade inspected the chestnut mare Hindes had been forced to abandon. A large leather pack strapped to the horse's back contained a change of clothing and a small knife. She withdrew her necklace from her skirt pocket, wrapped it carefully within the folds of her cloak, and stored both in the pack.

"We each have a horse now," Jade said. "Perhaps it is time we each traveled alone."

Evan turned to face her. He withdrew a slim pipe from his pocket and a glass tube containing a wax taper and a bit of phosphorus. The contents ignited upon contact with the open air as he lit the tobacco within the bowl of the pipe.

The fruity aroma of tobacco wafted toward her.

“I shall keep the horse, and you shall keep the gold,” Jade proposed. “It is fair.”

“I won’t abandon you on the road,” Evan said.

“I can take care of myself.”

His lips curved in a humorless smile as he drew on the pipe stem. “I haven’t seen any evidence of that.” His gaze swept over her, bringing a flush of heat to her face. “In the short time I’ve known you, you’ve been attacked by a drunk sailor and a footpad. I’ve seen bruises on your body you will not explain. I’ve seen you take risks—”

“Mine to take,” Jade said. “You are not responsible for me. We should split up.”

“We should eat something and try to get some rest,” he said calmly.

“I’m not hungry or tired.”

“I am. I’ve been up all night waiting for Hindes to make his move.”

Had he used her as bait, or gone without sleep in order to protect her? Why had he slept on a chair outside her room at the inn? “It is agreed, then? I will take the horse, and you will keep the gold?”

Something in his handsome, inscrutable face—coupled with his silence—gave her his answer. She pivoted toward the horse as Evan whirled and grasped the bridle of the mare.

“Keep the horse, you greedy *Gadjo*! I will walk.” Jade moved toward the pack to retrieve the *galbé* and her

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cloak. The skittish mare nickered and pranced sideways out of her reach.

Evan swore and snatched Jade's arm. "The horse is yours," he said, squeezing her upper arm in emphasis. "Half the gold is yours as well. Hinder owes you that much."

"Then I shall take my horse and leave."

When she tried to pull out of Evan's grip, his hold tightened. "Your uncle would have taken you home, if I hadn't interfered. I'm afraid we're stuck with each other until I can figure out what to do with you."

She was nothing more to him than an inconvenience, a duty to be discharged. A flood of moisture filled her eyes, and she twisted away from him so he would not see it.

"Walking or riding, I am leaving," she insisted, moving toward the horse.

Evan released her, untethered the mare, and slapped the horse on its rump. The animal shrieked and bolted into the forest, carrying Jade's necklace and cloak hidden in the pack.

"*Dinili!*" Jade shouted in disbelief as the mare disappeared into the underbrush, carrying everything of value she owned. Sobbing uncontrollably, she launched herself at Evan. He met her furious attack with a grunt of bewilderment.

"Have you lost your mind?" He grappled with her, finally grabbing her from behind, although she continued to buck against him, trying to free herself.

“My things,” Jade cried. “They were on the horse.”

Evan twisted to look in the direction the mare had gone. His expression of dismay faded into resolve. “It’s too late to do anything about it now. You can buy a new cloak. You have enough gold to replace the necklace.”

Her *galbé*. Her fine cloak. Those things were her past, and her future. It was more than a matter of gold. The *Gadjo* would never understand. To him, they were things easily replaced. It was another reminder she and Evan came from different worlds and would never share common ground.

“I curse you, *Gadjo*,” Jade sobbed. “I curse your heirs, every last one of them. May all your children have harelips and webbed feet. I will take my share of the gold and leave now.”

“And use the stars to navigate your way home?” Evan’s tone was laced with sarcasm.

He flung her away from him with a muffled profanity, reaching into the pack on his horse. “I’ll make my apologies later, when you’re in a frame of mind to hear them,” he said as he closed the distance between them.

“Apologize for losing my property? Ha! I will never forgive you.”

“I’ll apologize for that, too,” Evan growled as he grabbed for her, drawing her attention to the length of rope he held in his hand.

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Jade sat on the cold, hard ground, bound at the wrists and ankles, glaring at Evan as he stooped to tuck a blanket around her. She continued to glower at him as he fed chunks of kindling to the fire.

She had given up trying to loosen the knot at her wrists with her teeth. She was bound securely enough to subdue her without causing injury. Among his many talents, the *Gadjo* was also very skilled at tying knots.

Evan fashioned a makeshift bed out of another blanket and dropped to the ground beside her. He turned onto his side, presenting her with his back.

“Untie me, *Gadjo*.”

“In the morning, when you’ve calmed down. I don’t intend to chase you around in the dark. I’m too tired. Go to sleep, Jade.”

“How am I to sleep?”

“You might try lying on your side.”

“Trussed up like a pig about to be roasted?” Her voice rose in frustration. “All I lack is an apple in my mouth.”

Evan rolled to face her. He reached out and stroked her lower lip with the pad of his thumb. Tension coiled within her when she felt the shallow play of her breath against his finger. She felt the sensation spread through her like a fever. Her body had turned traitor. Unnerved by her response, she arched her neck to avoid his touch.

His fingers grazed the line of her jaw as he shrugged and turned away from her.

"I doubt I'd find a big enough apple," he cracked.

He was laughing at her. "I will never forgive you for this."

"I'm sorry about your necklace, Jade. I didn't know you'd put it in the pack. I couldn't let you run off when Hindes or others like him might still be out there."

Evan was just another man in her life determined to make decisions for her. "You sound like my father."

Sighing, she turned onto her side. The blanket bunched under her. Her empty stomach growled. Tree branches crackled as she shifted her position. The scent of burning pine tickled her nose. An owl hooted in the distance, and the rhythm of Evan's breathing filled the silence.

How dare he go to sleep. Her share of any ill-gotten gold would never compensate for the loss of her *galbé*. It was Evan's fault. If he had let her leave with the horse, she would still have the cloak and the necklace. But she would be alone, too, and without Evan's protection. She pushed back the thought. *I wanted to go on alone, didn't I?*

She squirmed until the blanket formed a lumpy pillow. Tomorrow she would negotiate her freedom, even if it meant forfeiting her share of the gold. She glanced at Evan's back, a dim shadow in the flickering firelight.

Her ankles and wrists tingled, and a curious lethargy crept over her. The owl hooted again. Crickets chirruped in answer. The familiar sounds of night com-

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forted her. She stretched out her legs and hugged her bound wrists to her chest. Her anxious thoughts gradually surrendered to drowsiness, and she began to drift.

“*Kushti ratti*, Jade.”

The words “Good night, Jade,” spoken in *Romanes*, pulled her into sudden wakefulness.

“Did you say something, *Gadjo*?”

A piece of kindling shifted on the fire, sending up a shower of orange sparks. Evan’s steady breathing softened into a gentle snore. Had he spoken to her in *Romanes*, or had she dreamed it?



Chapter Five

At first light, Evan released Jade from her bonds. He collected the blankets and poured dirt over the embers of the campfire.

“Are you hungry? You didn’t eat anything last night.” He gestured toward the remaining portion of bread and cheese wrapped in brown paper he had laid out on a tree stump nearby.

Jade shook her head, rubbing her arms briskly to restore the flow of blood to her hands. A feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach had replaced hunger. Evan had rejected her suggestion to split Hindes’s gold and go their separate ways. What did he plan to do with her?

She watched as he withdrew a treat from his vest

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pocket and offered it to Raven. Black equine lips rolled back from massive white teeth as the animal plucked the treat from Evan's outstretched palm in a display of trust.

He turned and caught her observing him. "I wouldn't try to steal my horse," he said. "You're safe riding with me, but don't try to ride Raven solo. I'm the only master he's ever known. You could be hurt."

"No more than his master has hurt me."

"Have I hurt you?"

Evan's earnest expression made Jade feel foolish. He had hurt her pride and lost her property, but all in the course of protecting her. It was difficult to hold onto her anger when he managed to make his every action against her seem practical and fair. She directed her gaze at Raven.

"You brought that beast across an ocean?" Such expense to accommodate the preference for a horse was unheard of in her world.

"Raven has belonged to me since he was foaled. He is loyal to me, more loyal than some people."

His cynical tone hinted at a depth of emotion beneath the surface of his words. Had someone betrayed him? "So, you shipped your horse to England and left your wife behind?"

"I'm not married." Evan glanced at her. "I have a fiancée waiting for me back home."

"Oh." Why did her chest constrict at the thought of a woman waiting at home for him? Evan was, after all,

only an obstacle in her path to freedom. He was as anxious to be rid of her as she was to be rid of him, perhaps even more so.

“What about you? Do you have a husband or husband-to-be awaiting you at home?”

The question was a painful reminder of Dimitri. Would she escape Dimitri this time, or would he scour England until he found her? Would he beat her and drag her back to camp?

Jade plucked at the frayed edges of her blouse. “You asked why I was running away.”

Evan rubbed Raven’s ear fondly. “Go on,” he prompted. “You would not understand.”

How could she explain her life to this man? He obviously enjoyed a life of wealth and privilege. She’d been bartered by her father, and once she was married she would likely be battered by her husband. Her circumstances were too humiliating to share with Evan. He had once asked her if she was a lady or a Gypsy. She wanted him to remember her as a lady.

“Perhaps not, but once you’re home with your family, I’m sure everything can be worked out.”

Home with her family? Her breath hitched. Had she heard him correctly? Her heart thumped in her chest. She felt the sudden urge to pick up her skirts and run.

“I’m not going home.”

“Yes, you are.” Evan continued to rub the ears of his horse with a calm that made Jade want to scream.

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"We agreed to travel north together, until you booked passage home. Have you forgotten our plan?"

"The plan has changed." He studied her face. "I can't leave you to roam the countryside alone, and I can't stay in England."

Would Evan be the one to deliver her into Dimitri's hands? A loud hum in her ears made his voice sound far away. She couldn't go back to the camp. She would be punished for running away this time. The camp would become her prison. Dimitri would never let her out of his sight again. It would mean the end of her dream for a better life for herself and for Liberina.

"Give me half of the gold and we will go our separate ways. I can take care of myself."

"No, you can't, Jade. You're headstrong and impulsive," Evan said. "You act before you think. The first thief who crosses your path will relieve you of any gold I give you. There are men who prey upon unprotected women. The only responsible thing I can do is return you to your family before I leave England."

Jade stared at Evan in dismay, trying to remember to breathe. She would be married to the stranger from the Wood tribe, or worse, to Dimitri. There would be no escape. An image of Dimitri's leering face loomed before her. She recalled her mother's face, pale and haunted when told the *Gadjo* doctor refused to enter a Gypsy camp to minister to her sick son. She saw the still, lifeless bodies of her mother and brother as they were put

into the ground, both victims of fever. Her life would be no better. Forest and sky began to spin together in a sickening blur of motion. The buzzing in her ears grew louder, causing all sound to recede as the mossy green forest floor hurtled toward her.



“You should have eaten something,” Evan scolded softly.

Jade opened her eyes and tried to move. Her limbs were leaden. She had been wrapped in a blanket. She shrugged free of the scratchy wool cocoon and sat up. Her head had been resting on Evan’s waistcoat. The brown silk lining of the once-fine garment was grass stained and streaked with dirt.

Evan stood nearby, his arms folded across his chest. “Women usually faint because their corsets are too tight, or because they starve themselves so they won’t have to wear a corset.” He crossed the distance and handed Jade a hard biscuit. “Eat.”

Jade accepted the offering, chewing it slowly. It was dry, brittle, and other than a faint saltiness, had no taste. She needed to think quickly. She could not go back to camp. She was at Evan’s mercy, and his sense of honor dictated he take her home. She had to find a way to change his mind.

Jade thought of Magda, one of the women in camp

who could always make the men do her bidding. Magda would dance before the firelight, gyrating seductively, twirling her skirts and smiling in invitation. The men trampled one another to dance with her. The other women whispered about Magda and did not associate with her, but Magda's wagon was always in excellent repair and she always had enough to eat. What would Magda do in this situation? Jade suspected Magda would have Evan well under control by now.

"I don't own a corset," Jade said. She tried to swallow the last of the dry biscuit. It lodged in her throat like a lump of starched cotton. Coughing, she smoothed the edges of the blanket and folded it.

Evan crossed to her and crouched to accept the blanket from her. He smiled. His beard added definition to his lean jaw. Why did he have to be so handsome? Why couldn't he be the sort of man who would abandon her on the road without a backward glance?

"Are you feeling better?" A curl of dark hair dipped forward over his brow as he leaned toward her. Her heart skipped a beat. Her fingers vibrated with the urge to touch the errant lock.

"I have not seen you smile often, *Gadjo*. You are handsome when you smile," Jade said.

Is that how Magda did it, with flattery? It wasn't a lie to praise his appearance. It was easy to admire Evan's even features and thick chestnut hair. It would not be a lie to tell him he had the most beautiful eyes she had ever

seen. They were luminous and captivating, like silver-gray storm clouds.

He lifted a wary brow, continuing to smile, but said nothing. The air vibrated with silence. This wasn't going well at all. Jade reached forward and placed a palm against either side of Evan's face. She jerked him toward her, the sudden action catching him off guard. He fell to his knees with a grunt of surprise, dropping the blanket on the ground as he braced his arms and shifted to avoid falling on her.

She reached for him and tangled her fingers in the soft sable of his hair, pulling his head down and molding her lips gently against his. Her cheek rubbed against the pleasant abrasiveness of his jaw. His breath was warm as his lips slanted across hers in a measured response.

He didn't pull away from her as she feared he might. She had the advantage. What should she do next? How did Magda gain control over a man? What would Magda do now? As Jade's mind raced, she felt Evan's generous lips curve into a broad smile.

"Trying a little seduction, are we?"

He was laughing at her. He always seemed to be laughing at her. Jade pulled back, abruptly ending the kiss. Evan was no longer smiling, but there was a glimmer of warmth in his eyes. He appeared amused, not seduced. The temptress approach wasn't going to work. She was not Magda, and Evan was not gullible like most of the men in camp.

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She sighed. “Would I have succeeded?”

Evan’s chuckle was good humored. “Did you succeed in my room at the inn?”

Jade’s face burned at the reminder. “I did not try to seduce you at the inn,” she snapped. “I was trying to warn you about Hindes. You were drunk.”

“I was not drunk. My defenses were barely breached by the rum.”

“You were drunk,” Jade insisted. “If you had been sober—”

“If I had *not* been sober, the encounter would not have ended the way it did.” He was looking at her with an intensity that stole her breath. “Which reminds me—you never did answer my question.”

“What question was that?”

“What are you running away from?”

Her blatant attempt at seduction had failed. The only option she had left was to appeal to his sense of gallantry. She didn’t want to lie to him, but she couldn’t go back to camp unless her circumstances changed.

“I ran away because he beats and degrades me.” It wasn’t really a lie. If she married Dimitri, it would be true soon enough. Dimitri had said as much himself. Jade drew a slow, fortifying breath as Evan’s expression darkened and his eyes turned to flint.

“Who beats and degrades you?”

Jade swallowed hard. “Dimitri. My husband.”

The knuckles of Evan’s long fingers whitened as his

hands balled to fists. “Does your father know?”

“You don’t understand our ways,” Jade said. “It is not my father’s place to—”

Evan’s jaw flexed. “It is a father’s place to protect his child.”

His outrage on her behalf surprised her. The fiancée awaiting him in South Carolina would never know how fortunate she was to have such a man.

Jade leaned forward and tenderly swept the lock of wavy hair from Evan’s forehead. He tipped his head back, watching her as she slowly trailed her fingers along the contours of his jaw.

“I came to your room at the inn to tell you about Hindes. But after you kissed me, I would have stayed with you.” She realized the words were true. If Evan had not noticed the bruises marring her skin, she would have remained in his room and surrendered the purity that made her highly prized as a Gypsy bride. “No man has ever touched me with kindness.”

Evan frowned. “And I wrestled you to the ground and tied you up.” He muttered an oath, bowing his head. “I’m just another man who’s abused you.”

“Protected, not abused,” Jade countered softly.

She eased Evan into a reclining position, moving with him until she was stretched out full length on top of him. His body tensed beneath her, then relaxed as his arms swept across her back. He molded her against him, resting his chin on the top of her head. She felt his chest

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expand against her as he drew a deep breath. Her body fit to his, his hardness and strength cradling her softness. A pleasant heat emanated from him. His earthy, masculine scent drifted to her, familiar and inviting.

“I’m sorry you’ve been ill treated, Jade. You deserve to be touched with gentleness.”

Jade’s ragged sigh was nearly a sob as she snuggled against him, savoring the contact. “Then touch me gently, Evan.”

Evan’s lips pressed against her hair. His hands massaged the small of her back with light, comforting strokes. Her body burned and her soul ached with wanting him. If she was to end up returned to camp, debased and married to a brute, she wanted one memory of tenderness to sustain her. One memory of a kind, honorable man with musical speech and eyes spun from moonlight.

Evan lightly touched her lower lip with his thumb, then lowered his mouth over hers, replacing his thumb with the warm softness of his lips. His hands caught in her hair, his fingers weaving through the strands, exerting a gentle pressure as he caught her to him and deepened the kiss.

Her lips parted under the gentle coercion of his tongue, the erotic invasion creating a tumult within her, spreading outward from her core. His long, graceful fingers gently traced the shell of her outer ear.

A delicious shiver vibrated through her as Evan’s hand sought her breast, kneading the globe through the

thin cotton of her blouse. She stirred and moaned as he pushed aside the barrier of fabric and placed his outstretched palm upon her bare skin. His hand was warm; her flesh seemed to burn where he touched her. Her scent mingled with his, a union of lavender and heady musk.

His lips traced the path his fingers had traveled, gently closing over her breast and coaxing the nipple to an ecstatic peak with his lips and tongue. The sensation was exquisite; she writhed beneath his touch, abandoning herself to the sheer pleasure of it.

Jade trembled with anticipation as Evan found the hem of her skirt and slowly slid the fabric up the length of her leg, creating unbearable friction against her aroused skin. His hands followed the line of her thigh, languidly approaching the juncture of her legs until she was breathless and burning. He rolled with her pressed to him, easing her onto her back.

She was consumed with fever and quaking with a desperate, aching need as his hand slipped between their bodies, finding and gently stroking her inner thigh. His mouth covered hers again, swallowing her gasp when his hand cupped her sex. Sudden, honeyed desire flowed through her. An aching emptiness sprang from the pit of her stomach and fanned outward, consuming her.

“Evan,” she whispered shakily. She didn’t know what to ask for, only that she yearned.

He buried his face against her neck, nuzzling the sensitive skin there. His fingers teased the slick, sensi-

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tive nub hidden beneath the curls of her mound, rubbing against her with a rhythm that only increased the exquisite torment.

Evan shifted and molded her tightly to him, plundering her mouth with a kiss evocative of a fuller possession. He rose above her, fumbled with his clothing, and entered her. Jade bore the brief pain silently, cringing at the sudden tensing of Evan's body as he encountered the slight obstruction marking her as a virgin.

His gasp of surprise was followed by a ragged expulsion of breath. Evan looked down at her, his expression filled with bewilderment. He finished quickly, with an agonized groan. Jade turned and lay on her side, averting her face from his gaze. As Evan silently spread the blanket over her, she remembered the other times he had tucked a blanket around her. This time his touch was cold, impersonal. Jade twisted to look at Evan as he rose and moved a short distance away. He combed his fingers through his hair with an unsteady hand, gazing at the forest surrounding them.

"A runaway virgin bride-to-be I would believe, but a virgin *wife*? Not likely." Evan turned to face her. His handsome face was set in harsh lines. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"You would not have touched me." She had wanted him, more than anything she had ever wanted in her life.

He studied her, his jaw rigid, his gray eyes molten. "You told your uncle we were lovers. It appears you've

schemed all along to turn your lies into truth. Why?"

"It does not matter now," Jade said.

"It matters to me."

She could not bear the look of betrayal on his face, or the accusation in his voice. She had tried to wield the power of seduction. She had been crushed in the attempt.

"I thought I could convince you not to return me to my *vitsa*, my tribe." Of her tangled motives, it was the least painful to reveal to him. She could admit her feelings for him, but Evan would never believe her. Not now. Her heart sank at the thought.

"Why?" he demanded again.

"I was promised in marriage." A torrent of misery threatened to spill forth in explanation, but after glancing up at Evan's furious face, she kept silent.

"An arranged marriage is not a reason to run away. It doesn't justify involving others in your schemes. Even in my country marriages are often arranged to join estates. Such marriages are considered the fulfillment of a duty."

Had such a marriage been planned for Evan? Did he love the woman he would marry? "Did your family buy the woman you will marry, or did she choose you?"

He glared at her. "I once asked what had made you desperate enough to endure the attentions of a stranger. You've been manipulating me from the moment we met in the tavern."

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“No, Evan, I—”

“You needn’t have made such a sacrifice. It doesn’t change anything. I’m still going to return you to your family.”

She winced at the anger in his voice. “Evan, I cannot go back.”

“I am not giving you a choice.” The words were hurled over his shoulder at her as he stalked toward Raven. The horse ambled sideways as Evan approached and unhitched the pack.

Her father would be humiliated if forced to return the bride-price paid by the Wood tribe. Dimitri would be the only man in camp willing to marry her. He would spend the rest of his days punishing her for the fact she did not come to him untouched. By trying to escape her fate, she had sealed it. She had failed Liberina as well.

“You should just go now, *Gadjo*. Gypsies do not remain in one place for long. You could spend months searching England for my family. I will not help you find them.”

Evan’s mouth flattened into a thin line as he handed her a pair of corded brown cotton trousers and a white shirt with sleeves gathered and pleated at the armholes. “I don’t recall asking for your help. Put these on.”

Jade lifted her chin. “It is against custom for a Gypsy female to wear trousers.”

“Don’t you dare quote custom to me when you’ve done as you’ve damn well pleased all along,” he barked.

“Put them on, or I’ll dress you myself. I don’t intend for you to ride into your camp wearing filthy, torn clothing, looking abused and bedraggled.”

She had no doubt he would do as he threatened. Jade unfolded the dark brown trousers and held them against her frame, pursing her lips. Perhaps if she convinced him they wouldn’t fit—

Evan stood stiffly, frowning at her as she measured the shirt against her full breasts, which were generously proportioned for her small frame.

“You might find the shirt a bit snug,” he remarked.

Warmth flooded her cheeks. “Turn your back,” she said.

“Talk to me while you put those on, so I know you’re not trying to run away.” He faced away from her.

“You already warned me not to steal your horse,” Jade reminded him. She quickly replaced her blouse with the linen shirt. The garment covered her from neck to knee, yet still managed to fit snugly in all the wrong places.

“Would a warning keep you from trying? You haven’t given me any reason to trust you.”

Sighing, Jade stepped into the trousers, bracing the strip of fabric along her instep as she turned up the leg hems into wide cuffs. She tucked the shirt into the trousers and fashioned a belt from a length of twine recovered from the pocket of her discarded skirt.

Evan turned. His gaze swept over her. She felt exposed in the form-fitting shirt and trousers. Something in his expression made her breath quicken as if a strong

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wind forced air into her lungs.

“*Roma* women do not wear trousers,” Jade said. Her father would be furious when she rode into camp dressed in men’s clothing, accompanied by a strange man.

“I doubt this is the first time you’ve defied tradition.”



Chapter Six

They were called *patrins*, or Romany trail signs. Composed of pebbles, twigs, branches, bits of glass, thread, or scraps of material, *patrins* were encoded messages used to pass information to other *Roma*. They were often placed above the normal sight line of most travelers. *Patrins* provided details about encampment locations, the identities of travelers in the area, and warnings when the local gentry were particularly unfriendly. Only the *Roma* knew how to interpret the signs and where to look for them.

Gypsies were within the law only while they remained on the move in England. Without knowledge of *patrins*, Jade was certain Evan would conclude he was

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chasing a moving target. He would become frustrated, abandon his search, and depart England, leaving her with a share of the gold to replace her lost necklace.

As they veered west, Jade saw the first *patrin*, a pile of stones telling of a Gypsy caravan on the move. A ravelling wisp of blue wool tied to the bristling branch of a yew tree pointed to the left fork in the road. Evan glanced at the sign, guiding Raven in the direction taken by the caravan. The *Gadjo* was lucky, nothing more. The damp ground was rutted with wagon wheel tracks. He was simply following the tracks left by the wagons.

Jade sighed in relief when the gray pearl sky darkened to slate. Storm clouds gathered, emitting a steady drizzle. The rain escalated into a brief downpour, filling the air with the earthy scent of saturated soil and crushed leaves. The wheel tracks faded into muddy oblivion, leaving no trail to follow. Soon, Evan would realize his task was hopeless. He would return to his home across the water, leaving her free to settle wherever she wished. After establishing roots in the *Gadjo* community, she would find a way to have Liberina join her. The promise of freedom was heady, but the realization she would never see the handsome *Gadjo* again filled her with an acute sense of loss.

They came upon an abandoned cemetery at the base of a low hill, the untended graves guarded by a copse of brambles. Jade fought to hide her dismay as Evan reined in the horse and hopped to the ground. She leaned forward in

the saddle and grasped the pommel with stiff fingers, sucking a slow breath through clenched teeth, watching Evan survey the pattern of scratches on a fieldstone marker. He stooped and poked at an arrangement of pebbles and twigs, rising to examine the tree branches above his line of vision.

“What are you doing? Why have we stopped?” Jade fought to keep the panic out of her voice. The *patrins* told of a tribe camped nearby. Her tribe.

Evan scanned the area, moving in a slow arc until he stood facing a gently sloping hill. In the distance, a thin white plume of smoke breached the leaden sky.

“You are lost?” Jade suggested.

His gaze shifted and speared her. His smile was dazzling, and unpleasant. “No, Jade, I’m not lost. I’ve hunted game on my family estate since I was a boy. I’m an experienced tracker.”

“But you are not experienced in tracking the *Roma*.”

Evan inclined his head in the direction of the rider who had appeared at the crest of the low hill. The horseman sat astride a black stallion, watching them. The bright canary of the man’s shirt and the vivid blue of his trousers stood out against the inky black flesh of his mount, lending the pair the appearance of a large exotic bird.

Horse and rider began a slow descent toward them. Jade frowned as the man drew closer. She did not recognize him. He was tall and slender, with a brown face weathered like a walnut. His long, glossy white hair was tied in a queue with a length of shiny green ribbon. The

small gold hoop in his left ear swayed in rhythm as his horse picked his way through the mud.

The old man drew alongside them and dismounted with a fluidity of movement belying his years. He grinned at her, his lips pulling tight across his teeth. He seemed familiar, yet she was certain she had never met this *Roma*. She would have remembered him. His eyes were an unusual hue, brimming with intelligence. *He has silver-gray eyes. Eyes the color of Evan's—*

With a soft gasp of surprise, Jade glanced at Evan.

“Culvato,” Evan said in a dull voice.

The old Gypsy's gaze roamed over Jade, taking in her form-fitting shirt and trousers with a wide grin. His smile made her feel like a prime piece of horseflesh purchased at discount. Jade tried to swallow past the hard knot of dread forming in her throat. Culvato of the Wood tribe was a guest in the Lowara camp. He had no doubt come to demand repayment of her bride-price after learning of her disappearance.

Culvato's laugh was a grating wheeze of glee. He thumped Evan on the back. “I see you found your runaway bride, Evan.”

The air left Jade's lungs in a whoosh of disbelief. Her stunned gaze flickered from Culvato to Evan.

“No,” Evan replied, turning to fix a look of gathering fury on her. “It would appear she found me.”



The wind whipped the heather in waves across the meadow where the Gypsies camped, the pink-purple blossoms twitching in the breeze like the rippling hide of some unusual beast. Evan guided Raven into the encampment, picking his way among deep ruts left by dozens of wagon wheels. The smells of wood smoke and pervasive damp filled his nostrils. An emaciated yellow dog nipped at Raven's fetlock, growling and shunting to one side to avoid the stallion's massive hooves.

His runaway bride. He should have handed the duplicitous little chit over to Culvato, jumped on Raven's back, and ridden hard to escape this trap. Evan had learned to decipher *patrins* during the months spent among his father's people. None of the signs revealed that the group of Gypsies camped nearby would include Culvato.

He still had a hard time thinking of Culvato as his grandfather. The first sight of Evan had driven the old Gypsy to his knees. Culvato had been certain he looked upon the ghost of his son rather than the grandson he had not known existed.

Jade sat silent behind Evan, touching him only when it was necessary to keep from falling off the horse. Fate—or something more sinister—had brought him back into Culvato's domain. The old man was determined his grandson would leave England with a Romany wife, having already

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expended good money to purchase one for him. Evan suspected Jade had been a willing participant in the elaborate entrapment, despite her expression of dismay when Culvato had referred to her as Evan's runaway bride.

The barefooted, brown-skinned children in camp were the first to recognize Jade. They scampered toward her with recognition in their dark eyes, their high-pitched voices raised in a joyous chorus of welcome. The adults paused in their chores, their manner cautious yet curious. Her form-fitting apparel was met with looks of censure as they crept along the line of caravans.

Jade uttered a sound of distress when a tall, barrel-chested Gypsy broke away from the gathering crowd and rushed toward them. She wrapped her arms around Evan's waist as the man closed the space between them and reached for her. Jade clung to Evan, kicking at the Gypsy when he snatched at her trouser-clad leg. Snarling in outrage, the man recoiled to avoid her slippered foot. He seized her arm and jerked her forward.

"Hold!" Evan shouted, dismounting as Jade toppled from Raven's back.

The Gypsy shoved Jade to the ground when she tried to regain her footing. She huddled in the damp, spongy grass, her arms raised as if to ward off a blow. The man's face reddened and a low growl escaped him when he found his path to Jade suddenly blocked by Evan.

The Gypsy stared at them, his eyes narrowing as Evan helped Jade to her feet. Jade remained at Evan's

side, trembling as she gripped his coat for support. The woman who had seemed to fear no one was clearly terrified of this Gypsy. Evan placed a reassuring arm around her shoulders. She glanced up at him, her green eyes shadowed. Her lower lip quivered.

"I demand to speak to Jade's father," Evan said.

"You are in a *Roma* camp, *Gadjo*," the man told Evan. "You do not make demands here." His dark gaze was riveted on Jade.

"He is my guest, as I am your guest," Culvato said. "You will treat us both with respect, Dimitri."

His interpretation of the *patrins* hadn't been wrong. This was not his father's tribe; it was Jade's. Culvato was simply a visitor here. He had vowed he would return Jade to her family, and he had kept his promise. What manner of hell had he brought her back to?

"This girl belongs to your tribe, does she not?"

"She does." Dimitri glowered at Jade. "She ran away. She was promised to me, and I will deal with her."

Evan's brown wool redingote bore the imprint of Jade's fingers. She continued to tremble, but the gaze she directed at Dimitri was defiant.

"Does my father know how you planned to deal with me?" she hissed at him. She hesitated, looking askance at Evan. A pink glow slowly suffused her face. When she continued, she spoke in *Romanes*. "You beat me and tried to rape me."

"Careful, Jade," Dimitri warned in a low growl of

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Romanes. He nodded toward Evan. "This *Gadjo* will not always be here to protect you." He waved a dismissive hand at Evan. "You can leave now, *Gadjo*," he said, speaking in English.

The front of Evan's coat remained gathered in Jade's fist. He covered her hand with his, gently prying her fingers loose. She looked away from him, hastily knuckling her tear-bright eyes.

"I have no intention of leaving until I speak with her father. Either you bring him to me, or I'll find him myself."

A low rumble of chatter followed Evan's declaration as those gathered gaped at him in astonishment. The restless noises ceased. The crowd looked to Dimitri for a response. Evan could not hear even the sound of breathing coming from the crowd.

Dimitri ground his teeth together, the muscles in his thick neck corded and prominent. He smiled suddenly, his gold tooth winking. "As you wish, *Gadjo*," he said. "I will see to the runaway while you search the camp for her father."

Jade cried out as Dimitri seized the chafed wrist of her left hand. He yanked her away from Evan. She struggled until he grasped the mane of hair at the nape of her neck and held her immobile.

"Let her go!" Evan thundered. He reached into his coat pocket. The blue steel of the stock of Hindes' pistol caught the light in a maleficent wink as Evan lifted his hand. He had never killed a man, but in this moment he

knew he was capable of it.

Dimitri retained his grasp on Jade's hair. One powerful hand rested at her throat, the rough, calloused fingers tracing her smooth skin. "Your weapon cannot bargain. Shall I snap her neck?"

Evan's jaw flexed as he bent and tossed the small weapon aside, casting it out of Dimitri's reach.

Culvato stepped forward. "I will take Jade to see her sister," he offered.

Dimitri hesitated, frowning. Culvato's smile was replaced by a taut glare of challenge. Dimitri reluctantly released Jade.

Evan's gaze followed Jade as Culvato led her to safety. She turned and glanced over her shoulder at them, her mournful expression changing to horror as something behind Evan caught her attention.

"*Churi!*" Jade screamed. "Knife!"

Evan tensed. His gut clenched as he spun around. Dimitri had drawn a dagger from his boot and was poised to hurl the weapon at him. Grunting, Evan dodged to evade the missile as Gypsies on all sides rushed to thwart Dimitri's attack. The murder of a *Gadjo* would result in reprisal against the entire Gypsy community. They fell upon Dimitri and forced him to the ground, where he bellowed in outrage, cursing and struggling against those who held him.

"Inform the *Kapo* I wish to convene a *kris*," Evan demanded in flawless *Romanes*.

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Everyone, including Dimitri, froze at Evan's shouted words. Culvato had taught him well. The *Kapo* was the chieftain of the community, responsible for settling minor disputes. In serious matters, a *Roma* court of law called a *kris* was convened. A *Gadjo* would have no knowledge of such things, but Evan was half *Roma*.

Evan looked across the camp at Jade. She remained rooted where she stood, staring at him. Her hair flowed down her back like a curtain of black silk, and even at this distance, he thought he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. She looked slender and fragile in the shirt and trousers he had insisted she wear. He had subjected her to scorn by insisting she wear them. It was one decision among many he now regretted.

Had she known his identity all along, or had the news come as a shock? He couldn't be certain. Her determination not to be returned to camp might have been a ruse intended to deliver him into the hands of the Gypsies. He could understand why she would prefer an unknown suitor to the certain abuse she would suffer at the hands of a man like Dimitri.

Culvato nudged Jade's elbow, motioning for her to continue moving along the line of caravans. She stood immobile, her gaze still locked with Evan's. When Culvato saw it was Evan who held Jade's attention, the old Gypsy smiled and gestured for Evan to join them. Jade pulled back, shaking her head at Culvato. He laughed at her reaction. She walked away from Culvato, covering

ground at a brisk pace. Still smiling, Culvato spared Evan one final glance before moving to follow Jade.



“Mishto hom me dikava tute!” Liberina gushed.

“And I am glad to see you!” Jade gushed, echoing her sister’s words. She clasped Liberina’s hands and held her at arm’s length, savoring the sight of her.

Liberina scanned Jade’s unconventional mode of dress and frowned. “Father must be angry—”

“Father has not seen me yet,” Jade said. She turned and traced the cymbals of the wall-mounted tambourine with an unsteady hand. The discs of metal shifted beneath her fingers, filling the air with a tinkling shower of faint musical sounds.

“Perhaps if he does not see for himself, he will not be angry.” Liberina lifted the scored, hinged lid of a wooden trunk. She extracted a green blouse spotted with blue and yellow flowers and a dark brown skirt. She handed the articles to Jade, who placed the slim bundle on top of the trunk. Dimitri would no doubt relay the description of her clothing to her father in excruciating detail. A change of clothing would not diminish her father’s wrath.

“Meski,” Liberina said, indicating a tarnished brass teakettle suspended above the cookstove. A plume of steam escaped the kettle, accompanied by an angry

whistle.

A pair of cups and saucers rested on the table near Jade's elbow. She lifted one fine china teacup and peered at the cobalt blue interior flecked with tiny silver stars. The set had belonged to their mother. As a child, the cups had fascinated Jade. The mystery of the stars was not revealed until the tea had been consumed. The magical teacups had been reserved for special occasions. With a pang, Jade noted only two cups and saucers remained of the set: the one fine thing their mother had ever owned.

The aroma of spice and orchids floated upward as Jade poured black tea into the dainty cup. She watched the silver stars disappear, swept up by a sudden feeling of longing and loss. She handed the steaming beverage to Liberina.

Taking care not to spill her tea, Liberina crossed the narrow floor of the *vardo* and slowly lowered herself onto a red stool decorated with yellow daisies. In Gypsy fashion, she poured some of the steaming liquid from her cup into the flat saucer and sipped the beverage from the saucer rim.

"I've heard your *Gadjo* is very handsome," Liberina said, peering at Jade under her lashes.

"He is not *my Gadjo*." Jade poured the fragrant tea into her cup.

"You did not find him handsome? Magda said she could drown in that *Gadjo's* eyes—"

“Oh, Magda,” Jade said with a snort of derision. “She has not met a man whose eyes she could not drown in.” A sudden flare of emotion exploded within Jade, an unfamiliar, dark roiling anger directed at Magda. The seductress would no doubt find Evan a worthy challenge.

“But did you find him handsome?” Liberina persisted.

“He is not unpleasant to look upon,” Jade said. What a liar she was. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen. She frowned when Liberina slanted a knowing look at her. She sipped her tea from the cup, pinkie extended, as the woman in Dorset had taught her. “I suspected he was a highwayman when we first met. I did not know he was the *diddikai* from the Wood tribe. He did not reveal he reads *patrins* and speaks *Romanes*.”

That was not entirely true. Jade remembered the softly spoken “good night” she thought she had only imagined. Her mind flashed back to her heated exchange with Dimitri, spoken in *Romanes* to spare herself shame in front of Evan. Evan had understood every word. Jade closed her eyes against the humiliation.

“He speaks *Romanes*?” Liberina chuckled, shaking her head in amazement. She drained the last of her tea with a noisy slurp. She placed her cup sideways on the saucer to indicate she did not desire a refill. “I think the *Gadjo* has affection for you.”

“No,” Jade said. “He wants to be rid of me. Now that I am returned, he will leave. I will never see him again.”

Her hand trembled, rattling the china cup and saucer

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in her palm. She and Liberina cried out in unison as the fragile cup tipped, rolled against the rim of the saucer, and bounced to the floor, showering her in tea. The cup struck the wooden floorboards with a sharp, brittle sound and exploded into pieces. Shards of cobalt blue speckled with silver stars lay scattered at her feet like pieces of fallen sky.

Jade stared dumbly at the mess. The sight made her feel sick, dizzy. She sat speechless as Liberina carefully scooped up the pieces of china and wrapped them in a scarf. Some losses were too great for tears. Her mother's precious cup was one. Evan was another.

"I will never see him again," Jade repeated in a dull voice.

Liberina straightened slowly. She placed the scarf containing the broken fragments on the empty saucer. She took Jade's hands in her own.

"*Phei*," Liberina whispered, "you love him?"

"He does not want a Gypsy wife. He already has a *Gadji* woman waiting for him at home. He did not know I was the bride Culvato bought for him. If he had known, he would never have brought me here. He does not want me any more than I—" She could not finish the words. She could not say she did not want him.

"He could have pushed you off the horse and ridden away," Liberina pointed out. "Instead, he protected you. Dimitri could have killed him."

Dimitri's skill with knives was renowned. Had he been a more ambitious man, he could have traveled with

a carnival and sold himself as an entertainment.

“Evan would defend any woman he saw being abused. He has honor,” Jade said. “He is a man who will always do what is right.”

Liberina beamed at Jade. “Just so. His grandfather says he will do what is right.”

The buoyant expression on her sister’s face filled Jade with foreboding. “Evan will not marry me,” Jade warned.

“Do not worry, *Phei*. Culvato says Evan will do what is right.” She leaned toward Jade with a conspiratorial wink. “And father says if Evan will not do what is right, then there are ways to force him.”



Chapter Seven

The *kris* had been assembled and the *phuri*—the elders who represented the functioning arm of the Romany judicial system—were present, including Jade’s father and her Uncle Opi. The men were seated on several wooden benches forming a wide circle. A campfire burned at the center of the ring, bathing the assembly in waves of heat and flickering orange shadow.

Milosh sat upon an upended bucket with a sturdy board placed across it. A pile of leather harnesses had been arranged upon the plank for his comfort. When Evan revealed the urgent matter he wanted to discuss was Jade’s future (rather than Dimitri’s attempt on his life), Milosh’s impassive face had fleetingly revealed his

surprise. While Evan could not guarantee Jade's happiness, he intended to do what he could to ensure her safety. After he left England, Culvato would remain to make sure any arrangements he had made would be honored.

The steady gaze Milosh fixed on him was no more enlightening than the other closed Gypsy faces surrounding him. Evan answered the questions put to him by the elders, pausing each time Opi interrupted to challenge his version of events.

"Is there nothing you can agree upon?" Milosh asked with an exasperated sigh. His large yellowed teeth clutched the stem of his pipe.

"We would have returned with Jade the night she ran away if the *Gadjo* had not interfered," Opi charged. Despite the fact Evan's heritage had been revealed by Culvato, the short, rotund Gypsy continued to refer to Evan as *Gadjo*.

"As I recall, she was able to evade you without my aid easily enough," Evan retorted. "Why else would you have been wandering around the London docks searching for her?"

"You helped her get away," Opi charged. "She would not have escaped us on foot."

"Had I understood the situation, I would have helped you recover her," Evan said. His voice had risen in an effort to be heard above the crowd assembled to witness the tribunal. "And you've forgotten: I'm the one who brought Jade back."

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"You brought her back to us, but too late, *Gadjo*," Opi said. "If there is to be no wedding, we will be expected to return the money to the Wood tribe. We accepted the *darro*, and the money has been spent."

Evan glanced at Milosh. The old Gypsy continued to study him without expression. "You should have waited until you had confirmed there would be a wedding before allowing money to change hands," he told Opi.

Opi's chest swelled in a huff of indignation. The twin rows of small brass buttons on his blue jacket caught the firelight, winking like a swath of fireflies.

"We planned to strike a bargain for the same *darro* with another *vitsa* and use the money to repay the *darro* to Culvato's tribe," Opi continued. "That way, Jade would have a husband, and we would have repaid our debt."

"Sell her twice? An interesting solution," Evan said dryly.

"It is no solution now! Jade has been gone for many days. She rides into camp wearing a man's clothes! We could not bribe a respectable Gypsy to marry her now. She is disgraced."

"I find it difficult to believe you will have any trouble finding a husband for Jade," Evan said rigidly. "She has qualities that will make her attractive to any man who is not a fool." Realizing what he had said, he quickly amended, "To any man who is not already engaged to be wed."

Milosh shifted on the pile of harnesses and leaned forward on the plank. He braced his feet on the ground

and directed his dark gaze toward Evan's grandfather. Culvato rose from his seat as if in response to a spoken summons. He crossed to stand behind Milosh. He leaned forward and the two exchanged words in low voices. Culvato smiled as Milosh nodded thoughtfully, his stolid gaze still fixed on Evan.

"We have spent Jade's *darro*." Opi turned to face the large group of *phuri* and the men assembled to witness the proceedings. "Jade is disgraced. She may never marry. What is fair?"

"The *Gadjo* should repay the *darro*," a voice immediately chimed in.

Opi rubbed his chin in mimicry of concentration. "Perhaps," he said. After a theatrical pause, he asked Evan, "Would you be willing to do that?"

"Whatever is fair," Evan replied in a trenchant tone.

Jade's uncle was leading the crowd through its paces with the objective of separating him from his gold. So be it. He had more than enough coin to buy his way out of this situation and settle a sum on Jade to ensure she would not be wed to a man who would abuse her. Perhaps there was no real threat to Jade. The entire scenario might be a grand bit of playacting involving the entire Lowara tribe. He would never know.

"He should repay the *darro* and buy Milosh a new *vardo* as punishment for his interference," another voice shouted.

"And a horse to pull the *vardo*!" another suggested.

Opi looked to Evan for agreement. Evan shrugged

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and nodded his concurrence with the new terms. "You're an opportunistic lot, aren't you?"

A disembodied voice in the crowd muttered "*dilo*." A rumbling underbelly of snide laughter rolled toward Evan.

"You might want to inform them I speak some *Romanes*," Evan ground out. "I am aware someone just called me a fool."

Opi grinned and flexed his shoulders in mute apology.

"I will agree to your terms, but I have a condition of my own," Evan said, raising his voice to be heard above the muttering of the crowd. "There is a matter I wish to bring before the *phuri*."

Milosh inclined his head, encouraging Evan to continue. Evan fixed his gaze on Milosh, making his appeal directly to Jade's father.

"I will repay the *darro* on one condition: Jade will not marry, unless it is to a man she chooses. In accepting my gold, you are bound by honor to abide by my request. My grandfather will make sure any agreement we make remains binding after I have left England."

"You are the man Jade was to marry. You shamed your grandfather by your refusal to wed the woman he chose for you," Milosh said. "You shamed my daughter." His voice was a hoarse growl.

"Culvato had no right to make such an arrangement on my behalf. I already have a fiancée," Evan said. "Your daughter ran away, just as I did. Jade wanted the marriage no more than I."

“Jade does not know what she wants,” Milosh said with a frown. He nodded toward a nearby bench. “Sit,” he instructed Evan.

The two Gypsies nearest Evan moved to stand on either side of him. Evan took his place on the bench, flanked by the two men. Milosh summoned Opi with a wave of his hand. The two spoke briefly. Opi tossed a look in Evan’s direction, then grinned and disappeared into the throng of onlookers.

Milosh no doubt felt he could shame him into offering a larger settlement. The delay was simply a tactic to raise the price. Had Jade’s uncle gone to fetch her? What was her role in this final negotiation? It might be better if he and Jade never saw each other again. Evan recalled his last glimpse of Jade, proud and beautiful as Culvato led her away. There had been tears in her eyes. The memory would haunt him.



The fragrance of cherry tobacco smoke wafted from the bowl of the pipe Milosh clutched in his hand as he motioned Culvato to his side.

“Do you still approve the match?” he asked in a low voice.

Culvato was surprised by the question. “I still desire a joining of our tribes. Evan may never understand what it is to be *Roma*. After his mother died, he learned of his

father from her diary. Evan grew up believing another man was his father. Our customs are strange to him.”

“He has no respect for our ways, then?”

“He has respect. He came to England to understand who he is,” Culvato replied. “He learned our language. But he is not *Roma*. He is a house-dweller who lives in a big home on land his family owns. He has the responsibilities of a much older man. He will never be *Roma* in his heart.”

“Neither will Jade,” Milosh said. He worried the stem of the wooden pipe between his teeth and drew the pungent smoke into his lungs, exhaling with a sigh.

After returning to camp that evening, Milosh had learned about Evan’s confrontation with Dimitri over Jade. He had heard how the young man had treated Jade respectfully and protected her from Dimitri. Milosh spent some time mulling over these details and what might be inferred from them. Now that the union between Jade and Evan seemed doomed, Dimitri had demanded Milosh honor his childhood betrothal to Jade. There was no time to draw Evan out and examine his feelings for Jade. Milosh would have to act on instinct alone. His daughter’s own reckless actions had forced his hand. He could not prevent Jade from being married to Dimitri if he could not find another solution.

He took another drag on the pipe. “Would Evan feel bound to a *Roma* wife?”

“My grandson is a good man,” Culvato said. “He

would not abandon a woman entrusted to him. But if you are speaking of marriage, I do not know how it can be brought about. You can see Evan is opposed. Even Jade will not agree.”

“My daughter will do as she is told,” Milosh growled.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, wiry beard stubble scraping his fingertips. His gaze swept over Evan, noting the young man’s stiff posture as he waited on the bench. He had to admit to a grudging admiration for Culvato’s grandson. Evan had answered the questions posed by the *phuri* with admirable composure and surprising candor, although his strange manner of speech had made him difficult to understand at times. He was clean looking and well dressed, with none of the look of hard living and dissipation that marked Dimitri. He had heard the women exclaim over Evan’s handsome face and unusual eyes. He motioned for Evan to approach him.

Evan got to his feet and edged around the bench, moving through the narrow walkway at the rim of the campfire. The flames cast his profile into sharp relief. Yes, the women were right. Even by *Gadjo* standards, the young man could be considered handsome.

“I think we can come to an arrangement,” Milosh said.

He studied Evan’s face as Evan pulled the pouch of gold from his pocket and manipulated the drawstring.

“What do you think of my daughter?” Milosh asked Evan.

The long fingers gripping several gold coins suddenly lost their purchase. The coins fell back into the

pouch with the heavy flat clink of metal on metal. Evan glanced up at him warily. Milosh savored the sweet cherry tobacco as Evan paused to frame his reply.

“She’s intelligent and spirited.”

A small cloud of smoke escaped as Milosh laughed outright. “Diplomat,” he grunted. “You mean she has a temper to match her beauty.”

Evan visibly tensed but said nothing.

“She is healthy,” Milosh continued, “and she can *dukker* with such skill that the man who becomes her husband will never need to work.” Culvato had said Evan was wealthy. Would such a man have need of a fortune-telling wife?

Evan held his silence.

“She has strong teeth. You may look at her teeth, if you wish. Shall I send for her?” Milosh offered.

“No. I’ll take your word for it,” Evan demurred, frowning.

“She has none of the low morals you find in so many of the *Gadja* women these days. She is *vujo*—” Milosh faltered at this point in his pitch, leveling his shrewd gaze at Evan, and amended, “Well, she was before she ran away.”

A red flush slowly crept upward from Evan’s throat toward his hairline. He said nothing. Milosh nodded. So, Jade was no longer a virgin. Under different circumstances, he might have killed the man responsible. In this instance, it was indeed good news.

“Culvato and I have agreed you should keep your gold,” Milosh announced. Evan took a step back, a wary expression on his face.

“*Bater*,” condoned Culvato, his loud assent spurring the other elders into a chorus of agreement.

Milosh embraced Evan in a powerful hug, planting a brief, *Roma*-style kiss on his lips. Evan stumbled backward when Milosh released him. He caught the backs of his legs on the bench directly behind him and sat down hard on the wooden plank, looking stunned.

Culvato stepped forward and slapped Evan soundly on the back.

“We have many causes to celebrate! We do not have to pay back the *darro*, and there will be a joining of the Wood and Lowara tribes!”



Evan bolted upright from the bench and was quickly flanked by the same two Gypsies who sat beside him earlier. The cheers of the crowd dwindled to silence as he handed the pouch of gold to Milosh. He sensed the folly of counting out the *darro* coin by coin when the faces around him already alleged insult.

“I’m leaving,” Evan said simply. “I’m sorry.”

“Take back your gold,” Milosh ordered in a thunderous voice. Jade’s father dangled the pouch toward him

in one meaty paw.

Evan shook his head and began to back away from the proffered gold. "I do not choose to marry your daughter any more than she chooses to marry me," he said. "You cannot force us to wed."

"There are times in life when choice vanishes," Milosh told him. "For you, young Evan, this is such a time."

As if on cue, Opi appeared at the edge of the crowd, carrying a dark bundle. Evan blanched at the sight of the uniform he had recklessly discarded outside the London tavern.

"One finds strange things in London alleyways," Opi smirked as he held out the outfit for Evan's inspection. "This uniform was stolen from a distinguished *Gadjo*. The Crown wishes to see the culprit hanged."

"Make your point," Evan said frostily.

"This is why you will marry Jade," Milosh said. His tone was matter-of-fact as he inclined his head toward the uniform Opi clutched in his hands. "You do not want to hang for this theft."

"You do not want a Gypsy for an enemy," Opi crowed.

"Or for a wife," Evan shot back. He looked into the smug faces surrounding him. He had been caught like a plump rabbit in a snare.

"So, my choices are to marry Jade or—"

"We will take you to London and turn you over to the authorities," Opi obligingly finished for him.

"Wed or dead," someone jeered, eliciting sparse

laughter from the crowd.

It would be easy enough for the authorities to prove he had stolen the uniform. Prior to his desperate decision to borrow a disguise in order to fool the Gypsies chasing him, he'd never stolen anything in his life. He hadn't been particularly clever about it. He would hang, and his family back in Charleston would eventually learn he had been executed as a common criminal. His brother Colin would probably welcome such an outcome, but his youngest brother Patrick would be devastated. And Glorianna, his fiancée? Ever-practical Glorianna would mourn him for a respectable period of time before finding herself another landed, wealthy suitor.

Evan raged inwardly at the ambush they had set for him. Jade had read him as expertly as any cunning *Roma* had ever read a *Gadjo*. Had she allowed him to assume the roles of protector and lover simply for the purpose of luring him into this trap? Had she been willing to go that far? Cold rage settled over him at the thought. Rage and an emotion infinitely more disturbing, which he did not care to contemplate.

He plucked the pouch from Milosh's hand. He hefted the bag in his open palm, studying it with unseeing eyes. He could not bear to look into the triumphant faces surrounding him. Instead, he called to mind an image of Jade laughing coquettishly at him. He would hold the picture in his mind and focus all his anger on it.

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“Advise your daughter she is about to become a bride,” he told Milosh, with a smile that did not reach his eyes.



Chapter Eight

Jade was forbidden to attend the *kris*, as were all the women. The seductress Magda had been the first to learn the outcome of the meeting through her network of male admirers. The news of a wedding planned for the following day soon spread through the camp.

“Evan would never agree!” a horrified Jade told Liberina. What had they done to him to force him to honor the arranged marriage? Had they hurt him? Her heart pounded a frantic rhythm at the thought. “I must go to him.”

“You cannot,” Liberina warned. “Father says you are to be kept apart until your wedding, so you can both become accustomed to the idea.”

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Her father must not want her to see what they'd done to him. She pictured Evan bloodied and bruised, perhaps unconscious. Did they intend to perform the ceremony to bind them while Evan was out cold? How could they compel him to marry her otherwise?

If she had not run away to escape the marriage arranged to align the Lowara and Wood tribes, perhaps the outcome might have been different. What would have happened if she had gone with her father to the Wood encampment and met Evan there after the marriage had been arranged? When she and Evan had been on the road together, there had been charged, breathless moments of undeniable attraction between them.

Foolish girl. Evan ran away because he did not want to marry a Gypsy. He has a Gadji woman awaiting him in America. She will be his bride, not you. If they force him to do this, he will never forgive you. You will have repaid his kindness by ruining his life.

"I will seek an audience with the elders." Her desperate words were hollow. The elders would not listen to her, and she and Liberina both knew it.

"Phei," Liberina said softly, shaking her head, "if you love him, why do you not wish to marry him?"

"Because he does not want me. He will hate me if they force us to marry, and I cannot bear the thought of him hating me." Tears filled her eyes, and she impatiently knuckled them away. Evan was not a man who would sit back and be told what to do. How had her

father and Culvato brought this about? “I want to see for myself that he has not been harmed.”

Jade hugged her shawl around her as she moved toward the wagon entrance. She opened the doors and peered out. No one had been sent to guard her yet.

“What will you do?” Liberina asked.

“The only thing I can do.”



Evan was quartered in an empty wagon at the end of the caravan line. A sentry standing outside spoke more of imprisonment than hospitality. She would need to find a way to distract the guard assigned to prevent her prospective bridegroom from fleeing the encampment or receiving visitors.

“Ah, young love,” Magda said with a throaty laugh when Jade asked for her help in creating a diversion. “You cannot wait for the wedding night?” Her dark eyes swept over Jade, and a knowing look came into her eyes. “I have seen your young man,” she said. “Were I you, I could not wait, either.” Her shrewd gaze fastened on the silver hair comb in Jade’s hair. “Pretty,” she coyly observed.

Magda owned an extensive collection of such ornaments, no doubt payment from other women requiring similar assistance. Jade tugged the comb free and handed it to her. Magda dropped the comb into the deep pocket

of her skirt.

She hid in the shadows while Magda persuaded the guard to abandon his post. It did not take long. The sound of Magda's husky laughter trailed after her as the pair disappeared into the darkness. Jade took a deep breath and mounted the wagon porch board. She entered the wagon, wincing at the creak of boards as she passed through the threshold.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the light provided by the cookstove and two glowing candles. Evan rested upon the bed, which was fashioned similarly to a berth on a ship. He lay on his back, one hand flung across his eyes. His hair was tousled and his clothing unkempt. There was no sign he had been beaten. She sighed in relief, the sound audible in the closed space.

"If you've come to bring the condemned man his last meal, leave it, and get out," he said.

There was no food or water visible in the interior of the small wagon. Did they intend to starve him into submission? How dare they treat him like this!

"Are you hungry?" Jade asked. "I can bring food."

Evan sat up so quickly he struck his head against the low wall of the *vardo*. The violent movement startled her. She retreated a step, sensing a current in the air as if a storm was about to break.

His bright silver gaze swept over her in a way she found disturbing. Heat flooded her face as images of the intimacies they had shared filled her mind. She could



almost feel his mouth and hands on her, the memory so vivid it made her heart race. Was he remembering, too?

"Can I bring you something to eat?" she offered again, not knowing what else to say. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

His eyes roamed over her again, from the mane of black hair no longer restrained by the silver comb to the tips of the slippers peeking out beneath her skirts. This time his stare was insolent. His full lower lip formed a sneer. "No," he said. His expression was stony. "There is nothing I want from you."

He blamed her. He blamed her for everything. Her racing heart slowed to a heavy thud of despair. She thought for a moment her heart might stop completely. Evan hated her. She could see it in his face. She wanted to run from the wagon and find some dark corner where she could sob out her grief. Instead, she remembered her purpose and faced him without flinching in the face of his anger.

"I can think of something," she said.

"Go on." His smooth drawl held a cutting edge. His eyes glittered with malice.

"There is something you want." She faltered when he only continued to look at her. "Y-you want your freedom. I can help you."

Evan pushed a hand through his disheveled hair and bounded to his feet in a lithe, subtly menacing movement. She instinctively wanted to recoil as he advanced

on her but held her ground.

"Is this a new game, Jade? I'm not playing. I would sooner bargain with the Devil than enter into a pact with you."

"I can help you escape tonight."

"What, on the eve of our wedding? What will people think?"

His sarcasm only hinted at the rage she sensed was simmering beneath his surface. She had made a mistake in coming here.

"You don't want to marry me," she said.

"No more than you want to marry me," Evan countered, lifting a brow in challenge. "Wasn't that your reason for running away in the first place? Or have you told so many lies you can't remember the truth now?"

If she told him she loved him now, he'd use the knowledge to punish her. "No, I don't want to marry you. I only want to escape my life here."

His mouth flattened into a thin line. "Perhaps you should have considered the consequences before you trapped us both in your snare. All you need to have done was tell me the truth, not just the details that served your purpose. This mess is your own doing."

"I am not the only one to blame," Jade shot back. "You allowed me to believe you were a criminal when it suited you. You told me nothing about yourself. I begged you not to bring me home, but you would not listen. *Dilo!*" She advanced toward him until they were faced off like a pair of spitting cats. *How dare he think*

none of this was his fault!

“Was it really a coincidence we met in the tavern? Or was your entry planned with flawless timing?”

“It was raining, and there was no other shelter! Do you also blame me for the storm? I did not want your help. I never asked for your help!”

“You didn’t want my help, then and I don’t want yours now,” he said coldly.

“Then I will leave, and may the Devil take you!”

She pushed past him. Evan caught her arm and spun her around to face him. The intensity of his expression made her breath catch in her throat. The air was charged between them, the quiet of the night punctuated by the lonesome croak of a distant frog.

“I do have one question,” he said.

Jade stared down at the powerful arm holding her, rather than into his compelling eyes. “What question?”

“It appears that your main goal was to be returned in an unmarriageable state. When your father listed your selling points to me, he was under the impression you were still . . . I believe his word was *vujo*.”

Humiliated by the reminder she had been the object of a negotiation, Jade tried to wrench out of Evan’s grip, but he held her fast. His gaze dropped to her lips. Her entire body thrummed in response to some primitive call.

“My question is, why me?” Jade briefly closed her eyes against the pain she saw in his face. When she

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opened them again, his expression had hardened. “Was it out of desperation at the last moment? Would any man have suited your purpose? I can’t help but wonder now if I interrupted a negotiation with Hindes. You might at least have come away with one of Hindes’s rings—”

Jade screeched in outrage at the insult. She jerked out of his hold and slapped him with all the strength she could marshal. Evan made no effort to shield himself from her attack or to retaliate. She stared in horror at the red imprint of her hand on his cheek. He stepped away, turning his back to her.

“I don’t need your help to escape,” he said. “All your father requires is that you become a married woman. There is nothing that says I must remain here and live with you as man and wife. A heathen ceremony will not make me feel bound to you. Or have you forgotten I still have a fiancée in Charleston?”

“No, I have not forgotten.”

So, he intended to escape, but in his own time and on his own terms. She should have realized he would not consider himself obligated by a *Roma* ceremony. He had simply used her attempt to help him as an opportunity to punish her for any part she might have played in his current predicament.

“I would not want to keep you from your bride.” Jade hurried toward the double doors of the wagon. She needed to be outside. She could not breathe. “I will have someone bring food and water,” she said over her shoulder.



Their wedding day was warm with a freshening breeze. A meadow near the camp provided an idyllic setting for the ceremony. A placid stream gurgled beneath large shade trees under a sky so blue and bright it seemed to mock her. She could hear a dog whining in the distance and the laughter of children. The aroma of spices and roasting rabbits drifted on the air. For most in camp, the worst day of her life was an ordinary day like any other.

She stood swathed in a satin dress the color of fresh blood, a gossamer scarf of scarlet shot with gold threads wound around her throat. As a *Roma* woman, her wedding was the rare occasion where she would wear red. The color was usually considered unlucky. How much more unlucky could she be? She was about to be married to a man who despised her and planned to abandon her at his first chance. Even worse, she had fallen in love with him.

She felt Evan's stiff-backed presence beside her as they stood together before her father. She did not have the heart to look directly at Evan. She felt numb and hollow, as if the ceremony about to take place signified grief and despair rather than joyous union. She should have broken with tradition and worn white, the color reserved for mourning.

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Jade raised her chin. If Evan could stand beside her and endure this torture, she could, too.

Jade's friend Starlina drifted to stand to her right while Liberina took her place beside Evan. Starlina held a silken white cord and a gleaming knife with an ornate handle. Liberina clutched a bundle of twigs from seven different types of trees in her hand. After selecting a weather-scrubbed, gnarled branch from the bunch, Liberina handed it to Milosh.

"I will now tell you the meaning of the marriage bond," he said. He snapped the twig and tossed it into the wind, his face somber. Liberina chose another branch and placed it in his hand.

"You must not break this pledge," Milosh said. "It must live on between you and be buried with you." He broke the second branch and scattered the fragments.

She blocked out the drone of her father's voice and the significance of the words as he continued to speak and snap branches. The words meant nothing to Evan, who had called the ceremony "heathen." At this very moment he was probably dismissing the ritual as a savage, primitive rite and planning his escape.

Jade was escorted to a wagon painted bright yellow with white trim. She found a basket containing a small loaf of bread, a bag of coarse sea salt, and the bucket of water she had filled from the stream earlier that morning. Returning with the items, she placed the basket and bucket at Evan's feet.

Milosh quietly coached Evan, who withdrew a small tin cup from his pocket and filled it from the contents of Jade's bucket. They had reached the moment when they would drink from the same cup as man and wife, for only this one time in their lives.

Jade turned to face Evan. He was scrubbed, groomed, and handsome in borrowed black trousers and a dark gray shirt whose sleeves were decorated with hand-sewn ribbons of blue and silver. His hair was gathered at the nape with a strip of leather.

He sipped from the small vessel and held it out to her, his jaw rigid. She lifted her eyes to his and nearly dropped the cup as she took it from him. The gaze resting on her was cold steel. The planes of his face were hollow with displeasure. She closed her eyes as she choked down a gulp of the tepid water, opening them again when Milosh murmured his next instruction.

Evan snatched the cup from Jade's unsteady hand and ground it beneath his boot. Jade looked down at the bright bit of metal lodged in the soft brown earth, feeling as if her heart had been crushed beneath the brown leather.

"*Abiav*," Milosh said solemnly.

The mingling of the blood. Jade glanced at Evan. A flicker of emotion passed over his face and was quickly suppressed. She guarded her own expression. He would interpret even a small smile as proof of her guilt. She was a bride with no reason to smile on her wedding day.

Evan turned his attention to Milosh. Without being

told to, he extended his right arm palm up as Starlina placed the knife in Milosh's hand. Milosh made a shallow cut on Evan's exposed wrist using the long ceremonial blade. Jade stared dully at the thin red line of blood. Milosh took her wrist in his hand and made a similar cut. It stung, and she felt faint as Milosh grasped Evan's arm and joined Evan's wound to her own, causing their blood to mingle.

Starlina handed the silk cord to Milosh. He took Jade's wrist and bound it to Evan's with the soft white cord, wrapping the length around their joined wrists. He sealed the bond with three knots.

"One knot is for constancy, one is for fertility, and one is for long life," Milosh intoned as he secured the final knot.

With their wrists bound together, they were forced to stand close to each other. Jade could feel the thrum of Evan's pulse beating against her own, and the power of the well-muscled arm pressing against her. She inhaled his familiar scent, recalling what it felt like to be held in his arms. She leaned into him, heat fanning from her core in a molten flare. He leveled an icy stare at her, stiffened, and pulled away.

A muscle twitched in Evan's cheek as Milosh slowly untied the cord binding them. Once free, Evan quickly separated himself from Jade. Milosh retrieved the loaf of bread from the basket, broke the small loaf of bread in half, and gave them each a portion to eat. Jade choked

on the dry bread, while Evan displayed even, white teeth as he chewed viciously.

Milosh broke the remainder of the loaf over their heads, scattering the pieces on the ground. He returned to the basket to fetch the bag of sea salt, and instructed them to each take a handful of the salt and toss it over their left shoulders. Evan gathered the salt in both hands and flung it over each shoulder, answering Milosh's censorious glower with a defiant smile. Starlina cut the silk cord stained with rusty ribbons of their blood into two pieces and handed the cords to Milosh.

"The threads must be kept for two years," Milosh told them as he handed a section of the cord to each. "After that time, if you wish to divorce, you must present the cord."

"But only the elder who performed the marriage is eligible to dissolve it," Evan observed in an arch tone.

"So you do know our customs," Milosh said, laughter rumbling in his massive chest.

Evan lifted his hand as if to fling the cord to the ground. Instead, he stopped and handed it to Jade. "I will have no need of it," he said.

Now married as securely as any *Roma* couple, Evan and Jade were allowed to freely roam the encampment. Liberina kissed Jade and offered shy congratulations to Evan before disappearing in the direction of her father's wagon. Dimitri pointedly ignored the newlyweds, but was seen trudging toward the far end of the encampment

dragging a barrel of beer as consolation.

A feast had been prepared in their honor. Fires blazed from newly dug pits, and jugs of beer and brandy were scattered throughout the camp. The aromas of roasting pig, rabbit, and hedgehog mingled with boiled cabbage and potatoes seasoned with garlic and rosemary. Despite the unusual circumstances surrounding their union, those in camp treated them like any other newly married couple, bestowing token cash gifts upon them, along with the traditional blessing, "From me, a little money, but may God give you plenty."

They were guided toward a long table trellised with white and yellow flowers. As they took their seats upon the wooden bench, the cloying scent of honeysuckle filled Jade's nose. She detested honeysuckle. She suppressed a smile when Evan's nostrils flared and a look of distaste crossed his face as he sniffed the air.

A trio of men approached the table of honor with violin and guitars in hand. The violinist tucked his instrument beneath his chin and coaxed a lyrical melody from the dark wood as strolling couples began to move in rhythm with the music.

Jade was unable to enjoy the music, the dancing, or the endless parade of well-wishers. The food remained untouched on her plate. A glance at Evan's plate confirmed he also lacked an appetite. He barely sipped from the glass of brandy he held. What was he thinking as he sat beside her on the bench at the center of the celebration, so remote

in his silence? She sighed and wearily rubbed her eyes.

“We may withdraw to the wagon whenever we wish,” she said. The wagon used as Evan’s temporary prison had ironically been set aside for their wedding night. Once they left the party, she would be alone with the tall, powerful, angry man at her side. Her mouth went dry at the thought. “But it is considered polite to stay and enjoy the festivities,” she amended. “In fact, we should be the last to retire, after everyone else has gone to bed.”

Her words hung in the air between them. She didn’t want to think about going to bed. Was Evan thinking about going to bed? She seized the glass of wine before her and took a deep drink from it. The red wine was warm and tasted sour. The inside of her mouth felt like a pit of sand.

Evan pierced her with a knowing look, as if he sensed her anxiety over what might happen between them in private. Glancing at the revelers around them, he placed his brandy on the tabletop and casually slid closer to her on the bench. She felt the vital heat of his body through her clothing as their legs touched. She flinched at the sudden contact, her skin tingling with the awareness of his nearness.

The heat of the fire, the pulsating violin music, and the errant beat of her heart all colluded with the natural force that was Evan. He leaned toward her and slowly unraveled the length of scarf from around her throat.

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Her pulse fluttered as his long fingers grazed her skin. Pressing his lips against the sensitive area below the lobe of her ear, he nuzzled her. His tongue followed where his lips had been, tracing a warm, moist trail over her skin. Jade clutched the tabletop to steady herself as he blew against the delicate shell of her ear. A moment more of this and she would slide dizzily to the ground.

“Kiss me, *Romni*,” Evan whispered. The heat of his mouth and the warmth of his breath against her skin were a seductive combination. She shivered. His eyes shone with reflected firelight, like the full moon mirrored in a glassy pool of water.

Under the circumstances, the *Romanes* word for “wife” sounded like a curse when Evan spoke it. Jade stared into his eyes, seeking a sign of softening in them, but the glacial look was still there. Apart from the effect caused by the glow of the fire, his eyes were an implacable gray. There was a resolute hardness in the line of his jaw. Judging by the look on his face, he didn’t want to kiss her. He wanted to wring her neck.

She shook her head in subtle refusal, her heart thumping in her chest. Evan’s eyes glittered dangerously. She stiffened, sensing a swift change in his mood. His arm descended over her head and closed around her waist before she could bolt from her seat. With no effort, he turned her to face him, swinging one long leg over the side of the bench to face her fully. He slid toward her and wrapped his arms around her in a crushing hold.

Locking his hands behind her back, he drew her against him. To onlookers, they would appear as two lovers engaged in a passionate embrace.

Her head pressed against his collar. She could feel the furious beat of the pulse in his neck. With a rising sense of panic, she lifted her head and tried to pull away. Evan wrapped one arm tightly around her waist and brought his other hand up to cup the back of her neck, forcing her to rest her head against him. Darning his fingers in the heavy drape of her hair, he tilted her head back far enough to force her eyes to meet his.

“Now, you can do as you’re told, or I’ll strangle you here in front of everyone.”

The unromantic remark was whispered as he stared into her eyes. No doubt to those around them his expression was one of doting attention, but Evan’s gaze was without affection or mercy. Jade squirmed and Evan’s hold tightened in warning. The pressure on the slender column of her neck mounted, and her muscles ached in protest. She drew a shaky breath and nodded her acquiescence. His hand dropped from her waist and moved in a light caress down her lower back, finally resting at her hip.

“Kiss me,” he commanded. There was no compromise in his expression. Jade frowned at him in bewilderment. Why on earth did he want her to kiss him? When she did not comply, his eyes narrowed. “If you’re anxious to move this little party indoors—”

Jade gripped the back of Evan’s head and clumsily

lifted her face toward his, expecting a chaste peck on the lips or cheek. His head dipped, his lips slanting across hers in a tantalizing declaration of desire. His mouth was warm and moist with a faint echo of the brandy he had consumed. She clung to him, her lips parting slightly as her entire being fell under the influence of his mouth. His tongue traced the breach, teasing and demanding. His teeth nipped playfully at the corner of her mouth. An anxious ache bloomed within her as the kiss faded into a bittersweet, gentle brush against her cheek. She was left wanting much, much more. Evan drew back, leaving her weak kneed and shaken. He stared at her, frowning, a victim of his own retribution.

A sudden explosion of enthusiastic applause and bawdy laughter followed. Jade flushed to the roots of her hair as Evan smiled sheepishly and waved at the on-lookers. He picked up the glass of brandy and drained its contents in a single gulp. When he raised the empty glass in a salute, his hand shook slightly.

“We now appear to be getting along quite nicely,” Evan said. “They won’t expect me to leave the wagon tonight, not after that.”

That was the kiss she had found so devastating. It had been a performance. He was planning to leave tonight. She turned away from him as the hot sting of tears filled her eyes. Her gaze swept the encampment, seeking a distraction from her misery.

The distraction came in the form of Liberina. Jade

stiffened with apprehension as she watched her sister move stealthily through the camp. Hugging her shawl around her, she ran from one patch of darkness to the next, as if to avoid being seen.

“Something is wrong,” she said.

“You’ve just now come to that conclusion?” Evan’s look of wry amusement faded when he saw what had prompted her comment.

“May I go to her?”

“You don’t have to ask my permission,” he said gruffly. He looked at her closely, his forehead creasing. “I’ll go with you,” he said.

“No,” Jade said. “You’re a stranger. She will not speak in front of you.” She rose from the bench, lifting her skirt as she picked her way across the uneven ground, following in the direction Liberina had gone.



An abundance of liquor had flowed throughout the wedding celebration. Although most of the revelers were able to drag their weary bodies to their wagons, here and there Jade saw men and women sleeping on the ground. Picking her way among them in the dark, she tried to navigate around a large log in her path. The hem of her dress caught on the obstacle, and she fell forward with a startled cry.

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The log emitted a loud snore as she stumbled across it. Burly arms closed around her. The odor of unwashed flesh and clothing saturated with sweat and alcohol drifted toward her in a noxious cloud.

"The happy bride," Dimitri jeered. "Where is your pet *diddikai*, Jade? He must have been a handsome sight in his *Gadjo* uniform."

His speech was surprisingly clear. Jade had seen Dimitri drunk numerous times. His mind was always coldly coherent, even when his limbs would no longer support him. He could still bray insults even when he couldn't walk.

"You make no sense, Dimitri. Evan stood at my side dressed as a *Roma*."

Dimitri relaxed his hold on her. "He was not married in the uniform Opi brought to the *kris*?" Dimitri chuckled. "Did you know he was given a choice? Wed or dead."

A wave of nausea washed over her. The uniform was the means by which Evan had been coerced into marrying her. No wonder he had lashed out at her. She pulled free of Dimitri's hold and struggled to her feet. She heard fabric rend and felt the cool rush of air against her skin as the bodice of her gown snagged on something she couldn't see.

She stumbled again when Dimitri grabbed for her ankle as she stepped over him.

"*Chavaia*, Dimitri," she snapped, resisting the urge to kick him.

“Stay and talk with me, Jade,” he wheedled. “Your new husband can spare you for a few minutes. He has all night.”

He reached up and grabbed her hand. She leaned away from him, forcing him to rise to his knees rather than allow herself to be pulled to the ground by his weight. Using her as leverage, he pulled himself into a standing position. He leaned against her, steadying himself by grasping her shoulders. She muttered a protest and tried to shake free of his hold.

“So, your betrothed means nothing to you now?” he whined peevishly.

“We will not speak of old promises,” Jade said. How much had he had to drink? Was it enough to render him harmless?

She tried to pull free again, but he dug his thumbs into her shoulders, clinging to her. He raised one hand in anger, his brows forming a *V* over the bridge of his nose. The movement unbalanced him, and he teetered unsteadily against her. He clutched at her to keep from falling.

“Then we will speak of the punishment for broken promises, eh?” Dimitri’s voice was vibrant with malice. “Your little sister becomes my bride tomorrow.”

“You have had too much to drink, or you have lost your mind!”

Fear, pure and terrible, filled her throat. The moon escaped the clouds bathing Dimitri in a wash of shimmering

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light. Jade suddenly saw what had snagged the bodice of her wedding gown. A necklace of gold chain adorned with coins formed a bizarre choker around his thick neck. A *galbé*. The memory of Liberina running through the shadows pierced her heart. What else had Dimitri taken from her frightened sister?

“Hear my promise to you, Jade,” he said. “Liberina will know my wrath. She will suffer in every way it is possible for a woman to suffer. Your weak *phei* will wither and die under my care. That is my punishment for your broken promise to me.”

Jade shrank from him. “I never promised you anything, Dimitri. It was our fathers—”

“The *Gadjo* does not want you,” he continued. “He will abandon you. When your sister is dead, I will be free to marry again, as will you. Then you will be mine.”

Jade shoved him violently. She ducked out of his reach as he grabbed for her, sending him sprawling to the ground. He rolled in the dirt, laughing as she ran from him.

“You will be mine,” he shouted after her. “This I promise you.”



Chapter Nine

Liberina had taken refuge in the empty wedding wagon. Her bruised face bore evidence of Dimitri's intention to keep his ominous promise. Jade paced the length of the wagon as Liberina sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers smoothing the frayed edges of her shawl.

"Father said I do not inspire any passion in Dimitri. He said I should expect to—be with him—a few times after the wedding night, then Dimitri will leave me alone."

"Dimitri took your *galbé*," Jade said. "Did he take anything else?" She paused and fixed a meaningful look on her younger sister.

Liberina ducked her head. "He tried, but the drink made it impossible." She touched the livid area below

her left eye. "He was angry he could not . . . He hit me. He took my *galbé* then. He said if I had no money, I could not run away from him as you had."

"I should have taken the necklace from him," Jade said. "He was so drunk he would not have been able to stop me." She should have strangled him with it.

"I should have taken my necklace when he passed out, but I could not bear the thought of touching him, even to take back my *galbé*. I ran away." Her eyes filled with tears. "How will I bear it tomorrow, *Phei*? How can I let him touch me? He disgusts and frightens me."

"You will not be here tomorrow," Jade said flatly.

Liberina turned huge gold-green eyes on her. Jade stared beyond her at the pine-paneled wagon wall, remembering how Dimitri had found her the first time she ran away. There was no place in England they could hide and hope Dimitri would not eventually find them.

"We must leave England," Jade said.

"We are two women with no money," Liberina pointed out. "How can we even leave the caravan? And what about your husband?"

"I have no husband," Jade said. "I make no claim on Evan. He was forced into the marriage. He plans to leave."

Liberina grasped Jade's hand and squeezed. "I am sorry, *Phei*."

"The Irish go to America without money every day," Jade mused. "How does one manage it without becoming a stowaway?"

She jumped in response to a sharp rapping against the door of the wagon. Liberina looked at Jade in alarm, clutching the shawl to her.

"Evan," Jade guessed.

"It might be Dimitri!" Liberina whispered.

Jade lifted a brow and smiled. "Have you ever known Dimitri to knock?"

When Jade opened the wagon doors, Liberina bolted through the opening and down the steep steps at the front of the wagon. Evan froze on the top step, gaping at the bruise beneath her eye as she flitted by him like a wraith in the night.

"She fell," Jade said dully.

His gaze slowly traveled over her, lingering on the torn bodice of her gown. "I suppose you fell, too?" His expression darkened when Jade paused to frame a reply. "*Where is he?*"

"Gone," Jade lied. To send Evan after Dimitri would solve nothing. It might even get Evan killed. "He has gone to spend the night with friends in another camp."

"I have trouble believing the man has any friends," Evan said, peering at her in the dim light. "Or that anyone would protect him."

She stepped from the wagon porch board onto the top step beside him, angling her body to face him. He stood a head taller than she. His features were hidden in shadow, but he tilted his head toward her as if he studied her face.

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"I've come to tell you I'm leaving," he said.

Jade drew a sharp breath as if a dagger already piercing her heart had been twisted by an invisible hand. She swayed on the step. Evan reacted to the movement by gathering her against him and easing her down onto the broad porch board. He sat down beside her.

She looked around at the silent, empty camp as Evan lit a cheroot and stretched his long legs out before him. The hum of insects and the myriad noises of nocturnal animals gave substance to the night. The fire pits yielded errant sparks from shallow pools of dying embers. The darkness was beginning to morph into the transient murkiness preceding dawn.

"Dimitri will marry Liberina tomorrow," Jade confided, her voice breaking.

Evan let out a sigh. "If I thought it would protect her, I'd marry her, too. But I've heard Gypsies and *Gadjos* alike frown upon the idea of a man having two wives."

"I have a different arrangement to propose to you," Jade said.

She held her breath as weary amusement passed over his face. "No doubt one I dare not refuse."

"I understand you have a fiancée waiting for you. I know you do not consider yourself bound to me by a *Roma* wedding. I never wanted to marry you. You do not want me. I do not want you." The words were not from her heart, but they were the words she knew he wanted to hear.

“Go on.” There was a wary edge to his voice.

“You must leave England. It is not safe for you here. I do not want you to be hanged.”

“*Nais tuke.*” His “thank you” was spiked with bland sarcasm. “You said something about an arrangement?”

She shifted uncomfortably on the hard porch board. Evan slanted a glance in her direction, his attention arrested on her face.

“If Liberina and I run away, Dimitri will search until he finds us. We will never be free of him. If you will agree to pay for our passage to America, I will repay you.”

Evan frowned. “How? By *dukkerin*—telling my fortune? By placing *Roma* curses upon my foes? By *bujo*? One botched swindle could have disastrous results,” he warned. His gray-silver eyes slowly traveled over her. Jade felt as though he had physically touched her. “Or are you suggesting a more intimate form of exchange?” The softly spoken suggestion made her heart race. The images his words called to mind made her body tighten with yearning.

“No,” she said. “I am proposing a contract. We will agree to terms, and I will work for you until the debt is paid. After the debt is paid, I will be free. I can do *Gadji* work as a seamstress or a cook or a kitchen maid.”

His mouth formed a wordless *O* of understanding. Bracing his back against the wagon wall behind him, he pushed a hand through his dark hair.

“What you are proposing has a name,” he said. “It’s

called indentured service.” He studied her face for a reaction. He shook his head, scowling. “Why not use Liberina’s *galbé*? Why indebt yourself to me? You know nothing about me. I could cheat or mistreat you.”

“My *galbé* was lost, and Dimitri took Liberina’s from her. *Romas* can be cheated just like *Gadjos*. But I believe you are an honorable man.” Without pausing to consider it, she had paid him the highest compliment she had ever given anyone, *Roma* or *Gadje*.

“Jade, I don’t believe you fully understand what you’re suggesting,” Evan said. “A period of indenture can last for years.”

“Usually four to seven years, in exchange for passage to America,” Jade supplied.

Evan’s expressive eyes grew even wider. “So, you do comprehend the gravity of your proposal.”

Jade nodded.

“Legally, you would be considered property,” he pointed out.

“A woman’s lot,” Jade replied with a philosophical shrug.

I would be considered your property. The thought came, uninvited, and Jade frowned when she realized she did not find the idea unappealing.

“You may not wish to be married now, but you might in the future.” He looked at her, his expression inscrutable. “By law, you would not be allowed to marry while you were my”—he searched for the right word “*employee*.”

“I will not wish to marry.”

"You cannot be certain of that," he argued. "You're a young woman. One day you will meet someone—"

"I am certain." If he only knew her heart, he would be convinced of her certainty.

"If you ran away, it would not be the same as running away from your *vitsa*. You would be breaking a binding, legal contract. Punishment would be swift and severe, and the time of your service would likely be extended."

Evan was doing his best to discourage her, but it would take the drastic measures of crossing an ocean and living in a foreign land to thwart Dimitri's plans. If she confided the nature of Dimitri's threats to Evan, he would feel bound to confront Dimitri. Evan would stand no chance against a sober, knife-wielding Dimitri.

"I would not run away," she asserted.

"And what if I am not interested in your offer?"

Her heart sank. Did he want so badly to be rid of her? "If you are not interested, I will find someone who is," she said.

A puff of smoke from Evan's cheroot floated upward as he considered her words. She could hear her heartbeat in the silence as she waited for his reply.

"I will require a formal contract," he said finally.

"Of course," Jade quickly agreed. She stood, smoothing the skirt of her ruined wedding gown. She glanced back at Evan. "Liberina and I will be ready to leave in an hour."

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"You will be ready to leave in half an hour," he amended. He raised an eyebrow when she opened her mouth to protest. "You'd better get used to following orders."

Jade nodded. She bent down and planted an impulsive kiss on Evan's cheek.

"*Nais tuke*," she whispered. "Half an hour." She hurried into the wagon reserved for her wedding night and began to collect her few belongings.

Jade sacrificed the twin to her silver hair comb in order to recruit Magda one last time. The *Roma* siren distracted Opi while Jade conducted a brief search of her uncle's wagon. Having found what she sought hidden in a cedar chest beneath a pile of blankets, Jade clutched the dark bundle to her chest as she and Liberina joined Evan in front of the wedding wagon less than thirty minutes later.

Evan had reclaimed Raven from the group of horses tethered at the end of the caravan line. The proud stallion affectionately nuzzled the back of Evan's neck as Jade and Liberina approached. Jade thrust the bundle into Evan's hands with a smile.

"What's this?" Evan said. He untied the length of string holding the parcel together and glimpsed the shiny buttons of the stolen uniform.

"I believe this belongs to you," Jade said, still beaming.

Evan chortled, casting a surreptitious glance around him when Liberina gasped in alarm at the loud sound. "No, I believe the problem was that it *didn't* belong to me," Evan whispered. "It will be the last time I ever steal

anything,” he vowed.

His vow could not include her heart. It was too late for that.

As they crept through the camp, Evan stopped before the main fire that was kept burning at all times. He paused, glancing at Jade before he tossed the parcel into the orange flames. A look of satisfaction crossed his face as the fire crackled and greedily devoured the offering. He looked at Jade. His smile was lopsided, but his eyes were charged with light.

“Nais tuke,” he said softly.



Chapter Ten

Virgil Redmond, the squat captain of the fifteen hundred ton merchant ship *The Marigold*, supervised his crew from the quarterdeck as the ship eased out of Falmouth Harbor. Evan and Liberina stood at Redmond's side, eager to put Land's End behind them.

The easterly winds had begun to pick up, the breeze distending the towering sails, their appearance like sculpted marble. The wind swept from deck to topgallant, gently buffeting Evan's dark hair with a casual caress as he conversed with the captain.

Jade stood on the main deck shading her eyes against the midafternoon glare reflected on the water as she watched the sheer, rocky coast of England recede. It

had been only days since they left the *Roma* camp, but she already felt far removed from her old life.

After traveling at a furious pace to reach the south of England, they had spent the morning in the offices of Evan's English solicitor. The junior clerk charged with the task of drawing up the contract between Evan and Jade had seemed well versed in the nature of such agreements. Jade's brief education among the *Gadjos* had been inadequate to prepare her to read the complex document, but she had been present during the discussion of its terms, and she did not waver when asked to enter her mark on the record.

Hindes's gold had provided for their immediate expenses, and a letter of credit had been sufficient to provide for the rest, including passage to America. Within hours, Jade and Liberina had stepped aboard a ship for the first time in their lives. Despite having committed herself to several years of servitude in order to leave England, Jade felt an exhilarating sense of freedom. She could not recall ever being so happy.

As the flow of conversation with the captain ebbed, Evan's gaze swept the deck, falling and resting on Jade. Officers and crew, reacting to the steady barrage of orders barked by their captain, dodged around Evan as he moved to join Jade on the main deck.

They stood in companionable silence, Evan watching the coastline fade from view as Jade's gaze avidly roamed his striking profile. Now that the voyage was

underway, the strain had lifted from his face. He looked younger and even more handsome, if that were possible. She knew little about him, not even his age, although in the harsh daylight she thought he could not be much older than she.

“Is your home anything like England?” Jade asked. America was almost mythical to her.

“Charleston is sunnier and more humid. And of course, the land is different: very lush and green, with rich soil.”

She closed her eyes, reveling in the musical cadence of his speech and the brush of the wind against her cheek. He spoke the way a good wine tasted, smooth and languid. When she opened her eyes again, he was looking at her.

“What are the people like?” she asked.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as his mouth bowed in a broad smile. “Many of them are transplanted Europeans like you. Privilege and poverty coexist side by side, just as they do anywhere. The southern folk, which would include us, are known for our generous hospitality”—he paused and his glance swept over her —“and for the unsurpassed beauty of our women.”

His drawl seemed to deepen when he spoke of Charleston. She wondered how any woman could fail to be charmed by Evan, especially when he spoke of his home with such affection.

“Your fiancée must be very beautiful,” Jade said.

“Hmmmh?” He seemed momentarily distracted by her question. “Yes, Glorianna is quite beautiful,” he agreed. He chuckled. “Although I don’t believe she would consider ‘beautiful’ a sufficient accolade. ‘Stunning’ would probably better suit her.”

“What is she like?” Jade asked. *What sort of woman would Evan fall in love with?*

“Glorianna is—difficult to describe.” Evan settled his thoughtful gaze on her. “I had a similar question from Milosh concerning you.”

“What do you mean?” Jade splayed her fingers and braced the curve of her forefinger against her forehead to shield her eyes from the bright sun.

“Your father asked me what I thought of you.”

“And what did you say?” Her heart constricted painfully in her chest as she awaited his answer.

“I said you were spirited.”

“Oh.” She supposed it could have been worse, but after hearing Evan describe his fiancée as “beautiful” and “stunning,” it was nevertheless a disappointment. “That was the best you could think of?”

“You have to remember I was trying to remove myself from the situation,” Evan pointed out, “not dig the hole any deeper.” A loud snort of laughter suddenly escaped him. “We did agree you have nice teeth.”

Jade rolled her eyes. She could guess the nature of their discussion all too easily. “I should have been a horse,” she muttered. Evan dissolved into another

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paroxysm of laughter. “What would you have said if you could have spoken honestly?”

“I would have said you were intelligent, courageous, clever, resourceful, and fine looking.” He used the fingers of his right hand one by one to tick off her good points. Although he had been laughing when he began to list her qualities, his mood was solemn by the time he finished stating his observations.

“‘Fine looking’ is a term used to describe a horse,” Jade observed, still smiling. “As in, ‘a fine-looking little filly.’”

The breeze gathered a tendril of her hair and floated it upward, caressing her cheek and momentarily obscuring her vision. Evan’s hand rose in reflex, checking the flight of the errant lock. He stared at the strands of ebony captured between his thumb and forefinger before releasing them.

“Beautiful, then,” he said with a sober expression on his face.

“Beautiful, but not stunning,” she teased.

His fingers trailed along the curve of her cheek, abruptly falling away as Liberina joined them. A gull screamed as it wheeled overhead. Evan tucked his hands into his trouser pockets, made a curt comment about checking on their sleeping quarters, and was gone.



“Here is where your bondswoman will sleep,” Redmond called over his shoulder. Evan followed the captain down a flight of narrow wooden stairs into an area located belowdecks.

The captain flung open the door. A rat as large as Evan’s fist scurried across the floor. The room was littered with stained, lumpy mattresses but contained no other furniture. A noxious stench permeated the space, possibly attributable to the inch or more of filthy water pooled on the floor. The disembodied sounds of coughing and muffled weeping came from the dim interior. While the cabins assigned to Evan and Liberina were barely large enough to accommodate one person, they were at least clean and comfortable.

Evan stood framed in the entryway, appalled that human beings were expected to endure the passage in such squalor. The foul, dank room was nothing more than a holding cell for those sailing to America as indentured servants. Coarse crew members roamed freely through the narrow corridor, an indication that their quarters were nearby. Evan had noticed the licentious looks Jade had been receiving from the more dissolute members of Redmond’s crew. There was no lock or barrier on the door to the room, giving anyone free access to those unlucky enough to be lodged there, many of them

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women and children.

“Jade cannot sleep here,” Evan said.

“Indentures don’t merit costly accommodation,” Redmond said with an apologetic shrug. “If the woman is a bondservant, this is where she will sleep.”

“She will not sleep here,” Evan insisted. “I wish to upgrade her status.”

“Shall I have her bunk with you?” Redmond raised one bushy eyebrow and smiled.

“No,” Evan curtly replied.

The smile faded from Redmond’s face and he cleared his throat. “There is an empty cabin adjacent to yours. It’s the last unoccupied one.”

“That will do.” Evan nodded. “Add the cost to my account.”



A blood red sun hovered above them the following morning. A light breeze stirred, whispering steadily from astern. A darkling ripple spread across the looking-glass face of the ocean, a deep contrast against the azure sea of the day before.

“Sure signs of bad weather ahead,” Jade overheard a crewman say.

She had slept soundly in the cozy cabin, lulled by the gentle sway of the great ship as it eased through tranquil

waters. Breakfast had been a bowl of oatmeal fragrant with cinnamon, a generous handful of currants, and a mug of strong coffee. Jade had never tasted anything so delicious.

She was disappointed when Evan did not join them on deck, abandoning them to the company of their fellow passengers. Many of the voyagers hailed from Germany and spoke no English, reducing their communication to spurts of pantomime. Jade encountered a trio of British indentured servants among the group but soon found she was ostracized by two of them, not because of her *Roma* heritage, but due to envy over her sleeping quarters. The third woman was curious enough about Jade's circumstances to engage her in conversation.

"So you're the bondswoman who has a cabin with a bed?" The pale woman who spoke was painfully thin, with red-rimmed eyes and open sores on her spindly legs. The shapeless brown garment she wore looked like it might have once held potatoes. "Would you like to see where the rest of us sleep?"

The narrow wooden flight of stairs had marked Jade's descent into hell. Moments later, she scrambled back up the steps, her hand clasped across her mouth and nose against the abominable smell and the gorge rising in her throat.

"Take a reef in the mainsail! Belay there!" On deck, Captain Redmond paused while guiding his crew in preparation for the coming storm. He acknowledged Jade with a smile.

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“You’re white as a bedsheet,” he remarked. “I hope you’ll be feeling well enough to accept the dinner invitation I’ve extended to Mr. Dark and his party for this evening.”

“Do you usually invite bondservants to dinner?” Redmond’s face registered surprise at Jade’s question. “And do bondservants usually sleep in cabins on your ship?”

“No,” Redmond replied slowly, “but the cost was added to Mr. Dark’s account. Or to your account, I would venture to guess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you read the agreement you signed, young woman?” Redmond studied her face. “No, I suppose not.” He shook his head and sighed. “Then let me explain it to you as best I can.”



An indenture contract included a clause giving the owner the right to adjust the length of service based upon the expenses incurred to shelter the servant. It was possible to extend the length of a contract by a number of years, simply by keeping a close tally of all expenditures made on behalf of said servant. No mention of such a caveat had been made when the terms of the indenture agreement between Evan and Jade had been explained. She could only assume the omission had been deliberate.

By the time they joined Redmond to dine by candlelight in his teak- and mahogany-appointed cabin that evening, Jade could not decide which had left her feeling more abysmal, the rolling pitch of the ship in the sudden gale, or Evan's duplicity in taking advantage of her ignorance.

"You still look pale as death," Redmond said to Jade. "Here, some wine might put some color back into your cheeks."

Jade accepted the glass, tossing a glare at Evan. He paused while sipping his brandy and responded by raising his brows in an open look of inquiry.

"So, you're returning to Charleston, Mr. Dark?" Redmond politely inquired. "I hope your business in England was pleasant."

"Pleasant enough," Evan replied. He frowned when Jade snickered and downed the contents of her glass.

"I'm sure he'll say it has been an adventure," she said. "A *profitable* one." She held out the empty goblet, and Redmond obliged by refilling it from a large diamond-cut glass decanter.

Liberina observed the exchange with an owlish expression of bewilderment. "How soon will we reach America?" she asked.

"A month or a bit longer," Redmond estimated. "Given the currents and the weather, not more than forty days."

"It will no doubt seem much longer by the time we reach Charleston," Evan remarked. The look of reproach

he leveled at Jade incorporated her death grip on the goblet of wine.

Jade refilled her glass for the third time. She smiled when Evan's brow creased in disapproval. She continued to sip the claret, idly using her fork to slide the beef and boiled potatoes across the surface of the brass plate in front of her. Her throat and chest slowly filled with a sensation of spreading warmth. Her arms suddenly felt weak. The fork fell from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

Evan bent down to pick up the fork. He carefully placed the utensil beside her plate. His lips were pursed, and a muscle jumped along his jaw. An irrational bubble of laughter welled within her when Evan glowered in her direction. She struggled to suppress it. A giggle escaped when she hiccupped.

"I can request that cook make something else, if the meal does not please you," Redmond offered.

"I'm not hungry," Jade replied. "I feel sick."

"Too much wine, no doubt," Evan said crossly.

"*Mal de mer*," Redmond suggested with an indulgent smile.

Jade raised her glass to Evan in a silent toast, bringing it to her lips. Evan watched her through narrowed eyes. When she reached for the decanter again, he leaned forward and snatched it from her. He emptied the contents of the decanter into his own glass. The combined brandy and wine sloshed over the rim and pooled on the

oiled tabletop.

"I see we need a fresh bottle," Redmond said graciously, half-rising from his chair.

"No, please. No more for us," Evan demurred. He glared at Jade. "I think she's had quite enough."

"More than enough," Jade hissed in agreement.

Evan stood, circled the table, and came to stand directly behind her. He rested his hands lightly on her shoulders.

"As you can see, the lady is not feeling well," he said. "Come, you need to rest." He pulled Jade to her feet, his solicitous manner in stark contrast with the stern pressure of the fingers gripping her arms. "Liberina will keep the captain company while they finish their meal."

It was an order, and Liberina seemed to recognize it as such. Her eyes were huge as she watched Jade make her way toward the door of the cabin with Evan following closely behind her.

"Mr. Dark, before you leave—"

Evan paused while Redmond searched his pockets and extracted a small vial. He handed it to Evan. "We have a rough storm ahead," he said. "The ladies may want to take the laudanum and sleep through the worst of it."

Evan nodded, mumbling his thanks. Jade swept through the open door and marched into the corridor, weaving slightly as she continued along the narrow passageway. Evan hurried after her, cursing vividly in her wake. He slowed, staring open-mouthed as she

bypassed her own cabin and continued down the long narrow hallway.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he shouted.

She rounded the corner and began to descend the stairs leading to the indentured servants’ sleeping area below decks.

“To bed,” she yelled back at him.

Evan ran to intercept her, skidding around the corner and making a desperate lunge for her from the top of the stairs. His hands snagged empty air and he nearly fell down the stairs after her. Recovering his balance, he descended the narrow steps two at a time, reaching Jade as she was about to pull open the door and enter the squalid space.

He snatched her elbow and spun her around to face him. “Have you lost your mind?”

Jade tugged the door open, releasing a miasma of foul air from the enclosure. A single brass lantern bolted to the wall illuminated the hallway in which they stood. The small room beyond was cloaked in darkness. Wedging his body between Jade and the door, Evan slammed the portal shut.

“This is where the bondservants sleep,” Jade said. “This is where I will sleep.”

“I’ve arranged a cabin for you.”

“I did not ask you to buy a cabin for me.”

“I’m only renting it. You can’t take it with you when you leave the ship,” he snapped. When she tried to push

past him, he seized her by the shoulders. “So, I’m to be punished again for having done you a kindness?”

Enraged, he thrust her away from the door. He plucked the vial of laudanum from his pocket and flung it at her. The bottle struck her skirt, slid to the deck, and began to roll with the pitch of the ship. “You’ll need that,” he said, pointing to the drug. “You won’t want to be awake when the rats start crawling all over you.”

“Rats?” Jade swallowed hard.

He peered at her. “Yes, rats the size of small dogs,” he embellished with gleeful malice. “I’ve seen them.”

Jade looked askance at him. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “I don’t believe anything you say. You’re a liar.”

Evan was taken aback by her declaration. “I’ve gone from honorable man to liar within a matter of days?”

“No,” Jade replied with a snuffle and an obstinate lift of her chin. “You haven’t changed. I was wrong. You were never honorable to begin with. You’re a scoundrel!”

“Why do you say that?” He took an angry step toward her when she didn’t immediately respond.

“Are you going to deny you paid Redmond for my cabin so I would not sleep with the other indentured servants?”

“What reason would I have to deny it?” Evan huffed. “How does that make me a liar and a scoundrel? As my *property*”—he spat the word at her—“you are obliged to sleep wherever I damn well tell you to sleep.” He paused at the shocked expression on Jade’s face and hastily

added, "Within the boundaries of our agreement, and within propriety, of course."

"Of course!" Jade mocked, the green fire of rebellion sparkling in her eyes.

The ship pitched and rolled with the rhythm of the churning sea. Evan struggled to keep his footing as he bent to retrieve the spinning bottle of laudanum. He stumbled, nearly bumping into her. When he straightened, they were nose to nose. The open contempt in her expression only infuriated him more.

"I've had enough of this foolishness," Evan said. "Like it or not, you're going to sleep where I tell you."

Without another word, he swept her into his arms, ignoring her gasped exclamation of outrage as he clamped one arm around her shoulders and caught the other beneath her knees. When he had nearly reached the top of the stairs, Jade suddenly bucked, throwing Evan off balance.

He grabbed the cold metal handrail and slammed the upper half of Jade's body against the wall to prevent them from toppling backwards. The hand grasping the rail was pinned between Jade's soft upper curves and the wall. Heart pounding and lungs burning, Evan braced against the wall for a steadying moment before tightening his hold on the rail and allowing Jade to slide down the length of his body until she was standing on the step below him.

Breathing hard from the exertion and still clinging

to the handrail, he grabbed her arm before she could dart back down the stairs. He hauled her up the last two steps and onto the landing, propelling her down the corridor in front of him until they reached her cabin.



Chapter Eleven

Jade forged ahead of Evan into the cabin. She settled on the edge of the small bunk with her head bowed, hair swept forward in a shiny curtain, obscuring her face. The heavy door swung shut behind Evan with a shuddering groan as the great ship was rocked by the heavy gale. He adjusted the wick of the brass oil lamp affixed to the wall before casting a quick glance over the room. Fortunately, most of the furniture in the cabin was nailed to the floor. The only objects he needed to worry about were those Jade could throw at him.

She didn't look up as he crossed to the small oak bedside stand and poured water from the pitcher into a glass. He withdrew the small vial from his pocket,

uncorked it, and tapped a drop of the brown liquid into the glass. The drug interlaced with the water, suspended like ribbons of marble. He dipped his forefinger into the glass and stirred the mixture.

"Wait until the wine begins to wear off before you take the laudanum," he advised.

"I don't want it."

Evan set the glass down in the center of the fiddleboards constructed to keep items from sliding off the table, punctuating his action with a clipped profanity. "The storm is only going to get worse, Jade. You will wish you had swallowed the dose." He pulled open the door and ran his fingers along the smooth wood, feeling for the bolt. "I'm going to lock you in."

Jade was on her feet in an instant. "No!"

"I'm going to take the laudanum to your sister. I can't have you scouring the ship in search of a *less* comfortable bed." He paused at the stricken expression on her face. "If you'll promise to stay in the cabin, I'll leave the door unlocked."

He felt another groundswell gathering momentum under his feet and moved to brace against the roll of the ship. Jade clung to the wall for balance, inching her way back to the bed. The unsettling play of motion was like riding the back of a giant centipede. Jade collapsed on the bed with a low moan as Evan reached the door. He glanced back at her.

"I'll check on you later," he said, pushing open the

door. "Try to get some sleep."

"What is the cost for the room and the drug?" Jade asked in a small voice.

The heavy oak door swung shut again. Evan turned to face her. "What do you mean?"

"How much time will be added to my term of service? Days? Weeks? Months?"

Evan crossed the oiled plank floor and sank into the chair beside her. "Why do you think a clean bed and a drop of laudanum will increase your length of service?"

"Captain Redmond said—"

"Damn the man! He had no right." Evan plucked at the frayed edge of the bed's worn, brown wool coverlet. The loose weave unraveled in his fingers.

Jade perched on the edge of the bed, tucking her feet beneath her. She stared at the floor. "He just wanted me to know how things work."

"Why didn't you ask me?" He cast a sidelong glance at her. "Oh, I've forgotten. I'm a liar and a scoundrel. I can't be counted upon to tell the truth. I abused you from the moment we met, and now I have the gall to expect you to sleep in a clean cabin instead of on a stained mattress in three inches of filthy water with God-knows-what floating in it."

"Redmond said—"

"Was such a provision mentioned to you when we reviewed the contract?" Evan reached out and tipped Jade's chin up, looking into her eyes. "*Was it?*"

The shake of her head was imperceptible, but he felt the movement echoed in his hand. The bones of her jaw felt fragile beneath his fingers. She looked frightened, vulnerable, and so beautiful he felt his chest constrict. The ebony of her hair, the budding rose of her cheeks and lips, and her radiant green eyes set off the blushed perfection of her skin. He had called Glorianna stunning, but Glorianna's beauty could not compare with Jade's exquisite loveliness.

He suddenly recalled a conversation with his brother Patrick, a gifted portrait artist, regarding Glorianna. After she had dropped numerous hints about having her portrait painted, a beleaguered Evan had finally approached Pat about it. "I just don't find her an interesting subject, Ev," Patrick had said. Patrick had never been fond of Glorianna, and at the time Evan had viewed his brother's refusal to paint her portrait as a deliberate snub. Now, as Evan studied Jade, he understood why Patrick had not found Glorianna's arctic beauty a compelling portrait subject.

"Jade, your term of service will not be increased," Evan said. He moved his hand from her chin to rest on her shoulder. "The cabin was my idea. I couldn't leave you to sleep in that cesspool."

"Why would you do that for me?"

He had no ready answer. He could claim he was simply protecting his investment, but his motives where Jade was concerned were muddled.

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Jade's slender shoulders began to shake. She was weeping and no doubt very drunk. When Evan gently gripped her shoulders and softly shushed her in a low, consoling tone, the floodgates opened.

She spoke in broken, tearful *Romanes*, perhaps finding English too much of an effort. It became obvious she had forgotten he was able to understand much of what she said. Jade's life had been a difficult one. Sleeping on the ground, tending campfires—often with little food to prepare over them—and fleeing persecution had been her lot in life. Nothing had prepared her for his act of kindness. She chastised herself for her bad behavior at Captain Redmond's dinner table, wringing a wry smile from Evan as he listened to her tearful tirade.

"I'm sure he'll forgive you," he whispered, smoothing her hair back from her face. "I have." Withdrawing a lawn handkerchief from his coat pocket, he dabbed at the glistening tears trailing down her cheeks.

He eased from the chair to the bed and folded Jade in his arms, rocking her as if she were a child. She continued to pour out her misery. Buried within the tumble of words, Evan learned why Jade had been willing to barter her freedom in order to leave England. At the heart of her sacrifice had been Dimitri's death threat against Liberina and Jade's fear Evan would confront Dimitri and be killed. He should have gone with his first instinct and simply paid for her passage with no contract to bind them, but Jade had been proud and stubborn, and

Evan had believed a formal contract spelling out their relationship as a business agreement would negate any hint of the more personal one implied by the wedding ceremony.

Evan stroked Jade's hair, pressing his lips to the top of her head as he cradled her in his arms. Her hair was fragrant with the scent of lavender. He murmured softly to her, and gradually her tearful ramblings subsided. She sighed and hiccupped softly, turning her face up to look at him. Although streaked with tears, her face was achingly beautiful, its sculpted contours mesmerizing.

He was acutely aware of his reaction to her, how his body stirred and his heart squeezed in his chest. He should not remain in the same room with her. It was too risky. In a manner of speaking, they were both drunk. Jade had consumed too much wine, and he was intoxicated by her nearness and the confused jumble of emotions she caused in him.

He shifted his position on the bed, gently lifting her body as he attempted to ease into a standing position. She clung to him. He felt the steady thrum of her heartbeat and inhaled her warm breath, sweetly aromatized by the wine she had consumed.

"Jade," Evan protested, "I must leave."

She rose to her knees and snuggled more deeply into the contours of his body, giving rise to an urgent response from his loins when her lower body brushed against his. She touched his face, skimming her fingers

over the surface of his skin with a light touch. When he lifted his hand to break the contact, she grasped his palm, entwining her fingers with his. She studied the bones and muscles of his hand, turning it palm up as she explored. She traced the cut on his wrist with gentle fingers. Her fingers brushed the sparse hairs on his arm as she leaned down to press a kiss upon the healing wound from the *abiau*, the mingling of the blood.

The innocent touch of her lips on his wrist was incredibly arousing. Evan drew a ragged breath when her moist, warm mouth touched his skin. He stroked the curve of her cheek with shaking fingers. Gently taking her jaw in his hand and guiding her mouth to his, he held her still to receive his kiss. His mood rapidly shifting from consoling to carnal; he cupped the back of her head, savoring the feel of her silky locks beneath his fingers as he kissed her.

He felt her breath catch as his fingers twined in her hair, drawing her closer. He claimed her mouth again, increasing the pressure of his lips until Jade's mouth opened to his and allowed him to deepen the kiss. She tasted like wine, sweet and heady. She timidly met the thrust of his tongue, her parry heightening his arousal. He grew hard, primitive heat and urgency coursing through him as he undid the fastenings of her blouse. He brushed the soft fabric aside with the backs of his knuckles, closing his hand over the gentle swell of her breast.

She moaned low in her throat as his palm glided

over the supple mound of her breast, softly cupping her warm flesh. His palm gently rotated, drawing a sigh of pleasure from her. His lips followed where his hands had worshipped, his tongue swirling over one tender bud until Jade writhed beneath him on the small bunk.

He removed the impediment of her heavy skirt with her assistance, tossing the garment to the floor. Her flesh quivered as he bent to blaze a burning trail of kisses down her rib cage. His hand swept the indentation of her waist and returned to her breast. His mouth followed, his tongue gently rolling over her nipple in a fusion of friction, moisture, and heat. A radiant flush fanned over her body, her raging blood sending heat and color in response to his touch as his hand rested on her breast, near her heart.

Jade shuddered as Evan's hand swept the creamy softness of her hip and spanned her flat stomach. She moaned anxiously as he planted moist kisses on her stomach while his hand skimmed the curve of her buttock. When his hand slipped deftly between her thighs, she cried out and arched against him, helpless with desire as his fingers eased into her. He pulled her closer, his desire for her so acute it was almost unbearable. His gaze traveled over her, reveling in her beauty and her abandon. He shifted, his hardness probing at the juncture between her slender thighs, eliciting a low moan from her in response. The pleasure was becoming too much like pain. He tightened his hold on her hips and rolled

with her until she lay beneath him on the narrow bunk. He looked down at her, noting the flush of arousal on her face and her passion-glazed eyes.

He quickly removed his remaining clothing, tossing aside his shirt and breeches, desperate to feel her heated skin against his own where their bodies touched. His blood sang with the fire she had ignited in him. His nerves and muscles drew taut as he gently used his knee to coax open her thighs and slowly sheathed himself within the oblivion of her incredible heat and honeyed sweetness.

The sensation was bliss. His blood pumped, his heart labored, every nerve ending sang with the perfection of their union. He sought to prolong it, allowing Jade time to adjust to the fullness of his possession. He still thought of her as a virgin. Her one experience had been with him, and no doubt it had been a disappointment. Not this time, he vowed. There would be only this one time between them, but she would remember it. He would make certain of it.

He braced one arm against the wall above her and slowly eased out, then into her again, stretching and filling her. Her mouth opened in a gasp as he lifted her hips and cupped her buttocks gently, guiding her response as he continued to stoke the rhythm, the heat and friction of their bodies combining into a fever of movement. Jade clung to him, instinctively shifting her hips to increase the intensity of her pleasure until she collapsed in

a shuddering vortex of passion.

Evan watched Jade's face as sensation and emotion played over her radiant features, culminating in wonderment over a climax that, in her inexperience, she could never have imagined. His own shuddering release was triggered by his recognition of Jade's soul-sharing fulfillment. The intensity of it left him feeling shaken and incredibly tender toward her. Nothing he would ever experience could compare to the communion he'd just shared with the woman who now snuggled against him in the small bunk, her hand forming a pillow beneath her cheek.

It was an inopportune moment for his thoughts to drift to Glorianna, the woman who expected to become his wife soon after he returned to Charleston. They had been lovers on and off for some time, although he had not been her first. She made love as though it were a transaction: for a bauble, for a favor, as a favor, to boost her self-esteem, or to make her lover jealous. He'd always had the impression that she found sex somewhat messy and distasteful but one of the few means of power available to a woman and therefore necessary.

Glorianna was an attractive woman to have on one's arm at a party. She would make a charming hostess. Her ambition to secure her social status coincided with the expectations Evan would have of a wife. There had never been an emotional bond between them, just an understanding that it was their duty to wed so their

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two adjoining plantations could be merged into one formidable estate. He suspected she would make a cold wife and a neglectful mother.

He listened to Jade's gentle snore as he gathered his scattered clothing and began to dress. The attraction he felt for Jade introduced too many complications into both their lives. Jade had no desire to be bound to him in marriage. She had said as much, more than once. He could not allow a situation to develop where he took sexual advantage of a female who was legally obligated to him, particularly one so vulnerable. He *would* be a scoundrel if he allowed that to happen.

She'd rather be my bondswoman than my bride, Evan thought as he donned his breeches.

He was pulling on his shirt when the door suddenly opened and a dark head poked into the room.

Evan froze. He was too surprised to be embarrassed as Liberina's perceptive gaze swept the room. Her eyes lingered on the shirt he still held in his hand before drifting to rest on her sister, fast asleep in the small bunk. Jade's blouse and skirt lay abandoned on the cabin floor. Although it was impossible to draw any conclusion other than the correct one, Liberina's face did not register anything unseemly about what she saw. In fact, Evan did not detect so much as a flicker of surprise on her face.

He crossed to the door and silently handed Liberina the vial of laudanum. She accepted it with the nonchalance of a sleepwalker, turning and continuing down the

corridor to her cabin without any comment. Evan shut the door. As soon as they arrived in Charleston he was going to teach Liberina how to play whist and three-card brag. He had a feeling she'd turn out to be one hell of a card player.



Jade had been awake for at least a quarter of an hour, watching Evan as he slept in the chair beside the bunk. His long legs were stretched out before him and crossed at the ankles, buff-colored breeches hugging his muscular thighs. The back of his head rested against the wall, with his chin tucked at an angle. A lock of hair had fallen across his brow, making her fingers itch with the urge to touch the soft brown curl. His chest rose and fell with the deep rhythm of his breathing. The memory of the passion they had shared filled her with a wistful, peculiar sense of loss.

She feared what his mood would be when he awoke. She had drunk too much wine and made a fool of herself, weeping hysterically and clinging to him, driven by emotions she had been unable to control. Evan had made love to her out of pity. What other explanation could there be? He had often reminded her of the fiancée awaiting him in Charleston. He had invested nearly every moment since meeting her in trying to find a way

to be rid of her.

The bustling sounds aboard the ship heralded early morning. Evan stirred when a crewman shouted in the corridor outside the cabin. The ship's bells began to toll, signaling the end of a four-hour watch. He yawned and stretched, wincing at the movement as he turned his head toward her.

The faint shadow of beard stubble and smudges of sleeplessness beneath his eyes did nothing to detract from his handsomeness. His expression was serious as he regarded her.

"We need to talk about last night," he said.

Jade sat up in the bed, drawing the scratchy wool coverlet up to her chin. She nodded.

Evan cleared his throat. His gaze wandered the room, settling upon Jade's discarded blouse and skirt. He rose from the chair and bent to scoop up the garments, handing them to her.

"I want to assure you that what happened last night will not happen again. I am not the sort of man who drugs and takes advantage of women."

Jade gestured toward the full glass on the bedside stand. "I was not drugged."

"No, but you were quite overcome by the wine," Evan said. "You are not accountable for your actions. I, however, must be held accountable for mine."

"Do not blame yourself, Evan. You comforted me. I wanted you."

His reaction to her guileless admission was evident in the widening of his gray eyes.

"It was your father's opinion that you do not know what you want," he said. "I tend to share his view. In the future, we will conduct ourselves in a manner suitable to our business arrangement."

He seemed to be waiting for some sign of agreement from her. She nodded slowly, swallowing back the lump congealing in her throat. It hadn't been a declaration of love, but she hadn't been expecting one, had she?

"I understand I am your servant and nothing more," she said.

His mouth flattened in a grim line. "I prefer the term employee," he said. His gaze roamed over her bare shoulders. "You should get dressed before you catch a chill."

He crossed the room and paused at the door, keeping his back to her. "By the way, Liberina was here earlier. She didn't seem shocked to find us together."

"No," Jade replied, "the sight of us together would not surprise her."

"Why do you say that?"

Jade shrugged. "To Liberina, it was not a heathen ceremony."

His back stiffened in response. Claspings the brass door handle, he wrenched open the door and disappeared into the corridor.



Chapter Twelve

When they reached Port Charleston, Evan hired a barouche drawn by two powerful gray horses for the remainder of their journey. Jade and Liberina settled against the black buttoned leather seats of the green satin-covered interior, holding the parcels containing their belongings in their laps.

After the gloomy leaden skies of England, the jeweled blue canopy and pristine white clouds of Charleston were almost too dazzling to bear. Unfamiliar fruits and vegetables took the form of riotous splashes of color as the carriage sped past marketplace stalls. Moss-hung oaks and trees bearing large white flowers redolent with heavy perfume lined the streets like sentinels. Jade had

never imagined such a place could exist.

They traversed gently rolling green hills boasting large manor homes with numerous outbuildings and well-tended fields. When Evan announced they had reached Rosefield, his home, Jade and Liberina gaped at the vista ahead of them before exchanging looks of astonishment.

Rosefield Plantation was a breath-stealing amalgamation of buildings surrounded by verdant gardens ringed by a wide circle of forest. The estate was so vast that all the Gypsies in England could have camped on the land. The mansion, a three-story structure of imported English brick, was nestled in a maze of meandering walks where beds of multicolored flowers reposed in blankets of emerald turf.

Simultaneously amazed and dismayed by Evan's wealth, Jade clutched the package containing her few belongings as she stepped from the carriage. She stood staring at the massive entryway, not trusting her legs to carry her. A gentle prodding at her elbow from Evan spurred her forward, while Jade pressed her parcel to her chest like a shield.

The promise made by the opulent exterior was magnificently kept within. A resplendent pink and brown marble grand staircase curved upward, boasting the symmetry of intricately carved gilded newel posts. Glancing up, Jade glimpsed a landing flooded with sunlight where dust motes danced like capricious fairies in the sunbeams flowing through recessed arched windows.

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Sunshine spilled into even the narrowest crevices, bathing everything in warm golden light. It looked like a place where only angels would dwell.

Her slippers whispered across patterned, inlaid marble floors as she followed Evan through a hallway boasting a gallery of stunning artwork in gilded frames. Oil paintings of portraits and landscapes alternated with stark charcoal sketches on the pale yellow walls.

As they approached a large room at the end of the hallway, Jade heard the sound of animated male and female voices. Seizing Liberina's hand, she took a deep breath, her heart hammering in her ears as Evan grasped the parlor doors and flung them open. Shocked silence greeted them, followed by a high-pitched outcry.

"My darling, you've come home!"

Jade saw a blur of gold and yellow as the woman rushed toward Evan. She was the embodiment of the sunlight filling every corner of Evan's home. Her bright tresses were piled in a mass of shiny curls with tendrils artfully framing her face. The lemon-colored twilled silk of her ankle-length, high-waisted gown rustled daintily as she launched herself into Evan's arms and kissed him passionately on the mouth.

Averting her gaze from Evan's reunion with his fiancée, Jade glanced into the parlor. A man lounged against a marble support column nearby, sipping amber liquid from a glass. He stared at her. Though slightly shorter than Evan, his brawny build gave the impression

of athletic prowess. Thick, wavy chestnut hair set off his gold-flecked green eyes. A raised, thin white scar cleaved the skin near the corner of his right eye. He was handsome and clothed with impeccable care in a rich combination of brown velvet, satin, and brocade. Even his boots bore a glossy shine, the patina reflecting the curved leg of the chair nearby. Boldly returning her look, he smiled.

Jade looked away from him just as the woman relinquished her grip on Evan.

“Now that you’ve finally come home,” she said, “I vow to never let you out of my sight again!”

Jade’s first impression of Glorianna Clayton was of stunning beauty: smooth alabaster skin, hair the color of winter sunlight, a delicate chin, and eyes the same deep blue as the skies above Charleston. The steely cast of her eyes hinted of life experience, making her age difficult to guess. Her small stature gave her a precious, doll-like appearance as she stood at Evan’s side. Her yellow gown flattered her buxom figure, accenting her womanly contours. Standing before the woman Evan loved, Jade felt scrawny and inadequate dressed in her faded skirt and blouse. She felt like the servant she was.

Glorianna’s eyes narrowed when she realized Jade studied her. She lifted her chin a notch and linked her arm possessively through Evan’s.

“Have you been rescuing waifs again?” she asked, with a regal inclination of her head toward Jade and

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Liberina. "I'll indulge these little acts of charity if they amuse you, but only because Rosefield is understaffed." Addressing Jade and Liberina directly, she said, "You don't look refined enough to be ladies' maids, but Eulalie can use help in the kitchen. I'm sure you can be taught to peel potatoes and wash pots. You may leave us."

When Jade hesitated, looking to Evan for instruction, Glorianna stepped forward without warning and delivered a ringing slap to her cheek. Jade jerked in reaction, losing her grip on her bundle of belongings. The last of her mother's china teacups shook free of the scarf in which she had painstakingly wrapped it, splintering when it hit the hard floor. Bits of dark blue china with alternating silver stars scattered across the pink and brown marble floor.

Liberina's cry of anguish was the last thing Jade heard before the roaring in her ears grew so loud she heard nothing else. Evan caught Jade around the waist as she launched herself at Glorianna. Lifting Jade off her feet, he spun her in an arc, sweeping her away from her horrified target. Jade struggled against his powerful hold, enraged he would not allow her to retaliate.

"She intended to attack me!" Glorianna shrank away from them in genteel alarm.

"Glory, I think you've finally met your match!" The nattily attired man sauntered toward Jade, his broad shoulders shaking with laughter. "I'm Colin, by the way, Evan's half brother." Jade glared at him. He jammed the

hand he had extended to her into his pocket, shrugging his shoulders. He grinned at the rebuff.

“As your future wife and mistress of Rosefield, it will be my obligation to discipline the servants,” Glorianna told Evan. “The girl had an insolent expression on her face and did not obey my order. I will not tolerate insubordination.”

“You are not mistress of Rosefield *yet*,” Evan reminded her. “Until then, you will treat anyone I bring into this house as my guest until I bid you to do otherwise.”

The public rebuke brought a gasp from Glorianna and a whoop of laughter from Colin, who reclined against the doorjamb, appearing to enjoy the volley.

“*Romni*,” Liberina said, indicating Jade. She repeated the *Romanes* word for wife, staring pointedly at Evan. The sound of birdsong in the garden outside filled the parlor in the sudden stillness. Jade caught Liberina’s eye and quickly shook her head. She could not allow Liberina to insist Jade was Evan’s wife in front of his fiancée.

“How am I to manage servants who cannot even speak English?” Glorianna demanded.

“Jade speaks English as fluently as you do,” Evan replied evenly. “And you needn’t concern yourself; these women are my responsibility.”

“I am not your guest,” Jade objected. “I will work to pay for our passage here as we agreed.”

“Which is it, Evan?” Glorianna sweetly inquired. “Is she your servant or your *guest*?” Her voice threatened

to escalate into a screech. “And if she is a servant here, in what manner will she *serve* you? Have your tastes become so exotic—”

“That’s quite enough, Glorianna,” a voice said.

Evan spun at the sound, equal parts relief and affection crossing his face as another man entered the room.

The new arrival stood a full foot shorter than Evan. Wide-set, pale green eyes fringed with dark lashes gave depth to his otherwise angular, sweetly youthful face. His finely-pleated white shirt and brown brocade waistcoat hung loosely on his lean frame. Splotches of green, yellow, and brown paint speckled his clothing. A line of forest green paint crisscrossed his brow, repeating in swaths on the cuffs of his voluminous shirtsleeves. The buttons on his buff-colored, broad fall linen breeches were also dotted with yellow, green, and brown paint, as were his stockings. Overall, the impression he gave was of an exotic plant come to life.

“Welcome home, Ev,” the young man said. He stepped back when Evan moved to embrace him. “I’m covered in paint,” he demurred.

“Did you manage to get any on the canvas?” Evan laughed as he tousled the young man’s unruly hair, which was several shades lighter than Evan’s and sun streaked with broad ribbons of gold. “Your timing could not have been better, Pat.”

“So, the great *artiste* deigns to put aside his paintbrushes long enough to greet his returning brother,”

Glorianna said. “Just look at the baggage Evan’s brought home with him. And I am not referring to his leather portmanteau.”

Liberina sank to her knees on the hard floor. Her skirt formed a dark blue pool around her as she began to collect the pieces of broken teacup. A sob escaped her. Patrick turned at the sound, his gaze falling upon the shards scattered across the floor.

He crossed and knelt beside Liberina, oblivious to her look of surprise. He picked up the largest piece. Turning it over in his hand, he examined the pattern of silver stars.

“This must have been lovely,” he said. “What a shame it’s been broken. A cup, was it?”

Liberina nodded shyly.

He joined the two largest pieces. “Oh, I see. The stars were on the inside?”

Liberina nodded again.

“How clever,” Patrick said. He glanced up from the cup and seemed to see Liberina for the first time. He smiled. “Allow me.” He withdrew a paint-spattered cotton handkerchief from his vest pocket. “Careful, we don’t want you to cut your fingers,” he said, motioning for Liberina to scoop the pieces onto the cloth. She obliged, rewarding him with a shy smile.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Patrick,” Glorianna snapped. “You have servants for that!”

Patrick stood. The white cuffs of his sleeves fluttered

as he dusted off his breeches. He bent down, assisting Liberina to her feet.

"You've arrived in time for dinner," Patrick said. "If the young lady will remain here while I change into clothing that doesn't reek of paint and turpentine, I would be honored to escort her in to dinner." His eyes were still on Liberina, who blushed and gave a shallow nod in response.

"The young lady's name is Liberina," Evan said.

"Liberina," Patrick repeated, his drawl lending elegance to her name. "Lovely name."

Jade suppressed a smile when Liberina met her gaze with wide eyes and a subtly lifted eyebrow.

Evan was left to choose between escorting his fiancée or his *Roma* wife into the dining room. His brief hesitation drew a glower from Glorianna and a throaty laugh from Colin. Colin grinned wickedly at Glorianna, signaling she should take his arm and allow Evan to escort his guest.

"I must decline your generous invitation to dinner," Glorianna said. "I have a terrible headache. I really must go home and lie down." She strode toward the parlor door as the brothers dutifully voiced their regrets. When Colin called after her, she turned abruptly, her agitation evident in her expression.

Approaching the inlaid Sheraton side table, Colin selected a cut crystal decanter of peach brandy. "Tonic for your headache," he said. The corners of his mouth lifted

in sardonic amusement. “Please accept it as a parting gift.”

Glorianna’s grip opened as he handed the decanter to her. The heavy glass container fell to the marble floor, shattering. Peach brandy splashed over the settee, darkening the Aubusson tapestry fabric and staining the pale yellow wall behind it.

“Oh, how clumsy of me,” Glorianna exclaimed. “You’ll need to have a servant clean up that mess.” She cast one last look at Jade before turning and strolling out the door.



The meal commenced in silence. A house servant stood by, creating a breeze for the comfort of the diners with the aid of a *punkah*, a fan hung suspended above the table.

“I take it your exhibition in New York was a success, Patrick?” Evan asked.

“Yes, I would say it was. Two other galleries have expressed interest in showing my work,” Patrick responded, his serious tone offset by the exultant sparkle in his eyes.

Patrick had undergone a transformation in the few minutes he’d kept Liberina waiting for him in the parlor. His skin was scrubbed pink, his damp hair was combed, and he had donned a clean, tailored suit. There was no sign of the ragged, gangly, paint-spattered urchin they

had encountered earlier.

Evan spooned a serving of food onto his plate and passed the bowl to Jade. She peered down at the steaming kernel-like white chunks before passing the dish to Liberina. Liberina curiously examined the contents of the bowl. She lowered her head and gave the stuff a delicate, experimental sniff.

"You've never eaten hominy?" Patrick observed Liberina with an amused smile.

Jade and Liberina shook their heads.

"It's a southern specialty," Patrick said. "Quite delicious."

While Colin began to describe in graphic detail a cockfighting exhibition he had attended, Liberina scooped a small amount of the hominy onto her plate. She sampled the dish and nodded in approval. Patrick smiled.

"You should try hedgehog," Liberina told Patrick, who responded with a look of surprise.

"Perhaps I should," he chuckled.

"How is the swamp reclamation project coming along?" Evan asked. "There's been enough time to clear the trees and plant crops on the land. I think I'll ride out for a look tomorrow morning."

"There's not much to see," Colin said. "We ran into trouble with that project while you were gone."

"What, a hurricane?" Evan put down his fork. He looked at Colin expectantly.

Jade felt a frisson of tension in the air. She glanced at Liberina, whose gaze slid warily from Colin to Evan as if she, too, sensed an undercurrent beneath the surface of their polite conversation.

Colin plucked a slice of ham from his plate as if attacking an enemy with his fork. “No. A simple matter of the levees not being kept in good repair,” he said. He sighed as if bored by the topic.

“The repair of the levees was your responsibility,” Evan said. “What happened?”

“I found other ways to occupy my time.” Colin pushed his plate aside. He met Evan’s gaze with a sullen curl of his lip.

“I see.” Evan flung his napkin on the tabletop as if throwing down a gauntlet. “You were too busy spending your afternoons losing at whist and your evenings at the cockfights to attend to your responsibilities.”

“As I see it, I have no responsibilities here,” Colin retorted.

“How can you possibly believe that?” Evan’s face darkened with anger. “I cannot manage this estate alone, and you know it. Rosefield belongs to all of us.”

“Is that so?” Colin rose from his chair and leaned over the table, glaring at Evan. “That is certainly a debatable statement, dear *half* brother! Unfortunately, *our* father”—he swept his hand to indicate Patrick and himself—“has been in Philadelphia for the last six months. There hasn’t been an opportunity to ask him why he left

the running of Rosefield to his *stepson* in his absence!"

"Colin, the dinner table is not the proper place for this discussion," Patrick said.

"You act as if you have no stake in this, Pat," Colin accused.

"And you speak as though you've been victimized by an unscrupulous relation," Patrick replied. "Evan has run Rosefield with no help from us for some time. I will freely admit I have no head for business. My interest lies in my art. Judging by how you spend your time, I would guess your interests do not lie where hard work is involved. You should be thankful you are expected to do nothing to earn your keep."

Colin shoved his chair toward the table with such force the cherry handgrips were scored by the impact. "I am not of a mind to feel gratitude for the crumbs offered to me." He hurled his napkin at the tabletop and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Evan started after Colin. He reached the dining room door and stopped, staring at the expanse of white-painted wood with gilded accents. He returned to the table and sat down, his face lined with frustration. Jade fought the urge to comfort him, realizing such an action on her part would only complicate matters for him.

"My apologies, ladies," Patrick said softly.

No one seemed inclined to finish their meal.

"Perhaps the ladies would enjoy a tour of the house?" Patrick suggested.

Evan directed a look of gratitude at his youngest half brother. “Excellent idea,” he said.



Jade and Liberina followed Evan up the marble staircase, hurrying to keep pace with his long-limbed strides. They trailed after him across the landing and down a hallway, waiting while he fitted a large brass skeleton key into a lock.

The door opened on a spacious, airy room dominated by a huge four-poster bed with light, graceful hangings. It was a woman’s room, decorated in elegant pastels and wallpaper patterned with large pink roses at the height of bloom. An octagonal-topped sewing table of cherry wood with dainty rosette knobs sat in the corner of the room next to a dressing table of matching design. The dressing table boasted a mounted mirror and numerous small compartments.

“*Rinkini*,” Jade breathed. Liberina stood at her side, turning to view their surroundings with a similar expression of awe.

Evan smiled at Jade’s exclamation of “beautiful,” but his pleased look faded when he noticed that the armoire flanking the wall nearby stood open and filled with clothing. His gaze sharpened as he glanced around the room, noting various personal articles scattered about.

Patrick appeared in the doorway with a contrite

expression on his face.

"I thought this room was unoccupied," Evan said.

"Sorry, Ev, I should have warned you. Glorianna moved her things in while you were gone. She said you shouldn't object to her taking the room adjoining yours since you two would be wed as soon as you returned from England. She divides her time between Rosefield and Seahaven these days."

"I see," Evan said dully. "I should have guessed from the smell of her perfume." He wrinkled his nose, his brow furrowing as he surveyed the room.

"Hangs in the air like a fog, doesn't it?" Patrick's expression brightened. "Shall I open a window?"

"No," Evan said slowly. "We'll continue with the tour."

Jade suddenly felt like an intruder. She followed Evan into the hallway, anxious to leave the room occupied by his fiancée. He would soon be married, and she would be a servant in his home, subject to the whims of a woman who already despised her. The thought—or the hominy she had eaten—did not sit well on her stomach.

"I think you will be more comfortable in the west wing," Evan told them.

They retraced their steps down the corridor, crossed the landing, and continued along another hallway. Evan opened the first door on the right, ushering them into a room furnished with a matched suite of carved oak pieces, at the center of which stood a large, canopied bed hung with various shades of green and gold silk. The air

smelled of sun-dried linens and the profusion of yellow roses spread in vases throughout the room.

"I thought Liberina might enjoy this room," Evan said. "It looks out on the garden."

Liberina gasped, staring at her surroundings with an expression of amazed delight.

"If you'd prefer to stay and settle in, we can finish the tour of the house tomorrow," Evan suggested. Liberina looked from Evan to Jade. She nodded.

A look of startled amusement crossed Evan's face when he turned to close the door behind them. He coughed as Jade looked beyond him into the room and caught a glimpse of Liberina bouncing joyously on the soft mattress of the bed.

Jade glanced at the ceiling, shaking her head. "This is new for her," she said.

"I can see that," Evan said, his voice deepening with a suppressed chuckle.

Jade walked briskly down the hallway ahead of him. She reached the landing and paused, expecting Evan to precede her down the stairs.

"Don't you want to see your room?" Evan called.

"Do servants sleep on this floor?"

Evan stepped out of the dim hallway and onto the landing, bathed in the sultry red-orange glow of dusk. He stared at her as he considered her question. He looked tired and distracted.

"No," he said. "But as we agreed, the work you perform

and where you sleep is my decision.”

“I do not wish to sleep in the house. I prefer to sleep among the servants who do not work in the house.”

“Can you tell me why?” His soft words held an edge. When Jade hesitated, his perceptive gaze pierced her. “I won’t allow Glorianna to ever raise a hand to you again,” he promised.

The slap had been disturbing enough. The fact that Evan had witnessed the encounter and had prevented her from retaliating only added to her humiliation. Jade’s entire body coursed with indignation at the reminder.

“I prefer to work out of doors,” she insisted. “I don’t want to be a house servant. As a *Roma*, I feel confined indoors,” she said. She felt her face grow hot, fearing Evan would recognize her excuse for the lie it was.

“It was you who offered to serve as a seamstress, cook, or kitchen maid,” he pointed out in a flat drawl. “There were no special provisions requested when the indenture was drafted.”

“I feel differently now,” Jade said.

I don’t want to sleep in the same house as your wife. I don’t want to watch you together every day for years to come. I don’t want to constantly meet you on the stairs or pass you in the hallway knowing I will never feel your touch again.

“Field labor is backbreaking work,” Evan continued, still watching her. “Many aspire to be house workers for the promise of an easier life.”

“I do not.”

"I see." He looked bemused, as if he expected her to say more. He drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Rosefield has no need for another field hand. I'm afraid you'll have to adjust to sleeping in the main house."

"No one will believe I'm a servant," Jade objected. "They'll think—" She stopped, feeling a fresh wave of heat spread across her cheeks.

"They'll think what?" His mouth formed a faint smile as he studied her. "I attempted to present you as my guest, but you stubbornly, publicly insisted on claiming your servant status," he reminded her.

"You know what they'll think. Your fiancée already hinted at it," Jade snapped.

"It is quite common for some servants to live in the house. A governess or tutor, for example," Evan informed her. His wide grin was wicked with triumph.

"What are my duties, then?"

She held her breath as he closed the space between them, his nearness causing her heart to leap, propelling an ache through her core having nothing to do with the hominy she'd eaten. His scent drifted to her, the heady, spicy, arousing smell that was Evan. Her legs threatened to turn to stalks of rubber as he leaned down to her, his breath ruffling her hair.

"Your first duty at Rosefield will be to teach *Romanes* to anyone who wishes to learn it."

Her head snapped up. She bristled at his amused expression. "No one here will want to learn to speak—"

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"I am master here," Evan loftily reminded her. Jade sensed he was fighting the urge to laugh at her. "Do you know what that means?"

"Yes," she bit out, "it means if you want me to teach *Romanes* to Raven, I will."

A rumble of laughter escaped him. "That might prove interesting," he said. "However, before you start tutoring my horse in *Romanes*, I've decided to let you practice on Patrick. Of the two, he'll probably prove the more difficult student."

"Does your brother know he is to be my pupil?"

Evan shrugged. "Not yet. Patrick did mention he wished Liberina spoke better English or that he spoke her language." He beamed at Jade. "I thought, 'why not both?'"



Chapter Thirteen

Evan wondered if a neckcloth had ever killed a man. The starched white python wrapped around his neck had seemed to slowly constrict over the last hour. The more Glorianna prattled on, the more difficult it became to breathe. Her voice was like the constant drone of a mosquito. Ignore it too long and he'd be covered in hives.

"Darling, you're a million miles away!" Glorianna stood before a floor-mounted celestial globe, smiling impishly at Evan as she ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the sphere. "Perhaps you'd like to come show me *precisely* where in the heavens your mind has gone?"

His attention had been focused on Colin and Jade, who

sat in a far corner of the drawing room. Colin and Patrick were teaching Jade and Liberina to play whist. Evan hadn't liked the idea of Jade and Colin as partners, but there was no rational reason to object to an innocent game of cards.

Evan glanced up as Glorianna joined him on the settee, allowing the length of her thigh to rest intimately against his. He fixed a smile on his face and tried not to squirm when he found his view of the card players suddenly blocked.

"The bride-to-be is supposed to be the one preoccupied," Glorianna chided, "not the groom."

Three days. The ball to announce their wedding would take place in three days. Evan tugged at his neckcloth. He stole a glance at Glorianna, who viewed him with narrowed eyes and slightly pursed lips. He knew that look. A tantrum was in the offing.

"You look lovely tonight," he said.

The simple compliment smoothed her brow and brought the sheen of brilliance to her deep-set blue eyes. She did look stunning. The sapphire silk of her empire-style gown flattered the shade of her eyes. Her upswept, shining curls were threaded with seed pearls. A rose glow adorned her cheeks and lips. There was a time when he would have thought her the most beautiful woman in creation.

Glorianna shifted on the small sofa, brushing suggestively against him. "Shall I leave my door unlocked tonight?" Her voice was husky as her long, tapered

fingers smoothed a lock of hair from his brow.

Evan stilled her hand but declined to answer, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. They hadn't been intimate since his return to Charleston. He had avoided the bedchamber adjoining hers, preferring to spend his nights in guest bedrooms across the city as he renewed acquaintances following his return.

"*Nais tuke*," Patrick said as he was dealt a card. Liberina squealed with delight and began speaking to Patrick in animated *Romanes*. "Stop," he protested, laughing. "Wait until I've had more lessons. All I remember at the moment is how to say thank you!"

"If you're unable to follow suit, you can trump the card," Colin said to Jade.

Evan leaned past Glorianna for a better view. Colin inclined his head toward Jade, lowering his voice to a whisper as he advised her on the rules and strategy of the game. There was something too intimate about the way their dark heads were nearly touching. Evan frowned as Colin scooted his chair sideways and rested his hand on the back of Jade's chair.

"Liberina and I win!" Patrick crowed, a gleeful smile on his face.

"What do you win?" Jade asked. She giggled as Colin threw his cards on the table in a theatrical reaction to being trounced. Colin offered Jade a glass of brandy, which she declined with a quick shake of her head.

"Hmm . . . what does the loser forfeit?" Patrick

mused aloud. He snapped his fingers as an idea occurred to him. "Jade must sit as a portrait model for me." Patrick stole a glance at Liberina and added, "Actually, I'd like to paint you both."

Glorianna's head came up sharply. Evan closed his eyes tightly for a moment, repressing the urge to groan. When he opened them again, the lovely pink blush adorning her cheeks only moments earlier had been replaced by the red hue of a registered insult.

"Patrick promised to do your portrait as a wedding gift," Evan said. He winced when he realized he'd revealed his need to wheedle the offer out of Patrick.

"Patrick's generosity knows no bounds." Glorianna's tone was arch. "It's unfortunate there isn't another couple we could partner with in a game of whist, since you seem so engrossed in their play." She brightened. "Let me play the Beethoven piece I've just learned for you."

Glorianna settled before the Gibson and Davis piano. She looked back at Evan. "I cannot play and turn pages at the same time," she pouted prettily.

"Oh," Evan said. "Of course."

He joined her, standing beside the glossy rosewood instrument rather than sitting beside her on the bench. He had a better view of the room that way. He glanced at the title of the piece as Glorianna began to play. *Moonlight Sonata*.

Evan fixed a smile on his face, allowing his mind to wander in tandem with the trilling notes. The sight

of Colin moving toward the French doors leading to the garden—with Jade on his arm—jerked him from his reverie. *Moonlight Sonata indeed*. Knowing Colin as he did, *Moonlight Seduction* would be a more appropriate title.

“The heat in this room is stifling, don’t you agree?” Colin rose from his chair and coaxed Jade to her feet. “Would you care to take a bit of air in the garden? I have never been fond of Glorianna’s piano technique,” he whispered conspiratorially.

Jade glanced in Evan’s direction. She nodded. Evan had been absorbed in Glorianna’s company all evening long. She would not have agreed to the card game if she had realized Glorianna would be in the room and she’d be forced to watch the two of them together. Jade had managed to avoid the golden-haired harridan, despite the fact Glorianna had all but camped out at Rosefield since Evan’s return.

Colin lapsed into silence as they strolled down the garden path. Jade reveled in the quiet beauty of the night surrounding them. The clear, star-studded sky was like a broken diamond tiara scattered across a backdrop of black velvet. The air was heavy with the perfume of a dozen different kinds of flowers. The sound of chirping crickets formed a night song more pleasing than the faint crash of notes coming from the drawing room. In the distance, a dog bayed at the full moon.

Colin plucked a crimson flower from an overhanging vine and impulsively tucked it behind Jade’s ear.

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“Even such a beautiful flower cannot do you justice,” he murmured, his eyes resting on her lips.

Jade’s faded cotton skirt and blouse had been replaced by a new uniform: a soft, flowing pale green cambric muslin gown with a wide sash at the waist. She had several lovely gowns in a variety of fabrics and colors in her wardrobe now, all at Evan’s behest. Rather than feeling beautiful, Jade felt heartsick because Evan had not spared her a single glance all evening long.

As Colin moved to take her in his arms, his expression hardened with desire, forcing a sudden recollection of Dimitri as he stepped toward her. Jade flinched involuntarily, backing away from him. Colin paused at her quick, hunted movement, his expression turning quizzical in the wash of moonlight illuminating his face. He abruptly turned away, glancing up at the sky as a sudden arc of white blazed across it.

“Look,” Colin exclaimed, “a shooting star!” He traced its path with his finger.

Jade gasped and grabbed his arm, holding his hand tightly against her. “You must never, ever point a finger at a shooting star!” she whispered in alarm.

Colin smiled indulgently, casually resting his other hand on her shoulder. “Why is that?” he drawled.

“*Romas* believe that for every star in the sky, there is a man here on earth. When a star runs away—when it becomes a shooting star—it means the man has stolen bread for his supper. If you point at the star, you cause

the hungry thief to be caught."

Colin raised Jade's hand and kissed her palm just as Evan joined them on the path, red faced and winded, as if he'd run a distance.

"I think it's time you retired for the evening, Jade," Evan said. "You'll excuse Jade, won't you Colin?" He posed his question to Colin without taking his eyes off Jade.

"I had hoped to finish our conversation," Colin lazily objected. "We were just getting started."

Evan's silver eyes gathered the moonlight and spewed ice. "Not tonight," he said.

Jade glanced back in confusion at Colin as Evan tucked her hand in his and propelled her along the path leading to the drawing room. Colin waved, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

The crimson flower in her hair became dislodged as Jade stumbled to match Evan's lengthening strides. The flower tumbled to the ground and she trampled it, temporarily losing her footing. Evan steadied her, dragging her with him at a relentless pace. They were moving too quickly to afford a good look at his face, but the rigid set of his jaw told her a great deal. What had she done?

"Should you leave your fiancée alone?" Jade breathlessly inquired.

"Miss Clayton has gone home." His words rapped out like drumbeats.

So that was it. The lovers had quarreled, and Evan intended to take it out on her. After she had spent the

evening pining for a glimpse or a word from him, he had practically worn blisters on his feet in his rush to ruin her walk in the garden with Colin. She wheeled on him as raw, ugly emotion filled her.

"Oh? She wouldn't wait downstairs while you tucked me in?"

His hold on her arm tightened. "Tread softly, Jade," Evan warned. "I'm not in the mood." He thrust her into the empty drawing room, slamming the door behind them with a backward kick of his black leather boot.

"I have done nothing to deserve your anger." She whirled to face him, rubbing the flesh where his hand had gripped her arm.

He cast a quelling look at her before he strode to the hearth. She watched the play of muscle across the rigid set of his shoulders as he adjusted the space between a pair of pink overlay glass mantel lustres. The rows of prisms danced beneath his fingers, filling the room with delicate, tinkling sound.

"If you continue to conduct yourself as you have tonight, you'll become the object of ugly gossip," he said.

"A fine comment coming from a man who shares a bedroom with a woman not yet married to him!"

He turned to face her so suddenly the melodious jingle reached a crescendo as his fingers brushed the prisms. "We share *adjoining rooms*," he snapped. "Besides, that is none of your affair."

Jade averted her face. Jealousy had her in its claws,

ripping and tearing at her heart. When she looked up again, he had closed the distance between them. He gazed down at her with intensity.

"You will behave in a manner suitable to someone in my employ," he continued. "There will be no walks in the garden, no moonlight strolls, no taking air on the verandah, and no tours of the stables."

"Why are you punishing me?" *Why is he so angry?*

"I'm protecting you, Jade. There are a number of ruses a man can use to isolate a woman when his intentions are less than honorable. Despite Colin's charm, he can be a reprobate. The fact that you think he's harmless is precisely *why* he's a danger to you. Given your inexperience, it's understandable you found yourself in a clinch."

"*What?*" Jade's mind reeled as she replayed the scene in the garden. Evan thought she and Colin had been embracing. She tried to force a sober expression. Failing, she turned her back to him to hide her amusement.

"I see nothing funny about this," Evan bristled. "I'll have you know Miss Clayton has gone home to Seahaven because she found your conduct offensive."

Jade turned and eyed Evan shrewdly. "Did she go home because she objected to my walk in the garden with Colin, or because she was angry you were so determined to end it?"

Evan stepped forward with an oath, stopping just short of touching her. Tension flared between them; the

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very air seemed to thicken. He stared at her mouth before his smoldering regard lifted and he looked into her eyes.

"No walks in the garden, no moonlight strolls, no taking air on the verandah, and no tours of the stables," he rasped. "Do you understand me?"

"You do not own me." He might own her services for a time. He did not hold dominion over her heart and soul.

"No?" He raised his eyebrows in direct challenge as his heated gaze swept over her. Without further preamble, he gripped her wrist, dragging her into his arms. His mouth descended over hers, his lips moist and warm. There was desperation in his aggression. His kiss was a branding, an avowal of ownership. His powerful arms molded her to him. She felt the thrill of desire steal through her blood like an infusion as she felt the press of his arousal through the thin fabric of her gown.

The realization that he wanted her—and badly—was a bittersweet balm. Evan was beyond her reach. A desolate sob escaped her. He froze at the sound, burying his face against her neck, his lips feathering against the erratic pulse at her throat. His hold on her moderated until finally he released her.

He stepped away from her, running an unsteady hand through his hair. "I've broken my promise."

She was afraid to ask which promise he meant.

"I promised I would abide by the contract," he said, his voice hoarse. "And so I shall." He turned to face her,

the planes of his face rigid. “I will not force my attentions upon you again, but I caution you where Colin is concerned.” He studied her for a moment. “And I remind you again you will need my permission to marry.”

“Marry who? Colin?” Jade scowled at the ridiculous idea. *Dilo*. “Is there anything else you wish to remind me of?”

“Yes,” Evan said stiffly. “The ball to announce my wedding is being held in three days. I’ve purchased suitable clothing for you. I don’t care which gown you wear, but I expect you to dress—and behave—in a manner suitable to the occasion.”

Jade recoiled as if he had slapped her. “Don’t worry,” she gritted, “I won’t embarrass you.”



A piercing wail erupted from a second-story bedroom at Seahaven. Sweat-drenched laborers working in the fields closest to the main house glanced fearfully at one another, thankful to be field hands instead of household staff on this plantation.

“Stop whining this instant!” Glorianna hissed at Lindy, one of the housemaids. “If you tell me one more time you cannot do as I ask, I’m going to have Daddy sell your precious Zack and your brats along with him.” Glorianna paced the room, winding a ringlet of her long

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white-gold hair around her finger. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes’m, but it ain’t gwine ter wuk, Ah jes’ knows it,” Lindy cried.

“Of course it will work. When you get to Rosefield tomorrow, you will take the servant’s stairway to the second floor. I don’t want anyone to see you who might know you come from Seahaven.”

“Wha’ do Ah say?” Lindy twisted her hands together.

“You will introduce yourself to Jade as Mrs. Izard’s ladies’ maid. You’ll tell her Mrs. Izard has sent you as a gesture of welcome . . . to help her prepare for the party. Then do as I’ve told you.”



The green tint of the beautiful gown reminded Jade of an apple waiting to be ripened by the autumn sun. There was also a pink gown with tiny raised dots in the weave of the cloth, and a gown of faintly iridescent fabric composed of alternating bands of blue, lavender, and green. She bit her lip as she considered the ball gowns on display in the armoire. She wanted to select the perfect dress for the party, but there were too many choices.

A knock on the bedroom door gave her a temporary reprieve from her decision. When Jade opened the door, a young black woman balancing a large wooden container of jars and bottles on her hip stole past her into the room.

“Ah’m frum Miz Izard’s. She sen’ me ter hep yo’ git red dy fo’ de pahty.”

Jade cocked her head in confusion as the young woman proceeded to lay out an array of colors, powders, and creams atop the mirrored dressing table. Glancing up at her, the woman dropped a small curtsy and smiled.

“Lindy.” She pointed to herself.

Jade smiled and imitated the woman’s shallow movement. “Jade,” she said.

Lindy stared at Jade for a moment. Her smile faded. She sighed, returning her attention to the vast array of containers. She opened a jar and withdrew a clove, holding it over a candle flame until it caught fire and burned.

“Ah’m gwine ter mek yo’ reel purty.” She blew on the piece of clove before carefully smudging it across her own eyebrow in demonstration.

Jade finally understood the woman’s purpose. She scanned the tabletop in amazement. “Do all the ladies wear this paint? Does Glorianna?”

“Yes’m,” Lindy said. She withdrew a piece of white linen from within the wooden container and used it to wipe the clove smudge from her eyebrow.

Jade surveyed the army of beautifiers with dismay. Evan had insisted she do everything necessary to avoid causing him embarrassment. If she went to the party bare-faced, she would stand out. She did not want to be conspicuous.

Lindy dropped her gaze. She rummaged through the pots until she came upon a jar containing a thick

white cream. She motioned for Jade to take a seat at the dressing table. Jade did as Lindy bade her, attempting to catch the other woman's eye in the mirror's reflection.

"Lindy?"

"Yes'm?" Lindy busied herself with extracting a set of brushes from the contents of the large wooden receptacle.

"Would you help me pick out a dress to wear tonight?"



Jade gazed into the dressing table mirror at the reflection staring back at her. She did not recognize her own face. Lindy had applied white paint to her skin, followed by deep red rouge spread from the hollow of her cheeks to the edges of her lower lashes and across her temples.

Dipping a fine camel hair brush in the wetted burnt clove, Lindy had used it to make Jade's eyebrows dark and heavy. Arching above eyes thickly outlined in kohl, the transformation of her brows made her look oddly menacing. Her lips were painted a bright vermilion hue, as if she had eaten a juicy pomegranate. A generous dusting of rice powder had congealed the white paint into a thick film. As the final touch, Jade's hair had been drawn back in a severe chignon, making her heavily painted features all the more prominent.

The taffeta skirts and numerous petticoats she wore rustled as she carefully made her way to the second-floor landing. She stared down at the magenta silk slippers

peeking out from beneath the hem of a gown the color of a ripe ear of corn. She felt heartened the people of Charleston shared the *Roma's* love of casually combined, bright color. *Perhaps Liberina and I will not seem so unusual to them after all.*



Evan consulted his timepiece for the third time in half an hour. His gaze swept the room. *Where is Jade?* Her sister had managed to be punctual. Liberina sat at the center of a wide circle of Charleston matrons, wearing a simple lavender gown and a timid smile. The women engaged in needlepoint and chatter, directing covert glances at the newcomer in their midst.

Glorianna crossed the room toward him, magnificently attired in a powder blue gown with matching slippers. The diamond barrette Evan had given her on her last birthday formed a glittering furrow in her elegantly arranged flaxen hair.

A frown crossed Liberina's face as she watched Glorianna link her arm through Evan's. Liberina's expression was one of reproach as her gaze slid from Glorianna to him. *To Liberina, it was not a heathen ceremony*, Jade had said. Well, he'd be damned if he was going to allow Liberina to make him feel like an unfaithful husband.

"Would you do the introductions?" Evan said. He

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gave a shallow inclination of his head toward Liberina.

Glorianna's gaze flickered toward Liberina. "Oh, we're introducing the servants to polite society now?"

Evan felt the white silk neckcloth around his throat begin to tighten. "Do it for me now, and we'll discuss it later," he said.

"Yes, we certainly will discuss it," Glorianna agreed through clenched teeth. "Liberina," she cooed, "have you met the ladies?" She nodded to the elderly lady seated at Liberina's right. "This is Mrs. Rutledge, Mrs. Hampton, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Foxworthy, Mrs. Carlton, Mrs. Izard, Mrs. Pinckney, and Mrs. Beaumont." She rattled the names off with alacrity, pointing at each woman in turn.

Liberina appeared taken aback. "I will remember your faces," she promised in a hushed voice.

"Your embroidery is lovely, ladies," Glorianna said. "Liberina, you should have brought some sewing to work on, since you don't dance."

"Who says she doesn't dance?"

The tension on Liberina's face faded as Patrick entered the circle and made a show of offering her his arm. She accepted with a look of gratitude. Glorianna removed her arm from Evan's and walked away as Liberina and Patrick joined them.

"*Nais tuke*. I do not know your dances," Liberina whispered.

"I'll teach you," Patrick said. "The next time you're surrounded by crows, you'll be too busy dancing to care."

He coughed. "I hope you won't be too disappointed if we don't dance. I'd prefer a glass of lemon syllabub and a walk in the garden over floor exercise," he said loudly, for the benefit of anyone within earshot.

"Liberina," Evan said, "where is Jade?"

"I have not seen her. She is taking special care to be pretty for you," Liberina replied.

Patrick's eyes widened. He darted a look of inquiry at Evan.

"I think you're making better progress learning *Romanes* than Liberina is learning English," Evan said with a forced laugh. "Jade wants to reflect well on her employer when she is in public, of course."

"Of course," Patrick agreed, looking unconvinced.

Maybe the language lessons were not such a good idea. Evan tugged at his neckcloth as Patrick guided Liberina toward the French doors leading to the garden.

Glorianna rejoined Evan, sipping daintily from a glass of punch. She motioned for a servant to pour a glass of Madeira for Evan. They watched as dancers selected partners for the Virginia reel. The couples took their places, waiting for the music to begin.

"What could be keeping the other new girl?" she asked. Her eyes glinted strangely as she surveyed the crowd. Evan wondered how much punch she'd already had to drink.

He was about to utter a noncommittal response when a hush suddenly descended over the room. Dancers

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faltered, their attention drawn to the ballroom entrance as the first strains of music suddenly died. Following the direction of their shocked gazes, Evan drew a sharp breath at the sight of Jade.



Chapter Fourteen

Jade was a riot of mismatched color. He did not recognize the yellow taffeta eyesore of a gown she wore. Gaudy gilt flowers bordered the hem of the matching train in a style long gone out of fashion. Her small waist was encircled by a wide orange sash, and she had chosen to wear purple slippers. A bright green handkerchief was loosely arranged across the bodice of the gown. Full-length, sapphire blue gloves concealed her arms, and a light stole of crimson gauze cascaded over her shoulders. Her glorious hair had been upswept and tucked beneath a lace cap of a brutal violet shade. She clutched a pink silk fan.

The damage she had done to her face was a travesty.

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She had masked her exotic beauty, standing before them looking like a painted harlot. His angry words from the other evening suddenly came back to him in a rush. The vivid colors in front of him faded, replaced by a red fog of rage. What a great deal of trouble she had gone to, just for the satisfaction of humiliating him in front of his friends and neighbors. Did she hate him that much?



Jade knew immediately something was wrong. Disastrously wrong. The women wore modest, pastel-colored gowns. No lady's costume combined more than two harmonious colors, and the hairstyles were softly flattering, curled coifs. If they wore any paint at all, it was subtly applied. But worst of all was the look on Evan's face. He gawked at her from the center of the ballroom, his shocked face nearly as white as hers. Glorianna clung to his side, bejeweled and beautiful, smiling maliciously. Jade was too stunned to cry foul at the trick played upon her.

She knew even greater humiliation when Glorianna said in a loud, ringing voice, "Evan, it looks as though Jade mistook Patrick's paints for her toilette articles."

The remark elicited laughter, some politely masked as coughing. During the terrible silence that followed, a hot flush stirred beneath the thick layer of white paint coating Jade's face. The night was humid, the room stifling.

She felt as though she might faint. She *wished* she would faint; anything to escape the look of rage on Evan's face

Evan set the glass he had been holding down upon a small circular table inlaid with marble birds and motioned for the musicians to resume playing. He tugged at the white cloth around his throat as he crossed the marble floor, a smile pasted on his face. Glorianna trailed in his wake, laughing as she exhorted the couples around them to dance as hesitant strains of music replaced the unbearable quiet.

Guests shifted uneasily, cleaving a path as Evan marched toward Jade. Reaching her, he plowed his index finger along her cheek, grimacing in distaste when his finger came away smudged with the heavy white paint. Jade met his eyes, saw the fury there, and hastily backed up a step, her heart pounding.

"I suggest you keep retreating until you've reached your room," Evan said in a low, ominous tone. "Go upstairs and wash that paint off immediately," he snapped. "*Now*," he hissed when she failed to move.

Jade hesitated, aware of Glorianna smirking at her beyond Evan's left shoulder. Evan's gray eyes darkened in warning.

"As you wish," he bit out, patches of hectic color high on his chiseled cheeks.

He stripped off his jacket and neckcloth, tossing them onto the corner of one of the Aubusson settees lining the wall. Jade backed up as Evan came toward her.

She looked around for an escape as he lunged for her and hoisted her over his shoulder.

Hanging face down, she saw the flounce of her multicolored petticoats and the marble floor moving at an alarming rate beneath her as Evan carried her from the room. She arched and struggled, fighting the arm pressing her against the hard shoulder beneath her stomach. Lifting her head, she caught sight of Evan's guests pouring from the ballroom and collecting at the base of the staircase as Evan mounted the stairs with her dangling from his shoulder.

Evan dragged Jade into her room and plopped her onto her feet. He turned to close the door behind them as she flew to the open window and stared down at the garden flagstones two stories below. The winding walkway was illuminated by torches. Shadows danced against the brick walls. With Evan barring her path to the door, the open window was her only avenue of escape.

He noted her frantic evaluation of their surroundings as he advanced into the room. "Don't you *dare* jump out the window and cheat me of the pleasure of throttling you," he said. He ripped the purple lace cap from her head and tossed it out the open window.

He left the room then, locking the door behind him. She wondered if he had gone to fetch a pistol so he could shoot her. When Evan returned, he carried a basin in one hand and a linen towel folded over his arm. After setting the basin and towel on top of the dressing table,

he grabbed Jade's arm and hauled her toward him.

He dipped the cloth in the basin of hot water and lobbed the heavy, sopping towel onto her face. She sputtered and coughed, unable to breathe. Soapy water soaked the crimson stole and dampened the yellow gown beneath it. Jade grabbed the towel in her hands, fighting to tear it from her face. Evan seized the back of her head in one hand and began to wipe away the paint with vigorous swipes of the other. Her skin tingled and burned from the scrubbing.

"I will have no skin left!" Jade wriggled as Evan soaked the towel in the warm water and raised it to her face for the third time.

"*Dilo*," he berated, his hold tightening painfully as she squirmed under the harsh treatment, "how did you manage this?"

"I had help," Jade said, still trying to duck away from the towel. "Stop, it hurts."

"This is therapeutic for me," Evan said through clenched teeth. "Otherwise, I'd be tempted to toss you out that open window. It's a damned idiotic practice to use those paints. In the future, I forbid it." He dug the rough towel into the skin of her forehead and scoured to remove the traces of white still clinging to her hairline. Jade screeched as a few strands of hair were snagged and uprooted.

"Mrs. Izard sent her maid to help me. The maid said all the women wear the paints, even Glorianna. She came to my room with a great wood box of colors. She picked

my clothing.”

“If a maid helped you, I don’t see how you ended up looking like a cheap carnival act,” Evan said.

“You don’t believe me!” Jade started to rise from her chair, but the pressure of Evan’s hand forced her back down.

“No, I do not,” he stiffly replied. “Mrs. Izard said nothing of it to me, and that lady does nothing in the name of charity without announcing it in the *City Gazette*.”

A sharp rap sounded at the door. He cursed and hurled the towel into the basin. As Evan unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway, Patrick cast a furtive glance into the bedroom. Evan pulled the door firmly closed behind him, facing his brother with a scowl.

“Her sister begged me to check on her,” Patrick explained.

“I’ve been washing the paint off her face.” Evan took a deep breath and released it in a ragged sigh. “I haven’t hurt her, if that’s what you’ve been sent to find out.”

A flare of color suffused Patrick’s fair face. “I never thought you had, Ev.” He squared his shoulders. “I thought you should know I’ve sent everyone home, including your fiancée.”

Evan stared at Patrick. “Why did you do that?”

“With or without you present, Glorianna was about to announce your wedding date,” Patrick said. “I thought you might have changed your mind.”

“Changed my mind about what?”

Patrick made a rude noise merging derision with exasperation. “Glorianna sent Lindy to prepare Jade for

the party. Is that the action of a woman you want for your wife?"

"The disaster tonight was Jade's doing," Evan said stiffly. "We had an argument. It was her intention to embarrass me—"

"Liberina assures me Jade wanted to please you. Jade would not even allow Liberina to see her before the party. She wanted to surprise everyone."

Evan glowered at the walnut door. "She certainly managed that, with the face paints, the horrible gown, and all the rest of it—"

"Did you forget the *Roma* love bright colors? How would Jade know our women don't dress that way for parties?"

A sinking feeling invaded the pit of Evan's stomach. "Is there any proof Glorianna was involved? I can't accuse her without—"

"Ev, I saw Lindy. She knocked on Libby's door first, looking for Jade. I assumed Lindy was here assisting her mistress, but Glorianna came directly to the party from Seahaven."

"It makes no sense," Evan said. "Why would Glorianna do such a thing?"

"*Dilo*," Patrick gibed, scowling at Evan.

"Jade isn't teaching you *Romanes* so you can call me an idiot in two languages," Evan growled.

"Glorianna is jealous of Jade. And don't tell me she doesn't have reason to be."

Was he referring to Glorianna's jealousy over Jade's beauty, or was Pat implying Evan's attraction to Jade was

obvious to everyone around them, including Glorianna?

"It has been understood for quite some time I would marry Glorianna," Evan said dully. "She has no reason to be jealous of Jade."

"You mean it is understood Rosefield will marry Seahaven," Patrick amended. "No one would blame you if you called it off," Patrick said. "After Glorianna's shameful conduct while you were away—"

"Glorianna has had other lovers," Evan said curtly. "So have I. It does not change my obligation to her." He thought of one former lover in particular, awaiting him on the other side of the door. Evan rubbed his hand through his hair. "It's a good thing you came by before I tossed Jade through the open window. I might have had cause to regret it."

"I'll let Libby know I managed to stop you in time," Patrick said, wagging his eyebrows.

"So it's 'Libby' now, is it?" Evan chuckled. "When did that happen?"

Patrick shrugged. "She's charming, Ev. She's not like any woman I've ever met."

"Yes, I know," Evan said with a smirk. "She's quiet."

Patrick laughed. "And because she's quiet, I don't think you guessed she speaks English nearly as well as her sister. Jade taught her."

Evan's gaze pierced Patrick. "Are you trying to tell me something, Pat?"

"Is there something you want to tell *me*, Ev?" Patrick countered.

Evan frowned. “Yes,” he said. “Liberina may suggest my relationship with Jade is something other than a business arrangement. Don’t believe her.”



Jade was washing the few places Evan had missed when he reentered the room. Her hand stopped midrevolution as he stalked to the window and stared out at the garden below. The towel made a splash as she dropped it into the tepid water. She watched him warily as he turned from the window, facing her. He folded his arms across his chest.

“It appears an apology is in order,” he said.

“Oh? From which one of us?”

Evan laughed at Jade’s stiff-lipped rejoinder. He unfolded his arms, holding up his hands in surrender. “From me, you’ll be pleased to hear. There may have been some treachery afoot today.”

“*May* have been?” Her skin still burned. She raised her fingers to her cheek and winced at the contact.

“I can have one of the maids bring you a cream—”

“No maids,” Jade said sharply. “We *Roma* learn from our mistakes.”

Regret and amusement warred on Evan’s face. He continued to regard her. “I do feel I need to atone for my brutality with the washcloth,” he said. “Those paints are infamous for their mercury content and the number of

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deaths and disfigurements they've caused."

Jade gasped in horror. "I did not know!"

"That's why they had to be washed off immediately," Evan explained.

"I thought it was because you were angry with me."

He cocked his head at her and smiled ruefully. "There was that, too," he admitted.

She studied the gilded hem of the ugly, corn yellow gown. "Are you still angry?"

"Not with you," Evan replied. "In fact, I wish to make amends."

His soft voice was a caress. Desire shimmered within her, filling her with an acute sense of hopeless longing. Standing before her in his shirtsleeves and black trousers, half soaked and rumpled, he had never looked as handsome.

"I can reduce the length of your indenture as reparation—"

"No," Jade said quickly. The thought of eventually being separated from him was a punishment, not a prize. The haste of her answer drew a probing look from him. She retrieved the cloth from the basin and used the now-cool water to absorb the rising heat in her face.

"What would you like as compensation, then?" He sank into the blue velvet slipper chair near the open window and crossed his booted feet at the ankles, waiting for a response.

"Would you show me your home? Rosefield and Charleston?"

A sudden breeze caught the curtain framing the open window. The sheer fabric floated upward, momentarily obscuring his face. As the curtain drifted down again, Jade saw a glimmer of warmth in the depths of his eyes.

“Of course,” Evan said. “If that is what you wish.”



Chapter Fifteen

Jade reveled in the surge of power beneath her as she urged her horse to match Raven's pace. The early morning air was surprisingly warm, its balmy heaviness pooling moisture in the grass and settling in dewy lacework patterns on spider webs. Streams of vapor trailed across the plateau of hills and red dirt valleys Evan had told her was called the Piedmont.

The breakneck ride was exhilarating. She did not realize how much she had missed being outdoors until this moment. Evan seemed more relaxed than Jade had seen him in days, riding with the posture of a conqueror over the raw land. She thrilled in his companionship, admiring the view of his broad back and shoulders. He

had forsaken his gentleman's attire for a simple brown riding suit and black leather boots.

"Where are we going?" she shouted.

"Sightseeing," Evan yelled back, his mood buoyant.

They stopped at a tavern called the Bowling Green House. Evan was greeted warmly by the proprietor and his wife, a silver-haired, apple-cheeked woman who smelled of cloves and cinnamon. The common room bustled with activity as Evan and Jade were handed mugs of ale and shown to a table flanked by spindle-back chairs. Grubby, bewhiskered, long-haired men in plain buckskin tunics and moccasin footwear looked up from their meals as Jade passed by, some nodding their heads in greeting while others simply stared at her.

"Are they wild Indians?" Jade whispered as Evan seated her at the table.

Evan chuckled. "No, those men are trappers. The export of deer and beaver skins is a big business in this area. Perhaps you ought to see some real Indians so you won't run in terror from a trapper into the arms of some scalp-hunting brave," he suggested, his eyes alight with mirth.

"And what self-respecting Indian would bother to scalp the likes of you, Evan Dark?" a voice thundered from behind them.

Jade recoiled at the loud voice and looked at Evan anxiously.

"Uncle Joe!" Evan sprang to his feet, grinning. He pounded the back of the tall, tawny-haired, blue-eyed

man who had voiced the insult. Jade allowed her pent-up breath to escape in a slow exhalation as the man pulled a chair from the next table and sat down beside Evan.

“So, you made it home after all,” Joseph said. “I was a fool to agree to leave England without being certain of your safety, boy.”

“You did as you promised,” Evan said. “I asked you to leave if we became separated.” Evan took a sip from the mug in his hand. “However, I’ve been home long enough for you to have paid a visit,” he scolded.

“I wanted to give you time to settle in,” Joseph said. His gaze fell on Jade. He squinted, the skin around his eyes forming deep triangles. “Have we met before?” he asked, scratching his head as if the action would stimulate his memory.

“Briefly,” Evan supplied, “in England.”

The reminder provoked a look of surprise followed by a wheezing chortle from Joseph. “Now I remember you. You were the girl the Gypsies said Evan kidnapped.”

“I was not stolen. I was leaving. Evan helped me.” Jade glanced at Evan, whose lips twitched in amusement at her succinct, deliberately ambiguous answer.

“A pity,” Joseph intoned as his gaze moved thoughtfully over Jade’s face. “I was hoping Evan had found himself a Gypsy bride in England.”

Evan choked on his mouthful of ale. “For no other reason than to spite Glorianna, no doubt,” he said.

“I wouldn’t regret such a consequence,” Joseph allowed,

winking at Jade.

Jade schooled her features into an expressionless mask as she tried to slow the sudden acceleration of her heart.

"I read your mother's diary after I returned," Joseph continued, directing a meaning-laden look at Evan. "It helped me put the pieces together after you disappeared in England."

Evan was silent for a moment. "Why are you no longer living at Rosefield?" he asked.

"Simple cause and effect," Joseph replied blandly. "Glorianna moved in, I moved out. I apologize for missing your announcement party. So, when is the wedding?"

"Why? So you can plan to miss that, too?" Both men laughed. "Actually, we haven't announced the date yet."

"Don't rush into anything on my account," Joseph said.

"Advice from a confirmed bachelor," Evan dryly noted. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm staying at the inn over on Broad Street. I've grown rather attached to the widow who runs it, if you must know."

"Perhaps not a confirmed bachelor after all," Evan joked.

"Enough talk of marriage for one day. You'll give me a bellyache," Joseph said.

The tavern owner's wife placed a brown straw basket in front of Evan. Evan lifted the edge of the yellow and white checkered towel covering the contents of the basket, releasing a bounty of delicious aroma. Jade suddenly realized she was hungry.

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“We’re going on a picnic,” Evan told Joseph. “Would you care to come along?”

Joseph looked at Jade and smiled. “Not today, but I’ll drop by Rosefield for a visit soon.”



In Charleston, they stopped at a three-story, stucco-brick combined storefront and residence on King Street. Jade followed Evan into the establishment, milling about the premises while Evan conducted his business with the proprietor.

An unusual piece of furniture caught her eye, a curious three-seated article with padded, upholstered rosewood swivel chairs on either side, separated by a low stool in the middle. Jade sat down on one of the chairs, running her fingers over the hard, smooth wood surface of the center stool.

Evan returned carrying a large box. He paused, watching Jade with an expression of amusement.

“I pity the one who must sit on the hard middle stool,” she said.

Evan placed the box on a nearby side table and sat down on the opposite chair, stretching his long legs out before him. “That seat is not intended to be comfortable,” he said, patting the stool centered between them. “A chaperone is meant to sit between the seats we occupy.

The center stool is purposely hard so the chaperone does not doze off and allow the courting couple even a moment of privacy.”

“*Gadjos*,” Jade snickered, shaking her head in baffled amusement.

“It’s called a ‘courting set,’” Evan said.

“I don’t believe you,” Jade snorted, still finding the idea ridiculous.

“Shall we make a bet on it?” Evan proposed.

Jade stared at Evan’s full lower lip as it curled upward in amusement.

“Only a man who expects to win proposes a wager,” she observed. She eyed Evan with good-natured suspicion. “What do I forfeit if I lose?”

“I choose the forfeit *after* you lose,” Evan said, laughing. He signaled to the store owner, who quickly joined them. “The lady finds this item unusual, Mr. Fleming. Would you explain its use?”

Jade shrieked with laughter the moment Mr. Fleming uttered the words “courting set.” The flustered shopkeeper struggled to finish his pitch, which included a colorful history of the item currently on display. He glanced at Evan, his expression animated with hope for a sale.

“Thank you, sir,” Evan said. “I’ll consider the purchase and let you know.”

Clearly disappointed, Mr. Fleming tossed a peeved look in Jade’s direction before discreetly removing himself to a far corner of the store.

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"I lose," Jade chirped. "What do I forfeit?"

Evan's eyes moved over her face, coming to rest thoughtfully on her lips. Jade's breath caught in her throat. There was no sound in the room other than the beat of her heart, thunderously loud in her ears. Evan took a deep breath before turning to retrieve the large box from the side table. He placed the box in her hands without smiling.

"You must accept a gift as your forfeit."

The box was heavy. Jade rested it on the chaperone's stool between them and lifted the lid. Stacked sleeves of quilted, soft white fabric lined the interior of the box. She lifted one of the sleeves and felt its contents shift. The quilted bag had a drawstring at one end. She gripped the bag carefully and pulled on the loop to open it, exposing a glimmer of dark blue against the white interior.

Cobalt blue.

Jade's breath hitched as her fingers clutched the china cup and lifted it from the bag. She bit her lower lip as she turned the cup in her hand, watching the pattern of silver stars swirl within the white interior.

"It's not a precise match to the broken cup," Evan said, "but it's as close as the potter could come."

"Oh." Jade did not know what to say. She glanced at Evan and smiled. "*Nais tuke.*"

Glancing down, she saw a single, crystalline drop spatter the back of her hand before she felt the warm moisture of the bead. Her hands shook as she attempted to replace the cup within the bag. Evan closed his hand over

hers, absorbing the teardrop. He briefly held her hand before gently easing the cup from her grip and slipping it into the bag.

"You own a complete set," he said, peering anxiously at her as he placed the bag on top of the other quilted bags and fit the lid atop the box. "Teapot, sugar, creamer, and a dozen cups and saucers."

Her eyes widened. "More than my mother ever owned," she breathed.

Evan smiled. "It occurred to me that additional cups and saucers might be a good idea. One never knows when breakage will occur."

She wanted to kiss him. Her heart was squeezed by the overwhelming urge to launch herself into his arms. Why was she reminded at every turn how much she loved him, when he could never belong to her?

"I know English well enough," Jade said, "but I cannot find words." Her voice shook.

"I feel responsible for the cup having been broken," Evan said. He shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

"It was not the forfeit I expected."

"Oh? What did you expect?" he asked. His brow furrowed as he studied her face.

A kiss would have been enough. But this gift means more, so much more. It broke her heart to realize how well this gentle, kind man understood her.

"I thought you might request a kiss," Jade confessed. "Colin told me that should I lose a game of whist, he will require a forfeit of one kiss," she said.

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Evan's expression hardened and Jade realized her error. *Dilo!*

"Is that so? Then I recommend you endeavor *never* to lose," Evan said with brittle formality. "My brother is not one who would fail to call in a forfeit."

Evan carried the box of porcelain to Mr. Fleming and requested to have it delivered to Rosefield. He gathered his riding crop and executed a perfunctory bow in Jade's direction.

"Mrs. Riley has provided lunch for us. Shall we find a suitable spot for a picnic?"

Jade followed Evan to the shop entrance, nearly colliding with him when he suddenly swung around to face her.

"One more thing," he said. "If you will recall, I promised to adhere to our contract, and I'm soon to be a married man. That is the reason I did not request a kiss as forfeit. It doesn't mean I didn't *think* about it."



Evan selected a picnic spot beneath a large oak tree. The leaves of the mighty tree rustled in hushed whispers as the afternoon breeze lifted them, casting fingers of shadow over the lush patch of meadow. Jade and Evan devoured a meal of cold chicken, bread, and cheese. A large glass container of lemonade had been included, and they shared the sweet, tart drink, passing the jar of lemonade back and forth as they consumed the meal.

Evan squinted against the glare of the sun and ate in silence as Jade struggled to find a way to restore his earlier, affable mood.

“Your uncle seems very fond of you,” Jade said. “Was your mother like him?”

“No, Joseph and mother were nothing alike,” Evan replied. “She was quiet and rather mysterious. Uncle Joe has never met a stranger.”

“You miss the quiet woman of secrets,” Jade softly surmised.

Evan plucked a blade of grass and twisted it between his fingers. “I miss one conversation we *should* have had but never did,” he said, bitterness woven into the fabric of his words. He tossed the twisted blade of grass, frowning. “I didn’t learn about my father until after my mother died.”

“Perhaps she did not know how to tell you,” Jade suggested.

“I used to sit by her bedside during the weeks she was ill,” Evan recalled. “She kept talking about a key that would unlock a secret. I thought it was delirium, a part of the illness. After she died, I found a locked compartment within her bureau, and I remembered what she had said about a key. I searched and found a key hidden behind a loose panel in the wall and used it to unlock the compartment.”

“What did you find?” Jade asked.

Evan held his silence until Jade concluded he did not intend to reply. Then, “I found a diary.” He glanced at

her. "I've read it so many times; I've committed most of it to memory.

"The first entry was dated May 8, 1777. My mother was about your age at the time. She was being sent abroad to complete her education. She was filled with excitement and plans for the future.

"The next entry began with the notation that she did not know the date. The ship had gone down in a storm off the coast of England. One of the crew had given her a length of oilcloth to protect her journal. Many lives had been lost, but she had been spared. Her diary described being rescued by strange peasants who lived in wagons. She wrote at length about one rescuer in particular." Evan lifted his head and followed the path of a cloud as it drifted across the late afternoon sky.

"Your father?" Jade prompted.

He nodded, a remote expression on his face. "Her comments were those you would expect from an impressionable young girl infatuated with a stranger who had shown her kindness. His name was Nicolae. She had made a drawing of him, and I immediately saw my likeness to the man in the sketch. She said he had unusual eyes—"

Beautiful gray eyes.

Evan paused and looked at her. Had she said the words aloud?

"His *vitsa* was preparing to move on," Evan continued. "My mother thought it was likely her family believed her lost at sea. The tribe had befriended her, and she fancied

herself in love with Nicolae. She decided to go with them. Not long after, Nicolae and my mother were married in a *Roma* ceremony. Soon after, she discovered she and Nicolae were expecting a child.” Evan took a deep breath. “Do you know the term ‘peace bond’?”

Jade nodded. It was customary for *Romas* to deposit a sum in gold with the authority of the town nearest their campsite. These offerings were called peace bonds, a guarantee the local law would have no trouble from the Gypsies passing near their town. If any incident occurred involving a Gypsy, the peace bond would be forfeited. Otherwise, it was returned to the tribe when they moved on.

“The *vitsa* had posted a peace bond and were preparing to leave. Nicolae and another man were sent to retrieve the deposit. Two days later, the other man returned alone. The local authority was a scoundrel who had no intention of returning their gold. Nicolae had demanded the peace bond be refunded, and the two men had fought. Nicolae was stabbed during the fight. They tossed him into a cell and told his companion to tell the rest of the tribe to move on immediately or face arrest. By the time my mother reached the jail, my father was near death from the neglected wound. Nicolae begged her to return to America because she had a family there who would take care of her. My mother did as he asked because she didn’t want her child to live as a Gypsy after what had happened to his father. She feared prejudice

against the half-Roma child she carried.”

“*Prohasar man opre pirende, sa muro djiben semas opre chengende,*” Jade intoned softly. When Evan looked at her quizzically, she translated the old saying for him. “*Bury me standing. I’ve been on my knees all my life.*”

“On the voyage back to America, she befriended a widower by the name of Edgar Dark. She confided her story to him. He fell in love with her and married her. He kept her secret because he loved her and wanted to protect her. I was raised as his son.”

“Does the truth change anything?” Jade asked.

Evan grunted. “It depends upon who you ask,” he replied with a wry smile. “As the eldest, I was groomed to inherit Rosefield. Colin was raised as the middle son. Now that Colin knows he is Edgar’s firstborn son, he feels Rosefield should one day belong to him.”

“And what does your fa—what does Edgar—say?”

“Edgar maintains Colin never showed any aptitude for, or interest in, running Rosefield. Edgar fears the entire estate will fall to ruin in Colin’s hands.” He glanced at her, his face taking on a ruddy hue. “Edgar will maintain I’m his firstborn son, even if it isn’t the truth. I’m a fraud, Jade.”

“What will Colin do?”

“There isn’t much he *can* do. The diary contained the only proof I’m not Edgar’s son, and it has been destroyed. In fact, Edgar was quite upset that I had been so forthcoming with my brothers about the contents of the

diary.” He slanted a look at Jade. “If you’re still keeping a tally, you should enter this under the ‘honorable’ column of your ledger, because it was not in my best interest to have disclosed the information. The news made no difference to Patrick, but it changed Colin. Perhaps I was naïve, but I’d always felt Rosefield belonged to all of us.”

“It’s certainly big enough,” Jade replied artlessly. Her remark seemed to lighten Evan’s mood. He chuckled and nodded in agreement.

“Shall we continue your tour?” he suggested.

“I hate for this day to end,” Jade said, sighing.

Smiling, Evan rose and dusted off his trousers. “I don’t believe it’s possible to show you Rosefield and Charleston in a single day,” he said with a twinkle in the depths of his gray eyes.

Jade beamed back at him as he helped her to her feet. “No?”

“No,” he affirmed. He formed a stirrup with his hands to assist her in mounting her horse. “It will take several days at least. Perhaps more.”



Jade elected to remain behind in the stables, savoring the last moments of their extraordinary day as Evan handed his horse off to a groom and began the trek toward the main house.

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She stroked the nose of her mount with affection, feeling the warm play of the horse's breath against her fingers. The smells of hay and rich soil blended with the scent of flowers from the surrounding gardens in an earthy, pleasing combination.

"Did you enjoy your romp?"

Colin's voice, vibrant with snide insinuation, shook Jade from her reverie. She turned as he strolled toward her, assessing him with her new knowledge of Evan's parentage and how it had strained the relationship between the brothers. Colin was equally handsome, but there was an aura of coarseness and dissipation about him she had not previously noticed.

"Romp?" Jade inclined her head. "I do not know that word."

His fingers smoothed over the nose of the horse, sliding toward hers. She withdrew her hand to avoid his touch. His lips formed a languid smile as his gaze roamed over her.

"I love how a woman looks after a *ride*," he said, "all disheveled and glowing." His hand dipped and rubbed the neck of the horse with deft, gentle strokes. "You look particularly fetching after your ride with Evan."

Sensing impropriety in his words, she stepped away from the horse and moved toward the entrance to the stables. He moved to block her exit.

"I need to speak with you," Colin said. "It will only take a moment." He stepped aside, indicating she was

free to leave.

Jade hesitated. "What do you want?"

"I want to protect you," Colin said.

"Protect me from what?"

"From *whom* is what you should be asking," Colin replied. "Evan's plan to marry Glorianna has not changed."

"I never thought it had," Jade said. When she moved to brush past him, Colin lightly gripped her arm, forestalling her.

"What you don't seem to understand is how his marriage will affect you." Satisfied he had her full attention, Colin released her arm. "Rosefield has always kept Evan very busy," Colin said. His green eyes bored into hers, the gold-flecked pupils slightly dilated. "Since his return from England, he's spent far more time at home than usual. Once he is married, I expect things will return to normal."

"What are you telling me?" Crushing intuition flooded Jade until she felt she might drown, but she waited for Colin to give substance to her fear.

"Glorianna does not like you," he said simply. "With Evan gone so much of the time, you will be at her mercy. I daresay she will endeavor to make life a living hell for you." He paused and lifted his hand, examining his index finger. "Damn splinter," he grumbled.

"Evan has promised to protect me from Glorianna," Jade said.

Colin did not mask his surprise quickly enough. "Oh? Did he now?" An unpleasant smile lifted the cor-

ners of his wide mouth. He shrugged. "Then you will not need my assistance," he said. "I bid you good night."

Jade felt panic rise within her as Colin bowed slightly and turned to leave. What if Evan was not there to protect her? How would she protect Liberina from Glorianna?

"Colin?"

He turned back. "Yes, love?"

Although his casual endearment boded an ill portent, she had to ask the question. "What were you going to tell me?"

"I was going to make you aware an indenture can be sold. I could buy your contract from Evan." Colin's gaze moved over her slowly, heated and hungry. "You and I would have the same—arrangement—you have with Evan."

Colin would make her his whore. "You are wrong about my relationship with Evan," Jade said.

"I'm not a fool, Jade. I've seen the way he looks at you," Colin replied. "So has Glory. And I assure you, she intends to punish you for it."

"Evan would not sell my contract," Jade said. *Would he?*

Colin shrugged. "It might be in your interest to convince him." He marched toward the stable door. "And do it soon," he called over his shoulder. "Glory tells me she and Evan will be wed before fall."



Chapter Sixteen

If you will recall, I promised to adhere to our contract, and I'm soon to be a married man.

After her conversation with Colin, the words Evan had spoken in the shop earlier held new meaning. Jade picked at the food on her plate without the desire to eat any of it. Colin's sordid proposal crowded every thought. She paid no attention to the dinner repartee around her until she realized the mealtime discussion centered on leaving Rosefield.

"Every summer we're visited by a malady called yellow fever," Evan was explaining to Liberina. "Most of the plantation owners here in Charleston move to our summer homes in the north from May until early fall or

later, in order to avoid the ‘sickly season.’”

“The other option is to remain and pray to be cured by an extract from Peruvian bark should you fall ill,” Patrick added.

“There is a Rosefield in the north?” Liberina asked.

Patrick laughed. “Nothing quite so grand as this. Our summer retreat is called Shy Oak, in Hickory Valley.”

“Do the servants go north as well?” Jade asked.

“Those necessary to the household do,” Colin replied. “I cannot imagine Patrick having to make do without his *language* lessons.” The oblique insinuation within Colin’s words drew a virulent stare from Evan.

“Nor can I,” Patrick concurred in earnest, oblivious to the undercurrent.

Colin paused in lifting his forkful of potatoes. “And servants will be needed to prepare for any planned festivities. Isn’t that right, Evan?”

Jade glanced at Evan. “Will there be festivities?” she asked. *Will there be a wedding celebration?*

Evan pushed away the plate containing his half-eaten dinner. “There are always parties,” he said dully.



Jade’s anxiety over the shift of residence from Rosefield to Shy Oak was fueled by Colin’s casual remark about Clayton’s Rest, the summer dwelling maintained

by Glorianna's family. It seemed the Claytons and Darks were even closer neighbors in the north.

She was in her room making a halfhearted attempt to get ready for the move when Evan passed by carrying several shirts strewn over his arm. Ignoring the open valise strewn across her bed, Jade stood at the open window, staring down at the garden withering in the early summer heat.

"Is something wrong?" Evan asked, pausing in the doorway.

"I do not want to leave Rosefield."

Evan dropped the pile of shirts onto the nearest chair as he entered the room. He crossed to the window and stood beside Jade, surveying the garden below. The buzzing of bees and the drone of dragonflies filled the companionable silence.

"Why would you want to stay here and risk your health?" he asked. He took her chin in his hand and tilted her head back to meet his gaze. His expression was warm, bringing heat to her face and a tingling awareness of his touch. "What is it?" he insisted.

"Colin said you would announce your wedding date soon."

"Did he?" Evan's eyes darkened in anger. He dropped his hand from her chin and stepped away. "He seems to know my intentions even before I do. Quite a remarkable talent, that."

"Is it true an indenture can be sold?"

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Evan's jaw tightened at her question. "Why do you ask?" When she hesitated, the look he directed at her boiled with wrath. "Let me guess," he said. "My chivalrous half brother offered to purchase your indenture so he could protect you from abuse by my future wife?"

When Jade nodded, a dull flush rose along Evan's throat. "What makes him think I would sell it?" he demanded.

"He said you might consider it if I asked."

"Like hell I will," Evan gritted.

"I do not want Liberina and me to be at Glorianna's mercy when she becomes your wife," Jade said in a small voice. "Colin said—"

"Damn Colin!" Evan growled. "Damn him for implying I would not protect you."

And damn you for believing him. Evan did not voice the words, but they hung in the air unspoken. He retrieved the discarded shirts and began to string them across his arm with impatient, jerky movements.

"I will address your status in my household with Glorianna before any marriage takes place," Evan said. "But sell you to my rake of a brother? *No.*"

His face was rigid as he crossed the room carrying the pile of shirts. Jade automatically held out her arms when she realized he meant to transfer the stack of clothing to her. He emptied the heap of silks and cottons into her outstretched arms.

"You obviously need a task to occupy you so you

have less time available for idle speculation. You *can* sew?" His voice fairly rang with sarcasm.

"I can sew," Jade sourly affirmed, hefting the armful of shirts.

"Good," Evan said mildly. He paused on his way out the door. "And don't forget to finish packing."



Glorianna Clayton lingered before the mirror, studying her reflection critically, smoothing frayed wisps of her blonde hair and biting her lips to force a rosy hue into them.

Instructing the butler to have her visitor join her in the front parlor, she glanced nervously around the room. She demanded perfection in her appearance and her surroundings. She was the privileged object of a very important man's regard, and although she did not know his family or his personal holdings, she was certain he was fabulously wealthy.

Count Faa Heron was from one of the Balkan countries. He was believed by many to be a member of some royal family. Glorianna anxiously fingered the folds of her light blue day dress as she waited for the count to be shown into the parlor.

She had toyed with the idea of introducing Count Heron to Jade, reasoning perhaps two foreigners would

find comfort in each other's arms, but when she suggested it, Heron had implied he considered Jade beneath him in status. The subtle slight directed toward her nemesis had instantly endeared the count to Glorianna. She allowed Heron to pursue her, simply for the purpose of making Evan jealous.

Glorianna was disappointed Evan had not thrown Jade out of the house the night of the engagement party. Instead, he had abandoned their guests, forcing Patrick to send everyone home before the wedding date had been announced. At the very least, Evan owed her a profuse personal apology followed by the public declaration of their wedding date. What she had received thus far from him had been a curt note of regret delivered on a silver salver by a household servant. No Gypsy harlot was going to prevent her from achieving her ambition to be mistress of Rosefield. She'd made too many sacrifices to be cheated of the title. With Edgar's departure following the death of his wife, an uncertainty hung over Evan's status as heir. She had recently taken measures to guarantee her place should Evan fail to inherit Rosefield due to the shameful circumstances surrounding his birth.

Count Heron swept into the parlor in a dramatic display of swirling, scarlet-lined, floor-length black velvet cape. The corners of his mouth quirked slightly as Glorianna offered her hand. He took it, planting a moist kiss on her soft, white, musk-scented flesh. She emitted a bubbly, self-conscious giggle in response to his suave,

Continental greeting.

“Oh, my dear Count, I am so distressed,” she sighed.

“Have I distressed you?” he asked. His thick, dark eyebrows rose, creating an illusion of ferocity that was oddly disconcerting when he frowned.

“You are at the heart of my torment,” she said. “I must leave for Clayton’s Rest soon.”

“I shall miss you, of course.”

His rigid formality simply would not do. She needed assurance he would pine during her absence. Most men would be distraught over the prospect of her leaving. If she had to take him into her bed to erase his cool indifference, she would.

“And what are your plans during my absence?” she asked. “Will you be returning home to . . . to . . . to your home?” she stuttered. *Where had he said he was from? Albania? Romania? Bulgaria?*

Count Heron smiled at her, his expression a politic affectation having no kinship with mirth. His dark, obsidian eyes glinted. “I shall remain here as long as you will allow me to call upon you, my white rose.”

Glorianna pouted prettily. “I fear you will not miss me at all!”

The count stepped forward and drew Glorianna into his arms, embracing her tightly as he lowered his head and kissed her.

“You *shall* miss me!” she exclaimed, her cry nearly a shout of victory as she coaxed a show of moisture into

her eyes. How would Evan react to the news that Heron was smitten with her? Fear of losing her to another man should induce him to announce their wedding date. “So, you’ll be here to greet me when I return in October?” she asked.

“Of course, my white rose. Perhaps you will allow me to escort you to the Snap Apple Night party?”

“Oh, you’ve received an invitation?” The Snap Apple Night party, a costume ball, was an annual Dark family tradition. If she had not received an invitation to the crowning event of the Charleston social season, it was an oversight for which someone would pay dearly.

“No, but *you* will be invited,” Heron said.

“Yes, of course,” Glorianna said, smiling.

If all goes well, I shall be mistress of Rosefield by then, and I will not need an invitation to my own party.



It was a lengthy journey by coach to reach the dry northern pineland region known as Hickory Valley. The large manor called Shy Oak was similar to those seen in Charleston, with gray brick walls and curving bays projecting on three sides of the building. The northern residence had been designed for the indolent summer season as an airy porticoed country palace of stone and wood.

“Welcome to Shy Oak,” Evan announced as the carriage entered the private drive.

Shadows of fatigue etched Liberina's face. Jade frowned in her sleep and continued to use her sister's shoulder as a pillow as the coach bumped and swayed over the gravel drive. When they finally rolled to a stop, Jade woke and glanced sleepily at her surroundings.

Evan jumped from the carriage, stretching his long limbs and smiling as members of the household staff shouted greetings. He jogged up the stone steps and was met at the door by Colin and Patrick, who had arrived two days earlier.

"Cook is in a temper," Patrick confided. "The pantry isn't fully stocked, and we're to have a dinner guest already."

"Glorianna sent word she would be joining us for dinner," Colin added.

Evan glanced back at the carriage. Liberina and Jade milled about in the driveway, looking around them with expressions of unease. He had hoped for a quiet evening to allow them to become accustomed to their new surroundings. The thought of Jade and Glorianna at the same dinner table was enough to ruin his appetite.

"I have a suggestion, Ev," Patrick said.

"I'm all ears," Evan said dryly.

"Why don't Libby, Jade, and I share a light supper while you and Colin dine with Glorianna?"

At the mention of her name, Jade's gaze swung in Evan's direction. When she caught him watching her, she looked away. She hadn't spoken to him since she'd asked him about selling her indenture to his brother.

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Half brother. He was furious with Colin for making the suggestion, and angry with Jade for expecting him to consider it.

Patrick followed the direction of Evan's gaze. He studied Jade for a moment before fixing Evan with a look of sympathy. "I could begin the preliminary sketches of Libby and Jade tonight," Pat quietly offered. "It would keep Jade and Glorianna from crossing paths."

"What?" Evan shook his head to clear it. He wanted to cross the yard, drag Jade into his arms, and . . . what? His fantasies did not end there, only his willingness to act upon them. Colin was the one who was determined to turn Jade into a whore. He'd kill him first.

"The forfeit from the game of whist," Patrick patiently reminded him. "Jade and Libby agreed to sit as models for me."

"Now that's a respectable sort of forfeit," Evan said. A tendril of ire snaked through him as he remembered the kiss Jade said Colin intended to seek as a forfeit.

He watched Jade tap a pebble from her shoe, the action a poignant reminder of the night he had "kidnapped" her in England. He had stopped her from marching alone down the road in England. He would not abandon her now. But what *would* he do with her? The thing Jade wanted most of all in the world was her freedom. She had crossed an ocean and immersed herself in an unfamiliar culture in search of it. To remain an honorable man, he must allow her to have the freedom she desired, even if the sacrifice ripped his beating heart

from his chest and devoured his soul.

“I expect you and Glorianna have some things to discuss in private,” Patrick said, with a pointed elevation of one tawny brow.

“Yes,” Evan replied, his lips forming a grim line. “I have much to discuss with Miss Clayton.”



After an hour of listening to Glorianna’s nonstop chatter, Evan had abandoned the food on his plate in favor of a glass of brandy.

“When does Edgar plan to return to Charleston?” Glorianna asked. She patted her napkin daintily against her lips.

Evan signaled to a servant to remove his plate. “His stay in Philadelphia has been extended indefinitely.”

“Rosefield and Shy Oak are in your capable hands during his absence,” she said, ignoring the offended look Colin directed at her. “Although it was my hope that Edgar would be here for our wedding. It’s a pity your mother did not live to see us married,” Glorianna remarked. “Such losses certainly make one aware of the passing of time, do they not?”

“Indeed,” Evan concurred. His glass had a tiny chip on the stem, hardly noticeable unless one was seeking a distraction.

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"Have you met Count Heron?" Glorianna asked.

"No," Evan replied. His nostrils flared as he stifled a yawn.

"Surely you've heard of him?" Mild annoyance tinged her words.

"I think I've heard of him," Colin said. "Isn't he the fat, balding man with the warts—"

"No, you've mistaken him for someone else," Glorianna snapped. "The count is quite dashing. In fact, he appears to be somewhat enamored with me."

"Another moth singed by your flame," Colin sighed, reaching for the bottle of brandy.

"I feared Heron might follow me all the way to Clayton's Rest. He's been relentless in his attentions ever since Evan failed to announce our wedding date."

"Has he shown interest in courting you?" Evan asked, looking up from his glass of brandy.

Glorianna smiled. "I'm certain when we announce our wedding date his ardor will cool. You needn't be jealous," she trilled. When Evan continued to stare at her, she waved her ivory fan rapidly in front of her face, as if a blush had mounted her pale cheeks. "Although he does grow persistent," she added, lowering her lashes. "I've twice had to stop him when his words began to have the ring of a proposal."

"Do let the good count enumerate his offer before you give him your answer," Colin advised. "You would not want to misapprehend just what it is he is proposing."

Evan grunted at Colin's advice. Glorianna glowered at them both.

"I might benefit from a stroll out of doors," Colin said, tossing down his napkin. He retreated from the room as Evan and Glorianna adjourned to the parlor.

After closing the parlor door, Evan paced the room. He finally paused before the mantel, staring down at the grate. Glorianna came to stand behind him, the silk of her gown rustling as she moved. She massaged his shoulders, sliding her hands down his arms, pressing her soft warmth against him.

"Do you realize how long it's been since we made love?" she huskily inquired.

Evan closed his eyes as her heavy perfume filled his nose. The musky scent overpowered the small room. Not like Jade's pleasant scent of citrus and lavender. Glorianna stepped into him, moving against him in a suggestive manner.

"The last time was long before you left for England," she said. She rubbed her body against him, purring low in her throat like a cat. "You can't imagine how badly I want you right now," she whispered. "Let me show you."

"We need to talk," Evan told her.

"I've missed your touch," she said in a throaty voice, facing him with a beguiling smile. She smoothed her hand over his shirt and allowed her fingers to glide across his chest, moving slowly and seductively downward. "Can you honestly say you don't want me?"

His iron grip stilled the steady descent of her hand.

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“What I *want*,” Evan said, carefully setting her away from him, “is to talk.”

Glorianna smoothed her clothes as a look of spite flashed across her face. She stepped away from him, tossing her hair back with a flick of her wrist. “Yes, we need to discuss Jade.”

“Jade?” Evan made no effort to conceal his annoyance. “What about Jade?”

“I want her to be sent to Seahaven for the remainder of her service after we’re married. I have an aversion to living in the same house with her.”

“No,” Evan stated unequivocally.

“Darling, people are bound to speculate about her function in our household.”

“At present, she is a language instructor and a portrait model for Patrick,” Evan said.

“Those are hardly fitting duties for a bondservant. People are bound to gossip—”

“Let them.” He turned away in curt dismissal of the topic.

“It will be humiliating for me, as lady of the house, to have people say my husband keeps his mistress under the same roof as his wife.”

“Isn’t that a rather inelegant way of asking me if I’m sleeping with her?”

“Are you?” Glorianna’s eyes gleamed with venom. Hectic, unbecoming splotches of red mottled her fair cheeks.

“No.” He glared at Glorianna. He wasn’t sleeping

with Jade, but he wanted to. He'd done his damndest to avoid taking advantage of her. But the desire was always there, the relentless temptation warring with his prosaic need to remain an honorable man in Jade's eyes.

"If you love me, you will defer to me on this one request," Glorianna insisted. "Send Jade and her sister to Seahaven or sell Jade's indenture. I don't care which."

"I brought them from England. I am responsible for them. They will remain where they are, protected under my roof." *Protected, even from me.*

Glorianna's mouth thinned into a flat line of temper. "So, you expect your wife to live at Rosefield while Gypsies camp on the plantation grounds?"

"Nothing quite so colorful, my dear," Evan drawled. "No *vardos* in the fields, in any case."

"What does *vardo* mean?" she huffed. "Am I also expected to learn their language?"

"No Gypsy wagons," Evan translated. "Have you forgotten your prospective groom is half Gypsy? You don't seem to object to *me*."

"You're accepted as a gentleman, and I've known you most of my life," Glorianna said, shrugging. "Jade and Liberina stand out as exotics."

Would Glorianna still be as eager to wed him if Edgar had denounced him as heir to Rosefield?

"Remember the fiasco at the party? I don't want Jade to turn us into a laughingstock within the community. I don't want to have to constantly count the silver,"

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Glorianna sniffed.

“Jade claims someone sent a servant to help her prepare for the party,” Evan countered, watching Glorianna’s reaction with interest.

“Oh?” She examined her fingernails. “Of course Jade would make such a claim. You were quite angry.”

“Yes, I was, wasn’t I?” Something ugly stirred in Evan as Glorianna’s face registered sly satisfaction.

“She probably feared punishment,” she said with an elegant shrug of her shoulders.

“Can you think of anyone in our acquaintance who would be vile enough to play such a shabby trick?”

“Of course not,” Glorianna snapped. She exhaled noisily. “If I consent to shelter your Gypsies at Rosefield, will you agree to publish our wedding date?”

“I would like to ensure Edgar’s attendance. Obviously, that requires a delay until he returns to Charleston.”

Glorianna nodded coolly. “Count Heron may view a postponement of our nuptials as an invitation to court me,” she warned.

Evan kept his expression blank. “It would be imprudent not to consider all your options,” he said. “You may decide you would prefer to be a countess rather than the wife of a half-Gypsy plantation owner.”



Chapter Seventeen

*I*f she had been a free woman, she could have refused. The announcement of Evan's engagement to Glorianna was imminent, making his companionship difficult for Jade to bear. The special relationship she shared with him would soon be reduced to cold formality. He seemed to have withdrawn from her, leaving her in the throes of what felt like addiction when the substance of habit was unattainable.

When Evan brusquely ordered her to dress to go riding, Jade had wanted to refuse. Now she rode beside him in silence, slanting looks in his direction as they galloped toward an unknown destination. He sat tall, his back ramrod straight, broad shoulders rigid. His shuttered expression discouraged conversation as they

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approached an impressive Georgian-style plantation home not far from Shy Oak.

Evan reined in Raven, gracefully dismounted, and helped Jade to the ground.

“Paying my respects to a neighbor,” he said.

He rapped on the door. A man dressed in a black suit with a black tie cinched at his throat promptly appeared, greeting Evan with deference before ushering them through the door and into the drawing room.

“I’ll notify the mistress you’re here,” the man said.

“No, Peter,” Evan said quickly. “Kindly have tea brought to us here and have Lindy serve us.”

“As you wish, Mr. Dark,” Peter replied, bowing slightly before exiting the room.

Jade’s heart began to pound at the mention of Lindy. “Where are we?” she asked. She abandoned her seat on the brown and yellow striped brocade settee and made an impulsive move toward the door before realizing she did not know the way home to Shy Oak.

“Clayton’s Rest,” Evan said calmly. “Sit down, Jade.”

“How could you bring me here?” Jade demanded.

The door opened, and the young woman who had dressed Jade for her disastrous debut at the ball entered the room, her attention focused on balancing the tray she carried.

As Jade stood facing the doorway, Lindy looked up and froze at the sight of her. Lindy’s mouth opened and closed as she slowly turned to view the other occupant of

the room. Her eyes bulged in horror and a low moan of terror escaped her as she locked gazes with Evan. Evan remained stiffly seated on a brown wing chair, his sharp gaze capturing every nuance of Lindy's reaction.

The silver tray slipped from Lindy's hands. She uttered a cry, then turned and fled the room as if the hounds of hell chased after her. Jade flinched at the resounding crash and sank onto the settee as Evan vaulted over the downed tray in pursuit of Lindy.

Jade remained in the drawing room, covering her ears with her hands to block out Lindy's loud, tearful denials. Jade could barely hear Evan as he spoke to Lindy in low, measured tones. Lindy's cries gradually faded into what sounded like normal conversation, then all sound suddenly ceased.

Evan peeked into the drawing room, silently motioning for Jade to join him in the outer hall.

When Lindy saw Jade emerge from the drawing room, she started to sob again. "Ah'm sorry," Lindy said to Jade.

Jade looked helplessly at Evan, whose jaw was rigid with anger, although his manner toward Lindy was restrained.

"Is your mistress upstairs?" Evan asked Lindy.

Lindy's gaze shifted uneasily toward the grand staircase. "Miz Glory say doan' distu'b," Lindy said.

"Don't worry, Lindy," Evan said as he started up the stairs. "*You* aren't the one about to disturb her."

Jade hurried to keep pace with Evan. Below them,

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she could hear Lindy's voice escalate into a wail as they ascended the stairs to the second-floor bedrooms.



Jade was close on Evan's heels as he flung open the door to Glorianna's bedroom without first knocking or announcing himself.

He froze in the doorway, seizing the carved wood of the doorframe in his right hand as he stared into the room. Jade leaned forward to peer beyond Evan. The sight of Evan's fiancée abed in the middle of the day was not half as surprising as the fact she was not alone. Her white flesh gleamed in contrast with the tanned chest of the man who held her.

Colin.

Jade marveled at Glorianna's composure as she shrugged out of Colin's embrace and casually reached for her blue silk dressing gown.

"No false modesty is required for my benefit," Evan commented coldly as Glorianna moved to cover herself. "Remember, I've seen it."

"We're all adults here, Evan," Glorianna said, tossing her head as she donned her robe. "Let's not pretend you have been any more faithful to me than I have been to you."

Glorianna eased from the bed, glancing back at Colin, who calmly studied Evan through half-lidded

eyes. She lifted her chin regally, carefully arranging the soft folds of the gown around her. Her hands were as steady as if she were discussing the weather while seated in her downstairs parlor.

She locked eyes with Evan. "I want her out of my house," she said. Glorianna did not acknowledge Jade's presence, but her meaning was clear.

"We'll be on our way," Evan replied, "after you've apologized to Jade."

"You can't be serious," Glorianna sputtered. She reached for the glass of water on the bedside stand and slowly sipped from it, watching Evan over the rim of the glass.

"Patrick recognized Lindy," Evan said. "It was clever of you to send Lindy from Seahaven to Clayton's Rest immediately after the ball, knowing I had to find Lindy before I could accuse you."

"That was *you*?" Colin asked Glorianna. She gave him a quelling look, and he eased back against the cushioned headboard with a low whistle of admiration. "Glory, you really *are* a bitch."

"I've brought Jade with me to hear your apology," Evan persisted.

"I do not apologize to servants. Besides, it was simply a prank," Glorianna said.

Jade tugged at Evan's arm. "Evan, I need no apology from her. Please, can we go?"

"Take your whore out of my home," Glorianna said.

Jade gasped at the slur. Standing so close to Evan,

she heard and felt his sharp intake of breath.

"You're lucky you're a woman." Evan's lip curled as he spoke. "And don't think you'll punish Lindy for telling the truth. If she or any of her family is harmed, you'll find yourself the subject of a very unflattering article in the next *City Gazette*."

"Evan, you don't seem to understand," Colin said. "Glory has her heart set on being mistress of Rosefield. She has to marry the son who will inherit in order to accomplish that goal. With the pecking order currently in dispute, you can't blame her for hedging her bet by seducing me."

"Shut up, Colin," Glorianna snarled.

Colin's green-gold gaze moved appreciatively over Jade. "One thing I'll say for you, Evan, you're a lucky bastard. Oh, I didn't mean that in the literal sense, even if it *is* accurate."

Jade touched Evan's arm again, wishing she had the physical strength to force him from the room. His entire body vibrated with fury.

"I have to applaud your taste in women," Colin continued. "You're obviously a man who appreciates diversity as well as beauty. After having your fiancée, I'm looking forward to tugging your little Gypsy as well."

With a shout of rage, Evan launched himself into the bedroom. Jade cried out, snatching at the tail of his brown linen riding coat. The fabric slid through her hands as Evan lunged for Colin and punched him.

Colin's head snapped back against the headboard with a loud thwack.

Blood gushed from Colin's nose, spreading in a crimson stain across Glorianna's ivory silk sheets. Colin lifted his fingers to his face, gingerly probing the bridge of his nose. Glorianna remained where she sat, her dark blue eyes still resting on Evan.

"The two of you belong together," Evan said disdainfully. "I wish you every happiness."

He folded his large hand over Jade's small one and urged her from the room.



Colin rose from the bed, wrapping the bloody sheet around him. "I should keep a dressing gown on the premises," he said. He surveyed the damage to his face in Glorianna's mirror. "I've a mind to call him out," he grunted, wincing as he touched his nose. "If he weren't my brother—"

Glorianna joined him in front of the mirror, gazing at his reflection with a speculative look on her face.

"*Half* brother," she reminded him. "Edgar's favorite, the one who intends to deprive you of your birthright."



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A visitor by the name of Miles Prescott, acting in the capacity of second on behalf of Colin Dark, presented himself at Shy Oak early the next morning. Prescott had been tasked with arranging a “personal interview” between Colin and Evan.

“What does it mean, ‘personal interview?’” Jade asked Patrick.

“It’s another term for a duel,” Patrick replied.

Jade felt as though her heart might explode in her chest. “Evan must not agree to it!”

“I tried to dissuade him, but he was deaf to my arguments,” Patrick said. His eyes were shadowed with concern. “Uncle Joe is here, trying to talk some sense into him, but I don’t think Evan will budge. It’s a matter of honor.”

“What good is honor to a dead man?” Jade stalked down the hallway and stopped outside the library where Evan had been ensconced in conversation with his uncle for several hours. She shouted and pounded on the door as Patrick reached her side.

“Come away,” Patrick said softly, taking her arm. When Jade resisted, he pulled her around until she stood facing him. He looked ill at ease. “He won’t see you, Jade.”

“Why?” Her voice broke with misery. “I must tell him—”

“You must not say anything to distract him until this matter is resolved,” Patrick said sharply. “Prescott informed Evan if he refuses the duel, he will be posted.

That means a statement will be published accusing Evan of cowardice. Evan won't refuse to fight."

"Foolish *Gadjo*," Jade hissed under her breath, glaring at the closed library door.

"Duels are commonplace occurrences here," Patrick said. "They are often resolved before the parties even go to ground, without injury. I'm certain Colin does not intend a duel to the death."

"A duel to the death?"

The conversation within the library broke off at the sound of Jade's voice, then resumed as Patrick's expression of compassion changed to angry frustration.

"That's certain to help," he said, seizing Jade by the elbow and hauling her away from the library door.



"Will you act as my second?" Evan asked Joseph. "If not, I'll have to look outside the family. Patrick has already refused to participate in what he describes as 'barbarity.'"

"If I cannot convince you to stand down, I must stand beside you," Joseph sighed. "I'm surprised you were not the one who issued the challenge, under the circumstances."

"It was never in my mind to challenge Colin," Evan said.

Beyond the initial moment of shock, Evan had felt a peculiar sense of relief in discovering Glorianna committing an indiscretion. He wouldn't have felt honorable

in breaking the engagement otherwise, but her actions had released him. On the return ride to Shy Oak, his mind had been teeming with thoughts about the future. He had decided to spend the morning with Jade before Prescott had arrived to deliver Colin's challenge. Now, instead of planning the future he anticipated, Evan found himself planning for the possibility that he may not have a future at all.

Evan produced a leather folio containing two documents. He placed the first in his uncle's hands.

Joseph gave it a cursory glance. "Jade's indenture contract," he said.

"The contract stipulates her indenture ends if I die. However, if I am incapacitated in such a manner that I cannot conduct my own affairs, I would want the agreement destroyed, not sold. I would want Jade to have her freedom."

Joseph nodded and set the paper aside. Evan handed him the second document. After reading through it, Joseph picked up the indenture contract again and placed the two documents side by side on the library table. He smoothed the parchment with his hands, looking up at Evan in confusion.

"These were prepared on the same date. Your revised last will and testament states that Jade is your wife. I don't understand."

"Jade doesn't know about the second document," Evan said.

"Her mark is on both documents. The mark indicates she witnessed the will. How could she not know about it?"

“She does not read English well enough to know what she signed. She assumed she was signing one indenture for herself and one for an agreed-upon term of service to be performed in exchange for Liberina’s passage. It was expedient not to tell her otherwise.” *Expedient?* He hadn’t understood what had driven him at the time. He would have been at a loss in trying to explain his actions to Jade.

“So, you chose to honor the Gypsy ceremony?” Joseph laughed at Evan’s stunned expression. “I spent some time in England trying to track you down. Gypsies don’t generally like to talk to *Gadjos*, but I came across a Gypsy named Culvato who seemed to find the situation quite amusing.”

“He would,” Evan grunted.

“What made you decide to marry the little spitfire after all?” Joseph asked.

“I didn’t. We didn’t want to be married,” Evan explained. “Jade proposed the indenture, not I.”

“Then why would you have a second document drawn up indicating Jade is your wife?”

“I realized I was taking them away from their family and into a foreign country. If something happened to me on the voyage, they would be vulnerable. The document was valid only in the event of my death. It was meant to protect Jade without binding us to each other.”

“What about Glorianna?” Joseph reached for the decanter of port and splashed a generous amount into a glass tumbler.

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“I planned to free Jade and destroy both documents in the event I married Glorianna.”

“In the event,” Joseph echoed. “Were you having second thoughts about marriage *before* you found Glorianna and Colin together?”

“I’ve been having second thoughts ever since I left England,” Evan admitted.



Chapter Eighteen

After one final attempt at reconciliation, the seconds proceeded to the declaration of the terms of the duel. Evan and Colin waited in silence as the distances were measured and pegged on the field. A toss of a coin determined Joseph would give the signal to fire. Miles Prescott would choose the place where Colin would stand. Miles directed Colin to an area shaded by live oaks festooned with gray specters of Spanish moss.

I'll be facing the sun. Evan wrestled against the unease threatening to destroy his focus. Despite the early morning hour, the humidity was stifling. He felt as though he was trying to draw breath through a layer of cotton. The hazy sun yielded glare but little warmth.

Stillness and silence permeated the meadow; not even the sound of birdsong leavened the gloom.

Readiness was declared. The large, walnut-stocked, octagon-barreled pistols were cocked, their hair triggers were set by the seconds, and they were delivered to the combatants.

"Gentlemen." Joseph's voice split the stillness like steel ringing against porcelain. He impaled Colin and Evan with stern looks of disapproval before continuing. "No dumb shooting or firing into the air is admissible. No apology can be received before the exchange of fire. A misfire shall be judged equivalent to a shot. The matter must proceed to two shots or until a severe hit is received by one party, if the challenger requires it. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" Colin's shout was confident, almost eager.

"Yes." Evan considered the dull finality of that single word.

The signal was given. To avoid flexing the muscles of his arm and betraying his aim, Evan moved his forefinger with barely enough force to discharge the pistol. Colin's weapon discharged in a cloud of spiraling smoke.

Evan felt a small thrust prod his arm, followed by white-hot, searing pain. He stared down, watching as a blur of red crept across the fabric of his shirtsleeve below his right shoulder. He clutched his arm and looked in Colin's direction. A physician busily applied a bandage where Evan's bullet had scored a nick in the flesh of

Colin's upper arm.

Joseph supported Evan's arm as the physician hastily slit Evan's shirt sleeve. The doctor clucked his tongue as he inspected the wound.

"An inch higher and your shoulder would have been shattered. A bit lower and more centered and you'd have no worries at all," he concluded flatly, glancing up to peer at Evan over the rims of his spectacles. "I'll have to remove the shot embedded in your arm."

His arm throbbed unmercifully. Evan sucked in a breath and grimaced in pain before turning toward Patrick and Jade. Jade looked like she was about to faint. Evan smiled and motioned with his undamaged arm, indicating his injury was not serious. *Thank God it is over.*

"I trust Colin is not badly hurt?" Evan inquired with a wry twist of his lips.

"A scratch compared to what he did to you," Joseph said. "He got off the first shot."

"Ruined my aim," Evan joked, wincing.

Evan turned and found himself nose to nose with Miles Prescott. Prescott was dressed splendidly for the occasion, the flounce of his frothy white cravat fluttering as if a clutch of birds had flown from it. He'd run to deliver his message. Sweat beaded his hairline in a crystalline halo.

"Colin wishes me to again demand an apology," he announced breathlessly.

Joseph stared at him. "It's over, man," he barked. "A

severe hit was received by the challenged."

"The challenger also sustained injury," Miles pointed out. "If no apology is made, we cannot declare the challenge satisfied."

Evan cradled his injured arm against his chest and made a face as he slowly flexed the fingers of his right hand. "Then nothing has changed, except we have exchanged first shots and I have proven to be the better target," Evan said dully.

"Without an apology, Colin cannot consider this matter resolved," Miles informed them.

He means to kill me.

"I'll be damned before I'll apologize to the bastard," Evan declared, deliberately raising his voice to cheat Prescott of the satisfaction of relaying his reply. "Load my pistol."

Evan flinched at Jade's high-pitched shriek of protest. She wrenched free of Patrick's restraining hold and ran across the field to him. Her vivid green gaze swept over the blood staining his shirt before lifting to his face. Her eyes were shining with tears. She had never looked so beautiful.

"You cannot continue with an injured arm, Evan. He will kill you!"

Evan swept the glossy black tresses back from her face with his uninjured arm, lowering his head to savor her fragrance. He brushed his fingers along the line of her jaw. She moved her head in answer to his caress. He

dipped his head lower, and whispered, “Would it matter so much to you, Jade?”

Jade lifted her head. When she blinked, a solitary tear rolled down her cheek. “*Dilo*,” she chided, her voice breaking.

“Can we finish this?” Colin shouted.

Evan held Jade away from him, searching her eyes. He yelled for Patrick, who sprinted across the field to join them.

“Patrick,” Evan said evenly, “please send Jade home. This is no place for her.”

Jade reluctantly allowed Patrick to lead her away from the field. He handed her into the family coach, glancing around him as he crossed the meadow to rejoin Evan and Joseph.

“I’m surprised Glorianna is not here. I wonder if she knows,” Patrick mused.

“She knows,” Joseph said. He gestured toward a black paneled coach resting a distance away.

Patrick glanced toward the conveyance. He shook his head. “That coach doesn’t belong to the Claytons. I don’t know whose it is.”



At Shy Oak, Liberina greeted Jade with soothing words and a drink laced with laudanum. Hours later,

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Jade woke suddenly, recalling the morning with brutal clarity. When she called Evan's name, Patrick quickly entered the room. The oil lamp he carried cast eerie shadows over everything; even his face seemed to flicker in the light.

"Colin took a bullet in his thigh at the third firing," Patrick said in a dull voice. "His physician removed the shot, and he's resting. He'll recover."

"Did you say the *third* firing?" Jade's stomach churned. "I don't care about Colin. What about Evan?"

"When both missed at the second exchange, Colin demanded a third firing." It seemed for a moment Patrick would be unable to continue. He took a deep breath. "The third shot struck Evan in the chest. He's lost a great deal of blood, Jade. We can only pray and wait."

"What does the doctor say?"

Patrick hesitated. "What physicians always say at times like these."

The feeble light shifted, and Jade saw he had been crying. She held out her arms to him, and he stepped into her embrace, his chest heaving as he sobbed. She watched the play of shadow upon the bedroom wall, unable to think or feel. She listened for her own heartbeat, certain the news had stopped it.

"Where is he, Patrick? May I go to him?"

"He isn't conscious, Jade."

"I want to be there when he wakes," she said. "I will not disturb him," she promised, "but I want him to

know I am there.”

“He might not—” Patrick took a shuddering breath and nodded. “I’ll take you to him.”



Evan was unconscious and pale to the point of appearing lifeless. His dark hair curled limply around his face. Jade fingered a lock near his temple, imagining him brushing it away from his brow with an impatient hand. The faint growth of beard stubble outlining his jaw cast his pallid skin in sharp relief. He looked like a wax effigy. Jade had seen men die of similar injuries. She swayed on her feet. Patrick quickly placed a chair near the bedside for her, and she sank onto it with a sob.

She took the hand of Evan’s uninjured arm and wrapped her own hand around it, drawing them both toward her lips. Patrick touched her gently on the shoulder and quietly left the room.

“Come back to me, Evan.”

Jade spoke to him in a muted voice, recounting their meeting in the tavern and their journey together. She continued to speak in a soft voice as the hours passed, describing their arrival at the Lowara camp, their wedding day, the ocean voyage, and her first impressions of Rosefield. She wistfully recounted each argument and every moment of passion they had shared.

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"My mother owned a blue teapot and three cups and saucers. All are gone now, broken. When I opened the box and saw your gift, I wanted to kiss you."

Instead, she had repeated Colin's flirtatious warning that she would be expected to forfeit a kiss the next time she lost at whist. Her insides twisted at the memory of Evan's reaction and how her words had ruined the moment.

"I wish I *had* kissed you," she said. "I wish I had kissed you every time I wanted to kiss you and more." Rising from the chair, she carefully leaned down and pressed her lips gently to his.

She slipped from the room to use the necessary and to seek a cool drink, passing by an open door as she crossed the narrow hallway. Colin's voice, distinctive and strong, called to her as she went by.

She froze and glanced into the open room. Colin was propped comfortably against a bank of feather pillows, a book in one hand, a snifter of brandy in the other.

"How is he?" he asked. Jade stared at him, mute and fierce, her heart pounding. He coolly contemplated her face, as if trying to glean the answer from her expression, then asked, "Is he dead?"

She gasped. "*No.*"

"You would benefit if Evan dies," Colin said. "Your indenture would expire with him. You would be free. You would be better off if he dies."

"If Evan dies—" Jade choked, trembling as anguish

engulfed her. Her heart hammered in her ears. She suddenly recalled she had observed Colin during their games of whist and had concluded he was superstitious and susceptible to suggestion.

“A curse upon you, Colin Dark,” she said. She began to chant an invocation in *Romanes*. She was a skilled *bujo* woman, and Colin was a gullible *Gadjo*. She would leave it to him to imagine the ghastly details of the curse she had placed upon his head.

“Get out!” Colin shouted. He drew the coverlet up to his chin as if to ward off evil.

Jade waved her arms and spun around in a gust of twirling skirts before exiting the room.

Liberina stood in the hallway, staring at Jade as if convinced she had lost her mind. “What did you do?”

“I placed a curse on him,” Jade replied.

“You cursed him with the recipe for hedgehog soup?”

“He should have learned to speak *Romanes*,” Jade said with a shrug. She tapped her forehead with her finger. “If the *Gadjo* believes he is cursed, then he is cursed.” She held out her hand to Liberina. “Come, *Phei*. We have work to do.”



When Jade reentered Evan’s bedroom, a stranger dressed in a long black frock hovered over him, holding a knife. Jade’s piercing scream brought Patrick and several

of the household staff running. Jade moved to place herself between Evan and the man holding the weapon. The stranger backed away, dropping the knife in his haste to retreat to the door.

"Jade, it's all right," Patrick said. "This is Doctor Ewing. He's here to help Evan."

"By stabbing him?"

"I was going to bleed him," Dr. Ewing said with icy composure.

"His brother already did that," Jade said. She flipped back her hair with a twist of her wrist and eyed the doctor with hostility. "If you try to take Evan's blood, be prepared to lose some of your own," she warned.

"And what course of treatment would you recommend, young lady?" Ewing asked. "Are you a physician?" He looked down his nose at Jade.

"I'm a *Roma*," Jade replied. "Your medicine is not helping him. We will use mine."

Ewing stooped to retrieve the knife he had dropped. He wiped it on the lapel of his coat and replaced it within the black leather bag he carried. He looked at Patrick. "Do you intend to allow this, Mr. Dark? I can at least make your brother comfortable until the end comes."

Patrick approached the bed and looked down at Evan, resting his hand on Evan's shoulder. Evan did not stir. Patrick's earnest green gaze traveled from Dr. Ewing to Jade.

"I hope you can do more than just make him comfortable," Patrick told Jade. He met Ewing's outraged

glare with a look of composure. “Yes, I will allow it. She has more to lose than you do.”

Liberina returned from her forage of the nearby woods bearing willow bark, Saint-John’s-wort, and dandelion root, the main ingredients needed for Jade’s *Roma* curative. Jade found a handkerchief belonging to Evan, formed a pouch by threading a ribbon through the top of the handkerchief, and placed a sample of the ingredients within the *parik-til*, or blessings bag, along with a lock of Evan’s hair, acorns, cloves, and a stick of cinnamon. Jade kept the blessings bag on her person at all times, while the remainder of the ingredients were pulverized, boiled, and kept simmering in a covered pot until the concoction was ready to be strained through a cloth and fed to Evan. After several doses, Evan’s fever broke and his shallow, labored breathing became steady and even.



Evan hovered between life and death for several days, and when he finally woke, everything around him seemed in sharp relief, as though he had moved from shadow into glaring sunlight. Patrick, dozing in a chair at Evan’s bedside, snapped awake as Evan stirred.

“How do you feel?” Patrick asked anxiously.

“Like I’ve been shot,” Evan replied. His gaze swept the room as he shifted in the bed, wincing. He glanced

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down at his chest, swathed in oily-looking bandages reeking of a sickly sweet odor. “What on earth—”

“A salve made of honey and rosin,” Patrick said, smiling. “*Roma* medicine. Doc Ewing had given up on you, but Jade simply refused to let you die.”

“Where is she?”

“I insisted she get some sleep,” Patrick said. “She hasn’t left your side in days. She’s exhausted.”

Evan nodded slowly. He blinked, his brain clearing of cobwebs. “Where is Colin?”

“In the bedroom down the hall.”

Evan grunted. “I’m surprised he isn’t recuperating at Clayton’s Rest.”

“Glorianna had him delivered here. Apparently no one else wants him,” Patrick said.

“No doubt she’s punishing Colin for failing to kill me,” Evan grunted.

“Oh, he’s been punished,” Patrick informed Evan with a grin. “He’s been cursed.” Liberina had shared the news of the hedgehog soup curse with Patrick, who now delighted in relating it to Evan.

Evan chuckled, drawing a sharp intake of breath as searing pain shot through his chest and spread to his midsection.

“Colin takes the whole thing very seriously,” Patrick continued. “We’re eating more rabbit these days. He’s collecting rabbit feet as a protection against the curse.”

“Good,” Evan said. “I hope he runs out of rabbits.”

He attempted to sit up and found he was too weak. "In fact," he said, "remind me to sell the hutch."

Taxed and drowsy from the brief conversation, Evan soon fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke again, Patrick entered the room carrying a tray laden with a silver tea service.

"I know you prefer coffee," Patrick said apologetically, "but Libby has brewed this tea especially for you. She says it is famous for its curative powers."

Evan looked cynical as Patrick poured the tea and a strong astringent odor filled the room.

"Milk and sugar?" Patrick offered.

"If you think it will help," Evan replied doubtfully.

Evan eased up against the bolster of cushions and accepted the proffered cup with the hand of his uninjured arm. He took a sip of the tea and grimaced. He tried to hand the drink back to Patrick who refused to take it.

"I promised Libby you'd drink it." Patrick took a sip of the tea and made a face. "While you're unable to take a swing at me, may I ask what your plans are for Jade?"

The cup Evan held trembled against the saucer, producing a sharp rattle of porcelain as he placed the pair on the tabletop nearby with an unsteady hand.

"With all due respect, Pat," Evan said evenly, "I'm not prepared to discuss Jade with you. At least not until after I've spoken with her."

Patrick stared down into his tea. "What can I do for you then, besides ask Jade to come fluff your pillows?"

Evan detected the subtle sting of sarcasm in the

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remark. “Damn it, Pat. I’ve tried to conduct myself honorably in an impossible situation.”

“Yes, you’ve acted honorably,” Patrick replied. “And I’ve never seen two more miserable people as a result!”



Jade lingered over her bath, adding lavender salts to the water and carefully washing and drying her hair. Her mood was jubilant. Evan’s health was improving daily, and he had asked her to join him in the study.

With Liberina’s help, she chose a light green day dress of soft muslin with green slippers to match. Scroll-cut gold hoops dangled at her ears as she brushed her hair. Gazing into the mirror, she smiled at her reflection as she adorned her flowing tresses with a green ribbon borrowed from Liberina.

Life was very good. She and Liberina had been blessed with *basht*, good luck. The indenture contract guaranteed her a place in Evan’s household, and thus in his life. Liberina shyly doted on Patrick, who was a kind and decent man. Jade did not remember ever feeling the sense of belonging she felt here. She was not treated like a servant. She and Liberina lived like *Gadji* ladies. She was living a life even better than the one she had dreamed for herself and for her sister.

Her step was light as she made her way down the

hallway to the study. She knocked on the door and entered. Evan was seated at a small secretary, engrossed in a stack of papers. Tea had been served. She watched as he lifted the cup and sipped the contents, noting his hand shook slightly, a sign he still experienced moments of weakness.

"You should be abed," she scolded.

He glanced up from the documents and smiled at her. His gaze moved slowly over her, but he made no comment other than to politely direct her to the chair opposite him. She covered her disappointment by pouring herself a cup of tea. As she poured, the aroma of Earl Grey tea, rather than Liberina's medicinal blend, drifted to her nostrils.

"Shall I ask Liberina to brew some tea for you?" she offered.

"No, thank you," Evan said quickly. "But Colin might benefit from a pot of it. Do you think your sister would oblige?"

"Would Colin drink it?" Jade asked doubtfully.

Evan shrugged. "Perhaps she can make it double strength for him. His wound suddenly worsened yesterday. The doctor told him he was using the leg too soon, but Colin is convinced he's been cursed." Eyes gleaming, Evan waited for her answer.

"A foolish notion," Jade said mildly, looking sideways at him.

Evan smiled before glancing down at the papers on

his desk. He shuffled them with his good arm. "I asked to see you today because we need to discuss your future."

His somber tone implied he found the subject unpleasant. A tremor of apprehension rippled through her.

"I would like your input because I don't wish to make a decision that is contrary to your well-being," he began. He paused, clearly considering his choice of words. His formal, stilted manner prompted another wave of uneasiness.

Jade jumped at the sudden, sharp rap on the study door. Evan frowned at the interruption as a servant entered the study carrying a white vellum card on a silver tray.

"Mr. Barnes is here to see you, sir," the servant intoned.

"He's early," Evan said, his jaw forming a rigid line. "Tell him to wait."

"No," Jade said. "I can take a walk in the garden while you meet with him."

The door opened again. A portly man wearing a tailored, striped suit and carrying a leather binder and a damp umbrella entered the room. Jade quickly got to her feet as Evan's face filled with exasperation.

"No, Jade, I would prefer—"

Jade slipped out the door before Evan could finish his protest. The man did not close the door behind him, perhaps assuming Jade would shut it on her way out. She paused in the hallway when she realized she could clearly hear their conversation. She hesitated, torn between

curiosity and fear.

“Did you bring it with you?” Evan asked.

“Yes,” the man said. “Open the case and see for yourself—”

A maid walked by carrying a large vase filled with daylilies, roses, and azaleas. Jade fell into step with her, moving down the hall away from the study. She did not want to be caught eavesdropping. Once the maid rounded the corner, Jade hurried to resume her place near the door.

“I have another matter I must discuss with you,” Evan was saying.

“How can I be of service to you, Mr. Dark?”

“I want to sell Jade’s indenture contract.”



*E*v, what have you done?” At the sound of Patrick’s voice, Evan looked up from the stack of papers on his desk. The interview with Barnes had taken longer than expected. He was anxious to join Jade in the garden, eager to propose his solution to the indenture that had separated them as surely as it had bound them together.

Patrick and Liberina crowded the doorway, staring at him. Liberina’s face was reddened and streaked with tears. Patrick’s usually mild expression was vibrant with indignation.

Evan blinked in confusion at the question. “What do you mean?”

“Jade is gone,” Patrick said.

“No,” Evan blandly replied, “she’s in the garden.”

“You sold my sister,” Liberina accused.

Stunned by the accusation, Evan stood up, clutching the edge of the desk to cover his weakness. “That’s ridiculous. I haven’t sold—” He remembered his early conversation with Barnes. *Jade must have listened at the door.* “It’s a mistake,” he told Liberina. “What did Jade tell you?”

“She said a man came here to buy her indenture from you. I did not know she would run away.”

Liberina marched up to Evan and opened her closed fist, palm up.

“She left this for you.”

The white silk cords stained with blood were scorched—as if someone had tried to burn them—but Evan recognized the rope used to bind his wrist to Jade’s during the *Roma* wedding ceremony. The air whooshed from his lungs, and his legs suddenly felt too insubstantial to support him. He groped for the chair behind him and sat down.

“What is that, Ev?” Patrick asked. He took a piece of the cord and examined it.

“It’s a message,” Evan said in a low voice. *I’ve been divorced. Perhaps not in accordance with Roma custom, but the meaning is clear.*

Evan pushed away from the desk and made his way into the hall, trailed closely by Patrick and Liberina.

They followed Evan up the stairs and into Jade's bedroom, watching as he inspected the armoire, still filled with clothing, but missing the simple skirt and blouse she had worn upon her arrival. On top of the nightstand stood the box containing the tea set he'd given her the day they had explored Charleston together. Jade had left Shy Oak with nothing but the clothes on her back.

"Jade has no money," Patrick pointed out, "the indenture doesn't allow it. How will she survive?"

"*Dukker*," Liberina said quickly.

"Liberina is right," Evan concurred. "Jade will tell fortunes." She would tell fortunes to survive, or attempt a swindle if she became desperate enough. She was alone, unprotected, without funds or family. And he was to blame.



Evan converted the study at Shy Oak into his strategy room. He met with Patrick, Liberina, and Joseph daily, often visited by agents he employed to track down and report on leads as to Jade's whereabouts. After weeks passed with no news of Jade, his emotional state began to impact his physical rehabilitation. He brooded, flying into rages with little provocation.

The clock chimed the hour as Evan paced the polished wood floor of the study, pausing now and then

to consult the maps posted on the study wall. Maps of South Carolina and city maps of the surrounding areas were littered with red circles and green triangles in an attempt to compare new reported sightings of Jade with reports already proven false.

“Joseph has made new inquiries as far north as Greenville and as far south as Augusta,” Evan said, updating the map as he spoke.

“What about the ships bound for England?” Patrick suggested. “Unless Jade boarded under a false name—”

“I have men watching the port,” Evan replied. “She won’t slip aboard a ship under her own name or any other.”

“She will not go back to England,” Liberina said.

Evan continued to pace, pausing to look out the window. A bank of gray clouds churned on the horizon, chasing the sunlight from the late summer sky. In the distance, he saw the flash of lightning as the first heavy drops of the storm pelted the study windows. *Is it about to storm where Jade is? Does she have shelter?*

“What have we not thought of?” Evan demanded. He stopped before the map, glaring at the parchment with growing frustration.

Thunder cracked overhead, and the storm became a downpour, flinging sheets of rain against the panes of glass and darkening the room.

“Evan,” Joseph said, “Jade may have gone west—”

“She will not go west,” Liberina said.

The quiet confidence in Liberina’s voice pricked

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Evan's ears. She blamed him for Jade's absence, he knew, but surely . . .

"Liberina, do you know where Jade has gone?" Evan asked.

Liberina stared at him. She shook her head.

Muttering an oath, Evan crossed the floor and seized Liberina by the shoulders, hauling her onto the tips of her toes. "If you know, you must help me," he begged. "Please."

Patrick and Joseph wrenched Liberina from Evan's hold.

"Don't you ever touch Libby again," Patrick warned. "I won't allow you to hurt her like you've hurt—" His face drained of color.

"Like I've hurt Jade," Evan finished for him. He looked at Liberina. "I hope you can forgive me," he said. "Nothing has gone the way I'd hoped. I've made a muddle of things."

Liberina studied Evan silently, with a speculative look on her face.

"Evan," Joseph said, "we have to face the fact that Jade may not want to be found. I think it's time we closed up Shy Oak and returned to Rosefield."

Bristling, Evan looked daggers at his uncle. "Are you suggesting we give up? *No.*"

"You may be searching for her until the day you die, boy," Joseph cautioned.

"Then I'll search until the day I die," Evan snapped, turning his attention again to the maps on the wall.

“Jade wants to be found,” Liberina said. When the three men turned to gawk at her, she blushed. “In her heart, she wants to be found.”

“Libby, we’ve looked everywhere,” Patrick said. He sighed in exasperation.

Liberina slanted a glance at Evan. She raised a provocative brow.

I think it’s time we closed up Shy Oak and returned to Rosefield, Joseph had said.

Evan snapped his fingers. “No, we haven’t,” he said. “We haven’t made inquiries in Charleston.” He grinned at the trio surrounding him as he breathed in renewed hope.

“Jade knows Charleston is dangerously unhealthy in the summer,” Joseph scoffed. “It is the one place I feel certain she would *not* go.”

“Charleston is her home now,” Liberina intoned softly. Her lips quirked, forming the barest of smiles.



Twilight had spread a net of gold across the shimmering sea. Jade looked out at the simple beauty of the sun-kissed ocean and sighed. The memory of the glorious sunsets at Rosefield and Shy Oak filled her with sadness. She ached for the life she had left behind, and she missed Liberina terribly. The thought of her sister living in comfort and security was her only consolation.

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Jade had not been forced to live by her wits for a long time. She had fled to Charleston, certain no one expected her to return to the city during the “sickly season.” She doubted Evan would search for her. Having run away, she wondered what punishment she might face if found by her new owner. The superstitious sailors and fishwives who used her services were not among Evan’s social set, so she did not fear discovery.

She rented a small room on the waterfront and placed a handwritten placard in the window offering her services as a fortune-teller. On a good day, she was able to pay for the room and purchase food. There had not been many good days lately.

Peter Beals, the man from whom she rented the room, made her uneasy. When he came to collect the rent, his eyes moved over her in a manner too familiar to be considered respectful. The way he looked at her reminded her of who she was: a Gypsy vagabond. She was not the lady she had been at Rosefield. She would never be that lady again.

The head of cabbage Jade had received in trade for the single fortune she had told that day was beginning to wilt. At least she would not go hungry tonight. She was salting the cabbage leaves when she heard a knock at the door. The dock area was filled with rough men, and daylight afforded a small measure of protection. She did not admit anyone after dark, especially Beals, who drank too much and often pounded on her door in the middle

of the night. The knocking persisted as she continued to prepare the cabbage.

“Come back tomorrow, Mr. Beals,” Jade shouted. “I will pay you then.” In truth, she had no money to pay him unless her next customer paid in coin.

Jade shrieked as the glass from the only window in the small dwelling suddenly exploded inward. A tall man in dark clothing swiftly lowered himself into the room through the gap. She bolted for the door, but he matched her pace and roughly pulled her back, using his body to block her escape.

“You lied to me,” Evan said, fighting to catch his breath. “You promised you would never run away.”

Jade froze at the sound of the beloved, familiar voice. *Remember, he sold you.* She stiffened her spine and looked directly at him. “You sold the indenture contract.”

“You had no right to leave without speaking to me first.” There was anger in his voice and something else. *Pain?*

The brilliant sunset flaring through the broken window gilded the room as Evan stepped away from her and took stock of their surroundings. He frowned at the pile of wrinkled cabbage as he slowly walked the perimeter of the room, pausing before the small table where Jade read tarot cards, palms, and tea leaves.

“Why are you here? Did you promise to find my new owner’s runaway bondswoman for him?”

He turned to face her, his eyes brilliant in the wash of golden light. The outer corners of his wide, sensual

mouth lifted slightly.

"I'm here to have my fortune told," he replied.

Jade made a rude noise. "You do not want to hear your fortune from me," she warned.

"On the contrary," Evan said softly, "there is no one better qualified to tell it."

"If I tell your fortune, will you leave?"

Evan took a deep breath. He tilted his head in a slight inclination that might—or might not—signal agreement.

Jade slanted a suspicious look at him. "How can I trust you?"

He lifted his broad shoulders in a shrug. "Do you have any choice?"

She stormed to the table and plopped down on the chair facing it. "Sit," she ordered.

Evan took the chair across from her, his gaze sweeping over the tea leaves, tarot cards, the small crystal sphere, and other assorted items stacked on the tabletop.

"Four bits," Jade said stiffly. "Put your money on the table."

Evan fished in his pocket and withdrew a gold eagle. As he reached to place the gold on the tabletop, he paused. He extended his hand to her instead. The ten-dollar gold piece winked in his open palm.

"It is too much," Jade snapped. "I said four bits."

"If you are that anxious to be rid of me, you'll take it," he said. "I don't have change."

Jade looked at the gold piece. They both knew it

would shelter and feed her for weeks. She resented his generosity when the last thing she wanted from him was charity.

When she reached to take the coin from his hand, his fingers closed over hers. His long fingers were strong and warm. A traitorous frisson of pleasure surged through her at the unexpected touch. She jerked her hand free and snatched at the coin, making a show of placing it between her teeth and biting down on it.

"It's genuine," Evan assured her, chuckling low in his throat.

She hated him for his kindness. She hated herself for being so aware of him; his familiar scent of tobacco and bay rum, the way he casually tossed his hair back from his forehead with the heel of his palm, and the slow smile that could cause her heart to flutter. The combination of his well-deep gray gaze and the seductive sound of his speech was torture. There was memory locked within the layers of sensation. Jade fought against a desire for him that had never died. To have him here, in the flesh, was torment.

She began to shuffle the tarot deck. *Read his fortune and send him on his way.*

Evan frowned as Jade rapidly flung the cards down in sequence on the tabletop.

"No," he said. "I'd prefer to have you read my palm."

He pointed to the annotated drawing of an outstretched palm prominently displayed on the wall behind her. His lips formed a half smile as he extended his hand to her.

"It's your money," she gritted.

Taking refuge in her anger, Jade steeled herself against his touch and yanked his arm toward her. She bent her head, avoiding his perceptive gaze and taking an almost clinical interest in the appendage she held.

"This," she said as her finger traced a long line cleaving his palm, "is your life line. I see a long life."

"Oh?" Evan leaned forward as if he was going to try to kiss her.

She snapped back in her chair, nearly losing her grip on his hand. He raised an eyebrow, smiled, and settled his hand in hers once again.

"This," she said, following a line beneath his ring finger, "is your head line. You are practical. You take your time making decisions." She snared his gaze. "Sometimes you take too much time."

"That's certainly accurate," Evan ruefully agreed.

"This," she said, skimming her finger from the edge of his hand toward a point between his first and second fingers, "is your heart line. A curved heart line," she observed. "You will love many women." That was what most men wanted to hear. She assumed Evan was no different. In truth she saw the opposite. Evan's palm told her there would be one woman for him, and their love would be a lasting one. She could not bear the thought of him with another woman.

Jade hastily pointed out a few other characteristics of Evan's palm and named their corresponding traits.

“Questions?” she asked. She released his hand as if she had been holding a hot coal.

“Can we go over the heart line again?” Evan asked.

Her gaze narrowed as his eyes widened in innocent entreaty.

“Heart line,” she repeated, poking at the center of his palm. “Many women.”

“Is that so?” He seemed fascinated, leaning toward her again as his fingers closed over hers. His warm breath ruffled her hair, stirring her senses into a pulsating state of awakening.

She tried to extricate her hand but found it locked within his grip. “It is time for you to go,” she said. His firm touch was gentle. It would be her undoing if he did not leave now.

“One more question, and I will go,” Evan promised.

“What?” Jade huffed.

“Did my palm tell you I met and married a young *Roma* woman in England?”

Flustered by the question, she hedged her answer in brief silence. “Yes, I saw it.”

“Did you see that I fell in love with her?”

She glanced up at Evan in confusion, wondering what sort of game he played. His expression was so earnest she could not have mistaken his words. He did not seem to be breathing as he waited for her reply. Her eyes blurred with tears until she could no longer make out the details of his palm.

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"No, I did not see that you love her," she choked. She bit her lip.

Evan brought up his other hand and used it to trace the line of her jaw. "Look again, Jade," he said softly.

She leaned her head back to avoid his caress and tried to pull her hand from his.

"Please look again," Evan insisted, still holding on to her hand. "She is either the span of the heart line or the end of it. Can you tell me which?"

Jade's gaze dropped to their joined hands. Evan allowed her to withdraw her hand, exposing his palm so she could see it clearly. She shook her head, fighting back tears.

"Then look with me, and I will tell you what I see," he suggested. He began to trace his own palm with the long index finger of his opposite hand. "I see false starts. I see strong desire. I see obstacles. I see jealousy. I see a breach caused by a misunderstanding. I see her running away from me. I see myself finding her after a long search. Can you tell me what happens after that. Can the breach be mended? Did she ever love me? If she did, can she love me again?"

"I see she *loved* you," Jade softly amended. "I see you betrayed her. I see the separation you speak of. More, I cannot see." She looked up at him. "Any mystic will tell you the lines on a palm can change throughout a life."

"Then what would you advise me to do?"

Jade felt as if a vise compressed her chest. She could not breathe. She stood suddenly, and Evan surged to his

feet as well, poised as if he thought she might try to run. “Tell her why—if you loved her—you could sell her to someone else as a bondservant.”

He reached into the folds of his coat and withdrew a black velvet case. He handed it to her. “I did not sell her,” he said. “She misunderstood. She left before I could explain.”

Jade looked at him questioningly before snapping open the case. She gasped. The necklace inside was a *Gadjo* jeweler’s painstaking attempt at recreating a *Roma galbé*. The magnificent creation contained a considerable amount of precious gold and pearls forming a splendid, shining collar of carefully strung coins of similar size amid alternating rows of meticulously matched pearls.

Evan removed the necklace from its bed of black velvet. Jade seized his hand as he leaned forward to place it around her neck.

“I cannot accept it,” she said.

“It is not a gift,” Evan said. “It replaces the *galbé* you lost in England. It was my fault you lost it.”

“It is much finer than the *galbé* I lost,” Jade argued, “and much more costly.”

Evan positioned the necklace on its cradle of velvet and snapped the case shut. Disappointment bracketed his mouth as he placed the case on the tabletop.

“You can use it to buy your freedom,” he said. “I owed you a replacement for the lost *galbé*. When I told Mr. Barnes I wanted to sell your indenture, it was my

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intention to sell the contract to *you*. I could have torn up the contract, but you never would have accepted your freedom as charity. It seemed like the perfect solution.”

“You have come all this way to replace my lost *galbé* so I can buy my indenture contract from you?”

“No, Jade,” Evan said. “I’ve come all this way to make you a much different offer.”

“Oh?” She sniffed and blinked at him. “What offer is that?”

“You can keep the necklace and agree to become my wife.”

Jade hitched her breath and nearly choked as her throat filled with emotion. Evan was tense, silent as she reached to take his hand. She smoothed her fingers over his knuckles and turned his hand over to study his palm.

“I was wrong about the heart line,” she said in an unsteady voice. She glanced up at him. “Perhaps the sun was too bright. What I see now is very different.”

“What do you see?” Evan stared down at his palm. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths.

“There is one woman for you, Evan. You met her in England. She loved you then, and she loves you now.”

Evan leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. “And will she marry me again, this time in a *Gadjo* ceremony?”

In answer, Jade grasped his face between her hands and gently kissed him. Gathering her to him with a shuddering sigh, Evan molded his mouth to hers in a kiss

both tender and possessive. The fusion of their mouths gradually yielded to light, feathery kisses as the tip of his tongue teased the corners of her mouth.

She felt his lips curve in a smile as he bent to lift her into his arms. He stood at the center of the small space with Jade balanced in his arms, turning in a circle as if realizing for the first time that the modest room held only a narrow cot with a curtain to protect the privacy of the sleeping area.

“This isn’t what I had imagined,” he said dryly.

Jade began to laugh. She was still laughing when he dropped with her onto the small cot, his heated gaze consuming her as she straddled him. He caught her face in his hands and drew her down to receive his kiss, plying the recesses of her mouth with his tongue. Jade moaned into his mouth as she tugged at his shirt, and Evan helped her pull the garment from his body with a lithe, impatient movement.

Evan’s luminous eyes flared like a cat’s in the gathering darkness. Her hungry gaze swept over his broad shoulders and muscular, lightly furred chest, her pulse skipping wildly as his arms slowly closed around her, his skillful hands divesting her of her blouse and skirt. She ran her palm over his flat, hard stomach, feeling the muscles bunch and grow taut beneath his skin.

Her fingers gently traced the raised, puckered scar where Colin’s bullet had pierced his chest. She leaned down and placed her lips over the scar, kissing it gently,

then trailed upward, smoothing her tongue over the flat nipple, leaving a moist trail as she worked her way up, pressing kisses along his throat and jaw.

Evan's hands cupped the tender flesh of her breasts as he sought her mouth in a passionate renewal of his kiss. Her lips parted and his tongue swept inside, warm and honeyed. The deepening kiss created a dizzying spiral of arousal within her as her breasts ached and swelled, her nipples forming hard peaks eager for his touch. She returned his kiss with mounting passion, her breathing labored, her skin slick from the late summer heat.

Evan shifted on the small cot, throwing Jade off balance as he attempted to remove his trousers. She snatched at him as she started to fall, and they rolled together, tumbling from the narrow bed and hitting the wood floor with a resounding thud. She winced as her elbow and hip hit the hard surface.

"Are you too uncomfortable to continue?" he asked, his warm gaze holding hers.

"*Dilo*," she grumbled. "It would be too uncomfortable *not* to continue."

"Good," Evan murmured huskily as he snatched the quilted counterpane from the small cot and placed it on the floor. He rolled Jade onto the soft material and stretched out beside her, pressing kisses against her throat and blazing a heated trail across her skin with his mouth, fanning out to include her breasts and the indentation between her waist and hips.

Jade's fingers nimbly followed the tapering line of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of Evan's trousers. She slipped her fingers beneath the fabric and gently cupped him with her hand. He moaned, the sound containing equal parts pleasure and pain. Evan stroked the inside of her thigh, cupping his hand over her moist warmth until she shuddered and pressed against him.

He increased the pressure of his touch, and Jade gasped and arched beneath his hand. He swathed her in a ravenous kiss, his thrusting tongue making her weak and pliant as he shifted her beneath him, the pressure of his body opening her thighs. The air flowing into the room through the broken window cooled her superheated skin. She arched and cried out as his fingers slipped inside her, working their magic within her honeyed depths. Jade tore her mouth from Evan's and traced the outline of his lips with the tip of her tongue. She dipped lower, fastening her mouth on his nipple, gently drawing on the nub until Evan groaned and shivered in response.

Primed with the desire to be possessed completely by him, Jade cried out as the engorged tip of his manhood pressed against her velvet entrance. She clung to him, panting as he slowly, gradually filled her with his length. Joined with him thus, she felt completed and on the precipice of ecstasy as he began to move, slowly at first, then faster.

Jade moved with him, matching his strokes as tension began to build within her. It was as if a fever raged

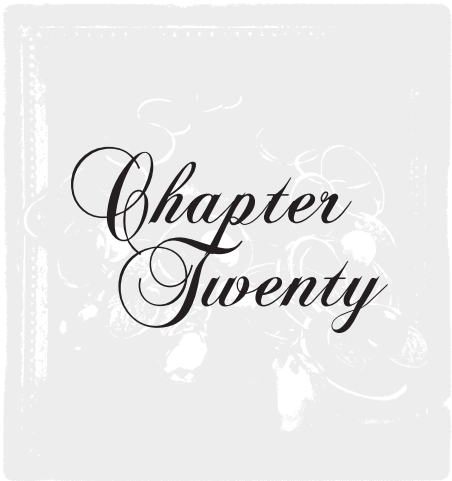
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in her veins, and the sharp pleasure increased until she was swept into an explosion of stars within the universe of her soul. As Evan cried out and clasped her to him, she felt a surge of warmth deep within her core. She felt sated, content, and loved.

He made love to her again before lifting her onto the small cot and tucking the coverlet around her. He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“Kushti ratti, Romni,” he whispered.

Good night, Wife.



Chapter Twenty

When Jade awoke, Evan was seated on the floor next to the cot, his fingers smoothing her hair. She had the feeling he had been watching her sleep. Debris littered the floor. Her handmade sign advertising her services as a fortune-teller had been ripped into several pieces.

She braced herself on one elbow and looked at him. “Why did you destroy my sign?”

“I would have found you sooner if the man I’d sent to search Charleston had been more perceptive,” he said. “Or if your sign had read ‘F-O-R-T-U-N-E-S,’ not ‘F-O-R-C-H-U-N-S.’”

“I do not read and write English very well,” Jade

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said. She sighed and closed her eyes as Evan's fingers massaged her nape.

"One of many things I intend to teach you," he promised. He leaned in and captured her lips in a slow, tantalizing kiss. "But first," he said, "I'd like to take you home with me to Rosefield. It's about time we made love in a proper bed."



Glorianna Clayton swept into the parlor at Rosefield with the bearing of someone who still intended to be lady of the manor one day. She stopped short at the sight of Colin reclining on the Aubusson settee with his leg propped upon a large tapestry cushion.

"Patrick and his portrait model are on a picnic," Colin warned. "You can't be here when they return."

"Goodness, Colin," Glorianna said, noting his palor and the dark smudges beneath his green-gold eyes, "you look horrible."

"I had a relapse," Colin said.

"One would think it was you who nearly died instead of Evan."

"I've been cursed," Colin confided, raising his eyebrows in emphasis.

Glorianna frowned at him as he clutched the trio of rabbit's feet dangling from his waistcoat. "Surely you don't believe in such nonsense," she scoffed.

“Jade put a powerful Gypsy curse on me,” Colin insisted. He gripped the talisman so tightly Glorianna expected to see rabbit fur float to the marble floor.

“She wanted to frighten you, and she succeeded,” Glorianna said irritably. She approached the settee and snatched the furry lucky charm from his hand. She glanced at the trio of tiny severed feet with an expression of distaste before tossing it onto the seat of the nearest chair. “Gypsy curse,” she snickered. “You’re such a fool sometimes.”

“I haven’t won at the cockfights in a month. I haven’t won at whist. My horse went lame. My wound festered and is only now healing,” Colin huffed. “I’m cursed.”

“From what I hear, Evan is fully recovered,” she said archly.

“He’s well enough to chase after Jade,” Colin snorted. “Evan will bring her back, and she’ll redouble the curse on me.”

“It would serve you right for not killing him.”

“If you wanted him dead, you should have shot him yourself,” Colin said.

“It would have been more convenient if he had died.” Glorianna sighed. “I don’t know what Edgar could be thinking, passing over his true son. Rosefield should belong to you, not the bastard son of a Gypsy.”

Colin blanched at the mention of Edgar. “Father will be furious when he learns about the duel. He’ll think I tried to kill Evan so I would inherit.”

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Glorianna feigned surprise. "Didn't you?"

He flexed his shoulders in what appeared to be a shrug, fixing his gaze on her. "I would have done whatever you asked, Glory. You know that. Would you have married me then?"

"Perhaps," she hedged. "It's doubtful a jury would have convicted you in a matter of honor. If you weren't incarcerated or hung, I would have considered marrying you."

She'd wanted to be mistress of Rosefield, not its overseer. Colin had an aversion to the sort of hard work required to run Rosefield and Shy Oak. He had proven entertaining while Evan was away, when there had been a chance Evan might not return from England and Colin might inherit the estate. Evan certainly would not marry her now. She had a better chance of becoming a countess instead. Count Heron wanted to attend the ball, and she was determined to court his favor by arranging an invitation.

Colin's face hardened as he studied her. "I don't think you ever intended to marry me, Glory," he said. He adjusted the cushion beneath his leg with an impatient tug. "In any case, our association is at an end."

"No matter," Glorianna drawled sweetly. "I have a new protector in Count Heron."

"Yes, you can always be counted upon to land on your feet—or should I say your back?" Colin smirked. "What are you plotting this time, another duel? That might arouse suspicion *and* get your precious count killed in the bargain." His gaze wandered to the furry

amulet Glorianna had thrown onto the seat of the chair. “Heron could end up under a Gypsy curse.”

“I’m planning nothing of the sort,” Glorianna replied. “I simply need an invitation to the masquerade ball. I’ve always attended Snap Apple Night—”

Colin grunted. “Evan won’t allow you on the premises.” He brightened. “I think I’d enjoy seeing him throw you out of the house.”

“Evan cannot afford another public scene after the fiasco at our engagement ball. If you invite me, he may not be pleased, but he will be obliged to be gracious. Count Heron will attend as my escort.”

“You didn’t care when I was nearly killed, and you don’t care that I’m cursed now,” Colin charged. “As I said, our association is over. If I were you, I wouldn’t count on receiving an invitation of any kind from any member of this family.”

Glorianna picked up her skirts and sailed toward the parlor entrance. She snatched the rabbits’ feet charm from the chair and tossed it at Colin. He winced in pain as he lurched to catch it.

“Good luck, darling,” she hissed.



The sultry summer months spawned an early fall, wreathing the countryside in shifting colors as Jade

and Evan made their way home to Rosefield. The mild weather was a welcome respite from the oppressive heat of summer as the hazy mornings gradually gave way to a crisp brightness hinting of the changing season.

Joseph had moved back into the main house, and he and the other members of the household, with the exception of Colin, warmly welcomed Jade home. Colin's absence when Jade was present soon became conspicuous, and when the cook complained she had no more recipes for rabbit within her repertoire, Evan gave the order that not another hare was to be sacrificed to feed his brother's superstition. Evan did not, however, ask Jade to remove the curse.

While Jade had been content as Evan's bondswoman, she was less at ease in the role of free woman in his household. She was installed in the same spacious room she had previously occupied. Her belongings awaited her return as if she had gone to visit a neighbor instead of running away with no intention of returning. Uncertain what was expected of her, she continued with Patrick's language lessons as before and began to plan an herb garden with Liberina to provide ingredients for the *Roma* medicinal remedies that might be needed.

Jade's tour of Rosefield had been cut short by the move to Shy Oak, a fact she pointed out to Evan one morning when he came upon her as she was setting out small clay pots in the herb garden.

"Be dressed to go riding tomorrow morning, and we'll resume your tour," Evan said.

The next morning loomed cool and bright, with a brisk wind that ruffled the treetops and brought the squirrels out in search of fodder for their winter stores. The air carried the scent of rain, so rather than venture too far from the main house, Evan suggested they begin with an overview of the various outbuildings.

Jade listened with rapt attention as Evan identified the different structures and described the purpose of each to her. He took her inside the huge cook house which stood a distance from the main house. The great kitchen housed an oven and a large copper kettle. As they explored the interior of the building, Jade was intrigued by a large rectangular piece of furniture with a hinged lid.

Evan withdrew a large ring of keys from inside his coat, selected one, and fitted it into the brass keyhole. When opened, the inside revealed a dazzling array of compartments. The largest held sugar, and there were smaller bins of graduated size containing coffee, tea, and various spices.

"These supplies can be costly. That's why they're kept under lock and key," Evan explained. "There are always thieves to be found wherever there are items of value."

Jade watched in silence as Evan carefully locked the chest and pocketed the key. He had moved on and was about to explain the uses for the outsized copper kettle when Jade called him back to the large cabinet.

He retraced his steps. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Liberina and I would not steal from you," Jade whispered.

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Evan looked startled. Without breaking eye contact with her, he withdrew the ring containing the keys and handed it to her. He closed her fingers over the key ring by covering her hand with his own.

“This ring contains the key to every lock at Rosefield. When I spoke of thieves,” Evan said, “I did not mean Gypsies. Any coffers you find locked at Rosefield have always been locked. When I asked you to marry me, I asked you to share all this with me. If there is anything you want here, you have only to ask for the key.”

“I already have all I could ever want,” Jade said, smiling as she handed the keys back to him.



They arrived back at the main house in time to observe two laborers struggling to remove a sizeable crate from a wagon parked in the front drive. The rain promised earlier began to fall, accompanied by small gusts of wind blowing stinging pinpricks of moisture into their faces.

The conveyance bore signage from the shop on King Street they had visited several months earlier. Evan hastened his pace as a member of the household staff informed the perturbed duo attempting the delivery that no such delivery was expected.

“It’s all right,” Evan shouted. “I’m expecting it. Please take it into the parlor.”

Jade watched as the two men noisily maneuvered the crate up the steps and into the entryway. They were given directions to the parlor, and by the time the container finally reached its destination, Patrick, Liberina, and Joseph had gathered to witness the unveiling of Evan's new purchase.

The workmen applied their tools skillfully to remove the protective outer shell, revealing the courting set that had been displayed in the shop on King Street. Joseph stood nearest to Jade, surveying the new piece of furniture with a slightly jaundiced expression.

"Well, if it isn't a courting set," he said. "A sure sign there will soon be too many females in the house."

Liberina skirted the unusual item, her forehead creasing as her gaze moved over the curious three-seat accommodation. She met Jade's eyes and shook her head slightly to convey her puzzlement. Evan and Patrick stood behind Liberina, observing her as she ran her fingers over the smooth, hard center stool.

Evan wagged his brows at Jade before drawing Patrick aside. Patrick ducked his head as he listened to his older brother, an expression of gathering mischief on his face as Evan spoke in a low voice. Evan looked quite pleased with himself as Patrick approached Liberina with a strategically earnest expression on his face.

"Libby," Patrick said, "have you ever seen one of these things before?"

Evan crossed to Jade, the light of amusement still dancing within the depths of his eyes. "I've just coached

my little brother on the art of the wager,” he whispered.

As they looked on, Patrick engaged Liberina in a lively discussion regarding the mysterious piece of furniture. The flow of the conversation was punctuated with exclamations of disbelief followed by laughter. It was a replay of Evan and Jade’s discussion in the shop on King Street.

“I must convince her a forfeit can be a good thing,” Jade said. She could hear Evan’s laugh echo behind her as she quickly went to her sister’s side.

“You will not believe what Patrick says it is used for,” Liberina told Jade. She pointed to the courting set and giggled.

“Has Patrick asked you to make a bet with him about it?” Jade asked.

“Yes,” Liberina replied, shocked. “How did you know?”

“Take the bet,” Jade advised.

“But I do not know the forfeit!” Liberina was not likely to gamble when she did not fully understand the odds.

“Take the risk,” Jade urged. “Trust me. You will not regret losing the bet.”

“Libby, I believe Pat is waiting for an answer,” Evan called. “Something about a wager?”

With a look of mingled exhilaration and trepidation, Liberina took a deep breath before returning to Patrick, who tossed a victorious wink at Evan from across the room.

“What type of forfeit does he have planned?” Jade asked.

“I bought the courting set on impulse,” Evan confided. “He hasn’t had any time to plan. He’ll probably

ask for a simple forfeit.”

“Like a kiss?” Jade suggested with a raised brow.

Evan’s pensive gray gaze wandered Jade’s face, coming to rest on her lips. “If you consider a kiss a simple forfeit,” he said softly.

His thoughtful focus on her mouth sent a thrum of desire reverberating from the crown of her head all the way down to her toes. The world fell away, and Jade felt as if she and Evan were the only two people in the room.

The intimate spell was broken when Evan turned his head at the sound of Patrick’s voice.

“I know just where I’ll claim the forfeit you owe me,” Patrick said as he took Liberina by the arm and led her toward the garden terrace. Liberina tossed a wide-eyed look back at them as she allowed Patrick to guide her from the room.

A look of concern crossed Evan’s face. “Should I stop him?” he suddenly asked.

“Why would you want to do that?” Jade asked.

“Your sister is . . . shy,” Evan explained. “Of the three of us, Patrick is undoubtedly the true gentleman of the lot, but I wouldn’t want to hear screaming coming from the terrace within the next few minutes.”

A snort of laughter escaped Jade, earning her an affronted look from Evan.

“This won’t be the first time Patrick has kissed her,” Jade said airily. She smiled as a look of stunned surprise crossed Evan’s face. “She won’t make any noise.”

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Evan shook his head. “Women,” he muttered, with a lilt of amazement in his tone.

Colin strolled into the room. His riding suit was torn and caked with mud. He hadn’t escaped the down-pour; his boots squished with the slick sound of saturation as he crossed the floor. He froze, backing up a step when he saw Jade. His hand sought the balding lumps of rabbit fur anchored to his waistcoat.


“What happened to you?” Joseph asked.

“A broken carriage wheel, a cloudburst, and muddy terrain,” Colin curtly replied. He twitched, hitched his breath, and twitched again. His eyes disappeared as he made a face and simultaneously erupted in a resounding sneeze. “Achoo!”

“The dreaded curse,” Joseph guffawed.

Colin’s jaw flexed and the line of his mouth flattened. He noticed the addition of furniture and scowled. “A courting set?” he inquired. “What the hell for?”

“I’ve formed a sentimental attachment to it,” Evan said. “Besides, with several eligible bachelors on the premises, Rosefield can use some of the trappings of courtship.”



Chapter Twenty-One

*T*he cooperation I had counted on from Colin will not be forthcoming,” Glorianna told Count Heron.

The Snap Apple Night ball was a scant week away, and the count had joined Glorianna for an afternoon of tea and scheming at Seahaven.

“Do you expect to be turned away?” Heron asked.

Glorianna made a face. “No. I can convince the servants I’ve misplaced my invitation. I’ve always attended the Snap Apple Night ball. People *expect* to see me there. In fact, I’m certain many would be disappointed if I failed to attend. I usually win the women’s best costume prize,” she added.

“I have a regiment at my disposal—”

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Glorianna laughed. "Oh, goodness, no," she tittered. "There's no need for a military assault! I hadn't planned for things to go quite that far!"

The count fixed his dark eyes on her, his expression severe. "What *are* you planning?" he bluntly inquired.

"Revenge," Glorianna said simply, "but I haven't yet decided what form it will take."

"You grow soft," Heron criticized. "When we spoke last, you wanted him dead."

"Yes, well, there was merit in the idea then," she explained. "Evan had broken off our engagement, and Colin was quite enamored of me and would have married me. With Evan dead, Colin would inherit Rosefield."

"Then kill the one and marry the other," he suggested.

"Colin's affections are unreliable," she complained. "Evan and I have a long history together. I stand a better chance of mending fences with Evan. I just need a certain obstacle removed."

"The Gypsy woman," the count surmised.

"Yes."

"Gypsies are a plague in my country, an abomination. I would be delighted to remove such an obstacle for you."

Glorianna smiled and swept forward toward the count. "How would I repay you for such a gallant service?" she inquired.

She was aware the daringly low-cut décolletage of her gown had repeatedly drawn his gaze to the creamy

white swell of her breasts. She leaned forward and pressed against him, and was disconcerted when an expression of revulsion passed over his features.

“In my country, a woman does not cheapen herself,” he said harshly.

“Just what are you suggesting?” Glorianna retorted, primly raising her chin.

A flood of color suffused her cheeks. He would not be seduced. She had planned to take him into her bed and turn him into the malleable creature most men became after they’d slept with her, but Heron had repeatedly rebuffed her. Her dreams of becoming his countess had withered beneath his indifference. He had become a confidante rather than a suitor. Her only hope for the future was to remove Jade and rekindle Evan’s affection for her.

“I do not make my meaning clear,” he said, apologetic. “In my country, when gentlemen champion ladies who have been wronged, they have no expectation of reward. It is our way.”

Glorianna nodded, frowning slightly. “How noble,” she said dryly.

She did not personally subscribe to the concept of gallantry. Her life had been built upon the solid principle of exchange. Heron smiled as if he sensed the nature of her thoughts.

“I do not mean to say I would not appreciate your patronage once you are lady of the house. I am a busi-

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ness man. Any association with a plantation the size of Rosefield would be a profitable one."

"Of course," she replied. "Have you arranged for a costume for the ball?"

"I will arrange for one," he said.

"You will have difficulty at this late hour," she warned. "Let me send you to my—"

"I have my own resources," he said.

"I will be going as Little Bo Peep—"

"No," he said. "I will provide your costume, my white rose."

"I always win the lady's best costume prize," she huffed. "I've already invested weeks in planning—"

"Your costume must act as a distraction while I remove your 'obstacle,'" he said. "You must choose: a prize for your costume or the Gypsy woman gone."

"I think you know my answer to that," she retorted.

"Then you will wear the costume I provide, *chav* Glorianna."

"What did you call me? What does *chav* mean?"

Heron's dark eyes widened before the glimmer of alarm in them was quickly shuttered. Glorianna ignored the prickling of unease she felt when Heron suddenly grinned at her. His wide smile revealed a flash of even teeth interrupted by one prominent gold eyetooth.

"It is an endearment in the old language," he said. "A pet name, my white rose."



Friday, the last day of October 1806, was ushered in by the faint pink light of a clear fall dawn. Jade faced the upcoming Snap Apple Night costume ball with more apprehension than anticipation. She could not help but dwell upon the fact that her first—and only—gala at Rosefield had ended in humiliation.

A feast was being prepared under Eulalie's strict supervision. There was no rabbit in any form on the menu. The ground-floor ballroom furniture was draped in flowing, neutral-colored sheets calculated to provide effective atmosphere when illuminated by candlelight. The garden walkways surrounding the main house had been lined with tall slender torches, bathing the area in warm flickering light.

Jade stared in wonder at her costume, an elaborate, costly reproduction of an Elizabethan-era gown fashioned in stiff blue embroidered silk studded with sapphires and seed pearls. After a struggle to don the mountainous dress, she stood before a full-length mirror with Liberina by her side, admiring the magnificent costume Evan had designed for her.

Her upper body was dwarfed by an immense, ruffled, fan-shaped cambric collar. The torso of the gown extended well below her waist, ending in a quilted V shape. The heavily padded skirts jutted out on either

side. She would require an entire settee to herself when it came time to sit down. When she walked, the bell-shaped skirts moved in a rhythm as if they were dancing, affording a peek at the embroidered high heels made to match her gown.

Liberina's Parisian painter's costume could not compare with the extravagance Jade wore, but Liberina seemed delighted with her own costume and uncharacteristically anxious to join the party downstairs. With no further reason to remain safely ensconced in her bedroom, Jade took a deep breath and made her way downstairs.

She smiled at the clever costumes worn by arriving partygoers as she passed Marie Antoinette on the arm of a Roman gladiator and an Aztec princess accompanied by a French pirate. As she neared the parlor, she heard the thunderous clanking of metal behind her.

She spun at the sound and found herself facing a fourteenth-century knight encased in plate metal with articulated joints. A large steel visor/helmet concealed the identity of the knight until she heard Joseph's muffled voice.

"Be a good girl and lift up this visor, will you, Jade? I can't see out of the damned helmet."

"You can't lift it yourself?" Jade smiled as she flipped up the visor and Joseph's pinkened face came into view.

"I have steel gloves on, Your Majesty," he drawled. He was perspiring heavily inside the armor. "It's an inferno inside this costume," he complained. "I could

bake bread in here.”

Jade laughed, ruefully tugging at her skirts to demonstrate their immense bulk as she nodded in empathy. “If I sit down, I may never rise again.”

“You look stunning,” Joseph offered gallantly, adding, “Sir Walter impatiently awaits his queen in the library.” He thumped his hand against the unyielding metal protecting his chest. “Evan could have used something like this the day of the duel,” he said.

He moved on amid a cacophony of clanking metal as Jade continued down the hall and entered the library.



Evan was sequestered in the library, enjoying his pipe as he waited for his guests to arrive. The starched white ruffs at his wrists courted the flame as he struggled to light the contents of the bowl without setting himself on fire. He tugged at the stiff, itchy ruff around his neck. The blue velvet doublet, short heavy cape, and silk stockings were enough of an annoyance, but he'd drawn the line when the costumer had produced a codpiece. *I will wear nothing more elaborate than a Roman toga next year.* He was willing to endure it for Jade's sake.

He had taken refuge in the library to await Jade because he did not want to join the party dressed as Sir Walter Raleigh without his Elizabeth on his arm. The

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pairing of their costumes was intended as a statement. Tonight Charleston society would learn of his intention to marry Jade.



Jade paused at the library door. Evan stood with his back to her. He turned at the sound of her rustling skirts as she entered the room, his gaze flickering with warmth and the smolder of banked desire. Her pulse soared as he took her hand and drew her into his arms. He brushed his lips against her temple. The faint contact sent a tremor of raw need racing through her abdomen and lower.

“You’re the most beautiful woman at the party,” Evan whispered.

“You haven’t seen any of the other women yet,” Jade protested, laughing.

“I don’t need to.”

His heated gaze held hers for a long moment, and Jade felt the attraction flow between them as if it were a wild thing to be caged. The sight of him made her heart race and her blood clamor in her veins. His touch burned and awakened her nerve endings until her body responded and all coherent thought was replaced by the need to feel his hands on her and to feel him inside her.

“I wanted a moment with you before we joined the

others.” Evan took her hands in his and led her to the chaise, helping her manage the massive skirts as she sat down.

She smiled up at him, and he leaned down and kissed her, a leisurely, intimate kiss that lingered even after it had ended, coaxing sweet longing from her.

“I need to show you something,” he said. He withdrew a paper from a corner of the desk drawer and handed it to her. “This document was drawn the same day as the indenture.”

Although Evan had tutored Jade in written English since their return to Rosefield, the dense legal language proved difficult for her to read, much less comprehend. Jade stared at him in growing confusion as he explained the substance of the document. Evan had bound himself to her as long ago as the day they sailed from England.

“Why would you do such a thing?” she asked. “You had the indenture—”

“The indenture protected my investment,” he explained, “but I didn’t think of you in those terms. I didn’t tell you I had changed my will to state you were my wife because I would have been hard-pressed to explain it at the time. I didn’t understand my own motives, other than feeling I had taken on a responsibility for you. I suspect I wanted you to belong to me, but I didn’t want to *own* you.”

“Is there a difference?”

“The difference is in your having a choice in the matter,” Evan told her. “While this document claims

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you are my wife, you did not agree to the arrangement, even in name. It does not reflect free will.”

Jade ran her fingertips over the stiff parchment. “These words have a different meaning for me,” she told him.

Evan looked at her, pushing his hair back from his forehead in a gesture now familiar and endearing to her.

“They mean you have loved me nearly as long as I have loved you. I made my choice long ago, of my own free will.”

“Then there’s nothing left to do but make it official,” he said.

Unfamiliar with *Gadjo* traditions, Jade laughed when Evan suddenly knelt down before her on one bended knee. The unexpected pose was made even more comical by the Elizabethan costume he wore. She clutched her middle and roared with laughter.

“Jade, if you laugh at me as I propose marriage, it does not bode well for the future of our relationship,” Evan warned with a lopsided grin.

She instantly sobered at the word *marriage*, and his expression clouded. “I proposed to you the day I found you,” he said slowly. “You allowed me to make love to you, but I recall now you did not answer my question.”

“Evan, I am a *Roma* who has lived all my life traveling in wagons. I have slept under the stars and stolen bread for my supper. I love Rosefield, but it needs a *Gadji* woman. It has taken me this long to discover I do not fit in your world. You will suffer if you marry me.”

"I will suffer if I do *not* marry you. You're more kindred to me than any of these milk-bathed debutantes. I went to England in search of my heritage, and I found the other half of my soul there. I want a woman with spirit and courage, not someone who knows forty different variations on a single needlepoint stitch."

"Your people will criticize you for marrying me."

"They aren't my people, Jade. I straddle the line between the *Roma* and *Gadje* worlds. I'm neither. You are *Roma*, but you've always yearned for a different life. Together we will be one. Whole."

When Jade hesitated, Evan leaned forward, cradling her face in the warmth of his cupped hands. "When we were apart, I vowed if I ever found you again, I would win your heart and you would be my wife." He drew Jade into his arms, resting his head against her neck as Jade's fingers gathered in his hair, stroking the soft dark brown pelt. "Jade, will you marry me?"

It was a simple question with an easy answer. She loved him.

Jade mussed his hair affectionately. "*Dilo*," she chided. "We are already married."

"But will you marry me again, this time in a church ceremony? I would not want the legitimacy of our children to be questioned," he said.

It was a practical consideration. If she was going to live in the *Gadjo* world, she must live according to its customs.

“What would your fortune-teller advise?” she asked.

“I think she would support the idea unconditionally,” he replied.

Jade ran her fingers lightly over his face, thrilling in the sensation of his smooth shaven skin and the contours of the underlying bone structure supporting his flesh.

“Yes, I believe you’re right,” she said.

He kissed her, a warm, tender kiss conveying passion in spite of its gentleness.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather lock the door and spend the evening in the library with me?”

Jade would have preferred to do just that, rather than face the critical horde awaiting them outside the room. Instead, she grasped her heavy skirts in hand and rose to her feet, forcing Evan to stand as well.

She stepped back from him and slowly turned, the weight of the dress flowing with her movement until she was nearly caught up in the momentum and spun completely around. She laughed at his expression as he scrutinized the solidly constructed costume.

“I’m not taking off this gown until the party is over,” she informed him with a seductive smile. “You’ll just have to wait.”

“Promise me one thing,” he said. “You’ll model your new *galbé* privately for me when this blasted party is over.”

She frowned, her fingers splaying across the pearls and gold coins at her throat. “I’m wearing it now,” she

said, leaning down so he could see the glint of metal at her throat, nearly obscured by the neckpiece of the gown.

A sensuous smile curved his generous lips as his gaze swept across the tops of her breasts, displayed to advantage by the square-cut bodice of her gown.

"I want to see you wearing the necklace . . . and nothing else."

A tremor of anticipation shot through her, and she flashed a saucy smile at him before turning toward the library door.

When they emerged on the brink of the lively gathering, Jade turned and impulsively planted a kiss on Evan's lips in full view of his guests. Before Evan could react, a short, stout gentleman costumed as Robin Hood swiftly maneuvered Jade onto the dance floor. Evan could only stare after her with longing, his gaze darting around the room as he followed her movements.

A young man costumed as an Egyptian Pharaoh, his movements hampered by his flowing, white linen gown, soon replaced Robin Hood. Jade, by contrast, moved with assurance and elegance. Evan watched her with mounting pride. The future mistress of Rosefield was already endearing herself to his guests.

Evan watched as Colin joined the party late, dressed in a thickly fringed buckskin tunic, a beaver cap, and heavy, knee-high leather boots. He spied Evan at the fringes of the crowd and strolled over to stand beside him. They stood beside each other in uneasy silence,

both scanning the gathering, conscious of the fact the breach between them could not be mended by small talk.

“Have you seen Patrick?” Colin asked finally.

Evan indicated a far corner where Patrick sat chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Izard. Patrick’s costume was the popular conception of the Parisian painter; blowsy, oversized clothing bearing numerous paint stains with a flat cap perched at such an angle that it obscured the left side of his face. Liberina sat beside Patrick, dressed in a similarly themed artist’s costume. It was no surprise they had also coordinated their costumes. The two had become inseparable as of late.

“One would think Pat hadn’t bothered with a costume,” Colin wryly remarked. Evan grunted and nodded in agreement.

The clanking of metal heralded Joseph’s approach. Evan peered into the helmet at his uncle’s face, which had progressed from the shade of a summer tomato to that of a beet root.

“You look about to pass out,” Evan remarked, frowning with concern.

“I’m not certain I’d topple over even then,” Joseph said. “This thing must weigh a ton.” The grinding wheeze of fatigued metal sounded as Joseph turned to look at Colin.

“I thought you were coming dressed as a musketeer?”

“My costume was stolen from the tailor. There wasn’t time to construct another,” Colin said. “I bought

this off the back of a trapper.” He shifted uncomfortably and shook himself, the buckskin fringes swinging with his movement. “I think it has fleas.”

“Where are your rabbit toes?” Joseph asked.

Evan marveled that Joseph could keep a straight face.

“Rabbits’ *feet*,” Colin said sourly. He shot his uncle a look bordering on despair. “I can’t find them.”

“Oh, you’re in for it now,” Joseph said. “They’ve protected you so well up to this point.”

Colin drew breath for a retort, then thought better of it. He hunched his shoulders and twitched his leg, as if to dislodge a parasite. Evan’s and Joseph’s attention returned to the dancing couples.

“Why aren’t you dancing with Jade?” Joseph asked.

“I haven’t had a chance,” Evan replied.

“Perhaps you should rescue her before that young fop steps on her foot again. Oh, too late,” Joseph deadpanned as the young man in the Pharaoh costume suddenly hopped back as if the movement were part of the dance. “Do you suppose she’s had enough dancing?”

Evan watched as the young rascal boldly wrapped an arm around Jade on the pretext of guiding her steps. “Yes, she’s had enough dancing,” Evan affirmed through clenched teeth.

He was about to wade through the sea of bodies to retrieve Jade when Colin stepped forward and signaled for the musicians to stop playing.

“The musicians have earned a break for refreshment,” Colin told the crowd of disappointed dancers.

Evan communicated his thanks with a slight inclination of his head. Colin shrugged and nodded.

Grateful for the chance to rest her burning, aching feet, Jade was content to sit and watch as Evan organized his guests into a circle around the fireplace hearth for an entertainment. He was so strikingly handsome, even the effete period costume he wore did not detract from the aura of masculine competence he exuded. If only she could transform herself into someone who would bring him increased status through marriage. If only she were a pale, proper, educated Charleston debutante from a wealthy, influential family. She had brought Evan nothing but shame, ridicule, and peril.

Colin reentered the room, approached Evan, and quietly drew him aside. After Colin had nearly killed Evan in the duel, the sight of them together was unsettling. As Jade watched, Evan's expression changed dramatically, his handsome face setting in anger. He stalked from the room with Colin in close pursuit.


Jade lumbered to her feet and followed Evan and Colin out of the room, stopping in an alcove opposite the entryway. She peered into the dimly lit hall and tried to discern the identity of several late-arriving guests. She recognized Mr. and Mrs. Prescott and their son Miles. Evan spoke briefly to them, waving them on toward the crowded ballroom.

Behind them stood a woman in a long, hooded pelisse escorted by a man dressed as a musketeer guard,

his figure cloaked in a red and blue cape emblazoned with a yellow crest and fleur-de-lis. He wore a feathered cavalier hat too small for his head. A black domino mask obscured his features.

Jade watched as Evan turned to the woman, his face rigid as the woman pushed back the hood of the fur-lined cloak she wore, revealing a crowning glory of familiar white-gold hair. There was no need to see the icy blue of her eyes or the cruel twist of her mouth to know it was Glorianna Clayton who stood in the entryway.

Her heart pounding, Jade slipped back into the ballroom and sank down heavily on the settee. Evan told her he had barred Glorianna from Rosefield. What was she doing here?



Chapter Twenty-Two

Evan glared at Glorianna. She had slipped past him and now stood poised at the entrance to the ballroom, waving coyly to other guests as they spotted her. She turned to face Evan again and smiled sweetly, her expression tranquilly defiant.

“I have always had a standing invitation to the Snap Apple Night ball,” she said. In a loud voice, she added, “I do hope my having been denied the hospitality of your home does not extend to include the holidays.” She took a step into the room, drawing further attention to herself. Her musketeer-costumed escort followed her like a silent shadow.

“It looks like a lovely party,” she trilled gaily.

Glorianna's gaze swept over the room and fastened upon Jade. Her ferocious semblance of a smile faded to rigor as she gawked at the magnificent gown Jade wore.

"She looks stunning, doesn't she?" Evan drawled. "She's sure to win best costume tonight."

He battled the strong urge to physically remove Glorianna from the house. The challenge issuing from her icy blue eyes caused him to pause and contemplate his actions and their possible consequences. Too many people had noticed her at the entrance to the ballroom. If she were sent home now, her brief appearance followed by her hasty departure would be all anyone would talk about for weeks to come. The news would eclipse his wedding announcement and paint his character—and perhaps Jade's—in an unflattering light.

He would not allow Glorianna the satisfaction of ruining this party for Jade as she had the last. He wanted everyone's lasting memory of this Snap Apple Night ball to be of the beautiful woman at his side and the joy of his wedding announcement.

"We were about to play a game at the hearth," Evan said in a frosty tone. He presented Glorianna with his back and returned to the crowded ballroom.

"Oh, I *adore* games," Glorianna mewled, hurrying to catch up to Evan. Colin dropped into step behind her, soundlessly mouthing the words she had just uttered in a brutally unflattering mimicry. As her escort elbowed Colin aside, Colin paused at the sight of the man's ill-fitting

musketeer costume and the too-small hat he wore.

Jade's fingers toyed with the bead-trimmed ruff at her throat. *Why had Evan allowed Glorianna to join the party?* Evan's expression was unreadable, but Glorianna was beaming. As Evan's guests looked on, Glorianna molded her arm around Evan in a display of affection. She pretended not to notice when Evan promptly pulled away from her with a scowl.

"We were beginning to wonder if you were coming to the ball," Mrs. Izard said to Glorianna.

"I don't believe there was ever any doubt," Glorianna replied. The silent musketeer fell in beside Glorianna. Jade moved to position herself at Evan's side where she belonged.

The partygoers had gathered around the hearth for the nut-burning game. Each half of a couple would select a nut to be tossed into the flames. The game of chance would predict the course of their relationship based on how the nuts selected by each reacted to the heat of the fire. If only one nut burned, it meant unrequited love, or that one would love more passionately than the other, but if both burned brightly, then smoldered into a tiny circle of ash, it was the sign of an enduring love.

Abandoning the game with a yawn of boredom, Glorianna approached the settee and flounced down upon it, arranging the folds of her cloak around her as she eyed the detail of Jade's costly, flattering costume.

"If anyone is in a mood for fortune-telling, perhaps Jade will do the honors," Glorianna suggested. "Is it true

the Saracens use fortune-telling as a way to separate the gullible from their money?" she asked Jade. The term *Saracen* was an obsolete name for Gypsies, one carrying an unpleasant connotation of thieves and murderers.

"No more often than you cheat each other at whist," Jade replied pleasantly.

"Touché," Evan said approvingly, under this breath.

Evan slipped his arm around Jade in full view of everyone in the room. Glorianna stared at them, a flush of riotous red creeping over her white skin.

"When will you have the costume judging?" Miles Prescott asked.

"We haven't even *seen* Glorianna's costume yet," a pretty woman dressed as Marie Antoinette commented.

Glorianna laughed. "Oh, it's quite scandalous. It's so shocking, I cannot even look in a mirror," she teased.

"Oh, do show us!" Mrs. Prescott begged. Others in the room immediately added their pleas to hers.

Glorianna smiled slyly and toyed with the fastenings of her pelisse. "I'll need a few moments in front of a mirror to complete my costume," she said, batting her lashes coyly as she waited for a path to be cleared. She stood, picked up her small reticule, and hurried into the parlor. She made a fuss of closing the doors and admonishing those who had followed her to return to the ballroom and await her entrance.

While the ballroom rumbled with speculation, Evan signaled to the musicians to resume playing.

"Do you suppose she's planning on walking into the

room naked?" Joseph asked Evan.

"She can't win in a costume half the men in Charleston have already seen," Evan replied through white lips.

"Everyone form a line, and we'll soon see who Eulalie will pick as best costume this year!" Patrick called out. He went to fetch Eulalie to officiate as judge.

Jade took her place beside Evan as the guests fell into one long line skirting the edges of the huge rectangular ballroom.

"Are you ready?" Glorianna called. A chorus of laughing voices replied in the affirmative. "Here I come," she shouted merrily.

As Glorianna entered the room, Jade's eyes widened in shock, filling with hot tears of anger and mortification. The costume was a reproduction of the outfit Jade had worn upon her arrival at Rosefield. Glorianna skipped into the ballroom dressed in a peasant blouse and multicolored, ample skirts. Heavy gold earrings dangled from her earlobes. She wore a long black wig to further enhance the similarity to Jade's appearance. Flat black slippers completed the costume. The outfit was not well made or particularly clean, making the display even more degrading.

"I will admit I'm too fair to pass as a Gypsy, but I believe if a Gypsy can masquerade as a member of the upper class, then surely I have the right to dress up as a Gypsy. Don't you agree?" She singled out Jade and addressed the comment directly to her.

Glorianna paraded across the room, modeling her costume. She stopped in front of Evan, who glowered at her, his jaw flexing as if he fought against the urge to slap her.

"You'll have to watch yourself tonight, Evan," Glorianna taunted. "You've grown so used to flowing skirts and no corsets on your women you might find yourself kissing *me* by mistake!"

"There's no danger of that," Evan bit out. "You won't be here."

Evan's attention focused on Jade. His expression softened. "Jade, will you wait for me in the library?"

Jade nodded, only too happy to escape the curious stares of the crowd. Evan crossed the room and looked down at her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know she was coming, but I shouldn't have allowed her to stay. I promise you she'll never set foot inside our home again." Evan frowned as he surveyed the ballroom.

"Your companion appears to have lost his way," he told Glorianna. His eyes were sharp, cold steel. "I'll find him for you. I wouldn't think of sending you home without an escort."

Jade scanned the ballroom, but the man in the red and blue cape was not in the room.

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When she entered the library, Jade noted the room was in near darkness. The fire had burned out, and there was a slight chill in the air. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust well enough to notice someone sitting in a wing chair near the large desk. She had heard of parties where guests wandered off and fell asleep in other rooms of the house. A good host or hostess would simply see to their comfort and allow them to continue their nap.

“Hello?” she said in a soft voice.

Silence. She moved to the desk and lit the oil lamp. Light flickered, creating tall shadows in the room. She had the sudden sense she was being studied by the individual who occupied the chair.

“Hello?” she said again, spooked by the silence. Gooseflesh dimpled beneath the rising hairs on her forearms as she approached a three-branch candelabra on the corner table. She lit a taper and appointed light to each branch until a warm yellow glow bathed the room.

Turning, she recognized the red and blue musketeer cape emblazoned with the yellow crest, and the feather hat. *Glorianna’s escort*. He had not removed the domino mask, even within the privacy of the library. She saw his eyes shift behind the mask holes. He was looking at her.

With a flood of relief she remembered Glorianna’s escort was a count from a foreign country who probably

did not speak much English. That would explain his silence. It would not explain why he stared so rudely at her.

“Glorianna wishes to go home,” she told him.

He stood suddenly, still watching her through the eye slits of the mask. Jade could not be certain he had understood her words, but his unexpected movement startled her. There was something vaguely threatening in his stance. And something uncomfortably familiar as well.

The library door suddenly whooshed open, and Glorianna backed into the room, glancing in both directions down the hallway before carefully closing the door. She turned, her face registering surprise when she saw Jade. When she saw her escort was also in the room, she smiled.

The man inclined his head toward Jade. He slowly raised his hand and wrenched the mask he wore from his face. A sharp, startled cry escaped Jade. She glanced in desperation at the library door.

“Count Heron . . . do you know each other?” Glorianna asked.

“Stupid *Gadji*,” he sneered at Glorianna. “There is no Count Faa Heron. I am Dimitri.”



Faa Heron. Two Roma surnames. Jade felt sick.

Dimitri had tricked Glorianna by claiming to be royalty and appealing to her vanity with his attentions. If someone would have referred to Dimitri as “Faa Heron,” instead of “the count” or “Count Heron,” the name would have aroused Jade’s suspicion. But now, it was too late. Dimitri had used Glorianna to gain entry to Rosefield.

Dimitri’s eyes swept over Jade. “Take off your costume,” he growled. His eyes flickered toward Glorianna. “You, too,” he said.

A small sound of haughty indignation escaped Glorianna. “That is not part of the plan. I will do no such thing.”

Dimitri crossed the room in two lunging strides and viciously backhanded Glorianna. She sank to her knees with a look of abject terror on her face, sobbing hysterically. He plucked at the billowing cape he wore, allowing them to see the inside lined with stilettos.

“Oh, God!” Glorianna wailed at the sight of the deadly collection of knives.

“You will dress as Glorianna, and we will leave together,” he told Jade. “If the *Gadjo* comes through that door, I will kill him.”

Jade’s mind whirled as she struggled to guess Dimitri’s plan. Glorianna and her escort were expected to leave. If she and Glorianna exchanged costumes, Dimitri could force her to leave with him without drawing undue attention. Jade remembered with fresh horror that Evan planned to meet her in the library.

“Do as he says,” Jade told Glorianna. “He *will* hurt

you,” Jade warned when Glorianna balked. Jade knew without a doubt Dimitri would kill Evan if confronted.

Glorianna began to remove the Gypsy costume, shaking and sobbing loudly as she undressed. Jade turned her back to Dimitri, who laughed at her modesty as she began to take off the heavy costume. She could feel his eyes on the slender line of her back, and she shuddered at the sense of invasion.

The women exchanged costumes and Jade dressed quickly in the Gypsy outfit. The Elizabethan gown, custom fit for Jade’s slender form, presented an obstacle for Glorianna’s more voluptuous figure. Glorianna began weeping again when she realized the gown would not fit. Sensing Dimitri was rapidly losing patience, Jade hushed Glorianna and tried to help her pull the bodice of the heavy gown over her torso.

“The *Gadji* cannot dress without her maid,” Dimitri sneered.

Jade watched Dimitri prowl the room, extinguishing the sources of light she had created, rendering the room in near darkness once again.

Dimitri forced Glorianna onto a wooden library chair he had wedged in a dim corner of the room. She had removed the black wig she had worn with the Gypsy costume, and Dimitri grabbed it and pushed it roughly on her head. From a distance and in the dim light, it was not immediately obvious that Glorianna was not Jade.

She sat where Dimitri had placed her, her composure

shattered by his brutal handling. She continued to cry, her weeping growing louder until it threatened to escalate into a howl. Jade began to fear the noise would draw someone to the library.

Dimitri stalked toward Glorianna as though he intended to strike her again. When his approach only caused her weeping to escalate in pitch, he curled his lip and quickly backed away from her.

"Hush kacker," he snarled.

"What did he say?" Glorianna whimpered, looking at Jade through swollen, tear-stained eyes.

"Shut up," Jade translated.

Glorianna reacted with the instinct of a coddled plantation heiress. "Shut up? How dare he tell me to shut up!" She realized her blunder when Dimitri spun toward her with a black look of menace. She bit her lower lip and began to keen.

Jade gasped as Dimitri deftly palmed a stiletto from within the cape lining and took swift aim at Glorianna. He tossed the knife with expert skill as Jade instinctively stepped forward to block his throw. There was enough distance separating the blade from its target to allow Jade to deflect the blow from Glorianna, but the knife opened a gash in Jade's upper arm before it struck the desk and clattered to the floor.

Furious, Dimitri hurled Jade out of the way with an angry curse. His eyes fastened with murderous intent upon Glorianna, who became still and silent as he

advanced on her. He withdrew a second knife from the cape lining.

Jade tore a length of her skirt and quickly wrapped it around her arm to staunch the flow of blood. She ran to intercept Dimitri.

"The house is filled with people tonight, Dimitri," Jade said quickly. "The longer we stay, the more likely it is that you will be discovered." *The longer we stay, the more likely it is that Evan will walk through that door.*

"This will not take long," Dimitri promised ominously, his black eyes boring into Glorianna's wide, terror-stricken blue ones.

"She is not one of us," Jade frantically reminded him. "They will not care if you steal a *Roma* woman, but if you kill this rich *Gadji*, they will hunt you, and you will die."

Dimitri halted, considering Jade's words. Glorianna exhaled in a rush when Dimitri returned the second stiletto to within the lining of his cape, eyeing her with something like regret before turning his attention to Jade.

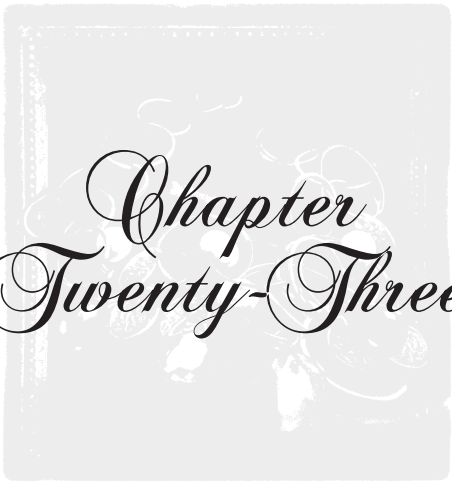
"Come," he said to Jade, taking hold of her arm. Jade felt the makeshift bandage become slick with her own blood as Dimitri's hand squeezed the gash in her upper arm.

He paused at the door and turned back toward Glorianna, regarding her with a mean smile, his gold tooth winking as it caught the light. Glorianna met his stare and began to cry anew.

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“Before we go, some amusement,” Dimitri said.

He withdrew a half dozen of the small, slender knives, flinging them one after the other with striking speed and agility at the target seated in the chair.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Several minutes elapsed after Dimitri fled with Jade before Glorianna stopped screaming long enough to realize she had not been injured. She twisted to view the knives she was certain protruded from her body and found she was neatly pinned to the chair by the series of small blades. They had passed through the fabric of the elaborate gown without touching her flesh and had become embedded within the wooden frame of the chair. Once she knew she was alive and safe, Glorianna emitted one final, piercing scream and fainted.

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The sound of screaming propelled Patrick toward the library. Colin heard it, too, and they nearly collided as they dashed toward the noise. It reached a crescendo, abruptly stopping as he and Patrick reached the door. Patrick wrenched open the door and uttered an exclamation of shock, immobilized by the sight in front of him.

A few feet into the room, there was a small pool of blood on the floor. Patrick's eyes fixed on the blood rather than look again at what he had briefly glimpsed directly beyond it. What appeared to have happened was too horrible to contemplate. In the dim light, Patrick saw the beautiful Elizabethan gown pinned to the chair by an obscene half circle of knives. Jade looked like an exquisite butterfly caught in the web of a deadly spider. Her head hung forward, her long black hair obscuring her face.

Colin started to move toward the figure on the chair, but Patrick stopped him.

"Go get Joseph," Patrick said urgently. "We must keep Ev and Libby out of this room!"

"I had no idea what she had planned," Colin said. His mouth hung open in dumb shock. "No idea," he repeated again, transfixed by the tableau in front of him.

"If you played any part in this, Colin, God help you," Patrick said. He closed his eyes and rested his

forehead against his open palm. His hand slid slowly down over his face, then dropped limply to his side. "This will destroy Evan."



Colin left the room, closing the door carefully behind him. He stood in the hallway, leaning heavily against the door, his eyes wide and his lower jaw trembling. His breath hitched in his throat. He hadn't guessed Jade was Glorianna's target. One didn't go around brutalizing and murdering women, even Gypsy women suspected of placing curses on people. It just wasn't done.

He hadn't wanted Jade dead. He'd been so enamored of Glorianna and flattered by her attentions he'd allowed her to manipulate him into untenable acts, including a duel with his own brother. *If I'm not cursed, I deserve to be.*



Evan narrowly avoided an encounter with Glorianna and her musketeer escort. He observed them using the servant's entrance as a means to quit Rosefield. *Good riddance.*

At first glance, their mode of exit seemed strange,

but when Evan reflected on what a fool Glorianna had made of herself, he decided it was logical she and her companion would sneak out a back door to save face. He was on his way to join Jade in the library when Colin and Joseph approached him in tandem, blocking his path down the hallway.

Joseph's expression told Evan he was about to receive very unpleasant news of some sort. It was the drawn, haggard face of the eternally blasé Colin that made Evan's heart skip a beat. *Something terrible has happened.*

Joseph, in his usually blunt fashion, simply related the facts as he knew them.

"Colin and Patrick found Jade in the library, Evan. She's . . . she has been murdered. I'm so sorry, boy."

Evan looked from Joseph to Colin, his eyes silently pleading for one of them to confess it was an attempt at a particularly tasteless practical joke. Joseph maintained his straightforward demeanor, but the unexpected look of grief and compassion Evan saw on Colin's face only heightened the horror of the news by making it convincing.

"No," Evan said. "No," he repeated, unable to accept the idea. With a bellow of anguish, he tried to sidestep Joseph and force his way into the library. With great effort, Joseph and Colin managed to bar his entrance and remove him a distance down the hallway.

"You can't do anything for her," Joseph told Evan, using all his strength to hold Evan in check. "We'll take care of her, boy."

Evan sought to push past Joseph again, becoming violent when he met with resistance. Joseph and Colin united to form a wall with their bodies to block Evan from the library.

“Glorianna is responsible,” Colin told Evan. “She asked me for an invitation to the Snap Apple Night ball, but I refused. I was as surprised as you when she showed up at the door.”

Evan didn’t hear a word Colin said beyond the reference to Glorianna. He whirled and rushed down the hallway, the image of the escaping duo still fresh in his mind.

“Fetch a pistol,” Evan yelled to Colin. He was tugging to free the ruff around his neck as he ran. “I’m going after them.”



Patrick considered leaving the room in near darkness so he would not have to view the violence committed there, but his practical nature overcame his squeamishness, and he lit the socket lamp.

He was in the process of lighting the candelabra branches when the head of the “lifeless” body on the chair suddenly lifted. It startled him so badly he dropped the light he held and had retreated several steps before he recognized Glorianna’s voice.

“I’m pinned to the damned chair,” she said crossly.



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Patrick approached her, peering at her as if she were a ghost.

“*Glorianna?*” Patrick stared at her. “Why are you wearing Jade’s dress? And where is Jade?” The events of the last hour rapidly replayed in his mind. He scratched his head. “Evan believes Jade is dead. What is going on?”

There was a sudden thump against the door, followed by a wailed blast of *Romanes* in the hallway outside. Patrick turned as the sounds of a scuffle ensued. Liberina’s and Joseph’s voices were equally matched in level as Joseph, tasked with keeping Libby out of the room, discovered he had met a formidable opponent in the small Gypsy woman.

Patrick winced as Joseph’s voice broke off in a loud grunt followed by a stream of very ungentlemanly language. The door flew open and Liberina ran into the room. Joseph trailed after her, clutching his knee and walking with a pronounced limp.

“You should have left the armor on,” Patrick said. He nodded toward Liberina with a wan smile.

Joseph forgot his injury when he looked beyond Patrick and saw Glorianna pinned to the chair, undoubtedly alive and looking perturbed.

“Where is Jade?” Liberina demanded.

“Where *is* Jade?” Joseph echoed.

“A misunderstanding, Libby,” Patrick quickly explained. “Thankfully, no one is dead. At least not that I know of.”

Liberina approached Glorianna, her attention focused

on the circle of knives piercing the fine silk costume. With a sharp exclamation, she seized one of the stilettos, yanked it free from the wood, and examined it.

"Where is Evan?" she asked, with an urgency that made both men turn to look at her. "Dimitri has taken Jade."

"Yes, that was his name," Glorianna concurred. "He wasn't a count at all," she sniffed. "He was a Gypsy masquerading as a count. He forced Jade and me to trade costumes. He tried to kill me!"

"If Dimitri meant to kill you, you would be dead," Liberina said coldly.

She inclined her head toward the half circle of knives. Glorianna shrank from Liberina as far as the impaled costume would allow as Liberina's gaze roamed over Glorianna's vulnerable body.

"Whose blood?" Liberina demanded, pointing to the blood on the floor.

Glorianna hesitated. "Jade's." Glorianna recoiled at the change in Liberina's expression. "She has a cut on her arm," she hastily explained. "She's not seriously hurt."

"Evan's gone after them," Joseph told Patrick. "With the frame of mind he's in, he's likely to shoot Jade if he thinks she's Glorianna."

"Oh, Evan wouldn't shoot me," Glorianna declared.

Patrick, Joseph, and Liberina all turned to look at her with identical expressions of incredulity.

"I'm going after Evan," Joseph said.

"I'm going with you," Patrick affirmed.

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Glorianna's voice rang out as Patrick started to follow Joseph out the door. "I'm still pinned to the chair," she reminded him.

Patrick hesitated. He looked at Liberina, who still held one of the knives.

"Libby, would you cut her loose?" Patrick asked. Liberina fingered the knife, eyeing Glorianna with vibrant dislike.

"I can wait until you get back," Glorianna assured Patrick, with a sidelong look at Liberina.



At one point, Jade realized they must be near the ballroom when she heard voices nearby. It filled her with despair to be so near possible rescue but unable to cry out without knowing whom she might endanger. She clenched her fists until her nails scored the soft flesh of her palms, drawing blood.

Dimitri continued to pull her along with him, seeking an escape from Rosefield, which he finally found in the form of a servant's entrance.

The carriage drive was well illuminated by a stream of moonlight pouring over the mansion rooftop onto the barren, horseshoe-shaped drive below. As they reached the gates, Jade tried to break free of Dimitri. She stumbled, her foot catching in the torn hem of her skirts. The plantation was sealed off from the roadway beyond by

iron gate arms extending from pillars of stone. Dimitri fumbled with the latch and flung the heavy gates wide, dragging Jade through the portal.

Jade was surprised to see a modified phaeton just outside the gates. The open sides of the carriage had been enclosed to ensure privacy yet still allow the passenger to handle the two-horse team. The black lacquered exterior of the added panels was oddly animated by moonglow, giving the carriage a sinister aspect. It looked like some hoary beast raised from the ocean depths, its sides still shimmering with damp.

She had seen the carriage before in the meadow the day Colin and Evan had fought the duel. As the carriage sat in the roadway now, it was like a specter from a full-blown nightmare. It was the means by which Dimitri intended to spirit her away from Rosefield and from Evan.

She tried to hang back, but Dimitri grabbed her under the arms and roughly hoisted her into the carriage. He commanded the team of horses with the brutal hand of a man unmoved by the suffering of animals. The horses quailed under the lash and suddenly bolted, establishing a frantic, breakneck pace. The carriage lurched forward, nearly depositing Jade on the floor of the coach.

She inched back against the cushioned interior and held on to the leather hand strap, the gash in her arm throbbing and beginning to bleed anew. Turning her attention to the roadway before them, Jade gasped in dismay at the sight of a glowing halo capping the forest beyond the outermost plantation buildings. Smoke

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was beginning to form an opaque cloud above the area encompassed by the raging blaze. As she looked on, turpentine-charged pine trees communicated the fire to the dry grass and thick underbrush.

“Fire!” Jade shouted. Her own peril fled her mind, replaced by the horror of what would happen if the blaze reached the main house. She lunged forward and tried to snatch the reins from Dimitri, but he held her off with one hand, his strong grip pressing the fragile bones of her hand. His laugh was a low, sinister bubble of sound as he gestured toward the fire.

“Will the *Gadjo* chase after you, or try to keep his home from burning?”

“You started the fire . . . as a *distraction*?”

Jade screamed in outrage and renewed her attempt to snatch the reins from him. Dimitri countered her feeble attack easily, initially amused by her grit, but when she began pummeling him with her fists and managed to clip his jaw, he rounded on her, slapping her viciously. He raised his arm, threatening to strike her again, and she cringed, putting out her hand to block the blow. Dimitri smiled, then reached out and lightly patted her cheek as she flinched at the contact.



Evan was already astride Raven and brandishing a

pistol when Colin came running into the stables after him.

“There’s fire to the west!” Colin shouted.

“I’m going after Glorianna and her friend,” Evan told him. “Do what you can to keep Rosefield from burning to the ground.”

“I’m going with you,” Colin shouted in reply, “unless you’re afraid I’ll shoot you in the back on some deserted roadway?”

The answering look Evan gave Colin was desolate. “With Jade gone, it ceases to matter.”

Evan prodded Raven’s flanks with urgency, churning up a cloud of dust as Raven met his master’s demand for speed. The horse and rider moved swiftly toward the front gates and onto the roadway beyond.

Colin stared after the disappearing figure of his half-brother, stunned by the realization that Evan’s desire for revenge had eclipsed his sense of duty where Rosefield was concerned. Evan seemed beyond caution or care for his own life. Colin quickly saddled the most fleet-footed stallion he could find and raced out of the stables after Evan.



Dimitri shouted and urged the team forward until the huge wheels of the phaeton wobbled. When the roadway widened, paralleled for a stretch by a sheer drop,

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he brought the carriage to a grinding halt. Jade slipped from the interior of the coach and tried to bolt for the cover of the trees. She cried out as his hand closed over the gash in her arm.

“If you try to run from me, I will shoot you in the leg.”

She froze and nodded, her heart thumping in her chest as he waved the pistol with his free hand. *He means it. He will hurt me.*

He thrust the pistol beneath his tunic and unhitched the horses, tying them to a tree where they would not be seen from the roadway. He returned to the carriage, positioned his shoulder against the rear of the vehicle, and pushed, grunting with the effort until the carriage broached the lip of the steep, sloped abyss. He pressed forward until the carriage toppled into the ravine, filling the silence with the sound of shattering wood.

He brushed the dirt from his hands and pulled Jade into the cover of the trees, pushing her to the ground. He crouched on his haunches beside her and withdrew the pistol. *He plans to ambush anyone who follows us.* Jade smoothed her skirt, trying to appear calm as she stared out toward the bend of the road. *What if Evan has followed us?*

“Dimitri . . .”

He tensed when she spoke his name, and she hesitated. *What words would buy Evan’s life? What bargain can I make with this devil?* “If you will allow Evan to live, I will not try to escape. I will stay with you. My

life for his.”

Dimitri made a savage motion for silence, and she suddenly heard what he heard—the thunder of hooves marking rapid movement over the dirt road. The sound intensified as the hapless rider approached the ambush.

Evan came into view, riding at breakneck speed and leaning into the curve of the road. As Dimitri raised the pistol and took aim, Jade screamed and launched herself at him, falling against his right shoulder and throwing the shot wild. Evan leapt from the horse and dove into the concealing underbrush along the roadway before Dimitri was able to take aim again. Dimitri snarled and cuffed Jade with the pistol.

Dimitri spun to face the road as Jade slid dazed to the ground. He whirled and trained the weapon toward each creaking branch and gust of wind as he waited for Evan to show himself.

“Glorianna,” Evan called, “you’ve had your revenge. Jade is gone. You’ve taken everything I care about from me. Come out and face me, you conniving bitch.”

Jade moaned. The sharp report of a pistol rang out as Evan fired blindly in the general direction of the sound. When the bullet zipped through the underbrush near her, she realized the extent of her danger. Evan believed she was Glorianna and would not hesitate to shoot her.

She heard the crunch of a twig snapping underfoot and turned to look behind her. The image of a wild beast crouched and ready to pounce filled her mind. Instead

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of a feared predator, Evan stared at her with a startled expression. He lowered the pistol he held. His hand shook. A fusion of horror and fury etched his ashen face.

She shook her head to warn him against speaking and mouthed Dimitri's name in explanation. Evan's eyes, cast silver by the moonlight, widened in surprise. As Dimitri continued to scan the area with his back to them, Evan crouched and crept toward her. His composure returned by degrees, but his expression became ferocious when he saw the darkening bruise below her right temple and the bloody bandage around her arm.

He touched a finger to his lips, and she nodded as he raised the pistol and took aim at Dimitri's back. She held her breath, gasping when Dimitri whirled toward her, speaking as he turned.

"He cannot be far—" He froze when he saw Evan.

"Looking for me, Gypsy?"

Dimitri took a step toward Jade, halting when Evan leveled the pistol at his chest. The two men faced each other in a hate-filled impasse, each holding a pistol aimed at the other.

An evil gleam lit Dimitri's black eyes as he swung the pistol and pointed it at Jade. He laughed as Evan visibly struggled to hold himself in check.

"Are you ready to die, *Gadjo*?" Dimitri spat. His refusal to acknowledge Evan's *Roma* blood sharpened the barb.

"Are *you*?"

"I will teach you a lesson about women." Dimitri

waved the pistol at Jade, smiling with rancor as Evan's eyes followed the sweep of the gun. "You can never believe them. Jade promised to stay with me. But now she hopes you will kill me."

"I should have killed you back in England," Evan said.

"Your weapon gives you courage. Would you say this with no pistol in your hand?"

Evan's lip curled. "I'd much rather feel your neck snap beneath my hands," he drawled. "Shooting you won't be nearly as satisfying."

Dimitri smiled, his gold tooth flashing in the feeble light. "Hand to hand, then?" he proposed. His thick brows elevated in a challenge as his dark eyes bored into Evan's clear gray ones.

"He is full of tricks," Jade warned. "Do not trust him, Evan."

"I will deal with you later," Dimitri told Jade. "The *Gadjo* has taught you to disrespect your man."

"You were never my man. And you have never been worthy of my respect or my love. Evan is."

It was a reckless declaration, but if they were about to die, she wanted Evan to hear it. Dimitri looked angry enough to shoot her. If Evan knew she loved him, she could face whatever was to come, even death.

"Hand to hand, then," Evan agreed. "But I'm not stupid enough to throw down my weapon when you still hold yours. Allow Jade to move out of range—"

"No, she stays. I have no wish to chase her again

after I kill you. We will stand side by side there”—he pointed to the edge of the ravine—“and toss our pistols at the count of three.”

They walked to the edge of the precipice, the eyes of each man fastened on the other’s gun hand as Dimitri counted down in *Romanes*.

“Jek, dui, trin!”

They threw their pistols into the bushes and turned to face each other as they separated, backing away from the edge.

“It is time I had what belongs to me.” Dimitri indicated Jade, who stood watching them, her body rigid with fear as he spread his hands wide and flexed his fingers, goading Evan to charge him.

“It’s time you got what you deserved,” Evan replied.

Dimitri hurled himself at Evan with a cry. The impact of his stocky, muscled form against the lithe, powerful body of his opponent bore them both to the ground in a somersaulting blur of twisting torsos and flailing fists.

Dimitri cursed and rolled to his knees, struggling to pull himself to his feet while Evan staggered to a standing position. Dimitri rose with difficulty, weaving as he fought to remain upright. He panted and flexed his jaw, wincing. As pain distracted him, Evan pressed his advantage by closing in and wrenching Dimitri’s arm behind his back in a wrestler’s hold, forcing him to the ground.

“Is this the arm you used to hit my wife?” He twisted the arm he held pinioned.

Dimitri grunted in pain and threw a desperate backward punch, catching Evan on the chin. He quickly rolled and surged to his feet, flashing a silver blade he had hidden in a sheath on his thigh. He cut the air in a crisscrossing motion with it, his confidence restored by the odds-maker he held in his hand.

“I will kill you now.”

Jade was too far away to interfere as she had done when Dimitri had tossed a knife at Glorianna. As Dimitri raised the knife to throw it, the consequences of defeat played over Evan’s face.

The tense silence was jarred by the sharp report of a pistol. Jade jumped, screaming at the sound. Dimitri still held the knife in his hand. He and Evan looked at each other with identical expressions of surprise. The knife fell from Dimitri’s hand as his hold relaxed. He slowly looked around him before falling to the ground. The yellow crest of the musketeer gradually disappeared from the red and blue background of the stolen tunic as blood poured from a fatal wound.

“I never could abide a cheater,” Colin said as he stepped out of the shadows. He looked at Evan. “I hope you don’t mind my interference. You appeared to have the upper hand until the bastard pulled a knife.”

“You saved my life.” Evan could not keep the surprise from his voice.

Colin chuckled. “What was I thinking?” He glanced down at Dimitri’s prone form, eyeing the musketeer cos-

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tume through narrowed eyes. “He stole my costume for the ball and forced me to wear that flea-ridden buckskin; another good reason to shoot the scoundrel.”

Colin’s gaze swept over Jade, lingering on her bloodied arm and bruised face. There was pity in his expression. “It appears I have much to atone for,” Colin said. “This is a good start.”

Evan crossed the narrow space separating them and swept Jade up into his arms. He hugged her to him and gently kissed her cheek. He pressed his face against her neck, heaving a shaky sigh.

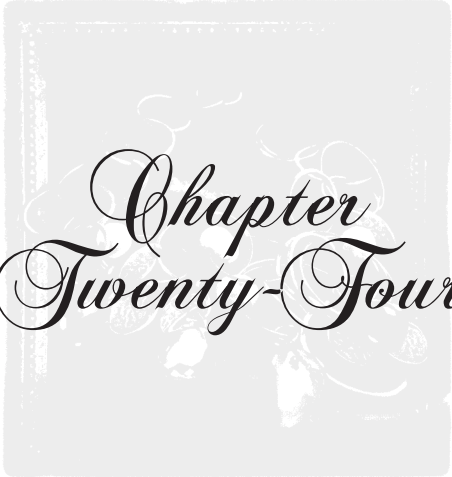
“I can walk,” she protested, smiling.

“I know. I just like the feel of you in my arms.”

“Let’s go home,” Colin said. “There’s still someone at Rosefield Evan may wish to interrogate.”

“Glorianna?” Evan frowned. “If she’s wise, she will have gone into hiding by now. In a foreign land.”

“No,” Colin replied with an oblique look, “it’s my guess she’s still *exactly* where we left her.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

All levels of the main house were shrouded in hushed quiet, as if for a wake. The majority of Snap Apple Night guests had fled home to safety while the neighbors nearest to Rosefield had remained to help battle the fire.

Jade jerked at the sound of the great front door as it slammed behind them. She had ridden home in Evan's arms, and he still carried her. As they entered the parlor, she caught a glimpse of Joseph and Patrick, their faces reddened by exposure to intense heat. Patrick's sun-streaked hair was matted, and his costume had been soiled by soot and ash. Both men looked bleary eyed with fatigue.

"The fire is out," Patrick said. "It destroyed two of

the empty outbuildings, but we managed to stop it.” He sighed. “Has anyone else returned?”

“Yes,” Evan announced as he entered the room carrying Jade with Colin trailing behind them.

Liberina cried out in joy and ran to them as Evan reluctantly allowed Jade to slide down the length of his body into a standing position. He drew a protective arm around her and hugged her close.

“I want to have the doctor look at your arm.”

“He’ll just want to bleed me,” Jade said. “Liberina will help me apply honey and rosin to the wound.” When he appeared about to argue, she tapped his chest with her finger. “We used it on you, remember?”

“I’ve never known anyone to benefit from a blood-letting,” Colin concurred. “Damned barbaric practice, if you ask me.”

Jade favored Colin with a warm smile. He had saved Evan’s life and ultimately hers. Leaning against Evan, she waved her arms and repeated the hedgehog soup recipe in grave tones before announcing, “I have removed the curse I placed upon you.” There was no point in telling Colin there had never been a curse. He might not appreciate learning he had been an object of ridicule for months. Jade knew his luck would improve once he believed the curse no longer existed.

“Good,” Patrick said. “I’m sick to death of rabbit.”

Colin slanted a look at Jade. “If I’ve been under a curse, it predates your arrival at Rosefield. My luck

turned sour about the time I allowed my head to be turned by the attentions of a certain ambitious blonde.”

“Speaking of Glorianna,” Evan said, “where is she?”

“Libby cut her loose hours ago,” Patrick replied. He glanced at Liberina for confirmation, and she quickly averted her eyes. “You did, didn’t you?”

Liberina looked sheepish and declined to answer.

Colin grunted. “I told you I had a feeling we’d find her *exactly* where we left her.”

“She’s still pinned to the chair?” Patrick frowned at Liberina.

Liberina smiled. “She said she could wait until you returned.” She shrugged. “I let her wait.”

In the moment of silence that followed, Jade heard muted shrieks of rage emanating from the library.

“Can we just leave her there until morning?” Joseph asked of no one in particular.

Colin laughed, his green-gold eyes twinkling. “Is there anyone among us who can be trusted with a knife around her long enough to cut her free?”

As if on cue, Beauregard Clayton, Glorianna’s father, arrived at Rosefield and was shown into the parlor. He had heard about the fire and was concerned because his daughter had not returned from the ball. Evan truthfully related the events of the evening to him, sparing no detail about the role his daughter had played. After listening patiently, Mr. Clayton calmly inquired after the current whereabouts of his daughter.

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“Unfortunately, she remains in the library pinned to the chair,” Patrick said. “It was my error, sir. I was too concerned with fighting the fire.”

Mr. Clayton stood. “I’ll fetch Glorianna myself,” he drawled. He made as if to leave but paused, turning back to face them. “Thank you all for your restraint,” he said. “And I do mean that literally.” He looked at Evan with an expression of regret. “I would have been proud to have you for a son-in-law.”



The following morning the main topic of gossip among the servants was how Mr. Clayton had dragged his daughter by her ear as he scolded her over her conduct and her lost marriage prospects.

It was discovered Dimitri had stolen a small fortune in jewelry from Seahaven, no doubt to continue his masquerade as Count Heron after he had spent most of Liberina’s *galbé* to reach South Carolina. On the heels of that revelation, Glorianna’s father decided to ship his daughter to England for an extended stay with a maiden aunt. Glorianna’s Aunt Violetta was instructed that her niece was not to partake in social interaction of any kind, unless said interaction was the direct result of a marriage proposal.



Jade had drifted off to sleep on the parlor settee. She awoke hours later in her own bed, dressed in a sleeping gown, her memory of having gotten there as indistinct as a dream. She felt exhausted but peaceful, as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

She was seated at the vanity, working tangles from her hair when Evan came into the room, handsomely attired in a black and brown pinstripe suit of dittos.

After watching her attempt to brush her hair with her uninjured arm, Evan stepped forward and silently took the brush from her. He pulled the bristles through her hair with a rhythm that was gentle and soothing. She studied his reflection in the mirror, his face solemn as he surveyed the angry purple bruise on her forehead.

"I wanted to choke the life from him with my own hands for having hurt you."

"I always knew he would die a violent death."

"He might have killed you. I allowed him to take you from Rosefield—"

"You allowed nothing! How could you have known Count Heron was Dimitri?"

"You suffered because I failed to protect you." He indicated the bandage around her upper arm and her bruised face. "You will never feel safe under my protection."

"I am safe. You brought me home. The cut will

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heal; the bruises will fade.” Jade shrugged. “The *Roma* have a saying: Some shade is good for us all. We accept the bad and move on.”

“You had nightmares last night, do you remember?”

“You watched over me as I slept?”

He gave a subtle nod, and Jade was deeply moved by the admission. “Bad dreams pass,” she said.

“Or they haunt forever.”

How can I convince you that you did not fail me?

“Then you no longer wish to be married to me?”

Evan’s hand paused midstroke. “I said nothing of the kind.”

“I cannot guarantee I will never have bad dreams. I may disturb your sleep at times.”

“And I yours.” His brows knit together in confusion.

“I cannot guarantee there will not be others who will plot against us as Glorianna did.”

“Nor can I,” he said, still frowning.

“I cannot anticipate danger and warn you of it in advance,” she continued.

“I do not expect you to,” Evan countered.

“I would give my life to spare yours,” she vowed.

“And I would give mine for you.” A dour look came over his face as he realized how she had manipulated him to make her point.

“Evan, I keep only one memory of that night.”

“With so many to choose from, which was the worst? The discovery that Heron was Dimitri? Dimitri

slashing your arm? Dimitri tormenting and hitting you? Or the fact that I shot at you?" Agitated, he pushed his hair back with the heel of his palm.

"When you believed I had been killed, you chose to avenge me, even as the fire burned toward your home. Only where there is great love can there be such terrible grief."

He considered her words. "Then you haven't changed your mind about becoming my wife?"

"*Dilo*," she muttered under her breath. *Fool*.



Once it was known that Edgar Dark would be returning to Rosefield in mid-November, Jade's and Evan's wedding date was announced for early December.

Evan was anxious for Edgar to meet his prospective bride, and Jade began to feel anxiety over whether Edgar would accept her as a suitable wife for Evan. Not only was the prospect of meeting the current owner of Rosefield daunting, there was also the concern that she would be compared to Glorianna and found lacking, both in social standing and suitability. Evan spoke of Edgar with such respect and affection it became of paramount importance to Jade she make a good first impression on him.

Edgar returned to Rosefield on November 14, arriving with little fanfare and even less advance notice. In terms of physical appearance, he was moderate in

all respects. He was slender, of medium height, and his hair was the same nondescript brown color that Patrick's would have been had Patrick not spent hours sketching in the sun. Still, Patrick was the one who most closely resembled his father. Known for being an astute, successful businessman, Edgar was also respected within the community for his leadership abilities and his integrity.

Although he had spent the better part of a year in the North, Edgar was surprisingly knowledgeable about what had gone on at Rosefield and Shy Oak during his absence.

After strolling through the front door of the main house, Edgar's first action had been to abandon his portmanteau in the entry hall and immediately summon his sons for a private meeting in the library.

Once Evan, Colin, and Patrick had gathered in the library, Edgar skipped all preliminary niceties and came immediately to the point.

"I hear you've been trying to kill each other," he said, directing his remark to Colin and Evan. "What's all this nonsense about a duel?"

"Oh, that was last summer," Colin said as if the event no longer held interest.

"What prompted it?" Edgar asked.

"It was a misunderstanding," Colin replied with a pointed glance at Evan.

"A misunderstanding about what?" Edgar persisted.

"It was over a woman," Evan said evasively.

Edgar looked directly at Colin. "Is that true?"

Colin hesitated. "I suppose so, if you think of Rosefield as a woman."

"Although that was the rumor, I had hoped it was not the case," Edgar said. "Rosefield is not worth killing each other over."

Evan nodded, but Colin remained silent.

"I've added a codicil to my will," Edgar informed them. "Rosefield will be divided into four parcels of land, ten-thousand acres to a parcel. You each shall receive one ten thousand acre parcel. My parcel shall go to Evan upon my death, giving him the controlling interest. This should end any disputes over inheritance."

Edgar looked pointedly at Colin. "That leaves you with a share of the estate. I had discussed this plan with Evan before I went north, and he was in favor of it."

Colin looked at Evan in surprise. "You're willing to give up half of Rosefield? Why?" he asked.

"A wise young woman once made the comment to me that Rosefield is big enough to share. I happen to agree with her viewpoint."

"That cannot have been Glorianna," Colin said.

"There is one other stipulation," Edgar continued. "If any of you challenges one of his brothers to a duel in the future, the instigator will forfeit his parcel. If any one of you is even remotely implicated in the injury or death of one of your brothers, your parcel will be forfeited. And I will cease to acknowledge the culprit as my

son. Furthermore, I don't wish to hear the word 'step' precede 'father' or the word 'half' spoken before 'brother' in this household ever again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father," they mumbled in unison.

"Now," Edgar said, in a tone signifying all previous matters had been satisfactorily resolved, "I'd like to meet Jade."

"I'll ask Jade to join us," Evan said. His gaze swept the library. "She recently had an unpleasant experience in this room. I'd rather bring her to the parlor."

"Son, I don't plan on an interrogation," Edgar said mildly.

"That's fortunate." Evan laughed. "I think she's quite terrified at the prospect of meeting you."

"Is she anything like Glorianna?" Edgar asked.

"Not one whit."

"Excellent. I like her already," Edgar said in a droll tone of voice so reminiscent of Colin it brought a smile to Evan's face. "What can I do to put the poor girl at ease?"

What, indeed? Jade had convinced herself Edgar would find her inadequate. Evan smiled as he realized the answer. "Ask Jade to tell your fortune."

Edgar looked intrigued and vaguely amused by the idea.



In retrospect, the fortune-telling suggestion had been a good one. It had drawn Jade out of herself, allowing her to focus on providing a colorful reading for Edgar.

She had been too distracted to consider how nervous she was, and Edgar had pronounced Jade witty and charming by the end of the interview. He had confessed to Evan that Jade had exceeded his expectations, not only in beauty, but also with regard to certain qualities Evan's bride would be required to have in order to survive in the Charleston social climate. In short, she was a success.



The *Gadje* wedding ceremony was as rich in symbolism as its *Roma* counterpart had been, and every aspect of the ritual was imprinted in Jade's memory.

Evan had selected her wedding dress, a lovely chemise gown, slightly loose over the bosom with a wide sash that tied around the high waistline. The satin skirt hung loosely with a train that was pulled up and tucked through the sash. The long sleeves were decorated with seed pearls, as was the bodice, and the austere simplicity of the gown proved a perfect foil for Jade's exotic beauty. Around her throat, Jade proudly wore the *galbé* Evan had given her.

The ceremony took place in front of family and friends in a quaint whitewashed church. Jade learned it was the same church where Evan had been baptized as a baby.

She soon found herself back in the carriage, her head

resting comfortably against Evan's shoulder, the fingers of their hands entwined as they rode down the streets of Charleston toward Rosefield.

An informal reception immediately following the ceremony was planned. After two disastrous celebrations at Rosefield, Jade was inclined to panic if the words party, gala, or ball were even mentioned in her presence.

Evan and Jade were not typical Charleston newlyweds. The publishing of the banns two weeks prior to their wedding had represented their one concession to custom. While most young couples planned a nuptial journey, Jade and Evan had agreed that, given the tumultuous events of the last few months, the idea of boarding transportation bound for anywhere held little appeal when they could simply come home to Rosefield and spend time in seclusion on the vast estate.

As their carriage pulled into the circular drive, Jade found herself reflecting upon the last year and how chance had brought Evan to her. She shuddered to think she might have been compelled to marry Dimitri and how wretched her life would have been with him.

She tilted her head up to look at Evan, drinking in the glorious sight of his beloved face. Many of the *Roma* men in camp had been handsome, but Evan's features represented a refinement of both races. With his patrician features and luminous gray eyes, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. And one of the kindest and most courageous she had ever known.

“Welcome to Rosefield, Mrs. Dark.”

Evan smiled broadly as he lifted her to the ground. He bowed and indicated the entryway before her with a flourish of his hand.

Jade felt a particular thrill in returning to Rosefield as Evan’s wife. She was his *Roma* wife. She was his *Gadji* wife. She was his. She looked down at the gold ring that Evan had placed on her finger during the wedding ceremony, emotion welling up within her as she reflected on the significance of the simple band.

Evan approached, smiling as he handed her a glass of punch. His eyes shone as he observed her fascination with the ring he had given her.

“Have you read the inscription?” he asked. “There are words written on the inside of the band.” Evan leaned down and whispered, “My private message to you.”

Jade grasped the ring and slid it from her finger. She held it up to the light, slowly revolving the band between her thumb and index finger as she read the words written on the inside of the band.

“*Devlesa araklam tume.*” She softly translated the old *Romanes* expression aloud: “It is with God that I found you.”

Her eyes glimmered with tears as she read and re-read the inscription.

“You’ve made your bride cry already?” Colin asked Evan.

Jade hastily wiped the tears from her eyes. She slipped the ring back onto her finger. Colin patted her

Stolen Promise

on the shoulder as she and Evan exchanged smiles. Evan was clearly pleased by her reaction.

“Don’t worry,” Colin consoled her. “All new brides are emotional. Some cry because the courtship is over. Some cry because they’re simply overcome with joy. I suspect some even cry because their corsets are laced too tightly.”

“And some brides cry because their groom is not an only child,” Evan added.

“I wish you every happiness,” Colin said as he held his glass up in a salute. He paused. “*Sincerely*,” he added in a somewhat defensive-sounding tone.

“Thank you,” Evan said graciously.

Jade watched as Evan extended his hand and Colin gratefully accepted it. After the events of the last few weeks, she no longer doubted Colin’s sincerity.

“Beware of blessings from black sheep,” Patrick cautioned as he and Liberina joined them.

“Does he mean me?” Colin asked innocently. “Black sheep, is it?” He mulled over the designation. “I rather like that. Gives me an air of mystery, don’t you think?”

“It might give you an advantage with the ladies,” Evan smirked.

“How can you even suggest that?” Patrick objected, horrified. “Colin’s edge with the ladies has been his downfall all along!”

“Don’t you have something to go paint?” Colin asked Patrick. “A barn in the lower forty, perhaps?”

It felt good to exchange banter without any mal-

ice behind it. Rosefield was truly beginning to feel like home again. Evan's eyes swept affectionately over the faces of the loved ones surrounding him, finally coming to rest on Jade.

He planned to surround Jade in luxury and comfort and make love to her. He was going to make certain her wedding night was memorable in every way imaginable. He would use his body to purge the hundreds of indignities and miseries she had suffered in her lifetime. Jade had told Dimitri that Evan was worthy of her love. He would do everything necessary to remain worthy of her for a lifetime.

It was difficult to recall a time when the sight of Jade hadn't caused his body to tighten with desire. She had drawn him to her with the lure of a siren. She was all he wanted in the world. And, at the moment, as he watched Jade laugh with his brothers, he realized his entire being ached from wanting her.

"Shall I repeat the question?" Patrick asked. "You look a little . . . distracted."

He couldn't very well bluff and pretend to have heard. Evan nodded, vowing that if he felt himself go red in the face, he was going to box Pat's ears.

"I have a wedding gift for the two of you," Patrick said. "May I present it to you now?"

"We would be delighted," Evan answered, placing an arm around Jade as Patrick smiled and beckoned for them to follow him up the stairs.

Under Patrick's direction, all of Jade's belongings

had been removed from her room and placed in the room that directly adjoined Evan's bedroom. It was a thoughtful gesture, and Evan was in the process of thanking Patrick for his kindness when he suddenly halted mid-sentence, rendered speechless as his eyes fell upon an oil painting that had been placed on the wall. Jade saw it at almost the same instant, and she gasped, emitting a small sound of awe as she viewed the exquisite work.

Patrick's talented hand had captured Jade and Evan in a moment of repose. Jade appeared in the foreground with Evan directly behind her. Jade was pictured leaning back as if supported by Evan's arms, so that the onlooker had an unopposed view of their faces. With the objectivity of an artist, Patrick had revealed the contentment they felt in each other's company and the emotion that bonded them, all with the same exacting touch he had used to detail their youthful beauty.

Evan realized that this portrait was the result of the numerous sessions in which Jade had posed as a sketch model for Patrick.

"It is extraordinary," Evan told Patrick. "How did you manage it when I never posed for you?"

Patrick laughed. "You were an unwitting subject. Remember those weeks you were confined while you recovered from your dueling wound? When your mood was foul because Jade was gone?"

Evan recalled Patrick visiting his room regularly, with sketchpad in hand, ostensibly to keep him company

while he recuperated. “‘Sketching the view of the garden from the window,’ or so you said,” Evan scolded him. “Devious brat!”

“As if I couldn’t paint you from memory alone, after having been subjected to your homely face my entire life!”

Evan drew his younger brother into his arms and hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” he said. “We will always treasure it.”

Somewhat embarrassed, Patrick struggled to maintain his composure. “I’m pleased you like it. Now, I have need of some advice, big brother.”

Jade started to leave the room.

“Wait, don’t go, Jade. I’d like your opinion as well. You know Libby better than anyone.”

“Ask her,” Jade said immediately without preamble.

Evan looked confused. “Have I missed part of the conversation?”

“Has she spoken to you about me?” Patrick asked anxiously.

Jade giggled. “You’re *all* she speaks to me about!”

Evan looked from Jade to Patrick. “And when did all this happen?”

Patrick looked at Evan thoughtfully. “I guess it happened while you two were busy falling in love.”



Epilogue

Royce Edgar Dark was born at Shy Oak in early summer 1808. The room adjoining Evan and Jade's bedroom had been converted into a nursery, and Evan had filled the room with toys until there was barely enough room for a crib. It was here that a domestic scene took place soon after Royce's birth that would become part of the Dark family oral history.

Jade had placed baby Royce in his cradle when Evan strolled into the room and eagerly offered to lull the infant to sleep. Jade had turned away from her husband and son momentarily, but when she turned back to supervise the rocking of her son in his cradle, she caught Evan in the act of carefully examining his son's toes.

Puzzled, she watched as Evan carefully tucked the blanket around the baby's tiny feet. She looked at him over the narrow width of the cradle, her eyes silently questioning.

"I just wanted to be sure he was all right," Evan said, looking vaguely embarrassed.

"The doctor would have told you of any deformity," she replied. "What did you expect to find?"

Evan hesitated, smiling sheepishly. "A beautiful young *Roma* woman once cursed my heirs with harelips and webbed feet."

Jade exploded with laughter. "At the time, I did not know I would be the mother of your heirs!" They leaned toward each other, their heads touching.

"And what does the fortune-teller see in our son's future?" Evan asked huskily, his lips touching the warm hollow of Jade's throat, causing her pulse to jump erratically at the contact.

Jade wound her arms around Evan's neck. "Many brothers and sisters," she predicted as she pulled him toward her.



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