



The Duke's Price (Wayward Dukes' Alliance #18)

Author: *Jude Knight*

Category: Historical

Description: As a governess, Ruth Henwood has always put her pupils first, sometimes sacrificing her own interest. The choice facing her now could become the highest sacrifice of them all.

Two men want her as their mistress. The Spanish war hero, the Duque de la Sombras, plans to wed the Princesa Isabella, Ruth's fourteen-year-old pupil, but promises not consummate the marriage if Ruth will come willingly to his bed. The English rake, the Duke of Richport promises help her and Bella to escape Isabella's tiny Pyrenean kingdom, but his price is the same.

Ruth's decision must be guided by what is best for Bella. No matter that one man repels her, and one man is a risk to her heart.

Richport lost his heart to his wife when he was seventeen, and had it broken and trampled on. He has managed very well without a heart in the twenty-six years since, gaining the nickname Duke of Depravity. His offer to Ruth is a heartless joke—he always intended to help her and her charge. But if she takes him up on the offer, he will be happy to school the governess in the ways of the flesh.

Little does Richport realise that his heart is back on the line once more.

But love is not their worst risk. The duque is in hot pursuit, and is determined to take back what he believes to be his own.

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The Duke of Richport was bored. Carlos was not as much fun as he remembered. To be fair, nothing had truly amused Perry Frampton, Duke of Richport, since he had fled from England just ahead of embarrassment, scandal, and possible retribution.

Certainly not Carlos's plans to seduce his cousin's governess. Miss Ruth Henwood was eminently seduction-worthy. Perry guessed her to be in her mid-thirties, but she had the kind of bone structure that meant she would be beautiful in her nineties, and a figure of which most women could only dream.

"I will, of course, bed my cousin as soon as we are married," Carlos said.

Wait. What? "I thought you were going to promise the governess that you would allow your bride to grow up a little before demanding your marital rights," Perry said.

Carlos snorted with disdain. "A promise to a woman. Who regards such a thing? Not I."

Pouring another drink was better politics than commenting. Perry never made promises. Not to women; not to anyone. But—perhaps it was a vestige of his upbringing as a gentleman—he firmly believed that promises made must be kept. "A gentleman's word is his bond," and all that.

Carlos paid no attention to Perry's silence. "No, no. I cannot wait. Bella must have children, enough to secure the throne. It is my patriotic duty to plant them in her as soon as possible. I shall have them both, and expect to get pleasure from both, I

promise you. Bella will be fifteen soon enough, and is ripe for the plucking. Fiery, too. I shall have to school her to show her who is master. I think I shall have to teach discipline to the governess, too. There is fire, I believe, under that starchy English reserve.”

Undoubtedly, and Perry wanted to be the one to uncover it. Not to quench the flames, either, as Carlos would, but to pour fuel onto them and warm himself at the conflagration. He took a sip from his drink.

“What will Princess Isabella’s people think of your marriage?” he asked. Carlos would be inviting a conflagration of quite a different kind if the citizens of the principality of Las Estrellas thought their princess was being badly treated.

“My people love me,” Carlos boasted, emphasising the word ‘my’. “I am their war hero. I saved them from Napoleon.”

Carlos had, it was true, led a cadre of guerillas in the mountains, taking the war to the French troops in all kinds of devious ways. He had clearly forgotten that those left at home in this small mountain principality had defended it against invasion not once but nine times, even expelling four invasions—one each by the Spanish, the English, and the French, and the final one eighteen months after the war by an army of deserters from all three nations.

And those domestic warriors had been led throughout the war by the father of the same princess he wanted to ‘school’. The prince had given his own life in expelling the third invasion. By that time, his daughter aged nine, was ready to take up her father’s mantle, with the help of a private committee of advisers which included retired soldiers as well as Madre Katerina, the Mother Superior of the local convent.

By the time of the fourth invasion, in the turmoil after the war, that committee included Ruth Henwood, the princess’s governess. Carlos might be a hero to those he

led, though Perry had his own opinion about that, but the bulk of the population preferred the heroines who protected their homes. The princess was a warrior, as were the women who supported her. Teach the governess discipline? Perry resisted the urge to snort. Carlos was likely to wake up with his throat slit if he tried.

Carlos, when he and his men finally sauntered back from Paris three years ago, had used his authority as the princess's guardian to replace all the women on the council, including the princess, with his own men. Spanish men, for that matter, not Estrellasans. Apparently, the population was unhappy with the change.

"I am certain you will do the right thing," he said, utterly convinced though he was of the opposite. But Carlos was his host, and no guest with any pretension to manners would tell his host to pull his head out of the dark orifice into which it had been improbably stuffed.

It was time for him to leave Las Estrellas. He did not want to see Carlos bring his plans to fruition, which he would, for no one here was likely to stop him before he had done his worst.

Nor did he want to be included, as Carlos's guest, in any retribution that followed, as it would, for the people loved both the princess and Miss Henwood.

"I am for my bed, Carlos," he said. Also, not true. He planned to go up and walk on the castle's battlements, and clear his head. He raised his glass in farewell. "Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow, my friend." Carlos returned the salute. "Shall we go hunting? I had a report of a sighting of wolves up on the mountain."

Wolf hunting. Oh, joy. Perhaps it would rain. Perhaps a large earthquake might hit the castle and solve everybody's problems. "How delightful," Perry said.

Ruth Henwood stood on the battlements of the castle and looked out into the night. She was stuck like a rat in a barrel, and the Duque de la Sombras had his guns fully loaded and aimed.

She could run, of course, but that would leave her pupil Bella to the girl's wicked guardian's non-existent mercies. Besides, he would probably send people after her, and she doubted she would even reach the border.

If she took Bella with her, she would guarantee the recapture of them both, for the duque would leave no stone unturned until he had his princess back again. She was daughter to his foster sister, and therefore no relation, though she called him uncle, and her father had named him her guardian. Without her, though, he had no legitimate role in the principality's government.

Ruth could get Bella out of the castle. She thought it possible, even likely, she could get her out of the town. But after that? Two women on their own, in a country where their faces were as well-known as if they were members of every household? And even if they made it out of Las Estrellas, how would they fare in Spain or France, with little money and no way to cover their tracks? Impossible.

Her other choices were even less palatable. She could continue to refuse the duque's advances, but only for as long as he allowed her to do so—she could tell he was losing patience, and one day she fully expected him to take her by force. Probably somewhere in private, for he was still enamoured of his own reputation as the kindly uncle who loved his niece and fought to save her from the evils of Napoleon's army.

Refusing him would not protect Bella, either. As her legal guardian, he had given consent to their marriage. A man approaching forty. Bella was only fourteen. Furthermore, she did not like her uncle. "He makes my skin crawl, Ruth," she said. "And he is cruel. He beats his servants. Also, he is disrespectful, not only to me, but to you and to Madre Katerina."

Madre Katerina was the mother superior of the town's convent of Carmelite nuns, and a member of the Council that had ruled the principality during the war.

Bella was correct. The duque acted like a gentleman when he was being watched by men of status, but in private, or when only women or servants could see him, he was rude, cruel, and offensive.

She had one chance to protect Bella. Except she did not believe that would work either. He had made her a solemn promise— “On the bones of my sainted sister,” he said—that if she would come willingly to his bed, he would put off consummating his marriage to Bella.

Since Ruth had Bella's word for it that her uncle had despised his foster sister, she had more than her instinct to say his promise was not worth a handful of beans.

“Miss Henwood, good evening.”

The voice that interrupted her musing was far from welcome. “Your grace,” she said. The Duke of Richport was as wicked a rake as Sombras, or so said his reputation. She knew this, but apparently her body was of a different opinion. Or perhaps, now she was in her mid-thirties, she had become susceptible to rakes. Certainly, this reaction to a man had never happened before.

She hoped she was successful in concealing her shiver of appreciation of the man's smell and his physical presence.

The duke came up beside her, so she had to shift to avoid being plastered to his side. A far more attractive proposition than it should be, and an exaggeration, besides. At most, his elbow would have brushed hers, and perhaps her skirts might have lingered against his legs.

And there she went again, with thoughts that no respectable governess should tolerate for a moment.

“Stars above in the sky and below in the valley,” the duke commented. “It is as if we wander among the celestial orbs, Miss Henwood. No wonder the land is called Las Estrellas.”

Whimsy, Ruth had not expected, but he was right. With the Valle de las Estrellas in darkness, the lights in the township below the castle did look like stars. Just a few of them. People in Estrellas were far too hard working, as they rebuilt what had been destroyed by the long war, to stay up this late at night.

“I find this view restful at the end of the day,” she commented.

It was not entirely dark on the battlements. Here and there a lamp cast a pool of dim light, and she could see that Richport’s glance at her was amused. “Is that a hint that my absence would be appreciated, Miss Henwood?” he asked.

It would, but not for the reasons he might suppose. “You are a guest of a castle, your grace,” she said, and turned to leave.

“Please,” he said, “grant me a moment of your time. I came looking for you, because I wanted to warn you.”

Warn me of what ? She did not ask the question, but merely waited.

“Sombras has no intention of waiting to consummate his marriage to the Princess Isabella,” said Richport. “He is lying to you, Miss Henwood. He plans to have you both.”

Ruth shut her eyes for a moment. It was as she thought. The duque could not be

trusted. Was there no hope, then? “How do you know this?” she asked. “He told you?”

The duke nodded. “He says he does not regard a promise to a woman.”

Ruth had another question. “Why are you telling me this?” The two men were friends, after all. Yet here was Richport. She did not doubt the truth of what he said—she had suspected Sombras would not honour his promise for long, if at all. And if there was a trap in Richport telling her, she could not imagine what it might be.

Standing as she was with the nearest lamp behind her, she could see a brief uncertainty in his eyes. It extended to his tone as he replied. “Why indeed? Perhaps because I am yet a gentleman in that one matter. I do regard promises—to men, women, children, animals—as binding. That is why I do not make promises. His plans offend honour.”

The duke chuckled. “And listen to me, prating of honour, like an untried cub.” He shrugged, and turned back to look at the view. “Perhaps it is that we are both English. The only English people in all Las Estrellas.”

“Whatever your reasons, your grace, I thank you,” Ruth said. “It is as well to be warned. I can at least prepare Bella for the worst.”

He cast her another glance. “You will give in to him then?”

“Will he give me a choice?”

“No.” Just the one quiet word, but the regret in it started another thought in Ruth’s mind.

“Will you?” she asked.

He turned fully to face her. “Will I give you a choice? What would you have me do? Run my host through with a sword?” His voice was carefully devoid of emotion, giving no clue to his thoughts or feelings.

“Nothing so blood-thirsty,” Ruth assured him. “I am about to trust you with a secret, your grace.”

He grimaced. “If you must do such an unpleasant thing, call me by my name, Miss Henwood. I am Death. De-Ath, if you prefer. It is one of my names, and the one by which I am most often called.”

Ruth knew. She and a former charge had looked Richport up in the castle library’s copy of Debrett’s. Perran Albert Kendrick De-Ath Frampton, Duke of Richport, and a string of lesser titles. De-Ath was a Belgian name of two syllables, but he was more commonly referred to by the English word with the same spelling. And Perran was a Cornish name that meant Black. Had his parents known they were calling him Black Death? If so, they had a very twisted sense of humour.

She ignored the invitation. “I think I can get Bella out of Monteluz without Sombras being aware. I need money to spirit her across the border and then through Spain or France to a port where we can take a ship to England. Will you make me a loan of the money, Your Grace? I will be able to pay you back once I am in England and with my friend and her family.” She had her savings, and she was certain her former pupil, friend, and sister of the heart, the Countess of Chirbury, would give her refuge, and reimburse Richport.

““Will you make me a loan of the money, Death?”” said Richport.

Ruth sighed. She had no patience for games when her life and Bella’s were on the

culp. “Will you make me a loan of the money, De-Ath?” she obediently repeated, though she gave his name the correct pronunciation.

He gazed back out across the valley, his face in shadow again so she could not see his expression. Was he thinking about it? Or had he dismissed her?

After several minutes, she turned to leave the battlements. Ah well. At least I tried .

Miss Henwood was leaving. Was Perry going to do it, or wasn't he? It was unlike him to vacillate. “Miss Henwood,” he said, just as she was about to step through the door into the tower behind him. “I have another proposition for you.”

“Yes?” Her voice was cautious. Wise woman! Beware wicked dukes bearing gifts.

“I have a yacht moored in Collioure, just across the border from Spain in France. I will escort you and the princess to my yacht, and then transport you to England.”

“You will?” The hope in her voice tugged at the dried-up shrivelled vestiges of his conscience. Ridiculous. He was a villain. A villain with some gentlemanly standards, but a villain, nonetheless. If he was going to betray his friend and go to the trouble of a no-doubt uncomfortable dash through the mountains and countryside, then someone had to pay.

“I have a price,” he said.

Miss Henwood did not flinch. “Which is?”

“We will travel as a family—husband, wife, and daughter. Or, given she looks like neither of us and you do not look old enough to be her mother, my daughter, and your step daughter, perhaps.”

Miss Henwood took the few steps back to his side before commenting. “That seems sensible.”

There was one point that should be made clear at the outset. Perry was not doing this as a favour, but as an exchange. “We shall travel as husband and wife in every way except the church blessing on the arrangement, which shall be temporary, Miss Henwood. Until we arrive in England.” By which time, no doubt, he would have tired of her, as he had of all others.

“I see.”

That was it. Neither yes nor no. Perry began laying out plans as if she had already agreed. It was a strategy that had worked for him time out of mind, both in amorous and business negotiations. “If you can get the princess out of the town, it is probably best if I appear to leave Las Estrellas. For Barcelona, perhaps. That way, they will be looking for a woman and girl, not a family. Tell me where to meet you and when, and I shall be waiting.”

Her frown deepened as she thought.

“I shall get the pair of you away to safety, Miss Henwood, and protect you with all my considerable resources until you are safely in the hands of your friend and her family,” he said. It was a vow, he realized. Was he in his dotage or suffering a second childhood? He was becoming a knight errant!

“You will protect me from everyone except you,” said Miss Henwood, the sarcasm heavy in her voice.

She was being coy. He was far too experienced not to know she found him attractive, and surely, she must be in her mid-thirties. She could not be so innocent that she regarded the perfectly natural acts he had in mind as dangerous.

However, it was not in his interests to point out her duplicity

“I shall tell Carlos in the morning that I have a mind to move on,” he said. Once my people and I are out of Las Estrellas, I’ll send most of them along the road to Barcelona. From there, they can cross the border for Collioure. I’ll write a note for them to deliver to my yacht. My valet and I will circle the country and wait for you—where?”

“La Camino del Lobo,” she said, naming the highest pass out of the principality, which was surrounded by mountains. “Bella and I will be there in... four days. Or I shall send a messenger.”

He had her! Did she realise she had just agreed to be his lover? To test her, he said, “A kiss. To seal our bargain and as a deposit in your account.”

Miss Henwood sighed, very much as if he was an annoying child who must be tolerated. However, unless the shadows misled him, she also blushed.

He said nothing, but waited for her to initiate their embrace. She waited, too. Was she playing games with him? That was not what he expected of her, but then women were unaccountable creatures, in many ways.

After a long moment, she said, “Well? Are you going to kiss me?”

“No,” Perry said. “I don’t owe you a kiss. You owe me one. I am waiting for you to kiss me.”

Instead of pouting, frowning, arguing, or laughing at his nonsense and giving him a kiss, Miss Henwood frowned, looking worried, but leaned forward and gave him a peck which would have fallen on his cheek if he had not turned his face to allow their lips to meet.

It lasted less than a second, and was over. Miss Henwood looked relieved. "I will say good night then, your grace."

"Death," he insisted, "and the toll required was a lover's kiss. That was not a lover's kiss, Miss Henwood."

He almost laughed at her huff of annoyance. "De-Ath, then," she said, the stubborn woman. "What am I supposed to know of lover's kisses, De-Ath? I have been a governess since I was seventeen."

Her irritation had him adjusting his assumptions about her experience. "You have never shared a kiss? No randy fathers or adult sons? No sweethearts on your days off?"

She frowned again. His guess that she was thinking about what to tell him was confirmed when she said. "I suppose, if we are to be intimate, you ought to know. I have never shared a lover's kiss. I have had lust's kisses forced on me, but have managed to avoid anything more than rude slobbering and even ruder fumbling."

Her disgust dripped from the words. Perry was suddenly very pleased he had demanded she take the lead in this first encounter. She would soften to him all the sooner if he behaved differently to those who had offended her.

What fools those slobberers and fumlbers were! He had never forced an unwilling woman, though he had seduced more than a few into willingness. As he would Miss Henwood. As he had intended for the lady he had tried to abduct just before he left England. Lady Charlotte had turned down his honourable proposal, and he had accepted his dismissal. Then he had seen her early one morning leaving the home of that notable rake the Marquess of Aldridge, looking noticeably debauched.

He had waited, expecting an announcement, and when none came, he had had her

kidnapped, to accompany him on his exile. As his duchess, for she was a well-born lady, the granddaughter and niece of a ducal house.

He had misread the situation, for Aldridge had rescued her. Perry had fled the country more rapidly than he had intended. In a foreign port some time later, he heard that the pair had married after all. Ah, well. Ancient history, and Perry had never liked dwelling on his mistakes. Especially with such a delectable lady before him.

“Well, then,” he said. “In this, let me be the teacher, Miss Henwood. You had the right idea touching your lips to mine. Do so again, but let your lips linger. When you are comfortable, open your mouth, and I shall open mine. You can explore my lips and even my mouth with your tongue, if you wish, but if that is too much for a first lesson, then go only to the second step. Touch me with your hands, if you wish. For this first time, I shall keep my hands behind my back.”

He put them there and, for good measure, clasped them together so they would not stray.

Once again, he waited while Miss Henwood considered the matter. Some vestige of conscience stirred. He should tell her he fully intended to help her whether or not she paid his price. After all, he did not make a practice of seducing virgins, though he occasionally allowed a venturesome virgin to seduce him. In part, it was a matter of good sportsmanship—in the perennial war that was relationships between men and women, innocents came unarmed to the battle, and picking them off was not the act of a gentleman. Mostly though, it was that they were too much work, and too much potential drama.

He opened his mouth to tell her a kiss was not necessary, just as she leaned closer and put her lips on his. She was not much shorter than him, so he did not have to bend far. Her lips were soft, plump, and tasted of port, which both surprised and delighted.

As instructed, she lingered. After several moments, she placed her hands on his chest and opened her mouth. It took every amount of discipline Perry could muster not to take over the kiss, but he was rewarded when her tongue slipped between his teeth and touched his own.

At first, she proved her claim of innocence, but he showed her what to do and she copied him with increasing enthusiasm and skill.

Perry had been intimate with the greatest whores in the British Isles, Europe, and the Near East—with both those courtesans who made their living by pleasuring men and those ladies whose rutting was purely about their own pleasure.

He was torn between running away as fast as he could and gathering her closer. He held himself still, all except his own mouth, which was busy giving her all the satisfaction within the reach of his considerable experience.

When his control began slipping from his grasp, he brought the kiss to an end, slowly closing his mouth and dropping kisses along her lip before standing straighter to take his mouth out of her reach.

“You are a very adept pupil, Miss Henwood,” he said. “Thank you. I look forward to further lessons.” Any thought of a different, more honourable course had been burnt to ashes in that inflammatory kiss.

“Once we are safely in France,” she dictated. Her voice trembled. She was not as calm as she tried to appear.

And thank goodness for that. His knees felt weak, and if she had been unaffected by the kiss, he might have leapt off the battlements and ended it all. Well, no, he wouldn’t. Not that. But he would have been very disappointed.

There was no question that this demure governess had vanquished his boredom and given him something delightful to think about. For the first time in many years, the future, particularly once they were out from under Carlos's hand, looked bright.

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O h my. Oh my. That kiss!

Ruth had decided long ago she must be cold by nature. After Anne married the Earl of Chirbury, she had accompanied the lady and her sister Kitty through one long Season in London, bending to Anne's insistence that they were sisters in everything but blood, and she should have the same opportunities as Kitty. Ruth had never met a man who stirred her enough to tempt her to try kissing or even holding hands.

Not that she would ever have done more than that outside of marriage, for she was a virtuous woman, whose most precious possessions were the prayer book her father had given her at her confirmation and the bible that had been her mother's.

After she had insisted on leaving the Chirbury household to go back to teaching, she had had opportunities, but not temptations. She had not enjoyed the embraces of those who thought a governess was theirs for the taking. They never tried twice. Not only had Ruth been taught exactly where to hit a man to dissuade him, the powerful Redepenning clan counted her as one of their own.

The only matron who had decided to believe Ruth was the aggressor in a grapple with the woman's husband was disabused of the notion by the visit of a duchess, two countesses, and two viscountesses. At the same time, the assailant had to deal with the ladies' husbands.

Ruth resigned from the position and was given a glowing reference, and somehow word got around that, when Miss Henwood said 'no', a wise man listened.

‘No’ had not been the word on Ruth’s mind when she was kissing the wicked duke. ‘More’ might have encompassed her feelings better, though—and she could be honest, if only with herself—no word at all had crossed her mind.

She was definitely not cold where the Duke of Richport was concerned.

Which led to the inescapable conclusion that the duke’s price was going to be high, indeed. Not her virginity. Ruth was thirty-five, and was unlikely to ever need the commodity, so she was not concerned about that.

She did expect to suffer for committing a sin—she had long observed the more casual morals of the ton , but underneath it all, she was still a vicar’s daughter. She had thought she would be able to console herself that her participation was unwilling, but that kiss had disabused her of the notion. He had the power to make her body, at least, follow where he led, and her promise to let him have his way with her meant she had handed over her only defence—a refusal to participate at all.

She was old enough, though, to understand that many women gave their hearts to unsuitable men, simply because they had first given their bodies. “The Duke of Richport has no interest in your heart, Ruth. Indeed, I imagine he is only interested in your body because you are English, and he is homesick. And because his friend has made you a dishonourable offer, and men are competitive.”

As long as she continued to tell herself that, she should be able to protect her heart from too much damage. And truly, she could see no other course with a better, or even equal, chance of success.

He had already, with his suggestions, proved to be a capable co-conspirator, and he was correct that she and Bella would be much safer with him as their escort than as two females on their own.

They did not have much time to lay their plans and put them into practice. She returned to the suite of rooms she shared with Bella. She could see light under her pupil's door. Good. The girl was still awake, probably reading. Ruth knocked.

"Miss Henwood," Bella said, when she opened the door. She looked a little wary. She probably expected Miss Henwood to remind her how late it was, and a year ago, she would have been right.

Ruth looked over the princess's shoulder to scan the room. Bella's maid was nowhere in sight, but even so, Ruth lowered her voice and spoke in English, which few of the servants in the castle understood. "We need to talk about escape, my dear. May I come in?"

Bella nodded even as she stepped out of the way.

"Can we escape, Miss Henwood? How?"

"The Duke of Richport has agreed to help us," Ruth said. "He will meet us at La Camino del Lobo in four days, and will escort us to England. We need to get word to Madre Katerina."

"Must I leave?" Bella asked. "I do not want to abandon my people to Uncle Carlos."

"You are not abandoning them, darling girl," Ruth reassured her. "Your horrid uncle will allow you no part in running the country, and until you reach your majority, you can do nothing to counter his orders. Furthermore, he will marry you, by force if necessary, and then he will expect you to obey him, even after you are twenty-one."

Should she tell Bella what she suspected? Yes. The girl was of marriageable age and an important political token. She deserved all the information so she could protect herself. "The duque intends to bed you as soon as you are married. He wants several

possible heirs before you are old enough to be a threat to him.”

It was a measure of the duque that Bella leapt immediately to the same conclusion as Ruth. “He will kill me when he has another... what is the English word? Another statue? Another bust, is it? To put on the throne of my dear Las Estrellas.”

Bella’s English was excellent. It was a measure of her distress that she struggled to recall the correct word.

“Figurehead,” Ruth said. “And yes, that is what I fear.”

Bella was silent as she considered, then she looked up, her eyes blazing and her jaw set. “Then I must run, and my people will know that I am safe, and will endure until I return. Why does the English duke help us? He is another such as my uncle, is he not?”

“He is not, I think, a bully.” Ruth didn’t want to give Richport too much credit, however. “Proud and fond of giving orders, but he is a duke, after all.”

“And has much experience with women, I think,” said Bella, knowingly.

“He says only willing women.”

Bella’s curled lip expressed her opinion. “So, I expect, does my uncle. What does Richport want, Miss Henwood? Me?”

Again, Ruth had a quick debate with herself about how much to tell Bella, but the girl would be travelling with them, after all. “Me,” she said. “He wants me to be his lover, Bella.”

After some more thought, Bella asked, “Have you ever had a lover, Miss Henwood?”

“No, I have not.”

Bella’s response was unexpected. “I think the duke would be a good one. I do not think the same of my uncle. The duke may be a—how do you say it? Some sort of garden implement?”

Not a word they had had occasion to cover in their lessons. Ruth wondered where Bella had heard it. “A rake. It means a womaniser.”

“Yes. A rake, though why... But never mind. The duke may be a rake, but he treats you and me with respect even when others are not watching, and the servants like him. One can tell a lot about a man by what the servants see, for people do not bother to pretend in front of the servants.”

“Yes,” Ruth said. “I agree that the duke is a better man, in some ways, than your uncle. He has promised to see us safely to England, and he claims to always keep his promises.”

“Then it remains only to ask if you want to be the duke’s lover. For if you do, then I think we should let him help us. You will gain a good lover, and we shall both escape my uncle.”

Ruth blinked while she absorbed this pragmatic view of things.

“It is simpler than you think, Bella,” she said. “Either way, I am going to give my reputation away to someone. My choice is whether to submit to your uncle and see you forced by him as well, or run away with you and Richport, in the hope that I can get you safely to England. And yes, while I do not entirely trust Richport, I trust your uncle even less.”

“It is not as bad as you think, becoming Richport’s lover,” Bella said. “Only you, the

duke, and I will know for certain, so you need not fear a loss of reputation. Virtue, yes, but as you say, keeping that is not one of your choices.”

“You are right,” Ruth replied, struck once again by Bella’s pragmatism.

“Well then,” said Bella. “I shall plan a retreat.” She grinned. “I shall tell my uncle that I need a time of prayer to prepare myself spiritually to be a good wife. Shall we compose a letter to the good mother?”

It took them nearly an hour to find the words that would convey what was needed to Madre Katerina.

Ruth had been Bella’s governess for four years, and was so used to the Spanish dialect used in the principality of Las Estrellas that she dreamed in it. Nonetheless, for purposes such as this, English was better. Madre Katerina was familiar enough with the language to make the translation, and Don Sombras, God rot him, could probably make a fist of it, though much good it would do him, since it was in code. But otherwise, the only person likely to be able to read the note was the Duke of Richport, who in this case, did not matter.

To the most excellent Mother Catherine

I trust this epistle finds you well. I am myself in some perturbation of soul, good mother. I am to be wed to my good guardian, the Duque de la Sombras. It is the best thing for my land and my people, but I am yet a child, and had selfishly hoped for a handsome young man. Yes, I know you will tell me that I must do my duty, and indeed, I wish to obey wiser heads than my own.

Dear mother, may I come and spend some time in prayer and fasting in the convent? With your counsel, I am confident that my thoughts will soon turn in a more humble and feminine direction.

I would wish to come to you on Friday, in the afternoon and descend into the Chapel of Our Mother the Star of the Mountains. How wonderful to stay there for Saturday, offering prayers to the Holy Virgin who is our great example of doing the will of God. I would be happy to welcome as many of the nuns as wish to make the retreat, and together we shall ascend to new heights of humility and obedience.

The castle will expect me back after Mass on Sunday, in a better frame of mind.

Miss Henwood will come with me, sharing this journey of a soul, for she, too, faces a great change in her circumstances.

With great affection and respect.

Isabella Estrellas.

I am in trouble , the note meant. Sombras is trying to force a marriage against my will. Allow me to use the tunnels from the chapel in the basement to escape the city and make our way into the mountains. You and the nuns should probably come with me, for by Sunday, Sombras will know we have escaped.

“There,” said Ruth. “In the morning, send that note. I suggest we inform your uncle during the afternoon audience, when as many people as possible are there to hear you.

Perry decided that refusing the wolf hunt the following morning would have two benefits. First, he would avoid a cold wet ride up and down mountains in pursuit of an animal he didn’t want to kill. Second, it would annoy Carlos, and thus set the scene for Perry’s planned departure.

As it turned out, he’d already achieved the second goal, as he discovered when he sought Carlos out immediately after leaving the chambers that had been assigned to him.

The man was down in the stables, giving orders for horses to be saddled and minions to be sent to drive the wolves toward the hunters.

He greeted Perry's cheerful good morning with a frown and a grunt.

"I must make my excuses," Perry said. "I would prefer not to go hunting."

"You have other game in mind?" Carlos asked, his tone clipped and his brows drawn together in a frown. "I heard you were hunting my governess on the battlements last night."

Ah! They had been observed, then. Perry should have guessed that Carlos was having Miss Henwood watched.

The key to being irritating but not dangerously so was to keep it light. Perry had been in five duels in his early twenties, before he got the balance right, and only one since. "I tried my hand," he admitted cheerfully. "Sadly, your governess was not interested, even when I offered to take her with me when I leave."

"Oh? I am reliably informed that you kissed her," growled Carlos. "That sounds interested to me."

Perry chuckled. "I wish! She is a delectable piece, Carlos, but I wish you well at warming her up! She told me the mattress dance is of no interest to her, and I suggested a kiss as proof that I could change her mind." He shrugged, and infused his voice with wry amusement. "Apparently, I was insufficiently convincing. She tells me she is all but promised to your good self."

That prompted a smile from Carlos. "What? The great lover was rejected? I should have liked to see that."

“Unkind, my friend,” Perry said, all mock indignation.

Carlos relaxed as he swallowed the tripe. People were very predictable. Humour, particularly self-deprecating humour, was a tried-and-true recipe for convincing people that one was being honest.

As if a man couldn’t be lying in his teeth when he was laughing at himself.

“Then come and hunt wolves with me.”

“I have in mind to pack instead,” Perry explained. “Rather than watch you succeed with both governess and pupil, I shall take up my travels again.” This time, he tried for mournful, and succeeded in so far as Carlos laughed out loud.

“If you must,” he said. None of the polite remonstrances Perry had expected to have to deflect. Undoubtedly, Carlo wanted a potential rival out of the principality before Miss Henwood had second thoughts.

“Pack, then, my friend,” Carlos said. “I shall go out with the hunters for a few hours. I will not be going far. It is the weekly audience this afternoon. I would not wish to disappoint my people.”

Carlos did not want to disappoint himself. The weekly audience was an opportunity for him to dress in his fanciest uniform and sit on a throne-like chair dispensing justice and favours in the castle’s grand hall.

“I’ll come to the audience and watch, shall I?” Perry suggested, and Carlos invited him to please himself.

Perry returned to his chambers and spent some time making plans with his valet and writing notes. He then sent out two of his couriers. There. Once he was out of Las

Estrellas, all would be ready for him and for his people.

A walk around the castle failed to satisfy, as he saw neither Miss Henwood nor the princess. He repaired to the castle's excellent library, chose a book to take back to his chambers, and spent a couple of pleasant hours reading.

The hunt returned triumphant. From his window, Perry could see that they'd caught and killed two of the wolves that were apparently haunting the near slopes of the mountains, poor foolish creatures. Carlos might be a cad and a potential tyrant, but he was an excellent leader of men, as successful in the hunt as he had been in the mountain war of attrition against the French.

And he had the loyalty of the Spanish guerillas who had survived the war in Spain and followed him home. It would not do to underestimate the hunt that would certainly start as soon as the princess was missed.

When it was nearly time for the audience, Perry went down to the grand hall, and congratulated Carlos on the success of the hunt.

Carlos waved him to the row of chairs set for the duque's advisors, but Perry laughed and took up a position leaning against the wall near the windows. Not coincidentally, that part of the room had the best view of the door through to the private residence section of the castle, and he was not disappointed. He saw Miss Henwood and Princess Isabella, pausing in the hall outside the door, waiting for Carlos to take his chair and ask for the first supplicant.

It was only then that they entered the audience chamber.

Of course, every seated person in the room stood and bowed or curtsied when the princess appeared, Carlos and his closest aide, Iago Rodriguez Garcia, a second or two behind the rest. Princess Isabella responded with a smile and a curtsy of her

own, took the seat that had been placed just below Carlos's dais, and said, "Please be seated, everyone. Good day, uncle. My apologies for my lateness. Please, carry on."

Miss Henwood was sitting with the advisors. Interesting. Would Carlos challenge her?

He didn't. He just waved a hand at the petitioner who had been about to step forward. "Continue."

Probably wise. Rebuking Miss Henwood would make him look petty, and he never liked people to witness his petty moments. Carlos's definition of people did not include women, servants, or anyone else whose opinion he didn't care about.

To be fair to the bastard, he did a good job of the audience. With his supporters watching, he carefully considered each matter brought before him, occasionally consulting the advisors. As far as Perry could tell, his judgements made sense, and if he was a little harsher with farmers than with merchants and with merchants than with nobles, no one appeared to think anything of it.

"If that is all," Carlos said, at last.

The princess stood. "Honoured sir. I have a favour to ask."

Once again, every seated person in the room stood, and the princess glided to stand in the petitioner's position before Carlos.

"You have?" Carlos glanced at the advisors, and his lips spread in a smile that did not reach his eyes. "What might I do for you, my dear Isabella?"

"Sir," said the princess, lowering her eyelids demurely. "As you know, I face a great change in my life. I wish to spend the weekend in the monastery with the nuns,

praying that I will be a good wife and mother. I wrote to Madre Katerina, and have received her approval for myself and Miss Henwood, and now I would like yours, sir.”

There was a murmur of approval through the room, and one adviser went so far as to say, “Very proper.”

“You will return home on Sunday?” said Carlos.

“After Mass, Don Carlos,” said the princess.

“You shall take your maid with you,” Carlos insisted.

“Prayer is always good for the soul, and I would not deny my maid the opportunity.”

“I think only of your consequence, my dear Isabella,” said Carlos, one eye on his audience to assess their response.

He should have watched Miss Henwood instead. It would be exaggerating to say her lips curled, but they pressed together and her nostrils twitched as she suppressed a flare of disgust.

“You will not need Miss Henwood if you have your maid,” Carlos pointed out. “She belongs to the English religion does she not? What place has she in a Catholic convent?”

Miss Henwood answered for herself, loading her speech on her own behalf with subtle references to her supposed future as Carlos’s mistress and prisoner. And, Perry supposed, her actual future as his temporary lover. “I also seek spiritual counsel, Excellency. It is true that I worship the God we share in the English way when I am my own country, but the people here can tell you that I have attended services with

the princess since I came to Las Estrellas. I have found much comfort in them. I face a time of much change, and I am grateful to Princess Isabella for offering me this opportunity.”

She curtseyed. “I beg you, Excellency, to allow me this nourishment for my soul, this time among the virgin brides of Christ, before I must step into the darkness of an unexpected future.”

The reference to the virgin brides of Christ was a masterstroke. Carlos’s chuckle sounded nervous. “Well, then. What can I say? It shall be as you wish, princess. You, your governess, and the maid shall have your three days in the convent, and the wedding shall be...” He looked around the room and fixed his gaze on the Bishop of Monteluz. “What do you say, esteemed reverend father? A wedding on Monday?”

The bishop’s eyes widened, but he nodded. Someone started clapping and others joined in.

Miss Henwood took the princess’s hand. “My goodness, princess, we have no time to waste. We must see to your gown before we leave for the convent.” The pair of them dropped curtseys, and they hurried from the room.

A couple of hours later, Perry watched from his chamber window as Miss Henwood left the castle with the princess and her maid, and an escort of Carlos’s soldiers. The soldiers returned thirty minutes later. The plan was afoot, then.

Perry wondered if he should have arranged to join the ladies outside of the city walls. But he would be known as an Englishman as soon as people saw his height and his hair colour. And as soon as he opened his mouth.

No, it would be best to wait until they were within reach of France, which would be once they reached the south-eastern end of the pass out of the principality. That was

the legal border, though they'd have another twenty miles through hard country to reach the nearest French town, and some measure of safety.

In France, Perry's colouring would be unremarkable and his accent was that of his French grandmother, who had raised him until he was twelve. He would coarsen it a bit to add to the disguise, and also because the French continued to be suspicious of aristos.

They'd still be in danger from Carlos and his men. But in the nearest town, he'd find a way to get word to the French constabulary that the guerilla known as El Diablo had led his band into France.

That should leave Carlos thinking about his own skin rather than his pursuit. Carlos as El Diablo—the Devil—and his deputy Garcia as the Devil's Wolf had been known for their cruelty, as well as for their remarkable successes against the French.

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Liliana was Ruth's and Bella's first problem. She was a spy for the Duque de las Sombras, but she was also lazy and venal. Putting her out of the picture was as easy as inviting her to spend three days on her knees and then suggesting that she might prefer to see Ruth and Bella to the convent and then slip away to visit her boyfriend for a couple of days.

A gift of a silver coin was enough to clinch the deal. Ruth and Bella happily promised not to tell anyone that Liliana had abandoned her post, especially Don Carlos, and just like that, they were free of their minder.

"I hope she has enough sense not to return to the castle when she learns we are gone," Ruth said. Don Carlos could be vicious when he was crossed.

Bella took the pragmatic view that Liliana brought any consequences on herself. "If she was trustworthy, it would not be a problem. If I could trust her, she would come with us. If Don Carlos could trust her, she would refuse to leave us."

Madre Katerina nodded. "Liliana must work out her own salvation. Let us consider ours. Princess, it is time for me to take my remaining sisters out of Las Estrellas to the southwest. We shall join those who have already left in another convent of our order."

"Those who have already left?" Bella repeated.

"I saw this day coming months ago," said Madre Katerina, "and have been sending

small groups of the sisters on ahead. We have not forgotten the lesson of St Teresa of Jesus.”

The Convent of St Teresa of Jesus had been sacked, and the nuns violated and murdered. They had taken in French soldiers who were too sorely wounded to keep up with the retreat from Vitoria, and the public story was that those soldiers had risen from their beds to destroy their hostesses. The persistent whisper was that Don Carlos de las Sombras had taken exception to Spanish nuns offering Christian charity to Frenchmen, even those who were dying. That rumour said he and his guerilleros had carried out the desecration.

“We shall leave tonight,” said Madre Katerina. “A group of volunteers will remain behind to attend Mass tomorrow morning, and will then follow us. We will have nearly two full days for our escape, and should be at the pass of the wolves by the time they know we have left the convent. Then you shall continue on to France, and we will make our way to our sisters.”

It was all organised then. They would go the way of the wolves, take the journey over the mountains into France, and then the duke would claim his reward. Ruth’s trepidation was tinged with a certain eagerness to know what Richport could teach her—a highly inappropriate response. When Madre Katerina proposed they join the nuns for Vespers, Ruth was as eager to agree as Isabella.

After Vespers, they changed into men’s clothes that Madre Katerina provided. “We have been saving them from the poor box against this necessity,” she explained. She wrinkled her nose. “They have been washed and mended.”

Ruth, who was much the same height as the average Estrellasan, found clothes to fit her easily enough. As for Bella, they had to tie a bit here and tuck a bit there, but with a loose coat over the whole, she would pass well enough.

The sun was setting when they went down into the crypts under the monastery, carrying their own clothes in a pack on their backs. It was not a trip for the squeamish, for the nuns of the Convent of Our Lady of the Stars had been buried there for hundreds of years, since the convent was founded. Madre Katerina led the way with a lamp, the prioress brought up the rear with another, and everyone else followed in single file between.

Ruth was astonished that only ten nuns remained in total, from a monastery that had once held more than fifty. With her and Bella, that made a dozen roughly dressed men—in appearance at least—who headed past the dozens of ossuaries, small rooms full of shelves holding bones.

The stone passage sloped down, switched back several times, and finally ended in what appeared to be a solid wall. Until Madre Katerina pressed the rock to one side, and the end of the passage rolled out of the way with a groan and the crunch of stone on stone.

The same noise sounded behind them when all were through the door into a rougher tunnel, this one more of a natural cave than a formed passage.

Madre Katerina did not stop, but continued on. The tunnel forked twice. Madre Katerina made her choice of paths without hesitation. They had been walking for what seemed like a long time, and now the tunnel was sloping upward, on and on, sometimes so steep that they climbed steps that had been chiselled into the rock. Then the walls of the tunnel widened, and the roof, which had varied from just above their heads to yards taller, suddenly soared out of sight in the darkness.

“Be aware,” Madre Katerina said, her voice quiet but carrying in the silence. “If any bats remain in the cave, they will be disturbed by the light. Do not be afraid. They will do you no harm.”

But the warning was unnecessary, for the bats, if there were any there, left them alone. As they walked on, Ruth could see a lighter triangle ahead of them, growing larger by the moment, and when Madre Katerina covered her lamp, it was the cave's entrance. The prioress, too, closed the cover of her lamp, so they walked in shadows through the rest of the cave.

They stepped out onto a shelf of rock half way up a hill. The sun was behind the mountains and the early stars were out, though the western sky was still aglow. They had gone down one hill and up another, so they looked across a valley at the town walls, with the castle looming above the town.

"Goodbye, Monteluz," Bella said quietly. "I shall return."

"May it be so, God willing," said Madre Katerina. "Our path lies above us, my daughters. We have a long climb before we dare light the lamps again. Let us begin."

They passed over the ridge and down the other side before the moon rose, and with the two lamps once more lit, they travelled far into the night. At last, as the sun rose, Madre Katerina called a halt at what appeared to be a small shepherd's hut built against the rock face. "We shall rest for a while, my daughters. This valley leads to the Path of the Wolves. We shall leave after we have slept. By nightfall, we shall be beyond the borders of Las Estrellas."

The prioress led the way inside, and one woman after another disappeared into a hut that looked as if it would be a squeeze for two. Bella exclaimed as it was her turn. "So that is how...?"

A moment later and Ruth followed, and understood Bella's surprise. The hut had been built to hide a cave that opened beyond its entrance into a cathedral of a cavern, which must have had openings to the outside, for it was not entirely dark.

The nuns, who must have been told what to expect, were unrolling blankets at a camp site on one side of the cavern, and soon Bella and Ruth had a blanket roll each. Bella seemed to drop to sleep as soon as she settled in the spot allotted to her. Nothing kept Ruth from doing likewise—not worry about the future, not the hard ground, not the sounds made as others settled, not even the ache of muscles unaccustomed to quite so much clambering up and down mountain slopes.

When she woke, it was to the disorientation of not being in a familiar place. Not in a bed, either. Ah yes. She and Bella were in a cavern under the mountains that surrounded Valle de Las Estrellas, with ten nuns. And the sound that had awoken her was the murmur of voices—three men in low-voiced conversation near the entrance.

No. She recognised one of the voices. That was Madre Katerina. In the half-light, Ruth did not recognise the other two. Had they been found? Surely the good mother was not selling them out. Ruth felt for her knife. She had unstrapped it, sheath and all, from her ankle before she went to sleep, and fallen asleep with her hand on it. Ah yes. There it was.

Her movement must have attracted Madre Katerina's attention, for the nun came over to her and said, in a whisper, "Are you awake, Miss Henwood? I want you to meet your guide."

Once upon a time, in his innocent youth, Perry had enjoyed walking in the countryside. Those days were long past, but even if he had retained the taste, this was not walking but scrambling along—and sometimes off—mountain paths not wide enough for a goat. It bore no resemblance to a stroll, even a vigorous stroll, in green and pleasant England.

Homesick, Richport? Oh, how his friends would mock!

"Not far to go now, excellensia ," said his guide, for perhaps the tenth time this hour.

Perry and Walter, his valet, had parted from the rest of Perry's men just outside of the main pass from the Valle de las Estrellas, at around the time he would normally be eating breakfast. Even if he had wanted to leave Walter, his old friend and companion would not have gone. They had been together since Walter was a young man, and Perry a boy, blessedly barefoot, escaping from the restrictions of his tutors and other keepers.

They had been up before dawn to leave the castle. "It is a three-day trip to Barcelona," Perry had explained to Carlos. "At least. We must be on the road as soon as we can." Carlos had been unflatteringly happy to see him go.

Perry had ordered horses, or perhaps a couple of the nimble-footed little mountain donkeys, to be waiting for him and Walter with the guide, but apparently the path to the pass for which they were aiming was unsafe for equines. And so, he and his valet trudged, climbed, and clambered in the wake of the guide, who was not even breathing heavily on the frequent stops he commanded because, "You English are not used to our mountains."

It was humiliating how necessary Perry found these halts, even if he would have liked to pretend they were just for Walter's sake. His valet was ten year's Perry's senior, which made the man—oh lowering thought—fifty-four on his next birthday.

"How are you coping, Walter?"

"I'll just about do, sir," said Walter, which was as close to a complaint as Walter would ever come.

"Is there a problem, excellensia?" the guide asked. Perry and Walter had been speaking English, so Perry repeated their exchange in Spanish for the guide. "I asked my friend how he was, and he said he was well."

“See that rock, sirs? The one that looks like a wolf’s head.” The guide pointed along the ravine they were currently skirting, and sure enough, Perry could see the rock he meant.

“That is at the opening to the pass. We shall be there in one hour...” he made a rocking motion with one hand—which Perry took to be a visual metaphor for ‘maybe’ or ‘more-or-less’. “Then we shall rest for a while,” the guide continued. “The meeting point is further up. The pass divides, with one fork coming down here into Spain. The other is the one we want. It leads to France.”

“Well then,” said Walter, getting to his feet. “sooner begun is sooner done.”

It was evening—the evening of the third day—by the time they reached the so-called wolf’s head—actually, it had looked more and more like one as the viewing angle changed. Tomorrow, they were to meet Miss Henwood and the princess. Tonight, they would camp here on the hillside, and without the comforts that Perry usually took for granted.

“What a feeble creature you have become,” he scolded himself. “A night without a bath or a feather bed is not going to kill you.”

As it was, however, his inability to sleep owed nothing to the discomfort of the ground. The wolves started their chorus not long after the sun set, and the three men sat listening with their backs to a rock, feeding the fire in front of them one stick at a time to keep it burning.

The howling moved from place to place, but never approached near enough to raise their wariness to outright fear.

A couple of hours after full dark, just as the moon rose, they heard sounds of movement. Broken twigs. The soft shift of stones underfoot. A whispered curse set all

of Perry's senses alive. Miss Henwood!

The voice that announced the new arrivals was not hers. "Fernando?"

Their guide replied, "Mateo, is that you?"

Three men trekked out of the darkness. No. One man and Perry's two ladies, dressed in men's clothes, and behind them the shadowy shapes of half a score more. "Miss Henwood, Princess," Perry said. He didn't take his eyes off those approaching, but relaxed a little when neither of his ladies seemed concerned.

"Ruth and Bella," the princess corrected him, sharply. "Miss Henwood and the princess remain in Estrellas."

Fair enough. "I beg your pardon, Miss Bella." The others were now close enough for him to recognise one of the men as Madre Katerina.

"Well met, Excellency," said the nun. "You have made good time. We did not expect to see you until tomorrow. Mateo, we have no need to stop for the night, since Richport and Fernando are here already. We shall carry on into Spain while the others make their way into France. The more space we can put between us and the border, the less chance that Sombras will catch up with either party.

A wolf howled and the remaining travellers—all nuns dressed as men, Perry realised—shifted closer together.

"That's the way, sisters," said Madre Katerina. "Keep close together. The wolves, if they are hungry enough, will attack a person on his or her own. They will not disturb a large party such as our own, and it is only an hour or perhaps a little more to the horses that Matteo has ready for us."

Miss Henwood and Bella looked hopefully at Fernando, but he didn't notice, as he was focused on the mother superior.

"You will take care, Madre ," he ordered. "I do not wish to have to explain your demise to my mother."

" I shall take care, cousin," said Matteo. "I also have to answer to my mother."

Madre Katerina smiled fondly at them. "Matteo and Fernando are my nephews, Ruth," she said to Miss Henwood, "and the best guides in the mountains. Go with God, my daughters. My sisters and I shall pray for you."

"And we for you," Miss Henwood replied.

They hugged, and then each of the nuns needed to hug the governess and the princess, but after that, the two parties quickly parted, the larger group heading down the obvious road, and Fernando going first up a slope where randomly placed stones formed a stair of sorts. "Stay close together," he ordered. "I do not want to be fighting off wolves. We have perhaps thirty minutes more to our horses. How close behind us do you expect the pursuit, honoured ladies?"

"We do not expect to be missed until tomorrow, when people arrive for Mass," said the princess—Perry had better get used to thinking of her as Bella.

Fernando nodded his satisfaction. "We can stop and wait for dawn," he decided. "We will still be five or six hours ahead of them, even if they have a tracker good enough to see we broke from the main group."

He grinned, his teeth flashing white in the moonlight. "And we are about to go downhill over solid rock. Take your time, and don't slip."

When they heard the wolves again, closer this time, he merely said, “They will, God willing, cover our scent with their own. Even El Diablo’s dogs will not be able to find us.”

Their haven for the rest of the night was a hut that defied logic to seem almost smaller on the inside than it looked on the outside.

Bella and Ruth—if the princess was to be called by her first name, then the governess would be as well—were assigned one of the two cots that lined the walls. They were tall enough that they would have to sleep snuggled together with their knees bent, Bella with her back tucked up against Ruth’s front.

“I am too long for these beds,” Perry pointed out. “I shall sleep on the floor. Walter, you and Fernando take the cot.”

“Take the loft,” Fernando suggested, pointing to a ladder, but when Perry looked, the loft was even smaller than any of the cots, so the two ladies took that spot and Fernando and Walter had a cot each.

Perry wrapped himself in the blanket that Fernando gave to him, and tried to make himself comfortable under the table, which was the only space available to him. I am getting too old for this.

Despite his misgivings, he slept, to be woken out of a deep sleep by the sound of a gunshot. He sat up and was reaching for his own gun before he was fully awake, which was probably why he forgot about the table and fetched his head a blow.

“What is it? Don Carlos?” he asked as he stood, this time being careful to avoid the table. Walter and Ruth turned to look at him. All he could see of the princess was her feet hanging over the edge of the loft bed.

“The wolves,” said Fernando, who was standing on the ladder to fire out the window.

“They are trying to get at the horses,” Ruth told him, “but Fernando says the brush fence will hold. We are shooting to give them cause to abandon the attempt.”

Walter handed Perry a second loaded pistol as Fernando got down from the ladder to reload his rifle. Perry climbed until he could rest his elbows on the bed and take aim at the shadowy shapes that circled relentlessly around the brush stockade.

One of them yelped, and Bella crowed with delight. “I got one,” she said.

“Let’s see if I can get another,” said Perry. He took careful aim and fired, and was rewarded with another yelp.

After a few more casualties, the wolves gave up, melting into the darkness. Perry didn’t think any of them were seriously injured, but he wasn’t going out into the night to check.

“I shall make some breakfast,” Fernando offered. “It will be first light in an hour or two.”

He built up the fire and put a pan over it, into which he poured oil from a flask out of his pack. A string of onions hanging by the fireside sacrificed one of their number to be chopped and added into the oil, then he found several crusty Spanish rolls in his pack, broke them into small pieces and dropped them into the frying pan, too.

His pack produced a long sausage of the type they called chorizo. Sliced, this too went into the mix, and finally, he dropped several eggs on top. Perry idly wondered how he had managed to carry eggs in his pack without breaking them, but the smell of the dish took priority over such idle curiosity.

It tasted as good as it looked, too, served though it was in an odd miscellany of chipped plates, bowls, and even a mug.

The horses were still safe inside their enclosure when dawn arrived. Perry had had a vague notion of a steed like those he normally rode—a noble creature with a lineage longer than Perry's own, and his could be traced back to the Conqueror. These were not those horses. These animals were a tough mountain breed—short, stocky, intelligent, and nimble-footed.

Perry kept his opinion of their unprepossessing appearance to himself and concentrated on making friends with the one Fernando said would be his for the ride. “Malhumorado is the biggest fellow we have, English, and you are a big man,” he said. “He is an obstinate beast, though.”

Malhumorado translated as bad-tempered, which was not encouraging.

“His Grace can handle him,” said Walter, stoutly. “His Grace can ride anything.”

That put Perry on his mettle. If he was thrown, he would dent his valet's pride as well as his own. Besides, the beast's name amused him. Death would show he could ride Malhumorado.

Walter's form of address reminded him of something else that needed to be agreed before they made their way down into France. “Monsieur De-Ath,” he announced, pronouncing both syllables in the Belgian fashion and pointing to himself. “Quentin De-Ath, merchant from Belgium, holidaying in France with his wife and daughter. My second wife,” he pointed to Miss Henwood. “Madame De-Ath.” The princess was next. “My daughter by my first wife, who was, shall we say, Spanish? Mademoiselle De-Ath.”

Miss Henwood nodded her agreement. The princess glared at him. Obviously, Miss

Henwood had shared with her pupil what he expected in return for his help in their rescue, and the girl was not amused. She would just have to get used to it.

Fernando bowed. "Senor and Senora De-Ath. Senorita. We should be on the road. We do not know how long we have before they pursue us.

The horses agreed with that sentiment, clearly keen to put as much road as possible between them and the stockade in which they had been besieged. Since they were all competent riders, Fernando agreed to let the animals have their heads, at least for as long as the road was relatively smooth and flat.

Those conditions lasted until the pass opened out onto a steep mountainside and the road took a sharp turn. It must have been five or six miles from the stockade, and even Malhumorado was content to be reined into a walk.

After that, both riders and horses had to concentrate on picking a path up and down slopes and in between boulders, as the road narrowed to single file then widened again, curving with the mountain side and never the same from one stride to the next.

When their guide finally called a halt at a flat spot where they could see out into the plains, they had been riding for hours and were still negotiating the narrow windy road along the mountain range. "We will let the horses rest, while we have something to eat and perhaps a little siesta," Fernando said.

Much though Perry wanted to hurry on to the plains, he had to agree. The horses had shown tremendous stamina, but they were tired. So was Perry, and if he was feeling the effects of the strenuous ride, Miss Henwood and the princess must be exhausted.

Perry's plans to further Miss Henwood's seduction would have to be delayed. The woman was exhausted to the bone and very likely aching from a long ride. When he did seduce her, he wanted her to be awake enough to enjoy it.

Fernando and the horses left them in the mid-afternoon, just outside of a small village set among the foothills. Ruth dismounted with the others and walked a little to try to stop her muscles from seizing up. She had not ridden so far in years, and everything ached. In Las Estrellas, nothing was more than half a day's ride from the castle.

Fernando said, "Follow the road. It is not far—perhaps a few minutes. There is an inn in the village, and you will be able to hire a carriage there."

"How far by carriage to the nearest town?" the duke—De-Ath—asked.

"Two hours, perhaps?" Fernando answered. "But the ladies are tired, Senor."

Ruth certainly was, but she also understood De-Ath's reasoning. "Bella and I can continue," she said. "If Don Carlos is chasing us—I hope he has gone after the good sisters instead, but if by some chance he has come after us—it will be easier to evade him in a town."

De-Ath gave her an approving nod. "Exactly. If you feel you can manage it ladies, I think we should continue."

Bella and De-Ath's man, Walter, agreed, so that's what they did. The carriage they were able to hire from the inn was a tired old thing, with worn springs, tattered upholstery, and an elderly postillion. But the horses were good enough, and they made it to Saint Gerard before dark.

Once there, De-Ath refused to stay at the inn to which the postillion took them. He shouldered his own bag and picked up Ruth's, and Walter did the same for Bella. Once again, Ruth followed his reasoning. If Don Carlos asked at the village, this was the inn to which they'd be sent.

The innkeeper at the Le Vieux Moulin, which they found by dint of walking to the

other end of the town, admitted to having rooms. De-Ath hired two, and asked for baths to be sent up to both.

“You will be sharing with Bella, dear wife,” he told her. “And I shall share with Walter. Lock your door, and let no one in unless it is either me or Walter.”

Oh. How considerate of him . Of course, Ruth was relieved that he did not intend to deflower her tonight. Annoyed, perhaps, that he was being considerate, for he was far easier to resist when he was being arrogant and demanding.

Not that he was easy to resist. Tired as she was, she kept thinking about that kiss. That amazing, absorbing, all-consuming kiss. Some part of her was disappointed she was not about to discover more. It was ridiculous, and she didn’t want to dwell on it. A bath, some dinner, and a good night’s sleep. That was all she wanted.

She should not be feeling as if she had been short-changed.

De-Ath arranged for the two women to have dinner in their room, Walter said when he accompanied the meal to the door. He told them his master was organising transport for the morning, and sending letters with instructions to move his yacht and those of his people who had headed into Spain. “He thinks Don Carlos might remember where the yacht was moored, ma’am,” Walter told Ruth. “Moving it will make it harder for the man to find us.”

When Ruth opened the door to Walter in the morning, he ushered in a maid with breakfast and reported, “Mr. De-Ath’s compliments, ladies. He asks you to take whatever time you need this morning. He and I will be ready whenever suits you.”

“We did not have much packing to do,” Bella told De-Ath a short while later, when they were settled in a comfortable carriage and on their way to the next town. “Ruth and I shall need to go shopping, De-Ath. Or should I call you ‘Papá’?”

Ruth found herself sharing an amused smile with the unaccountable man.

“De-Ath will do,” he said. “I hope to reach Toulouse tonight. I am certain that city will have shops to supply suitable clothing and other items for a wealthy merchant’s ladies.” He turned questioning eyes to Ruth. “If we are delayed on the road, will you be able to manage for one more night?”

“We will,” Ruth assured him.

“Why not ‘Papá’?” Bella enquired. “Do you feel too young to have a daughter of

nearly fifteen, De-Ath?”

He didn't allow Bella's impertinence to ruffle his equanimity. "I know I am old enough to have a daughter of your age. I do not, as it happens." He grinned. "At least, as far as I know. But I do have a son, Bella. My heir, the Marquess of Lockswell. He will be twenty-five this year."

"Goodness!" Bella said what Ruth was thinking. "You cannot have been more than a boy!"

De-Ath laughed outright at that. "Are you asking my age, young lady? I am three and forty, and yes, that means I was married at the age of seventeen."

"You are a widower, then, excellensia ? De-Ath, I mean?" Bella asked.

Ruth should really remind her that such personal questions were impolite, but Ruth also wanted to know.

"These twenty-three years. And that is enough, senorita. No more questions."

He started telling them a story about his last trip through France, making an amusing tale of being chased out of town by burghers who had been treating him as one of their own until a Frenchman he'd met in London recognised him as the Duke of Richport.

When that episode had reached its end, with a lucky escape thanks to a sympathetic barmaid, Walter mentioned another escape, this time in Greece, and that led to a further tale and then another, so that Ruth was surprised when they rolled into a village and stopped at an inn for the first change of horses.

"It is very hard, Ruth," said Bella when they had a private moment while the men

were busy. “To lose his wife when he was not yet twenty. I wonder that he has not married again. Perhaps he loved her very much, and cannot bear to see another in her place. Perhaps that is why he is a rake. Do you not think that is possible, Ruth?”

Ruth thought it was more likely he had been a wicked youth, and that his wife had died of a broken heart. Ruth was going to take it as a warning. Don’t let his charm, his storytelling and his kindness fool you into thinking he is a good person .

He reinforced the lesson repeatedly over the course of the day, letting his hand linger as he helped her in and out of the carriage, or ushered her through a doorway at one of the inns they visited on the day.

He found other ways to touch her that were not so innocent, such as resting his leg against hers as they travelled, stroking her fingers when he handed her a cup of beverage or a glass of wine, even lifting her hand to kiss her fingers when he introduced her to one innkeeper as, “My cherished wife, Madame De-Ath.”

He was attempting a seduction—right in front of Bella and Walter. Furthermore, annoying though it was to admit it—shaming, too—it was working.

Ruth was responding to him. She might not realise it, but Perry did. Physically, the signs were obvious, but emotionally, too, she had softened towards him as he told his stories, ably supported by Walter, who had been with him through it all.

He had not intended to mention Lockswell or the young man’s mother. He never spoke of them, but Bella’s faintly hostile attitude, at first amusing, had begun to grate. Clearly, Ruth had told her pupil what the price was for his assistance, and she was indignant on her mentor’s behalf. Polite, but ever so slightly scornful. When she mocked his age, he had responded without thinking.

If he was not mistaken, the fact he’d been a widower for more than half his lifetime

had softened the girl's attitude, though he had not been seeking her pity. No doubt she'd invented a whole romantic story about the poor duke grieving for the love of his youth.

What would she think if she knew the truth? What would Ruth think? She would probably pity him more than ever—yes, and despise him too, the weak innocent ignorant creature he had been, a dupe of his uncle and his faithless wife.

There was a reason Perry never spoke of the youth he had been and the mistakes he had made.

Ruth, he was pleased to note, did not take it on faith that he was a pitiable widower, pining for his long-dead wife. She was warier than ever. Whatever she thought of his personal revelations, she was not allowing it to overwhelm her good sense.

It was already too late for her, did she but know it. He had her hooked, senses and emotions. Only by the most careless of mishandling would he lose her now. And Perry was far too experienced to mishandle a seduction.

He had already planned the next step, and when they arrived in Toulouse, he set about putting it into action. Once again, they walked to another inn after leaving the hired carriage and team. Perry ordered a suite of their best rooms, and it was perfect—three bedchambers, a single dressing room, and a shared sitting room, which included among its furnishings a dining table. The bill had used up almost the last of his gold, but tomorrow he would sell a couple of jewels and they would be in funds again.

Since Bella clearly knew that Ruth had agreed to be his lover, he did not have to disguise the sleeping arrangements, so he assigned Bella to the middle-sized room, Walter to the smallest room, and him and Ruth to the largest. Bella opened her mouth on what was, by her expression, going to be a complaint. Ruth waved her to silence.

“I have ordered a bath for you ladies to be brought to Bella’s room,” Perry said, “and one for me and Walter in the dressing room. Once we have bathed, our dinner will be served in the sitting room.”

Ruth looked relieved, which was ever so slightly insulting. Did she think Perry was so inept that he’d insist on bathing with her when they had never done more than kiss? Nor would he do more than kiss tonight, even though his inflaming touches had left him as aroused as they had her. Perhaps more aroused, for he knew where the amorous journey led.

Tension was the way to play the game. By the time they were fully intimate, she would be eager. Indeed, if he played her well—and he fully intended to do so—she would be the one to initiate the action at each step of the game.

He was no longer a foolish boy, falling head over heels in love with the first woman in his bed, nor a grieving and angry youth shagging every female in reach with little finesse and less control. He was Death Richport, the Duke of Depravity, known for his affaires throughout the civilised world. Abstinence and denial now would pay off enormously in the end, and what a magnificent end it would be.

That didn’t mean it was easy, however, particularly given the uncertain but smouldering looks she sent his way during the meal the four of them shared. Walter would have excused himself from the table had Ruth not insisted that he join them. She cast him a challenging look when Walter demurred.

“You usually eat with me when we are travelling,” Perry pointed out to his faithful servant.

“Not when you have company, Your Grace. Mr. De-Ath, I mean.”

“We are not company, but travelling companions,” said Bella. “Please join us, Mr.

Walter.”

The stew was excellent, the pie robust and tasty, and the apple tart delicious. Furthermore, the inn had been able to supply two excellent bottles of wine, one a rather lovely Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

When Bella could not repress a yawn, Perry suggested it was time for bed. “I believe all of us would benefit from an early night.

Ruth nodded. “I shall be fine, Bella. Off you go. Sleep well.”

Bella kissed Ruth’s cheek, glared at Perry, and left the room.

“Walter, I shall not need you again this evening,” Perry told his valet.

Walter stood and fetched the trays on which the dinner had arrived. “I shall just pack up the dishes and put them outside the door, sir.”

“Leave the wine,” Perry directed. “Another glass, Ruth?”

“Not for me, thank you,” she said.

“Leave my glass, Walter. Pack up the rest unless you want another.”

He waited to see what Ruth would do, as she shifted in her chair and switched her gaze from him to the bedchamber door and back again, but when Walter left the room with his tray, he took pity on her. “Not tonight, Ruth, either. Perhaps a kiss on account? But I shall not leap on you as soon as we are in bed, I promise. Or at all, tonight. Go and ready yourself for bed, my dear, while I finish my wine. I shall give you thirty minutes.”

“She is not your usual sort,” Walter observed, when he returned.

“No,” Perry agreed. “She is not.” Was Walter going to admonish him? If anyone had the right, it was Walter.

“Have a care, sir. Someone might be hurt.”

Interesting. Walter didn’t say “she might be hurt”. Did he think that Perry was in danger?

“I will do nothing she does not want, my faithful friend,” Perry said. “Nothing I don’t want, either.”

Walter nodded, and said nothing more until he was leaving the room, when he muttered, as best as Perry could hear, “Enough good intentions to pave the road to hell.”

But it wasn’t true. Perry’s intentions were as bad as they could be.

However, the kisses and perhaps a caress or two he had intended for tonight would have to wait until the morning, for Ruth was either asleep or an expert actress.

In the night, he woke from a nightmare that fled his mind even as he reached after it to drag it into the light. But in the next breath, every thought of nightmare fled as arms enfolded him and he was held to the shoulder of a soft fragrant woman.

“Shush,” she murmured. “Shush, my dear. It is only a dream. You have nothing to fear. The bad earl is gone forever. Ruth and Anne will never let him hurt you again.”

Where did she think she was? Who did she think he was?

A former pupil, he had to suppose, as she stroked his hair and murmured reassurances, all—he was beginning to realise—without waking up. His baser self was taking the attention as his due, and making suggestions about next steps, but Perry ignored it. Ruth was still asleep, and was—in any case—offering a mother's comfort, not a lover's.

He wondered how she'd feel if she woke to find her arms enfolding him, and his head on her breast. There was one way to find out, though it wouldn't do anything for the rest of his sleep. To his surprise, though, he did drop off to sleep again, cradled against her, her heart beating firmly just under his ear.

He woke when she gasped and pushed at him.

“Richport! De-Ath, I mean. You said you wouldn't... De-Ath!”

He lifted away from her and smiled as he noted her position in the bed. “I am still on my side of the bed, Ruth,” he pointed out. “You came to me, and I must say, I slept very comfortably. I would like that kiss now, if you would be so kind.”

Was that a growl? His prim governess woke up growling in the morning! Who would have guessed? Was she always grumpy before she was fully awake? Or was it his presence? He couldn't wait to find out. And if he had never had such a thought about a lover before, what of it? New experiences were what he lived for.

“You are a horrible man,” the delightful lady growled. “A kiss, indeed, when I need tooth powder and... and other things.”

Perry rolled out of bed, springing far more lightly to his feet than he felt inclined to do. But he would suffer the tortures of the damned rather than admit that his bones ached. He was, after all, only three and forty—a healthy man in his prime.

“I shall order coffee, shall I? Or do you prefer tea or chocolate at this time of the morning? That should give you enough time to use the chamber pot and clean your mouth.”

He decided that the dark look she cast him was answer enough. He’d order all three and hope to coax her into a better temper.

His own temper took a turn for the worse when he found Bella and Walter already awake, and when Bella announced that she would take Ruth her cup of tea. That had not been how the morning was meant to go.

The coffee was excellent, though, and he was about to spend a considerable amount of money on the two ladies. Surely shopping would put her in a more amenable mood?

The first stop was to break their fast in a cafe, with another coffee and a selection of delicious pastries. The innkeeper had recommended the place as being near a bijoutier—a jeweller’s shop.

Perry left the ladies with Walter as their escort while he crossed the square to the plain-fronted shop, where he soon managed to translate several unset emeralds and two large pearls into enough money to outfit two ladies and purchase outright a carriage to see them to the coast.

He always travelled with a pouch of saleable objects. Today’s transaction left the pouch severely depleted, and he’d probably empty it before the journey was through. However, he had more aboard his yacht, so if he was in a place where his bank had no connections, he could still afford whatever he wished.

They would be travelling to Sète, the seaport for Montpellier, for one of his messages yesterday had instructed his people to move his yacht to Sète. Collioure was too close

to the Spanish border for his comfort, and besides, Carlos knew he'd left his yacht there.

"I have a list of modistes who have readymade clothing," Walter offered, when he rejoined the others at the cafe. "Also, other places that will have items the ladies might need."

"Then let us begin," said Perry. "Which is closest?"

Left to herself, Ruth would have bought next to nothing, and then only the most basic items—dull in colour, cut, and fabric. "Please remember, my dear Madame De-Ath," Perry told her in the hearing of the first modiste, "what you wear reflects on me and our daughter. I trust, of course, in your quiet good sense not to go too far, but do not, I beg you, give our customers the notion that my business is failing."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "This is quite unnecessary, De-Ath," she said. "I shall be reunited with the rest of my wardrobe when we reach the coast."

"Meanwhile, how many people will look at me and think, there is a poor man who cannot dress both his wife and his daughter?" said Perry, enjoying himself enormously in the part of a burger from Belgium.

"You," said Ruth, "are a very annoying man. But I suppose, if you wish to waste your money, you will, and I cannot stop you."

"Remember that, darling," Perry murmured. "I am determined to get my way."

Shopping with Richport—De-Ath, rather—was confusing, infuriating, and glorious. He insisted that his wife must have the best of everything, and for every kind of occasion. His daughter, too. Bella was thoroughly enjoying herself—Las Estrellas had spent its entire treasury during the war and all of Bella's gowns were makeovers

of old garments from the attics.

In the end, Ruth stopped arguing, and if she was not going to argue, she might as well take pleasure in having new things. New things suitable to the wife of a wealthy merchant, furthermore—a far cry from the sober and demure wardrobe of a governess.

“Perhaps you can recoup some of your costs by selling them when we part,” she whispered to De-Ath, just to annoy him.

It didn’t work. He chuckled. “Something I shall keep in mind if I hear the Richport coffers have inexplicably emptied overnight. Take heart, Ruth. Just imagine all the seamstresses and cobblers and stocking knitters who will eat well for a month, thanks to your purchases.”

“You need not think I can be bought with a pretty bonnet,” she warned him a while later, as he coaxed her into buying a frivolous item of fabric, ribbon and lace that made her look at least five years younger.

“How quickly you forget, darling,” he retorted. “It was you who purchased me! And my handy yacht, of course.”

The man was impossible!

They lunched at a restaurant, on onion soup and baguettes, followed by lamb shanks cooked with vegetables in red wine, and finished with cheese. After a stroll through the Place du Capitole admiring the old buildings, they returned to shopping.

De-Ath had purchased some items over the morning—shoes, a pair of boots, stockings, a hat. But now he left them to Walter’s escort while he visited a tailor. “You shall be next, Walter,” he said to his valet. “When I return to accompany

Madame and Mademoiselle.”

“As you wish, Monsieur,” Walter replied, with a bow.

He was gone for a little over an hour. “I told them you would no doubt wish to check my selections,” he told Walter, when he returned. Walter merely grinned, which said volumes about their relationship. They were far closer than Ruth had observed before between a valet and his master. Though, to be fair, the Earl of Chirbury had purportedly had a similar friendship with the manservant who died rescuing his dear lady from a criminal.

After they had exhausted the shops—and themselves—De-Ath proposed a stroll along the banks of the Garonne River outside the walls of the city, and then an early night. “We should discuss tonight. Just so there is no confusion, Ruth,” he suggested in a murmur while Bella was listening to Walter explaining about the canal boats and their horses, and the huge quantity of goods they could transport.

“Tonight?” Ruth’s voice squeaked on the word, as her mind ran riot with images that were not as disagreeable as they should have been.

“Kisses. Perhaps a few caresses,” he decreed. “You are not ready for more.”

Ruth found herself wanting to argue she was ready enough, though she should have been grateful. Or should she? Knowing him, he would make her burn and then walk away as if nothing had happened. Ruth must not give him her trust for a moment.

She inclined her head in agreement, and then their private discussion was over. Bella hurried up to convey a miscellany of information about the value of canals to manufacturing and trade, and they walked the rest of the way back to the hotel debating whether canals would one day be replaced by railways. De-Ath had heard a presentation by a Mr. James who was proposing a network of railways throughout

England and Scotland.

Ruth, who had once seen a demonstration of Mr. Trevithick's steam locomotive, was inclined to think no one would want to replace the peacefully plodding horses of the canal paths with noisy smelly steam engines. De-Ath pointed out that the leavings of horses were smelly, too. With predictable cynicism, he added that business men would choose the method giving them the cheapest transport. Bella agreed.

They split to have their baths. After that, Ruth and Bella helped one another pack their new belongings into their equally new luggage, leaving out a gown each for dinner and another in which to travel in the morning.

Ruth found herself fiddling with her food—another magnificent meal. Kisses and maybe caresses . What did he mean by caresses?

All too soon, it was time for bed. “We have two or possibly three more days of travel before we reach my yacht,” De-Ath said. “We should sleep so we are rested tomorrow.”

Tonight, there was no half hour to change and leap into bed. De-Ath was waiting inside their room when Ruth returned from helping Bella with buttons, hooks, and laces, and receiving the same help in return.”

“De-Ath!” she said, indignantly. “I need to change.”

“There is a dressing screen, darling Ruth,” said De-Ath. “Change behind that. Do you need help with your buttons and laces?”

Ruth tugged at the shawl that she'd thrown on to cover her unlaced back, making certain it kept her modest. “What do you want of me, De-Ath?”

“You know what I want,” he replied, inexorably. “You want it too, or part of you does. You will have to be patient, though, my dear delight. Tonight, I have no intention of letting this go beyond kisses and relatively innocent touches.”

The rebellious spirit Ruth had never quite managed to suppress, even though it was unbecoming in a vicar’s daughter, wondered if she could tempt him beyond his limits. Not that she wanted to do so, of course, even if she could. He was the one who wanted this, whatever this was going to be. Not her.

Even in her own mind, her protest sounded hollow.

“Now,” De-Ath said. “I am going to strip for bed. You are most welcome to stay and watch, or you can change behind the screen.”

Ruth gasped, grabbed her night rail from the top of her trunk, and hurried to put the dressing screen between her and the sight of the Duke of Richport, removing his coat, then his waistcoat, and beginning to unbutton his falls.

Thank goodness she had brushed her teeth and attended to other bodily needs before leaving Bella’s room. She would die rather than use the chamber pot while De-Ath was listening!

How foolish was that? He intended to take her to bed and ravish her! She couldn’t help but feel that this was all a mistake... that he would take her right to the point of ravishment then tell her she was past her youth and only passably pretty, with no experience and little charm.

Which, of course, she knew.

At least the nightrail was pretty. It was a new one, purchased today—in a sweet powder blue linen, trimmed with more lace and ribbon than she thought appropriate

for a governess, but cut sensibly full and sewn all the way to the floor on both sides. Quite different to some of the others the modiste had shown her—pieces of temptation in silk and lace with strategic peepholes and open seams that allowed one's legs to show as one walked.

“You can come out now,” De-Ath said, after several minutes. “The bits you were trying hard not to look at are covered.”

She emerged from behind the screen. Dear Merciful Lord. He wore nothing but a pair of loose silk pants, tied low on his waist, the fabric a riotous oriental print that thankfully disguised the shapes the thin silk lovingly hugged. And nothing else. He wore nothing else. His chest was naked! And magnificent.

His feet, too. Stark naked. Ruth had left her stockings on, feeling diffident about him seeing her unclothed feet. At least he would not see anything else through the modest night rail. Unlike her. Ruth, you are standing there with your mouth open, almost drooling. Sharpen up, girl .

Papa had always said she had a wild streak, and all these years, she had prided herself on proving him wrong. And now look at her. Papa, you were right, after all .

“Like what you see?” De-Ath asked, provocatively.

“What is it you are wearing?” Ruth asked.

“Mogul pants. Comfortable wear around the house, and I prefer them to sleeping naked.”

“One normally wears a night shirt,” she reminded him.

De-Ath smirked at her. “One might. I do not. Horrid things. They get all tangled

around one's legs, or ride up and make lumps under one's hip. Or worse. Come here and give me a kiss, Ruth."

Kiss him? When she was naked under her night rail, with no stays or petticoats to give her a sense of protection? When he was completely unclothed except for a pair of thin silk pantaloons? She couldn't do it.

But he had his hand held out for her to take, and was waiting. Patiently. The fiend.

Torn between fear and what even an innocent like her knew to be lust, she took one slow step and then another, until she could put her hand into his.

At last! If his heart beat any louder, she would hear it. Ruth had come to him. Before she joined him, he had taken temporary measures to prevent a hair trigger reaction. He had, in fact, seen to his own needs so they would not be too insistent while he gave her pleasure. After all, tonight was just one more step in her education and seduction.

He'd not done such a thing in years. He was not a cub, still wet behind the ears, allowing his desires to drive him. He'd been celibate before, sometimes for months on end, and had not allowed it to bother him, nor to prevent him from enjoying himself in the fashion of a gentleman when he reached a temporary oasis in the desert of female company, with expert attention to her delight and his own.

Something about Ruth Henwood tested his self-control as no one else had in years. Even now, freshly satisfied in a physical sense, he could feel his interest stirring again. Not bad for a man of three and forty!

He pulled her to him, and wrapped his free arm around her delectable form while bringing their linked hands up to rest on his breast. "Would it be easier for you to reach my lips if we sit?" he asked.

Her eyes had darkened as her pupils expanded. "I suppose," she admitted.

Agreement enough to scoop her up and place her on the bed, leaning against the pillows. He hurried around to the other side and took his own place beside her. "Better?" he asked.

When he had been a boy, running wild over his ancestral lands with Walter ever at his side, a poacher had taught them how to tickle fish. They hadn't, at the time, known the fellow was a poacher. To them, he was just an old man who didn't mind them being around, as long as they did not scare the fish.

The trick was to stay very quiet, to move very slowly and carefully, feeling under the banks with fingers that drifted like the water. Then, on encountering a fish, one had to move the hand gently up the belly, from the tail to the head, barely touching the fish, until the hand could firmly grasp the head.

Patience and gentleness were the keys to trout tickling, as they were to seduction. Perry lay back against the pillows and stroked Ruth's arm with the fingertips of one hand, with barely any weight in the brush of his hand. Perhaps a little more than he would have used had her arms been bare, for he wanted her to feel his touch.

He said nothing, waiting and touching, touching and waiting.

At last, he was rewarded. With a sigh, she came up on her elbow, put a hand on the side of his face, and bent to lay her lips on his.

This time, she knew about the play of mouth on mouth, tongue on tongue. This time, he intended to take her a little further. With her above him, he had both hands free, and he began at her neck, at the soft spot below the ears, again just a soft brush, slightly more substantial than a breeze.

He wanted to cheer when she moved to accommodate him. No frightening the maiden. A few more moments, and then he allowed his lips to follow where his fingers had been, letting his fingers drift lower. She tasted so incredible that he forgot his plan for a minute, instead simply letting his senses soak in everything about her. Her scent—something floral but with an edge of spice, her taste—tooth powder and something indefinably Ruth in her mouth, pure Ruth as he licked and sucked her

neck, lower and lower, his fingers having made short work of the ribbon ties.

Sound, too. Moans and whimpers that she did her best to keep to herself, so that every single one was precious.

Her untutored response was ruining him for the artificial theatrics of the experienced women he usually bedded, who seemed to think his generosity would depend on their flattery of his performance.

And oh, the sight of her, the feel of her! If he died tonight, he would die happy, though he had every intention of living, at least long enough to enjoy her to the full. More than once. Once would not be enough to drive her from under his skin. She had possessed him, and the only way he knew to exorcise her was to let her further in.

If he allowed himself think about it, it would terrify him, so he wouldn't think. He would just enjoy her. A little more. Surely, she was ready for a little more? A kiss on her nipple! He reared up and pivoted her backward against the pillows, falling on her and taking her nipple into his mouth, sucking her through the linen, all in one movement.

For a moment, she stiffened in shock and he feared he had gone too far, but even as he started to lift his head to apologise, she softened again, and arched her back to lift her breast against his mouth.

A touch skin to skin! He needed it more than he needed to breathe. Slowly, carefully, gently, trying not to attract her attention, he stretched out his arm to use one hand to gather her nightgown, lifting it from her ankle to her knee. A little more and it would be up to her hips and his hand would be on the bare skin of her thigh.

“De-Ath?” Her voice was strained, soft. “You said kisses.”

He had pushed her too far. Time to retreat. “And caresses, but if this is as far as you wish to go, darling Ruth, let me make the other breast feel as good as this one.”

He hiked himself higher on his elbow to reach the other breast, and—he offered fervent thanks whatever capricious power sometimes gave rakes more than their just deserts—she turned towards him to make it easier.

The knock on the door a few minutes later startled them both.

“Your Grace? De-Ath? Sir? May I come in?” It was Walter’s voice. The fact that Walter would not disturb him for anything less than a clear and present danger slowly penetrated Perry’s lust-preoccupied mind.

“Excuse me,” he said to Ruth, as he rolled from the bed and padded across the room. As he opened the door he glanced back. She was under the blankets. All he could see of her was her head—wide eyes and a furious blush.

It was both of them at the door. Walter and Bella. “Your Grace,” said Walter, “The duque’s man is here. Iago Garcia. The princess saw him in the innyard.”

With a mental sigh, De-Ath said. “You had better come in. Just a moment while I put on a robe.” Iago Rodriguez Garcia . He was not from the valley, but had returned with Carlos after the wars. A stone-cold killer, he was completely loyal to Carlos.

Bella was certain of the identification. “The light was on his face, De-Ath. It was certainly him. And I recognised some of the men with him. They had their saddle bags over their shoulders. They looked as if they were planning to stay here for the night.”

“Coincidence?” Perry mused. “If they have just arrived in Toulouse, they cannot know which inn we chose, and they must stay somewhere, after all. Walter, can you

go and see what you can learn? Ladies, we will need to go tonight, before they begin to ask questions. Pack your things and be ready to leave at a moment's notice."

He grimaced. "All they need to do is ask after the De-Ath party, and half the merchants in town will be happy to talk about how much money we spent. I am sorry, ladies. I should have changed our name again."

Ruth replied with an old saying. "It is easy to be wise after the event."

True enough, but the safety of the party was Perry's responsibility. He had been stupidly arrogant, and now he had to make certain that Bella and Ruth did not pay the price. Though there was one precaution he had thought to take.

"One more thing." Where were they? Ah! There. Tied up in brown paper and string. "I asked Walter to order you some men's clothes. Slightly more respectable than those awful things you were wearing when I met you up in the pass." Walter had written on them. Just their initials. R.H. and I. V.

"There you are. Ruth, you would be more comfortable changing in Bella's room. I shall dress and then pack."

"But De-Ath," Bella protested, "what are we going to do?"

"We can discuss that when we know what Walter finds out, and when we are dressed and packed," Ruth said, and guided Bella out of the room. Magnificent woman.

Perry dressed, and was loading his carriage pistols when Walter came back from his scouting mission. Bella and Ruth returned to hear his report.

The Spanish gentleman had taken rooms for himself and his men. "They asked after the De-Ath party, your grace, and described you and the princess. The innkeeper is a

veteran of the wars and hates the Spanish. He has ordered his servants to tell them nothing.”

A stroke of luck.

“Walter, I want you to acquire a carriage and team. I would prefer to buy the carriage, so we do not need to change?—”

A knock on the door interrupted him. Pistol in one hand, Perry opened it a crack. It was the innkeeper. “Sir, I came to warn you. I have a guest at the inn, a Spanish gentleman by the name of Garcia. He has asked about you—told me a tale about you running off with somebody’s niece. I did not believe him. I think he is a dangerous man, sir.”

“Come in,” said Perry. Best to have this conversation where one of Garcia’s men could not accidentally wander by.

The innkeeper’s eyes widened when he saw Bella and Ruth. Dressed as men, they were unconvincing, but a long coat and a hat would cover most deficits.

“As you can see, innkeeper, we are already preparing to flee. My daughter saw Garcia from her window. You are right about him being a dangerous man. He was with the guerrillos during the war, and did many terrible things.”

“Please,” said Ruth, extending a pleading hand towards the innkeeper, “do not tell him you have seen us. Our daughter... he is infatuated with her. He demanded to marry her, and would not take ‘no’ for an answer.”

That was a good one! Perry could work with that. “He has friends in high places in Spain, and men who work for him who will stop at nothing. My family and I thought we had escaped him when we left Spain, but he pursued us and tried again, here in

France.”

Bella eclipsed the thespian skills of them all by bursting into tears and casting herself into Perry’s arms. “I am so frightened, Papa. You will not let him take me, will you?”

“Never, Bella,” he assured her. “We will keep you safe. Innkeeper, we must flee. If I can make the coast, we can take passage to Belgium, where all his influence will not matter.”

“The magistrate?” The Frenchman suggested. His doubtful tone suggested he had little faith in the ability of the magistrate to withstand ‘friends in high places’.

“We tried that, sir,” Ruth informed him, her tone indignant. “But the magistrate said Senor Garcia had done nothing that was illegal in France. We were to inform him at once if Senor Garcia actually abducts our daughter! Or shoots my husband, as he has threatened. By then it will be too late, I told him. But he said there was nothing he could do.”

“We must leave Toulouse,” Perry said. “Tonight. Before he begins to ask for us. This is my fault, Madame De-Ath. We should have travelled under another name. I did not think of it.”

Bella had stopped sobbing into Perry’s shoulder. “I shall finish packing, Papa.” She smiled at the innkeeper, though her lips quivered as if she were about to burst into tears again. “Thank you for not giving us away. Thank you for coming to warn us.”

She went off into her room, and the innkeeper watched her go. “That pretty child. It is monstrous to think of it, her and that man. How can I help you, Monsieur and Madame?”

“Can you tell us where we can buy a carriage?” Perry asked. “Now? In the middle of

the night? I am, of course, prepared to pay a premium. Money means nothing compared to the safety of my wife and child.”

“He was a guérilla , this Garcia?” the innkeeper asked.

“He was the second in command of the band known as Los Demonios ,” said Bella.

The innkeeper’s eyes widened. “ El Diablo ’s people? Certainly, the young miss must not fall into their hands. I shall sell you my carriage, Mr. De-Ath.”

Perry went down with the innkeeper to see the carriage, using the servants stairs to avoid Garcia and his men. It transpired that the innkeeper’s wife had been angling for a better carriage. The innkeeper was blunt about it. “I am charging you more than the carriage and team are worth, Mr. De-Ath, but you are rich. Also, I and my people are taking a risk, keeping information from one of those demons. You will pay my price, yes? And then the little miss will be safe, my wife happy, and all of us shall have what we want except that swine Garcia.”

The price he named was extortionate and once more reduced Perry’s cash reserves to almost nothing, but Perry supposed he was buying the inn’s silence as well as the carriage and team. He agreed. “We are very grateful,” he assured the innkeeper as sincerely as he could, as the man robbed him blind.

The innkeeper somewhat redeemed himself by helping Walter and Perry to harness the carriage, since Perry wanted as few people as possible to know when they left and in what vehicle. Garcia and his men were on the other side of the inn, the innkeeper said, and undoubtedly fast asleep. He had heard Garcia talk about visiting every inn in Toulouse to ask after the De-Ath party.

“He will not get much cooperation. I shall spread the news that he was with the Demons.”

That couldn't hurt, and even without the people of Toulouse being deliberately obstructive, checking all the inns would take Garcia most of the day. Perry and his people would have a fair start. The sky was clear, and the moon, though past full, would be in the sky before they left the last lights of Toulouse. They should be able to travel quickly on a good road.

With the innkeeper's help, and with Ruth and Bella carrying a trunk between them, they fetched the luggage in one trip, loaded the carriage, and said their thanks and farewells. The innkeeper waved them on their way. "Good luck to you and your ladies, sir," he said, "and a plague on Garcia and all his men."

Perry took the driver's seat for the first part of the trip. Walter would be able to manage in full daylight, so Perry would take a rest then, but not now. Not with chancy visibility, an unfamiliar team, and an unknown road. He had no doubt of his own ability to keep his precious cargo safely on the road.

Precious cargo? What sentimental claptrap. He had made a promise and he was keeping it. That was all. Added to that, Ruth Henwood had still not paid her fee. And if he began thinking about the evening's entertainment and where it might have led, he would overturn the carriage himself.

Ah, Ruth. I fear you will be my ruination .

Ruth was exhausted, and sore all over. Between moonrise and sunset some sixteen hours later, they had travelled from Toulouse to Carcassonne, stopping only to change horses and attend to the needs of their bodies, Walter and De-Ath taking it in turns to drive.

They used different names at each stop, hoping to throw Garcia off their trail. Bella and De-Ath thoroughly enjoyed inventing them, each trying to top the other with more and more ridiculous suggestions.

Exchanging stories had entertained them for most of the journey. De-Ath and Walter had an inexhaustible store of tales. Bella had had some hair-raising adventures as a child causing as many problems for invaders as possible. Ruth, by contrast, had led a calm and uninteresting life, apart from one incident in her youth, when her first position had ended with her and her pupils having to make a wild escape.

But that adventure was not fully hers to share, and even that had led to six years of peaceful village living. She could, however, and did share the adventures of the Redepennings, the family she had come to regard as her own.

She spoke of Rede, the Earl of Chirbury, his years as a trapper in Canada, and his romance with Ruth's first pupil and almost sister, Anne. Also, his cousin Alex, and his desperate escape from villains with his now wife, Ella. Both of them injured and weak, they had sent Alex's manservant to draw off the pursuers and had ridden in comfort from Cheshire to London on a canal boat.

Alex's sister Susan had fallen in love with her husband when they pursued her daughter and a French spy up the Great North Road. Dear Mia, married to Alex's brother Jules, had faced off and defeated a kidnapper who was trying to steal her stepson, and a group of French spies who had made a prisoner of her husband. And who could have expected that the love Kitty, Anne's sister, had for a gamekeeper would lead to an all-out battle for control of a village in the far north of England?

It helped to pass the time, even with repeats as one driver replaced another, saying, "Get Miss Henwood to tell you about..." or "You won't believe what her Highness said about..."

Even so, in the last couple of hours they had run out of stories, or perhaps just out of energy. Surely, at the speed they had been going, they had left Garcia far behind and could afford to stop for the night at Carcassonne?

Ruth heaved a sigh of relief as they turned into the stable yard of an inn.

“He might just be going to change horses,” Bella said gloomily, referring to De-Ath, who was driving.

But when the carriage stopped and De-Ath opened the door, he said, “I’ll take a couple of rooms for the night, but we’ll be on our way first thing in the morning. I don’t want to give Garcia time to catch up.”

The inn was a bit rougher than last night’s place. “We will eat in the ladies’ room,” he instructed the innkeeper. “Whatever you have hot, and as fast as possible. A jug of wine with it. A bath to be delivered to the ladies’ room as soon as the meal is cleared.”

The ladies’ room, he said. So, he did not mean to continue what they had started. At least tonight. Was Ruth pleased or disappointed? She was too tired to decide.

Money changed hands and the innkeeper nodded and agreed to everything.

Over the meal, a delicious stew with crusty bread, De-Ath said to Walter, “I have one more errand this evening. Are you awake enough to come with me?”

“Always,” Walter replied.

“Ladies, lock your door once the bath arrives, and don’t let anyone in until morning. I don’t want the footmen coming to empty the bath unless one of us,” he indicated himself and Walter, “is here to protect you.”

He must have caught the spark of rebellion in Bella’s eyes, or perhaps in Ruth’s. “Yes, I know you are both Amazons, but the footmen don’t know that. If they try something, Walter and I will have to stay up late to bury the bodies, which would be

inconvenient, since I plan an early start.”

Bella burst out laughing at the insouciant remark.

“De-Ath, we shall lock the door,” said Ruth, who had not thought about the risk from lusty footmen. Since Anne married Rede, she had never had to seriously consider such things. Until Sombras. She had been locking her door in the castle ever since he came back from the wars.

Obviously, De-Ath was sincere in his concern, since he appointed Walter to watch the footmen deliver the bathwater. “I have a few questions to ask in the bar room. Don’t leave until the ladies have locked themselves inside, Walter. Then come and join me.”

What on earth was the man up to? Ruth knew him well enough by now to know that he wouldn’t answer questions until he was ready. Bella, bolder and perhaps less perceptive, said, “Where are you going, De-Ath, and why?”

“I had an idea,” De-Ath told her. “I’ll tell you more if it works out.” And with that typically obscure remark, he was gone.

Walter, when Bella turned her attention to him, put up both of his hands in a “stop” gesture. “He hasn’t told me a thing, Miss,” he said.

As they took turns in the bath, and prepared for bed, Bella kept wondering what it might be. Ruth noticed that the girl didn’t doubt De-Ath was working on a plan to escape Garcia. Neither did Ruth. For all his reputation, the Duke of Depravity was an honourable man, and he had promised to help them.

Ruth fell asleep considering the price she had yet to pay for that promise.

When she woke again, it was dark in the room. For a moment, she wondered where she was and what had woken her. Then she heard the tapping on the door, which answered the second question, and by the time she reached the door, she had remembered going to sleep in Carcassonne.

“Who is it,” she said, pitching her voice to reach through the door.

“De-Ath,” said the now familiar voice. “Get dressed, my dear. We must be on the road in fifteen minutes.”

Ruth found her way to the fireplace, fumbled for a poker, and stirred the ashes enough to find a couple of glowing embers, to which she put a spill so she could light a candle.

That gave light enough to see Bella sitting up in the bed. “Is it time to get up?” the girl asked.

“Yes, and we must hurry. Get dressed, dearest, and pack anything that you have unpacked.”

Walter was waiting outside of their door ten minutes later to take the small bags that were all they’d brought into the inn, and to escort them down to the carriage.

De-Ath was up in the driver’s seat, but he gave up his place to Walter and climbed into the carriage behind Ruth and Bella.

Ruth’s curiosity would wait no longer. “Did your errand last night prosper?”

“It did,” De-Ath answered. “Thank you for asking.”

When he said nothing more, Ruth found herself wishing for a fan to hit him with. Or

an umbrella. Much more satisfying.

The incorrigible man burst out laughing. “Your face, Ruth! Very well, Bella. I will tell you all before you decide to carve important pieces off me with the knife I am certain you still carry,”—one of Bella’s stories had involved the use of the knife she said she, “always strapped to my thigh under my skirts”.

“Ruth, I was struck by your story of Alex Redepenning and the canal boat. Walter and I went to the inn just out of town where the canal boat folk gather. I’ve found a family—father, mother, and three daughters—who are willing to take Bella and Walter as far as the coast while you and I amble our way along leaving a trail for Garcia. And Carlos, for if he has figured out we are in France, he is certainly searching, too.”

Ruth wasn’t at all keen on being separated from her charge. “Could we not all go? Surely, he won’t think of looking on a canal boat?”

De-Ath shook his head. “We need to give them something to chase, Ruth. Keep their attention away from the canals altogether. A canal man, his brother, his wife and his four daughters are a crowd on a canal boat, but not unlikely. Add another man and another woman, and it will draw attention.”

“It would be better if I am Walter’s daughter,” Bella said. “People who know your canal family will question an extra daughter.”

De-Ath gave her a nod of approval. Ruth had further objections to make, but De-Ath had answers for them all, and so did Bella. The family were, De-Ath said, kind people and a happy family. He had told them the story of the pursuing suitor, which was true enough, as far as it went.

When Walter brought the carriage to a halt by a boat moored on a quiet stretch of

canal, Ruth had to agree with De-Ath's assessment of the family. The father and mother clearly loved one another and their daughters were both respectful and lively—and very curious about the young heiress who was running away from a powerful suitor.

Ruth helped Bella hunted through her luggage for items suitable for a canal girl—not much, but she could at least wear her own undergarments—and the daughters of the family assured Bella that they could loan her whatever outer garments she needed.

Soon, they had said their goodbyes and the canal boat was pulling away from the bank. “She will be as safe as Walter can make her, Ruth,” De-Ath reassured her, “and we shall do our part by laying a trail for our enemies to follow. For the first part, we’ll head back to Carcassonne, where I shall make a great show of my rank while hiring a driver to take us to the next town, since my own faithless driver has abandoned us. After all, a duke cannot be expected to drive his own carriage, even for a princess!”

It was not until they were on the road to Carcassonne that Ruth realised that, for the next part of their journey, she and De- Ath would be alone. There was no point in wondering whether De-Ath would take advantage of that fact. Of course, he would.

Perry gave an excellent performance of a spoilt English duke to a fascinated audience of an innkeeper, more than a dozen maids and grooms, and a score or more of travellers and bystanders. He had made a spoilt duke's attempt at disguising his name—he was the Marquess of Rich, he told the innkeeper, and the driver, and anyone who was listening. He required immediate attention, for his ward was in danger, and he had to get her out of the country.

He had played many roles in his life, and spoilt duke was one of the easiest, since it was what people expected. And perhaps it was true. Certainly, he had never wanted for material possessions. Nor for women, at least the easy sort. In his maudlin

moments, he wondered if being a duke had deprived him of most of the rest of what made life worthwhile. A loving family. A worthwhile profession. Pride in self rather than simply one's name.

He had little patience with his maudlin moments. He would rather focus on the fact that he would have Ruth to himself in private for two hours, until they reached the next change of horses. He didn't intend for her first time to be in a moving carriage, but he did intend for her to reach the end of the day's journey eagerly awaiting her first time.

She had waited in the carriage, supporting the impression he had been at pains to convey—that "his ward" was in there with her governess. The lure duly laid, Perry gave the driver the word to move off, and joined her.

"That should send Garcia after us. Carlos too, if he has joined the hunt here in France. When we leave the driver with his fare home towards the end of the day, I propose to double back a little by hidden ways. I have friends who will give us safe shelter for the night. I'm happy to lead Garcia and Carlos on a wild goose chase, but I don't propose to permit them to catch up."

"That is good," Ruth agreed. "They are both men of violent tempers, and will have others with them. I do not wish you to be hurt."

"I thank you for your kindness," said Perry. "I do not wish me to be hurt, either." If it came to it, he was more able to defend himself than Ruth might expect—or Garcia and Carlos. But in any conflict, something might happen to Ruth, and that was not acceptable.

His surge of anger at the mere thought alarmed him. I am not feeling possessive, am I? The Duke of Depravity was never possessive. No. It wasn't that Carlos might take her from him, it was that she might be hurt.

He shot a glance at her and sighed. That wasn't it at all. He could lie to others. He was good at it. He gloried in his reputation for debauchery. He always followed his own self-interest. But he did have standards. He never forced anyone. He always kept his promises. And he didn't lie to himself.

Ruth Henwood had become important to him, quite without him intending it or understanding the reasons.

"Is something wrong, De-Ath?" she asked, looking at him with concern

"Not particularly. Why do you ask?"

"You sighed," she explained.

Yes. He had. The lady was far too perceptive. "Nothing to concern yourself with, sweetheart." He shifted to put his arm around her. "Now, Ruth dearest. Where were we two nights ago when we were so rudely interrupted."

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed red. "De-Ath! We can't. In a carriage? Can we?"

"Oh yes, we can, my darling innocent. Let me show you."

She regarded him gravely from those innocent brown eyes, but said nothing.

"I need you to give me permission, Ruth," he coaxed. "I shall not take things too far, not in the coach, but I shall make you feel good, I promise."

"You have my consent," she said—or whispered, rather. "I promised I would be your mistress during the trip. I have not kept my promise, but it has not been my doing, De-Ath."

He had an urge to hear his name on her lips. Perry, short for Perran. The name he used when he lectured himself. The name his grandmother had called him. The name he hadn't heard anyone else use since Grandmama died when he was twelve.

Even his sister had called him by his title—Lockswell until he became duke, and Richport thereafter. That had been five days after the accident in which his grandmother died, for the old duke had lingered, refusing to submit to his wounds. But even the Duke of Richport was not able to force wounds to heal, or broken bones to mend, or infection, that great killer of men, to leave his rotting flesh.

Like his grandfather, the uncle who had become his guardian only ever called him Richport. “Richport, sit up straight.” “Richport, apply yourself.” “Richport, remember who you are.”

“De-Ath? Are you upset with me?” Ruth’s warm voice, recalling him to the present.

“Upset with you? Not at all. None of the interruptions have been your doing, darling. A blue moment, that was all. I am not a good man, Ruth, and I do not deserve to have your trust.”

“You are a rather bad man, in some ways,” Ruth said, judiciously, “but I trust you because you do not break your promises, you have been kind to Bella, and Walter loves you. You are a good man, in many ways, De-Ath.”

“Perry,” Perry said, quite without meaning to. Ah well. It was done now, and he really would like to hear her say his name. “It is what my grandmother used to call me when I was young. Perry, usually. And sometimes Perran. Will you? Call me Perry or Perran, I mean?”

“Perry,” she said, obediently. “You are a good man, Perry.”

The feeling in his chest was alarming. Was it some sort of heart attack? It felt like pain, only good—and he had never been one to regard pain as pleasure. He made a joke to lighten the moment. “Good in parts. Like an egg, that has only just begun to go off.”

She chuckled, and then said, “Kiss me, Perry, if you wish to do so,”

And he did so wish. He wished, in fact, to keep her in his life forever, which frightened him, so he kissed her to give himself something else to think about, and for a while, it worked.

They arrived in Narbonne an hour after noon. There, they left the driver. He would allow the team to rest for a couple of hours and then take them back to the previous staging post, to exchange them for the now rested team they left there, and would continue sapping teams until he took back to Carcassonne the horses Perry had purchased. Ah well. No doubt someone would benefit from them.

The driver's fee was in a pouch, double what Perry had promised him. Perry handed it over. At their next big town, he would have to find time to sell another couple of gemstones. The driver weighed the pouch in his hands and peered inside. His eyes widened and he smiled. "A pleasure doing business with you, sir. Can I help you find a new driver to take you to... where was it?"

"Perpignan," lied Perry, naming a town to the south, "and thank you. The ladies and I will stay here overnight—or perhaps in another inn if this one doesn't please them." He cast a supercilious glance at the busy innyard, curling his lip. "If you find someone, send them to me. I'll tell the innkeeper here if we decide to take rooms elsewhere."

The driver shrugged. "As you wish, sir." He weighed the pouch again and walked away muttering, "Arrogant goddam."

Perry followed to make sure he was occupied. Sure enough, he ordered a room, a meal, and a glass of wine. When he took a giggling barmaid onto his knee, Perry was satisfied that he'd not be checking up on Perry any time soon.

Fifteen minutes later, with a new team, this time hired, Perry was driving the carriage north east, having told the innkeeper he had just recalled some friends who lived on the coast to the south east, and intended to call on them and perhaps stay for a day or two.

He had thought to head to just outside of Beziers, where his friend lived, but as he drove around the Narbonne market place, a troupe of horses on the other side of the market changed his mind—or, rather, their leader did so.

It was Carlos. Perry was finding it harder and harder to read small print, but his long-distance vision was excellent, and Carlos had made no effort to disguise himself. He was wearing the gaudy purple uniform encrusted in gold piping that was his favourite, and he had just lifted his hat as he bowed to a lady who had caught his eye.

By contrast, Perry had changed his fashionable attire for workman's trousers, heavy boots, and a driver's jacket. Even if he drove straight past Carlos in his slouch hat—and he could, for he was well camouflaged—the man was unlikely to look at him. Common drivers were beneath Carlos's notice.

There was a knock on the sliding panel that allowed those inside the carriage to communicate with the driver, and a moment later the panel slid open. "Perry, I just saw Carlos."

"I see him too," Perry said. "It is just as well that I changed, sweeting. Don't worry. There's no reason for them to look closely at us."

The cart that had been holding them up moved a few feet forward, giving Perry room to pass. Perry touched his cap and nodded to the other driver, in acknowledgement. "Sit down for a minute, love. I'm just going to pass this cart and get us out of here."

He focused on his team for a few minutes, but as they crossed the bridge over the

Canal de la Robine on their way to the main road north, he cast a glance back over his shoulder at Carlos and his men. They were leaving in the opposite direction.

“Have they followed us?” Ruth asked from the communications panel.

“They didn’t notice us,” he assured her. “We won’t go far today, Ruth. Perhaps two villages on. Somewhere they wouldn’t expect us to stop. We’ll abandon the carriage and buy a couple of horses so we can leave the roads and go cross country. No. Three, for we’ll need one for our luggage.” Perhaps he should give her something positive to look forward to. “We’ll find a place to stop for the night, and tomorrow, we’ll ride to where my yacht is moored, and take it offshore until it is time to meet the canal boat.”

Tonight, he would take her fully, and after that as often as he could. Would coupling get her out of his system? He was afraid it would not, and then what was he supposed to do?

The word ‘wife’, which he’d spoken as a blithe lie for the last few days, hovered at the fringes of his mind, demanding to be acknowledged. Had it come to that? He had known so many women. What was different about this one?

Domestic scenes he’d observed played in his mind, with him and Ruth cast in the main roles. Was marriage to Ruth such a terrible idea?

Of course it was. She was a woman like any other, and he’d had hundreds. And yet, it seemed like blasphemy thinking of Ruth in the same moment as the hordes of wanton females who’d fleetingly possessed his body, even more fleetingly his attention, and never his heart.

It is because I have not yet had her. Afterwards, I will tire of her as I have tired of all the others . As he had the thought, he knew he was lying to himself. He had never felt

this way about anyone. Even Mathilda, back in the early days of his marriage when he was besotted with the bride his uncle had chosen for him.

Perry, my boy, you are in deep trouble. Best drop Miss Henwood to the nearest British consul and run . He wouldn't, though. He had promised to take her and Bella to England and he would keep his promise. Yes, and take his price out of her lovely hide. Even if it destroyed him.

The day had been long and boring. At least leaving the driver behind in Narbonne meant that Perry was willing to stop along the road, far from human dwellings, to let her stretch her legs and use the bordeleau in some privacy and comfort.

Not in villages. In an excess of caution, as he himself put it, he insisted on her not showing herself when he stopped to change horses. Furthermore, at one village he called on a wheel wright. He bought a pot of paint and a brush, and turned outside of the village on a track into a small forest, where he stopped in a clearing to inexpertly paint the carriage door and the wheel hubs.

“We'll have to wait until the paint is dry or all the dirt and dust of the road will stick to it,” Ruth observed.

For a moment, Perry looked flummoxed, then his devilish grin appeared. “I wonder what on earth we can do as while we wait?” he asked.

Ruth was torn near in two. On the one hand, each amorous encounter left her eager for more. On the other, they were already far past what her vicarage upbringing taught her was appropriate for people who did not intend to marry.

Indeed, as a child of the gentry, she was shocked at what they had already done, though she'd lived long enough to know that both the aristocracy and the common folk were relaxed about anticipating marital vows. A betrothal was, after all, very

nearly a marriage.

Except Perry did not mean to marry her. Of course, he didn't. She was not duchess material, nor young, nor particularly beautiful. That she even thought of marriage was witness to how far she had fallen, and she had no doubt at all she would fall all the way, and gladly.

And suffer after, both for her sin—for she believed Perry when he said he would never force her, which meant her fall was her own choice—and for the loss of the flawed but noble man with whom she was in love.

You will have saved Bella. It will be worth it .

She stepped into Perry's waiting arms, determined to hold on to any last pieces of her heart that were not already his, and already knowing she would fail.

"The day has been long enough," he said an uncountable time later, surfacing from a long kiss. "Let us make camp. We can tether the horses and sleep in the carriage."

Ruth nodded, knowing exactly what her agreement meant. Today, perhaps before nightfall, Perry would complete the seduction he had begun. She dreaded it and could hardly wait.

Had she been asked, Ruth would have said that a duke, especially one with Perry's reputation, would be at a loss faced with setting up a safe and comfortable camp. She would have been wrong. Wherever he had learned the skills, as she collected wood and kindling for the fire he proposed to build, he took the horses to the nearby stream to drink, tethered them where they could graze, and produced a spade from a tool rack under the carriage to dig a fire pit.

"Would you make a bed for us upwind of the fire, Ruth darling?" he asked.

“A bed? But are we not going to sleep in the carriage?”

Perry’s eyes twinkled as he gave her a wicked grin. “We’ll sleep in the carriage,” he explained. “This bed is not for sleeping. Sweep the ground of any rocks or sticks, then lay a couple of quilts for comfort underneath, and put a sheet over them. The bedding is inside the backward facing seat.”

“And the broom?” Ruth did her best to sound as matter-of-fact as Perry. It would be soon, then.

“I’ll make you a broom,” Perry offered. He pulled out a knife and began cutting branches from one of the bushes that surrounded the clearing. By the time Ruth had collected the bedding, he was binding branches to a stick he’d selected from Ruth’s firewood. “There. Not particularly robust, but it should hold together for long enough to sweep the ground.”

The man is astonishingly competent . Ruth blushed at the thought of the competence for which he was most famous, and perhaps he guessed at her thoughts, for he winked at her as he bent over the fire pit, carefully placing wood to build the fire.

“We won’t light this before the sun sets,” he commented. “I don’t want smoke to give us away, and it is warm enough that we only need it for cooking. And for a cup of tea, if you want one, dearest. Meanwhile, our wash will need to be cold. I propose that we wash now, and then go and test out the bed you have made. Do you want the stream first, darling? Or we could wash together, if you prefer.”

“First,” Ruth said, through a suddenly dry throat. She did not drag out her wash. The cold water did not make her inclined to linger. Besides, now that the time was on her, she wanted it done and over.

Perry did not keep her waiting long. He returned quickly from his wash, with a towel

wrapped around his waist, a pair of shoes on his feet to protect him from stones and prickles, and nothing else on.

Ruth was sitting on the make-shift mattress, still fully dressed. He came and sat beside her to take his shoes off. He then started to unwrap his towel. Ruth stiffened in shock.

“Too soon?” Perry asked. He pulled back the top sheet and slipped under it, pulling the sheet up to his waist before tossing the towel to hang from a nearby branch. “If I may just comment, Ruth darling, you are somewhat overdressed for the occasion. Do you need help with your laces?”

An advantage of men’s clothing was that nothing fastened at the back. Ruth shook her head and took off her coat. Her fingers fumbled with the laces on her trousers, but she reminded herself that Perry would offer to help again, and she would far rather do it herself. She had not replaced her socks and shoes after her wash, so once the trousers were off, all that remained was the voluminous shirt that hid her down to the knees.

Apart from her chemise and drawers, and she was not taking those off while Perry watched. Though perhaps later. Since this was going to happen anyway, she was putting the demure daughter of the vicar into a box for the moment. Instead, she was going to experience everything Perry could show her. It was going to happen, so why should she not enjoy it?

He obligingly shifted to the far side of the mattress, and flipped the top sheet ready for her to slide under. She did so, pulled the sheet as high as she could, and tugged the shirt off over her head.

Lying down, with the sheet up around her neck, she waited to see what happened next.

“What are you still wearing,” Perry whispered, sounding interested rather than irritated.

“My chemise and drawers,” she muttered.

His response was a noncommittal noise. “Would you be kind enough to kiss me, Ruth?” he asked next.

She could do that. She now knew how, and kissing was very pleasant. Keeping the sheet over her shoulders, she rolled to face Perry, but he remained flat on his back, his face turned to the sky, smiling as he watched her from the corner of his nearest eye.

With a sigh, she raised herself until she could lower her mouth onto his. After that, she quickly lost the ability to catalogue what was happening. Perry didn’t take over the kiss so much as lead her to greater and ever greater intimacies. Deeper kisses. Caresses. Kisses in places that would have made her blush if she had paused to think about them.

He filled her senses. The sight of him—so male, so fit, so beautifully sculpted. His smell—something spicy and musky, with an extra something that said ‘Perry’. His touch, with mouth and fingers—gentle and then firm, always pleasurable, each stroke and glide ensorcelling her still further. His taste on her tongue, as he encouraged her to explore his body with her kisses—a slight remnant of his lunchtime coffee, the tooth powder he must have just used, the slight salty flavour of his perspiration. And his sound—the murmurs of instruction and encouragement, the soft sighs and groans that were her reward when she found the touches that affected him the way he was affecting her.

At some point, he dispensed with her chemise. She didn’t miss it. The drawers went the same way, though she could not remember how or when. All of the sensations

were mixing together, until she could not tell whether she was hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, or feeling. She was just one creature of sensation, every nerve in her body straining for something.

“That’s it, dear heart,” Perry murmured, his voice just one more sensation in the orchestral symphony he was playing on her body. “That’s it. Let go. Let it happen.”

Let go of what? Let what happen? But even as the thought struggled to make its way through the sensuous haze, she found out. All the sensations reached a crescendo, a peak, a space of light and glory.

She shouted as the culminating peak stretched across moments, and slowly drained from her body, leaving her limp.

Perry was moving, coming over the top of her, shifting her legs apart so that he could lie between them, nudging the focus point of those wondrous feelings with the blunt tip of his male organ. “May I enter you, dear Ruth?” he asked, polite as ever. She said, “Mmmm-huh,” even as she wondered whether she could make him as mindless as he made her.

“I need a ‘yes’, darling,” he coaxed.

Ruth found the energy to lift her body against him. “Yes.”

He brought her back to mindlessness, but this time, he came with her, and it was even better.

It was only afterwards that she remembered her father’s teachings. How disappointed he would be with her.

Perry had never felt so wonderful. Their coupling had been spectacular. Ruth was

spectacular. He couldn't wait to do it all again, to show her more of the magnificence they had wrought together this first time. He chuckled to himself—waiting was a physical necessity. His age might have given him greater staying power, but it took him longer to recover.

Or perhaps not. With Ruth in his arms, he was already beginning to feel the first stirrings of interest. He pressed a kiss to her hair. What a woman! He wanted to never let her go. And for once, he let the thought settle in his mind without shying away.

It was then that he realised the reason for the growing dampness on his chest, too much for perspiration. Ruth was crying, without movement or noise, weeping silently into his chest.

He twisted his neck to try to see her face, but all he could see was her hair.

“Ruth? Ruth, darling, what is wrong? Did I hurt you? Dear God, Ruth, why didn't you say something! I would never have... But I could have sworn...” Surely, he had felt her reach her culmination? Heaven knew he was experienced enough to tell when a woman was faking it. Not that Ruth was the sort to fake anything.

“You must know it was beautiful.” The sob was obvious in her voice as she spoke. “Don't mind me, Perry. I am just being silly.”

This unaccustomed feeling was panic. Perry wanted to slay whatever villain had upset her, and he had a growing sense it was him. “I don't believe it. You are not a silly woman. Tell me, darling. What is wrong? What makes you cry?”

When she did not answer him, he cradled her head gently in his hands and pulled back far enough to look into her eyes. Tears kept welling up and sliding down her cheeks. “Tell me,” he begged. “How can I fix it if I don't know what is wrong.”

“You can’t.” She gave a watery chuckle. “It is well and truly broken. Oh, Perry, do not worry so.” She brought her hands to cup his face so that they lay there, him half over her, both holding one another’s heads. “I am fine. Truly.”

Something that was well and truly broken. Her maidenhead? If she’d had one, which was unlikely, given her age, it had not presented any barrier to his entry. Something less tangible? “You are still a virtuous woman, Ruth. If we have done wrong, I am to blame.”

Something in the way she sighed told him he was on the right track. “Is that it, Ruth? You think we have done wrong?”

“Not you, Perry,” she assured him. “You have acted the way you always act, the way I expected you to act. It is I who have allowed you to change me, to weaken my will. I cannot deny I gave myself to you gladly. I, who resisted so many who would have assailed my virtue. What would my father say if he saw me now?”

It stung, to be dismissed as a careless rake. She expected him to seduce her and he had done so. There was nothing wrong with that. They were both adults, and though she had been a virgin, what use was her virginity to her? And yet he felt guilty, as if he had broken something precious.

He rolled away from her. What right had he to touch her when he had made her cry? “Tell me about your father,” he said, hoping to give her time to calm herself.

“He was a vicar,” Ruth said. “He raised me on his own after my mother died, and then he left me all alone when I was seventeen. A heart attack, they said. A broken heart, I think. He was never the same after my mother died. I think he knew it was about to happen, for I had just started in my first position—as governess to the Stocke sisters, though I was only a year older than Anne Stocke. The Earl of Selby, their father, was a friend of my father, you see. I think they arranged it between them so I

would have a home.”

That would have been the uncle of the Selby Perry had known. As Perry remembered it, the uncle and his wife had died in an accident, leaving a son and three daughters in the guardianship of his brother. “I am sorry,” Perry said. “Lord and Lady Selby died too, didn’t they? And then their son, the new earl?” One of his partners in debauchery, a man called George, had brought the son to an orgy at Perry’s place in London, once. Then a disaster had ruined their friendship.

Out at the Selby country estate on a repairing lease, George had humped someone he thought, in the dark, was the governess. He later discovered it was one of the sisters. When his friend, their brother, challenged him to a duel, the drunken fool accidentally shot and killed the brother.

After that, the three sisters disappeared, too. And the governess. Perry hadn’t made the connection, though he should have. After all, he knew that the Countess of Chirbury, Ruth’s beloved friend Anne, was also Countess of Selby—holding that earldom in her own right.

“So you went into hiding,” Perry mused. “The sister who was attacked had a baby, and your friend Anne pretended to be a widow.”

“I forget that you must have known that awful man,” Ruth said, frowning at him.

“Selby, too,” he admitted. “I had to ban Selby from my... ah... parties. I don’t allow violence or forcing the unwilling. But George was mainly just a drunk. He was truly sorry, you know. About the rape and about his young friend’s death. I’ve always believed that is what he meant by his suicide note.” It had been three words, written over and over until it filled the page. “I am sorry. I am sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t put what is broken back together,” Ruth responded sharply.

Broken. It was how she had described herself. Or her maidenhead. Or her virtue. Perry was not quite sure what was broken, but he had done it.

He hardly dared ask his question. “Did I force you against your will, Ruth.”

To his relief, she shook her head. “You did not.”

But his heart sank again when she added, “I do not have that excuse, Perry. I knew you would not force me. We had a bargain, but if I had begged off, you would not have abandoned me. I wanted what we did. I just didn’t expect to feel so dreadful. Such a wretched sinner.” The last four words were almost whispered.

It was rubbish, of course, her holding herself accountable. He knew how to seduce. He’d coaxed any number of women to his bed, some of them at least technically innocent, though he had always steered clear of those who were innocent out of conviction rather than habit or the fear of what people might think.

With Ruth, he had miscalculated badly. Hers wasn’t a temporary discomfort, easily soothed by a tawdry gift and the reassurance that no one would ever know. Hers was a bone deep belief. She felt soiled, and he was responsible.

“It is not your fault, Ruth,” he told her. “I’m not called the Duke of Depravity for nothing. I have been seducing women for twenty-four years, and I am an expert at making a woman’s body my ally in her downfall.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand better than you think.” Was he really going to tell her this? He never spoke of it. “I fell in love with my wife, Ruth, if you can believe it. I thought we were a love match for the ages. Then I discovered she loved someone else—someone unsuitable. Her father and my uncle had cooked up the plan of her marrying me, and

had promised she could have her lover once she'd given me a son. I caught them together, in her bed, in my own house, and she told me all of it." Ruth had been lying beside him, staring up at the sky, but part way through his story she had come back into his arm, tucking herself into his side with her head on his shoulder.

He hugged her close and continued. "She hated me, she said. She had always hated me. I went straight to London and to bed with one of the women who had been propositioning me since I first came out in Society. And then another and another. And I felt unclean, disgusting, unfit to be near decent people."

He shuddered. And he had done that to her. To Ruth. To the best woman he had ever met.

But Ruth, of course, was now thinking of him. "Oh Perry. I am so sorry."

"She died a year later. Measles, of all things. Her lover had them, and passed them on to her. Fortunately, she had little to do with Caspian, which is one of things that make me think he really is mine, and not her lover's."

"Caspian is your son," Ruth commented, making it a statement, but he agreed, as if it had been a question.

"We write to one another, you know. After Mathilda died, I sent him to live with my sister, and she has raised a fine young man. He will be a good duke, I think, when it is his time."

"How did you heal? How did you feel clean again?"

It was a discomfiting question, for he had responded to that sense of wrong by diving into debauchery. Several couplings a night with different women, often two or three at a time. Wild parties where he did things he didn't want to think about in

Ruth's sane company. Drink. Drugs. Women. Gambling. Crazy life-risking stunts.

"Marry me," he said, startling himself as much as Ruth. It was a good idea, though. He couldn't think of any other way to wipe out his crime against her, and besides he wanted to marry her. He really did. He'd not been bored once in days. "Marry me, Ruth. Then what we do together won't be wrong. Won't have been wrong. Just a bit previous."

Ruth stared at him in disbelief. Then she laughed as if he had made a joke and rested her head back down on his shoulder again. "It would serve you right if I took you up on that. Can you imagine? Me, a duchess?"

"I'm serious," Perry insisted. "It isn't so bad, you know. Being a duchess. Duchesses, like dukes, make their own rules. You can still be you."

She was silent. Was she thinking about it, or had she dismissed him out of hand? He shifted so that they were side by side, facing one another. "Think about it, Ruth. I know I am no prize. My past doesn't bear speaking about. But it is the right thing to do, for us both. You are not made for casual entanglements. I am trying to change... You asked what I did to feel clean again. I didn't. I threw myself into the muck. But in the past few years, I've begun to yearn for something different."

Her clear-eyed gaze drew out of him thoughts he'd never articulated before. "I thought I was bored. But nothing satisfied. Not for long. Temporary distractions, but the restlessness always returned. But in truth, I was changing. Perhaps I was growing up at long last—my sister always said I needed to. It is why I decided to return to England, to reform my life and get to know my son. I can do it, Ruth. I can be a better man. Marry me?"

She shook her head, slowly. "You don't mean it, Perry. It is just that you are sorry for me. I won't marry a man because he pities me."

She couldn't be more wrong! It was her strength and resilience, as well as her integrity and kindness that he wanted to make his own. But before he could find the words to explain that, she spoke again.

"I have seen enough marriages, good and bad, that I have promised never to marry where I cannot give my heart. And I cannot give my heart to a man that might well grow bored with me. That probably will grow bored, for what is there about me to compete with the women you have known?"

"Everything," he insisted. "None of them held my attention beyond the physical. Not like you do."

Another slow shake of the head. "I wish I could believe you. I am tired, Perry. Let us sleep. Tomorrow, we can talk about this again, if you still wish to do so."

Perhaps that was best. Give her time to think about it. At least her 'I wish I could believe you' showed some desire for him, did it not? "Just know that I mean this, Ruth. I want to marry you." Should he promise her a lifetime of fidelity? But why should she trust him? As they tidied up the blankets they had been lying on, set the carriage seats up as beds, and saw to the horses, he tried to consider the question logically. Certainly, she was justified in her doubts, given his past.

Even Perry was not certain. He had no doubt he could resist the lures of the harpies, but what if he was faced with a long period of celibacy because she was ill or they were separated either physically or emotionally? He had never tried, which was a lowering thought. On the other hand, surely it was something that he didn't break his promises? If he promised fidelity—he had a vague notion there was something about that in the wedding vows—he would be faithful.

As they lay down to sleep one on either bench of the carriage, he said, "Ruth, if we marry, I will give my word to be faithful, and you know I keep my word."

“But will you come to resent me?” she replied.

He had no idea. Would he?

After a moment, Ruth turned her back and pulled the blankets up over her shoulders.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Ruth, are we not both reasonable adults? If we have problems, we can talk them out. Can we not? And come to a decision that suits us both?”

“Go to sleep, Perry. I am too tired to think about this.”

Fair enough. Perry pulled up his own blankets, and said once more, “I will not change my mind.”

Ruth, tired though she was, had a restless night. When she did sleep, she dreamt—and woke with vague confused snippets of scenes in her head. Her, searching a great mansion for a missing Perry. Her, in a ballroom full of people pointing and jeering at the would-be duchess. Her, weeping alone while surrounded by trunks of clothing and jewellery.

At last, the carriage windows showed a lightening sky. Dawn was underway. Another day, and today they would swap the carriage for horses. Thank goodness Bella was passionate about visiting every corner of her little country, so that Ruth, who always accompanied her, was a competent rider.

She became aware of being watched. A slight turn was enough to see Perry, a shadowy figure sitting on the opposite bench.

“Good morning, Ruth,” he said.

“Is it time to get up?” she asked, and answered her own question. “If we are both awake, why not?”

“We have the bread and cheese from yesterday to break our fast on,” he said. “Dress in your men’s clothes, Ruth, and you can sit up beside me on the box.”

Much better than travelling alone in the carriage. She sat up, clutching the blanket to her chest—which was slamming the stable door after the horse had bolted, in anyone’s terms. But although he had seen every inch of her body, their discussion last

night, and his astounding proposal, made her wary.

Perry reached for the door handle. “I’ve put your trunk down. Find your clothes and attend to your ablutions, and I’ll begin harnessing the horses. We can eat as we travel.”

He left the carriage, and Ruth went after him, first wrapping a blanket around her as a cloak. Apparently, he was not going to talk about last night. She was glad. She had no idea what to say.

She washed and got dressed, then tidied away their makeshift beds and repacked the trunk and bags they’d opened. Meanwhile, Perry toiled away harnessing the horses and, when he was finished, reloading the luggage onto the carriage.

The sun had just cleared the horizon when they drove out of the forest and back onto the road.

“I calculate that Sète is about six hours away,” Perry said. “Early as we are, and even allowing time for me to change to look respectable enough to be selling this carriage in order to buy horses, we should arrive in the early afternoon.”

“Is Sète where the canal ends?” Ruth asked, trying to make her tone as casual as Perry’s.

“No, the canal ends at this end of the Basin of Thau, so we’ll have to collect Bella and Walter by horse. In fact, we should check whether they’ve arrived when we pass Agde. There’s a long spit of land between the basin and the sea, with Agde at one end and Sète on the far end of the spit, where the basin opens into the sea. That will be the most dangerous time, actually—when we are riding from the end of the canal to Sète. Pray, dear Ruth, that Carlos is searching for us somewhere else. I’d rather not meet up with him or Garcia until I have my sailors and servants behind me as extra

muscle.”

Dear Ruth . Her heart thrilled at the endearment, even though her mind told her that Perry was as lavish with endearments as he was with his money.

With his uncanny ability to catch her thoughts, or perhaps just because he thought of it, Perry changed the subject. “On another topic, I still want to marry you, Ruth.”

She had to be honest, at least about her worries if not her feelings. “Perry, I have been thinking and thinking, and I cannot see how it could possibly work. I am probably too old to have children.”

“I have an heir, and cousins in the wings in case of need. I do not need you to have children.”

“I would be a possessive and jealous wife. I will not share.”

“Surprisingly, neither will I. I have never been possessive, Ruth. Not since Mathilda. But I find the thought of another man putting his hands on you turns me red with rage.”

What a surprisingly gratifying answer. But Ruth’s major objection was still to come. “I do not belong in your world.”

Perry’s answer startled. “Neither do I, Ruth. Truth to tell, I have been uncomfortable in it for some time. I suppose that was why I tried to kidnap the Duchess of Haverford.”

The last sentence had Ruth whipping her head around to stare at her travelling companion. Was he joking? He looked perfectly serious.

“I suppose I had better explain,” he said. “The trouble with being outrageous to avoid boredom is that outrageousness becomes boring. So, five or six years ago, I was taking more and more risks, doing things that were sillier and sillier. One of the most stupid involved a mistress of the king—the prince regent, as he was then. I am not going to tell you the details. I am ashamed enough of them without explaining them to you. Suffice it to say that a royal lackey conveyed to me that an extended overseas trip would be good for my health.”

“And the Duchess of Haverford?”

“She was not that then. She was Lady Charlotte Winderfield, niece of the Duke of Winshire and well-known bluestocking and spinster. I quite liked her. She is intelligent, kind, passionate about her causes, full of integrity, highly moral—much like you, in fact, though you have the edge on her in looks.”

Despite herself, Ruth was flattered. The Duchess of Haverford was a pretty woman.

“I had for some time been wondering if I should marry. Various friends had done so, and seemed happy. Even Aldridge—the Marquis of Aldridge, who became the Duke of Haverford—even Aldridge was courting. Lady Charlotte, as it happened, but any fool could see that she wasn’t going to have him.”

“So, you decided to do so.”

“I thought if she refused Aldridge, who was at least still welcome at ton events, I should not give her the choice. She would come round, I assumed, and I did intend to marry her, after all.” He sighed. “It was not one of my better moments.”

“The kidnapping failed?”

“It did. And I left London just ahead of a visit from my former friend, breathing fire

and swearing vengeance. Just as well, as it turned out. I heard later that she married Aldridge—Haverford, because his father had just died. They are a love match.”

Ruth nodded. Haverford was a cousin of the Earl of Chirbury, so she knew him a little, and Anne had written about how happy they were. “Did you love her, Perry?”

Perry shrugged. “I did not. I thought she was a suitable bride. And I liked her, what I knew of her. That was all.” He flashed her his cheekiest grin. “Haverford and his wife might be the most embarrassing part of going back to England. If we are married, Ruth, he is less likely to geld me.”

Refusing to be goaded, Ruth said, “You owe them both an apology, but I imagine that, if you truly are determined to turn over a new leaf, they will accept it.”

The story was interesting though. If he really had been thinking of making a change in his lifestyle even six years ago, perhaps she could have more faith in his ability to be faithful. It didn’t change her unsuitability, though.

“So, have you been travelling since then?” she asked. What she really wondered was whether he had continued to be a rake. Certainly, apart from his friendship with Carlos and his proposition to her, he had not behaved badly during his visit to Las Estrellas.

“I have. And, before you ask, I have not been celibate, but I haven’t attended or thrown any orgies, either. I’ve had the occasional pleasant interlude with a neglected wife or a willing widow. Nothing for months. Even the most casual of connections can suddenly turn sour and full of drama. There are other, more convenient, ways to deal with one’s physical impulses. Not that they are as urgent as they used to be when I was young.”

“Brothels do you mean?” Ruth didn’t like the thought of that.

He grinned and nudged her shoulder with his arm. “Not brothels, sweet innocent. Mother Palmer and her five nimble daughters.”

She frowned at him wondering what he meant, and then blushed when he held up a hand, palm towards her, wiggling his thumb and four fingers.

They had had a stroke of luck with finding horses when they stumbled across an encampment of Roma. After a few tense moments, defused when Perry proved to be able to make himself understood in their language, the impudent man negotiated for the use of two riding horses and a pack horse. And the services of a man called Hanzi, who would ride with them and take the borrowed horses back.

From their gestures, Ruth gathered that the Roma would have accepted a straight swap for the four carriage horses, but Perry insisted on leaving them at an inn, where they would be rested and then put back into traces for a return journey with another carriage.

“When I pointed out it would become a matter for the police if I let them have our hired horses rather than sending them back to their owner, our Romani friends agreed that the animals must be returned,” Perry told Ruth, as they rode towards the village where they would leave the horses. “They have suggested we just slip them into the field the inn uses, so the inn knows nothing about where we came from or where we are going.”

“That is why you abandoned the carriage,” Ruth realised, and Perry nodded.

Goodness. The man spends money like water. Precisely how rich is he?

Even more reason that he couldn’t be—or, at least, shouldn’t be—serious about marrying her.

Perry set a swift pace, avoiding villages and houses wherever he could. Hanzi knew the area well, and took them down country lanes and sometimes across vineyards between the vines. Once an elderly man chased them out of a vineyard, shaking his cane at them.

Ruth wanted to go back and apologise. Perry laughed.

They arrived in Agde, near the end of the canal, in the late afternoon. “We’ll stop and check to see whether Walter and Bella have arrived,” Perry said. “If so, we can take them up behind us, to Sète.”

They left the horses with Hanzi, and went into the town, to look for a tavern or whatever other such place that the boat people gathered.

Perry suddenly stopped, and called out, “Walter!”

His manservant was crossing the street just ahead of them, but he changed directly and loped towards them. “Your Gr—Mr. De-Ath, sir. Dear Lord, am I pleased to see you!”

“What is wrong?” Ruth asked. Something was. The man looked both exhausted and worried.

“I don’t know for sure, Miss, and that’s a fact. They are all sick, Miss Bella, too. And the doctor here won’t see canal people.”

“We’ll see about that,” Perry said grimly.

“Not in those clothes, Perry,” Ruth told him. “Go and turn yourself into a duke again. Walter, take me to the canal boat. I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll come with you far enough that I know where to bring the doctor,” Perry said. “Sick how? And for how long?”

It had come on after they left Beziers—first a griping stomach pain and then, as Walter delicately put it, voiding at both ends. Both other adults were ill, as well as Bella and two of the three daughters. Fortunately, the daughter and the canal horse knew what to do to get them to Agde, while Walter emptied, cleaned, and returned buckets, and did what he could to comfort the sick.

“It could be something they ate,” Ruth suggested. “Do they have a high fever, Walter? Headaches?”

“Not to say high,” Walter said. “Up a bit, I’d say.”

Probably not typhoid, then, though there were other diseases with similar symptoms.

“There’s the boat, sir,” Walter pointed.

Perry nodded. “I’ll bring the doctor,” he told them. “I will be as quick as I can.”

They parted ways, and Ruth hurried on with Walter. “What did they last eat, Walter? And did you have any?”

Bella was weak and pale, but she insisted she was well. “I have not needed a bucket for more than two hours, Ruth, but I am so glad to see you. I am worried about Madame and Monsieur.”

Ruth found the well daughter trying to look after her parents, who looked gaunt and certainly did need the buckets that Walter kept recycling. While Bella put on a kettle to make tea, Ruth washed the faces of the remaining patients and asked questions about what foods they had eaten in the past twenty-four hours.

Mushrooms picked from the canal side were almost certainly the problem, since they'd had them for lunch, all except for Walter and the one well daughter, neither of whom liked mushrooms. The doctor confirmed the diagnosis when he arrived. "The girls are already recovering, Mr. De-Ath. They should be given plenty to drink, and they must rest. Moreau and Mrs. Moreau? You are doing the right things, Mrs. De-Ath. Continue. Keep them as clean as you can. Encourage them to drink. I shall call again tomorrow."

Perry went off to let Hanzi know what was happening, but soon returned.

"Hanzi is gone and so are the horses," he reported

"I suppose he thought we had abandoned him," Ruth acknowledged.

Perry shrugged. "In any case, I need to sell another gem. I'd planned to top up my purse when we returned to the yacht, but instead I'm going to send a messenger to fetch the yacht. Have you got everything you need here? I'll head out again and see what I can manage."

"Some ingredients to make a nutritious broth," Ruth ordered. "Also, ginger and peppermint, if you can find them, to make tea."

"And something for us for dinner," Perry concluded. He gave her a kiss on the cheek in front of Bella, Walter and the Moreaus—though the couple were not thinking about anything except their unstable digestive systems—and left again.

He reappeared some time later, walking in with freshly washed buckets when Ruth expected Walter. "I have put aside the ones that need to be emptied and rinsed out," she said, without looking around.

"Certainly." Perry's voice jerked Ruth's head around.

“You’re back.” Ruth had been feeling weary, but Perry’s presence made her feel she could manage anything.

He touched her cheek. “For that smile, darling, I would climb mountains. Emptying a couple of reeking buckets is easy enough. But where is Walter?”

“I sent him to bed. Bella, too.” Everyone else, in fact. “They were up all night, Perry, and you and I slept well after...” She blushed. After their coupling, her emotional outburst, his unbelievable proposal.

“Then we shall look after the Moreaus,” Perry said. If his thoughts had marched with hers, he gave no sign of it, but trudged away, uncomplaining, with the buckets.

He had managed to purchase broth and the herbs and ginger Ruth had asked for. He sat with the canal boat couple while Ruth made them a drink each, and heated enough of the broth for the patients. For him and Ruth, he’d bought bread, cheese, and fruit, and they ate that, washed down with a rather pleasant local wine, while he told her what he’d achieved.

“No jeweller, but I had enough cash left for the food, and I gave one of the fishermen a pearl to sail across the basin to Sète with my message. The yacht will arrive in the morning. Hopefully by then the Moreaus will be able to manage without us.”

At that moment, Mrs. Moreau called for another bucket.

It was a long night, but by morning, both Mr. and Mrs. Moreau were past the worst of it. Pale, weak, but no longer voiding, and sleeping peacefully. “Go and get some sleep, Ruth,” Perry suggested. “I shall watch our patients, but I think they are on the mend.”

Ruth wasn’t sure where she could sleep. Every cabin was occupied. In any case,

while her body ached with tiredness, her mind was still racing. Again and again in the night, Perry had come up with reasons she should marry him. If he only knew, his greatest argument was his presence, washing Mr. Moreau's face, spooning broth into the poor man, holding a bucket for him. Who could not want a husband who was so kind—and so practical in his application of that kindness.

Could she do it? Could she marry him? If only she could be certain he would not regret it. Regret it and, in time, come to resent her. It would be different if he loved her. Love was the one persuasion she could not refuse, and the one he had not offered. She stepped up on deck. Perhaps a short walk along the dock, just to have a breath of fresh air.

Several of the canal folk were up and working. They called out enquiries about the Moreaus and were pleased to hear that the whole family was on the mend. Walking from group to group to answer their questions took her further than she had intended. She was surprised, when she looked back towards the Moreau boat, by how far she had come.

She had better return before someone came looking for her.

Ruth was almost back at the boat when she heard the horses. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see riders coming—a dozen men, with Carlos and Garcia at their head. She lowered her head and tried not to run. She was still dressed as a man. In her cap, she must look much like the other canal people. Just an anonymous man. Nothing to see here .

What went wrong, she never knew. Perhaps they knew she was disguised. Perhaps she did not walk like a man and Garcia was perpetually suspicious. One moment she was walking, and the next she was slamming into the ground, Garcia on top of her, shouting with triumph in Spanish, “I have the English bitch, excellency!”

Bella wandered into the cabin some time after Ruth left. “Would you like some coffee and a bun, De-Ath?” she asked. “Is Ruth sleeping?”

Perry went from half awake to panicked alertness in a breath. “Ruth went to bed. If not with you, then where?”

“I’ll check with the sisters. You look at Walter,” said Bella, and whisked herself out of the room. But Ruth was not below deck in any of the tiny cabins.

“Look after your parents,” Perry told the Moreau girls, all of whom were looking much better. “Don’t wake them. Sleep is their best doctor now.”

“That is what Ruth always says when our patients are out of danger,” Bella observed, almost tripping on Perry’s heels in her haste to follow him up the narrow stairs to the deck. Walter clattered up behind them.

The scene on the docks was spread out before them as if it was on stage and they spectators at a play. A chorus of boat and townspeople, drawing away into worried clumps to observe from safety, a cluster of heavily armed horsemen, Garcia jerking Ruth to her feet by an arm, Carlos striding across the wooden boardwalk, reaching Ruth as they watched and yanking her from Garcia’s grip into his own.

“Get your hands off my wife!” Perry roared, sheer instinct driving both shout and words. Bella shot him a startled look, but he had no time for her. “Protect the princess,” he muttered to Walter and leapt from the canal boat to the dock.

“I said,” he repeated, “Get your bloody hands off my wife. Now, Carlos.”

“Not before she tells me where I can find my princess, Death,” Carlos growled back. “I thought she had kidnapped Isabella. I might have known you were the thief. And married? To a mouse of a governess? The Duke of Depravity? What a joke! Have

you ruined them both, Death? For if you have, I shall kill you.”

“I escorted the Princess Isabella to safety after you threatened to force her to be your wife and her governess to be your mistress.” Several of the Carlos’s escort shifted uneasily, so Perry continued, infusing a taunt into his voice. “The princess knows you plan to kill her as soon as you have got a son or two on her, to be your excuse to keep control of Las Estrellas. How did you get yourself named guardian, Carlos? Or were you? Did you forge Prince Rodolfo’s signature on the will?”

He was too successful. Carlos tugged Ruth against his body, wrapped an arm around her to keep her trapped, and set the edge of his knife against her throat.

“Where is Isabella?” he demanded.

“Here,” said Bella’s clear young voice, and Carlos’s eyes widened. Perry didn’t want to look away from his beloved, standing straight and proud with a knife to her throat, her eyes fixed on him, sending a message of confidence and love. When his gaze met hers, she smiled, the gallant creature.

“Put that gun down, princess,” Carlos ordered. “Females should not play with guns. Put the gun down and I shall let Miss Henwood go.”

Perry spared a glance in that direction. Bella and Walter both stood on the canal boat, one with each of his pistols. Bella looked as if she knew what she was doing, and Walter was a champion sharp-shooter, but Ruth still had a knife at her throat, and Perry was not going to be able to breath until she was free and safe and in his arms.

“You put the knife down, Uncle Carlos,” Bella responded. “And let the Duchess of Richport go. You are in France now. You and your men are breaking the law. I am not in your control any more, and I shall not marry you.”

Behind Carlos, the same men exchanged an uneasy glance. Perry recognised some of them—they were all from Estrellas rather than the Spaniards who had come home with Carlos. Would they stand with the princess? Or with the duque?

“I’d heard that about you, Carlos,” Perry said, strolling casually a few steps closer. “That you were bravest when faced by women and children. Why don’t you let my wife go and face a man!”

“What man?” Carlos sneered. “You? A warrior of the sheets? A man whose only sword is fitted between his legs?”

“And a fine weapon it is, too,” Perry replied, unperturbed. He had the man! “Get one of your men to loan me a sword and we shall see who is the better man. You! Garcia—or should I call you El Lobo? The devil’s wolf, are you not?”

The boat people drew further back, and Perry heard a few low growls as some of them recognised the nickname. With luck, if he fell today, the onlookers would get Bella and Ruth away. The Estrellasan men would help, unless he missed his guess, but there were only five of them to the seven Spaniards, and the Spaniards were all vicious men without family or any friends except their comrades. Dangerous as wounded wolves, in other words.

“Give him your sword,” said Carlos, and when Garcia obeyed, he shoved his knife and Ruth at Garcia. “Keep the bitch for me. After I have killed this dog I shall enjoy her, then give her to you while I take the princess.”

Garcia’s sabre was heavier than the foils Perry usually used in duelling and in exercise. It was a cutting weapon rather than a thrusting one, but it could be used to thrust, and if Carlos gave Perry an opening, he might not expect Perry to use a fencing trick.

Carlos returned to his horse for his own sabre, and came at Perry in a rush, swinging with deadly precision. But Perry was ready for the attack, and danced out of Carlos's way, sweeping his own weapon in a wide arc that should have connected with Carlos's side. Except that Carlos was already moving, spinning out of reach, and then attacking again. Slash, slice, crash as Perry lifted his own weapon to block, slash again, and withdraw. Each was more cautious now, eyeing one another for a moment.

"You're a fool, English," Carlos proclaimed, "and today, you shall be a dead fool and your widow shall be my whore."

"Haven't you heard, El Diablo?" Perry taunted. "I am Death. I am, in point of fact, your death, for you threatened my wife."

Another rush from Carlos. Another clash of arms. Another pause to examine the enemy and to breathe. Perry might just win this. Carlos had experience in sabre fighting, but little science. Furthermore, Carlos was out of practice and he had let his fitness slip while lolling around on a throne pretended to be the ruler of Estrellas.

"You've grown podgy while you were planning to take over Estrellas as your own personal kingdom," Perry observed. Carlos reddened and rushed him again. Perry met him, sabre crashing against sabre, feeling the sting through his hand but holding on as Carlos fell back, almost giving Perry an opening.

Almost. Not quite. Perry was saving the rapier move until he was certain he could connect.

"How did you find us?" he asked. "I thought we'd covered our tracks."

Carlos drew off again, putting a distance between them so he could crow. It was a hopeful sign that he couldn't fight and talk at the same time, so Perry let him. "It was easy. Iago found a canal man who was happy enough to sing like a little bird, and so

he followed the canal, and sent me a messenger to bring me here, too.”

Poor canal man. El Lobo had a reputation for the methods he used to make people sing. The man was unlikely to have survived the experience. This time, Perry rushed Carlos, letting a little of the anger he felt past the barrier that allowed him to remain calm.

Carlos fell back, driven blow by blow around the circle that the watching crowd had formed. There! He had exposed his side with that swing. Watch for it, Perry. Watch for it. Four of five more loud rings as the swords met, and then Perry’s chance came, and as Carlos’s sabre swung in a great arc, he leaned out of its way then leapt forward, sabre point first, and thrust the weapon into Carlos’s chest.

Carlos dropped backward dragging Garcia’s sabre with him. Perry stood there, unarmed, and at that moment, Garcia gave a huge shout and flung the dagger he had been holding to Ruth’s throat. At the same moment, gunshots sounded.

Perry looked at the knife, standing out of the flesh of his shoulder. There should be pain. Is there pain? His knees suddenly folded, and he was lying on the boardwalk. Ruth was holding him, begging him to live. No. Scolding him. That was more like it. He chuckled. “Ruth, my dearest love, never change,” he said. “Even if I die.”

“You shall not die, Perran Albert Kendrick De-Ath Frampton,” she admonished. “You have called me your wife in front of all these people, and now you have to make good on it.”

He chuckled again. “I love you very much,” he said. “I never expected that to happen, Ruth.”

She had tears in her eyes. “And I love you, you impossible man.”

“Mrs. De-Ath, please move over while I see to your husband,” said the doctor, and Perry had little thought to spare for anything for the next short while, beyond Ruth’s hand in his and what the doctor was doing.

“You’ll do,” the doctor said, once he had checked that the knife appeared to have missed everything vital and had stitched up the wound. After that, Walter and Bella reported.

Bella and Walter had both shot at Garcia—and both had found their target in the man’s head. “A moment late, DeAth,” Bella said. “But we killed him.” After that, the Estrellasan men had turned on the Spaniards, with help not only from the canal men, but from a small troop of Bella’s soldiers, who had come from Las Estrellas, and the gendarmes to whom they had taken their story of a princess running from a usurper and a gang of guerillas loose in France.

Carlos’s remaining men were under arrest. And Carlos had already lost the kingdom. When Carlos left with his Spanish bullies, the bishop had sent for Madre Katerina, who had returned to rally the countryfolk behind their princess.

“Las Valle des Estrellas is mine again,” Bella said. “Will you come home with me to finish your recovery, Your Grace?”

Ruth wanted to do so. Perry could tell. “Perhaps we could get married in your church,” he said. “Ruth would like you to be at her wedding, princess.”

“You, sir, are travelling nowhere until those stitches are out,” scolded his duchess, his darling, his dear delight.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER, SHARDMORE BURKENSTONE, ENGLAND

“How did I not remember that this is awful,” Perry grumbled to those waiting with him in his library at Shardmore Burkenstone. Caspian raised an eyebrow in question. One of the best parts of returning to England was meeting his son, and discovering a mature and responsible young man who claimed not to blame Perry for a lifetime of running away.

“Childbirth,” Perry explained. “They throw us out and we do not know what is going on.”

“Just as well,” said Haverford, with a shudder. His old friend had been cautious at first, but once he’d come to see that Perry was truly a different and better man, he had welcomed Perry back to England. The duchess was initially polite to him for Ruth’s sake, and because Haverford asked her to give him a chance, but even she had warmed up to him in the past few months.

“When Sally was born, I was there,” Haverford explained to Caspian. “I do not recommend it. And they say that women are the weaker sex!” After seven years of marriage, Haverford’s wife had presented him with a daughter. Haverford was besotted. Perry would be happy with a daughter. Perry would be happy with any result that included Ruth safe and well.

“I will keep it in mind,” said Caspian, who was still unwed. Since he was twenty-seven, it was time for him to begin considering a wife, but Perry, who had made a

mess of his first marriage and had not married again until he was forty-three, did not feel qualified to recommend the marriage mart to the young man.

Indeed, their relationship was more friendship than father-son. If Caspian had a father, it was Perry's brother-in-law, the Earl of Garrick. Garrick, or Uncle Garrick, as Caspian called him, was cradling his brandy and saying little. Morwenna, Perry's sister, was upstairs with the other women, attending Ruth.

"How long does this take," Perry complained, striding across the room in another restless circuit.

Those who had children—Garrick, Haverford, and the Earl of Chirbury—all looked at him with pity. Chirbury—who had put his poor wife through this experience not once, not twice, but eight times—said, "As long as it takes, Richport."

Perry wouldn't go so far as to say that Chirbury liked him. But Ruth's beloved Anne had stopped glaring at him every time the Richports met the Chirburys, and Chirbury was here, after all. Perry was grateful.

"What did the Princess Isabella say in her letter, Father?" Caspian asked. Of all the men in the study, he was the one with the greatest grievance, but also the one who had welcomed Perry home with open arms. "Mama Ruth was about to tell us when her... um."

When her waters broke, sending Perry into a panic. He had insisted on sending for the midwife and carrying Ruth up to the chamber they had prepared for the birthing, though Ruth insisted she could walk and was perfectly well.

If anything happened to Ruth, he wouldn't want to live. Why had he not insisted on taking precautions against a pregnancy? He knew the answer to that. Ruth wanted to have a baby if she could, and he could never refuse Ruth anything.

That had been yesterday afternoon, and now it was sixteen hours later. What was happening up there?

“Father?” Caspian said.

Oh yes. The young man wanted to know about Bella’s letter.

“All is well in Las Estrellas,” he reported. “Her highness writes she gets on well with the council. As you may remember, it is headed by her three guardians, Mother Catherine, the bishop, and the general who served with her father. In the will they found—her father’s real will—that was what he’d had in mind from the beginning.”

“Are they still having difficulties with the remnants of Don Carlos’s men?” Chirbury asked.

Perry shook his head. “They think they have expelled the last of them. Expelled or imprisoned for crimes while in Estrellas. As long as Carlos was in charge, they thought they were untouchable, you see.”

“Your princess sounds like quite a woman,” said Garrick.

“She will be. She had a good teacher,” Perry said, proudly. And his thoughts, which had never left the struggle upstairs, returned to their primary preoccupation.

“We have lost him again,” Chirbury commented.

“Another brandy?” Haverford asked Perry.

He blinked as he replayed the sound of their conversation and figured out what he was being asked. He shook his head. “It is too early,” he explained. Ruth would not approve if he turned up to meet his new son or daughter smelling of brandy.

He stood when Walter entered the room. He had stationed his faithful friend in the passage outside of the birthing chamber, with instructions to come for him when it was time, and the smile on Walter's face immediately soothed his worse fears.

"You are a father, Your Grace," said Walter. "Her Grace and the baby are both well. You are to come upstairs, please, Lady Chirbury says."

Perry emitted a shout of relief and joy mixed, and hugged Walter. "Have a drink, man. Chirbury, pour Walter a drink," and without another word, he charged upstairs, stopping his wild rush at the door of the birthing chamber.

His somewhat tentative knock was answered immediately. "Richport," said Lady Chirbury. "Good. Come in. Ruth is asking for you."

His eyes were already eating her up. She looked tired but triumphant. She looked up from the little bundle she was holding and her smile beckoned him in.

"Perry. Perry, my dearest love. Come and meet your daughter."

Perry bent over the pair of them in the bed, looked into the unfocused blue eyes of the tiny mite Ruth held, and—for the second time in as many years—tumbled deeply and irrevocably in love.

He had the strongest of feelings that he would never be bored again.