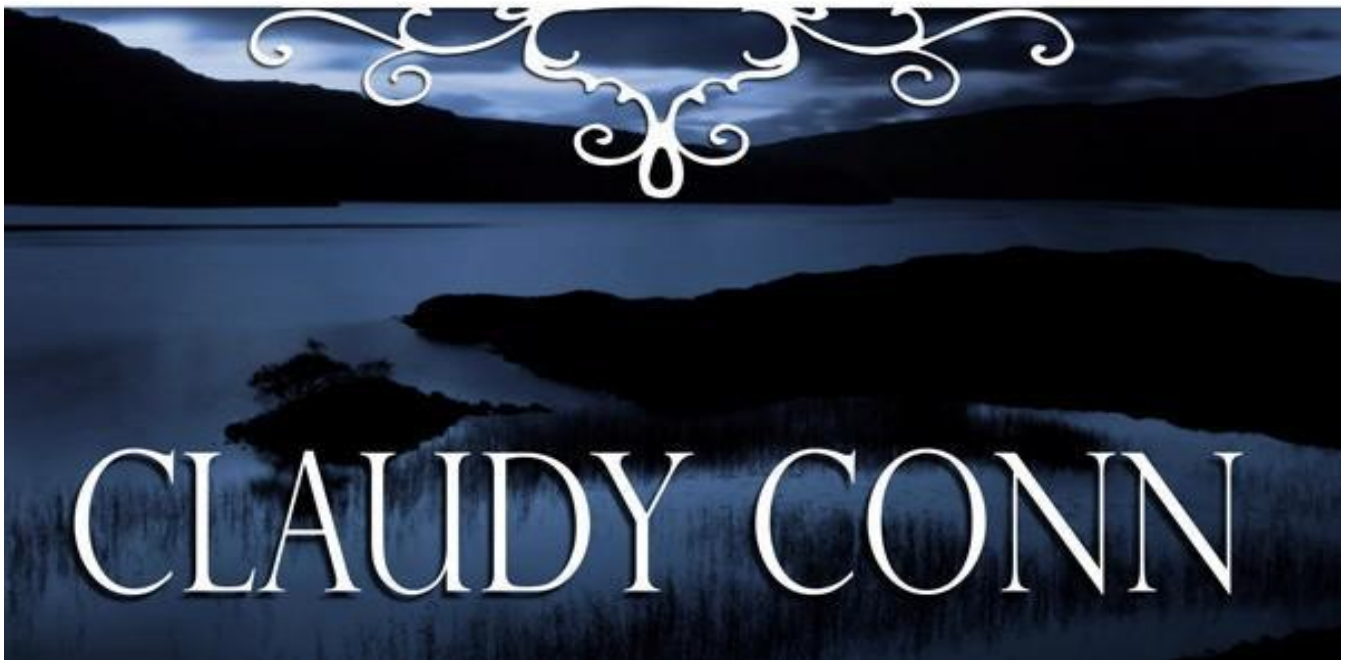


TAFFETA^{AND}
HOTSPUR



Taffeta & Hotspur
“War it is, my lady, and to the victor go the spoils.”

His eyes stared into hers, and once again he was the man in her vision. Feral with desire ... coming for her, and she was oh, so willing. She had to stop this. She couldn't think of him like this. Maids were not supposed to—

Tarrant jarred these thoughts when he laughed and said, “Let's call a truce, you and I, shall we?”

“A truce, my lord? Were we at war?”

He smiled, and she was all too aware of his magnetism. This one was dangerous. He had a killer smile and a singular charm to go with it. When he used them, a woman could forget he was a scoundrel.

He inclined his head. “I don't know why it was, but I think lunch was a sparring contest.”

She eyed him warily. The devil was actually flirting with her. *Does he think I would be an easy conquest? Ha!* “A truce, then. I shall not throw my handkerchief, or cap, your way, *and you won't* try to seduce me.” She watched the devil glitter in his eyes, and it was most definitely intriguing. She had to keep him at arm's length for certain.

He laughed again and answered easily, his eyes full with his amusement, “I shall have to consider this ...” Without warning, he leaned over and lightly, easily managed to kiss her lips, parting them, and expertly found refuge there for his tongue.

She was startled by the unexpectedness of it. She was shocked by her reaction both in her body and mind. The blood raced through her veins, calling all her nerve endings into action. Her heart began to purr with anticipation. A spot between her thighs tickled her with heat and an itch to be touched.

His kiss was everything she had expected the rakehell Hotspur's kiss to be. More, she realized, it was what she wanted it to be.

She went into battle with herself and somehow found the ability to pull away abruptly. She put up her chin. “Am I to assume then, we have not negotiated a truce?”

His laughter resonated on the breeze, and she found herself smiling in spite of the frown she tried to maintain. He said, “Must it be one or the other?”

“One or the other,” she answered firmly.

“Then I think not,” he said brightly. “War it is, my lady, and to the victor go the spoils.”

Also by Claudy Conn

Risqué Regencies

Myriah Fire
Oh, Cherry Ripe
Rogues, Rakes & Jewels
Wildfire Kiss
Runaway Heart
Netherby Halls After the Storm
Lady Bess
Mandy
Serena

~

Legend Series

Prince Prelude—Legend
Spellbound—Legend
Aaibhe—Shee Queen (Novelette)
Shee Willow—Legend
Prince in the Mist (Novella)
Trapped—Legend
Free Falling—Legend
Catch & Hold—Legend

~

Shadow Series

ShadowLove—Stalkers
ShadowHeart—Slayer
ShadowLife—Hybrid

~

Through Time Series

Through Time-Pursuit
Through Time-Whiplash
Through Time-Slamming
Through Time-Frankie
Through Time-Compulsion

~

Hungry Moon Series

Hungry Moon: Quicksilver
Hungry Moon-Destiny

~

DarkLove
Lady X

***What reviewers are saying
about Claudy's books***

5 out of 5 stars

Fanning the flames of Myriah Fire!

What was once an innocent, if rollicking, regency romance has exploded with passion as Claudy Conn revisits Myriah Fire to turn up the heat.

The addition of unbridled sexual passion to Myriah Fire's strong story brings dimensions of maturity and depth to the struggles faced by Myriah and Kit, without diminishing any of the innocence, joy or charm found in the original story. This revised version of Myriah Fire allows Claudy's regency followers to appreciate what her paranormal romance fans have discovered—mind-bending eroticism.

A truly captivating tale with a blast of added sizzle, Myriah Fire will kindle the flames of your heart and burn up the night.

~ Vonnie Faroqui, *Ink Slinger's Whimsey*

Love, love, love Myriah Fire!

It's a brilliant, fast-paced, and 'true to its title', 'going to catch you on fire' romance. Looking forward to more! Hoping Claudy Conn plans to share more of her historical treasures with us.

~ Candice Stauffer, author

Myriah has always been my favorite

This is a sweet, funny, charming romance. The characters are likeable and the story is well told. I loved all of the Claudette Williams (now Claudy Conn) books, but this one has always been my favorite. I hope she will put out more of her backlist.

~ Imjolicoeur on *Smashwords*

ShadowLove—Stalkers is hot, Hot, HOT

ShadowLove—Stalkers is filled with steaming action and dramatic tension ... Claudy delicately plants the seeds for future development and characters without distracting from the excitement and romance of *Stalkers*. The result is that she has a paranormal, vampire series, of romance novels, which carries her own unique and spicy aroma.

ShadowLove—Stalkers is hot, Hot, HOT ... and yes, I am blushing.

~ Vonnie Faroqui, *Ink Slinger's Whimsey*

Five Cups and a CTTR (Coffee Time Reviewer's Recommend) Award

ShadowLove—Stalkers is a story that immediately hooks the reader. It reminds me of a roller coaster just beginning, only to plunge into speed, drawing the reader into non-stop action. Intense and spellbinding, this paranormal romance kept this reader engrossed until the conclusion. I loved the passion and chemistry between the main characters. With tremendous action and well thought out characters, this fantastic read sizzles and sparks like a firecracker.

~ Coffee Time Romance & More

Trapped Legend has my pulse skyrocketing!

A clever, fast paced, unpredictable blend of action, adventure, mystery, magic and steamy hot loving ... I picked it up and couldn't tear myself away from it until I read the last page.

I highly recommend each book in Claudy's Legend series. You're seriously missing out on some wonderful adventures if you haven't read the previous stories. It's by far one of the most exceptionally crafted, enchanting Fae series I've ever read.

~ Candice Stauffer, author

Five Stars for ShadowHeart—Slayer

This second in Conn's Shadow series is filled with vampires, a vampire slayer, demons, wizards, a Fae prince and an unlikely romance. Claudy Conn does an excellent job of making this a standalone story while incorporating some of the characters from the first book and introducing us to several new characters. The war is still brewing and now the fae are becoming involved. Can't wait for the next book in the series.

This is another one I couldn't put down and read in a single sitting. I got so caught up in the action I was sad to see it end. Fans of the paranormal romance, urban fantasy and vampire genres should enjoy this as well.

~ Wild About Bones on GoodReads

One hot and thrilling book

I fell for all three of the main characters, fun loving Maxie, dark and brooding Julian, and one hot Fae, Breslyn. However, it wasn't just the characters that kept me on the edge of my seat, it was the entire involved plot that included jealousy, betrayal, magic, murder, and, of course, hot passion ... The well-written out mixture of myth and legend, not to mention the characters, all in today's world has me Joyfully Recommending *Spellbound—Legend* as one book you won't want to miss.

~ Jo, Joyfully Reviewed

Taffeta & Hotspur

By

Claudy Conn

Copyright Page

Taffeta & Hotspur

By Claudy Conn

<http://www.claudyconn.com>

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~ *One* ~

Spring 1813, Nottingham, England

TAFFETA LOOKED OUT the window as their well-sprung carriage rumbled languidly over the country road. It was a cool spring day, and the air held a fresh, crisp scent. She looked at her brother and uncle across from her. Although she could see they hadn't paid the least heed to the sweet breeze as it wafted through their open window, she breathed it in and prepared for battle.

"Don't pout, Taffy! It ain't like you, and it won't change my mind," snapped Lord Nigel in a tone obviously meant to be suitably firm and effective.

She wasn't pouting, but she couldn't pull herself out of her 'dream' to tell him. She was too deeply engrossed in the vision being enacted in her mind as though actors were on a stage right before her eyes.

She saw a huge, muscular, and beautifully naked man with dark eyes that burned through her as he looked right at her—at least the 'her' on the stage. His black hair fell in waves around his handsome face, and she watched herself as she glanced at him from top to bottom and allowed her gaze to linger on his ready manhood.

Lady Taffeta lived in the country and from time to time had witnessed a stallion breeding. This incredible man was much like a stallion. She felt herself blush and wondered who he could be—and why she wasn't shocked in her dream vision.

She had to get out of this vision. It was wrong—all wrong. She sucked in air and broke out of the dream as she pushed her golden tresses away from her face and tried to concentrate on the present. She didn't know where this vision had come from; she was sure she had never seen such a man—yet.

"What did you say? Pouting? I ... I am not pouting," she announced, doing a very good imitation of it.

Taffeta knew she had to direct her attention to the present. Sighing, she focused on the conversation at hand. "Nigel, why you are suddenly taking on this attitude is more than I can fathom. You may be my uncle, but you are only two years my senior and not fit to tell me what I should or should not be doing."

Nigel turned to her brother beside him. She knew he was looking for help. Her brother, the young Duke of Grantham, had been more friend and confidant than nephew to Nigel since the first day they had gurgled together on the lawns of Grantham Castle, she'd frequently been told.

"What are you grinning about, Seth? I should think you would lend me your aid in this. After all, she is your sister!"

Taffy watched her brother as he eyed his uncle doubtfully.

"Don't look to me for help with the brat. Papa was the only one able to control Taffy, and this muddle is all your doing, you know."

Lady Taffeta eyed her brother ruefully and then her young uncle and guardian. She knew it

had been difficult for him. Nigel had been born to his parents late in life. After his parents' death, his care and upbringing had gone to his older brother, and he had grown up with Seth and her. The job of guardianship, therefore, was forever in conflict with the position he held as their confidante and friend. Scarcely a month in age separated her brother and Nigel, but that month had been enough to award Nigel guardianship of both her brother and her upon the death of their beloved father. She didn't know what she would have done without both of them.

However, it was getting close to the day when Seth would be of age and take the reins of his own and her legal interests. *It is sad really*, she thought idly, *how little women are allowed*.

"You know, Seth, when we started this thing with the Luddites, well ... I allowed myself to be drawn into it, even allowed you to drag Taffy in," Nigel said.

This brought her out of her reverie, and she raised one brow as she eyed them. "I wasn't dragged."

"Very well, I allowed Taffy to join in the thing because she—we—needed a diversion. We were all so glum when we lost your father, but dash it, man, I didn't think it would go this far. It just isn't the thing for Taffy to be involved in," he said irritably. "All of this just now is wrong. In fact, it is time *for us* to withdraw as well."

"Taffy always gets into everything we do. Always has," Seth answered with a wide grin in her direction. "And we *are* withdrawing."

"Well, fond of her, we are both fond of her—spirited thing," Nigel conceded, talking about her as though she weren't there. "And yes, thank goodness, we are withdrawing."

"You have always enjoyed having me with you before, Nigel," Taffy said with hurt in her voice.

"As to that, don't mind now, quite the opposite really. You have been helpful, in fact, but that isn't the point, is it?" Nigel answered impatiently.

"That's right. You're a great 'un, and I'm proud to own it!" answered Seth.

"Well, but you shouldn't, Seth. You are a duke. One day you will owe it to the line to take a wife and beget an heir. Your sister needs to marry to suit her station and have a life. You should not be referring to her as a *great gun*!"

"Bit out there Nigel. Taffy has a life. Deuce take it, what maggot's got into your head, with all this talk of marriage and heirs? None of us are ready for that."

"That is just it—we should be getting ready for it. We all owe it to our names. Taffy may only be nineteen, but next month she will turn twenty, and she needs to attend the London cotillions and not have these escapades hanging over her head. They may rear up and haunt us."

"Oh pooh, as though I care for such things," she said.

"Well, you *should* care for such things," replied her uncle. "The job of guardian wears heavy on my mind lately."

"I am happy here at Grantham with you and Seth. I don't want to troll about for a man in London."

Her brother barked a laugh, and Nigel shook his head. "*Troll about*, indeed. Taffy, don't you want to be courted?"

"Have enough of that right here in Nottingham," she said with a giggle. "*Your* friends have been doing a bang-up job of courting me these last few months."

"Really?" her brother was moved to exclaim. "Never say so, Taff—who?"

“Trevor Harley for one. He has been making up to me for the last three months. And Sir Edward tried to kiss me in the rose garden yesterday, and Jeffry *did* kiss me the day before ...”

“Edward tried to kiss you? *Jeffry did kiss you?* I’ll run them through.” After making this quite proper declaration, the young duke immediately burst into laughter. “Pon my soul, Edward and Jeffry?” He bent over with rollicking mirth and slapped Nigel, who was also chuckling, on the knee, and repeated, “Edward, and Jeffry!”

She waited patiently for some moments while they caught their breath again before returning to the issue at hand. “So, I am perfectly content to stay at Grantham and not bother with a London season.” She shook her head. “Don’t want to add my name to the lists of debutantes and stand in line waiting to be noticed.”

“You may be my sister, but I ain’t blind, girl.” Her brother let out another chuckle. “You wouldn’t be waiting in line—you would stand out. Have you looked at yourself lately?”

“Taffy, you are naught but a green girl,” her uncle Nigel pronounced.

“Take care, Nigel,” Taffy warned. She lowered her voice in annoyance and was satisfied to see they understood her well enough to know she was in a temper about to boil over.

“Oh, now, Taff, take a damper,” said her brother. “What Nigel means is that you will want a house of your own one day. You know Papa always said two women could not comfortably rule one household, and if one of those women were you—whoa.” He smiled at her and took her chin. “In order to make a suitable marriage, you are going to have to *out-strut* the best of them at Almack’s and choose the man of your dreams, not go wildly about with Nigel and me.”

“But I am a part of it all.” It was half a plea, half a demand and delivered in an obstinate tone. “And I shan’t allow you to shut me out at this stage. I want to see it through.”

“We allowed you to join us to shake you out of your depression over Papa’s death,” her brother offered gently. “We—”

“Yes, but—” Taffy interrupted.

“But, nothing. As you were interested in the Luddite movement, we let you tag along on that first harebrained fetch we came up with—”

“Yes, but—” Taffy interrupted again.

“Stop it. We were wrong, Taffy. We didn’t give a monkey for the consequences, but you must see now, it won’t do.” He shook his fair head. “You must see that now, and, Taff, Nigel is right. We must take you to London, and you *will* take your place amongst the *haute ton*.”

“Tonight has nothing to do with tomorrow. London is something we will do if it will please you and Nigel, but tonight we will go through with our rig, just as planned,” Taffy said with some determination as she folded her arms across her middle.

Their carriage had approached a long, winding drive cutting through neatly clipped, lush green lawns. Flowerbeds of daffodils were in riotous bloom. Tulips of rich shades gently swayed in the breeze, and with a sigh of resignation, Lord Nigel noted that they were fast approaching Lady Watson’s front drive.

“So then, it is settled?” Taffeta pursued quickly. “We go as planned?” Her uncle and brother exchanged defeated glances. She knew they were honor-bound to proceed as they had promised. They had given their word, and she was sure they would never renege. She was also sure they relied on her very unique and secret abilities, which had been of service to them in the past. Taffy’s ‘gift of sight’ had saved them already more than once.

They nodded at her, and her brother said, "Aye then, this last time, vixen."

She smiled, pleased enough, and hoped these strange dream visions of the handsome stranger would stop and allow her to concentrate on the job at hand.

* * *

Hotspur! Lady Watson considered the amazingly tall and well-built Corinthian conversing amicably with her as he stood by the long window in her parlor. He was eight and twenty and still full of fire—the very devil of a man. Even the dandy cut of his light blue coat and buff-colored breeches couldn't disguise the athletic swell of his lean and sturdy form.

His black, windswept curls were neatly at variance with his rugged and thoroughly masculine countenance, and his smile, so rarely seen by most, was almost incongruous in contrast to his dark, stern eyes. Everything about him gave credence to the name the *haute ton* had given him.

Hotspur indeed—an appropriate name if ever there were one. An odd thing, considering his youth. Oh, he had ever been the passionate lad, full with romantic high ideals. But she had watched those ideals wither unmercifully, and he had put an end to such beliefs, putting them away if not banishing them completely.

She could remember him at twenty—warrior-hearted, generous, shy, and so very much in love. That was then, however; now ... now he was *Hotspur!*

She patted the empty spot beside her on the richly upholstered, Regency sofa of yellow damask. "Already itching to be off, Tarrant? Never say you are bored after only one morning in my company."

He smiled warmly at her. "Aunt Lizzie, favorite of my aunts, dear to my heart, I must admit, *I am* feeling edgy."

"Ah, too much vapid conversation, but I shall look to entertain you better ... shortly," she replied, teasing him back.

He eyed her. "Oh? What are you up to?" And then, before she could answer, he sighed heavily and said, "I was thinking of taking Demon out for a run." Raising his hands as she started to object, he laughed and admonished her, "It is only a ride, after all." When she pulled a face, he said, "Wait a moment. You are up to something, aren't you? What have you done? Something, I'd swear."

"I don't know what you mean." She avoided his eye.

He chuckled. "Well, I wasn't sure before, *but now* I am. Come on then, Aunt Liz—what is towards?"

"I only meant you should just leave the stallion be. He is grazing happily in my stud paddock and is happy for the time off, I am sure."

"Right, as though you give a fig about such things. What are you up to, Lizzie dearest?"

"Again, I repeat, I don't know what you mean." She busied herself with the folds of her skirt, sweeping away an imaginary wrinkle. Her aged hand then fluttered to the puff of white curls that ornamented her regal head. "Do come and sit with me, Tarrant. There is so much I want to discuss with you."

However, at that moment the sound of the carriage wheels scraping against gravel drew his gaze to the window. She watched him stand rigidly observing the carriage as it came to a complete stop in the courtyard just within their view. A footman went forward to open the carriage door, and a dainty blue silk shoe emerged.

“Ah,” Lord Thurston Tarrant remarked as he turned and stared at her. His hands clasped behind his back, he leveled a disappointed look at her. “So then,” he said in a tone that displayed a level of hurt, “*Et tu, Brute?*”

Her lashes fluttered. “I don’t know what you can mean.”

He paced, and she could feel his tenseness, could see the irritation lingering in his eyes. This was the first time she had ever tried to throw a female in his way, and she knew he would be angry. She had not been able to help herself, and even as the sneer marred his good looks and destroyed the smile that had been there only a moment ago, she still felt she had done the right thing.

“Do come and sit with me, and I shall explain later,” she offered.

Tarrant eyed her. “I thought myself safe with you, Lizzie. You have never played matchmaker before. You know that is why I come and visit you.”

She sighed. “’Tis not what I am doing now.” She was lying, and when he raised a brow at her, she realized he knew. “I simply thought, well, you shall see,” she said as she got up and joined him at the window.

They watched the newcomers just outside, and he grimaced at her. She smiled at him and said on a whisper, “She is such a wild young thing, and I thought she could use a friend in London, especially at the balls.”

“And you thought I ...?” He raised a brow at her again, and his surprise appeared genuine.

“She is a diamond, Tarrant, don’t you think?” She sighed heavily.

He wagged a finger at her. “Think you I have not had diamonds enough thrown at me?”

“Yes, but ...”

* * *

The Duke of Grantham, Lord Nigel of Rothbane, and the Lady Taffeta were announced, and the Hotspur stood back and apart to better observe their arrival.

The ‘diamond’ wore a simple blue redingote that covered an alluring female figure. She seemed to him, to have an easy manner as she walked, and he watched her with casual interest as she unbuttoned her coat and allowed it to fall without ceremony onto a nearby chair. *Hmmm, he wondered, is she a frequent visitor here at Aunt Lizzie’s?*

Next went her matching blue bonnet, displaying bright yellow hair lit with copper, thick with a profusion of curls trailing over her ears and down her back. Her waist was tiny; for a moment he imagined his hands holding her waist, and he felt himself get hard.

He frowned as he made an attempt to stop it, but when he caught sight of her full breasts, nipples hard and probing the soft material of her gown, his hard-on began to pulse. *Hell and fire!*

This had to stop—she was a veritable schoolgirl. Then she turned fully to him with her aunt’s introductions, and he saw her face. *Hell and fire is right. She is stunning!*

Her gray eyes were bright with amusement, her nose pert, her lips full and rosy. He wanted to take her into his arms and drive his tongue into her mouth and ...

“I am very pleased to meet you.” His kept tone reserved.

She laughed. “Are you? You don’t look very pleased. In fact, you are wearing a scowl,” Taffy said, her merriment charming.

He chuckled in spite of himself. “Am I?” He gave her a false smile. He had to set her apart, to demonstrate he wasn’t interested. “Is that better?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” she said. “Try again when you mean it.” Taffy turned away from him to plop herself on the sofa with his aunt, seemingly uninterested in him.

“Tarrant surprised me with a visit when he arrived yesterday. I was just about to tell him you, Seth, and Nigel were coming for luncheon today when you arrived.”

“Oh, is that why he is all dark and gloomy?” Taffy teased. “Thought he would have you all to himself? Well, we won’t intrude too long.” She smiled up at Tarrant with mischief in her eyes.

He was again taken by surprise—she was refreshingly direct, quite a pleasant change, really, from the simpering misses he often encountered. Scowling at the direction of his thoughts, he turned away from her to enter into conversation with the two young gentlemen who were in a lively discussion at his back.

His attempt to ignore her was thwarted when Taffy entered their discussion about politics, and before long he found he was actually enjoying himself. Their ideas were innovative—youthful and naïve at times, but definitely intriguing. He had never met a woman interested in such matters before. His aunt appeared totally at sea and got to her feet, telling them she would see about getting things ready in the dining room.

Taffy rose and stood with them, wagging her finger at her brother with good humor, laughing, making references to the *Chronicle*, quoting members of Parliament, and fascinating him.

He was taken aback by her, sure he should not be conversing with such a young chit in such a fashion, and yet ...

Her style had caught his interest, and the next thing he knew, he was watching the way she moved. Her walk was a series of bounces—so full of life—and her body looked so damned provocative. Something in her every step displayed that she was happy to be alive, and yet, she was graceful and feminine. She was new, shiny and bright; however, he knew better than to fall victim to such charms. His life experiences had taught him to be wary. Yet she seemed to glide in a whirlwind of unconscious high spirits and had displayed sweet affection when his aunt had remarked something amusing. She hugged his aunt affectionately and placed a kiss upon her white cheek upon her return, and he could not deny the sincerity in the chit.

“Don’t squeeze me so, child,” cried Lady Watson with a laugh. “I’m too old and will, in all likelihood, crack.” She took Taffy’s hand. “Now, in with you. Time to eat.”

“Is it true they call you the Hotspur?” Seth asked as they walked toward the dining room.

His uncle exclaimed in a shocked accent, “Seth!”

“What?” Seth took to blushing.

Tarrant laughed out loud and bowed his head. “The same, sir,” he said as he noted from the corner of his eye Lady Taffeta was studying him rather openly. It was not a surprising circumstance. He had achieved over the years an education in the arts of the female. He had been subjected to maids of many admirable qualities and had suffered more than he cared to remember from their missish airs and coy flirtations. He knew he was a marriage prize. He knew, but it had not always been so. It had not been true when his oldest brother had still been alive with both the title and most of the fortune. He had only been the second son and had been in love with a beautiful woman, but she had wanted more—more than the second son.

He understood the game, and he loathed its intricacies and its inherent dishonesty.

After they took their seats in the dining room, Taffeta said to him across the table, “That black of yours, the stud we saw when we came up the drive, is magnificent. I don’t think he was here

when we were last.” She then turned to his aunt. “Was he, Lizzie dear?”

“Absurd child, what would I do with such a beast? His name is Demon, and he belongs to Tarrant here,” Lady Watson answered. “His lordship is considered quite a horseman, and we believe Demon will let no other on his back.”

“A Corinthian is what his lordship is,” Taffy’s brother stuck in and then receded into a deprecatory cough. “Or so I have heard ...”

Taffy turned her bright gray, interested gaze back to Lord Tarrant. “So then, are you saying Demon is the very devil to handle, my lord?” Her eyes twinkled at him, and once again he was mesmerized by her.

“That he is—in fact it’s how he got his name.” He discovered that against his will she had drawn a smile from him. He had meant to ignore her to the point of rudeness.

Lady Watson’s pug at this point managed to push open the dining room door, which had not been totally closed. He stopped at the threshold, surveying the assembled group, and with a screeching series of barks, ran over, and jumped into Lady Taffeta’s lap as she turned in her seat to coo to him.

She petted the dog with a laugh, saying, “Do stop it, you vicious, adorable little thing. There now, go sit by Lizzie. There is a good boy.”

* * *

With this, Taffy returned her attention to her companions and discovered Nigel and her brother had engaged Tarrant in conversation, so she used the time to better peruse him.

He was the man from her dream. She had seen this at once, and how she had controlled the fit of coughing she’d nearly succumbed to was more than she presently knew.

At first she thought she must be wrong, but when she looked at him fully, she knew he was the man—only he had been naked in her vision. This was wrong—all wrong.

He was devastatingly handsome, more handsome than any man she had ever seen. Here, however, unlike in her dream, he appeared cold-hearted and arrogant. *Yes, insufferably arrogant.*

His manners, though polite, had been decidedly aloof. She decided he was probably no better than any London Corinthian puffed up with his own consequence. He could not be the man in her vision. She knew she could never be romantic with such a man—and it was clear he certainly was not interested in her.

She shrugged him off in her mind and returned her attention to Lady Watson, who smiled and asked, “And so, my child, you will be leaving for London and dear Sissy’s soon? Are you very excited?”

“No. Dreading it, in fact,” Taffy said on a heavy sigh. “It is bound to be dull work.”

Lord Tarrant regarded her, and she was, for a moment, caught up in his gaze.

“London—*dull work*?” he quizzed.

She wasn’t sure if she liked his tone or the manner in which he lifted his dark brow, as though he didn’t believe her. “Yes, dull work, when one considers what it is all about—at least to a female.”

“How do you mean?”

“Sissy will insist I put up my hair all the time and no doubt outfit me in the most fashionable gowns and make me hold my tongue and ride sedately and all manner of horrible things, and why? Because I must be paraded and then sold to the highest bidder! Outrageous. The entire

thing a bore.”

“Perhaps.” He grinned. “But I rather think all those things will bring you some measure of entertainment.”

“No, it won’t. The *haute ton* my aunt so desperately intends for me to enter sounds a dim-witted lot only interested in the cut of their clothes and the latest *on-dit*.”

He laughed, and she heard the genuine amusement in his laugh. “You may be pleasantly surprised.”

She considered this with a wrinkle of her nose. “Do you think so? This is what Nigel and Seth keep saying, so perhaps you are right.”

“Moppet,” Lady Watson said with a shake of her head. “As though you have anything exciting happening here in Nottingham.”

“But we do. What of the Luddites?” Taffy bit her tongue. She couldn’t possibly tell Lady Watson what was so exciting about the Luddite movement.

“Luddites, eh?” said Tarrant. “We had something of a riot last week in the Riding Country. It is a terrible business, and at present I don’t see a solution.”

“The solution is to pay these people a fair wage. It is the only solution,” Taffy said with feeling. “Shouldn’t England’s peers work in Parliament to do just that?”

“Indeed, Taffy is quite right, you know. It is Parliament’s duty,” Nigel said.

“The only talk I have heard in Parliament about the Luddites is a heated desire to put them to trial,” Tarrant said with a shake of his head.

“Monstrous!” Taffy cried.

She found Tarrant looking into her eyes and was caught off guard a moment, but only for a fraction of a moment, when he said, “You must feel strongly. Your eyes are alive with gold-lit flames.”

Was he actually flirting with her? She blasted such a thought away. No, he was not; he looked at her like she was nothing more than an ignorant schoolgirl. Even though she was seated, she still managed to put her hands on her hips. “Of course I feel strongly. We should all of us feel strongly. Such things should not be allowed to go on.”

“However, they are too often a part of life,” he answered quietly. “You are young and a bit naïve still, and as I have no wish to shoot down your ideals, I shall leave it at that.”

“Well, I am not naïve,” her brother interjected with some vigor. “And my sister is quite correct. We can not allow such things to stand.”

“Indeed,” added Taffy with strenuousness. “Men in your position should work to prevent injustices.” She shook her head and saw he was staring at her again. Was she getting through to him? Did he agree with their point of view? Would he help them in Parliament? “Are you aware, my lord, these people’s working conditions at the mill are not bearable? Are you aware of the pitiful wages, of the dangers from the machinery, or the hours they are forced to work?”

Her brother was clearly drawn in by her passion. “Indeed, Tarrant, they are worked harder than slave labor. They are starving, so they accept anything they can get, and their employers take advantage of that.”

“Yes, I quite agree with you, their situation is dire, but what they need to do is make active *verbal* protest. I can’t condone their riots—the smashing of machinery, their attacks of violence on innocent people. Good lord, lad, I have even heard of a group of Luddites here in Nottingham

who meets in Sherwood Forest. It is said they have taken to robbing the rich on the highway in the name of Robin Hood with the excuse they are giving to the poor.”

“And why was Robin Hood admired as a hero for his efforts, and these people scorned?” she asked heatedly.

“Robin Hood is a legend.” His voice was grim as he continued, “The Luddites are a fact of life, and another fact is they will be crushed if they continue in their present course.”

Taffy was frustrated, because what he was pointing out was sadly true. However, she was also frustrated by men who would point out the problems with a just rebellion and not offer a just solution. Too, there was something dismissive when he spoke to her, and so she put up a cold shoulder. Men very often thought that women should not involve themselves in politics, and she was heartily sick of that sort of attitude. No doubt, he was one of those men. He spoke gently to her, but was he patronizing her? Was he allowing her to think he understood, but only trying to quiet her? She could not yet tell just what he thought.

“Well, as a peer of the realm, I for one, plan to do something about it when I get to London,” Seth declared with feeling.

“Aye,” Nigel agreed. “We’ll take them on, won’t we, Seth?”

Soup plates were placed in front of them, and Lady Watson, with a pleasant smile, said, “Now, enough talk of politics. Cook has prepared a wonderful potato and leek soup, and we must not allow it to get cold ...”

~ *Two* ~

IT WAS LATE afternoon, and Lady Taffy was sparring for wind. Thurston Tarrant, the rakehell Hotspur, was the man in her visions—no doubt about it whatsoever.

This is, of course, impossible, she told herself. Her dream vision had to be off somehow—could be off? Now and then she managed to change a vision; not often, but it did change. Oh, this was all wrong.

She had come home in a great irritation of nerves, changed into her green riding habit, plopped a matching top hat on her head, grimaced at her reflection, and thrown it off. How could she have been dreaming about such a cad of a man? He was a rogue of rogues. He was a heartbreaker. Why had she seen him naked—why had she been naked? What a stupid question. She set this aside. It had to have been some strange quirk of the mind. She just wasn't getting the entire story from the small snippet of a premonition—that was it. It had to be.

What she needed was a good run to dissipate her confusion and put her back in order. But the thing was, she was in a state of agitation because never before had she met such a man as Thurston Tarrant.

Her brother had said he had the reputation of being the very devil with the ladies. *Oh yes*, the rakehell Hotspur could certainly have no place in her life. What she wanted when she fell in love was not a rakehell but a man who would love only her—faithfully. This one, this Hotspur, would be faithful to no one woman.

Her brother had said there wasn't a woman who didn't want him, *eh?* Well, she could see Tarrant thoroughly believed in his own myth. *Hotspur, indeed!* And then her mind's eye recalled his perfect naked body reaching for her in her dream. She recalled how she felt in her vision, hot and ready and willing. It brought on a wave of heat in the present, and her blood surged through her body. This had to stop. The vision was a mistake ... an error ... a false dream that meant nothing.

He was arrogant, rude, and puffed up in his own consequence, and he had been impudent enough to think *she* was interested in him. Well, at least she had managed quite neatly to put any such notions he might have had on that score deeply into the earth.

She had exchanged dagger for dagger, hit for hit, during lunch and then again just as she quit his company. But the truth was it had been frustrating because he pointed out the hopelessness of the Luddite situation without addressing any possible solutions. It had felt like a fruitless discussion that had gone nowhere.

Lady Taffeta had been cosseted and adored all her life. What little she could remember of her mother had been dear and loving. Her father had been openly devoted to her. Seth and Nigel were wont to tease her, but never had they, or any of their friends, treated her with such disdain. More than that, their friends had recently been quite gallant and flirtatious, a circumstance she had been learning to appreciate.

This Hotspur had the audacity to think she had set her cap for him, so she had spent the entire luncheon trying to convince him of the reverse—*vision be damned!* The effort had left her breathless with chagrin. These agitating thoughts had taken her stomping toward the stables, where she had tacked up her chestnut gelding without benefit of her groom's help.

She led her favorite riding horse outside and mounted him with ease. Her loose hair blew freely about her face as the wind picked up. She walked her gelding onto the bridle path and then put him into an easy trot, telling him all the while she was very happy he was in a chipper mood, for she was not.

His ears pricked to her voice as he listened, and she reached over and patted his neck affectionately. "There, never mind me."

She wanted to keep to the fields and wooded trails; in order to accomplish this, she was forced to skirt the pasturelands that divided Watson Halls from Grantham.

The gate was closed, and with a silent oath, she set her pace, as she got into position, placing her heels well down and her body neatly poised. Her gelding's ears flickered alertly as he looked ahead at the jump.

"I know, Red Moose. You don't like the high jumps, and truth is, I don't much either, but the gate is closed, and I don't feel much like getting down and up. Let's just take it. Right then—here we go."

She knew her horse loved her, and he told her so then with a soft sound, something between a snort and a whinny. "I love you, too, Moose," she said with a laugh. "Come on—pick up the pace, and we'll do fine. Just think of it as only a few feet higher than a log. Honestly, you could step over it." Her tone was confident, encouraging the gelding. "Nothing to worry about, Moosey."

She legged him on, and he obediently went for the jump. At the very last moment, however, he changed his mind and made as though to duck out and refuse. Taffy screamed irritably, "No, sir, no! You know better."

She went into position and drove him, but his sharp movements shifted her position in the saddle and sent her off balance. Her gelding did finally accede to her demand and took the gate flying, landing heavily on the other side, which sent her sideways in her saddle when he planted his fores on the ground.

She nearly lost her seat completely, and with no dignity whatsoever, she scrambled, grabbed his neck and mane, and managed to right herself. As she settled back into her saddle, she scolded him. "Odious brute, you almost lost me there." Taffy, however, was so relieved she was still in the saddle she released a nervous laugh and added ruefully, "You certainly are well named, Moose."

"*Damn* if you didn't make him do it. Didn't think he would for a moment there ..." She heard the chuckle of a male rider making his way along side of her. "I thought for a moment I might be picking you up off the ground. Well done, Lady Taffeta."

She had been nearly surprised enough to lose her seat again, and she blew out a whiff of air when she spun around and discovered, of all people, the rakehell Hotspur seated on his horse, grinning broadly.

She knew what she must look like—a complete mess. As she started to speak, she discovered she was hindered by a long tress between her teeth. She removed her hair from her mouth, but

the wind would not cooperate and blew it right back. Oh, why hadn't she at least pinned it back? However, she managed to draw herself up and regain her composure. She eyed him coldly and thought, *Of all people to witness a clumsy jump—it had to be him. Grrr.* She could have cried right then, but instead she said with an edge of haughtiness, "My lord. I thank you, but I must admit it to have been my fault. I should have stopped Moose and brought him back in for a better line to the gate."

"Agreed, but nevertheless, you made him take it, which he did like a rocket, *and you* managed to stay put when he landed badly."

His grin made her want to throw mud at his face.

She grimaced. "He doesn't like jumping; I don't know why I made him ..." She patted the horse's neck and managed an amiable laugh. "Poor Moose—the big jumps frighten him." She sighed. It was over and done. He had seen her at her worst. So be it. Brush herself off and move on. "What brings you out? I had thought you would be packed and off for London by now."

Tarrant's black stallion pranced beneath him, and he took a moment to bring his horse under him. She could not help but admire his horsemanship. He was strong of leg and quiet of hand.

The two horses touched noses, and the stallion seemed pleased to find Moose submissive so they fell easily into step beside each other, leaving Tarrant free once more to converse.

He eyed her and said, "As to that, it was my intention, but my aunt wishes me to stay for dinner, and I have dutifully accepted. She is the favorite of my aunts, and I don't see enough of her." The stallion snorted for an unknown reason, and pranced a bit until he quieted him again.

Taffy laughed appreciatively as she indicated with a flick of her chin. "He suits you—restless."

His eyes stared into hers, and once again he was the man in her vision. Feral with desire ... coming for her, and she was oh, so willing. She had to stop this. She couldn't think of him like this. Maids were not supposed to—

Tarrant jarred these thoughts when he laughed and said, "Let's call a truce, you and I, shall we?"

"A truce, my lord? Were we at war?"

He smiled, and she was all too aware of his magnetism. This one was dangerous. He had a killer smile and a singular charm to go with it. When he used them, a woman could forget he was a scoundrel.

He inclined his head. "I don't know why it was, but I think lunch was a sparring contest."

She eyed him warily. The devil was actually flirting with her. *Does he think I would be an easy conquest? Ha!* "A truce, then. I shall not throw my handkerchief, or cap, your way, *and you won't* try to seduce me." She watched the devil glitter in his eyes, and it was most definitely intriguing. She had to keep him at arm's length for certain.

He laughed again and answered easily, his eyes full with his amusement, "I shall have to consider this ..." Without warning, he leaned over and lightly, easily managed to kiss her lips, parting them, and expertly found refuge there for his tongue.

She was startled by the unexpectedness of it. She was shocked by her reaction both in her body and mind. The blood raced through her veins, calling all her nerve endings into action. Her heart began to purr with anticipation. A spot between her thighs tickled her with heat and an itch to be touched.

His kiss was everything she had expected the rakehell Hotspur's kiss to be. More, she realized, it was what she wanted it to be.

She went to battle with herself and somehow found the ability to pull away abruptly. She put up her chin. "Am I to assume then, we have not negotiated a truce?"

His laughter resonated on the breeze, and she found herself smiling in spite of the frown she tried to maintain. He said, "Must it be one or the other?"

"One or the other," she answered firmly.

"Then I think not," he said brightly. "War it is, my lady, and to the victor go the spoils."

She made a show of sighing heavily. "Well, you still needn't worry I shall aim my cap your way. You are not at all the sort of man *I* am after."

His pique set his jaw, and she had an urge to giggle but managed to control herself.

"Oh, really? What sort of man *are* you after?"

She beamed mischievously. "What every girl wants, of course. A knight of the realm, a hero, a man of principles and romance—a man who will always take her side."

"He doesn't exist," Tarrant retorted harshly.

She looked at him sideways. "Then I am destined to be a spinster." With this, she clicked her horse and took off into a heady canter.

He caught up to her in a moment, for she could see his black did not mean to be left behind. They collected their horses and moved along side by side. They slowed as the field ebbed and the wooded path opened before them.

Taffy brought her horse to a stop and allowed him to graze on some nearby tall grass. "Oh, that was lovely," she said breathlessly. "What a fine animal you have, my lord. But never say you ride him tamely in Hyde Park."

"I've schooled Demon myself. He will go as sedately or as wildly as I ask of him."

Again, she saw the arrogance, the self-confidence, the high opinion he seemed to have of himself. She bristled. "Of course—how foolish of me to doubt you," she said in mock meekness.

He looked at her sharply, but said nothing for a moment, and when he did speak a tinge of criticism lined his words. "Tell me why it is that both your uncle, young though he is, and your brother allow you to go off alone like this—without even a groom in attendance?"

She took umbrage. "I suppose that is my business and theirs."

He laughed. "It certainly would have been theirs had you fallen back there and been injured, fledgling."

"Well, they are off to a cockfight, and I am quite used to riding about unattended."

He smiled, and a tease twinkled in his eyes and lit in his voice as he admonished her casually, "In addition to the fact you could take a tumble, riding freely as you do, it is not at all the thing for a lady to ride astride and without the protection of at least her groom."

She put up her chin. "I am well enough known in our village and surrounding area. Who would accost me?" She shrugged this off. "And as to riding astride, I prefer it. Riding in a lady's saddle is not always an easy or comfortable task. Why we should have to do so is outrageous. Taking a tumble? If I were missing, someone would come looking."

He raised a brow quizzically. "As to who would accost you—any man with eyes in his head, sunbeam."

"But any man with a brain in his head wouldn't dare. There are consequences they would

have to incur, and I am no easy prey.”

He inclined his head, and she could see he had decided to change the subject. “Ah,” he said, looking into the distance, “Grantham looks quite lovely from this hill.”

She eyed her home and smiled. “Yes, yes, it does.”

“And with it in sight, I am afraid I must leave you, sunbeam, as I am headed for the village.” He tipped his beaver hat. “Perhaps I may see you in London.”

“Perhaps.” She noted black waves of hair fell across his forehead most fetchingly. She immediately banished the notion. He was a hell-bent rake. He was Hotspur, and she was not going to be just another one of his conquests.

She watched as he left her and made for the village road only a short distance off. He turned to wave at her, and she felt a moment’s gratification, which she immediately chastised herself for feeling. In all probability, she would not see him again, and his kiss had been a kiss goodbye. Still, it was a kiss she would remember forever, for she was fairly certain she would never receive another kiss quite like it from anyone else.

~ *Three* ~

STARS GLITTERED IN a dark velvet sky. A moon's smile was partially shaded by scudding, shapeless clouds. It was a windless night but nipped at the skin with winter's leftover chill, and Nigel shuddered against the cold and the excitement.

The country road had misted over, making visibility for him—and he was certain for all of them—a difficult task. The fog gave no sign of lifting as it meandered through the trees of Sherwood Forest, gaining substance as it made its way.

He looked at his companions and noted grimly they were no more than three hooded, voluminous, and darkly caped figures. They had purposely tethered their horses away from the road so that they could slink about through the heavy brush in the woods to the edge of the road without being spotted.

He hurried now to keep up and ahead of Seth who scurried before him through the church graveyard on foot.

Seth tripped over a diminutive gravestone and released a soft curse. “Devil is in it! I’ve stubbed my toe!” The young Duke of Grantham groaned in pain as he bent to uselessly touch the booted area covering the injured extremity.

“Shut up, ninny!” Nigel returned in as harsh a tone as he could muster in a whisper.

“Bleater!” pronounced Lady Taffeta. “Working the night has its consequences.” His niece then giggled.

“You two will be m’death. Sneak up—both of you!” snapped Nigel. He pulled a knit dark wool scarf over his lower face. “And, Taff, that ain’t no way for you to be speaking!”

“If I can slink about at night with you, I can swear with you,” answered the lady.

“Shh,” Nigel cautioned urgently.

“What the deuce?” replied Seth.

“Thought I heard something.”

“So did I, Nigel,” Taffy agreed. “Tis a carriage—it would appear Dirty Barkins is going out after all!”

“We don’t know it is Barkins’s coach,” Nigel said thoughtfully. “I mean, we have it on excellent authority he is home suffering with the gout.”

“Aye, Nigel, but we had two possibilities—one that he feigned the gout to his wife so he could pay a visit to his mistress. If that is true, he would take the shortcut through the Forest, wouldn’t he?” Seth stuck in, looking thoughtful.

Nigel rapped Seth’s shoulder and then glanced pointedly at Taffy.

Seth coughed and hurriedly said, “I mean ... er ... well ...”

“Yes, yes, I know—married men have lovers on the side.” Taff shook her head. “I probably know more about these things than you do, Seth. We girls talk, you know.”

“Sauce box!” Her brother chuckled, apparently recovered from his stubbed toe, as he turned

to lead them to their horses, tethered nearby.

Mounting hurriedly, they walked their animals slowly down a narrow wooded trail towards a bend in the road.

The coach came into view, and for a short space they took a parallel path, until the moment they needed to follow on the dirt road.

They were ready. They were completely in line for what they were about to do, but something jarred in Taffy's brain. Something wasn't right; it was as though a bell kept clanging in her head, heralding trouble.

As she stared at the sleek lines of the coach, doubts began to shake her resolve. She tried conjuring up her ability to sense, to 'see' the future, but it was as though some force blocked her from doing so.

Interference in the form of buzzing in her head worked against her ability to see into the future, such as it was, usually only a glimpse. A face came to mind, clearing away the fuzziness, and it was the face of the rakehell Hotspur!

For when she tried to see the future, it was his face she saw. *Absurd.*

"Doesn't look like the Barkins's coach," she whispered as she focused her gaze on the coach.

"It is probably new, bought out of the hides of his laborers," Nigel said angrily as he led his nephew and niece forward.

"*I have a bad feeling.* Oh 'tis such a bad feeling," Taffy told them as she shook her head. "I don't like this. I just don't think ..." Her words stopped

Nigel watched her for a moment, but when she didn't continue he shrugged. Then he and Seth moved forward, armed and ready.

Taffy reached out and called, "Stop!" But it was too late. They were already caught up in the moment, riding hard, guns drawn and raised.

Nigel released a shot in the air, and then he and Seth took a stand in front of the coach. When Taffy approached, Nigel saw an awful, doubtful expression on her face as she rolled her eyes and said, "No...Nigel..." But it was too late.

Nigel and Seth shouted out in the accents they had perfected, "*Out wit ye! Come on, flash covey ... out!*"

* * *

The passenger within the elegant coach sat back leisurely. He was on his way to the Red Hart in Nottingham, where he had been told there was sure to be a card game and a fancy piece or two that could please. He wasn't sure what he wanted, but he was restless, and this sounded better than a sedate evening by the fire.

Suddenly the carriage lurched to a halt. He caught himself from falling over, and with a soft curse began to rise until he heard shots shattering the quiet of the night.

Imperceptibly, automatically, his hand found the small, neat, and deadly hand pistol he always kept hidden within his carriage. He held it in place even as he retrieved his dagger, long and threateningly sharp, which had been sheathed within his cape. He always traveled prepared. Damn, but if they thought they were robbing him this night, they would be surprised. He smiled grimly to himself as he patiently waited for his moment.

Ah, he thought, as he heard the blackguard's command. He shook his head, for these highwaymen sounded young. Nevertheless, they needed to be dealt with. He sat back against his

squabs and disobeyed the command to get out of his carriage.

He sat silently, cunningly waiting for the right opportunity. He heard a lad, a very young lad with a high voice, growl once again and waited still longer. He knew this game well and knew just how to best his opponent. He hung back and was well able to see their approach through the window.

“Looke, lads, Barkins is afraid to show his phiz,” crowed one young toby as he leaned over from the saddle to pull open the carriage door.

Within the carriage, Tarrant thought this crew seemed heady and careless from the way they approached their target. Again the voice of the toby closest to the coach sounded young in spite of the harsh, low-throttled growl.

Tarrant didn't allowed the toby to finish opening the door; instead, he shoved it hard and wide, catching the highwayman's horse head-on and sending the poor animal up into a high rear. He then quickly jumped onto the ground and stood in place as he roughly, harshly, tore the reins away from the toby struggling to keep his seat. As Tarrant struggled with the highwayman, he thought the lad must be younger than he even first realized, for the boy had no strength at all against him.

Tarrant glanced at the lad's horse, but it appeared to be nothing special. In fact, it looked to be an older cold-blooded gelding not meant for distance or speed. Odd that.

When he grabbed the toby's gun, he got the lad's glove in the struggle as well, which allowed him a quick touch of fingers that couldn't possibly belong to a man. They were small and delicate. He dropped the gun to the ground and kicked it away. In one easy movement he held the toby's horse near and pointed his gun at his captive's hooded head.

With efficient grace, Tarrant had taken control; he had done this before and with great success. He had been taken unprepared only once, and after that, never again. That was his standard. He allowed himself only one learning mistake.

He held the horse's reins in hand, putting his hostage and the horse between him and the toby's cohorts. With fluidity he had reins and captive in hand.

The driver of the marquis's coach leaned down to retrieve the pistol at his feet, but one of the two tobys still mounted pointed his gun at him and commanded, *“Easy now, covey, throw it away, fer though I have no quarrel wit ye, I will shoot ye if ye point that at me—and m'gun is already in place.”*

The driver did what he was told and sat stiffly in place, waiting to see what the marquis would do.

The toby struggled furiously, but the marquis had the boy out of the saddle and onto the ground in front of him with an ease that he found surprising. He bent and remarked in the toby's ear, *“Too young, too small, and too stupid to take on the life of a toby, lad.”*

He saw the toby look at his accomplices and frowned over this. The lad seemed more worried about them than he did about himself. They had no way of getting to him, but they could take off and save themselves. They didn't—another odd thing.

Tarrant kept the toby's horse between the two mounted men and himself. He leveled his gun at the lad's head.

Wrong—it occurred to him that these men were either very inexperienced, or had made a series of mistakes that was making this all too easy.

As he held the gun to the young lad's head, he was not surprised to find the boy put out a small hand and worriedly caution his cohorts, "No! No, don't—jest run, lads, jest run." Then to Tarrant the lad added, "Right then, covey, oi'll do oi will ... won't oi?"

"Whot?" one of the hooded highwaymen cried to the hostage. "And leave ye? Are ye daft?" He turned his attention to Tarrant. "Leave the lad be, flash—no 'arm done, and it wasn't 'is fault now, was it ... 'im being so young."

So these three were perhaps family or very good friends? Brothers perhaps, Tarrant thought as he listened to this exchange.

"Get out of 'ere, m'blokes! Save yerselves—go!" cried his hostage.

Instead, they shouted threats at Tarrant, and then one toby tried something else, something close to pleading. "I disremember when I've made sech a muddle of me rig," he said in a Yorkshire dialect. "Ye ain't the right party—no, ye ain't. So if ye'll let me young brother go, we'll be on our way and treble ye no more."

Tarrant's beliefs regarding the punishment of highwaymen was stringent. He thought they should be dealt with harshly and made an example of to deter others. They were a dangerous lot that often took more than money and jewels. He would not tolerate them or show mercy, and yet ...

As he held the lad pressed up against his body, something disturbed him about this particular high toby. For one thing, the shape of the young toby's bottom against his thighs felt—*bloody hell!*

Just a moment now ... this wasn't right. Wafting past his nose was a hint of a familiar perfume—*rose water*—and *hell and fire*, he was getting a damn hard-on.

He twisted the lad around, and both the lad's hood and scarf went askew. Even in the dark and the fog, the toby was too close for him not to know.

He stared into her eyes with complete shock, and for the first time in a long time he was left totally speechless and totally entertained.

Oh famous, he thought, *if I had been drinking heavily, I would have an excuse for this dream. It must be a dream, because this can't be possible and yet, here she is, the Lady Taffeta—playing at highwayman!*

She made a frantic attempt to pull free, but he yanked her hard. The next thing he knew, he had her spun around and she'd landed, wrapped nicely, in his arms. Her cloak parted to display the blousy white shirt she wore, and her full, firm breasts pressed into his chest as he held her close. His other arm went around her trim waist, and he was uncertain just how to proceed from there. He was stunned and uncertain how to proceed. This was absurd. *Damnation and brimstone!* What was he going to do? Here was Lady Taffeta in his arms, which meant the two riding with her were the young Duke of Grantham and his uncle, Lord Nigel.

He could just own to knowing them and let them proceed on their way, but perhaps he should play with them for a bit longer?

He remembered her small handgun in the dirt and kicked it farther away. Then he told the two men on horseback jabbering threats at him to stuff it. He was going to allow the lads to save face, but he meant to have a little fun with the lady. She knew that he knew; he had seen dawning in his eyes and had heard her gasp. There was no doubt, and he whispered in her ear, "Well, well, my lady, what do we do now?"

He wanted to play this out, and for that he needed time, and so he maintained a gun pointed at her while telling the boys, “This lad is dead if either of you make one move.” His tone was ominous, for if this was a prank, they needed a lesson to wake them up to reality. His threat worked—one lad was nearly foaming at the mouth with fear, and he nearly felt a moment’s pity for him; the fear, he could see, was for the girl in his grip.

“Now guv, ye won’t want to be ’urting the lad,” the one he suspected to be the Duke of Grantham said. “It ain’t ’is fault, ye know, so let ’im go. Do, and we’ll be calling it a night, *even-steen*—what ye think of that?”

He turned Taffy once more and, holding her rump against his shaft, for one moment closed his eyes as sensations traveled through him. He managed to set desire aside but continued to hold her tightly as he murmured, “Right then, little toby, we shall deal, you and I, because it amuses me to do so.” He looked at the lad he assumed was her brother under the knitted dark scarf and hood. “I tell you what, my friend. I’d be willing to release you two—*but not this one*. I should like to keep this lad for a bit longer.”

One toby spluttered to the other, “No! No,” and then he turned to Tarrant. “Oi couldn’t do without m’brother. Oi would be beholden to ye, sir, if ye would let ’im go ...”

“What could you do for me in return? Naught, I think.” Tarrant meant to teach them all a vital lesson.

All at once, she surprised him by saying softly, and only for his ears, “Let them go, and me as well, Tarrant. You may take my promise that I shall repay the debt when you call it in.”

He grinned wickedly. “Fair enough,” he said and then, to banish any doubt of her future fate in this regard, he allowed his hand to slide to her waist, under her cloak. She was playing a dangerous game. What if he had been someone else, someone who had no scruples about how to interpret a promise such as that from an attractive young woman? Lady Taffeta needed a life-altering lesson. He said in a low, husky voice, meant to show her what she was up against, promising such things. “I just might hold you to it.”

“Arse,” she hissed quietly, pulling the hood lower over her forehead. He supposed this was for her brother’s sake. She wouldn’t want him to know about the ‘deal’ she had made to save them from this night’s work.

She moved away from him, and he said lightly, “Go then ... no harm, and fare thee well.”

He then set Taffy’s quiet horse in place for her to mount, moved in close to her, and whispered, “I shall see *you* in London.” With a marked drawl, he added, “Make no mistake.”

“I am afraid so,” she answered coldly as she swung herself into her saddle.

In response to this, Tarrant laughed, greatly amused.

What the driver of Tarrant’s coach thought of all these proceedings, he immediately voiced as he watched the three highwaymen ride off into the darkness. “Ye jest going to let ’em ride off then?”

Tarrant only laughed again. “Aye, they aren’t any good at this profession, and I suspect they mean to give it up,” Tarrant said before giving another chuckle.

“Will ye still be wanting me to take ye to the tavern, m’lord?” the driver asked with a frown.

“No, Dods, I think I have had enough entertainment for one evening. Let’s return to my aunt’s and make an early day of it back to London tomorrow.”

As his coach lumbered forward, the rakehell Hotspur put his head back against the leather

squabs and thought of Taffeta. She was a rogue, much like himself, and he fancied she knew the rules well enough; otherwise would she have promised herself away so freely? Why were they playing at highwaymen—robbing unsuspecting people in the night? Why act the part of highwaymen? Why did her brother and uncle allow it? For the thrill of it? He could not believe that. This had to do with the Luddite movement. Were they perhaps playing at Robin Hood? Oh no, how absurd! But ... it made sense, given their heated conversation about the movement. They were young, full of ideals—perhaps that was exactly what they were doing? Fine, but then why let their sister join them in such a dangerous sport? It was unthinkable. Again, they were so young, so foolish. What they all needed was a lesson.

What did he care if they needed a lesson or not?

He did care. Odd that.

* * *

The Rogues Three rode until they were out of sight, and then, all of them breathless, pulled their horses up and allowed the steeds to slowly walk into the thick of the woods. They sat their horses stiffly, each unable to speak after their terrifying experience.

Finally, Nigel broke the silence and exclaimed, “I can’t believe he let us go. What did you say to him, Taff?” He then turned to his nephew. “Seth, your accent was absolutely prime. *Well done.*”

“I’m sorry. This, this is my fault,” Taffy said, changing the subject away from his question. “I had a ‘bad feeling’ when the coach approached and should have stopped us, but I didn’t get enough of a warning in time and absolutely no vision at all ...”

“Never mind that! We narrowly escaped, that’s what—and that Hotspur,” Seth said. “How he came out ready to take all three of us on.” Taffy caught the note of admiration in his tone.

“By Jove, yes,” Nigel agreed. “And Seth, did you see the way he managed Taffy’s horse? He kept it between us the entire time while he held onto Taffy!” He shook his head. “We were in a damnable fix, and it wasn’t your fault ol’ girl,” he said to Taffy. “I mean—what could you do?”

She thought of her promise to the Hotspur. She had done what she could do, may the fates save her. Would he call in his debt? Or would he simply choose to humiliate her to amuse himself?

She sighed. “Right then. No time to do more than ride to the meeting now and tell them there shall be no more of the Rogues Three. They are officially retired.” She smiled to herself at the sight of the boys’ shoulders slumping. It was time they all grew up a bit and began handling their political points of view in a different manner.

She started off toward the small cabin where the Luddites had chosen to hold their meeting this night. Every week it was a different location.

As their horses weaved their way through the woods to the small clearing that housed a farmer’s cottage, her brother and uncle were still babbling on about ‘Hotspur this’ and ‘Hotspur that’. She rolled her eyes and went deep into thought. Her future now had a black cloud hanging over it, and its name was the rakehell Hotspur!

“Well, we are done playing Robin Hood,” said Nigel. “It has been good fun, but can’t risk it anymore.”

“More than fun. There has been a certain amount of justice robbing the worst of the mill owners in the name of the movement—calling out their sins against them while they stand there

and hand over their money.” Taffeta added with a sigh as she dismounted.

“Aye, but ’tis at an end now.” Her brother added his own heavy sigh.

“The thing is,” said Nigel, “what end does it accomplish? It simply hasn’t served to help their situation, has it?”

“We need to tell King Lud he needs a new approach,” Taffy said thoughtfully.

Her brother and uncle looked at her and then at each other, and Nigel said, “She is a knowing one.”

“Aye,” her brother agreed with a proud tone. “That she is.”

It was later, much later that the ‘knowing one’ lay in bed telling herself she wasn’t very ‘knowing’ at all. Hotspur was bound to call in her debt to him, and soon, and then what would she do? Would she go to his bed willy-nilly? Was that why she had the vision of him naked?

He was reputed to be a connoisseur of women, a rogue of hearts, and would no doubt subject her to ... to ...

She closed her eyes, thought about his kiss, and licked her lips in spite of herself. *Faith!* She was going to have to add *tart* to the list of names she was compiling against herself. However, this name did not really make her close her eyes in shame. Indeed, when she thought of being a tart in Hotspur’s arms, she wasn’t ashamed at all.

* * *

It was the end of April in the year 1813, and London was in a convulsion of activity. Jane Austin had captivated the Prince Regent with her *Pride and Prejudice*, which so very closely mirrored the Regency society.

Lord Byron amused his peers with his scandals. And Lady Caroline Lamb added to those scandals by taking his book, his ring, and copies of his letters, as she couldn’t bear to part with the originals, and burning them in the public square.

London’s *haute ton* lived for these things, tittering gleefully over every new escapade in which anyone who was anyone managed to become embroiled.

As sister of a duke and niece to a lord, Taffeta should have been prepared for such flurries and wayward talk, but the sorry truth was that she was, in spite of her class, only used to country ways, country hours, and country manners. She found the *haute monde* a shallow group of fashionmongers bent on entertaining themselves at the misfortunes of others, and she heartily wished she could turn on her heel and return home. However, her aunt Sissy had plans for her, and her uncle and brother were busy taking their idealistic causes to Parliament.

Her male relatives had taken lodgings in Duke Street, and she was no longer constantly in their charge. But even so, her aunt allowed her a great deal of license, saying only that she must do her proud and align herself with the match of the season.

“And who would that be?”

“There is only one, but no one, not even you with your style, name, and fortune, stands a chance of catching him.” Her aunt sighed.

“And he is?”

“Why, Lord Tarrant of course,” Sissy said, waving her hand in dismissal. “But forget that—there are others, many others,” her aunt declared as she led her out of the dressmaker’s and then down the street.

“Really?” Taffy rolled her eyes. “As though I would want such as him!”

“What? Don’t be absurd—any young maid would want him! Faith, *I* want him!” Her aunt Sissy laughed like a schoolgirl, and made Taffy smile.

A friend called to Sissy, and after introducing her to Taffy, her aunt fell into conversation with her friend. Taffy wandered away a few steps to look at the park across the avenue with longing. *If only I could just go for a walk alone.* It was such a lovely day, sunny, with a delicious breeze. Fashionables strutted to and fro, and she admitted to herself that London was quite intriguing.

Sighing with pleasure, she turned then and bumped right into the rakehell Hotspur himself. He held her in place while she looked up and found his twinkling dark eyes perusing her from her bonnet to her toes.

“Well, well,” he said softly, and his voice went right through her, all of her, like a caress. “If it isn’t the little high toby in the flesh.”

“Oh do hush,” cried Taffy with a desperate note. It didn’t occur to her to pull out of his hold, but he dropped his gloved hands and laughed as he said lightly, “Blushing? No need, never fear, sunbeam, I don’t mean to give you away. I have a better way to call in my debt than to torture you with threats of disclosure.”

“I am certain you do,” she said ruefully.

He smirked. “Are you trying to find a way out of your promise?”

“If I could, I would.”

He laughed again and touched her nose. “Then I must call in my debt soon, very soon, before you outfox me.”

“You are a scoundrel!” she muttered under her breath.

“How astute of you to realize it, though as yet *you* have no cause to say that,” he snapped with a frown, his expression turning dark.

“Taffy!” called Nigel from across the avenue, rushing toward her and Tarrant with a worried look flitting over his face.

Tarrant’s eyes twinkled again, and she wondered at it. What did he find so very amusing? She had just called him a scoundrel.

“Glad I found you,” Nigel said, looking more than a little nervous. He nodded a quick hello to Tarrant and tried to catch his aunt’s attention by looking her way and flashing his eyebrows to no avail.

“Why were you looking for me?” Taffy asked in surprise while studying his antics with some puzzlement. What was wrong with him?

“Well, wasn’t, but all the same ... need to talk to you.” He turned an apologetic look toward Tarrant, who inclined his head and excused himself. He sauntered away and down the curbing, giving Taffy a touch to his top hat and a smile only she could interpret as he left.

“Whew, what did *he* want?” Nigel looked after him anxiously.

“Never mind him,” Taffy said with a wave of her hand.

“Never mind him!” said her aunt Sissy, suddenly joining them. “I purposely kept Gertie in conversation so Taffeta could have a private word with Tarrant, and what must you do, Nigel, but burst in on them! *How could you?* And, dearest,” she said, looking to Taffy, “I did not realize you were acquainted with Tarrant. Of all the good fortune, and with all the world watching! Wonderful that his lordship showed you a decided preference. Oh ... *this will make your*

season.” She sighed happily before asking, “And what did he want, dear—anything in particular?”

Their aunt, however, did not wait for an answer but went on babbling about the number of passersby who’d noticed the Hotspur smiling and laughing with Taffeta.

Her aunt paused to take a breath and look at Taffy with new interest.

Observing this, Taffy waved it off. “Oh, just the usual.”

Nigel snorted. “I sincerely hope not. Hotspur’s *usual* is not yours!”

“Stuff!” snapped Lady Taffeta. She had had enough for one morning of everything and everyone.

* * *

Lord Tarrant moved off, rounded the corner, and entered the hallowed halls of the famous men’s club known as White’s. The little yellow-haired beauty, Lady Taffeta, was driving him mad with her pouty cherry lips, her bright gray eyes, and a body that promised sweet passion.

Was she innocent or jade? Had she learned, like some of her peers, to play passionate games with the lads when she was away at school? Was that why giving herself away came so easily? And, he wondered, why did it matter?

It mattered. If she were jade, it would be amusing to wrap her around his finger and make her his own. But if she was innocent, he could not—would not—ruin her.

He sighed over the problem. She certainly did not like him, and yet she’d made the bargain, knowing full well what the payment would mean. Where was the innocent there? He had come to the conclusion that their ‘stint’ as highwaymen was to play at Robin Hood. It seemed they had put that part of their lives behind them, but she had made a bargain with him, and it appeared as though she meant to keep it.

This irritated him. She had ridden like a man with the intent to rob rich mill owners—no innocent there. She had made a deal to give herself away to protect her brother and uncle’s reputation—no innocent there. And yet, something bright and sweet in her eyes told him she was in fact innocent. He needed to see this through.

One way or another, he was going to find out soon! He was going to call in his debt and see just what she did about it. If she was innocent, she would renege before she climbed into his bed.

The notion of getting her into his bed immediately gave him a hard-on, and he was barely able to respond when a group of his friends hailed him as he entered the club’s main room.

A quick survey of the room found Taffeta’s brother at the card table. Tarrant casually walked into the elegant green card room furnished for a man’s comfort and approached the young duke. In his unhurried fashion, he watched Seth laugh and push his cards away.

“Well then, lads, I own myself fairly fleeced.” He began to rise, though his young friends entreated him to stay.

One called out merrily, “Come on, green un, if you leave, where is the use? There ain’t another who will lose his blunt as readily.”

Seth gave the lad an amiable slap across his shoulder, setting up a chorus of laughter, and the duke turned to find himself looking at Lord Tarrant.

Tarrant smiled to himself, for he saw that Seth eyed him uncomfortably for a moment, and he could guess the boy was remembering the last circumstances when they had eyed one another.

“My lord,” Seth said, sounding uneasy.

“Duke,” Tarrant said amiably—damn if the lad wasn’t blushing. “I have been hearing things about you in the House of Lords. Mean to have a go at them, do you?”

“Well, someone must. Nigel and I are staunch believers in change.” He waited a brief moment and added, “Our system is addle-brained if it will not accept change with the modern world. We are overwhelmed with the injustices dished out to English subjects ...” He grinned, looking sheepish. “Do stop me—I know I go on and on. ’Tis a thing of mine.”

“Not at all. I agree with you, but it won’t be an easy or quick thing, you know.”

“What won’t be an easy thing?” cried a large, casually dressed man. He walked up, put a friendly hand on Tarrant’s shoulder, and gave him an affectionate shake. “Easy? That isn’t a word to describe anything you do, you old devil you!”

“Jimmy!” Tarrant said boyishly as he greeted his friend. “When did you get back from Leeds?”

“Last night, and I head about you and Bruton. Beat him again, eh?” He shook his head. “Don’t know why you let him egg you into these things, Thurston. Dangerous man ...”

“Oh, and I suppose you think I am a puppy at his mercy?” His brow lifted.

James Fenmore laughed easily. “Take a damper. You know I meant no such thing, but that one doesn’t play by the rules.” He immediately changed the subject by turning to Seth and asking, “Now who is this young pup?”

Tarrant made the introductions, and soon the three fell into easy camaraderie. It was not long before they went off together to Jackson’s saloon for a bit of ‘sparring’ with the champion.

All the while, and in his own fashion, he took the young duke’s measure; he liked what he found. It didn’t fit with the game they had been playing in Nottingham. He still could not understand how or why they had allowed Taffeta to join in their prank.

He could see the lad was full of fire and brimstone and plans to change the world for the better. It was all so very intriguing.

~ *Four* ~

THURSTON TARRANT WATCHED the entrance Lady Taffeta made with Nigel on one arm and her brother on the other. Everything about her mesmerized him. He found he couldn't look away.

He could hear people all around him; one man nearby exclaimed, "She is a diamond of the first water." And he felt himself swell with pride. Why?

He had witnessed the launching of Lady Marble's three daughters in the years past. She had produced beautiful seasons for each, and he could see she meant to do the same for her niece.

Lord Tarrant bent to Sarah Jersey, the regent's favorite and present mistress, and whispered in her ear. "A favor ...?"

She turned, and her words sounded hopeful to Tarrant. "*Rogue*. But do quickly ask away, for, Tarrant, you are the very specimen of a man, and I like you in your black velvets—and I am certain I would like you with them off as well." She laughed at his expression and her own outrageous tease.

He chuckled. "Ah Sarah, I can always count on you."

Surprise lit in her eyes as she asked, "What is the devil Hotspur planning? For I swear you are, and it has naught to do with getting *me* alone and in your arms!"

He smiled sweetly at her. He liked Sarah but had to walk a delicate line. He had to appear to want her but stay far enough from the edge. "Lady Marble has it in mind to strike up a waltz for the first dance. I thought you might sanction it for Lady Taffeta?" He purposely caressed her with his gaze.

"You lecherous thing! She is too naive for you. Just look at her, a famous beauty, yes, but those *eyes*." She sucked in a long breath and let it out. "Pure innocence."

He looked at Taffy in her white satin gown, which scooped low over her full breasts. She had chosen to offset the white with aqua threading throughout, and it was most charming. Her long, copper-tinged gold curls cascaded from the top of her head to the middle of her back, and wispy curls ornamented her forehead and ears. She was completely stunning. "Yes, I am, as ever a cad, but it is only a dance after all."

"It would ensure her season, and Sissy and I are good friends." She then rapped his knuckles with her fan. "Go on then—lead her out for the first waltz."

* * *

Lady Taffeta found herself looking up and into the Hotspur's smoldering dark eyes, and in spite of herself she was conscious of his charm. She felt warm all over, and a tickle of desire sprang up and teased her between her thighs in a way that made her want the feeling to last.

He smiled, took her elbow, and deftly led her away from Aunt Sissy and the elderly nobleman who had been boring them both. When Taffy looked back and discovered her aunt had used the opportunity to escape, she smiled to herself before turning a frown to Lord Tarrant.

“Just *what are you* doing?”

“Preparing to waltz with you, my lady,” he said glibly.

“Really? They have not even struck up the music yet, and I have not been given permission from the Jersey to waltz.”

The musicians, as though in his employ, began at that very moment to play a very pretty waltz, and Taffy’s lips parted with surprise.

He chuckled and said, “And as for permission?” He nodded toward Lady Jersey.

Taffy looked toward the great lady of Almack’s. Sarah, Countess of Jersey, inclined her head with approval. Taffeta lowered her eyes in elegant thanks and looked up at Tarrant.

“How did you arrange that with the regent’s woman?”

“Hush—we don’t say such things out loud. You never know who might hear and carry it around that you are gossiping about her.”

She sighed. “Yes, of course. You are right, and it wasn’t nice of me either.”

She gave herself over to his expert lead as he tooled her around the ballroom in exhilarating movements. Manners dictated she look at him and carry on a light conversation with him, but she couldn’t seem to look anywhere but at his chest.

“I am so pleased you like it. I’d hoped you would,” Tarrant said suavely.

“What? Like what?” she asked, bringing her eyes up to his face.

His smile was genuine, and his eyes glittered with amusement. “My waistcoat. You seem very interested in its design.”

She felt herself flush. “Indeed, the embroidery is unique and sets off the deep black velvet of your coat.” She smiled devilishly.

“You have such a naughty look in those beautiful eyes of yours,” Tarrant said in a husky tone.

“And the tails of your coat, my lord, just the right length—oh yes, you are clothed quite beautifully.” She continued to tease.

“A younger, less experienced man would be now yours forever,” he murmured, “slain by your beauty, enchanted by your eyes, and bewitched by your sense of humor.”

“But you are not a younger, less experienced man, so you are safe,” she said and gave him a saucy look. “You are all of eight and twenty—*quite an old man*.”

He stiffened for a moment, and then she giggled. It must have won him over because he roared with laughter. Heads turned to see the Hotspur so animated by a debutante.

“Does London yet meet with your approval?” he asked softly.

She sighed. “I have been to London before, as a child. I was not impressed then, and I am not now. However, this waltz is quite fun.”

He chuckled. “Lady Taffeta, we are kindred spirits, you and I.”

“Do you think so? *I do not*.”

“You miss riding your horse freely and unattended, I suppose?”

“Yes. My aunt says I would be gossiped about and that even I would not find London gossip mongers an easy thing to contend with.” She remembered once more the pledge he had taken from her and stiffened.

He seemed to feel her sudden reticence, and he frowned as he asked, “What is it? What have I said?”

“Naught. You have only reminded me what an obligation I owe you—if I don’t want to be

meat for them to chew.”

“Dearest beauty, I daresay you wouldn’t give a fig,” he answered with a shake of his head. “I can see you flicking a finger and putting up your chin at such absurdities.”

“That is not quite true, my lord. I do care. I can’t have my family subjected to such gossip, and besides that, there is the matter of the ... criminal proceedings that would ensue if that matter we refer to were to be leaked. I shall keep the deal I made with you, but it is for my family’s sake, not for mine,” she said quietly.

Taffy could no longer bring herself to look at him. How could he take advantage of her now that she laid it out for him? Did he not realize that if he were to reveal their secret, her brother and uncle would face serious charges? Of course he realized. He was a cad. She must remember that and not be taken in by his dark, warm eyes.

The waltz was drawing to an end, and he would have to lead her back. She knew she had not given him much time to respond, but even so, she had hoped he would relieve her of her promise.

Instead, he said quietly, “Ah, of course. We had a deal in which you took on a debt, a debt which you mean to repay, do you not?”

“I do not go back on my word.”

He delivered her to her aunt, bowed, and walked away.

Her aunt hugged her. “Darling, *your season is made!* However did you get him to lead you out for the first waltz? He has never done so with any debutante ever before, I do assure you.”

“Of all the absurd things,” Taffy shook her head. “That anyone should look my way because Tarrant danced with me”

“It is the way of the world,” announced her aunt happily. “You would have taken the *haute ton* anyway, my dear—why, just look at you. You are a wealthy beauty and sister to an established dukedom. Of course, you would have been taken, *but now ...*”

And right on cue, two young gentlemen came to add their names to her dance card. She sighed, for now, now yet another thing hovered over her—she was indebted to the Hotspur for her popularity. How very upsetting. Grrr.

* * *

Tarrant had a nagging thought as he returned to his group of cronies and watched Lady Taffeta as imperceptibly as he could manage. The lady actually seemed to be waiting for him to call in his marker.

For some unknown reason this irritated him. Had she been with other men? Was she then no more than a thrill seeker? No, he knew in his heart that her words rang true. She had entered their deal to spare her brother and uncle. Did she, then, actually believe he would be such a blackguard as to turn them in to the authorities? This disturbed him as much as anything else.

Moreover, the fact that, without caring for him—perhaps at this point she even disliked him—she was willing to bed him, drove him mad with conflicting emotions. Innocence hung about her smile and her bright eyes. But had all the freedom she had enjoyed at home with only a young uncle and brother in attendance, somehow given her a lack of morals? Would she bed him?

Had she bedded others? When he thought of her in someone else’s arms, he felt like he could put a fist through a wall, and that annoyed him further. *Why should I care? Because,* he answered, *because you like her.* Damn if he didn’t like the little vixen!

And liking her, he had begun to know her. Knowing her, he rather thought she was the sort who believed in ‘love’. She just didn’t have the ‘look’ or the demeanor of a woman experienced in the art of sex. Even her style of flirting was fresh and light. Yes, she looked an innocent, and yet?

He watched ruefully as she was led into the second waltz of the evening by the Marquis of Bruton—his enemy and rival in so many pursuits. He felt bile begin to form in his throat, and he had a sudden urge to tear him away from Taffy and throw him out the window. What the deuce was wrong with him these days? He felt violence stir up inside of him and couldn’t imagine where it had come from. He had seen Bruton ruin young maids before, he told himself, aye—but not this one! He was not about to let Bruton ruin this one!

He watched Taffy throw her head back as she laughed with obvious pleasure while Bruton twirled her round the floor. He watched Bruton’s hand on the small of her back and felt an agitation shake him to his core. *Damn the man’s soul!* She conversed with Bruton, easily, sweetly, and looked comfortable with the charmer. He recalled she had not looked happy when he took her to the floor and had appeared relieved when the dance had ended.

Tarrant moved toward the musicians, and a notable sum was exchanged. The waltz ended sooner than it normally would have; when it did, Tarrant stood ready to take up Taffeta’s hand. She turned toward him—and he knew a moment when all air left his lungs. Her eyes, those bright laughing eyes, looked askance as she regarded him, and he swept her with a quick glance, feeling heat beat a rhythm that pounded out her name in his blood.

Her voice held surprise. “My lord ...?”

Tarrant smiled enigmatically and took up her gloved hand, turning for a moment to the marquis. “Bruton, didn’t think you would be back in London already.” This was calculated to sting, for it had been Bruton who had tried to sway a race in his own favor by using his henchman to cut down a broad tree branch just as Tarrant had rounded the bend in the designated route. Thanks to his quick-witted and faithful groom, who had noticed Bruton’s man and followed him in time to stop him before the many-branched limb blocked the road entirely. His groom had forced Bruton’s man to help him remove the offending limbs, and he had won the race against Bruton and left him, once again, red-faced and out for revenge.

Bruton inclined his head a moment, but as he withdrew, his smile was all for Lady Taffeta. Tarrant was annoyed. He had apparently and unwittingly brought Taffeta to Bruton’s notice by leading her out for the first waltz. He bent and said softly, “Now, don’t be setting your cap at that one—he is a rake of the first order.”

“Faith!” snapped the lady. “I have sworn to keep my handkerchief out of *your* path, and if you forbid me rakes and rogues ... la, who is left here in London?” She had apparently forgotten for the moment what lay between them, and her eyes twinkled at him.

He had a sudden urge to take her up and away, and his voice was a flirtatious caress, “Naughty puss.”

“Answer the question, my lord—who should I set my cap for?”

He decided to play along with her game. “That young dasher there seems a catch, and a nice chap.”

“Hmmm, not my sort. He would not approve of my antics, which I must confess to the man I marry.” The light in her eyes danced saucily.

“Must you? Why is that?”

“Oh, if love is to survive the rigors of marriage, secrets have no place between a man and a woman—at least, not *important* secrets.”

“And so this chap must know your foibles and still want you?” Tarrant teased her.

“Of course, in fact, he must want me *because* of my foibles. They will never go away, you see. Foibles might ease up with time and circumstance, but we are who we are.”

“And you? Will you want a man in spite of his baggage?”

“Oh, but baggage makes us who we are. Of course, when I fall in love, it will be with my eyes and heart open.”

“Yet,” he asked, frowning, “you would give yourself outside the marriage bed?”

“If I must,” she said with a slump of her shoulders. “I-I keep my promises.”

“Look there,” he said, pointing with his chin, wanting to change the subject. “Now there is someone you might want to drop your handkerchief in front of.”

She wrinkled her nose and looked at another very handsome beau. “No, but I think that one.” She indicated with a nod in a young man’s direction. “Look, I like the yellow of his hair and the way it falls across his forehead—very attractive, don’t you think?”

“You don’t like him at all. Why, he looks twelve years old!” Tarrant laughed out loud as they watched the young man trip and spill his punch onto the dowager at his side. “No, that one would never be able to brandish a pistol in the dead of night and hold a carriage at bay.”

She sobered at once. “Stop it. Oh ... how can you toy with me in this dreadful manner? I own that I am in your debt, my lord. What more do you want of me?”

“Ah, you own to it, but will you pay up when I call for it? I think not.” He eyed her, trying to take her measure, taunting her in spite of the fact that he did not really want her to distress her. Why did he do this to her, he wondered fleetingly.

Later, when he returned her to her aunt, he bent and whispered in her ear, “Answer me now, and we’ll have done with the subject. Will you come to me when I ask? Will you repay the debt you owe—for if you like, I can call in my marker, as you earlier called it, as soon as we can arrange the time.” He was more than teasing her; he was attempting to get her to renege. He wanted her to see the deal for what it was, outrageous, and he wanted her to plead for him to forgive her debt. Why would she not do that?

“I do not break my word,” she said, raising her chin, “to anyone, not even a scoundrel, for you are more than the rakehell Hotspur, you are the scoundrel Hotspur. Who else would have taken such a promise?”

He felt the flame of irritation sprint through him, and he bent low over her hand and said softly, “Excellent. You will do well to remember it.”

All at once and before he had released her hand, he saw her face go white. She moved unsteadily, and he grabbed hold of her and whispered, “Taffeta, what is it? Are you all right?”

“Taffeta, Taffeta ...” Her aunt touched her cheek and turned to Tarrant. “We need to find her a chair.”

She snapped herself out of whatever was wrong, though he saw that it had taken extreme effort. She pulled away from him and looked up at his face, blushing until even her lovely neck went pink.

Just what happened? he wondered.

~ *Five* ~

TAFFY SAT BACK and thought about the moment when Tarrant had been returning her to her aunt. *What must he have thought?*

She had suddenly been overtaken by one of her visions, and it had been so real. Usually they unfolded before her like a play on a stage, but in this one, she wasn't there as an observer; she was just there as the participant.

They were in a hayloft, and she was naked, lying back against a wool knit blanket. She was looking up at him, at his huge throbbing staff, and it wasn't the first time they had been together like this. They were lovers! Her debt had been paid and evidently repaid over and over again. She blushed to think about her vision. It couldn't be true.

No. She wasn't going to allow this to happen. Even if she had to give herself to him to keep him quiet about her uncle and brother—and her—it would be that one time only!

Tarrant moved possessively as he touched her, and his touch sent shivers of passion through her. She knew she had to get out of her vision, and she had managed to do that but not before he lowered himself to her, brushed her mouth with his warm, sensual lips, and whispered, "Sweet sunbeam ..."

Her aunt had called to her, helping her to break from the vision, and they had found her a chair. She had been filled with heat, not because of her vision, but because in her vision she had welcomed his touch!

Now, the morning after the ball, Taffy tried to vanquish this memory as her aunt preened and compliment herself on the success of her ball. She found herself squeezed as her aunt hugged her and declared jovially, "La, but all of London will be talking about it for weeks to come. I was so proud of you. Taffeta, imagine, dancing with the Hotspur—*twice!*" She clucked and went to the fireplace, poked at it, and turned to Taffy to add, "It bordered on indecent—twice with the same man, and that man Lord Tarrant! La, my dear, well done."

"Aunt Sissy, you make too much of it." Taffeta laughed at her antics and bit into a biscuit.

"La, but I do not. You two whirled around the dance floor. It was Tarrant's second waltz with you—and they are calling you the *new beauty!* You have become the talk of the season."

"Oh, Aunt, it is all nonsense."

Her aunt eyed her. "You are a diamond—la, child, and your taste in clothing is perfection. That is a very fetching morning gown. The blue draws on the gray color of your eyes, and the fit is very alluring. Fetching, very fetching, for I suspect we shall soon have morning callers."

Taffy laughed and waved this off. "Thank you, but I do hope not. It is so pleasant just to sit quietly about this morning. I hardly slept last night."

As though to prove her aunt a fortune teller, Jarvis, their butler, appeared at that moment and announced, "Miss Catherine Frome asking to see Lady Taffeta."

"Cath? Here?" Taffy jumped up with excitement and said, "Yes, Jarvis—do show her in."

Thank you.” She turned to her aunt. “Of all the wonderful things!”

“A school friend, dear?” asked her aunt.

“Yes, my very dearest,” she answered as Catherine entered the room.

Taffy’s excitement took over the room as she rushed to embrace her friend, and the two squealed with obvious affection for one another. It was a moment before Taffy remembered her manners and turned to her aunt to say, “Aunt Sissy, Lady Marble, this is my dear friend Catherine Frome.”

Taffy adored her friend and was proud of her. She was tall, graceful, and sedate, and Taffy often giggled about how opposite they were. She bounced, but Catherine glided. Even as she stood making introductions, she squeezed her friend’s hand and said, “Cathy, you can’t know how much I have missed you!”

Taffy often thought the two of them were like hot meeting cold and creating warm. After the introductions, Taffy pulled on her friend’s hand, led her to the sofa, and inquired, “Cath, what are you doing in London? I thought after your season last year, you had decided never again would you allow your family to launch another?”

Before her friend could answer, the butler appeared once again. This time, however, he was amiably set aside as he tried to Seth and Nigel, who strode jovially into the room. Seth proclaimed, “There, there, Jarvis, no need to announce us—family, you know.”

Jarvis inclined his head. “As you wish, your Grace.”

“Much you know,” Nigel said to his nephew in an aside, obviously continuing the discussion they had been engrossed in during their arrival.

“I am telling you, that ain’t the way to handle it,” the young duke answered. Taffy smiled when she saw him suddenly notice Cathy.

He put out his hand and went toward her, a very genuine smile lighting up his fair face. “Catherine! Dear Catherine Frome.” He then surprised his sister by taking Miss Frome’s hand and placing a gallant kiss on her knuckles. “Lord,” he exclaimed as he came up from her hand, “you’ve quite grown up, and your eyes ... such a blue—”

“You must forgive him his rare form.” Nigel interrupted, appropriating her hand from his nephew. “He hasn’t yet given up his lease of infancy.”

“Cath—ignore these fools,” cried Taffy on a laugh. She had never really seen Nigel and Seth make up to a woman. “Come on, Cath, take off your bonnet and be comfortable, for I don’t intend to let you leave till we have had a nice long visit.”

Catherine took off her pretty straw bonnet and placed it to one side of the sofa while Seth drew up a chair and kept her engaged in conversation. Taffy found she couldn’t fit in a word as Nigel tried to vie for Catherine’s attention as well.

Taffy rolled her eyes and said, “Gentlemen, the lady is here to see *me*, not to be badgered by you two.”

Miss Frome laughed and patted Taffy’s hand. “Oh, it is so good to see you—and them as well. You three are always so lively!”

Jarvis looked weary as he appeared once more and announced, “Lord Thurston Tarrant.”

In spite of herself, Taffy felt a wave of anticipation. She knew she was dangerously attracted to the devil and meant to purge herself of this attraction somehow. She had to or own herself lost.

However, when he stood in the doorway, a giant of man, and his piercing dark gaze found

hers, she felt herself neatly conquered and very nearly speechless. *Perhaps, Taffeta*, her inner voice whispered, *'tis too late, and you are already lost to the rake?*

Another voice could be heard behind Jarvis, who had not yet left the arched doorway of the morning room. Taffy's smile grew as everyone looked toward the sound to see who next would appear. Then Jarvis pronounced, "And Lord James Fenmore."

Taffy glanced at Aunt Sissy, who whispered, "*Both here ...*" This seemed to take her aunt's breath away momentarily, and then she added. "At the same time—Fenmore ... Tarrant ... the two most sought-after bachelors in London? Why this will be the talk of the *haute ton* for the entire season."

Tarrant made his way directly to her aunt and bent perfunctorily over her hand. "Lady Marble, I am delighted to find you looking so well this morning, and after such a strenuous night."

"It was perfect, wasn't it, Tarrant?" she asked conspiratorially.

He winked, and it was obvious to Taffy he liked her aunt. "You know it was." With this he moved on to bend over Taffy's hand and audaciously kissed her wrist.

"You are a ravishing minx ... even in the morning," he whispered as his dark gaze swept over her.

She felt her cheeks burn. She had purposely donned a pretty, if somewhat low cut, yellow day gown that fit her well. Why? She had hoped he might stop by. Why? She didn't want to think about why.

However, as she looked into his bright, hungry eyes, she rather thought she knew: she was falling for the scoundrel. *No ... I must not.* She would have to do something to get him out of her thoughts, but how could she? She had a debt to pay—where, when, she didn't know—but it was hanging over her head. The idea of him taking her into his arms and making love to her both frightened and thrilled her in the same moment. She had to scold herself silently, *He is a cad and a rake, a heartbreaker a—* She said softly, "Thank you."

James Fenmore pushed Tarrant aside as he took Taffeta's fingers and bent over them. "Ravishing. How pleased I am to see you this morning." He looked to Catherine, and Taffy quickly introduced them, noting how his eyes lit up as Cathy's lashes lowered.

She smiled and looked to Tarrant, who had pulled up a chair to sit neatly at her knees.

"Your hair, loose and all about your shoulders," Tarrant said, "is very fetching." Tarrant said.

She felt a fool and answered all she could think of, "Thank you."

"Do you braid it for bed or leave it ... loose like this?" The look in his eyes teased her.

She looked around and noted everyone was involved in hearty conversation and not looking their way. She darted a look at him. "I like it loose ... and I sleep with only my covers to keep me warm," she whispered. "Is that what you want to know?" Her eyes flirted outrageously. It was as though only she and Tarrant were in the room.

A maid arrived with a tray of refreshments, and Taffy laughed to herself as she watched her aunt flutter about in her fashion, popping a sweet treat into this one's mouth, making certain everyone was served something as the jovial banter continued.

Tarrant continued to sit close to her, looking deeply into her eyes whenever the opportunity arose.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?" he asked with amusement.

"Looking at me like that, like you ... want to devour me. 'Tis not seemly—especially in my aunt's morning room."

"Would it be seemly somewhere else?"

She giggled. "Nooo, but do stop ..."

"I cannot," he answered. "I was not aware that was how I was looking at you."

"Oh, *downright fib!*" She gasped.

He laughed and took a pinch of air between his thumb and forefinger. "Just a little one, sunbeam." He chuckled and leaned back against his hardwood chair. "Right then, tell me, are you enjoying London? I seem to remember you declared you would not, could not ...?" The twinkle was back in his eyes.

She dimpled up at him. "Ah, apparently I am more superficial than I thought, for I am enjoying London so far—immensely." She then eyed him quizzically and said, "Have you brought your high-perch phaeton to town, my lord?"

"So you have already heard about my phaeton?" He grinned ruefully and touched her nose.

She found she liked his touch far too much, even on her nose. She regarded him playfully and added, "Indeed, and the matched dapple grays to draw it. I am told you are the best whipster in the land."

"For once I am thankful for rumors if it wins me your company in my phaeton."

She laughed,. "Oh yes, I would love a ride."

"We can go right now." He encouraged her with a grin.

"No—how can we just leave everyone and go? Impossible."

"Impossible? Not at all—we will just excuse ourselves."

"Oh, my lord," she objected with a laugh. "I am persuaded you don't have your phaeton standing outside. That would never do for such high-stepping horses."

"You are correct, but I can have them hitched and ready in no time, shall I leave and return for you?"

She pushed at his arm, forgetting herself, forgetting what lay between them, forgetting that very soon he would call her to his bed.

"Ah, sunbeam, when you look at me like that, all I want to do is—"

Jarvis appeared in the doorway, and because no one paid him the least heed, he cleared his throat and loudly announced, "The Marquis of Bruton."

All conversation seemed to float into the atmosphere and die as though a sudden fog had descended. Taffy heard her aunt say under her breath, "Oh no, oh dear ..."

Taffy noted her aunt's reaction, but what she found more worrying was her friend Catherine's response to his name. Miss Frome went white and sat quite rigidly beside her. Taffy bent to her to ask, "Cath? Cathy, what is it?"

"Naught." Her friend's voice was shaky at best.

Taffy watched the marquis with interest. He was certainly elegantly dressed. His dark green superfine had been molded to his lean form. His pale cream breeches looked as though they had been painted onto his long legs. His boots sported gold tassels at their heart-shaped tops. His face conveyed an expression of boredom, dissipation, and fast, hard living, but even so he was a handsome buck much in his heyday—or so it seemed to her.

Catherine's hand strayed into hers, and Taffy felt her friend tremble. *Faith*, she was going to

get to the bottom of this. What was it about Bruton that so worried Cath? Tension seemed to infiltrate the atmosphere and hang like a heavy, dark cloud. Obviously Bruton was not liked by the company who surrounded her.

Taffy got to her feet and walked over to her brother; she knew instinctively Bruton would follow, and she wanted to stop him from looking toward Catherine, for she acted like he was frightening her to death.

He did in fact follow Taffy as she came to stand beside her brother, and she said, "Seth, what news in Parliament of Wellington, and what is your guess as to his future plans?" *There*, she thought, *that should get the men talking*.

"Devil is in it, so no one can hazard a guess," her brother answered with a frown.

"Not so," corrected the marquis, falling, as Taffy had expected, into the conversation. "Everyone has been guessing, but no one knows how far off his guess may be."

She could see he thought himself very clever. She also noted Tarrant was watching her with interest. It appeared to her the rogue players in the room each had their agenda. *Well, well ... what is Tarrant doing now?* He had risen from the sofa, leaving Catherine to his friend Fenmore and was unobtrusively making his way toward her. She felt a trickle of anticipation. She felt a shiver shoot straight up her spine. She felt drawn to him as he stalked panther-like toward her as though claiming possession of his prey. Oddly enough, she wanted him centered on her, even if he presently thought of her as prey. She knew she wasn't—and she knew what she wanted.

Tarrant spoke to her brother, and she realized at once the two had developed a friendship of sorts. *How very strange*, she thought.

"I think you are in the right of it, Seth." To Taffy, he bent his head and whispered in her ear, "That was neatly contrived."

She gave him a brilliant smile. He was so knowing—so up to every rig. It was most irritating.

What then, had he had noticed her friend was uncomfortable in Bruton's company? Had he watched to see how she would handle the situation? Something inside of her lit with pride. He had approved, but something else berated her. *Why should I care if he approves or not?*

The men went on to discuss Wellington and Napoleon, and she quietly returned to her friend, sat with her, and patted her hand. "What we need, Cath, is some private time," she whispered and was pleased when her friend nodded and gave her fingers a light squeeze.

Some moments later, Tarrant bent over her hand and said, "Tomorrow then, sunbeam—a ride with me and my matched grays?" His voice cajoled, but it wasn't necessary. She was more than willing to ride in a high-perched phaeton, for she had never done so before. She was also aware, all too aware, of the disappointment she felt when she realized he was leaving.

"Well as to that, I could never pass up a chance to ride with you in your phaeton, now could I? I am told that to be seen in your company must add considerably to my consequence."

"Used, abused, and cut down in my prime by a snip of a girl!" he pronounced and chuckled heartily. He reached and tweaked her nose. His friend Fenmore nodded to him and said he would meet him at the club later, and returned his attention to Miss Frome.

Bruton descended on Taffy, who decided to keep his attention away from her friend. She used flirtatious banter to accomplish this and could tell her aunt heartily disapproved. Later she would have to tell her aunt she was simply running interference because Catherine did not like Bruton.

Sighing heavily when she had a free moment from all these maneuvers, she realized what was

most discombobulating was the fact she'd missed Tarrant the moment he walked out of the room. It was absurd. She wasn't even sure she liked him—how could she miss him?

* * *

Taffy knew all about Vauxhall Gardens. It was a deliciously opulent place where those who wanted could hide in the darkness and steal a kiss and more—so much more.

Weeping willows hung with a welcoming and sensual invitation, affording lovers their secrets from the curious. Tulips and daffodils were arranged in a wild, bold profusion of colors and were deliciously inviting to the eye.

Rogues, ladies, the elite, and the lowly strutted in their own style, as the Gardens were open to all. Youths laughed, dowagers clucked, and nearly everyone there felt at least a moment's thrill.

It was the beginning of the Season, and Vauxhall was ablaze with torches and newly installed gas lamps. Music filled the air. Jugglers and jesters paraded in mischievous abandon. Roués ogled, and Lady Taffeta drank it all in with innocent wonder.

"Cathy, are you as astounded as I?"

Her friend laughed and shook her head. "It is all a bit much for me, although I was surprised by Vauxhall the first time I was here last year."

"It is all so full of wonder and yet oddly appalling at the same time."

Catherine sighed, and then as though confessing a sin said, "I think I wasn't made for all this gadding about."

Taffeta laughed. "Isn't it absurd, Cath? I swore I would hate London, and here I am enjoying every minute, and you always swore London was just the place for you and have discovered that it is not."

At that moment their attention was captured by a jester atop the circular wall that framed an ornate fountain. He lost his balance and tumbled into the water, throwing Taffy and her friend into uninhibited mirth. When they had eased up on their laughter, Taffeta touched her friend's arm and said, "There ... that is better. You are smiling. Now, tell me before anyone comes to interrupt us, what is wrong, Cathy? For something is, and why are you frightened of Bruton?"

"Taffy, I-we-this is not the place—oh look, there is Lord Tarrant!"

Taffy turned and saw him, and for a brief moment she was filled with a sensation she could not name. Then she saw an astoundingly pretty woman leaning into him and nibbling with wantonness at his ear.

Taffy felt a flood of emotion and immediately recognized it as jealousy. *Jealousy?* she silently asked herself. *Impossible.*

"Who is that beautiful woman with him?"

"Oh, that is the famous Mrs. Connors."

"Mrs. you say?" asked Taffy, surprised. "But ... she is hanging onto Tarrant as though he is the only man in the world—and, Cath, she has her hand on his backside!"

"She does that and so much more, I am told, with every handsome nobleman she can find." Cathy leaned in and added, disapproval coloring her tone, "She is the biggest flirt—well, I suppose she does more than flirt—in all of London. You see, hers was a marriage of convenience, and they don't bother with each other. She wanted his fortune. He wanted to be plush with the aristocracy. He is a mill owner, a very wealthy one."

Taffy sighed. "When I marry, I will marry for love."

“I have found that a more difficult thing to achieve than we assumed when we were in school, Taffy—so much more difficult.”

Taffy frowned but could not pursue it as Seth called out as he approached, “Taffy, only look who I have found here!” He had the husky and amiable James Fenmore in tow. “I’ve invited him to join us in our box, which we had better get to right now, for the concert is about to begin.”

As he hurried them along, a squealing sound caught Taffy’s attention. She looked around but did not at first discover its source. Curious, she hung back a few feet while her brother, with Cathy’s hand in his, continued through the crowd, unaware she was not with them.

She followed the sound and heard the unmistakable yelp of a puppy in distress. It was with sudden blazing outrage that Taffy discovered a group of young ruffians, obviously in their cups, out to have their form of fun with a poor mongrel pup. They were dunking it in the pool near the fountain, nearly drowning the poor, hapless thing.

Taffy saw the puppy was all ribs, weak, and frightened to death. She didn’t think as she stamped them, and with one slapping movement, dislodged the pup from the culprit’s claws and held the wet, whimpering thing to her velvet cloak. “Heathen brutes, just what do you think you are doing?”

The lad appeared unabashed and angry. It was obvious he felt his manhood had been attacked. “Well now, whot we got ’ere? Quality is it? Lookin’ after a mongrel?”

“There will be consequences for what you have done!” she retorted fearlessly as she held the wet, shivering babe within the folds of her cloak, heedless of her gown.

“Eh now, that’s me own pup, and oi’ll drown him if oi wishes,” he brazenly answered with a swagger toward her.

Taffy hurriedly stepped back, scrambled into her cloak’s inner pocket, and brought out a weighty coin. She threw it at him. “There, now the puppy is mine!”

He picked up the coin and pulled an ugly face. “Oi’ll need more than that if oi has to give ’im up.” He came toward her once more and reached for the pup.

Without thinking, Taffy reacted from the gut; she hauled off and smacked his face with her open-gloved hand.

He held his burning cheek, and his face was an expression of fury about to be unleashed. “Oi don’t mean to let ye get away wit that—no oi don’t,” he said as he raised a fist and moved menacingly toward her.

Out of nowhere, a mountain of a man appeared. He was all light and darkness, strength and power, control and fury, and he stepped between her and the ruffian. With one hand under the brute’s chin and fingers of the other hand tightening around the ruffian’s neck, he said, “I think you need to have some water to cool you down. Indeed, that is just what you need.” Down went the drunken lad’s head into the pool of bubbling water, where the Hotspur held him down for some moments before pulling him up by his collar and demanding, “Did you like that? Will you remember what it felt like to be helpless and at another’s mercy?”

In answer, the lad choked and spluttered. Hotspur shook him. “Get out of here, and I will remember your face, and if ever I see you hurt an animal—any animal—again, I shall dole out to you what you have doled out to it. Am I understood?”

Taffy waited, but although he opened his mouth, nothing came out. When the ruffian nodded his head vigorously, Hotspur pushed him into the waiting friends at his back and watched them

all scramble away.

Her hands were full with the wretched puppy, but she felt an urge to applaud and hug Tarrant. Fenmore arrived on the scene next, and Taffeta said, "Oh my, you're here as well? This is excellent. I would be so thankful if you will apologize to my brother and Miss Frome. I must return home at once, as this poor thing needs immediate attention."

Fenmore's brows were up with surprise, but he readily agreed. Taffeta then turned to Hotspur and said happily, "I shall call him George."

"You can't call him George," Tarrant protested with great amusement. "You see, as cute as he may be, he is a mongrel, and you can't give him the prince regent's name."

She laughed. "Right you are. Would you like to name him? It is thanks to you, after all, that he was saved."

"I would like to hear you come up with a name," he said softly.

"Then Valiant. Only just look at his sweet, brave eyes ..."

"Jimmy, thank you," Lord Tarrant said to his friend. "I will see Lady Taffeta and her new charge safely home now."

"Oh, I couldn't ask that of you," Taffy replied at once. "You are here ... I am sure with, er ... someone ... and will be missed."

"No, I brought no one here. I came alone, and *I am* taking you and your young Valiant home."

"Yes, he is starving, poor thing, and I could never enjoy the concert knowing he needs food and care."

Fenmore nodded and looked at his longtime friend Tarrant with interest as he bowed himself off.

Tarrant turned back to Taffy and asked, "And what of your aunt? Will she not be unhappy you have left her party?"

"Oh, no," Taffy answered, unconcerned. "She said she had no desire to sit outdoors when the weather was still so cool. She is off with friends—some card game or other."

He offered his arm and smiled warmly as she placed her hand in its crook and allowed him to lead her to his coach.

* * *

Tarrant helped Taffeta inside his coach and took the puppy from her to set him down on a blanket at their feet. The pup looked adoringly up at Tarrant, who shook his head and said, "No, don't look at me like that. I'm not your benefactor."

Laughing, Taffy laughed, picked Valiant up and snuggled him with her fingers and chin before putting him back down. Sitting back up, she turned a grateful face to his lordship. "It seems I am once again putting myself deeper in your debt."

"I am well pleased with that." He grinned and teased her.

She looked into his eyes. It was dark in the carriage, but she could see a strong, bright glitter in his dark orbs as he returned her look. "When do you mean to call in your marker and be done?" she asked, trying to press the issue, not sure if she wanted him to say he would forgive her the marker. *Part of her wanted him to call it in ...*

"In time ..." he said, his expression enigmatic.

She sighed. The next thing he did was to put his arms around her and draw her close.

"However, I wouldn't mind a down payment," he whispered as his mouth first brushed lightly

over hers, teasing her with sensations. As her lips parted, his tongue found its mark and lapped at her own in an erotic, slow, and sensual movement that set her tingling with desire.

What was happening? It was a kiss ... just a kiss, and yet, rockets exploded in her head and fireworks went off in her blood, traveling throughout her body. She gave herself to his kiss and realized she had been hungry for it—waiting for it. What was wrong with her? She was behaving like a tart.

His tongue drew on hers and taught it a new rhythm as his hand moved to cup her breast beneath her cloak. She should have been shocked—not at his action, but at her reaction. She should have been horrified with herself, but she wasn't. She wanted his touch, and she owned it to herself.

"Taffeta," he murmured, breaking into her thoughts, "you are delicious, but that is all for now. It is bad enough we are alone in my carriage, without giving fuel to the gossip mongers. *We might be seen.*"

She was off her game, taken off guard, and she couldn't find the words to respond. She should have come back with something witty or offensive or ... But all she could do was lick her lips and look up into his seductive eyes.

He held her face with his ungloved fingers. "You beauty you ... do you know what you do to me?"

"I know what you do to me," she surprised herself by answering him.

And then he shocked her by saying, "Don't allow it. You *must not* find me desirable. You must not think me as anything but the scoundrel you have called me. I have made a deal with you and mean to cash it in when it suits me—*remember that*. It is a deal—nothing more. That is who you must know I am. For I will never be more—it isn't in me."

His words slapped her in the face and ruined the dream. A dream that had developed because of her premonition, a premonition that was blocking her ability to have the visions she had come to rely on. He looked so serious. She had to buck up and handle this—it was all part of growing up, wasn't it? "Then call in your marker, and let's be done," she said softly.

"I am not ready to be done, but I shall call it in, sunbeam. Believe me, I shall call it in. Will you be ready when I do, or is it all bluster?"

She eyed him ruefully and turned away to pet her sleeping pup and stare out the window at the passing traffic.

* * *

Tarrant surprised Taffeta again when they reached her aunt's town house. He insisted on accompanying her inside and to the kitchen, where she rummaged for just the right sized basket.

"Do you have the *Chronicle* about?"

She hurried off and returned, waving the newspaper about. She smiled when she saw that he had cut out a portion of the basket to allow the small pup to get in and out of it at will. He seemed to know what he was doing, so she simply watched as he took the paper from her and shredded it into the basket, spreading a few leavings of paper on the floor around the front of the puppy's new sleeping area.

While she waited, she finely chopped some cooked chicken and fed it to the weak little Valiant, cooing to him all the while. He fell asleep chewing on a final morsel, and Taffy sighed contentedly.

“Come along,” Tarrant said, taking her hand.

“I mean to take him to my bedroom,” she answered. “But I will put him in here when I can’t watch him.”

Without another word, he dropped her hand, bent, and picked up the basket and the pieces of the *Chronicle*. “Right then,” he said.

“Well ... but ... you can’t ...”

“Lead the way.”

“You can’t go to my bedroom,” she answered, frowning.

“Oh I can, and I will, but this time only to deliver your pup there.”

She raised her chin and went ahead of him to the stairs and then down the long hallway to her bedroom. She opened the door wide and stood aside to allow him passage with the basket and the sleeping pup. He placed it gently at the foot of her bed and turned to leave, but even as he started out the doorway, he turned, took one long stride, and wrapped her in his embrace.

His kiss was wilder this time, hungry, demanding, and she got lost in the passion it generated in her. His mouth on hers was in control not only of her lips, but of her body, and she pressed into him.

He elicited physical and explicit sensations from her that she couldn’t deny—and knew she would not feel for anyone else.

Friends talked about the magic of finding ‘the one’. They had talked about how a kiss should feel, but none had ever talked about what it felt like to kiss someone you wanted for all time.

Was the Hotspur ... *her one*?

His hand moved to her breast, sensually cupping and fondling, generating a reaction she was embarrassed to own. He taught her in that moment she was a woman in waiting—waiting for his touch, for what his touch could do for her—and proprieties and rules went out the window. She had always been a rule-breaker.

His tongue showed her how to give and bend to him, and then somehow he had managed to undo her gown enough to release her from the bodice, and he bent his head to suckle at her hard, yearning nipple.

She gasped with pleasure and made no attempt to stop him. She knew what she was doing. Maids were not supposed to give themselves before marriage. She knew this, but oh, she wanted him, had never wanted anyone like this before, and she whispered, “What am I doing?”

Suddenly and without warning, he straightened and backed away from her as though he had suddenly been stung. “I-I ...” He inclined his head. “Forgive me ...” With that he turned on his heel and vanished.

What the deuce? she asked herself as she heard him hurry down the stairs and out the front door. *Faith and la ... just what the deuce!*

* * *

The rakehell Hotspur leaned back against the plush squabs of his leather carriage seat and tried to call himself to order. *What the devil is wrong with me?* He had planned a convivial evening at Vauxhall and then a tryst with the Connors woman just to get some physical relief from his constant hard-on. He couldn’t remember when last he had been with a woman—and this one was driving him mad with desire.

The next thing he knew, he had heard Taffy’s voice berating someone, and it was all he could

do to control himself from killing the devil for even looking at her, let alone threatening her.

Then he'd looked at the pup, poor little survivor, and realized it had been starved as well as tortured, and his heart went out to the little Valiant as she'd named him. The pup couldn't be more than six weeks old, newly weaned, and every emotion was pinpricked into action.

However, she then announced giving up her night at Vauxhall, giving up her concert to take the puppy home with her and nurse it. He found himself not only amazed but touched—deeply touched.

She seemed to constantly astound him with her actions, but what was worse, he was drawn to her in a way that just would not do. He wanted to do things with her he had never done with an untried maid. He did not tamper with virgins, and if that was what she was, he had no intention of calling in his marker or seducing her.

He felt something for her, something so strong he found himself constantly looking for her. When he couldn't find her, all he did was think about her. *Absurd.*

I am done with love. It served no purpose and led to pain. He was much happier as he was, enjoying his life and doing *what* he wanted *when* he wanted. Now look at him—playing nursemaid to a green girl who played nursemaid to a mongrel. This should have made him frown, but instead he realized he was smiling!

He would keep up the pretense of the so-called 'marker' because if she was not a virgin, then by all means he would satisfy his need for her. That was fair and just, was it not? A bit of sport. That was all it was, wasn't it? He was merely entertained by the Lady Taffeta—nothing more.

He was fairly certain he would never get the opportunity to get her into his bed, as she was undoubtedly an innocent. He would not break his rule and play with an innocent in that fashion.

Tonight when he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her and then began removing her gown ... when he'd been on fire and unable to stop himself from touching her breast, suckling her nipple ... *Damn*, he had been nothing more than a cad with a hard-on. He knew it the moment she whispered, "What am I doing?"

He had swept her away with seduction and had been no better than the scoundrel she had called him. Why had the fates played their nasty little game with him and sent Taffeta, the highwaywoman, to haunt his thoughts? *Why?*

A sweet tongue slowly licked cherry lips ... laughing eyes looked into his ... *Damn!* But the touch of her skin ...? He had to get her out of his system. Only one way to do that—avoid her as much as possible! Forget her. Ignore her. He would do it. He would ...

That was the only way to break from the driving, raging need when she came into view—and then even afterward, when she was no longer in his sight.

A heavy sigh escaped him. Tomorrow he had promised to take her for a ride in his phaeton, yes, but after that—he would avoid the chit.

What made it all worse was he suspected Taffeta was beginning to fall for him. He couldn't have that—she wasn't up to snuff. The decent way to handle this situation was to forget all about her. But could he?

* * *

Lady Taffeta threw off her gown and stomped around as she donned her nightdress and brushed her long, golden locks. She looked in the mirror and asked her reflection, "What is wrong with you? What is wrong with him? What does it all mean, for goodness sake?"

She grimaced at the young woman looking back at her and shook the hairbrush at her. “You are behaving like a schoolgirl, an infatuated schoolgirl. You will end by getting your heart broken by a rogue of a man—”

Her conversation with herself, however, was interrupted when she heard her brother call out, “Taffy! Taffy!”

“Up here, Seth,” she answered and went toward her door, but her brother was already there, flinging her door open wide and storming her bedroom, with Nigel right beside him.

He immediately spied the sleeping puppy and exclaimed, “So it is true!” He walked over and surveyed the wretched babe deep in slumber. “I hope Tarrant beat the hell out of the blackguard who hurt this poor thing! Why, its ribs are nearly out of its skin. I never! You did very well to bring him home, Taffy—proud of you.”

She went to her brother, sank into his arms—a thing she hadn’t done for many years—and then surprised them, herself included, by bursting into tears.

“There, there ... he’ll do now.” Seth patted her back and attempted to soothe her. “Couldn’t have anyone better to look after him. There, there.”

Nigel cleared his throat. “Indeed, and we will help you with his training. He’ll be right as rain and, before you know it, taking walks in Hyde Park with you. What did you name him?”

“Valiant.” She sniffed. Nigel and Seth chuckled in unison.

“So he is, Valiant indeed,” remarked Nigel, bending to pet the exhausted puppy. “He’ll do in just a few weeks time, aye. He’ll do ...” He seemed to be talking to himself as well as to her.

She led them to the settee and indicated with a wave of her hand she wanted them to sit, which they did. Then she demanded, “Now, tell me everything—what of Cath and Lord Fenmore?”

“Fenmore ... Cath?” Her brother frowned, and then his face cleared. “*Damn* if you don’t have something there. The man couldn’t keep his eyes from her. Noted it a few times but didn’t think anything of it at the time, because he talked about you and how astonishingly in control you were in your efforts to save the mongrel and how you wanted to call it George.” This made her brother burst out laughing, but she stared him down, and then Nigel cleared his throat.

“I noted it as well,” said Nigel. “Noticed it immediately, and what’s more, I think she likes him as well. For when he wasn’t looking at her, she was looking at him.”

“Oh, excellent, I so hoped it would take.”

“Did you? Did you see it in one of your visions?” her brother inquired lightly.

She frowned. “Not getting any visions lately.” She wasn’t about to tell them she only got visions of herself in Tarrant’s arms. She shook her head. “I don’t know what is wrong, but haven’t had any visions since that night we held up the Hotspur.”

“Scared out of you!” Her brother snorted.

Nigel, ever serious, said, “You might have a point there, Seth.”

“Well, did you two see Cathy home?”

“Aye, that we did, and all is well,” said her brother.

Tarrant running away from her skipped into her head, and she thought, *Not so very well for me, no—not so very well at all.*

~ Six ~

NATTILY ATTIRED IN his caped black greatcoat, his tie superbly fashioned in the mathematical style, his superfine waisted and tailed coat of blue fitting his so very perfect body, his breeches of buff cream tightly molded over his muscular thighs, and his Hessian boots gleaming in their blackness, the Hotspur, Tarrant, took the ribbons of his high-perch phaeton. He then ordered his tiger to take position at his back and tooled his high-stepping dapple grays through the hum of London's morning traffic.

He told himself he hadn't dressed to impress Lady Taffeta, that this was his usual style when he took out his high-perched phaeton, but he knew in his heart it was a lie.

When he had regarded himself in the long looking glass, he had wondered absently if she would like the way he looked. He caught the question in his head and immediately berated himself. *What the devil are you doing?* She was a chit—a lass, a virgin—and all he could think about was getting her into his bed and driving himself into her in every imaginable position he had ever fantasized about. He was a cad.

She was a child, playing at games she knew nothing about. She was an imp of a woman. He shouldn't be thinking about her. He should visit Melody Connors and relieve himself of his raging and demanding constant need.

These thoughts were driving him mad, and then there stood Mrs. Melody Connors at the curbing, flagging him down. *Should I stop?* He had no choice—she was stepping into the street. He pulled up his grays and smiled.

"Tarrant," she said in a soft, alluring voice. "I missed you last evening ... wherever did you vanish off to?"

"Something unexpected kept me from you, Melody." Though he automatically pitched his voice to be low and flirtatious voice, he was aware of a sudden impatience to be off. What the hell was wrong with him?

"How very vexing, but I trust you may find your way to me this afternoon, for a private bit of ... relaxation?"

She was a lovely piece of bit and fluff, and he was sure to enjoy an hour's frolic with her in her bed, but ...

"I am afraid not, lovely lady—I am already otherwise promised." He watched her pout and laughed to himself as he waved and tooled his horses back into traffic. He pulled up at Lady Marble's townhouse and nimbly planted himself on the curbing, giving the ribbons to the young groom acting as his tiger. "Right then, Jason. I shan't be long, but walk them if need be."

"That oi will, m'lord," said the lad with a grin, obviously proud to work for Tarrant. "Probably will 'ave to if ye've come fer a loidy—all of 'em keep 'em standing too long."

Tarrant laughed and pulled the peak of the boy's wool cap down over his eyes. "Cheeky, but you are right. I don't think this lady will delay us though. She is a bit different than most of her

kind.”

He skipped up the steps and found Jarvis very civil as he showed him inside. He didn’t have to wait at all. As he suspected, Taffeta must have been standing at the top of the stairs she was presently bouncing down toward him.

She was a vision of cheery life, an alluring figure clothed in a fitted aqua velvet driving ensemble designed to display her provocative figure. Her long, highly dressed, copper-lit gold curls cascaded down one elegant shoulder. On her tilted head rested a chip hat of matching aqua with netting and one twirling white feather. Short, thick wisps of her hair ornamented her forehead and ears, and her bright gray eyes twinkled impishly, without a hint of what had passed between them the previous evening in her bedroom. He could see she meant to put it aside and be comfortable. She was more than stunning. Everything about her enchanted him.

As she came toward him, he discovered the air in his lungs had been sucked out. He had to remind himself to breathe in and breathe out. The rakehell Hotspur, gourmet of women, prince of flirts, proponent of cynicism, received his leveler completely in that moment. And then he attempted, with careful reserve, to vanquish it. He told himself he had recognized she was incomparable at their first meeting. So, what was this? *She is not for me ... not for me*, he repeated silently.

With a calm demeanor, he went forward to greet her. Again, though, all built-in resolves were shaken, for what must she do but take his hand and shake it famously.

“My lord,” declared Lady Taffeta, still holding onto his kid-gloved hand, stepping back to eye him with teasing admiration. “My, but you do look an out-and-outer, a regular dasher, a—”

He felt his lips quiver, but he restrained the bubble of mirth and admonished lightly, “Take a damper, sunbeam. We made one another a promise—I *don’t seduce, you don’t* throw your cap.”

“Ah, but you did not promise to not seduce, and I think that is what you have been trying to do to me—soooo, if my cap falls at your feet, you have no one to blame but yourself,” the lady glibly said, her bright gray eyes laughing at him. “And you really do look absolutely—”

“Ravishing.” He cut her off. “I know. I always mean to.” He led her toward the front door.

“Oh, there you are,” cried Lady Marble, sticking her face out of her morning room to wave them off. “Such a lovely day for a ride.” She eyed Tarrant. “Don’t you dazzle my niece, sir, for I shall hold you to account.”

He laughed out loud. “You needn’t worry, my lady, Taffeta and I have quite agreed, we are both quite off limits to one another.”

“Oh?” her ladyship replied with a note of disappointment. “Pity.”

With this last, he led Lady Taffeta toward his waiting phaeton.

Taffy leaned into him and said on a giggle, “What you need is to be set down a peg. You are far too lofty, you know.”

“Where is your puppy?” he asked, effectively changing the subject.

“Oh, the dear little man ate most of his breakfast and even tried hobbling about. He is so very weak but getting better. He is in the nether regions of the kitchen as Cook is very fond of dogs and will look after him while I am gone.” She sighed. “He slept most of the night and only whimpered once for me.”

“And what did you do when he whimpered?” He found he couldn’t look away from her eyes.

She smiled softly and sighed again. “I cuddled him and put him back to sleep. We gave him

fresh paper in his basket this morning, but Cook has a method of housebreaking, and will start teaching him as soon as he is strong enough. In the meantime, I have promised to help her clean up his basket and supply her with fresh newspaper, so we must get a great deal of them.”

He burst out laughing and helped her into the carriage. “Yes, I am familiar with the method of housebreaking a pup.” He shook his head and laughed again. Never was there such a chit! Her conversation was so natural, and he almost admitted in that moment that he felt something more than lust for her—but what did he feel? *Love*? No, love could not, would not work for him. He didn’t believe in love—it was no more than ... No. Love was an impossible emotion, and he certainly was not about to—

“Tell me, my lord,” said the lady, bringing him out of his cogitations, “have you been abroad?”

“Aye.”

“Not just to Paris, where my parents took us when we were still so young, but—”

He grinned. “Yes, I know what you are asking. One of my favorite places was Venice.”

“Oh, I do so want to go to Venice—gondolas and history and Italians.”

He laughed once again as he tooled his horse through the London traffic toward Hyde Park. “You are a wonder. I never know what is in that busy brain or what you will say next.”

“I hear Italy has some very plausible rascals?” she asked, ignoring this.

“Aye, you would find yourself very comfortable there,” he answered teasingly.

She inclined her head, but her eyes were lively when she brought her gaze up to his. “A flush hit, my lord.”

“Then I must make it up to you by letting you decide our destination—a sedate ride through the park or somewhere else?” He pulled up his pair of dapple grays as he eyed her, looking for a response, and once again found himself caught up by her bright gaze.

“The Peerless Pool!” she announced, looking like a schoolgirl.

“No—absolutely not, funny little brat. Who the deuce has been telling you about the Peerless Pool?”

“Well, Seth and Nigel went there and enjoyed it excessively, but when I asked them to take me there, they became very stuffy and said ‘twas impossible.’”

She tickled him in ways he had thought would never happen to him again. She looked so demure and innocent, and then she batted her lashes purposely, and he burst out laughing once again.

“Will you not, my lord?”

“Certainly not!” he answered jovially. “Taking you to the Peerless Pool would forever ruin your reputation. It would have been bad enough for you to be seen there with your brother and uncle, but *with me*?” He shook his head. “Disaster. Pick another place, sunbeam.” He saw her expression and chuckled. “Don’t pout.”

She pouted at him, and he wanted to take her in his arms. She interrupted his thoughts by touching his thigh and igniting his already fully charged desire into a blaze he had to find a way to quiet.

“I don’t know of anything else,” she said, still pouting. “And I don’t pout.”

“Don’t you? Ah, then it is merely a very good imitation of one.” He chuckled, and then an idea came to him. “I know just what you would like—I rather like the place myself.”

Her eyes opened wide, and he almost lost concentration, as he stared into them. But then she grabbed his upper arm, and even through the thick wool of his greatcoat sleeve, once again, he felt a titillating wave of excitement.

“Where?” she asked with a bit of a bounce.

He thought with some amusement that she was so young, so spirited, and so full of life, and he wanted her more than he would soon be able to control. He cleared his throat and answered, “The Royal Exchange.”

“Sounds dashed flat to me,” the lady said with a slight frown.

“You won’t think so when we get there. It is where they house the wild beasts.”

He had definitely hit upon the place in all the world she would enjoy, and she told him so enthusiastically. “Oh, oh ... I do forgive you all your sins, yes, yes, the Royal Exchange!” She was quiet for a moment. “I have always wanted a monkey ...”

Shaking his head, he gasped. “Well, I am not getting you one. You may look—you may even touch where they allow, but we are not foisting any wild beasts on your poor aunt.”

Taffeta laughed. “No, you are quite right. I have already turned her kitchens into a kennel with Valiant.”

As he toiled his team around the corner, Taffeta exclaimed, “Tarrant, look, at that man! What a beautiful man—who is he?”

“Sir Francis, and it is not the thing to be pointing at men simply because their looks are pleasing. He noticed you.”

“Oh pooh,” she answered. “Men are forever pointing out women to one another.”

“It is not the same thing, Taffy. You simply can’t go about ogling handsome bucks.”

“Why not?” Taffy shrugged. “All the town bucks spend a great deal of time ogling the chits!”

He laughed in spite of himself. “Incorrigible minx!”

“Besides, he had such fine shoulders,” she teased him in answer.

“Bah, wadding,” retorted Tarrant, a bit irritated.

“Yes, but he was dressed to the nines,” she pronounced.

“Dandy.”

“Well, I thought him good looking,” she replied.

He eyed her suspiciously. “And so the Lady Taffeta collects her handsome beaux?” His voice was dry and touched with irritation.

“Now what does that mean?”

“Evidently you take it upon yourself to give as good as you get. The town bucks preen and ogle, and you feel entitled to do the same. Town bucks collect pretties—do you feel it your right to collect a list of hearts?”

She suddenly went serious. “*That is not nice*. Odd that *you* should take such a notion into your head. I rather thought you were up to snuff.” The tease had returned to her gray eyes. “You see, my lord, I don’t *ape cruel behavior*.”

Caught, he wouldn’t give it up. “You wouldn’t lead a man on?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then what of Bruton?” he replied triumphantly. “I rather thought you were leading him an excellent dance the other night.”

She raised her brow. “When I danced with Bruton, he did the leading, and it was most

enjoyable.” With this, she read out loud, “Ah, the Royal Exchange!”

~ Seven ~

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Lady Taffeta's excursion with Tarrant, and she had not seen or heard from him since.

Moping about wasn't her style, and yet, she felt a fit of the 'blue devils' start to overtake her mood. It was time to own up to what she felt, and what she felt, she conceded, was a great deal more than infatuation.

She loved everything about him: His great big, hulking good looks. His dark, mysteriously lit eyes she could never quite read and that kept her guessing all the time. The way he moved, like a stalking wild beast, graceful and yet powerful. And, she had to admit, she loved his kisses, his touching, and wanted more.

What was she going to do? He was a rogue and had a slew of women all vying for his affection and his bed. He didn't want her, not really, for he hadn't even called in her marker, and it didn't appear as though he meant to do so.

He probably thought she was nothing more than a silly schoolgirl. Maybe her kisses had done nothing for him? Maybe he thought she would be inadequate in bed, and on that score, he might be right. What did she know about the art of making love? She shook her head over the problem. *Naught*—except what she and her friends had whispered about and giggled over in the dark of night when she had been at school.

However, her aunt constantly clapped her hands together and declared she was in heaven. Sissy told her the rakehell Hotspur had gotten her coined the 'incomparable' amongst the *haute ton*. How absurd. But apparently Tarrant had never before given a marriageable chit so much public attention, and it had everyone jabbering with excitement and speculation.

The last two mornings had been overloaded with callers, and she was heartily weary of the entire social scene. Each time Jarvis would appear, she would look hopefully, only to find it wasn't Hotspur ...

And her dear Cathy! That was another problem she was going to have to solve. Something awful had happened to Cathy, but although she had tried, she could not get her to speak about it. All she knew was it had something to do with Bruton, and Bruton was ever lurking about making her friend uncomfortable.

Taffeta wasn't sure what to make of him but flirted with him in an effort to get to the bottom of Cathy's distress, hoping he might let something slip during their conversations.

Third on her list of matters to dissect and solve was the gentleman Lord James Fenmore. He was besotted with Cathy, but Cathy kept him at a distance, and he had adopted Taffy as his confident. He was always seeking her out and then mooning over Catherine and asking her what next he should do to win dear Catherine's approval.

Then, if those things weren't enough of a trial for any one young woman in her first London season, she had Nigel and Seth.

Her brother Seth had come of age and now had sole guardianship of her. He had been playing the superior card all morning, coming on strong, and she was heartily sick of it.

She sighed, for she would just have to let it all slide for the moment, as her aunt had already raised a glass of champagne—to her brother.

“’Tis only eleven o’clock ...” Her voice, even to herself, sounded as though she was whining, and she sighed again. She picked up a glass, rolled her eyes, and joined in the birthday toast to her brother.

A sip later, she wrinkled her nose but said, “Hmm, lovely ...”

Seth laughed, and Nigel said, “Another toast from me, nephew. Here’s to you, Seth. Thank Jupiter, the brat is now yours to order about.”

“No one can order me about.” Taffy rounded on them. “The very idea,” she said, teasing back and then turned to Nigel. “Look who is going all fashionable—that is an oriental knot you have sporting your tie.

“Well, one must keep up if one wants to be taken seriously, and I do think our arguments in Parliament have not been for naught,” retorted Nigel.

“What are you talking about?” Seth looked scornfully at him. “After you gave your speech, they called you a radical.”

“Yes, but then Lord Byron got up, and his speech silenced everyone. It was quite beautiful.”

“Read the last paragraph,” Seth entreated. “Where he speaks about the bill.”

“What bill?” Lady Marble asked, showing some interest.

“A death penalty has been proposed for all Luddites caught smashing frames and looms,” Nigel explained.

“You cannot mean it?” Taffeta cried.

“Indeed, a death penalty is severe, but something must be done to stop the destruction of property.”

“Yes, something must be done—pay them a decent wage so they don’t starve,” Taffeta argued hotly.

“Aunt Sissy, Taffy, listen to Byron, for he is so very eloquent on the subject,” Nigel said and then began reading: “*Suppose it passed. Suppose one of these men, as I have seen them meager with famine, sullen with despair, careless of life which your lordships are perhaps about to value at something less than the price of a stocking-frame ... suppose this man—and there are ten thousand such from whom you may select your victims—is dragged into court to be tried for this new offense by this new law. Still there are two things wanting to convict and condemn him, and these are, in my opinion, twelve butchers for a jury and a Jefferies for a judge.*”

Taffy clapped her hands and pronounced, “There you are. Lord Byron is a much better man than I was led to believe. I shall most certainly seek him out and applaud him—”

“No, you shall not,” admonished her aunt. “He is not the sort of man you should be interested in.” She added, “Nor is the Marquis of Bruton.”

“What had Lord Tarrant to say about the bill?” Taffeta asked as casually as she could.

“He was absent,” answered her brother.

“You mean he did not take a seat for such an important meeting?”

“No, but it wasn’t going for a vote yet, but it does look as though the Tories will have their day, and the death penalty will pass.”

“No! Oh, no ...” Taffy cried. “I can not believe Tarrant did not stand up against the bill ...”

“What is all this interest in the Hotspur?” asked Nigel.

She colored up. “I have no interest in him as such, only in the fact that I have learned he carries a bit of weight among his peers. He is not, by his own words, a Tory.”

“No, he is not a Tory,” Aunt Sissy stuck in. “But I have never known him to take an active part in politics.”

“Besides, I suspect he is out of town,” said her brother.

At that point, Valiant appeared in the open doorway and wagged his tail. She regarded him with interest as he eyed the people he had surely grown to love and started to make his way toward her. She knew he must have made some effort to escape the kitchen and sniff his way to her. Apparently exhausted, he plopped down only a few feet from the doorway.

Taffy laughed and ran to pick him up. Snuggling him, she took him back with her to the sofa and allowed him to sleep in her lap. “Is he not beautiful, Aunt Sissy?”

Her aunt regarded him approvingly. “I must say for a mongrel ... his black and white markings are quite outstanding. He looks as though he might have Border Collie in him. Yes, he is quite a nice little thing.”

Jarvis appeared and announced, “The Marquis of Bruton.”

“Drat!” said Nigel.

“Loose fish,” Seth whispered. “Don’t like the blasted fellow.”

“You may show him in Jarvis, thank you,” Aunt Sissy said, giving them a reproving look.

Seth looked surprised. “Didn’t think you liked him either.”

“Don’t ... but he runs with Prince Regent, and one does not wish to make enemies in that quarter unnecessarily.”

Taffy had very definite views about Bruton, but she wasn’t letting on just yet. She rather thought she might need to further a friendship if she were to solve her dear friend’s problem, so she kept her thoughts on Bruton to herself.

At least with her, he had never overstepped, and he had never bored her—he had that, and probably *only* that, in his favor, for as he walked into the room she once again concluded he thought too much of himself.

After placing a perfunctory kiss upon her aunt’s hand, he bent over hers and said, “I have gone through the agony of sitting in hell waiting for this moment.”

He brought himself up from her hand and nodded to her brother and uncle, who had no qualms displaying their open displeasure with him. They were polite, but just barely.

He took up the back of a Windsor chair and pulled it near to where she sat. “May I?”

“Of course,” she answered. “Or did you think I meant to keep you standing? I am not so heartless, especially to a man who has gone through hell just for me.” She was tickled with inner laughter.

“Precious beauty, what I suffered before is nothing to what I suffer now,” he answered adroitly.

“How so? I allowed you to sit, my lord.” Taffy was enjoying herself immensely. She had this man’s measure.

“Because your beauty always slays me, and yet I find myself coming back for more.”

“And if I were out of looks—pale with fatigue, of ill mood and manner—what then, my

lord?”

“Were you sick with fever, pale with weariness, still would I find you the most ravishing woman in all the world.”

“Don’t you believe the blackguard,” James Fenmore said with an accompanying laugh, but it was obvious to Taffy he quite meant his words. On his arm was Catherine. Jarvis had no doubt thought it unnecessary to announce them first, as they were such frequent visitors.

Cathy’s face went white, and Taffy realized Bruton was looking at her through his quizzing glass, deuce take the fellow, for she was sure he meant to make her nervous. Why?

“Cath, James—what a delightful surprise,” she said and got to her feet with her arms open to receive her friend.

“Indeed, I met Lord Fenmore on the way here, and we walked together.” Catherine bent and kissed Taffy’s cheek and squeezed her hand. “It is a lovely day.”

Pleasantries were exchanged and refreshments served before Taffeta was able find a moment in a quiet spot near the window to touch Cathy’s hand. “Dear, this won’t do. You must tell me what the marquis has done to offset you so.”

“I cannot speak of it.”

“And still you will.” Taffeta regarded her friend intently. “Cathy, you and I have never kept secrets from each other.”

Catherine laughed shakily. “That is not quite correct, Taffy dear. *I* didn’t keep secrets from you, but you, oh, the secrets you have kept from me.”

Taffy pulled a face at her, but they were being called back into the conversation that had taken over the room about the upcoming soiree for the evening. Taffy whispered, “This is not done.”

“I know, Taffy.” Catherine sighed. “I know.”

* * *

The rakehell Hotspur tried desperately to keep Taffeta out of his thoughts, but the harder he tried, the more she would sneak up on him and laugh, and the sound—a sound he had grown to enjoy—made him long for her company.

He stood in the Home Office with Sidmouth and found he actually had to concentrate on the matter at hand.

“Look, Tarrant, if you don’t want to get involved this time,” said the Viscount of Sidmouth, Home Secretary, “I can release you from your obligations.”

Tarrant stopped his pacing and rounded on the home secretary. “*Certes!* I did not ride to Dover and handle our little problem because I want out, and well you know it, so don’t talk nonsense to me, Henry. You damn well know better.”

Sidmouth laughed. “Calm down, lad. *Egad*, but that temper of yours needs letting. All I was ... well, you seem preoccupied—especially when I mentioned the Rogues Three in Nottingham.”

“What I am is not preoccupied but at a loss to understand why the Home Office would be interested in such a minor apparition of the Luddite movement.”

“Let us review the situation,” Sidmouth said frowning.

“Fine.” He would review and dismiss it, for no matter what happened, no one was going to know the identity of the Rogues Three. “But what you should be reviewing is the fact we have a leak in the Honor Guards unit.”

“Then our problem is twofold. We must plug the leak, and we must stop the Rogues Three.”

“They have stopped their aggression against the mill owners and, from the information I received, have packed their bags and left the county,” Tarrant said.

“And brought their little ken here to London, if rumor is to be believed—besides, should they not be punished for their acts in Nottingham?”

“Not our job. The local authority is looking into it, and I don’t believe that little band is one and the same with the three working London.” Tarrant shrugged and looked away.

“My information may be wrong, but if the Rogues Three are merely mimicking their Nottingham counterparts or not, they still must be stopped.”

“Indeed, I quite agree. These three scoundrels have a completely different style. I can tell you that, as when I was visiting with my aunt, I was in a position to learn a great deal, and those three never injured the mill owners they robbed. Our London three are murderers and traitors!” Tarrant said impatiently.

“If word of our plans leaks to Napoleon—”

“Then whoever these London Three are, we must not allow anything ‘important’ to be leaked their way. I have a thought on the subject.”

“Aye, you may be right, but, Tarrant, this is an ugly business, and I caution you to watch your back.”

The next hour saw them finalizing plans to get documents to their man in France. Then Tarrant bowed himself off, saying, “I damn well mean to put an end to this blackguard!”

~ *Eight* ~

AUNT SISSY LOOKED around Lady Darthborn's ballroom and turned up her nose as she leaned into Taffeta and whispered, "Cecilia means to outdo me with all these flowers and constant champagne, but she shan't because her ballroom is too small and her musicians only passable!"

Taffy laughed and said, "Naughty thing—but I doubt anyone can outdo the ball you gave me. It was perfect."

Aunt Sissy preened and sighed. "The marquis is just thirty, but remember, love, he has a reputation of being a heartbreaker. He trifles with young maids—so different than the Hotspur. Bruton takes the innocents and ruins them."

"How do you know this?"

"I know and look, Fenmore is making a cake out of himself for your friend, Catherine, but she scarcely gives him a smile. What is wrong with the chit?"

"I don't know, something has made her ... cautious," replied Taffy as her eyes narrowed, and she made up her mind. "I shall be right back."

She knew the next dance was a waltz, for she had promised it to some young man, and she meant for Cathy to waltz with Fenmore. She hurried to them and managed to trip into her friend, knocking her right into Fenmore's arms just as the musicians struck up the waltz.

Somehow the young man, whose name she couldn't remember, managed to run her to ground and started to lead her onto the dance floor, but not before she said, "Cathy, do not sit this one out too. Lord Fenmore, I am persuaded, will not dance until he has waltzed with you."

Fenmore winked at Taffy and took Catherine's hand, appearing openly relieved when she allowed him to lead her onto the floor. Taffy sighed happily, turned, and gave her dance partner a smile that instantly won her an affectionate expression.

She had only danced a few moments with her hopeful suitor when the Marquis of Bruton tapped his shoulder and ousted him with a derisive remark.

She looked up at Bruton's face and said, "That was not nice, my lord."

A soft, self-assured tone answered her. "Nothing ever is in love or war."

"I am not involved in war—or love—and prefer ... *nice*."

He laughed. "I shall have to remember that, although nice is not something I do very often."

"So I have heard, and since you now admit it, I suppose, I must as people advise, be wary of you, my lord."

"You needn't be, for I mean you no harm. In fact, I rather think I mean to make you my wife," he said nonchalantly.

She was shocked and nearly pulled out of his hold. "You can't be serious. You don't even know me. I can think of only one reason you would want such a union, and it isn't a pretty one!" Taffeta pushed at his chest.

"You mistake. I know what I need to know—you are beautiful, titled, and worthy of my name."

"I will not have this discussion with you. It is most improper!" Taffeta said, pulling away and inclining her head. "I am sorry, but I am a bit weary and must find my aunt and take a seat." Before he could lend her escort, she had fled him and started wending her way through the crowd of dancers.

Two strong hands were suddenly on her shoulders holding her in place, and a welcome voice that nearly made her lunge into his arms said, "Sunbeam—steady now. Whatever did the devil say to you?"

"It was nothing." She looked up at him and discovered it took everything she had not to sink onto his chest and make him hold her tight. He was here; finally he was with her ...

"Damn the man's soul—it was something. Shall I run him through?" he asked and tipped her chin up. As their eyes met, Taffeta knew that although he was trying to make her smile, he would defend her honor. She could see it in his face. He was ready and able to do battle.

"No ... no ... it was nothing," she repeated. She couldn't have a scene, and Tarrant looked as though he was ready to stomp over to Bruton and lay him low. Taffy's heart pumped furiously, spelling out his name, his size, his magic touch, but he wasn't letting go of the issue.

"It was something, obviously," he answered on a frown.

"He said I was worthy to be his wife." She seethed as she repeated the words. "He is a very bad man, and he thinks I am worthy his badness!"

Tarrant stared at her for a long moment before mirth exploded from his lips, and he began laughing uproariously and turning heads. She watched as he finally got control, realizing how absurd she had sounded.

He took her chin, heedless of tongues ready to wag, his voice low and filled with pleasure. "Taffeta ... you are a wonder. My complete wonder." He put her hand through his arm and said, "Come, let us get some refreshments and take them into the garden."

"Yes, and then, my lord, you may tell me where you have been," she said with what she hoped was a flirtatious look.

"Did you miss me?" he asked, his eyes bright as he waited for her answer.

"I noticed you were not about," she answered, giving him a little, only a little.

"I am glad of it, sunbeam. There are big guns about to go after the Luddites and squash them if they can, and the Rogues Three are wanted for treason and murder."

Her eyes opened wide. "Treason and murder? But that is absurd."

"Precisely and yet, as I said—big guns and squashing. I am looking into the matter, for whoever is behind the London three posing as the Nottingham *Three*, needs to be stopped. They are traitors."

"Indeed. We can help."

"You and yours had better stay well away from it. Leave it to me."

She considered this for a moment. "Hmm, you may be right. I shan't even say anything about it to Seth and Nigel."

"Good girl," pronounced Tarrant, smiling at her warmly.

"Why were you absent from the meeting about the death penalty for the Luddites?"

"It was a lost cause. Defeating it—just impossible now."

Instead of taking her into the dining room, he had led her outdoors without stopping for refreshments, and she was vaguely aware he'd stopped their little stroll where they were well hidden by a row of evergreens. No one from the ballroom's French doors would be able to see them. She turned to say breathlessly, "You said you would feed me?"

"Did I?" His voice was low. "Will this do?"

She had heard the husky desire in his voice and the hard determination. She found herself wrapped in his strong embrace with his mouth covering hers, devouring ... tasting ... taking ... infusing her with an undercurrent of mounting need. Her longing met and matched his as his tongue lapped at hers and seemed to drink and taste with an unquenchable thirst.

Taffeta's response was primal; she pressed her yearning body into his, and suddenly it was like an internal explosion between them that drew and melded them together.

She clung to him, holding on and wishing he would never let her go. She knew she wished he would take her away, take her completely, and make her his own. She returned the fervor of his embrace with a passion that swept away all logical thought.

He handled her deftly as his fingers explored her and turned her into an unabashed, wanton creature. Her heart reverberated with a riotous flurry of sensations, and she never wanted this time with him to end. He lifted up all the wildness in her and gave it release. She wanted him to take her and hide her away from the world, somewhere private where she could explore their mutual needs. She wanted to feel him, all of him.

He broke away and whispered, "Taffeta."

When he said her name, it was like an enchanted melody that made her raise up for another kiss.

He chuckled her under the chin and said, "Beauty, you beauty—would that I could call in the debt now, right now. But, I had better get you back indoors before your brother calls me out."

Slap, a splash of cold water. They were in the garden! Of course he had to take her back, and yet she reeled from the sudden rejection. He so easily could put her aside? He so easily could resist her? Was she so undesirable he could take his kiss and part from her while she was still floating in the wind?

She had expected words of love and devotion, of undying need and passion. What she got was totally unexpected. Cold, calculated logic. He was the rakehell Hotspur and didn't seem even mildly ready to take her to bed.

He should be making assignations with her. He should want to meet and make love to her. She still quivered from his touch, and a sure hurt replaced desire. She felt her protective shields rush around her to encase her as she answered. "Indeed, and my brother should call you out—fie, my lord, seducing a maid in the garden!" She attempted to make light of their encounter with a tease in her tone. She started to turn and walk away, but he grabbed her arm and frowned at her.

"What are you talking about? *Certes*, woman—"

She cut him off. "Call in your marker, my lord, so I can get it over with and forget all about you, for this is torture—waiting, forever waiting ..." A catch in her throat made the words sound jerky, and she breathed in air trying to stop the tears that threatened. She could do only one thing at that moment. She needed to save face and run. She yanked hard out of his hold and rushed toward the garden doors. Slipping back into the ballroom, she found Catherine and hugged her fiercely. "Cathy, some men are beasts, beasts I tell you, and oh, *do not let me cry.*"

“Cry? Nonsense. I don’t know which of them has upset you, but put up your chin and make him see what he is losing. There is naught like to you, my sweet Taffy,” said her friend, who took her hand and firmly led her to the dining room. “Cake is the answer at the moment. We must have cake, all kinds of cake, and then we will dance with many and forget the one.”

Taffeta squeezed her hand and looked at her. “Love you, Cath. Yes, we will eat cake, chocolate cake, and we will dance with many.” She eyed her for a moment and then said, “And then you will come home with me tonight, and we shall talk, you and I, just like we did when we were in school, and you will tell me why Bruton worries you so.”

Catherine smiled and then sighed. “Yes, I suppose you will hound me until I do, but I won’t until you tell me which man was a beast to you tonight and why.”

“Deal,” Taffeta said as she watched the Hotspur take his leave of his hostess and depart the ball. This brought back the flood of hurt and tears that threatened to engulf her, but Taffy was made of sterner stuff. Instead, she vowed to put the rakehell Hotspur out of her mind with chocolate, lots of chocolate!

* * *

Catherine Frome’s father, Sir Miles, sat back heavily in his coach to contemplate the fates, well satisfied his daughter was safely on her way with Lady Taffeta. He would have had to send her home alone from Lady Darthborn’s ball, if he wished to keep her safely out of what they were sure was about to occur.

Sidmouth and he had come up with a plan earlier that day and set it about he would be carrying home a ‘packet’ from Lord Darthborn meant for Wellington. What they needed was to flush out the traitor, so they had allowed the person Tarrant believed was their ‘leak’ to overhear their plan.

Frome had instructed his driver to take the route that would lead them out of the city toward Dover. He needed to make it appear as though he was indeed quietly delivering important documents to waiting hands at the coast.

He told himself this was all absurd—he was more than fifty years old, and a man his age should not be engaging in such dangerous pastimes. But this was for country—for his beloved Albion!

The Rogues Three had to be flushed out, Miles thought, and then something caught his attention. A quick glance out the side window revealed darkly clad riders emerging from an alley, and he had no doubt what they would do next.

Miles Frome heard the sound of horses’ shoes on cobblestone and knew they were getting closer. They had just passed an arched opening to an alleyway near the wharf overlooking the Thames. He had told his driver to take a dimly lit shortcut, something he normally would not have done. And then, just as he had expected, he felt the coach lurch.

He heard one of the men on horseback grunt out a gruff sound. “This time, there will be no sport in it. I want that understood.”

Sidmouth frowned. Somehow, even disguised, that voice sounded familiar. Evidently, though he was the leader, he was still giving last minute instructions?

“Aye, Flash, we knows whot ye want,” said the another man.

Sir Miles waited as they came to the door of his coach waving their horse pistols and threatening his driver with ‘Stand and deliver!’

* * *

Lady Taffeta poured out the hot water from her silver ewer into her washbasin, sighed, and continued to jibber jabber at her friend as she washed her face. She had dismissed her maid, telling her to get some rest and that she and Miss Frome would see to themselves.

Catherine laughed and cried out, "*Enough!* Stop hounding me, you miserable wretch who must know all."

She had already washed and changed into one of Taffy's pretty white nightdresses and was curled up on the settee with a shawl wrapped around her.

"Well, you can save yourself a great deal of trouble by just telling me what the devil Bruton did to make you so uncomfortable in his presence."

"First, you tell me what is toward with you and the gentleman you called a 'beast'," Cathy replied knowingly.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Odious thing, you are forever in my business—like tonight when you pushed me into Lord Fenmore so that he must ask me to waltz." Cathy sighed. "And we both know it is you he wants."

"Idiot. Complete and total idiot—me? Nonsense—stupid girl. Anyone with eyes in their head can see he is mad about you."

"But, he is always talking *to you!*"

"Yes, to ask me how he should go about catching your interest," Taffy said and burst out laughing. "My dearest friend is a moron."

Catherine flung a nearby pillow at her friend's head. "I won't have you matchmaking for me."

"Stuff and nonsense. I did very well by you in Southwell when we were at school, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was different—that was just fun and games and growing up."

"So tell me about Bruton," Taffeta demanded, getting serious and coming to sit near her on the settee.

"Naught to tell," Miss Frome replied quietly.

"Rumor has it he is a complete and utter devil with young ladies." Taffy really would not give up.

"*Is he?*"

"Yes, although I think he is so much fun." Taffy tried a new tactic.

Catherine grabbed her hand. "No—do not let him bamboozle you, Taffy." She sighed heavily and lowered her head. "Did you never wonder why I was sent home from my first season in such disgrace?"

"Disgrace? I never heard anything about disgrace—I just thought you went home because of something to do with your aunt," Taffy said in shocked accents. "In fact, I remember now, your letter said your aunt was tired of playing hostess."

"It was a lie, and I thought a feeble one at the time, but it seems Papa did such a good job of scotching the gossip, it was not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Gossip? *You?*" Taffy shook her head. "I don't believe my quiet, serious-minded, good girl Cathy could give anyone fodder for gossip."

"You see I ... Bruton ..." Catherine stumbled on the words.

"Oh no, never say you fell in love with the devil and thought yourself lovesick and went into a

decline?”

“You are a wretch for putting it that way, but I suppose, yes, to some extent that is what happened and I let him kiss me, and, Taffy, I let him ... touch me.”

“Bed you? Did he bed you?” Taffy stood up. “I will run him through myself if he bed you and hurt you!”

She pulled on Taffy’s hand and made her sit again. “No, not quite but nearly. I was so very infatuated and thought, stupidly, he wanted to marry me, but all he really wanted was to add another virgin to his collection.”

“I *shall* run him through—he is a criminal,” Taffy said, temper flaring, eyes narrowing.

“Papa caught us—that day when I nearly lost myself to him. Oh, Taff. Papa walked in on us, and Bruton told him he had no intention of marrying such a girl as I. Can you imagine my mortification? And there was poor, dear Papa, and he threw a punch at Bruton, and it was awful ... and then Bruton started the gossip. We don’t know for sure it was him who started it, but he was the only one who could have known anything about the incident. I can’t bear to look at him, and when I do, I am reminded what a complete fool I was.”

“Never you mind. You were not a fool—he was a cad, Cath, and he took advantage of you. Do not blame yourself for his unprincipled behavior. There is an old saying that what you do to others, comes back to you, and it has great meaning.” She went very thoughtful for a moment and then with determination in her voice said, “Your dowry would never do for him, but you see, *mine would*. He is very interested in my dowry.”

“Taffeta, what are you planning in that mad mind of yours?”

“Bruton thinks naught of seducing virgins and leaving them to fend for themselves. Well, it is time I made good on that old saying and bring things around neatly and dump them in his lap. I have heard talk about his debts. He must be desperate for immediate funds. I mean to open his eyes to the money that would be at his disposal if I were to agree to marry him.”

“Taffy, Oh no, Taffy. Just stay away from him.”

“No, I mean to bring the blackguard low. I mean for him to center his efforts on one, just one, *me*, and then I mean to blow his chances sky high!” Taffeta hugged her friend fiercely. “He is a bad man—to the heart, *bad*—and deserves what I have planned for his future. Cath, he has to be stopped.”

* * *

Sir Miles made something of a show as he flung the brown wrapped packet behind him on the coach seat and stepped out of his conveyance to glare defiantly at the three darkly clad high toby riders.

His steely brows drew together. Their voices were muffled, and although he couldn’t quite recognize any, one seemed to stand out.

“What did you throw back in the carriage? Never mind—get it and hand it over,” said the tall toby, whose voice sounded somehow refined in spite of the low, hoarse tone he used.

“It was naught,” he answered evasively.

“Get it now!” the tall one who appeared to be in charge rasped threateningly as he waved a gun at him.

He did as he was ordered but attempted to delay and argued, “Take whatever belongings I have—but not this packet.” He held it to his heart, hoping he was not being too dramatic.

The tall toby rider grabbed it from him and put it in his saddle's satchel.

"But for your country's sake," pleaded Sir Miles, "leave me the packet.". The packet contained just enough information to make it look authentic and to trap the villains at a later date.

"Country, is it?" asked the smallest of the highwaymen. He turned to the man in charge and said, "Whot is this? We don't need to be taking—"

"Shut your stupid mouth and get on your horse," growled the man in charge in a voice that once more made Frome hear something familiar in it.

A few moments later, as he watched them ride off into the darkness, he answered his driver's harangue of questions simply, "No we will not set up a call for the Watch. Let's head for Lord Sidmouth's establishment immediately."

~ *Nine* ~

Two days later

TARRANT SAT UP in bed and held his head against the morning's light. *Damnation*, but what had he done to himself last evening? After the Darthborn ball, he had sworn to himself he would steer clear of Lady Taffeta. However, he wasn't able to stop himself, and off he went last evening to yet another ball she was bound to be attending. All he knew was he had a physical need to see her, a heart wrenching desire to touch her, and *bloody hell*—there she was right before his very eyes, and what the bloody hell was she doing? Flirting outrageously with Bruton—that's what he found, and it drove him to the brink of madness.

The pair had made a great show of liking one another. They laughed and teased, and she batted her thick lashes at Bruton, and he didn't know who he wanted to rant at more. *Hell and brimstone*, why hadn't her brother, her uncle, her aunt—why hadn't any of them stopped her from her audacious display?

Bruton had actually taken her on the floor to waltz three times! Even he would not do such a thing. Everyone had remarked upon it. He had watched them from his corner, and his ominous mood had brought him to the brink of losing control. When he noticed his friend Fenmore leaning into Miss Frome, he stormed to their side, if nothing more than to discover what the little Taffeta's game was.

"What is she doing, Catherine?" Fenmore frowned as he watched Lady Taffeta making eyes at Bruton.

"Do not worry about my Taffy. She knows full well what she is doing. There is only one person who will get hurt in her little show, and it won't be her."

"Really?" Tarrant remarked as he overheard this. "And why is that?"

Catherine Frome blushed and quietly answered, "Because she knows what she is doing. Always does."

"Not this time," Fenmore retorted. "She will have all the gossip mongers chattering about her if she doesn't bring it down a notch."

"No, I don't think so. She is sister to the Duke of Grantham and wealthy enough to gain her a great deal of leeway," Tarrant answered. "But what *is* her game?"

"Oh, I am hungry. James?" Catherine said, obviously trying to change the subject.

He jumped to offer his arm. "Shall I take you to the dining room, then?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "I would be so very grateful."

James Fenmore turned to Tarrant. "Do you join us?"

Tarrant laughed. "No, I wouldn't dream of it." It was obvious his friend had received his *coup de gras* and that the lady returned his 'feelings'. He was happy for him but miserable for himself. He couldn't come to grips with what he was feeling for Lady Taffeta—didn't want to face it and damn well didn't like seeing her with Bruton for many reasons, but one reason headed the list:

downright possessive jealousy! Him—jealous? He had thought he would never experience an all absorbing emotion in regards to a woman, ever again.

The feel of Taffeta's sweet lips pressed against his as he parted them jarred his mind, and the memory was vivid. He could almost taste her once more as his tongue had lapped against hers. *Certes*, what a perfect, delicious, promise of passion she was! What a contradiction of everything he believed was so. What a desirable, quixotic beauty. What wonderful, laughing eyes.

She had his head spinning, seemingly attracted to him one moment and then flirting with Bruton the next. Just what was she doing? He had left the soiree early and had gone to a favorite tavern, where he had met some of his cronies and had drunk more than he usually did. Now he had an aching head and, if he admitted it to himself, a heart that did not feel much better.

The next thing he knew, he was on the street hailing a hackney and directing it to Lady Marble's townhouse, where he was sure to find Taffy at home at such an early hour.

He was met by Jarvis at the door but was told Lady Marble had gone off for the entire day with friends. He frowned and then asked, "Perhaps Lady Taffeta is at home?" He shouldn't be calling on her when she was unchaperoned, but *damn*, the thought of getting her alone excited him!

As Jarvis began to lead him forward, he called him off. "I know the way and shall show myself in." He ignored the mild objection Jarvis tried to stop him with and hurried to the morning room.

He opened the door and stood transfixed a moment as he contemplated Lady Taffeta's profile in the sunlight. Ravishing! From the top of the blue confection of ribbons threaded through her yellow hair to the toe of her blue slipper, just peeping out under her gown.

She turned halfway, and he found her gray eyes filled with laughter as she held Valiant out to him and declared, "Here, Valiant, your hero, here to see what progress you have made." So saying she shoved the black and white puppy into his hands.

He was indeed pleased to see the puppy was thriving and petted him a moment before putting him down and watching him make his way back to Taffy. She bent, picked him up, and took him to a cushion where she placed him lovingly. She then turned to Tarrant and said brightly, "Well, and good morning to you, my lord."

He went forward, took her hands, and said softly, "Sunbeam, you slay me with your beauty—and with the cold shoulder you gave me last night. You had eyes only for Bruton."

She laughed. "Did you think so? Then I have played my part well."

He frowned. "What game are you at now?"

"Ah, you must wait and see."

"No, I must not. I know you think me a scoundrel, but forget that for the moment, sunbeam. That one, Bruton *truly is*."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that ... *and as to you?* I am not sure what you are yet. I wish you were perhaps more of a scoundrel ..." She glided up to him, and it was more than he could take. He pulled her into his arms, and as he kissed her, they seemed to move in unison, in a flurry of emotion that leapt from him to her and back to him again. He couldn't stop, didn't want to stop as emotions, lust, and fully charged need took over.

* * *

He is the one. Her heart had been telling her this for some time. She had known beyond any

doubt for some days. When she turned a few moments ago and saw him standing there, she knew she couldn't let him leave without making a push to show him how she felt. He had to feel it too. She sensed it, wanted—hoped it was so.

He took her into his arms, and she knew, absolutely, they had to bring this to its completion. This morning would do, as her aunt was gone for the day, and her brother and uncle were in Parliament. She was free to explore what she was feeling, and what she was feeling was savage desire.

His ardent kisses took her to another world. His touch made her forget all else. His voice in her ear thrilled her senses. She realized she wanted him with a stormy desire that took hold of her and made her travel through *must not* into *must!*

Letting her go, he threw off his coat. He went to the door and, after locking it, returned to her. Taking her hand to his lips, he said, "You are driving me mad, Taffy." Then he showed her just what that meant. He was feral, his eyes dark with hunger as he tore at her clothes, whispering words of need and how he reveled at the silky softness of her skin, and oh, she wanted him.

She couldn't speak; she only reacted, and she wasn't sure just how her clothes ended up in a pile around her naked body.

What was she doing? She was in her aunt's house and, oh, but it felt so right. She was breaking the rules; she was always breaking all the rules—but this broken rule, *this one might end in breaking her heart*.

But she didn't want to stop. She wanted the feeling to go on ... and ... his mouth was on hers again as he lowered her to his greatcoat spread out on the Oriental rug along with her discarded gown. How had he thought to do that? Had he done this before? Of course he had done this before—she was the only fool in the room ...

His hands manipulated her breasts, his head bent, and the next thing she knew, his tongue licked at her nipples as he pulled her hands over her head and took control. She squirmed with the intensity of the sensations he aroused in her, and she gasped with pleasure as his fingers found and manipulated the crease between her legs.

He took one nipple between his forefinger and thumb, bent to lick it, and then teased it with friction. He licked his palm and rubbed it over her pink pertness till she arched her back with need. She knew she wanted something more, and she threw her head back and said, "Tarrant ..."

"Yes, love ... ah, you are wet, so wet and ready," he whispered as his fingers traveled into her canal and pleased her to the point of distraction.

"Deeper ... push your finger deeper ..."

"Yes, love ..." He did, even as a feral sound came from his throat, and he explored her with skill and deftness.

She opened her eyes as he released his rock-hard cock and watched it dance. It occurred to her he was stallion-sized, and she gasped with sudden fear, "Oh ... no ..."

He chuckled, but his voice was hoarse with hunger. "Oh, yes, sweetness, you are so ready for this ..."

She stared and realized she wanted to touch. She reached for his shaft, ran her hand along its length, closed her fingers around it, and whispered, "I ... Oh my ..."

"We'll make it fit, steady now ... not yet ..." He bent and pushed her back down as he lifted her butt and got into position to lap the sweet moisture from her canal.

She began to pump and grind against his tongue, moving instinctively as her body seemed to know what to do, and when he nibbled at the nub just inside, she arched up toward him and released a short, wild sound just before she climaxed. She shuddered with pleasure, was still trembling with the aftermath as he rubbed his cock against her clit and then positioned it at the wet opening.

“There, woman ... want that ... want more ...?” His voice was hard and rough with the intensity of his desire.

“Yes, yes ...” she answered. She would make this big, beautiful man hers—take everything he had to give and return the prize in full. And she knew something else. She loved him with all her heart, and she hoped if he didn’t love her yet, he would very soon.

“Ah,” she uttered breathlessly, “*Now*, Tarrant ...”

“Say my name,” he whispered as he continued to tease her with his pulsating cock.

“Tarrant ...”

“*No!* My name. Say it.”

“Thurston ...” she growled at him and then suddenly pulled away from him and got onto her knees. She looked first into his hungry, startled eyes and said, so that he could not mistake her meaning, “I want this, Thurston—I want you.” She bent to stroke his shaft with her delicate fingers, dropped a kiss on its head, licked its length, and stroked it lovingly.

He uttered a primal sound and grabbed her hair as she kissed and stroked his hard, throbbing dick. Then he lowered her onto her back once more, spread her legs, and asked her roughly, “Want it? Want it now inside of you?”

“Yes, please...do...do want it now!” she answered, and she looked into his dark eyes as he tenderly started his journey, and then he suddenly paused mid-movement.

“Taffeta ... I ...”

“What? Why do you stop?” She squirmed under him and knew the answer to her question. She could see it on his face. He was momentarily taken aback, and Taffeta was no fool. He hadn’t expected her to be a virgin. She smiled to herself and was not at all insulted. *She had not behaved like one.*

She was ready; oh, she knew she was ready.

“I ... I had thought ...”

“You didn’t know I was a virgin,” she told him playfully.

“I ... Oh, precious girl ... this will hurt at first.”

She wiggled toward him, trying to drive him in deeper, and said huskily, “Then get it over with quickly, my lord.” It was too late now for regrets, and Taffy did not believe in regrets. This was the man of her choice, and she had made her decision—so be it.

He smiled. “There is no other like you—there never will be.” He dove through her virginity and whispered, “Ah, sweet girl ... a first for both of us ...”

He had never taken a virgin before! *Score one for me*, she thought with great pleasure. That had to mean something, because she rather thought she knew the Hotspur, and he would not have taken her had he not cared ...

She felt a moment’s tearing and a pain shoot through her, and she cringed as he first entered. Then he stroked her face and kissed her, saying her name before he pushed deeper. All she knew was that she wanted him, all of him, like this.

She groaned with the ecstasy flooding through her, and as his cock lapped and teased and found her pleasure point, and she moaned his name. He built her desire to a frenzy, and she had a moment when she thought she might have to scream.

His finger joined his cock at the moisture-filled cleft and vibrated her pleasure point until she climaxed and shuddered uncontrollably once again. She grabbed for his hands, wanting to touch him in her aftermath of pleasure, a pleasure she had not believed existed, and holding with the tips of her fingers, lay back once again and watched him as he positioned himself.

And then there was no time for thought as sensation took over. He rocked her body, and she matched his movements with her instincts guiding her. She pushed against him as he pumped into her. She ground into him as he rammed her. He took his cock out and played at her opening, and she begged him to put it back in, and he did, and she gave herself to his ministrations with wild abandon.

She bumped and pumped and climaxed again as he rocked inside her, and then all at once he stopped himself, picked her up, and turned her over to set her on her hands and knees—grinning all the while as he whispered, “Quick intro lesson, love ...” and rammed into her from behind, holding her breasts, flicking her nipples, and all she knew was she never wanted him to stop.

When he went off, he grabbed her breasts and held her as he pulsated inside her, and she realized the amount of control he was using to keep himself from shouting out.

Rolling with her tightly in his arms, he whispered, “You are a fit for me ...” He nibbled at her ear. “Taffeta, precious little woman, I don’t want to let you go ...” He kissed her tenderly at her neck and whispered her name over and over, and then suddenly he was all quick efficiency. “Hurry, love—you *must get dressed*. Too much time has gone by. I don’t want anyone to know how long I have been here alone with you ...”

“Doesn’t the Hotspur want another notch for his belt?” she asked on a half tease.

He frowned darkly. “What do you think of me?”

She was already pulling her clothes on, watching him throw on his. “I don’t know—*what do you think of me?*”

He grabbed her then and kissed her long and hard, and with his clothes still a bit askew, threw on his greatcoat, buttoned it up tightly and said, “Make a bit of a fuss with your butler after I have left. Ask him if he knows when I left. Taffy, I won’t have you gossiped about, understand?”

She peeped at him. “Aye, aye, my lord.”

“Taffy!”

“Yes, yes—right then, be comfortable about it.”

She watched him leave as she finished patting her hair in place. She ran into the hall and rushed up to the small window overlooking the street, to watch him as he walked down the avenue. He hailed a cab, and then she turned and rang for Jarvis.

The butler appeared, and she asked, “Jarvis, did his lordship say when he would be back?”

“Oh no, my lady. He said he would show himself in ... and *I am* sorry, I never heard him leave.”

“Oh, very well then, thank you.” She smiled to herself as she hurried upstairs to wash and change and think of the rakehell Hotspur in the privacy of her bedroom.

~ *Ten* ~

LORD TARRANT RETURNED home to find a note from Sidmouth that required his immediate attention.

His services were needed, and time was creeping up with none available to lose. He hurriedly jotted down a note for Taffeta.

Dearest little love,

Business has called me away for a few days, but know this. I shall miss you with all my heart and await the moment I can be with you again.

Miss me.

Yours,

Thurston

He put the sealed note into a lackey's hand and sent it off, comfortable in the belief she would smile when she read it, comfortable he would return and officially make her his own.

In the meantime, he scarcely had time to throw water on himself, change his clothes, toss some clothing in a portmanteau, and call for his coach. Documents in his possession now had to be delivered as planned.

As he left the city, his thoughts were not on Wellington, Napoleon, or the fate of his beloved Albion, but of his wild, unprincipled, unruly, completely mischievous, and precious love, Taffeta. He adored her with every beat of his heart and wanted her just as she was.

He had not been certain she was a virgin, because she was so unreserved, so passionate, so willing ... But *egad*, when he found she was, his heart swelled with absurd pride and a sudden desire to scoop her up, take her home, and declare to the world she was his woman—*his*. It had nearly overtaken his good sense.

Well, that was something he was going to do very shortly, and as soon as he got back. And he didn't want a long engagement either. He wanted her in his bed, in his house—running his life with her smiles and her laughter and her wildness ... *Damn*, but he loved her.

He had not told her yet. Wait—she had not told him.

She must love him. He couldn't bear it if she didn't love him. She did—*she must*. She could not have given herself with such abandon had she not—could she?

Hell and damnation! He could not get back to her soon enough.

* * *

Lord Bruton was met at the door by Jarvis and told Lady Taffeta was abovestairs.

"I'll wait," he said.

"She asked not to be interrupted," Jarvis said with a frown.

"And still, I will wait. Perhaps you can slip my card under her door and tell her I am here to take her for a ride through the park if she would like."

Jarvis sighed and started for the stairs. Bruton looked at the silver salver on the center round table and saw there Lord Tarrant's seal. It was a note addressed to Lady Taffeta.

As soon as Jarvis was out of view, Bruton snatched it up and immediately slipped it into his pocket. At his back and just at that moment, the door opened to admit both Nigel and the lady's brother.

They saw him and stopped short. He couldn't know if they had seen him take the note from the salver. He assumed not, for they were just the types to challenge him for it.

The young duke said curtly, "Bruton, my aunt is away, and my sister is not receiving male visitors in her absence."

Bruton nodded and said aloofly, "Of course. I merely thought to take Lady Taffeta out for a ride in Hyde Park."

"She can't go. She is promised to us for the day."

He inclined his head and left them at his back, much irritated with the manner in which they'd received him. *Who the devil did they think they were?*

This was going to be difficult if her brother did not approve the match, although he rather thought Lady Taffeta had a mind of her own.

He was hardly able to wait until he was safely within his coach before he opened the sealed note to read Tarrant's note and smirk to himself. Well, well ... So the Hotspur had received his *coup de gras*. How very amusing it would be to steal the lady out from under his grasp.

* * *

"Come on," her brother said as he dragged her down the stairs. "We are taking you to lunch. We have something of a problem and don't want the servants hearing bits and pieces."

"What—won't the waiters hear us?"

"Not at Wilkes Coffee House—we'll take a private booth. You'll like it, and it will get you out. You'll like that too."

Taffy sighed. She had been happily lying on her bed, dreaming of Tarrant and looking forward to the little soiree that evening where she was sure she would see him again. However, her brother and uncle seemed very anxious for her company, and so she went along willingly enough.

Nigel looked at her as he helped her into the waiting hackney and remarked, "You are looking very well, Taffy."

"Thank you, Nigel. I feel ... very well," she answered with an impish smile and settled on her seat, spreading the skirt of her blue velvet cloak about herself.

"Taffy, have you had ... any premonitions lately?" Her brother got right to the point.

She blushed as she thought of the one that had just been fulfilled and answered hesitantly, "Nooo ..."

"Well, we need to talk, because something ugly has occurred."

And then, without warning, it happened, and it was so different than her other visions. This time, it was as though a strong, giant hand had reached over and scooped her up. She sat in the giant's palm and watched totally detached from the scene unfolding before her eyes. It was in the dark of night, and she saw herself being dragged from her carriage. Why was she alone in a carriage? Ah, she wasn't alone; Catherine was with her. Two men were holding guns to the driver, and Catherine was clutching her hand.

They were clothed in gowns—going somewhere—but unescorted. Why? Why were they unescorted? That was all wrong.

The men were in black low hoods and masks, and the tall one yanked her away from Catherine and pulled her toward his horse. Something about him, about his scent, was familiar.

His voice was low and raspy, and he snapped at her, “Don’t worry—I mean to make it right, and by morning, you will be my wife.”

And she realized. “Bruton ...” she whispered. It all made sense now.

Just as suddenly as the vision had arrived, it was gone.

“No, Seth ... it can’t—I won’t let it happen ...”

“What, Taffy? What did you see? And do let go of my arm—you are pinching me to death.”

“Oh, sorry,” she said as she released him and took a long drag of air. “I saw someone dressed like ...” She lowered her voice. “... the way we dress when we are the three ... pretending to be the Rogues Three, and he said he was going to marry me, against my will, and I tell you, Seth, I won’t let it happen.”

“Don’t you worry, Sis. We won’t let it happen. Where were you? We will take care not to let you travel that road.”

“I was alone with Catherine. We were in a carriage ... going somewhere together ... just on the outskirts of London, and, Seth—it was Bruton.”

Seth released a long, low whistle and turned to eye Nigel. “Damned impudent scoundrel.”

“Well, we have his measure, and we won’t let this happen, Taff—mark me,” her uncle said with some determination.

“I wonder ...?” said Seth.

“You wonder about what?” Taffy asked.

“Whether Bruton, dressed like he was in your vision, has anything to do with what we have just discovered.”

“What have you just discovered?”

Their hack had arrived outside the entrance to the coffee house, so conversation was suspended until they had left it behind and were seated in a quiet corner of the busy establishment.

With their heads together, Nigel said with a frown, “I shall get right to the point. Three blackguards have been disguising themselves as the Rogues Three and stealing secrets from the crown—delivering them to the frogs,” he said under his breath.

“I know about the imposters. Tarrant told me,” said Taffy. “It was supposed to be a secret.”

“And you didn’t tell us?” Seth was shocked to ask.

“I was going to, just haven’t had a chance, but go on, go on,” she urged.

“It makes no sense why they should ape the Rogues Three, though perhaps it amuses them to also work against the Luddite movement—put the blame at their door, make everyone think they are traitors as well as thieves.” Seth visibly seethed.

“This is awful. We must do something,” cried Taffeta.

“Yes, but what?” Seth brightened. “Do you think you could conjure up a vision—see who it is?”

“It doesn’t work that way. You know that.” Taffy sighed.

“Work on it, and it might.”

Taffy glared at him before taking a long sip of her coffee and then a bite of her cake. She stared across the room. Her mouth opened and closed as she watched the fashionable man making his way toward them. *Bruton*.

He was a devil. How now could she bring him low without putting herself in the line of fire? She couldn't. She *was* the line of fire.

Her vision had put a new take on just how much of a blackguard he was, and she was going to have to devise a new plan.

Bruton arrived at their table, where he bent low over her fingers, ignored her brother and uncle in his usual aloof fashion, and looked only at her. Taffy managed a smile. Was he already planning to abduct her, or would it enter his head at some later date? If only her vision had given her a clue as to timing.

He took up a nearby chair and lifted it to set it in place at their table before he made a flourish of sitting beside Taffeta.

Nigel objected. "I say! *We are having a private—*"

"I shan't stay long." Bruton interrupted as he turned to her. "Shall I see you at Lady White's soirée tonight?"

"Oh, why yes," she answered, all at once, wishing she wasn't attending.

"And will you wear my posy?"

"Your posy? I have not received your posy," she answered truthfully.

"You shall, later this afternoon," he answered.

"Oh ... I am sorry, I have already agreed to carry another's posy," she answered brightly.

"Really? Who holds that honor?"

"*I do*," said a strong, hard voice at Bruton's back.

Taffeta looked up with adoration and relief in her eyes. She found dark, bright eyes looking back soothingly into hers. He spoke to her with those dark, sensual eyes, and she felt her heart beat faster.

It was as though his voice whispered in her ear, telling her he would always be there for her, would always protect her, and her emotions expanded and made her want to cry with happiness.

Bruton stood up at once. He nodded to Tarrant, bowed to Lady Taffeta, and said quietly, anger lining his words, "It appears I was behind in my attention. I shall not be again." He turned on his heel and left them.

"Good show, Tarrant!" said Taffy's brother, standing to slap the Hotspur on his shoulder. "Do sit ..."

Tarrant took up Bruton's vacated chair and got right to the point. "I was on my way out of town, made a stop at the Home Office, and plans were changed. When I stopped by your aunt's, Jarvis told me that you were all here."

Taffeta felt the caress as his gaze traveled over her, and he asked her softly, "Did you get my note?"

"Note? No."

"Aha!" said Seth. "*Devil!* I thought I saw him slipping something into his pocket." He shook his head. "Looks like Bruton got hold of it. *Devil!* The very idea—stealing people's private missives!"

Tarrant didn't answer this directly, but his voice was low and hard when he said, "I will have

to cut out his heart and feed it to him in pieces.”

“Yes, you must.” And then her pretty features softened once more as she asked Tarrant, “You sent me a note?” Before he could answer, she turned on her brother. “*Faith*—Bruton was at the house? You didn’t tell me, Seth, and he stole a note meant for me? This is outrageous.” She turned back to Tarrant. “Yes, do cut out his heart—if you can find it.”

A moment’s silence fell over them as each considered the meaning of Bruton’s behavior. The silence was broken by Seth, who cleared his throat and said, “Better tell Tarrant now, sis. He is a right ’un, and he should know ...”

She wasn’t about to disclose the fact she had visions. She just wasn’t ready, so she glared at her brother and said, “Seth babbles like a woman. It is nothing. I have very strong instincts, and Bruton worries me, that is all.”

The Hotspur considered her for a moment but obviously didn’t mean to grill her about it as he said, “Then let us get to the point. Rogues Three must never ride again in Nottingham.”

“Right,” Nigel said.

“And their cloaks, masks—I can’t help but wonder where the three rascals hid them,” Tarrant mused, looking meaningfully at them.

“Well, as to that ...” Seth coughed in his fist. “I would imagine they thought to keep the things as mementos, but wisdom overruled, and we believe the three must have burned their disguises.”

“Ah, they have more brains than I gave them credit for.” Tarrant grinned. “My next question is this. You know, I believe, we have a problem with imposters here in London, posing as the three and stealing documents meant for Wellington?”

“Villainous traitors!” Nigel declared.

“Just so,” said Tarrant. “We mean to set a trap for them, and I want you somewhere very public when we do ... just as a safeguard.”

“No one knows ... I mean ... well ...” His voice trailed off.

Tarrant laughed and shook his head. “’Tis done, but we still wouldn’t want anyone making any connections and attempting any ... er ... blackmail.”

“Damn, no!” Nigel agreed.

“And one more thing. In the upcoming days and evenings, I expect you to help me keep an eye on Lady Taffeta, as I suspect if certain individuals are denied their goals, they may think to take by force what isn’t given willingly.” He looked at Taffeta and then at her male relatives. “You will have to make certain she does not enjoy the freedom she has grown accustomed to, clear?”

“Clear but ...” Seth started on a snort. “Easier said than done.”

“Nevertheless, I believe her well-being to be in immediate danger for several reasons, and if you can’t manage to keep her in check, I shall.”

Brother and uncle eyed one another and then Tarrant, a bit skeptically.

Taffeta eyed them all and finally let go with her thoughts. “Now, hold on a moment, all of you. I am very capable of looking out for myself, and I will not be kept a prisoner because of a blackguard.” She eyed Tarrant defiantly. “I won’t be curbed by—”

“Do not test me, my love. You wouldn’t like it, not one bit.” Tarrant grinned wickedly at her, and her mouth opened, closed, and then opened again without anything coming out.

Seth beamed. “Aye then, Taffy, what say you?”

“I say, I know well enough how to watch my back, and so I shall—so should we all.”

~ *Eleven* ~

THE FOUR LEFT the coffeehouse, but their chattering continued. Taffy noted to herself how quiet and thoughtful Tarrant appeared. She was also aware that his fingers caressed her cloak as they stepped outdoors.

Nigel turned to Tarrant. "Do you come to m'aunt's with us, for there are a few questions I still have for you, Tarrant?"

"Aye, have one or two, m'self," Seth said, looking his way.

Taffeta smiled at Tarrant and urged in hopeful accents, "Do come with us ..." Her voice was soft and cajoling because all she knew was she wanted his company forever. As she spoke, she stepped backward and did not realize she had stepped to the edge of the curbing. She lost her balance and wind-milled her arms. This spooked a horse being walked by a lackey. Everything that happened flashed before her eyes. The skittish horse reared up and came down before she could jump out of the way, and its left hoof caught her soundly, freakishly just below her bosom.

The lackey yanked on the poor, spooked horse and pulled him to order with a sharp reproof, but the damage was already done. Taffy bent over in pain. As she attempted to straighten up, she squeaked out, "Lord, *flush hit* ..."

"Sunbeam ... my sweet love," Tarrant cooed as he swept her up into his arms cradle-style, turned to Seth, and demanded, "Hail a hackney at once!"

Her brother did so at once, leaving Nigel and Tarrant to care for her. Taffy saw Nigel's expression as he shot a glance between her and Tarrant, and she knew from his face that he had come to some conclusion. She saw a slow smile curve his lips but was in too much pain to consider what he might be thinking.

Her brother had finally caught the attention of a hackney, and she thought she might faint as pain shot through her when Tarrant gently saw her situated in the carriage. He climbed in beside her, followed by Seth and Nigel.

A few moments later, they were home, and the rakehell Hotspur placed her in a reclining position on the sofa, where he solicitously looked after her.

At this point, she knew from the rolling eyes her brother and uncle were giving one another that she would be teased pitifully as soon as Tarrant departed.

"Be easy, my lord—it is naught," Taffy assured the Hotspur as she tried to wipe off her brother's wicked grin with a glare.

"I would feel better if you would let me tend the bruise," he said, and it appeared to her that he was not at all put off by the fact both her brother and her uncle were privy to this.

Taffy stared at him, warning in her expression, and he laughed out loud. "Think I care for the proprieties when you have been injured?"

"But I am perfectly fine, I do assure you," she replied, gritting her teeth, for she could see her brother's expression and knew as soon as Tarrant left, he and Nigel would quiz her relentlessly.

"I have been kicked a time or two, my dear, and know otherwise. You are very brave, and we shall leave it at that for now. I shall leave you to rest and hope you will be well enough to attend White's soiree tonight, where I will be looking for you—only you."

She felt herself blush and met his gaze. It was as though no one else existed, as though life revolved around the moments they were together. When had this happened to her? She had always been so independent—and now, now she needed so much more than herself. "Must you leave?" she asked on a soft note.

"If you wish me to stay, I shall, but I have one errand that must be discharged—soon."

"Then do go," she said softly. "Take care of it, for it must be important. My brother and Nigel will look after me."

He kissed her hand. "It is of the utmost importance. Nothing else could take me from you at this time."

Tarrant stood up from the sofa and turned. Seth went forward to shake his hand, and Nigel grinned idiotically as he extended his, all under Taffy's gaze. She put a hand to her forehead.

"Gentlemen, I trust you to look after our precious treasure and shall see you this evening." So saying, he strode out of the sitting room and was gone.

"I say!" said Nigel, staring hard at Taffy.

"Indeed, sister mine, you have some explaining to do!" Her brother grinned from ear to ear.

"Why—don't you approve?"

"Approve?" replied Nigel. "Damn if you aren't close to bagging the catch of the century!"

* * *

The door was flung open, and Taffy exclaimed, "Cathy!"

Catherine stopped short and gasped. "Oh—what is wrong? You are hurt ... how ... oh no, this is awful. Whatever has happened—what?" she demanded, coming forward to sit on the sofa with her. She shrugged off her bonnet and gloves and took Taffy's hand.

"It is nothing," Taffy said, waving it off with her free hand. "Got kicked by a horse. My fault—wasn't watching where I was going ... startled the brute."

"Oh Taffy! Poor dear—shall I take you upstairs and have a look at it?" Catherine frowned with concern.

"No, not now. It is bound to be black and blue. That is what bruises do—turn black and blue and then heal. There is nothing to be done. Now, why did you explode in here as though the devil was on your heels?"

"Yes, Cath, you did do that, you know," Seth agreed with a nod.

Nigel inclined his head, and both men pulled up their chairs closer to the sofa. Something definitely was toward, for Catherine's excitement was almost a visible force.

She eyed them all and said, "You know the other night, when I stayed over here?"

"Yes," said Taffy.

"Papa was attacked!"

"What?" shrieked her audience as a whole.

Miss Frome stood up, removed her spencer of maroon brocade, and sat with a thump. Taffy impatient urged her friend to proceed, waving her hand with a wince.

"Yes—*attacked*."

"Go on, do, Cath," Taffy encouraged.

“By highwaymen who called themselves very loudly, and made certain Papa heard them, the Rogues Three,” Cathy said as she gazed at her friends.

Silence reigned for a moment, and then Taffy found her voice. “How do you know this? Surely your papa did not tell you?”

“No, of course he did not. I ... knew something was wrong, and I listened in on his conversation when Sidmouth paid him an early visit this morning.”

Taffy snorted and laughed. “Cathy, you astound me. You eavesdropped? I am so very proud of you.”

“Yes,” she said, blushing, “but I had to. You see, Papa seemed ... odd, and I was worried about him.”

“What I should like to know is ... what do you know about the Rogues Three?” Nigel asked gravely.

Cathy’s hands folded and unfolded in her lap. “Why do you ask?”

“Catherine Frome, answer my uncle,” Taffy demanded, eyeing her quizzically. “Oh, my. You have guessed, haven’t you? Why, you cunning thing.”

“Only because I know you three quite well, and I know your views regarding the plight of the Luddites. I thought, perhaps you might support such a thing and then, well ... three ...” Her voice trailed off.

“Let us not say anything further.” Seth made a fist and coughed into it. “One never knows who may be about—servants and such.”

“Well, this attack on your father,” Taffeta said, “what could they have wanted?”

“To steal documents meant for Wellington, but the Home Office was aware and did in fact expect the brutes to attack. They had a plan, you see, and set a trap of sorts. I couldn’t quite hear everything—but I knew it wasn’t the Rogues Three of Nottingham. Needed, however to ... er ... warn you of the situation.”

“Yes, our rogues have retired, but it is a shame their name is being sullied like this,” Seth said with a sigh.

“Who are these traitors, and why would they betray their country?” Taffy asked, not really expecting a reply.

“Money,” answered Nigel. “It is always about money, which brings me to another subject. Stay away from Bruton, young lady. He is after you for one reason only.”

Taffy laughed. “I *loathe* him.”

“Do you?” Seth asked with surprise. “You could have fooled me, sis.”

“I meant to fool *him*, so if I fooled you, I did my job, but as you say, I think I shall now turn him up cold. I’m weary of the sport.” She saw her friend was blushing furiously and immediately said, “Now, what of your papa? Did he suffer any injury?”

“No, no, he is fine and apparently pleased.”

“Good, so now tell me—what of Fenmore?”

Again, Cathy blushed, and Taffy giggled deliciously. “Ah ... also good.”

“Here is the thing.” Nigel looked penetratingly at Miss Frome. “Catherine, what does your father know about the Rogues Three? Does he believe they are one and the same as the ones who worked Sherwood Forest?”

“From what I overheard, they have their doubts, but they don’t care really. They mean to set a

trap for the fellows. I was interrupted when one of our servants came out of the dining room, and I couldn't very well allow her to see me listening at the door."

Taffy laughed. "No, and in fact, it amazes me you did so."

"Well, I knew something was wrong, and I was worried—although when I took to listening, I didn't realize it would have anything to do with you three."

Seth reached over and patted her on the arm, pronouncing, "You are a right 'un for all your frills and quiet, a right 'un, and if Fenmore doesn't propose to you, I think I will!"

She blushed and slapped at the young duke. "You will not, you horrid tease—now stop it." She turned toward Taffy, who moved on the sofa, found it brought her some discomfort, and winced again.

"Oh, Taff, what you need is a hot bath. Come along, let me take you upstairs, and we'll have hot water brought up."

Taffy sighed. "Yes, I think if I am to feel better by tonight, I must do something."

Nigel and Seth were silent before they regarded one another under Taffy's watchful gaze. "We need to find out a bit more ..." Nigel said.

"How?" answered Seth.

"Tarrant," they both answered at once and then grinned when Taffy shook her head.

* * *

The music was low and sweet. The night air was cool and inviting. Lady White's soiree buzzed with the inevitable squeeze, and Taffeta wore Tarrant's posy with delicious pride.

He had remembered, even though he had said he had serious matters that needed attention, to send round a posy for her with a note that said simply, "I am yours ... Thurston."

She felt as though she could walk on air, and then she was dancing on his arm. A cotillion, and then a waltz, and he seemed determined not to leave her side. She saw astonished dowagers looking their way and hiding behind their fans as they gossiped. She giggled to herself and then out loud. To Tarrant she said, "Well, you certainly are causing quite a bit of commotion."

"Am I? Well, as to that, there will be even more of one when they read the paper in a few days and see the banns have been posted."

"Banns?" Taffy looked straight up into his eyes.

"I have already received permission from your aunt and brother. It leaves only you to seal my fate," he answered quietly.

"Thurston Tarrant ... are you picking up the cap I said I wouldn't throw your way?" She scarcely got the words out.

"I am." He took her gloved fingers and held fast. "Shall I take you outdoors and get on one knee, sunbeam?"

"No—ask me here, ask me now!" she demanded, joy taking over her senses.

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and making me delirious all the rest of my days?"

"Oh, I can do that," she said and gave him a long, exquisite, and low bow.

He roared, "Of all the ways I imagined you might accept my proposal, sweet life, I did not expect a bow!" He pulled her up and hugged her tenderly, remembering her injuries, and heedless of the shocked glances of many.

Then, grabbing her hand, he led her to the musicians, whispered in the lead musician's ear,

and slipped him a few coins.

A moment later, the man announced, “A waltz to celebrate the engagement of Lord Thurston Tarrant to the Lady Taffeta of Grantham.”

A gasp went up, followed by a round of applause as friends and acquaintances alike began to surround them. The music began, and Tarrant led his future bride onto the floor.

* * *

Bruton’s jaw dropped as he listened to the engagement announcement. He couldn’t believe his ears. He knew Tarrant was interested in Lady Taffeta, but it had never occurred to him his rival would propose to her.

Damn the man’s soul! Did he think he would get away with this? Well, he wouldn’t. Bruton would still snatch the prize out from under him. He frowned over his new problem. Why had Tarrant done this? Tarrant didn’t need her money—he had a fortune of his own.

Bloody hell! Damn the little vixen for her betrayal. No doubt she had used him to get the Hotspur jealous and bring him to this point. Well, he would teach her a lesson. No one would use him and get away with it.

A situation like this could only be handled in one way in his mind. Scandal would definitely ensue, but what did he care for scandal, and it was no more than what she deserved for her perfidy. If Tarrant thought he could steal his gilded calf, the only way out of his debts, well, he was wrong.

One way or another, he would have Lady Taffeta for his wife and her money to stave off debtors’ prison.

He was down to his last sou. He was a desperate man, and he knew it, knew what he had to do, and had no intention of hesitating. What he had in his favor was that no one knew just how very desperate he was.

He wouldn’t be bested in this way. He had to work on his alternate plan, a plan he had in place because he had been afraid from the start he would have to elope with her because of her family. He had suspected her young duke of a brother would never agree to his suit and had hatched an alternative plan.

He smiled wickedly to himself as he stood and watched the couple in question go around the dance floor as though they were in heaven. *Heaven?* They would both soon know hell—for he meant to take them there. Tarrant for daring to blatantly best him, and the little beauty for daring to lead him on.

One way or another, Taffeta and her wealth were going to be his. He would have to execute his plan a bit sooner than he had thought, and he would have to be careful. It would all depend on the fluidity of his movements over the next few days. It would have to appear to Tarrant and Lady Taffeta he was quietly withdrawing his interest in her. And now, he would begin to show her and the world at large he had transferred his interest to ... He looked around and moved to take Melody Connors onto the dance floor. Yes, Melody would do very well ...

~ *Twelve* ~

Three nights later

“OH, BUT THAT was dull work,” exclaimed Taffeta as she led Catherine to the front steps of Lady Higgins’s townhouse. She looked around for her brother and Nigel, who were still in conversation with a friend some distance at their back.

Their coach had pulled up to the curbing, and the Higgins’s footman held out his gloved white hand to help the ladies up the steps and into their carriage. Taffy looked to her brother and waved for him to hurry as she followed Catherine into the coach, and they spread their skirts around them.

“Well, at least it was an early evening. I must admit to being a bit tired from all our gadding about.”

“Yes, and I would have rather spent the evening at home than listening to those dandies try and ape poetry. Ugh, ’tis no wonder Aunt Sissy stayed home. We should have as well.” Taffy sighed.

“Hmmm, especially when there was no chance of having your dear Tarrant in attendance on you.”

Taffeta sighed more heavily. “Yes, I admit nothing seems as much fun when he isn’t about.” Taffy eyed her knowingly. “You were bored as well, and I noticed Fenmore wasn’t present either,” she said meaningfully.

“I knew he wouldn’t be. He is off with your Tarrant,” answered Catherine with a soft smile.

“Is he? I didn’t know,” Taffeta said with a frown. “I wonder what they can be up to? Something deliciously exciting I am sure, and what must we endure but ...” When she turned to look for her brother and uncle, she saw that a young and dirty urchin of a boy had gained their attention. “How odd—I wonder what is toward?”

Even while she was still looking their way out the curbside window, the coach suddenly lurched forward. Her heart skipped a beat, and she froze for a fraction of a moment as her reasoning took the situation and put it into cohesive order. This was wrong—all too wrong.

Taffy took immediate action and knocked on the inside box to the driver’s back wall. “Thomas, what are you doing? Stop this instant and wait for my brother and uncle.”

No answer. She went forward, pulled open the box to the driver’s seat, and saw some of the man’s back. He was not dressed in his usual uniform but wore a dirty set of clothes, and his long, straggly hair, under a peaked cap, told her at once this was not their coachman. Not Thomas. What had happened to the man? *Oh*, she immediately thought, *I hope he was not badly hurt*. But she could not spare more worry for him now—she and Catherine were in trouble. This was her vision coming to life!

She sat back and said to Catherine, “Right then—here we are alone with a villain at the horse’s head. Cathy, when the carriage slows, as it will in the traffic up ahead, will you take my

hand and jump out?”

“Yes, of course, but ... what is this?”

“There is no time to explain, but we have to get away before the driver turns down an alley or quiet street, where no doubt another coach is waiting.”

“Will he stop in traffic? Can we get out then and run?” Cathy asked, looking determined.

“He won’t stop the coach unless he must, I am certain, and we have the advantage because he doesn’t know we know what is afoot. He is already slowing ... just a bit more, so we don’t lose our balance when we jump out.” She squeezed her friend’s hand. “You can do this, Cath. I know you can. Remember a few years back when those Eton boys took us for a wagon ride and things got a bit out of hand? Remember?”

“Yes, we were glorious, weren’t we? You knocked one boy off the wagon, and the other two were busy holding up their team while we jumped off and vanished into the woods. Yes, that was glorious, and we laughed all the way back to school—stupid boys.”

“This is different. They were only playing a prank. This time, we are being abducted. We have no choice but to take it seriously and do what we must. Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then hold my hand and get ready,” Taffeta said, looking out the window and discovering a maze of traffic ahead. “He is already slowing, but I don’t think he will stop—are you ready?”

“Ready?”

“I shall open the door, and we must hike up our skirts and take to ground.”

“Go ahead—I am with you.”

Taffy hiked up her skirts and jumped. She nearly lost her balance, steadied herself and turned to find Catherine stumbling from her jump and nearly colliding with her.

“There ... now—off we go,” Taffy said.

“Not so fast, tart, not so fast,” said a hard, familiar voice.

Taffy realized Bruton must have been riding behind the coach. He was already off his horse and grabbing at Taffeta. He had her by the arm.

His mistake, for she brought up her foot and gave him a resounding kick to his privates. When he howled and bent over in pain, she took Cathy’s hand and screamed, “Come on, Cath!”

However, Bruton recovered quickly and took chase. Taffy heard him but kept up her pace, weaving through traffic. He was on her suddenly, this time taking hold of her hair and yanking hard, so hard she cried out, “Oww!” She then realized they needed help. She screamed out to her friend, “Run, Cathy, and get help! Tell them ...”

Bruton hissed into her ear. “It won’t do you any good. By the time they find us, you will be my wife, and will have spent the night with me.”

Taffeta brought her heel down on his toes, and he screeched with anger and pain as she broke free and ran.

Once again, she tried dodging him by using the traffic of carriages and hacks to hide her as she darted in and out of traffic. She took a moment and pounded the door of one of the carriages but then couldn’t wait for admittance.

Even as she cried out for help, Bruton was on her. She ran as fast as her heart and legs could take her, but as she thought she was getting away, the heel of her satin shoe broke, and she tripped on the curbing, going down to her knees.

Her gown was torn in several places, her slipper broken, and still she picked herself up and started off, only to be cornered by him at the opening of a dark, long alley.

Bruton closed in on her and took her arm to drag her off screaming and kicking into the darkest part of the alley. There he hauled off and slapped her.

“Now, bitch, now ...” he said, and she saw he was about to knock her unconscious.

* * *

Seth and Nigel tried to understand what the small lad was trying to tell them but found it difficult to follow his message.

“Look here, lad. Who told you to give us this message? How did they know we would be here this evening?” Nigel asked.

“Oi don’t know ’is name, oi don’t ...” said the lad, shaking his small, dirty hands nervously. “’ee gave me a coin and told me jest to tell the Duke of Grantham and Lord Nigel to meet ’im at the Home Office—that’s all oi knows.”

Seth took out a few coins and handed them to the grubby street urchin. “There. Go get something to eat.” He watched the boy rush off and turned to frown at Nigel. “What the devil is all—hold on ...” He moved toward their coach just as it pulled away from the curbing.

“What the devil? I say, hold up, Thomas!” Nigel called out.

“Wait a moment. That isn’t Thomas. Who the devil?”

“Taffy!” they both said in unison. Seth slapped his uncle’s shoulder. “Come on.” He led the chase of the coach at a run.

However, as the coach made its way down the avenue, it had not yet hit traffic and so it gained quite a distance on them. Seth stopped to catch his breath. They both bent over their knees as Seth sucked in air and grinned to see Nigel doing the same.

“What the deuce is going on here?” Nigel asked.

“We were diverted. Don’t you see? ’Tis Taffy’s vision. She is alone in the carriage with Catherine. They are being abducted!”

“But why?”

“Doesn’t matter why—come on,” Seth said, starting off again. However, a hackney came to a stop near them, and the driver nodded at them to ask, “Need a ride, do ye, gents?”

Nigel looked at Seth, who then climbed up and took the reins from the driver. Nigel gave the driver a gold coin. “Don’t worry there, my good man, the duke is an excellent whip, and you’ll be well paid when we are done.”

The driver was pleased enough with the guinea he already found in his palm. and nodded, “Right then, off we go.”

* * *

Tarrant and Fenmore had alighted their coach just in time to see Nigel and Seth’s behavior with the hack.

“What the deuce are those two doing now?” James Fenmore said with a shake of his head.

Tarrant felt something cold clutch his heart, and he whispered, “Taffy.”

“You have no reason to think it has something to do with—”

“Oh but I do, come on,” Tarrant said, motioning for Fenmore’s driver to move over as he climbed up onto the driver’s bench and extended a hand to Fenmore.

“Do you know, I don’t think I have ever been up here,” Fenmore said as he sat beside Tarrant.

“It is damn good fun.”

“Hold on, James, my man—I mean to make these horses of yours move!”

“There!” He pointed. “I see them—there ...”

“Don’t see them ...” replied Tarrant, frowning.

“Just ahead.” Fenmore shook his head. “Whatever made them take the hack? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does to me,” said Tarrant.

“Turning—there!” Fenmore’s voice was full of excitement.

“Aye,” said the Hotspur, feeling like the devil on the hunt. “Aye ...”

~ *Thirteen* ~

TAFFY'S HAND WENT to her stinging cheek as she backed up against the building. It was dark, and she tripped over something, going down on her hands and knees. When she stood back up, she leaned with her hands behind her back against the limestone wall of the building.

She was in a rage, but she needed to stall for time. They weren't so deep into the alley that a passerby wouldn't hear if she screamed. She needed to bide her time and make one last attempt to either escape or call for help. "You know," she said slowly, loudly, "if Tarrant doesn't kill you for this night's work, I shall. You will never be safe again."

"No? But I will be rich." He sneered at her.

"Do you think so? You will need to be alive in order to enjoy it, Bruton. So if I were you, I would think about what I was doing. In the end, it won't be worth it. I can promise you that."

"Shut up, tart. Just shut up. What do you know about the trials of poverty? I have nothing left. What little my father didn't gamble away, I have spent in maintaining our lands. I'll have your money, and that is all I am thinking about. That is all I care about." He shrugged. "It won't be so bad for you. I shall not be a difficult husband. In fact, I shall allow you to come and go as you please after our nuptials."

"Husband? I loathe you and shall never call you husband. Fool—you are a fool. You have not seen past your own immediate needs. You have not seen what the consequences will be. You will never call me wife, because you will be dead. I will happily, easily, slit your throat while you sleep if I have to, but I rather think Tarrant will obliterate you from the face of the earth long before that—*don't you?*"

Bruton frowned, but she taunted him. "Didn't expect I would escape your coach and ruin your plans?"

"You haven't ruined a thing."

"Catherine will tell, and they will know ..."

"It will be too late. You will be my wife. I will own your fortune."

"Tarrant will make me a widow," she snapped angrily.

He frowned again and, sounding infuriated, replied, "What good will it do him? He will end in prison."

Taffy had positioned herself as subtly as she could and now used the moment. She swung the board of wood she had been holding at her back all this while, and she swung it with all her might.

She didn't give him time to duck, and it hit him square.

She charged away from the alley, left it at her back, and was on the main thoroughfare a few seconds later, yelling with all her heart, "Help!"

* * *

They were slowed almost to a stop in traffic, and Tarrant saw her before he heard her. He

threw the reins of the horses to Fenmore, nimbly jumped down from the carriage, and began to run.

Had his heart ever beat with such frenzy? Had he ever felt so slow? She was disheveled, her gown torn, and she was running as though for her life. Bruton, damn his soul, was at her back.

He reached her and held her as she collapsed into his arms, saying, "I knew you would come ... just a little while ago ... I saw it ..." And she began to cry.

He put her behind him as Bruton stumbled down towards them, and he went forward to land Bruton a leveler. Even as Bruton hit the ground, Tarrant picked him up and hit him again.

He turned, took Taffy into his embrace and saw immediately, even in the dim light of the street lamp, that her cheek was bruised. "Taffy ... my own sunbeam ... did he do this?" He didn't wait for her answer but turned to pick up Bruton so he could hit him again, but Taffy stayed him.

"No ... oh, Thurston ... do just take me home."

Commotion erupted behind them, for Catherine had arrived with a beadle. Seth and Nigel also were there.

"Tarrant—you're here? We would have been here sooner ... saw Cathy running and screaming like a banshee ... Cathy never screams ... took off after her on foot," Seth announced in a breathless voice.

Fenmore, now on the scene, took Catherine's hands to his lips and cooed to her as the beadle began addressing Tarrant.

"Thank you, sir," said the Hotspur. "We can take it from here."

"Would ye be wanting to press charges?"

Taffy shook her head.

They didn't need a scandal, so Hotspur answered softly, "I think not ... as I said, we thank you for your quick service, but we will get him to where he belongs."

The beadle seemed well pleased for the compliment and the accompanying coin. He tipped his hat and moved off.

"Taffeta, I need you to go home with Catherine, your brother, and Nigel. Fenmore and I will see to Bruton. Will you do that for me?"

"What are you going to do? You must not kill him!"

"Never mind what I am going to do. Please, my love, Catherine too needs you, and you both need to get home to a hot tub and relax. I will call on you first thing in the morning."

"Right then ... but, Thurston ... I ..."

"Steady, my brave beauty." He touched her under chin and then saw her and Catherine installed in the hack the boys had waiting for them.

"Take the ladies home, and not a word of this to anyone," Tarrant said quietly before turning to Fenmore. Together they picked up the unconscious Bruton and threw him into Fenmore's coach.

"What shall we do with him?"

"Drop him into the Thames," said Hotspur harshly.

"Aye ..." Fenmore regarded his friend. "But, really?"

"Really," replied the Hotspur wickedly.

~ Epilogue ~

One month later

Taffeta leaned into her husband as their gondola plowed through one of Venice's deep canals. Her rakehell had insisted on an early wedding and would wait only long enough for her to have a gown created and a wedding party assembled.

Their honeymoon had been, from the moment they began, a trip filled with laughter, new experiences, and lovemaking that took her to what she told him were depraved heights.

She had questioned him a few times over the last few weeks about Bruton, who had vanished from society. A part of her was worried her beloved had indeed killed the man in a fit of rage.

She looked up at him now and asked softly, "Tarrant, love, I need to know, and I need to know the truth, not a fairy tale. What have you done with Bruton? For when I asked Seth and Nigel, they said I must not ask and were convinced you drowned him in the Thames."

He laughed. "They must have had that from James."

"Did you drown him? I shall forgive you if you did, for he deserved it, but ... oh, I hope there won't be repercussions."

He hugged her fiercely. "If I drowned him, as was my first inclination, I would have done so in a manner where there would never be any repercussions to worry you. However, I allowed Fenmore to persuade me to take another route."

"Huh, what then?"

"Bruton was a desperate man. He was about to be served, and if he could not come up with the money he owed, he would have been hauled off to debtor's prison—perhaps even sent to Australia. I gave him a choice he didn't deserve."

"What choice? What did you do?"

"We, James and I, helped him pack all his belongings, and we delivered him to a ship that was about to depart for the Colonies. What do they call themselves, ah yes, the United States. I bought him a first-class ticket for the passage and gave him a tidy sum to invest when he got there. I rather think he will do well in the colonies—and hopefully stay there."

"Brilliant! You are absolutely brilliant," Taffeta said as she bounced in his arms and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"I am, am I not?" He laughed. "And I want that kiss, but not on my cheek." He bent his head and brushed his lips against hers. "You drive me mad with need, do you know that? I want you all the time."

"The gondolier will hear you." She giggled and snuggled closer.

"Let him hear me." Tarrant sighed, settling back and looking around. "Ah, I think we are nearly there. Are you hungry, my sweet?"

"Yes, yes, I am starving, and I do so adore Italian food." She eyed him and said naughtily, "It is a shame we couldn't have drowned him. He did so deserve it."

He barked a laugh. “Wicked wife, you suit me, you fit me.”

Taffeta sighed. “Next month James and Cath will marry. It will be so much fun. Their wedding will be beautiful. I shall be so proud to stand as her maid of honor with you as James’s best man.”

“Indeed, but I wish we had more time here in Italy. I love it so,” he whispered softly.

“Yes, I do as well, but, Tarrant, we go to your grange, and that will be very exciting, and it is so very near Grantham that Seth and Nigel will be able to visit often, and—”

He laughed and said, “And who knows what my sunbeam and her rogues will get up to?”

She smiled sweetly. “Oh, yes, poor Tarrant. You could not have thought it out when you asked for my hand P as I go, those two as well. Three for the price of one.” She giggled.

“Rogues Three ... aye ... and my own sweet love. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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~ Prologue ~

*Sutton Village, England
1815*

SASSY WALKED THE short distance from the livery, where'd she left her cob horse and curricule, and made her way to the curio shop that also served as their village book shop.

It was a busy time of the morning, nearly lunch, and the wide avenue was bustling with people, horse-drawn wagons, and quite an impressive number of carriages of all sizes, ages, and styles for their quaint village.

The dust they kicked up didn't do her well-worn blue cloak any good. With a grimace she brushed and shook off some of the offending dirt as she made her way to the lead-paned window of Mrs. Plummet's Curio Shop and stepped beneath the awning.

A little bell announced her arrival, and a tall, buxom woman looked up from the counter where she was arranging a stack of the new and latest novel that had only just come in. The woman smiled and welcomed Sassy. "Hallo, m'dear, and how is the vicar today?"

Pushing a stray hair away from her ear, Sassy adjusted her chip hat and sighed as she gave Mrs. Plummet a warm smile. She had known her forever. "Papa is cranky today, I am afraid. He shooed me off and told me to come into town and purchase a book to keep me busy. He says I am always fussing about him, and he won't have it."

Mrs. Plummet laughed and said, "Good then, Sassy love. If he is feeling feisty, perhaps we will have a small miracle and he will take a turn for the better."

Sassy almost released her pent-up emotion but fought back the urge to dive into Mrs. Plummet's arms and cry. She held herself in check and unconsciously rubbed the ring on her right hand beneath her glove.

She couldn't very well tell Mrs. Plummet the guilt she felt because, once again, she felt useless. She hadn't been able to save her mother two years ago when she had suddenly fallen ill and died within a week. What good was *the power* if she couldn't rid the ones she loved of disease?

Now, her father was not getting any better, and not all the tisanes in the world were helping. Not even those her mother had taught her to concoct had worked to do more than ease his discomfort.

She picked up the latest novel by an author whose name she did not recognize and looked it over. "What do you think?"

"I started reading it last evening. It was very ... absorbing"

"Right then, I'll give it a try." Sassy fished in her knit purse for a coin. She shouldn't be wasting her father's money on a book, but he had insisted and she didn't want him to worry

about her. It was all he talked about these last few days—*her future*.

She knew she was going to lose him, and her heart was being ripped to shreds at the thought. How could she do without him and his guidance, especially now?

When her mother had passed, she was left to carry the burden of what she was alone, except for her father. He kept her secret, even as he had her mother's.

Now that she had reached her majority, she was experiencing the 'transition', and without her mother to advise her, only her father could help her.

There was, of course, her mother's family, but they had disowned her when she married her father so she could not turn to them, although like her they had the 'power'.

She set these disturbing thoughts aside as she took up the package Mrs. Plummet handed her and made her way outdoors.

Before crossing the avenue, she meandered down the walkway, stopping to look in the window of the village dress shop. It was still there—a gown that had caught her eye the week before. It was breathtaking. Yellow and in the fashionable A-line, low cut and trimmed with Belgium lace and much too expensive for her. She sighed as she turned away from it.

Her own ensemble beneath the aged cloak, though once a pretty shade of blue, was becoming threadbare. She hadn't thought much about refurbishing her wardrobe in the last two years. She had been devastated at her mother's death, and then this year her father's health had been dwindling; socializing had been out of the question.

The sound of laughter across the street caught her attention, and she glanced in the direction of the hearty noise.

Two men stood at the curbing at the edge of the avenue, but only one of them stood out. It was as though the atmosphere around him glowed, and her heart actually skipped a beat and then made up for the offense by beating faster.

His beaver-skin top hat was set saucily on his head of black silky hair. His black cloak had been rakishly thrown back over one shoulder, revealing not only the cream silk lining but the breadth of his obviously muscular chest.

As Sassy's gaze traveled up to his face, unconsciously a small breath of air left her lungs, swished up her throat, and escaped in an audible gasp.

He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, but more than that he was the man who had been making passionate love to her in her dreams!

This was madness. This was ... Before she could complete the thought, *it happened*. Only this time it was different. This time he right there. He was nearby—the man of her dreams was standing only thirty feet away.

His blue eyes had suddenly locked with hers, and all at once she felt herself transported to another place.

It was a bedroom—and she recognized the bedroom, for she had been there many times in her dreams. It was as though she were in a theatre shamelessly watching herself, watching him—watching, experiencing things she had no physical knowledge of.

She was a virgin, and yet in her dream she had been his intimately many times. Now, with him so near, she saw herself naked and lying across dark smooth sheets.

He was bending towards her, his blue eyes glittering, his black silky hair falling across and touching her breasts as he licked her nipple and then suckled there with expertise that sent her

body into a convulsion of pleasure. His fingers moved over her flesh, and she could feel herself clench with desire as he touched—

What ... ? No. No—this was just schoolgirls' talk coming back to haunt her. This had to stop. She had to stop. She tried to break with the vision. How could she know what it would feel like to have a man ... how could she know?

And then she saw something in his eyes across the avenue that told her a fact she could not deny! *She wasn't having this illusion alone. He was as well. It was so real and not only for her—but for him.*

When he took a step into the street towards her, Sassy Winthrop ran as fast as her little walking boots could take her and escaped around the corner.

~ One ~

THE VICAR'S ROOM was in darkness as Sassy got up from her chair where she had been keeping vigil to open the curtains and allow some of the morning light into the room.

"Sassy," her father whispered hoarsely.

She turned and ran to sit near him on the bed. The sheets felt cold to the touch, and she frowned.

The vicar of Sutton moved fretfully for a moment and then stopped to stare at her. He reached a hand, and she took it to kiss his fingers. "I'm here, Papa."

It had been a long and difficult night. "Papa," she said, gently brushing his hair back from his brow, "I am here, everything is fine. You are getting better." She didn't believe her words, but she needed to comfort him somehow.

"Hush, child, I need to remind you before I go ... keep your secret close. Never allow anyone to know, and never use it in any but life-and-death matters."

"Yes, Papa. You and Mama taught me well, and I understand, so don't worry," she answered, putting a damp cloth to his sweating forehead.

"Yes, my dear ... but there will be times when you are tempted to use what is in you ... *be careful.*"

"Yes, Papa, I know," she repeated. He was saying good-bye. How could she bear it?

"Your mother always told me that you were special. She said yours was the gift of many ... that it had passed over her and into you."

"Don't think about it, Papa."

"Hush now. I have made arrangements for you, my beloved girl, to go to ... Lady ... Lady ... I ... made ... arrangements ... Lady ... Margate ..." His words were labored; she had to lean forward to hear him.

"I know, Papa," she said, the words catching in her throat as she struggled not to cry. "I know."

"Promise you will go to her ... for the new vicar will arrive here ... and you ... will lose your

home.” He moved again fretfully. “I thought you would be safely married before I had to go ... *my fault* ... all my fault.”

“Nonsense—nothing is your fault.”

“Promise me, child ... you will let Lady Margate protect you ...” His voice was scarcely a whisper.

“I promise, but I shan’t have to go anywhere. You will get better and ...” He slumped, and she touched him gently. “Papa?” Realization sped through her, and with an anguished cry she bent her head onto his hand and sobbed.

* * *

Sassy put down the miniature of her mother and paced as she thought about the last few months. Nightmarish? Nearly, though most of the time, she had felt numb. Both her parents within two years of each other were gone, and now, now she had to leave her home—the only home she had ever known.

She gazed at herself in the long mirror. She had lost weight, and her pretty day gown of pale green needed some taking in at the waist. Her black hair, though still full of luster and curls as it hung about her shoulders and back, also needed some attention. Sad green eyes looked back at her.

Her father had been a vicar in a small village and thus had brought in very little income. It had been supplemented by her mother’s small trust, which her family had not been able to undo.

Her mother’s family had turned their backs on her when she married Sassy’s father, for she had spurned the plans they had for her.

Now that small living was Sassy’s, but the home ... the home would go to the new vicar.

Lady Margate had called on Sassy immediately after the funeral and reiterated the vicar’s wish for Sassy to join her at Tanderlay Place, and thus Sassy began putting her affairs in order.

Even so, leaving had been impossible until she received the letter that a new vicar had been appointed and would soon be arriving.

A note was dispatched to Tanderlay Place, advising Lady Margate that Sassy was ready to leave.

And so it was, Sassy with her well-kept secrets, unsure, grieving and unsteady, prepared to leave the only life she had ever known.

***According to prophesy, Ravena is the only one who can rescue a powerful sorcerer trapped in another dimension—but the prophesy doesn't promise she'll survive the experience. Read her story in
Hungry Moon—Quicksilver***

~ Prelude ~

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

1575, Scottish Highlands, where many honored their clans and chose to follow the old ways

Quinn MacValdane had a great deal of weight on his shoulders, but those shoulders were huge and certainly capable of carrying the burden. The weight, however, was unlike any other he had ever lifted, and he was tired of constantly having to deal with it. He just wasn't ready to get married!

He was more than six months away from turning thirty and tired of the nagging as his birthday drew closer. He had to get out and away from it!

Mayhap he just needed a tussle with the pretty tavern wench, Sarah, to loosen up his nerves? Och but he liked her full breasts. The notion of her naked body under him made him smile, and he felt his dick spring up, ready for action.

A crackle of twigs made him look around and hold his lantern up.

He had heard the rumors but had shrugged them off. He wasn't concerned—why should he be?

He was a sorcerer with supreme powers and had naught to fear from the beast.

Thus, he proceeded into the woods to take the shortcut to the town tavern. He grinned and hummed to himself, much like a boy at the thought of a few drinks with his friends and then a bit of fun with Sarah. She was a lovely, full-bodied woman ...

He heard something again.

His hearing had always been extraordinary, and it told him now that something moved stealthily through the woods at his back and was eating up distance between them.

Once again, he held up his lantern and looked around—not afraid, but wary, very wary, for he knew that something evil was at his back.

He touched the silver-tipped sword that was tucked at his belt. If something rabid was out there, it was time to put an end to it! And, bloody damn, he was just the man to do it. He would enact his shield, protect himself from getting bitten, and finish the beast once and for all. The shield would protect him from the dangers of a rabid bite.

Everything in the forest seemed to go still.

Nothing seemed to move. Even the crickets had ceased their chatter.

Warily he started forward again.
His mother's face flashed in his mind.
If only she would stop her nagging at him. Lately it was always the subject at the dinner table.
She was a dear heart, but he wasn't in love, and he wasn't ready to tie himself down to one woman.

She wanted grandchildren, something to fill the void and still the grief of his father's passing.
She wanted him to carry on the line.

He liked being single ... he liked women ...

He had told her to leave him be.

He was the only son, she enjoyed reminding him. She wanted to keep Valdane in a direct line.
If he didn't have a son, the castle and the estate would go to his father's brother. What she didn't realize was *he didn't care*. He loved his good uncle—why shouldn't the estate go to him?

These thoughts were once again interrupted, and Quinn MacValdane knew the creature was not only at his back, it had had gained ground.

The first thing that assailed him was the odor. Musky, and because his sense of smell was as good as his hearing, the scent of fresh sweet blood filtered through to him. It was dripping saliva mixed with blood.

The second thing that assailed him was the sound of the beast, the low, unthinking wild growl. The sound was primal as the creature trumpeted hungrily with mindless rage.

The third thing was the sure knowledge that this was something sinister, something otherworldly: more, so much more than a rabid beast—more than the 'werewolf' he had actually expected to appear.

It was near, and it was exploding with Dark Magic.

This beast was frothing at the mouth and mad.

He would not be able to outrun it, and he wasn't sure his shield would hold against its Dark Magic. What was this? What kind of werewolf had magic?

He felt its power vibrate in the air. He had been just a teen when the male members of his family had hunted and killed a werewolf years ago. This was so much more.

Quinn MacValdane did the only thing he could do: he enacted a spell that enswathed him with a protective shield.

It should have been enough.

He set down his lantern and withdrew his silver-tipped sword.

His shield should have worked like a coat of armor, but he had been right—this was more, so much more than a werewolf. This creature wielded Dark Magic and had stalked him with purpose.

It stood a foot taller than Quinn's six feet. It clawed the air, its amber eyes burning with bloodlust. It was drooling saliva and blood from its recent kill, and it roared with fury.

Quinn looked into its eyes and knew he was looking into the eyes of madness. It swiped at him, but its claws bounced off his shield.

Infuriated, it went down on all fours, and Quinn heard the voice, its voice, in his head as it began reciting an ancient Gaelic spell.

And then he knew.

It was tearing apart his shield with its magic.

He looked up and noted the moon was in its full glory as the feral creature attacked with a ferociousness he believed would kill him.

He picked his spot and began maneuvering it in a circle. It kept its head low and stared at his sword, which seemed to deter it.

Quinn couldn't get over its size ... huge and pulsating with power.

He studied it, trying to get its measure, its weakness. Its fur was ragged, spotted with what smelled and looked like blood.

Fangs, sharp fangs snapped as it snarled. Violence governed its purpose, and that purpose was to tear, maim, kill—and something else. Usurp. It wanted his magic. He could hear its thoughts in his head. What kind of werewolf was this?

Devour ... take ... take Quinn's magic. Damn, how did it know his name? How the bloody hell could it know his name? Who was this? Weres lost all memory of themselves, their loved ones—it was part of their curse. This one was a thinking, magical beast.

He could detect nothing of the human in it. And yet, somehow, it seemed familiar, must be familiar if it knew his name?

This thing looked to be unmistakably insane, and yet, Quinn fancied he saw purpose in its amber-lit eyes.

Would his white magic work against the beast?

Once again it attempted to slash at him. Quinn jumped out of the way, knowing he had to call on darker magic to protect himself.

He needed a ward, but he had no time to create one. He had but one chance for survival.

The silver-edged short sword he was never without.

And then the werewolf sprang into action, and Quinn sneered as he shouted, "Well then, beast—come and get it if ye be a mind to!" He plunged his sword just at the right moment directly in the center of its beating heart.

But even as the were roared and suffered excruciating pain, even as it started to fall, even as death began to take it, its jaws locked down on Quinn's shoulder and bit—*bit hard*—and Quinn's fate was sealed.

He was able to punch and beat the creature off, and he watched as it fell to the ground, rolled over onto its back, and began the transformation back into man.

Quinn saw at once it was Whelan MacPoole, clan leader of the neighboring estate. *Husband to his mother's sister.*

They had never been friends throughout their family's history. He should have known. He should have suspected. The signs had been there all along, if only he'd noticed.

Quinn bent, pulled his silver-tipped sword from the man's heart, and stood to look up at the stars before closing his eyes.

He had been bitten.

~ *Prologue* ~

All that glisters is not gold

—William Shakespeare

Present day, New Jersey

RAVENA MACALLISTER LOOKED at her wristwatch. It was nearly six o'clock. It had been a hectic day. Graduation was over. She had her BA in her hand, but she had one more night at the fashion school where she had been taking additional classes as she pursued her dream of designing clothes for the fashion industry.

Todd Decker, her boyfriend of two months—a record for her, as she rarely dated, let alone ever thought of any as ‘keepers’—wasn't expecting her. She had thought she had one last class at the Fashion Institute, but it had been cancelled.

She was going to surprise him. *Tonight was the night.*

He had been trying to get her into bed. She had been resisting. Why? She couldn't put a finger on it. Perhaps she wanted more. Her friends told her she was nuts, that she would lose him. She didn't want to lose Todd, and she knew after two months he was getting impatient with her refusal to take it to the next level.

She liked his kisses. She was nearly sure he was the ‘special one’ she had been looking for, but she just couldn't put a finger on her reluctance to take it to the next step. Jump into bed with him, her libido demanded.

At twenty-one she was old enough and mature enough to handle what her mother had called the *consequences of sleeping with a man who may not want you the next morning*. Would he not want her the next morning? Did it matter? It did, but why—why should it matter? She was living in an age when a woman could be intimate with a man just for pleasure ... just for a night. She wanted more, that was why; something in her inner being wanted more, and she knew with a shake of her head what that something was ... hidden, dormant ... *secret*.

A tall, beautifully framed mirror hung on the far wall of her bedroom, and she moved to stand in front of it. She blew at the wavy golden bangs that tickled her forehead. She cocked her head, gave her waist-length silky hair another brush, and twirled the shorter curls on either side of her heart-shaped face. She supposed she would do.

Ravena didn't consider herself stupid about sex and guys. She used to laugh with her friends and say she was a slow-blossoming flower waiting for just the right amount of water and sun.

She knew the general male population considered her hot, and she had to admit she liked the way she looked in the reflection staring back at her. *Yup*, she told herself, her dress was really eye-catching. However, insecurity nibbled at her mind. What if her inexperience turned him off? What if she got clumsy taking off her clothes? What if ... on and on.

She sucked in air. For Rave, this was a really big step. Guys had been coming on to her ever

since she was fourteen, but no one had ever interested her before Todd. *Her* Todd (and he had encouraged her to think of him that way) was big, bold, handsome, ambitious—a keeper. She liked him so much ... *but did she love him?*

Her girlfriends had told her to go for it because it was time. Her best friend Meg had told her she was crazy if she didn't *close the deal* with Todd because someone else would. Meg had laughed at her and told her she didn't need to be 'in love' to have a good time.

Her mother had told her to wait until she was ready. Her father had whispered over the phone quietly that he rather thought she should wait until she was in love. *Was she ready? Was she in love?*

She wasn't sure, but she did think it was time to find out.

Her heart wanted to do what her dad had told her—fall in love and know it first. She sighed and wished she were with her father roaming the Highlands of Scotland like they always did every summer. She wished she could sit and talk to him; he didn't get her all crazy like her mother always did.

Another sigh followed this thought. It was because of Todd that she had told her dad she might not be staying the entire summer with him this year. That troubled her as well. She really wanted to return to the Highlands and her father—even more than she wanted to be with Todd. *Did that mean she didn't love Todd?*

She smoothed the low-cut black silky dress that clung to her curves.. She had designed and then made the dress herself. She knew she looked sexy as hell and that her mother would raise an eyebrow—so the trick was to get past her overprotective parent without being seen.

She made it down the stairs of their Colonial styled-home and then remembered the keys were in the kitchen. She peeked into the kitchen. Her mother wasn't there—nor was her stepfather, who was probably tinkering around in the garage. Rave scooped up her keys from the tray on the desk near the fridge and was out the door and nearly to her pale green Saturn parked out front when she heard her mother call her name.

"Rave—honey ... *wait!*" Her mother ran towards her.

Ravena couldn't stop the impatient tone as it escaped her lips. "Yes, Mom." But she loved her, so she stopped and turned, glanced archly at her, and sighed. It struck her that no one would guess the petite, green-eyed redhead staring authoritatively at her was her mother.

Rave had her father's gold hair and his dark, multi-shaded gray eyes, and although she was not tall, she was in her stocking feet, five feet five inches and towered over her mother's five foot one.

Her mother gave her back the challenge with a raised brow that said it all. Rave laughed and hugged her before holding her shoulders. "Don't worry."

"Where are you going?" She looked her over and sighed. "Wait, let me guess: to see *Todd*."

Ravena frowned. "I know you don't like him, but I don't have time now to argue in his defense."

"No, it is more than a simple matter of liking or disliking the young man. It is that I don't think he is the *right man* for you. He is still a boy ... and, Rave, that will never do for you—you need *a man*."

"And what sort of man are we talking about?" Ravena teased.

"This is serious. You will know when you meet him, and it isn't Todd, who is more interested

in himself and *his needs* than yours.”

“You don’t really know him.”

“I do know him. I watch from the outside and know him very well.” Her mother sighed. “However, perhaps it is as my Tom says. He feels the same way as I do about Todd, but he doesn’t want to be drawn into this. He says sometimes we each have to learn from our own mistakes.”

Tom was her mother’s husband. Her parents had been divorced since she was two, having married only because her mother had found herself pregnant. Her stepfather had come into their lives when Rave was ten. He was a good guy, and she had grown to love him over the years.

Affection flooded her, and she smiled in spite of her impatience. “Tom is right, Mom. I need experiences—good and bad.” She had never called him anything but ‘Tom’ because although she did in fact love her stepfather, she felt she had only one dad.

“Look, baby, I don’t want you hurt ...”

“Like you?” Rave again arched her brow.

“Don’t be annoying to win a point. You know your father didn’t hurt me. He and I were never in love ... not really. And we certainly weren’t made for each other. He was who he was ... and I was so different. We were friends—we still are. But I have this awful feeling that Todd *will* hurt you.”

Ravena saw the look of helplessness in her mother’s eyes and touched her cheek. “I am old enough to know what I am doing.”

“We all say that at your age ...”

Irritation swept over Ravena’s face, and she grimaced at her mother before she walked away with a wave of her hand. “Don’t wait up.” She jumped into her car and did not look back as she pulled away from the curb.

Guilt suddenly flooded through her. She shouldn’t have left her mother like that. But what could she do? She would make it up to her tomorrow. Besides, she was a college grad. She was twenty-one. She was all grown up.

Over the years Ravena had heard her mother refer to her marriage to her father, Daniel MacAllister, as a mistake, and she hated hearing that. It negated all the good.

She was so much more her father’s child than her mother’s. An odd thing to admit even to herself but so true.

For the hundredth time she thought about changing her plans once more and just heading off to Scotland for the summer—maybe making a side trip and visiting with her grandmother, her father’s Canadian Indian mother, first.

She took a long gulp of air and bolstered herself. Todd was a great guy. She was doing the right thing—*wasn’t she*? He had committed himself to her in so many ways. He talked about the future. It was what she wanted, wasn’t it—a normal future? *Did she want a future with him? Was she making the same mistake her mother had made—settling for someone who made her comfortable? Because to date, he damn well did not make her feel ... passionate!* The sorry truth was that no one ever had ... yet.

Well, that would change tonight—wouldn’t it? She turned the corner, pulled into the lot adjacent to Todd’s apartment house complex, and parked. Princeton was a charming university town, and students were everywhere. Two acquaintances waved to her as she got out of her car

and headed for the building.

She reached his door, key in hand, and hesitated. She had never used the key before. She was here unannounced. Should she use the key? *Don't be silly—he gave it to me to use.* She put the key in the lock, opened the door, and stepped into the small, sparsely furnished living room.

She froze.

Todd and her best friend, Meg, were on the small shag rug on the living room floor, grunting and going at it with wild abandon.

Todd must have felt a draft on his bare butt, for he suddenly turned, saw her, and started scrambling to his feet. “Rave ... Rave ... no ... this ... *this is nothing* ... Rave!” he shouted as he threw his clothing on hastily.

Too late—so few letters, such small words, such large meaning. Too late.

Ravena backed up clumsily until she hit the closed door at her back. She turned then, opened the door, and with shock and hurt flooding through her veins, *she ran.*

About Claudy Conn

Claudy Conn, a native New Yorker, now lives with her husband, Bob; their wolf, Cherokee; and Cherokee's son, Rocky Man, who weighs in presently at 190 pounds.

She loves horses and riding and raised her ten-year-old gelding Southern Pride from the moment he was born. She also loves gardening, swimming, skiing, hiking, and travel—and of course, reading, writing, but no, she says, no arithmetic!

To get her monthly news, her reviews for all her new paranormal romances, and excerpts, come on and visit her at her website: <http://www.claudyconn.com>

To see pictures of Cherokee—and her shepherd-wolf son!—have a look at her Facebook page:
<http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Claudy-Conn-Paranormal-Romance-Author/135826686471445>

Read more about Claudy Conn's books

Risqué Regencies

Myriah Fire

Myriah Whitney wants thunder and lightning, not a proper courtship and a sensible marriage. Then circumstances lead to an encounter with the mysterious Lord Kit Wimborne—in his bed, with both of them naked, no less!—and the meeting is an explosion of wills that finally sets Myriah on fire ...

Oh, Cherry Ripe

Cheryl Elton has been in London for three seasons and refuses to be courted. When her mother takes matters into her own hands, Cherry runs!

Rogues, Rakes & Jewels

What happens when an eligible marquis pretends to be a rake and a gambler, and the woman he is supposed to be courting disguises herself as a masked French card dealer? Find out in this spicy, risqué Regency romance.

Wildfire Kiss

Lady Babs is a rule-breaker, but has she met her match in Lord Wildfire?

Runaway Heart

Chelsea takes London by storm, but the only man she wants thinks she is no more than a child.

Legend Series

Prince Prelude—Legend

In this stand-alone tale and the backstory for the Legend series, we find ourselves in 1814. Gais and the prince come head to head over a woman. We will see Lamia DuLaine when she first sees Julian Talbot, and we will meet the first Maxie Reigate. Come along and see their world unfold...

Spellbound—Legend

Maxie is a reluctant heroine who travels to Scotland to find and save herself. Julian is a Druid priest in a modern age, and he is full of guilt—Can Maxie turn to him? Or will she turn to Prince Breslyn, a Royal Fae hunk offering her everything?

Aaibhe—Shee Queen (Novelette)

This is a love story but it is fringed with envy, jealousy, and bitterness—oh and more. It is laced with the havoc those devastating emotions can bring. It is about the seeds of hate born of love, and what havoc that hate can wantonly roar over even immortals. This is a story of Aaibhe, Queen of the Seelie Fae, because she deserves that it be told.

Shee Willow—Legend

Half-human, half-Fae Willow Lang has never felt she truly fit in either world, but she's doing her best to ignore her Fae nature. But when she finds herself in the middle of a conflict between the Seelie Fae and the evil Dark Fae, she must embrace her Fae powers in order to protect the Human world.

Prince in the Mist (Novella)

Fact one: By tradition and treaty, Fae do not interfere with the human world—it is against the rules. Fact two: For a Royal Fae prince who suffers from the ennui of immortality, watching and interacting with humans—especially lovely, spirited human females—can be entertaining. Fact three: When entertainment changes to affection, and affection becomes love, rules will be broken.

Trapped—Legend

Magical powers, a castle, and a charming prince sound like the ingredients for a fairy-tale life, but for BJ Mulroy, reality turns out to be a whole lot more complicated. The war between the Seelie and the Unseelie is heating up, BJ has been drawn into the fray ... and there's the matter of the seventeenth-century hunk in the painting.

Free Falling—Legend

They call her Z, and she is a handful ready to explode. She has entered the war against Gais and the Dark Fae and means to take him on all by herself. She is driven. Aaibhe, Queen of the Seelie Fae, has other plans, and she sends in Prince Danté to execute and preserve her wishes. When Z and the prince meet, hackles go up on both sides.

Catch & Hold—Legend

Half-human/half-Daoine Fae Radzia MacDaun—Z to her friends—finds herself in the Dark Realm, where she'll have to fight Gaiscioch on his own turf. Danté, Prince of the Tuatha Dé and Z's lover, is not about to let her face this danger alone, however, and the two of them are thrust on a ride that takes them to the edge of life as we know it ...

Shadow Series

ShadowLove—Stalkers

Shawna Rawley has no choice but to run when Pentim Rawley, one of the most evil vampires who has ever lived, discovers she is his daughter. Chad MacFare has an offer for Shawna he thinks she can't afford to refuse: he'll protect her from Pentim and his minions. But Shawna doesn't trust the sexy immortal. She knows he has his own agenda—he wants to kill her father, and he wants to set her up as bait ...

ShadowHeart—Slayer

Damon Drummond and Nikki Walker are on opposite sides. He is a potent vampire—she is a skilled and powerful vampire slayer. Problem right there ... but when they look at each other, sparks of all kinds fly. Too much stands between them: He will live forever, she will not, and yet ...

ShadowLife—Hybrid

WB and his clan have moved in, and section by section Dublin is going dark. When the team needs help, they turn to a shapeshifter, Roxie MacBran.

Time Series

Through Time-Pursuit

Revenge is the driver. Will love be the equalizer in *Through Time-Pursuit*? Chance LeBlanc and Princess Royce are about to find out in this contemporary fantasy romance, picking up where *Catch & Hold—Legend* left off.

Hungry Moon Series

Hungry Moon: Quicksilver

Seeking a haven in which to recover from heartache and betrayal, Ravena MacAllister returns to the Scottish Highlands she loves. But instead of peaceful solitude, Rave discovers a passion she had never dreamt possible and an adventure that will change her life—if she survives. Oh, and she's also going to have to face a truth she has long tried to deny: *she is not exactly human*.



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