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CLAUDY
CONN



Windmera
Desperation

WINDMERA--DESPERATION

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Copyright Page

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By Claudy Conn

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*Youth rambles on life's arid mount,
And strikes the rock and finds the vein,
And brings the water from the fount,
The fount which shall not flow again*

Matthew Arnold

~ **Prologue** ~

1782

GODWIN, LORD OF RAVENSBURY, STOOD, a lone figure on the craggy cliffs of Land's End in Cornwall, England.

Before him lay the ocean, its whitecaps foaming as they crashed into the jutting rocks. Those jutting craggy rocks, harsh in their greatness, looked much like weathered turrets of castles of long ago.

He loved this scene. He belonged here. He supposed he must look to any passerby as a rough figure of a man against such a wild background. He was proud that he was much like his father had been, of imposing height and broad shoulders. Enough to make a quarrelsome chap a charmer, and his mien...he knew was a buck in his heyday and fiercely honest in his beliefs.

His red hair swept over his eyes, wild in the wind, and he pushed it away from his face. He held his cloak with his free hand close to his chest as it whipped around him.

A pool of water had collected from the night's rain and he gazed at himself in its shallow depth. *Aye, he thought, could she love such a devilishly looking man with such black eyes and brows? Could she?*

He had come here to his favorite place to be alone. He had to make a decision. He was young, too young, at only one and twenty, to have to make this decision, but he had no choice.

He was lord and master of his home, and his home was empty and lonely.

He had lost his parents while he was at school, when he was seventeen. Still a boy, he lost his older brother a year later, when his brother sailing a rough sea had been found with the wreckage of his sloop on the rocky beach.

At eighteen, he was alone. He had no other family to claim as his own.

Aye, he was Godwin, Lord Ravensbury, and with all his wealth and position, he knew deep sorrow.

Now, though only one and twenty, he knew he wanted a family to brighten his home. He needed a family, and although he was still so young, he was quite (he told himself) grown up. He was a man. He had taken charge of his father's prosperous holdings, of the estate, and he had done well with those responsibilities.

Now what he needed was to keep the name alive. He loved children. Aye then, children running around his house, making it a home was what he wanted—what he needed. He could picture them dashing about, laughing, arguing, playing, and how he wanted them. They would breathe life into his stale home. The notion of fathering such a pack made him delirious with pleasure.

A bride? Oh, but he had one in mind. She was lovely, a gentle being whose full youthful body was something he dreamed about making his own. He wanted the lovely Lisa...no, no, what was he thinking? It could never be Lisa. Lisa was lost to him.

It would be the lovely Sara, Sara of Farenday. She would be his bride. She was a beauty, with hair the color of sun-ripened wheat and eyes the color of a clear sky. She was an innocent, so very different than Lisa.

He would take Sara for his own and teach her what pleasure could be had in the bedroom.

Hot blood raced through his loins, but a nagging voice, a voice that would not be stilled, asked if he loved Sara.

He must love her, he answered himself. How could he not?

He had made up his mind to take the hand of Sara Farenday and he would bring his bride to his castle and they would make it a home!

* * * * *

Sara Farenday sat alone on a hilltop not far from her home. Heather filled the air with sweetness as it swayed in the wind and she absently ran her hand through it, picked a few sprigs and breathed deeply.

Her long blonde hair blew across her face and she pushed it away. She was only seventeen, and her family was forever telling her that with her beauty she could have anyone she wanted as a husband.

So then, why didn't they let her choose the man she wanted?

She gazed back at the modest Tudor home in the distance. She loved her home, but her mother had inspired her to want more. *Jewels and beautiful clothes*, her mother had said and wagged a finger. *That is what you need, what you deserve.*

Indeed, she grew up believing this was true.

She liked those things. She liked having servants to take care of her every whim, and the only way to achieve her goals was through marriage.

She needed a wealthy and noble peer of the realm. She would settle for nothing less and the thought of such a life became an obsession.

Godwin of Ravensbury made her smile and though she *did not* love him, she felt she could endure his touch and his company, at least for a time.

He courted her relentlessly now, but it had not always been so. Once, all he could think of was *Lisa*, her dearest friend. Lisa of Cotham, who was friend no more.

Silently, she congratulated herself. It had not been an easy trick to wean him from Lisa.

Careful thought and planning had come into play, and both Godwin and Lisa had been easily duped. She smiled to herself as she remembered just how easy it had

been to trick both Godwin and Lisa.

Ah, but the first time she saw Godwin, she knew he would have to be hers and hers alone.

She had been riding with Lisa across the fields, as had been their habit, and there in their sights riding towards them was Godwin of Ravensbury.

Faith, but she could still recall the wave of envy that suffocated her as she watched him with Lisa. She knew that Lisa and Godwin were in love. She saw the way they looked at one another and the way they laughed together. They were well suited.

Even so, she determined she would have him, though it would end her friendship with the only woman who had ever called her friend. Lisa was kind and for a moment, just a moment, Sara thought perhaps she shouldn't...but the moment passed.

She sent Godwin inviting looks, she flirted and touched him whenever she could, though he scarcely noticed. It was curious she thought then, and now again, how entranced he was with Lisa.

After all, Lisa was unfashionably small, unfashionably plump, and although quite pretty with her hazel eyes and dark brown hair, she was nothing to the vision Sara knew she presented.

Yet here was Godwin, a large handsome man with his title and his fortune, and in spite of the fact that Lisa was no great beauty, it was Lisa he wanted.

Irritating.

It was in that moment perhaps when Sara had hatched her plan, her devious plan, and once Sara was determined, she usually got what she wanted. She was unscrupulous and cunning.

“Lisa...” she had said at a cotillion that very week, “I didn’t realize his lordship was courting you.” She purposely looked towards Ravensbury.

Lisa blushed. She glanced at Sara and then hurriedly looked away. “Indeed, he is not.”

“Oh, you naughty girl, to lie so *brazenly to me*, your friend!” Sara bantered purposely and with a flutter of her lashes.

“Stop, Sara, do. ‘Tis no lie. He makes no formal court of me.”

“But he does come to call?” Sara pursued.

“Yes, he has paid my parents a few morning calls,” Lisa hesitantly said.

Sara eyed her friend. Lisa had never fully trusted her and that had not mattered in the past.

She had been happy for the company, for the easy friendship. She could see that Lisa did not want to confide in her now. *Annoying little twit.*

“I shan’t go around the countryside chattering about you and his lordship, have no fear of that, my dear,” Sara said, and then winked. “Besides, any fool can see you want him...how could you not? I should if I were you.”

Lisa laughed, but Sara could see that she was uncomfortable from the way she looked away and said, “Sara, you are outrageous.”

“So, you do want him?” Sara prompted.

“I...well, he is ever so handsome and clever and...”

“Affluent,” Sara stuck in.

“Sara!” Lisa was shocked. “That does not weigh with me.”

“Ah, you think me calculating, and I suppose I am. What choice does a woman have in this world of men? We must marry well or suffer the consequences.”

Lisa frowned. “No, a worthy character is far more important...and he adores children. He shows so much patience when my young sisters and brothers clamor around him.” Lisa sighed.

“He is a good man, with a good heart.”

“Hmmm,” Sara returned thoughtfully, and marveled that he had the patience to

allow her siblings to pester him when he visited Lisa. When she visited with Lisa, she couldn't abide the little brats.

After that evening, Sara learned all she could about Godwin of Ravensbury and made it her purpose to ensnare him for herself.

She watched him with Lisa and decided his feelings while engaged by Lisa, had not yet developed deeply. He seemed as though he admired and liked Lisa, and Sara thought, in time he could love her, for he certainly was attracted to Lisa, though why...she could not tell.

Her job, Sara decided, was to nudge him while he was still vacillating with the notion of Lisa as his bride. Her job was to provide reason enough that he would be disillusioned with Lisa and thus turn to her.

Indeed, she was just the person to win Godwin of Ravensbury, and so she made up her mind to do just that. Her friendship with Lisa? Ah, she would perhaps miss that, but she would be a lady of leisure and make new and notable friends.

And so it began!

~ **One** ~

THE VERY MORNING AFTER SARA set her sights on Godwin, she visited with her second cousin, Oscar Welby. He was three years her senior and just home from Cambridge for the summer. She knew he was infatuated with her.

"Sara!" He bent low over her hand. "I could scarcely believe my eyes when I read your note asking me to come 'round."

She laughed and flirted with her eyes. "La, but how could I not? I have missed you, Oscar, and was surprised when you did not immediately call on me. You naughty boy. You have been home two days!"

Her mother, with Lisa's arm linked with hers, made an appearance just at that moment, and Sara was pleased to look up and find Lisa looking quite pretty in her little riding habit of dark blue. Indeed, she had timed this all so very well.

Introductions were made and though a flicker of jealousy shadowed Sara's

mindset as she watched Oscar's face show great and immediate interest in Lisa, she was well pleased. Here was the beginning of her plans taking fruition.

Oscar was obviously taken with Lisa.

This fact, though most annoying, was welcome. She watched and saw Oscar, who had been infatuated with her for most of their youth, suddenly drawn to another. Though that was exactly what she had hoped for, it rankled.

She frowned darkly but managed to keep her irritation in check. She told herself she was being absurd and perverse. She could not help but wonder, however, what it could be about her plump friend that so turned men's heads? Godwin, and now Oscar. It was most agitating. She wanted to pinch Lisa 'til she cried.

She controlled herself, and Oscar and Lisa's first meeting went just as she had hoped it would. After the two's initial meeting, it was an easy thing to arrange more encounters as a threesome. *She*, escorted by a very willing Oscar, called on Lisa, went riding with Lisa and he became, Sara noted, quickly very amiable towards Lisa.

It also piqued her to see that Lisa could make Oscar laugh so easily and that the two got on so well. She had never made Oscar laugh, and in fact remembered that as children he often scolded her not to do this or that.

Oddly enough, when the time came for her to inaugurate the next step in her plan, she again felt a moment's regret. Lisa had always been a good friend. In fact, Lisa had taken her part in school once when another girl had said some hurtful things.

Her plan would end all that, and Lisa would never smile at her again when this was over. A sure and sudden sadness hit her flush in her heart before she brushed it off. She simply had no choice.

At every opportunity, Sara made herself disagreeable to Oscar. She allowed him to draw mental contrasts between herself and the sweet Lisa. She was, after all, simply being herself, so it was an easy task. She rarely allowed anyone to hear her true opinions. No one really knew just who she was inside. Even her mother, who had guided her towards finding a wealthy and titled husband, did not know

to what lengths her daughter would go to achieve that goal.

Sara had always felt impatient with Oscar and really didn't give a fig about him. For years she did the polite, only in the event that she did not find a wealthy lord to marry—there would be

Oscar, who did not have a title but was certainly well off. She had kept him infatuated with her, kept him in the wings, *just in case*. If her plan now did not work, she would lose not only Lisa, but Oscar as well. Therefore, *her plan must work!*

As it chanced, whenever Godwin was shown into Lisa's sitting room, she seemed to be in a lively conversation with Oscar, and Sara was privy to the irritation that flickered over Godwin's face.

Sara knew that Lisa and Oscar were in the early stages. They had not progressed beyond an easy friendship...yet. She wasn't sure what love was, but she rather fancied they might find it in one another. As to that, she didn't care, if only she could get Godwin to believe that Lisa and Oscar were falling in love.

On one occasion, Godwin stood uncertain as he watched Lisa and Oscar laughing over some anecdote he had told her. He frowned and looked ready to leave.

Sara hurried to take his arm and said, "Ah, Godwin, they do get on so well, don't they? I had long thought Oscar *devoted to me*, but alas, my best friend seems to be stealing his affections."

Godwin's countenance took on a troubled expression, which was just what Sara wanted.

Indeed, she needed to make him believe that Lisa was deliberately trying to take Oscar from her.

Godwin was kind and bent towards her. "Now, you surely cannot believe any man could be wrested from you, Miss Sara? Your beauty is quite riveting."

She didn't feel the blush she wanted to appear on her cheeks, but she managed to demure and looked at her feet.

He laughed. "Come, stand with me near the fire."

She did just that and saw Lisa gaze their way with a look of puzzlement. She wondered then if Lisa was in fact truly infatuated or in love with Godwin. Well, that would be too bad, but Sara told herself she had no choice.

The next time the four of them were together, Sara pressed on. Time and time again, Lisa and Oscar behaved in a manner she was able to point out to Godwin in sad terms, and then her strategy unfolded just as she had hoped it would on the night of Lisa's ball.

Sara wore a gown of soft gold, a bit too bold for her maidenly status, as it showed the swells of her breasts. Sara had been leery about the gown, but her mother actually convinced her that it was all the rage and she must wear this gown this night, as all the eligible beaux would be present at Lisa's ball.

The dress was adorned with dark gold silk roses and the entire confection hugged her slim and provocative figure. Sara was aware of all the intrigued looks she was getting from the men, but she wanted only one to stare and appreciate.

All of them were naught next to Godwin, and she could see he was aware of their admiring gazes as they looked in her direction. She bantered with Godwin, laughed with him, teased and invited him using her eyes as no seventeen-year-old maid should do. All the while, she was confident everything was falling into place and her plan would work.

Sara left nothing to chance. Even then, at seventeen, she always knew what she needed to do to get what she wanted. She looked Godwin over for a moment. She could no longer wait 'til she was eighteen and for her parents to give her a London Season, as they had always planned.

She couldn't wait, although she was not in love with Godwin and dreaded the moment she would have to give her body to him. But, again, she told herself, she had no choice.

It was her father's fault. Her father, who every year allowed a gypsy clan to use one of their open fields to rest their horses and recoup their supplies.

Over the years, Sara had found her way to their camp. She enjoyed their robust lifestyle, and this year, when they came with the spring, Sara visited the camp. This time, it wasn't curiosity, it was with a purpose.

She needed a little extra to insure her plans would work.

Thus, it was that night in which Sara carried an herbal concoction that *Magda*, the gypsy matriarch, had assured her would do little more than make the victim slightly queasy.

Sara thought about Lisa and felt a slight twinge of guilt as she prepared to make her ill.

What she was about to do would ruin Lisa's only 'coming-out' ball. It was cruel. Was she cruel? *No*. She was only doing what she had to do.

All guilt was quelled in that moment when she saw Lisa descend the stairs in her white-on-white gown! Her friend did look stunning. Her dusky curls fell in an array around her pretty face, and though she was plump, she looked sensual and alluring.

Sara glanced at Godwin who had, at that moment, no eyes for anyone other than Lisa. Thus, she made up her mind to go through with her plan and administer the potion to her friend...her only real friend. *Cruelty be damned*.

When Lisa came over to Sara, bubbling with her excitement, laughing over being breathless over the rounds of dances she had enjoyed for the first time in her eighteen years, Sara smiled sweetly, especially as Oscar had accompanied Lisa.

"Sara, you will turn eighteen in a few months, and Mama tells me your parents are planning your ball in London. *It is all so exciting.*"

Sara had been holding a glass of Negus and handed it to Lisa. "Here, love...you are flushed, this cold drink will do you good."

"Oh, but don't *you* want it?"

"Oscar, be a dear-heart and fetch me another glass," Sara said. As both girls

watched him hurry off to do as he was bid, Sara added, “He is so good, it is no wonder you have a fancy for him.”

“I— *fancy*? No...no, you mistake,” Lisa covered her mouth with her silk gloved hand and shook her head, “we...Oscar and I, are friends, nothing more . It is *you* he wants,” Lisa said, and took a long sip before she added, “you know, he is hurt that you won’t dance with him.”

The rebuke in Lisa’s voice irritated Sara and she said, “Drink up...there, good girl. You need to cool down and as to wanting me—indeed, before he laid eyes on you, I suppose he did.

But I see how he dotes on you. The two of you are far more suited to one another than Oscar and I.”

“Oh no, no,” Lisa objected.

Sara laughed, well pleased with the look of doubt that came into Lisa’s eyes. She had made her think of Oscar in another light. “Now, what was that you were saying? *Me— dance* with Oscar? Whatever for? I have no interest there and would not lead him on.”

Lisa regarded her friend doubtfully. “Well, there is that...one wouldn’t want to... but one must be kind. What is in a dance after all?”

Sara clucked her tongue as her eyes narrowed. Had the potion already done its job? She seemed to think so as she watched Lisa put down her glass and lay a hand to her head.

“Lisa, what is it?”

“Oh, I must have been more flushed than I thought,” Lisa said, and swayed.

Oscar arrived at that moment, putting the glass of Negus down on a wall table and an arm around Lisa to exclaim, “Lisa...are you faint? It is the heat...all the people squeezed into this room.”

Godwin marched up to the trio at that moment and said, “What is this? What is wrong?”

Sara put a hand on his arm. “Lisa seems unwell...she was very flushed from dancing and...oh!”

Lisa collapsed into Oscar’s arms.

“I will take her out for air!” Oscar announced.

Godwin frowned and stepped forward, but Sara quickly put a hand on his arm. “Godwin, Oscar has her...you can’t very well wrest her away without causing a stir.”

She turned to her cousin and anxiously told him, “Oscar...quickly take her into the garden for some air. She might then be able to recover without all the world’s eyes on her.”

Oscar actually surprised Sara at this juncture by taking control and hurriedly leading Lisa, whose hand was still on her head, out the nearby garden door.

Godwin followed, Sara did the same.

As Oscar got Lisa to a garden bench, she promptly disgorged the drink she had just imbibed onto the grass.

Godwin turned away in disgust, but once again, Oscar surprised Sara by immediately taking out his handkerchief and dipping it into the water fountain and returning to wash Lisa’s face and make sure her gown was not dirtied.

Sara was impressed with her cousin’s ability to handle the situation, but only momentarily.

She had to keep her mind focused on her goal and so she turned to Godwin and said, “Let us leave them be, dear Godwin. I am certain Oscar will know just how to take care of her.”

“Indeed, they appear to be quite comfortable with one another,” Godwin said, stiffening.

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand, and I see that you do. They are friends... *only friends,*”

Sara told the truth, but in a tone that meant the two were much more.

“It appears much more than that. I count myself lucky to have you now at my side. Will you not tell me the truth so that I shan’t continue to make a fool of myself?” he said quietly.

She had to be careful, she cautioned herself. She did not wish to be caught in a lie at some later date. “I certainly don’t want that either, my lord. All I can tell you is that Lisa has assured me that they are friends. They enjoy and are at ease with one another. More than that, I simply cannot say.”

“I see. Very well, I shall have to make up my own mind about this,” he said as much to himself as to Sara.

They turned to find a tall, husky man of mature years barreling down on them. Mr. Cotham, Lisa’s father! He stopped as he reached them and his voice was jolly. He appeared well pleased with the evening his wife had put together for their precious daughter. Once again, Sara felt a wave of envy. It was just too bad that Lisa had turned eighteen before her.

“Well, well, are you young people all enjoying yourselves?” Mr. Cotham asked, slapping his gloved hands together.

“Yes, yes, sir, very much,” Sara assured him sweetly.

“Right then, where has that minx of mine gone off to?” he asked, and looked around.

“She wasn’t feeling quite the thing, sir, and went into the garden for some air,” Sara said, and lowered her eyes to the silky toes of her shoes.

“Good God! I thought she looked a bit too flushed,” he exclaimed. “Well then, go on, keep having fun. I shall see to her.”

Sara said, “Oh, but I shall accompany you...in case she needs me.”

“Humph, well, all right then,” Lisa’s father said, and made his way towards the garden with both Sara and Godwin in tow.

The scene that met their eyes shocked all three. Even Sara had not hoped to find them in such a compromising state.

“I am so glad you are better,” Oscar said, and lifted Lisa’s chin.

“Yes, apparently emptying my insides so completely has done the trick,” Lisa said, and giggled.

“Oh, Lisa dearest, you are so good, so easy to be with,” Oscar said, and unaware that he and Lisa had an audience, he dropped a kiss on her lips.

It was only a short, quick, little kiss, but Lisa immediately responded by taking his hand to her cheek.

Lisa’s father found his voice at this juncture. “What is the meaning of this?”

Sara had to forcibly look away. She couldn’t smile, she told herself. She must not smile, but when she saw the hurt and confusion on Godwin’s face, she couldn’t help herself, and hurriedly clapped a hand over her lips.

She couldn’t have hoped for a better result. Lisa’s father took her away. Godwin bowed to her and left the ball. Her cousin stopped her from walking away and said, “This is your handiwork. I am certain of it. What was in that drink you gave her? You have engineered this from the start.”

“Nonsense,” she said, and went to her parents to complain of a headache and ask that they take her home.

Later that same evening, with her mind and heart blissful with the results of her successful plotting, she quietly left her bedroom and went out the backdoor of the house with her parents, as always, none the wiser.

She could see him coming towards her in the darkness. Oh, but a fine figure of a man whose black cloak flapped in the wind behind him. She started to run towards him over the pebbled path, with her arms opened wide.

She had everything she could possibly want. She had ruined Lisa in Godwin’s eyes, just as she had hoped she would. And it wasn’t even her fault, she told herself. She hadn’t made Oscar kiss her. She hadn’t made Lisa rub her face

against Oscar's hand. Ha! It was all working in her favor.

Godwin would turn to her now, and she would have a husband and a position in society that all other women would envy.

But now? Now she had the man of her dreams! "*Raoul!*" she called breathlessly as his strong arms enveloped her.

"My love," he murmured as he bent to kiss her lips.

"I have missed you," she said when he let her up for air. She reached feverishly into his breeches and found what she wanted, what she needed. "Raoul...we have to find a way to see each other more often."

He said nothing to this. She was aware that he rarely spoke and often wondered at it. His mouth took hers crushingly once more. His body was so hard, so desirable that all she could do was surrender to his touch.

He was her first true love and she was certain, so very certain that it was true love. He was a gypsy and social dictates forbade their union, but they could have stolen moments, she told herself. The future? She would have him always, waiting in the wings. She would never give him up. It was why she did not wish to go to London.

Yes, soon, she was certain, she would be Lady Ravensbury, a child bride of sorts at seventeen, but she would have her handsome wild gypsy to warm her heart and her body!

He took off his cloak and laid it on the ground even as he brought her to her knees and said,

"Show me, woman, *show me* how much you want me."

She licked his hard cock, took its length into her mouth and sucked harder, pleased with herself because he groaned with pleasure.

All at once, he made a primal sound and pushed her roughly onto her back. Oh, but she liked it. She liked the way he handled her, as though he couldn't get enough of her.

He rammed into her over and over, harder, faster, and she pushed her palms down against the earth as she arched and screamed out his name.

He climaxed with her and rolled off to lie on his back.

She stroked his shadowed face and he pushed her hand away. “No,” he said. “If you love me, you will marry me.”

“I can’t. My parents would never agree,” she said, and realized though this was true, she was thankful of it as an excuse because she didn’t want to marry him. She wanted this... *only this*.

She mounted him then and found his cock still hard as she rubbed herself against it. “Did you say no, Raoul?”

He grabbed her hips. “Did I?”

She teased him with her wetness until he growled, “I want inside, woman. Take me inside.”

“Oh, I mean to when I’m ready...when I make you regret telling me no.”

~ **Two** ~

SO IT WAS IN THE fall of 1782 when Godwin brought to Ravensbury a new and bright-eyed wife.

Sara, now eighteen, seemed nothing more than a child to most of the servants at Ravensbury, but she held herself erect and demanded respect with a stature she had learned from her mother. She had the confidence of knowing that she came from good and respectable English gentry, and she had married into better.

Her wedding night saw her restless, agitated, and unable to meet her new husband’s eyes.

He took her hands. “My darling...so shy? You needn’t be nervous, we can take this slowly.”

She was in a flimsy nightdress and took his hand and put it on her breast. He

looked surprised, but the desire took over and he fondled her, teased her nipples, bent his head as he exposed her lovely young breast and licked the rosebuds into pertness.

“Come, Sara,” he said as he led her to the bed and took the straps of her white nightdress and dropped the gown to her waist.

She said nothing. She couldn't tell him that what had her nervous wasn't shyness, no, but the fact that she wasn't a virgin. Would he know? She had to pretend she was a virgin. Would he wonder if he didn't see blood? Could she cut herself somehow where he wouldn't notice and leave a stain of blood for him to witness? How would she manage?

He laid her gently on her back as he rubbed her leg slowly and murmured praise. He found the tuft of dark gold hair between her thighs and expertly cupped her there. Her body responded to him. She discovered she liked his touch.

“There, love, does that feel right?” he said softly as his finger played with her sex. “You are my wife, my treasure...one day you will be the mother of my children.” He bent and kissed her long and passionately.

She threw her arms around him. He was gentle with her, and she wanted it rougher, but she had to control herself. She couldn't be too forceful. He believed her a virgin.

He had to believe that. It was all important that he believe that.

Oh, but she liked his hands on her...could he make her forget Raoul?

Perhaps? Sara had found the more time she spent with Godwin, the more bored she became.

He was good and he was steady, but she wanted wild and exciting.

“I'll try not to hurt you, precious,” he said as his clothes vanished and he climbed onto the bed to straddle her. He positioned his manhood at her gateway. “Sweetheart, you are so open, so ready,” he said, sounding slightly surprised.

“Because I love you and have been waiting for you to make me yours,” she said

as she tensed.

He entered her slowly at first, rubbing his erection against the walls of her opening before he worked his way inside of her. She could feel him hold back and knew he was being careful because he thought her untried. Oh, but this was so different than being with Raoul. Raoul had taken her roughly, boldly, and made her his in an instant that very first time.

Oh, but she preferred Raoul's lovemaking.

She moved towards Godwin, pressed into him until he had no choice but to drive deeper into her, taking her completely, and she could see he was caught up in his passion and the ardor he

exhibited. Would that be enough to distract him? She was so worried. She had to make him unaware that he was not the man who had broken her maidenhead.

"My bride, my beautiful bride," he whispered, absolutely taken with her beauty. He seemed not to notice anything but that she received him, pumped against his movements, enjoyed him as she worked him into a frenzy. He found her so willing and that willingness excited him. All at once he was slamming into her as he climaxed.

Later, when she lay in his arms, she feigned soreness and managed to cut herself with the little scissors on her nightstand. She made only a slight incision while he slept, just enough that she could drop the blood-lets onto the sheet.

He stirred, suddenly awakened by her movements and warmly snuggled her. "Are you...uncomfortable?" he asked.

"Oh, a little sore...nothing of consequence, but I am afraid..." she lowered her lashes. "I have ruined the sheets with...my...blood."

"Indeed, my dear, you have ruined naught," he said, sounding satisfied. He got to his feet and returned with a wet rag. "Here, this is cold, but it might serve to soothe your soreness."

"You are too good," she said, and realized that she would never love him. She liked him well enough, how could anyone not like Godwin? He was a decent

man, but she had not been satisfied during their lovemaking, and she knew he was not the sort who ever would satisfy her.

* * * * *

Sara was the Lady of Ravensbury Castle in every imaginable way.

She was still young, eighteen, but she had the stature and the will to command her household, and she did. While her servants did not hold her in affection, they did respect her ability to run the inner workings of their beloved lordship's estate.

Sara had all she desired—position, clothing, jewels, the tender attention and love of a good man whom she held in mild affection. What more could she want, she asked herself. It should be enough. It wasn't, and she knew it wasn't.

Godwin had been tricked that first night, their wedding night. He had thought her a virgin and now she had one more situation to handle, one *more trick* she had to manage.

She was with child.

Everyone beamed and fussed, chatted and laughed, pleased that their lordship was ecstatic and happy there would be a little one brought into the home.

She was not due yet, for by her husband's reckoning, if he had impregnated her their first night together, their child would come in the spring, three months hence.

Her concerns had greatly affected her appetite and she was thin, Godwin said too thin, so she didn't show for the actual reality of her pregnancy. If only the baby would be late a few weeks...she could manage to fool them all when it was born looking like a full term infant.

She stared out the window of her bedroom and whispered, "Please *let my* reckoning be wrong. Let me have a few weeks, and then the baby would be seven months...yes, that would work."

Time was not on her side and by her reckoning the baby was only a week late.

Would that serve or had her luck run out?

As she saw the storm raging outside and felt those first awful pangs, she knew her baby was on its way.

The midwife fussed over her as Sara grabbed her wrist and said, "It is too soon...it isn't right, the baby won't be right...not due yet. Perhaps it will die." She put on an act as best she could as she grabbed hold of the sheets and screamed in agony of mind and body.

"Whist now, m'lady, babies have no care for nature, they don't hear the winds harshly blowing over Cornwall...baby says 'tis time," the midwife said gently. "Now don't fret, you'll do and so will the baby. I have birthed many a babe before it was due."

His lordship had already been sent out of the room and paced with a frenzy he had never known before, but before he left his wife he asked the midwife, "It is scarcely seven months...scarcely...will our child survive?"

"There is no telling until the child is born. Out with you now," the midwife took command.

Hours went by and finally he could stand it no more. He burst into the room and demanded,

"My wife... *how is she?*"

"Fine, fine, her water broke and as this is her first, it will be a hard birth...and there is naught we can do but keep her comfortable 'til the little one decides to join us. Now whist with you, m'lord."

When he had left, the midwife said quietly, "From your size, m'lady...I think this babe is as close to full term as ever I have seen."

"Yes, yes, it is obvious his lordship had me before our marriage then," Sara improvised.

"Aye, but," the midwife shrugged as though she had her doubts. "Well then...we'll manage if keeping this quiet is what you be wishful of."

Six more hours passed and a healthy son finally made his debut. He was a large, albeit wrinkled, boy child. The midwife roundly spanked him on his rump and he wailed with his objection. Godwin and all the household turned to one another with joy as they watched their lordship race up the stairs.

Commotion at Ravensbury turned into the sounds of a festival. The male child had given them what they needed, another Ravensbury to carry on.

* * * * *

Godwin's son was brought to him and as he held the boy in his arms, all his dreams were shattered. Godwin was not only a good man, but a knowing one.

"But...he is so large...larger than most newborns at seven months. How can he be seven months?" he said out loud.

Dawning took hold. He was too worldly not to realize.

He had been used as a fool. He had believed himself Sara's only love. He had believed no other had her...she was so young, how could anyone else have bedded her already?

He had waited all these months for *his* child, and this child was not his!

A lie...it had all been a lie!

He went to his wife's room and looked at the midwife. "*Leave us,*" he said.

He waited for her to close the door at her back and turned to Sara, unable to go near her, he clasped his hands at his back and asked, his voice scarcely audible, "Whose babe did you birth today, Sara?"

"Godwin, he is gone... *you are here.* 'Tis yours. You felt its first kick, you cared, you care still. *He is your son.*"

Her words ripped him apart. His eyes met hers and he knew in that moment she had never loved him. How had this happened? What had he done wrong? Why was he being punished so wickedly?

“Whose son is he?” he asked still, and felt his teeth grind.

“What does it matter?”

“Because he should know he has a son!” Godwin growled.

She lowered her eyes. “He was a gypsy and I was so young. I fancied myself in love with him...but he didn’t love me and he left. *I was a fool*,” she answered.

“As you have made me.” He shook his head. “This is probably the first truth you have ever spoken to me.” He paced a moment and when he returned to look at her, the words were wrenched from him. “I was there, wasn’t I? Ready to play your game...ready to believe every word you uttered.” He had not yet even raised his voice, but it cracked, as did his heart, as did his spirit.

“Try to understand. I needed you...a name for my child. I could not bear to wear the scarlet cloak before all society. You drove all thoughts of him away. You have been my husband, strong and wonderful, and I was pleased to be your wife.”

“*But you do not love me*. How could you love me and not have confided in me? You didn’t trust me to understand...and I can no longer trust you,” he said, turning on her as the words burst out of him.

“Godwin, no one need ever know,” she said. “Your pride need not come into play.”

“You are beneath contempt! Is that what you are thinking...that I am worried about... *my pride*?” It hadn’t even occurred to him what his circle would think.

“But, Godwin, we can manage this whole thing...let them know we made love before our wedding night...a forgivable offense, you see,” Sara hurried to explain.

He eyed her, absolutely stunned, and said, “*Did I ever know you*? What did I see? How could I have been so blind to *who you* really are? Did you laugh inside yourself and think how clever you had been? Did you laugh as I declared my love for you? Did you laugh when I was so hesitant, so gentle on our wedding night ? *Did you*?”

“No. I was worried that you would discover I wasn’t a virgin...there, there is your truth you treasure so much. Does that make it better?” she snapped. “Oh... leave me be...I am weary and hurting.”

His pain had festered into anger and he slammed his fist into his other hand as he shouted,

“You have hurt me, Sara, but you shall never do so again!”

“Godwin...please, understand...I was young, seduced...and then desperate,” she pleaded.

He had turned to leave her, but this stopped him in his tracks. “And what act is this? Sara, you knew me, or I thought you did. Don’t you know that had you come to me and told of your predicament I would have loved you still and protected you? I would have loved your baby as though it was my own.”

“You can still do that,” she cried.

“No, I cannot,” he whispered as he left her room and made his way to his library and locked himself within. He took down a bottle of his finest brandy and poured himself a stiff drink, swallowing it in one shot. He then poured himself another and another.

He was in his cups—his brain was fuzzed with drink, but not so much that he did not hear when Sara screamed.

He was followed by the midwife, who had been in the kitchen having some tea while her ladyship slept.

They found Sara on the floor in a pool of her own blood. It had soaked through her gown, down over her thighs.

Sara tried to raise her head as Godwin came hurrying over and he cried as she slipped into unconsciousness, “Sara, oh, my god, what have I done?”

It was not until the next day that the doctor could be found and brought to Ravensbury. He was able to stop the hemorrhaging, but there was infection.

The doctor kept Sara alive over those next few days, but at the end of the week when he pronounced her no longer in danger, he took Godwin aside and said, “I am sorry, my lord, but she’ll bear you no more children.”

Godwin stared at him. *No children?* Her sin against him, he had nearly forgiven, or was dealing with it, but this?

The doctor tried to assuage his lordship’s apparent grief. “Look here, my lord, you have a fine strapping child in the nursery. Count yourself fortunate.”

Godwin closed his eyes and said nothing.

A fine lusty bairn to carry his name, but it was a lie... *all a lie.*

His house would never be filled with Ravensbury children.

The child was an innocent and so he went into the nursery and stared at another man’s son.

He stroked the babe’s cheek and felt a wave of pleasure. That surprised him.

He picked up the babe and cradled him in his large arms. “Aye then,” Godwin said. “You are a fine lad.” He named him Roderick of Ravensbury that day, and the one woman who could have told the countryside a tale, the midwife, had been sent up north to family.

Roderick was accepted as a true Ravensbury and Godwin, because of who he was, found he loved the boy.

~ **Three** ~

1793

MORE THAN TEN YEARS HAD passed since Godwin’s first disillusionment with his wife. Many other disappointments followed.

His decision, however, to take Sara’s love-child as his own was one he never regretted. In spite of the fact that his youth’s dreams and hopes of a loving marriage and a household of children had been dashed, he had found a place of

acceptance. He found a place in his heart where he could give his love to Roderick, who he thought of as his son.

Because of who Godwin was, he was able to bring a certain measure of contentment to his orderly and quite dull life. He had learned to exist with what he had and forget about what he would never have.

He had come to adore Roderick in every conceivable way. He was proud of his son, and life at Ravensbury went on in this fashion. He watched Sara as she dove into her social teas, routs, and gossiped outrageously with the ladies of society. He watched Sara as she indulged herself and took lovers. She tried to be discreet, but he knew and did not care.

He had taken another bedroom as his own and no longer visited her bedroom. He allowed himself an occasional and passionate night with a pretty barmaid or two when he traveled on estate business. Now and then, when he thought of the life he had envisioned for himself, he was struck with the terrible loneliness of oneness. He and Sara couldn't even find a common ground for friendship.

He thought her an awful mother to Roderick. She scarcely bothered with the boy who seemed to adore her.

Godwin knew he was trapped, if for no other reason than his love for Roderick. He was resigned to the fact that he and his wife would never really be friends. They were too different in too many ways and he could not shake his dislike of her.

Friendship, he knew, he believed was one of the most important ingredients to a healthy marriage. He also knew much of his loneliness was his own fault. He knew he had never really loved Sara. He had loved a creature of fiction.

He realized he often treated her with disdain and coldness and often regretted some of the remarks he shot at her. Now, he had a wife who often did not feel comfortable with him in the same room and lowered her eyes when he spoke to her. At times, *he felt the cad* and then he would discover another lie...all small ones, but lies nonetheless.

He stood looking over the rocky cliff, gazing in earnest contemplation of his life

and wondering how he could make it better.

He loved Cornwall, with the ragged harshness of the jutting boulders being splashed by the crashing waves. Cornwall's beauty made him feel alive. He loved how the salt air smelled, how the spray from the ocean whispered to him of another time.

As he stood there on the cliff, something, he wasn't sure what, made him turn to his right, and then he couldn't look away.

She was walking towards him, her red hair glinting in the sun's rays, its silken tresses swaying over her dark cloaked shoulders as she bent among the crags to gather her herbs. She had not seen him yet.

Undetected, he watched her, mesmerized by her beauty. Her cloak blew about her graceful body, and she smiled to herself as she inspected her basket nearly full with her pickings.

She stumbled over an unseen rock in the ground and he heard the instinctive cry of one who knows a fall is inevitable, and she vanished from view.

He hurried in her direction, going as fast as he could over the razed slope and steep terrain, and came to find her rising to her feet. She was intent on brushing the pebbles and sand from her clothes and did not notice him as he approached.

He was at her elbow and asking hurriedly, as he was genuinely concerned, "Are you all right, miss?"

She looked up and it was obvious to him she was startled by his presence. Her eyes, he thought, as he stared, were the color of wild violets!

She gave him a hesitant smile. "Oh, quite, thank you, though my clumsiness has given my pride quite a hit." She looked herself over and added, "Ah, I have injured my gown, haven't I?"

Now, if only I haven't dropped a morning's work into the sea...?" With which she spied her basket, dove towards it, and nearly landed herself on the ground once again.

Godwin reached out and held her, preventing her fall. “Careful,” he said on a chuckle, “or we’ll have you toppling into the sea, and I have no desire to take a swim this morning.”

“Oh, what an awful idea...an April swim?” She laughed and the sound prodded a smile from him. Her laughter was musical. Her violet eyes twinkled, and he thought her the most stunning woman he had ever encountered.

She frowned and said, “I must collect my basket and return to my uncle or he will say I am a lazy wench not worth my keep.”

“Then stay put and I’ll retrieve the basket for you,” he said, escorting her to a nearby somewhat flat rock and seeing her seated there. He found the basket with most of its contents still in tact and brought it to her. “There, and I don’t mind telling you that you have an odd sort of uncle sending you off on such a dangerous mission,” he teased.

“In truth, the herbs can be had closer to home.” She sighed. “‘Tis just that I do so love Windmera, and thought I might be able to enjoy the morning here and still get my errand accomplished.”

“*Windmera?*” he repeated, frowning, having no idea what she meant.

She laughed and said, “‘Tis what I call it. Look...they all meet here, don’t they? I mean the sea, its marvelous winds...the rocks. It creates a peace. Papa and I gave it that name. We used to come here together before he died.”

He smiled warmly at her. “Yes, *Windmera* suits this place. But tell me, what *is your name?*”

he asked, and felt the heat rush to his cheeks. He was surprised at his boldness. He was not a womanizer. He had never thought of his occasional wayward nights as more than the needs of the body. He was married to Sara. He had never tried to romance a woman who might expect more. How could he? He was tied up in marriage and so when he looked at this young beauty, he felt a wave of conscience sweep over him. *What are you doing?* He felt guilt, but not because of Sara...he felt a shade of guilt because all at once and completely he was aware that he wanted this beauty so much more than he should.

He knew why he lingered with this young woman. The animal in him wanted to take her in his arms and ravage her...the man in him wanted to save her from himself.

She smiled and studied her fingers. "Yes, it is only fair that you should know my name, as I know yours, *my lord*."

"You know my name? How?" he asked, surprise filling him.

"You are Godwin, Lord of Ravensbury. Everyone in this part of Cornwall knows that." She looked up and smiled warmly at him. "Indeed, I have seen Lady Ravensbury in town now and then."

Ah, so she knew he was married, was his immediate thought, and shame once again traveled through his mind. What must she think of him, married to such as Sara?

"Very well, then," he said softly. "As you said, it is only fair I know your name."

"I am Heather Martin." She looked away towards the white foam spilling on the rocks.

"Oh, so you are the vicar's niece?" he said, surprised.

"Yes, the same," she answered, still not looking at him.

"But that is impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Is it? What an odd thing to conclude," she said, turning a bemused eye to him.

"What I mean is..." he started.

"What you mean is that you have heard the vicar's niece is a spinster of sorts and that I am far too attractive to fit the fiddle?" she teasingly interrupted him and arched a brow.

He laughed out loud, inclined his head and said, "Indeed, far too beautiful to be a spinster, and too young."

“I am one and twenty, nearly in my dotage, you see. Up until last month I chose to teach in the school my father founded in Hampshire. However, when I lost him...well, the school was closed, lack of funding, you see—so here I am at Uncle Martin’s, driving them to distraction because I am not interested in the young men they throw at me.” She stopped and shook her head. “Gracious... whatever made me go on and on to you in such a manner?”

“Please don’t stop. I want to know... *everything* about you,” he whispered, and his dark eyes found her eyes as he drank deep.

* * * * *

Heather and Godwin found themselves meeting often after that first encounter. Their reasons...all too obvious, although Heather told herself she was rushing to meet him only because he was her beloved friend, someone who understood her, someone she felt whole with—

no more than that.

How he made her laugh and how often she told herself that she was dipping into dangerous waters. He was another woman’s husband, but oh, the thought of not being with him, not listening to his dear voice was far more terrifying.

At some point, Heather looked inward and honesty roared its hoary truths. Her motives, she told herself, needed questioning. Clearly she saw what Godwin made her feel, and she felt so very much when with him.

Truths are frightening revelations of heart and mind, and she couldn’t deny that she needed Godwin, wanted him, and dreamed of kissing him, of holding hands, of being with him. All these things told her that her heart was lost to a married man who would never be hers.

Somehow he had worked himself into her mind and soul and now she was forever lost to her love of him. It was wrong. He was married, she drummed into her head. He belonged to Sara.

He had confided a great deal to her over their weeks of friendship. He had told her that his marriage was a sterile thing, lifeless and hateful. He had told her he had felt dead inside for so long...until he had met her.

He told her how Sara had tricked him into marriage and how he now suspected that she had tricked him with intent from the first moment she smiled at him. He told her how he felt she had somehow thwarted his courtship of Lisa, tricking them all. He never held back as he spoke from

the heart. Heather listened to him as all his angst and heartache flowed out and saw the relief he felt at confiding in her.

He was Godwin of Ravensbury. How could she live with him so near, knowing he would never be hers? What kind of life had she to look forward to if she allowed her heart to rule her head?

Godwin stared at himself in the looking glass. Once again, he felt alive. The vivacity of youth had infected him. He only knew that his life had taken on new sparkle, his heart felt light, his nerves tingled, and his blood bubbled with passion. He only knew that Heather was the source of his delight, of his newfound purpose.

What was the answer? There could only be one. It came to him late one day in May of that same spring. They met, he and Heather, at Land's End, on the cliff she called Windmera. How she loved it there, how he now thought of it as Windmera. They met with but one shared thought—to make the other happy.

Godwin watched her as she came to him, and knew himself on fire. He reached for her, and she fell into his arms for their first kiss.

It was enchantment.

They cherished one another and they drank of a fount that for them was innocent and pure.

Forgotten was the world with its demands. Forgotten was the world and its snares. Such was the joining of Godwin and Heather.

Afterward, she lay in his arms, his chin resting upon her head, and she listened hungrily to his words.

“It cannot, will not end. We are meant,” he whispered softly. “You must be mine

in name, as well as body, my love.”

“Hush, Godwin...that can’t be,” she answered gravely. She had not expected this kind of talk.

“I will not demean you, demean our love by keeping you as my mistress. No... my darling, that would never do,” he said determinedly.

“What of Roderick? Would you shame him? Oh, my love, leave well enough alone. I am content to have stolen moments with you,” she said gently.

“No, Heather, *I am not* content to live half a life,” he growled. He held her face. “I have lived a sham of a life with Sara. There was never any love between us. There was only Roderick.

I intend to see my solicitors and divorce her.”

“Godwin...no, you must not. It isn’t done...that would bring shame to your house.”

“Shame? She brings shame to my house. Don’t you see? It is the only answer. And divorce is done from time to time, one way or another,” he said, his voice firm. “I will see that Roderick is not hurt by this. He is my son, and my heir. I shall not use him to free myself of her unless she forces me to. I shall provide for Sara’s needs—send her to London, but I will be rid of her once and for always. I will not suffer this marriage any longer.”

Heather begged him to reconsider, but his mind was made up.

And so it was that Godwin of Ravensbury made the second fateful decision there at Land’s End, their Windmera.

~ **Four** ~

HOW COULD SHE SUSTAIN THE shame? Sara paced and wrung her hands. She would never be able to hold her head up. Oh...faith, how the ladies of Cornwall would point and whisper. She would not let him divorce her! She could not allow this to happen.

He could only divorce her through an act of Parliament, but he had told her that he had already made arrangements. It wasn't done. Divorce was not an acceptable manner of handling an unhappy marriage in their society. He could keep a mistress. She could go her own way. That was how matters of the heart were handled amongst their own. How could he treat her thusly?

Well, he needed her to sign the deed of separation. *She wouldn't*. She wouldn't sign it.

However, she could clearly recall the stone hardness in his eyes when she told him she wouldn't sign.

"Sign willingly, Sara, or you will live to regret what will follow!" he had seethed low and furiously. "I will not tolerate this farce of a marriage any longer."

"No, I won't sign. What can you do to me that divorce wouldn't do? You have no just cause," she had answered, and realized she had been a tad too smug and said quite the wrong thing.

"Really? You think not?" he returned coldly.

"Indeed, you had just better forget your little jade or keep her hidden on the side!" she snapped.

He had taken a sharp step towards her and for a moment she was frightened. He had never struck her, and over the years she had taunted him enough to try his patience. She watched as he gained control of himself. She had never seen him quite this angry. There was a streak of hatred in his eyes and a sense of violence in his demeanor.

She watched as his body shook with emotion. "*Never*—do you hear me, Sara, never insult her again!" He eyed her and his voice was low and sharp. "Listen to me, Sara. I will have this divorce, even if I must dredge up the past."

"What are you saying?" she asked fearfully.

"I have no wish to hurt Roderick. I hope you will not put me in a position where I will have no choice," he answered, a sneer marring his fine features. "Sara, do you think I didn't know you have been sleeping with half the county?" He made

an inarticulate sound. “I knew and didn’t care...even when my friends...never mind. As I said...don’t buck me on this or your name will be ruined for more than just a divorce. I will have our marriage annulled, which would pull Roderick directly into it!”

She thought he was bluffing. She could not believe he would hurt Roderick. He loved the boy, far more than she did. Truth be told, she couldn’t abide the sight of her son. He reminded her of a youthful indiscretion that led her to this point. She put up her chin. “If you think to humiliate me by announcing that Roderick is...not yours, if that is how you wish to proceed, then do your best. What do I care if Roderick learns the truth?”

He stared at her for a long moment before answering, “Your lack of affection for your own son is beneath contempt, but no more than I expected from you. However, do not believe that I shall not do what I must. I do assure you, it is not what I want. *I love the* boy, but I’ll not sacrifice my future for either of you. I will, if I must, explain to him that I love him and your and my situation has naught to do with my love for him. So yes, I am ready to go that route if I must.

The notoriety will ruin you, Sara, even more than a divorce. If you accept, I will buy you a London townhouse and set you and the boy up with everything you could ever want, providing you allow him to visit me as much as I want. That is a non-negotiable term. If you do not sign the papers, you will be ruined by your own hand, *not mine!*”

Pacing, now in her room, she realized she should have taken his warning more seriously.

Godwin was not generally a hard man. Indeed, his nature had always been pliable and gentle.

However, she now recognized he was desperate to be rid of her...to have a new wife, perhaps children with that new wife.

What should she do? *What?* She knew from his perspective he owed her nothing. He had given her his name and more. She knew in the eight years they had been married he had been kind enough not to flaunt any of his indiscretions, even when she had not returned that favor.

Who could have guessed that he would fall in love with this...this nobody!

He had said he had friends in Parliament, and that he would tell them he had discovered she was unfaithful before their marriage and that Roderick wasn't his. *He could do that.* He could have their marriage annulled. Roderick? Roderick would be called a bastard and she would lose all standing. Would he do that to Roderick? Was he bluffing? He must be bluffing. He wouldn't do that to the boy. He really loved her son in ways she couldn't fathom.

A month passed and Lady Ravensbury sustained yet another shock. She wasn't sure what Godwin had been doing during this time, but as he never again broached the subject of divorce, she assumed he had perhaps put the issue aside because of Roderick.

She and Godwin maintained separate bedrooms and had done so for years, but she was aware that he left the house very early and did not return until very late. She believed he was perhaps playing house with his doxy somewhere, and was content at least that he had not bothered her about the divorce.

Thus, she was not prepared for Mr. Chale's visit. She had him taken to the morning room where she first offered him refreshment.

He declined, and as she took a seat and bade him sit as well, he declined again.

Chale was an elderly man, an experienced solicitor who had served Godwin's father, and she had noted in the past, he had been pleased to serve the son just as faithfully. He looked uncomfortable and her stomach churned.

She knew why he had come. He fidgeted and stuttered, and it became obvious to Sara that he had come to discharge an uncomfortable duty. She was immediately set on edge and ready for a fight.

As he played with the fobs at his waistcoat, and hemmed and hawed over the words he was about to speak, she became impatient and snapped, "Out with it, sir, please."

"His lordship has confessed his situation to me," he finally said on a hushed note. "Thus, I am here to advise you that...he is very willing to do what he must for his freedom. I am here to try and make you understand that he has everything

in order and ready to implement should you not sign the papers in question.”

Sara sat back and closed her eyes. When she opened them, her gaze fixed on nothing in particular and her voice was barely audible when she spoke. “He is determined in this dreadful course?”

“I am sorry to say he is, my lady. Though it grieves me to say it, his lordship will stop at nothing to obtain what he calls his freedom,” the solicitor said as dark patches filled his cheeks.

He proceeded to point out the lifestyle and allowance his lordship was willing to give her in London if she would only sign the papers.

“Kindly advise Lord Ravensbury that I shall have to...study the situation before I give him my answer,” she said as her mind raced to find a way to save herself.

“Very well, but, again, I am sorry to inform you that his lordship is anxious and will not wait long for your reply. If he does not have it soon, he will ask me to go ahead, and...well, as I said, though I find this matter distasteful, under the circumstances...I must say it is his right, and he has already prepared his friends in Parliament, who have indicated with or without your signature he can proceed.”

“Mr. Chale!” Sara objected in outraged terms as her chin went up. “If my husband wishes to settle the matter of our marriage ending amicably, he must understand that I need time to adjust to his proposals. It is...for me, an unbearable shame. I ask only for one week. Surely a week is hardly unreasonable?”

“No, no, of course...quite reasonable,” blustered the elderly man. He stopped his pacing and added, “I will see to it that his lordship will be patient about this and give you the week to decide what course of action you wish to follow. But I do caution you that there are only two choices you have, an annulment or a divorce.”

Sara was in a rage. How dare this little man speak to her this way! How dare Godwin do this to her! Well, she would not demean herself. She stood and inclined her head as a dismissal.

The elderly man made his way out, and her face was austere as she watched him take his leave.

When he closed the door at his back, she sank back onto her lovely yellow damask sofa and put her hands to her face.

She would have to leave Ravensbury...leave what she had for years thought of as her home.

She would have to live with the fact that another woman would occupy it? *No*. She could not allow this to happen. Yes, she had always dreamt of being a London hostess, but one with a title and position. This divorce or annulment would only leave her with money—no status!

For no reason at all, her mind flew to Lisa's ball all those years ago. Oscar and Lisa would gloat and think she had only gotten what she deserved. In the end, Lisa had realized what Sara had done and had cut their connection. Why Lisa should have done that, she couldn't understand, after all, Lisa went on to marry Oscar, and by all accounts, the two went on very happily. In fact, they owed their happiness to her!

She had to find a way out of this and because she was desperate, and because it was in her character, she found what for her was a suitable answer.

Her eyes narrowed and took on luster, the gleam of a youth's excitement when faced with an adventure. Her eyes darkened as she formulated her plan, and her lips took on a twist as she entered the worst of her dark nature.

* * * * *

Sara didn't waste any time as she attended to the intricacies of her plan. She knew a great deal of its success depended on her handling matters herself.

She smiled. It was early yet, and she had just enough time. Ha! Godwin was a fool to think he could do this to her. Did he think she would quietly go off to London and give up what was hers? She was neither soft nor beaten, as the years had left their mark on her. She had learned to find Godwin's reluctant forgiveness a bitter draft to swallow. Indeed, a part of her despised him for it. She had made a fool of him. She had turned him away from Lisa without his

being aware who held those strings. He was a fool then...he was a fool still.

So, he meant to challenge her, did he? Very well, she would make him rue the day for his decision. The first thing she would have to do is turn to Mrs. Abernathy, the village gossip.

Once again, Sara remembered Lisa and Oscar, who had turned to one another at the end of Sara's ministrations all those years ago. The two married and their marriage, or so everyone was fond of telling her at the routs and country dinners, was quite a success.

She hadn't seen either of them except in passing since that fateful night of the ball. What would they say if they knew Godwin was divorcing her...or worse, annulling their marriage?

With a sure determination in her heart, she made up her mind, crossed the oak flooring to a large well-worn Gothic table of monumental proportions and took up its matching chair.

She dipped the quill in the ink well. What she needed first was Mrs. Abernathy. Indeed, she thought of the odd woman as a gross little skirter forever on the fringes, hoping to be accepted by the gentry. She would do to carry out one of her errands.

The first and most important step of Sara's plan, she believed, could only be handled by herself. No other in her household could be trusted—they all loved Godwin too much.

~ **Five** ~

DAYS AFTER SARA AND GODWIN'S ugly encounter over the divorce, Godwin was called away on estate business.

He and Heather had met at their cottage and he had promised he would only be away for a day.

“Dearest, I have arranged a meeting with my estate manager at my Parliamentary friend's Grange, some hours away. Because of the distance, I shall not return until late into the day. I must attend to the arrangements my friend, the

one I mentioned, is conducting on my behalf. He wields a great deal of power in Parliament, but he needs me to sign some of the documents he will be presenting to the court. You see, he is making all the arrangements for an annulment should Sara refuse to sign the divorce papers.”

“Oh, I do feel so badly about this. Godwin, my love, I would be happy to stay here in our cottage as your mistress...and not do this to Sara.”

“No! I will not allow you to suffer over this. I took advantage of you, Heather. You were an innocent, and now you are mine. I will not treat you thusly. I will not shame you,” he said vehemently.

“Yes, but, Godwin, a second wife under such circumstances will be not much better than a mistress’s role in society, and honestly, I am content to go on as we are. I shall live here in this cottage that I adore...”

“And our child? Will you condemn our child to such a life?”

Heather had frowned, and he had promised that in the end all would be well. She watched him leave and sighed.

Heather adored him, but she honestly did not want to put Sara into such a predicament. She was content with her life the way it was and the way it would be as Godwin’s mistress. She had his love, she had no need of his name.

As she strolled home to her uncle’s modest but well-ordered household, worried about the future, torn because of the child she carried, she made up her mind to try and talk Godwin out of his present course. She would tell him that he must think of Roderick.

Her red hair trailed freely unhampered as she hadn’t bothered to don the hood of her cloak.

Over her arm a basket was slung full with wildflowers. In her throat one of her favorite tunes.

Godwin loved her voice and was forever asking her to sing for him. Godwin, she thought and sighed heavily. Why had the fated brought them together? It was up to her to keep him from denouncing his wife and the boy he had called son all

these years.

She loved the cottage. She loved watching him come through the door. Theirs was a private world when they were there together. She had no need to be Lady Ravensbury. She only needed him and a quiet life, but a nagging voice told her she wasn't being realistic. Life would intrude and hurt their child in the future... but how she loved Godwin, and if only he had never crossed paths with Sara. He had a habit of peering at her with those brilliant eyes of his that made her knees weak. Oh, he had been so full of joy, so wildly thrilled that he had picked her up and swung her around when she told him she was with child!

He had glowed with happiness, so much that he could not contain himself as he began voicing the plans for the baby's nursery, and then he stopped talking and took her into his arms to hold her, just to hold her. She clung to him.

She wished he hadn't gone off on business. She missed him so very much. Still, she would see him soon.

Heather couldn't keep the smile from her face when she entered the kitchen. A fire was burning low in the hearth and she rubbed her hands before she removed her cloak and hung it on a nearby hook.

Cook eyed her and said, "Sit...sit with me a moment, child."

"My goodness, whatever is wrong, Mabe? I can see that something is very wrong, for you never look so dour," Heather exclaimed, and gave the woman's full round shoulders a hug before she sat beside her at the table.

"Mrs. Abernathy came to see yer uncle, she did, and she made no secret of it, 'twas Lady Ravensbury who sent her. I know, coz m'boy listened at the door—I told him to, ye see, cuz I was worrit about ye."

"But what does this mean?" Heather had a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach. This was alarming. Her uncle barely tolerated her as it was. He had only taken her in because if he hadn't, people would have thought him coldhearted, which, in fact, he was. Her aunt had very little to say in their household, and Heather knew she would find no help in that quarter.

"Mrs. Abernathy made him know the worst of 'ee and *himself*. She come to end

it, this illicit love affair ye be having with his lordship—her words, not mine,” Mabe said with some disgust.

She reached for Heather’s hand and patted it. “It be wrong, *ye know, I know...* ye and his lordship carrying on, but bless ye child, I understand the heart and life... but I think if ye promise to give him up...perhaps all will be well.”

Heather jumped to her feet. “Mabe? End it? I could no more end it than end my life.”

“Ye’ll get nowhere speaking sech to the vicar, m’darling girl,” Mabe said, and sighed as she shook her head. “Lord bless ye, I’ve a fondness for ye, but still... himself be another woman’s lawful man. Think on that if nothing else.”

“But, Mabe...I have. It isn’t what you think...” Heather started to object and then cut herself off. At the kitchen door stood a small but hearty lad.

Mabe’s son was thirteen, round-faced and round-eyed. He walked over to Heather and took her hand worshipfully. “Miss Heather, master saw ye coming down the walk. He says to have ye go to him in the study at once, but if ye don’t want to...if ye want to run away...I’ll gladly go with ye and protect ye, *I will.*”

Mabe reached over and touched her son’s shoulder. “Whist with ye now putting such notions in Miss Heather’s head. Go on, young’un...off with ye now.”

He lowered his head and shuffled out, but it was clear when he turned and gave Heather a long look that he was concerned and ready to help her.

Heather bolstered herself as she made ready to face her uncle. Before she left, Mabe hurried to turn her and throw her arms around her. “Never ye mind, love... matters of the heart have a habit of working out in the end. He will berate ye, ye tell him ye regret what ye’ve done...tell him ye were an innocent and taken advantage of...tell...”

“No, how can I do that, Mabe? It would be a lie,” Heather said, and left the cook at her back.

Every instinct told her that she was in peril.

She walked slowly down the long narrow hall, up the two steps to the main hall, down its length and across its width to the study door where she stopped. She took a moment to compose herself as she smoothed her modest, blue day gown, lifted her chin and knocked.

She knew her uncle despised her. It was the only ‘feeling’ he had ever displayed in her regard. She knew why. She knew she was so like her mother in appearance that he couldn’t bear

to be in the same room with her. He had never forgiven her mother for refusing his suit and marrying his brother, and now here she was...accused of being immoral, and it *was not a lie*.

His voice was harsh. “Come in and close the door tightly at your back, girl!”

Heather obeyed meekly. What else could she do? She had sunk their household into shame.

How this Abernathy woman found out she could not tell, but somehow she had.

He eyed her, his expression accusing, his lips forming a sneer. “Is it true?”

That was all he asked. He knew that she knew what he was asking. *She could lie*. She perhaps should lie.

She wondered why he bothered to ask, for he obviously believed what he had been told. She put up her chin and said, “Yes, it is.” She was surprised at the calm she felt.

He sat back. “Faith preserve me,” he breathed on a hushed note. “I have nurtured a creature of Satan!”

“No, you *have not* nurtured a creature of Satan, for you *have not* nurtured anyone,” Heather snapped back. “You have scarcely spoken more than a word now and then to me since I arrived.”

“Quiet!” he snapped, and his fist pounded his desk, making her jump. “You stand before me, boldly admitting the foulest behavior without blushing, without shading your eyes from mine?”

“No, Uncle, I do not admit to behavior most foul,” she answered gravely. She had no idea where she found the strength to face him down.

“Of your own free will you have just confessed...”

She cut him off, “You asked me if it were true. I assumed you meant is it true that I, Heather Martin, love Godwin of Ravensbury. Yes, that is true and I cannot admit it to be foul!”

“You play with words? You stand here feeling no shame and...” He appeared, in that moment, to be overcome as he pounded the table again with his fist. “You have participated in clandestine meetings with his lordship, and yet claim you have done nothing evil? Your actions are only surpassed in wickedness by your attitude.”

“I am not playing with words or trying to win an argument, sir. You asked me how it was I did not blush, did not hide my eyes by looking at you directly when I answered. You call my lack of shame wickedness...but I cannot call it wicked that I love Godwin. Nay, I am proud of it.”

How could she make him understand what Godwin had gone through since he discovered Sara had married him on a pretext? She could not without giving away a confidence, and besides, her uncle still would not understand. Her uncle obviously thought Godwin a libertine and she a wicked woman.

“You find nothing shameful in engaging in unlawful fornication with a man who is wedded to another? It is adultery!” He frowned after a pause, and added, “I can see his lordship has taken advantage of you...and still, your upbringing should have...”

She cut him off, furious that he should criticize her beloved. “Nay...he took no unfair advantage.”

“Ah, you are blinded,” he said grimly.

She did not answer. What was the use?

He added, “Aha, finally, I have succeeded in making you see!”

“No, I don’t see at all,” she said, and not cowered, she put up her chin. “We will never agree on this point.”

Her retort, her unwavering attitude burned through him. “By my faith!” he shouted.

“Ravensbury is a married man. Does that not mean anything to you?”

“Yes, had she been a good woman and he happily married I would cut out my heart before I would allow myself to come between them. That is not the case. You speak from your pulpit of evil. Why would God have put me in Godwin’s path if he had not meant for us to meet, to love?”

Did she believe those words? She wasn’t sure.

“To test you...as God tests us all the time, and *you have failed,*” he snapped.

“God is good and you are wrong!” she shouted.

“You are mad and I have heard enough!” He stood, and she thought for a moment he was going to slap her. He fisted his hands at his sides. “I had hoped to bring you to your senses before sending you away. I see that it is impossible, which only strengthens my resolve that I am right in my decision.”

His words struck her a blow and she chided herself. What did she think he would do? Why hadn’t she foreseen this would be his solution? He had never wanted her at the vicarage and this gave him good cause to get rid of her.

She thought he would try and extract a promise from her to stop seeing Godwin. She had been ready for that, even meant to give it, knowing that soon she and Godwin would be together.

She gasped. “You cannot mean it?”

“Indeed, you leave me no choice. I am told that it is Lady Ravensbury’s wish that I send you elsewhere, and without her patronage, there would be no vicarage,” he said, and sat down heavily in his chair.

“But...Uncle?” she said.

“Uncle? Do not call me that. You shame me. I have had your aunt pack your bags, and have put a pouch of bills in your purse. It should be enough to see you back to your Devon residence and keep you until you can apply to receive your competence there. If you are frugal, the money should last until you find work. I had sent for you believing I was doing my duty, believing you were but a maid in need of protection. I looked to the proprieties, but you *are an ingrate*. I can have no scruples regarding your future. I have no niece. You are to me less than a stranger.”

He was sending her home. Thank goodness there had been just enough inheritance to maintain her small home while she was gone. She had thought he might send her off under guard somewhere, someplace where she would have difficulty escaping. Such was his nature. His decision to send her back to Devon made her sigh with relief.

So he and her aunt would no longer be a part of her life. What was in that? They had never been a part of her life. She would have no family, but she would have her child and Godwin. It was all she needed.

Also, her uncle obviously didn't know about the cottage Godwin maintained in the woods—

she would go there, and not to Devon!

She would take her bags and what coins her aunt had packed away for her and leave immediately on foot. It would take her less than twenty minutes to walk back there.

“You are what you are,” she told her uncle. “Society is what it is. I am not governed by such things. I know what is truly right and wrong. Happiness was a thing denied to his lordship because of Sara. Happiness was denied to you because my mother did not choose you over your brother...” She saw the shock and anger on his face.

“Yes, Uncle, I know. You wanted my mother and hate me because I look so much like her.

There is a reason she chose your brother, and we both know what it was. Heart.

He had heart and you do not. You treat your wife like a servant and you treat your servants like slaves. You say you are a man of God, but I believe God knows better. What you are is a bitter old man, and you will never know true happiness.”

She turned and slowly, shoulders straight, started to walk out of the room. She turned when she opened the door and inclined her head. “Goodbye, Uncle.”

He watched her leave. The door closed at her back. Her words had struck a nerve. For a moment, he thought back to his youth. Had he ever known happiness? Yes, as a young man...the first time he had spent an afternoon with Heather’s mother. How her smile had lit him up and made him believe he could do anything... *be anything*. But then his brother had entered the picture and she had eyes for no other.

Damn the girl!

And even he knew not which girl he spoke of. Perhaps both.

~ **Six** ~

THE DAY HAD PROGRESSED, SHE would soon accomplish her goals, Sara thought with a smile that was cold and calculating. She was proud of herself. She had accomplished so very much in so little time.

She sat her horse well, her dark blue riding hat atop her yellow curls was angled fashionably. Her blue riding jacket hugged her body and her matching skirt flowed dramatically over her bay horse’s glistening body.

Two men rode toward her. She urged her horse forward to meet them. One of the two men was well known to her and when their eyes met, she smiled.

He sidled his horse up beside her own and leaned in to say, “My lady, looking lovely as ever today.”

She merely inclined her head. “I have had quite a day and am anxious to get it all sewn up right and tight,” she answered. Indeed, first she had visited with the dower Mrs. Abernathy, who had been surprised by her visit but greedy to hear the gossip. She had made a show of distress while she told her tale of woe. Sara

had been clever enough to allow the widow to think going to the vicar with this information was her idea. She even demurred saying she had no wish to upset the vicar and allowed Mrs. Abernathy to insist.

The veil of Sara's riding hat was drawn across her face, as immediately upon leaving Mrs.

Abernathy she rode into town and made her way to the weathered and not quite reputable establishment known as the Cat & Fiddle.

Sara tensed as she looked around, for she did not wish to be seen. Satisfied that none of the local country gentry were about, she meandered into the tavern and drew quite a few looks her way, as it was not the sort of establishment a lady of quality frequented.

It was there that she and Colin saw one another.

She did not know who he was, but immediately had the feeling that he would be just the person to help her. Later, she would discover he knew who she was.

Even now, looking at him, she was well pleased with her choice.

He had been bold when he got up from his chair and walked over to her and said, "My lady, may I escort you to a quiet corner?"

She had inclined her head and allowed him to do so.

They sat for a moment and he said, "What do you need, my lady?"

"More than you can imagine," she answered, flirting with her eyes and her tone.

She was well pleased at his reaction, for he sucked in air and bent in closer.

"Whatever my lady needs, I am ready."

He looked like a rugged sailor, yet he had breeding and his English was genteel. His manners were intriguing as he seemed a rogue, but was he up to what she needed him to do? He put up his hand to the tavern keeper and asked her, "Ale?"

She inclined her head, thinking, *why not?*

Sara asked, "What is your name?"

"Colin, and as I said, no need to tell me yours," he answered.

The ale was delivered and he toasted her silently before taking a long swig. She sipped at hers and for a moment she felt free, wild, and young. It was as though she were seventeen, meeting Raoul on the cliffs.

Was she now about to pass the boundary of wrong into evil? Perhaps.

She knew that the vicar would banish Heather from his home. She knew him, had endured his boring conversations, and because he was dependent on her good offices for his continued presence at the vicarage.

Yes, the vicar would no doubt send his niece away, but that would not solve her problem.

Godwin would follow and find her and be angrier than ever. No, she had no choice but to proceed with her most intricate plans.

"Colin, I should like to hire some men," she whispered. "For a very special job. Discretion is utterly important."

"I'm your man, then," Colin answered

La, was she making a mistake? This man knew her. If she left now, she would be safe, but Heather Martin would also be safe. She couldn't have that.

She had to go through with her plan.

The tavern keeper returned at that moment and said, "Madam...perhaps ye would like a table alone, or better yet, I can recommend another tavern more suited to the likes of ye."

"Well, Jenkins, mayhap you don't understand that the lady is quite comfortable here... *with me*." Colin inclined his head and asked, "Aren't you, my lady?"

"Yes, thank you...er, Jenkins," Sara answered. What was she doing? What? She would go to hell for this? Well, hell in the afterlife was uncertain...if she didn't

do this, if she didn't ruin Heather, she would be ruined. Easy choice.

Jenkins, the tavern owner frowned but seemed to wash his hands of the situation as he walked off and returned to ordering his barmaid about.

"Well then, my lady, how can I be of service?" Colin asked.

Sara hesitated.

Colin lowered his voice, "Is it protection you are looking to hire...for a journey? If so, my men and I are at your beck and call."

"You say your name is Colin. That isn't enough. Your speech is that of an educated Englishman from the north, I think, and yet you have the sea written all over you. Just who are you, Colin?" she asked quietly.

"Ah, very astute. Yes, I am from the north and I am the third son of a squire whose estates are to let. I took to the sea—the navy, and when I sold out, my love of the sea suggested there was a living to be had transporting goods to and fro." He eyed her. "Now, what is your need of me and my men?"

"Are you saying you are a smuggler?" Sara already suspected this, but she wanted to gage his reaction.

"Aye, ye could say that we are," Colin answered with a grin. "Bred a gentleman but born for the sea and the excitement it has provided."

"And, of course, one must survive and a third son doesn't always have choices," Sara said, not because she cared, but because she was still taking stock of him.

"Exactly," he said.

"I think I have seen you before, in the village," she said as they exchanged a long glance at one another.

"Indeed, though we have never been properly introduced, we have on occasion passed one another here and there. I am Colin Falwell, and I would appreciate it if you would tell me what it is you need, as I would very much like to give it to you," he said with a smirk and a slight bow of his head.

“I am not sure you are just the sort of gentleman for the job,” she started doubtfully.

“Oh, but I am exactly what you need,” he interrupted. “My crew...and I are at the moment in-between...gainful employment, and I would be happy to serve you in any manner you deem fit.”

She laughed. “Very well.” She was attracted to Colin. He brought out the flirt in her immediately. “Perhaps you may be in a position...to...er... *please me.*”

He grinned and reached for her gloved hand. She allowed it.

He rose from the table and pulled her along. “Let us take a stroll out back, where we can be more private and you can draw less attention.”

She rose and a thrill swept over her as he slipped his arm around her waist. He gave her a squeeze as he led her out the tavern’s back door to a small stone bench.

He saw her seated and sat beside her. “That is better, as I am certain you would not have wanted the luncheon crowd to take note of your presence.”

“Oh, no...is it that time already?” she said, momentarily distressed. She would have to hurry.

He lifted her chin and their eyes met as desire flared at his touch. She hadn’t been stirred like this in a long time. It had been months and months and then she had only a few stolen moments with one of the sturdy stable hands, which had proven inadequate to her needs.

She had come to the town of Penzance with only business in mind, but this good-looking rogue had reminded her that she was a desirable woman, and she liked the sensation it aroused.

Colin led her out the back door and through an ill-kept garden to a dirt path before he said,

“Now, my lady, tell me what troubles you and how I may alleviate that trouble.”

She felt his dark eyes penetrate hers and then travel over her body. She liked him, indeed, she liked everything about him.

“Do you have men you can trust?” she asked.

“I do, my sweet, I do,” he answered.

“I shall require your services and those of your crew,” she said carefully. “You will need to work both on land and at sea.” How fitting, she thought, that Colin should have introduced himself to her. How convenient. It was as though the fates smiled on her grand plan.

“On land and sea? You intrigue me, beauty,” he answered, and pulled her in close.

Ardor flooded through her, and she swallowed before she asked, “You said you have your own vessel?”

“Aye, I most certainly do and she is a fine vessel, most capable of taking on the mysterious sea, sweetheart,” he said, and his hand moved to her breast, cupping the silk covered fullness and teasing her nipple already pert and hard beneath the material. “And a Captain’s quarters that can accommodate us should you like to...have additional privacy.”

She kissed him and he dove into that kiss. She took his tongue and felt a glorious wave of fever fill her sex as her thighs clenched.

As she pulled away, he attempted to have another kiss. She put up a finger. “First...you must hear what I require of you.”

Sara began slowly, and painstakingly telling him what she needed him and his crew to do for her and why. When she had finished, Colin Falwell stood and frowned as he studied her.

“Not our line of work, my lady,” Colin said.

That worried her and she frowned as she asked, “Have I come to the wrong man?”

“Here is the thing, my lady. My men are a good sort. Aye, we cross the sea into France and buy very fine brandy and smuggle it back to England for sale. ‘Tis, in a sense, honest work, clean

and simple. A bit of rum running is our trade and proud of the fact that we do it well. No one has ever gotten hurt. But this...well, this...?” he said, and rubbed his chin.

“She deserves it. She purposely took my husband from me and then that wasn’t enough. She talked him into divorcing me.”

“Aye, I don’t hold with that. The tart should keep her place, but what you are asking?”

“Colin, if I don’t divorce him, he will have the marriage annulled and make his own blood son a bastard. What kind of man does that?”

Colin frowned. “No, I don’t hold with that either. If I agree... *it will cost you.*”

She smiled. “How much?”

“How much have you got to give?” he answered quietly.

“One hundred pounds and no quibbling,” she said sharply. “It is all I can get... without his lordship noticing.”

“No. I won’t take a sou below two hundred,” he replied, and reached for a lock of her golden hair. “I told you, I’m good at what I do, and that includes bargaining. If you want my men to go against the grain, there has to be enough in it for them.”

She moved in close to him. “You will take one hundred... ‘tis all I have. Remember, you’ll be making a pretty guinea on the other side.” She looked up at his face and watched him as he considered this. “‘Tis all I have to give,” she said in the most seductive voice she could muster.

His hand was moved to her bodice, tearing it as he went for her breast and pulled it out of her gown. He bent and suckled and when he came up, he found her eyes closed and her face drawn in pleasure.

He said, "Is it now? Well, I know better. I'll take two hundred, and you...right here, right now..."

She laughed, but truth was, he excited her. "You are good at what you do," she said, and pulled out the two hundred and put it in his hands.

She watched him stow it away and asked, "Now, do you think you can handle me?"

"Hell and fire, woman, you are a diamond all right, but I can see you don't want to be taken easy-like. So aye, I mean to handle you as you have never been handled before." His voice was husky as he pulled up her skirts and sat on the stone bench.

She undid the button of his sailor pants and released his large hard cock before she pulled off her underclothes. Colin had his cock in his hand and asked her, "The question is, my beauty, can you handle that?"

For an answer, she went down on her knees and took his dick into her mouth. Oh, but she loved a big cock on her tongue. She sucked hard, and saw pleasure on his face.

"Easy now..." he said. "Better come on up and let me slide inside," he said hungrily.

She climbed on board and took him roughly inside of herself, rocking him hard, slamming down on him, filling herself with his large cock.

He kissed her mouth and slid his tongue along hers. She put her head back from that kiss and said, "Did you taste yourself on my tongue, Colin?"

"Ah, you fine wench, fuck that cock harder now. Fuck!"

She did what he asked and moved in a way that touched just the right spot, and as she climaxed, she released a small scream.

He slapped his hand over her mouth and cautioned, "You'll have them all coming out to have a share of you, and right now, I'm not sharing you with anyone."

She said hungrily, “More...I want more...”

“And you damn well are going to get it, but if you keep moving like that, I am going to go off...and you don’t want that yet, do you?”

“Oh, but it feels so good,” she said, moving in a circular motion.

He suddenly picked her up and put her on the bench, leaned her onto her back and once again lifted her skirts. “I’m going to ram you now, beauty...and take control.”

“Yes, yes...do that!”

She gasped with pleasure as he pounded into her and experienced another shattering climax.

She marveled at his stamina as he continued to slam into her for a bit until he stiffened and went off.

When he was done, he said as she started to rise, “Where are you going?”

“I...er...”

He grinned. “I’m not done yet,” he told her, and took her hand and led her to the back wall of the tavern. He set her palms on the building and pulled her by the waist into position before he lifted her skirts and rammed inside of her again.

His thrusts were unrestrained and swift as she begged for more and he growled, “More...I’ll give you more.” He pulled out and dove into her again and again as she squealed with pleasure.

All at once he heard someone approaching. They were a bit out of sight and he stilled her as he listened.

“Colin...?” a lad no more than eighteen called as he rounded the corner of the tavern and stopped in his tracks to watch.

Colin saw that it was only one of his shipmates, and a good friend as well. He grinned at him. “Say hallo to one of my men, he has a great liking for the ladies,

don't you, Jimmy?"

"Don't stop!" Sara cried, not at all concerned about the newcomer.

"Jimmy, come over here. Look at this very fine ass. Yeah, that's right. Now take out your dick and let our lady have a taste," Colin said, still grinning broadly.

Jimmy was presently hot and ready. He immediately did what he was told and Sara had her first threesome.

She was in ecstasy.

Pleasuring the handsome virile young man while being pleased was a new experience, and they brought her to her climax over and over before first the lad and then Colin were brought to theirs.

When Colin was done, he slapped her rump soundly and told her to straighten up, as they had a job to do.

Sara put herself together, put on her underclothes, all the while allowing Jimmy to suckle at her nipples. Oh, but she liked it and held his head in place. "Yes... like that," she said as she got heated up again.

Colin laughed and pulled him off. "Later, we'll have more, but now...we have work to get to and cash to be had."

~ **Seven** ~

IT HAD BEEN A LONG walk from the vicarage to the little cottage near hidden in the woods near Godwin's estate lands. She found herself breaking down as tears overtook her. Life had come out of the light and dragged her into the dark. Would Godwin be upset with her? No, he was never upset with her. Would he think she should have lied to her uncle and denied the truth?

She had thought she would one day live there with her child and that Godwin would have easy access to her. She didn't know that she would be banished so soon from her uncle's home.

She supposed her uncle was not wrong. She had behaved like a fallen woman in

his eyes, and she knew that was what she actually had become.

She climbed over the rolling hills, taking a shortcut through a farmer's field, cutting the four mile walk along the road to just over three miles.

It was usually an easy walk, but carrying a portmanteau made it less so.

Her anger and her pride had made her defiant and carried her the first leg of the trip without feeling sorry for herself. Now, however, the enormity of what had occurred hit her straight on, breaking her braver resolve, and she cried right out loud.

Emotions ran high and then subsided as she tried to consider the reality of her future. She would be, once again, dependent on a man.

When her parents were gone, she had been dependent on her uncle. She could have stayed alone in the small home they had left her, but at her uncle's insistence she had come to Cornwall and taken residence with him and her aunt.

She had made a complete mess of her life. It was her own fault, she thought now. It was punishment for allowing herself to love a married man.

Heather had never before been confrontational. She had never had reason to be. Why had she fought with her uncle? Why had she not thrown herself at his mercy and begged forgiveness?

He would have made life hard for her. He would have monitored her movements...but then he would have discovered she was with child. Ah, then he would have sent her away. The outcome would have been the same.

Her uncle had made a very good point. She was the reason Godwin had turned on his wife and son. The fact that he and his wife were not in love, did not even like one another, didn't matter. She was the reason he was suing her for divorce. She could not excuse her part in that.

She put down her portmanteau and rested her arm. Her belongings were not great, but the weight was beginning to strain her right arm. She switched the handle to her left hand.

She sighed as she thought of her untenable situation. She should have been more circumspect. But it was done, no sense going over it again and again.

It was her fault yes, but she knew in her heart that even if she had apologized and promised never to see Godwin again, it would only have put off the inevitable. She was with child.

She supposed that was what had triggered her defiance—the fact that she had none to offer.

Godwin would be so distressed when he returned. This was exactly what he wanted to avoid.

She should have listened to him. He wanted to take her and sail to Italy and handle Sara from afar, through his attorney. She should have agreed. She would have had their baby while away and when they returned, everything would have been settled. Why had she not accepted to do

that? Because, she answered herself, you were still trying to dissuade him from divorcing Sara, that's why!

All this while, she thought she was living a fairy tale with Godwin. That was how he had made her feel. Perhaps her uncle was correct and she was wicked and selfish? Perhaps she should have left Godwin and gone home to the home her parents had left her long before she became so attached to him?

It was so hard to separate what was right and wrong when emotion and desire drives you to the brink.

All she wanted was to be with the man she loved. All he wanted was to be with her and raise their child.

Why had life done this to them— *to them all*...?

Reality now struck swift and hard.

She looked up from her cogitations and saw the cottage. It was lovely. A cream colored stone building that Godwin had purchased some weeks ago.

It housed a few bedrooms and a lovely sitting area, and she had actually thought she would live there, decorate, garden...could she still?

Her heart was heavy and her mind a mess. The awesome questions reared themselves for inspection. She was selfish, had been selfish to fall in love and then act on it. She was wicked.

There was no other way to look at her situation. Her child might grow up to hate her? Oh no, no.

She put her portmanteau down in the small foyer and walked through the sitting room to the small hearth. There was enough kindling and firewood, so she started a small fire to chase away the chill from her body and the room. She shivered and hugged her cloak tightly as she waited for the fire to take.

She had no way of knowing that the smoke from the fire would be a signal.

* * * * *

Sara Ravensbury's timing and planning were enmeshed that day. The widow Abernathy had carried her part in Sara's scheme out perfectly. The vicar had reacted exactly as she knew the mean-spirited man would react.

Sara knew Heather would leave and go to the cottage Godwin had purchased for their clandestine meetings.

How stupid of Godwin. Did he not realize that she knew all about his little hideaway?

Sara knew Heather would never take the stagecoach for Devon. She would not, could not leave without first seeing her lover. No, Sara thought, Heather Martin would go to the cottage and await Godwin's arrival.

He would see the smoke on his way back from his business dealings, at least, Sara believed that Heather would think that.

Thus, Heather Martin had fallen right into her hands.

She watched the smoke curl upward from the chimney and motioned her horse

forward out of the dusky woods. Colin smiled at her and followed. He hadn't brought Jimmy on this job. No, he brought a younger man, one that needed a bit more training in discipline. He had brought Bunky, a young lad that had balked at the plan they were about to embark upon. Colin couldn't have any of his crew criticize his actions.

The young lad at his back frowned darkly, apparently unhappy with the job they were about to do, but remained silent.

Farmer Burns closed his field gate at that moment, stretched his well-worked limbs and sighed wearily. It had been a long day. All he wanted was his meal and his little wife in his lap.

He hoped she had made his chicken pot pie, his favorite, and that was all he was thinking about as he looked up at the sound of a horse's snort.

Curiously, he watched horses, their riders unknown to him, crossing the field at a trot. Three riders, he counted. As they neared, he began to frown. Two men and a woman...damn, if the woman wasn't Lady Ravensbury. He was shocked. Whatever was her ladyship doing with the likes of them?

They were seamen by their garb, so what were they doing here? He removed his peaked wool hat and scratched his head of light brown curls.

He heard her ladyship laugh. Well then, no need for him to worry about her, yet, to his way of thinking, the three looked as though they had a purpose. He had a 'feel' for such things and he wondered, in spite of the fact that she had laughed, if her ladyship was in need of help.

However, as the three paused and her ladyship turned to push one of the men's shoulders, bend towards him and kiss him soundly, Farmer Burns revised his opinion. 'T'wasn't she that was in trouble!

Well then, as bad as he might feel for his lordship, it wasn't none of his affair, and besides that, he knew the stories. Stories about Lady Ravensbury's amusements were wide-spread and as he was a tenant of his lordship's, he couldn't help but note that there was no love lost between Godwin and Sara Ravensbury. No, no love at all.

At any rate, there was naught for him to do. What he needed was the feel of his wife in his arms, and her chicken pot pie.

* * * * *

Heather plopped down on the hearthrug by the fire and stared at the growing flames. They were so beautiful, so vivid.

A gusty sigh escaped her lips as she thought of Godwin and what he would say and do when he discovered what had happened.

She still could not believe that her uncle had thrown her out of the house with instructions for her to walk to town and take the stagecoach at 5:00 PM to Devon. Town was a good eight miles. He could easily have had their stablehand give her a lift. No matter, she wouldn't have gone, as from the moment she knew she had no home with him any longer, she had determined she would go to the cottage.

By now, he would think her now well on her way and probably be saying *good riddance*. He didn't care for her safety or comfort and was more wicked than she, for she had not set out to hurt anyone, while he had.

She ran her hand down her flat belly. Godwin's child. How she already loved the baby was something she couldn't even put into words. She felt herself drift off when all at once a strong draft made her look up to find the doorway filled with an imposing figure of a woman. *Lady Ravensbury*.

Heather cringed beneath the woman's scrutiny and didn't make a move. She was some years Sara's junior and until she became Godwin's lover, she had led a sheltered life. Heather said nothing to her ladyship as she waited for Sara to state her purpose.

"Are you going to just sit there and stare at me, or are you going to invite me in?" Sara said haughtily.

Heather rose to her feet, brushed off her dress to straighten the wrinkles, and crossed her arms over her middle as she readied for the confrontation. "It doesn't appear as though I need to invite you in," she said, and inclined her head, indicating that Sara had already entered and closed the door at her back.

Sara smirked. “No, you don’t have to, do you, because if this cottage is Godwin’s, then it is also mine.”

“Ah, you make assumptions without knowing facts,” Heather said as she asked herself where she was getting her bravado. Was it now that she was face to face with the woman who had ruined Godwin’s life that anger on his behalf drove her?

Sara’s eyes narrowed. “Well, it appears you have a sharp tongue.”

“Only when I must,” Heather returned.

Sara looked her over. “I have never seen you up close. My, but I quite see why Godwin is so taken with you. Stunning creature...such violet eyes and beautiful red hair. You should do very well where you are going,” Sara said slowly. “There on the hearthrug you made quite a picture.

If you hadn’t caused me such trouble, I might have wanted to...pleasure myself with you.”

Heather gasped, absolutely shocked at this.

Sara laughed. “However, I can see you have the heart of an innocent though you play the slut with my husband,” her ladyship sneered at her.

Heather did not know how she got the courage to stand tall and put up her chin. “Ah, and you play the innocent without heart while you are in fact a slut,” Heather enraged, snapped back.

Sara’s eyes flashed and she raised a hand as she moved in. Heather stood her ground and said, “I wouldn’t if I were you. I’m not so missish that I wouldn’t think twice about defending myself.”

Sara accepted the threat with narrowed eyes and controlled herself. Instead, she moved around the cottage and wore an expression of disgust.

“So this is where you two play house,” Sara said.

“What do you want?” Heather asked.

“I want my husband to remain my husband, what do you think I want?” Sara snapped.

“Why? *You don’t love him,*” Heather answered easily.

“No, and still I want the protection of his name and title. Did you think I would sit idly by and allow him to divorce me?” Sara answered quietly.

“I don’t have the power to give him to you. I have been trying to deter him from such a plan,” Heather answered softly, more sure than ever that she and Godwin were right to love one another. *This woman was evil!*

“Really? Should I be touched? Well, I am not. You underestimate your power over him.

You underestimate *me!*” Sara said coldly. She opened the leather pouch she held in her gloved hand.

Heather watched, fascinated, to see Sara move to the desk and set quill and an inkwell in its place. What was she doing? What was Lady Ravensbury doing? If only Godwin would return from his business and appear.

Sara stared at her and quietly said, “Are you stalling? He won’t arrive in time, you know. I have planned this very carefully.” She made a grand gesture and said, “There, Miss Martin, please be seated and I will tell you what you are to write.”

“*Write?* What are you talking about?” Heather had a sinking feeling.

“I am talking about you *saving Godwin’s life.* You will sit and write what I tell you, for his life depends on it,” Sara snapped.

Heather closed her eyes. She knew this woman was capable of anything. When she opened her eyes, she stalled. “Who am I writing to?”

“You dimwit. What can he see in you aside from your youthful beauty, and that will fade in time.” Sara shook her head. “You will sit and you will write to

Godwin, of course.”

“To Godwin?” Heather still did not sit as she had been bidden. Perhaps Godwin would arrive now—soon? He would see the smoke in the sky from the country road on his way home.

He would know she was there and wonder at it. He would come. He had to come.

She had to stall this madwoman. “What would you have me write to Godwin?”

“Tell him you are leaving. Tell him you cannot bring shame to his household, that you never want to see him again... *sit, write,*” Sara insisted.

Heather eyed her and chose her words slowly. “That is a lie. He would know that I would never tell him such a thing in a letter. He would not believe it. I will not write such a thing to him.”

“Ah, very well. You are reluctant to do as I ask...so come here to the window,” Sara urged.

“It is time you learned to what lengths I mean to go.”

Heather refused to budge, still stalling for time, still hoping for Godwin to appear.

Sara made an impatient sound and exclaimed, “For pity’s sake...come now to the window.”

“Why?”

“I want to show you what is at stake here,” Sara said grimly. When Heather still did not move, Sara clucked her tongue. “For Godwin’s sake...come look out the window!”

Heather did as she was bid and looked out with great misgiving at the two men on horseback not far from her cottage door.

“Those two men are here for a reason. Do you know what that reason is?” Sara

said, and her eyes glinted with hatred, a hatred so deep Heather felt as though she had been slapped.

Heather shook her head and her heart sank. Impossible to believe that a lady of quality would stoop to such threats. Sara was threatening not only her, but Godwin as well. What was the awful woman planning now?

“Ah, you wonder to what lengths I have gone,” Sara said. “You wonder what it is I mean to do. Don’t you know?”

“No, I can’t imagine why they are here,” Heather finally said as Sara stood watching her reaction.

“I have brought these unscrupulous seamen here. They are smugglers by trade, but ever ready to make money any way they can. Desperate fellows, really. They carry pistols, you know, and are capable of great evil for very little money. I was prepared to pay them a great deal more than the two hundred pounds I gave them.”

“And you want me to know this because?” Heather asked, though she knew the answer.

“They have agreed to murder Godwin for me tonight. There is only one road from St. Ives and he will be on it and nearing soon, very soon.” She halted and smiled. “Indeed, ‘tis a lonely road, and the deed can be accomplished quickly.”

“You are mad!” Heather cried, fully horrified. “You would not dare such a thing!”

“No, it was not my first choice, however, I would rather be a widow than a discarded wife, you see,” Sara answered.

Heather’s hand went to her heart and she gasped. “Wicked woman...no, I don’t believe you would dare such a thing. You would be blamed immediately. Everyone...as witnessed by Mrs.

Abernathy’s visit to my uncle, already knows that Godwin is about to divorce you, and you would be suspected at once.”

“Indeed, I do admit to a certain reluctance to take that course. However, as I said, I will not be a discarded wife, and suspecting one of a crime is very different than proving it.”

“Oh my god!” Heather was beside herself as she searched her mind for a way to stop this awful woman. Unconsciously, her hand went to her stomach, as though to shield her infant from such ugliness.

Sara eyed her and then said, “You still don’t comprehend your situation, do you? Very well, allow me to outline my thoughts. I will not sign the papers Godwin wishes me to sign. I will not be divorced. He has threatened me that if I do not sign, he will disavow Roderick and me. He said he would have our marriage annulled...tell the world I foisted a bastard child on him. He would ruin us all... for what?” Sara looked Heather up and down. “For you? A nothing, with nothing, not even the will to protect herself.” She paused and there was so much hate in her eyes.

Heather shivered, unable to immediately respond to this, aware suddenly that Godwin was in danger this very evening.

“You see now, don’t you? I have two roads before me. Either *he dies* before he can do this awful thing to me, or I get rid of *you*. Simple, isn’t it? I cannot murder you. Godwin would know, and I do believe he might even try to kill me with his bare hands. No, killing you is not an option...for now. I can’t have him turn to the courts and accuse me of murder. He has powerful friends. I know that. Therefore, I have found another way to dispose of you. *You will leave him.*

If you do not accept to leave him, I shall have him killed this very night and chance the consequences.”

“You...you would not succeed...people would know, they would talk. They are already talking!”

“Oh? I shall succeed. But why allow me to do that when you can stop me by writing this letter? Godwin will believe it. He will discover that your uncle has already disowned you—sent you off, and...”

“I will bear witness against you should you hurt Godwin!” Heather snapped,

standing up to the woman.

Sara eyed her. “Indeed, I do believe you would. Therefore, I shall put your bodies together.

What an intriguing idea. It will look as though you were killed on the road by highwaymen while on one of your little trysts.” Sara shrugged. “After all, as you say, people are already talking. In fact, that seems the far more simple game to play.”

“No...this is too ugly, even for you!” Heather said as much to herself as to Sara. Would those seamen really murder two people? Was Sara bluffing?

“As I have said, I have no wish to be a widow. I have no wish to kill you either if I don’t have to. The truth is, my seamen may be loath to kill a woman, and then I might have to come up with more money, which would delay my plans. No. I shall stick with either getting you to write the letter, or killing Godwin,” Sara left this in the air.

Heather collected herself. What to do? Sara would kill him. She had believed the woman would rather him be dead than finding herself divorced. She had to pretend to accept. She would do what Sara wanted for now...and then Godwin would find her, come for her. He would not believe she had left him. She would write the letter, and even if Sara’s men actually forced her to travel with them to her home, Godwin would come for her.

“It would appear, my lady,” Heather said, “you have left me no choice.”

Sara smiled. “That is quite correct. You are out of choices, have been since you decided to bed a married man. I am the one who has been wronged . *Not you!*”

That was doing it too brown for Heather. “You have wronged Godwin from the start. He told me the entire sordid story. He knows you are the one who tore him from Lisa. He knows all the while he courted you, you bedded a gypsy. You have wronged him, and I have made him happy.”

“Naïve girl. Happiness is a fleeting thing. You have had your months of happiness. It ends now, as it should, as mine did the moment I married Godwin.”

“Why did you marry him then?”

“For the title, for the wealth!” Sara screamed. “Certainly not because he was exciting.”

“Not exciting?” Heather cried. “You are a fool.”

Sara’s hand lifted, but she seemed to get control and dropped it to her side. “Sit down at the desk. Take up the ink and quill there...oh, you can write, can’t you?”

Heather did not answer, but took a chair, pulled out writing paper from the desk drawer and undid the lid of the inkwell.

Sara said, “Yes, now, write as I tell you. Let’s start with...

“Darling,

Too many are hurt by what we have done. I have shamed my family and friends and must go.

It is over between us. Indeed, it never was. Do not try to find me.

Heather”

Sara picked up the letter, aired, folded, and concealed it within her dark cloak. She turned back to Heather and her voice was full with hatred. “Miss Martin, it is now time for you to go to your destiny...where you belong.”

“I am far too weary to journey tonight, my lady,” Heather answered, eyeing her worriedly. It suddenly occurred to her that the seamen on horseback outside had not come with Sara to lay in wait on Godwin. Heather realized that Sara had carefully planned the outcome of this meeting.

The seamen weren’t here to murder Godwin. Heather suddenly knew beyond a shadow of doubt that those seamen were here to take her away...somewhere Godwin would not easily find her.

“If you don’t mind, my lady, I shall not leave Cornwall until the morning,”

Heather said.

“Fool! Do you think I would leave you to your own devices? Did you really think I could be so gulled? You will never see your lover again, mark me on that, but you will see others, and in a French bordello. You will have many others to keep you pleased. You are going to a French bordello...just across the channel. Ah, I see you believe me, and when those men there are done with your body, even your precious Godwin will turn his back on you.”

Heather jumped away from her and snarled, “Get out!”

Sara laughed. “My men outside wait only for me to signal them. They are well paid and will be taking you now to the harbor.”

“No one would do such a thing—it is unthinkable!” Heather said as genuine fear clutched at her insides. “Why, this is monstrous.”

“Again, you know nothing about greed. Money equates all things. These men are going to sell you, my dear, to a choice brothel. They will get paid well, and you will be able to use your many talents,” Sara said on a sneer as she moved towards the door and opened it wide.

Heather watched Sara motion to one of the men. Heather started for the hall that led to a back door, but before she could reach it, the seaman had her in hand. She kicked and screamed and begged him to let her go.

“Please, sir, you cannot do this. You cannot mean to abduct me and...no, you don’t realize. I am an Englishwoman, niece to the local vicar—”

“I am sorry for it, but you are coming with us. I always complete a job I am paid to do, and my job is to take you in hand and get you...well, across the channel,” the man said without sympathy.

“Tell her, Colin...tell her where she will end up across the channel,” Sara said in a taunting voice.

“She’ll find out soon enough, darlin’,” Colin answered.

“But...I will get you a larger fee if you don’t do this,” Heather cried.

“Will you? And how would you do that? I’d have to let you go and there is no telling what would happen after that. No, come along now, or do I need to knock you out to keep you quiet? I don’t hold with hitting a woman—goes against the grain, but if you need to be silenced, well then, I see you understand.”

Heather kept quiet. If he knocked her out, she would have no chance at escape. “Just one thing, sir, you must have a heart...?”

“Aye, I did once, but life got in the way,” he said, and pick pulled her along. “Don’t fight me, woman, or it will go badly for you.”

She believed he would knock her out, so she kept quiet for the moment.

Outside, he called, “Bunky, get over here and tie her wrists while I hold her in place.”

A lad, Heather thought no more than eighteen or so, got off his horse and walked over. He looked unhappy and kept his eyes lowered.

The other man shoved some rope at him and said, “Come on, lad, we have to hurry now.”

Heather began screaming as she fought and managed to break free from his hold. She lifted her skirts and ran with every ounce of strength she had. She heard the two seamen closing in at her back. There was nowhere to escape them, but if only she could run far enough, run and stall until Godwin arrived.

“Colin, no!” the lad he had called Bunky called as Colin’s lunge brought her face down onto the ground. She turned her head and looked up at him, and his fist was raised.

Evidently Bunky’s shout stopped him, and he said, “I warned you, sweetheart. I will hurt you to keep you quiet.” He hauled her to her feet.

She was winded as he dragged her back to the horses. She noted that no horse was provided for her. Were they going to drag her along? Would she then be able to escape? Would someone see them?

But, no, he handed her off to the lad. “Bunky...she rides with you.”

“I don’t hold with this, Colin. No...this is not the line of work I signed up for,” Bunky said on a grumble.

“You signed up as a mate. I’m fond of you and you have served me well, but remember, lad, you take your orders from me. I make the decisions around here.” He put an affectionate hand around the boy’s skinny neck. “Now, gag and truss her up. Can’t have her screaming over the countryside.”

Sara handed the second man a linen napkin, which Bunky gently used to gag Heather, saying softly to her, “There now, miss, don’t struggle so and it will go better for ye.”

“Shut up, Bunky, don’t talk to the mort,” Colin snapped. “She isn’t an innocent in this, I told you that, so try and remember it.”

Heather tried to calm herself. She looked at Bunky, who appeared extremely uncomfortable in his role as co-abductor. She couldn’t believe he was already a hardened criminal. Could she appeal to him to let her escape?

She saw a blush steal onto Bunky’s cheeks, but as he took Heather’s arm, he whispered,

“There now, ye be looking at me like I’m some kind of devil and I’m that sorry I am, but...I don’t have a choice.”

“Bunky...take her up on your horse with you now and don’t dawdle,” Colin yelled. “Right then, we had better be making pace to our boat.”

A few minutes later, Heather heard Sara laughing as she mounted the horse and sat straddling as best she could with her hands behind her back. Bunky mounted behind her and said,

“I’ll try not to make ye too uncomfortable, miss...this is not to m’liking. Fiend seize it all...not to m’liking. Smuggling is one thing, but abducting a fine woman such as yerself, even if ye did steal that one’s husband...well, I just don’t hold with it.”

Heather didn’t see the point in struggling just then. What would be the advantage? She had nowhere to run. They would be on her and Colin would

make good on his promise to knock her out, and then she would surely be lost. No, she simply had to wait for a better opportunity.

She was sick with fright, and had but one hope— *Godwin*. He would never believe that she had willingly left him. He would know better. He would find her. He had to find her. But dusk had set in and he would not see the horses' tracks this evening. Tomorrow would be too late.

She was with child—his child, and he would never give up looking for her. He would not believe the note Sara was going to give him, even though he would know it was in her hand. He would suspect something. He simply had to have faith that she would not leave him.

She turned in the saddle and saw Sara watching, a smile wide across her face as they walked their horses off. She wouldn't give up hope. She couldn't, and yet she had an awful feeling in the pit of her being.

~ **Eight** ~

HEATHER SAT UNABLE TO SPEAK, unable to think beyond her present predicament.

The cloth in her mouth and her level of anxiety made it difficult for her to even breathe.

She turned and stared at the lad called Bunky, pleading with her eyes.

“Looke, ma'am...ye have pretty violet eyes, ye do, and I know ye want me to help ye. I can't. I told ye I don't hold wit this, and there isn't anything I can do. If Colin sends me off, I have nowhere...nowhere to go. So what I like doesn't make a ha'porth o'difference in m'world.

I'm naught. That woman, the one who arranged this...she struck up a bargain with Colin, she did, and Colin never goes back on a bargain. I jest be doing whot Colin told me.”

Heather wanted to rail against this philosophy and beg him to free her, but the gag in her mouth kept her silent.

The color of wild purple crocus was everywhere, and even in the dusky light she could just make them out as they trotted along. Life was taking her away from everything she loved. How was she going to escape? *How?*

She needed to find a way to escape. Could she manage to slide off the horse... run, and maybe someone would come along before they recaptured her? Maybe if she slid off, she could scream? No, how could she get the gag out with her wrists tied behind her back? Oh, faith, what was she to do?

She shifted in her seat in front of the lad, and he said, "I know what ye are thinking. Ye want to run, but I'd have to chase ye, and Colin...well, he would be none too kind. Don't do it...lest ye see someone coming along. Then mayhap ye'll have a chance."

So, he wouldn't stop her if help was nearby. Hope trickled into her heart, but no one came along, and after thirty minutes of slow trotting, they reached the cove.

"Colin ordered the men to moor the sloop down in that cove...there." Bunky indicated with his chin. "They be waiting for our signal."

Bunky slid off his horse and helped Heather down, steadying her as she faltered. She was frantic. This couldn't really be happening...could it?

She frantically looked about, checking her surroundings for some way she might escape. She saw Colin wave a lantern. No doubt to his men. Once she was on the vessel with them, she would be done. Life would be over. Oh Godwin... Godwin?

Bunky confirmed her worst fear. "He is signaling to the men to come for us with the small boat."

She closed her eyes and Bunky clucked his tongue. "I'm sorry, miss...if I could help ye, I would."

Colin came over, handed the lantern to Bunky and took Heather's arm. "Right now, little missy, I want no trouble from you. So come along." He dragged her as Heather put up a fight. He stopped suddenly and rounded on her. "Stop. I don't want to hit you. In fact, a part of me knows I am crossing a line with this job. But I took payment and gave my word. That is the end of it."

Don't you think I know you want to flee, so I'm not going to rough you up any more than I must.

Understand? But I'll not take much more of your struggling. What is the point, woman? What is the point?"

Heather saw the boat in the shallow water and a tear fell down her cheek. A large burly man called out, "Whot is this, Captain? I don't hold with gagging a lady."

"Never mind what you hold with. She comes with us," Colin took command. He turned to Heather and said on a hard note, "Up with you, miss. Into the boat."

She would not comply, so he picked her up on a heavy sigh and lifted her within the skiff.

He heard his men grumbling and shouted, "Enough! The woman comes with us onto the sloop and we make enough to keep us for a month. We have the two hundred from the Ravensbury woman, and quite a bit more when we sell her to the Pink Chateau Brothel."

"Now and then, it ain't about the money," a slim seaman complained loudly. "I don't hold with abducting ladies. She looks no more than a slip of one, too... goes against m'grain."

He was joined by a chorus of objections.

Heather's hopes rose and quickly sank when Colin said, "Shut up, the lot of you, and start rowing."

They grumbled, but row they did.

Bunky sat beside her and called out to his captain, "Colin...can I ungag her? She looks right uncomfortable, she does."

"Why not? I don't suppose anyone will hear her out here, but if she makes any trouble..."

Colin answered, leaving the implication on the air.

“Bunky,” Heather whispered as soon as the gag was off. “I understand you and the men here are only following orders. If you could find a way to let me escape when we land in France? Just don’t let him give me to a...a...”

“Aye, miss, I know, that is the worst of all this business. We’ll just have to wait and see,”

Bunky said. “Now stop yer whispering or he’ll gag ye again, he will.”

As they got closer to the sloop, Heather saw its sails shivering in the wind. Bunky had tied her cloak tightly around herself, as her wrists were still tethered.

Hope was quickly fading. She had actually believed that Godwin would come to her rescue...or that someone along the route would see her and call a halt to her abduction, but those things had not occurred. She was doomed, and suddenly Heather knew this beyond all else. She was being taken away and sold to a brothel. She felt sick.

Colin had not relieved her of the small amount of money her uncle had given her. She had that deep inside her inner dress pocket, but she knew someone yet might do just that if they suspected she had any money. She had no other hiding place.

Everything seemed to happen as though she were walking through a nightmare she could not wake up from.

In quick succession, Heather was taken on board and stowed at the bow of the sloop. The only good thing she could think of was the kind treatment of the various seamen on board. Each one treated her gently, and it was obvious the abduction was just being barely tolerated.

One of the men draped a blanket around her and whispered, “Sorry, miss...that oi am.”

She wasn’t naïve about smugglers. Each one of these men had a hungry family back in Devonshire, waiting on their return, waiting for the money they would receive from their efforts.

She understood that in these difficult times, smuggling was just an avenue to

survive. She hoped they would not allow her to be sold...yet there was money in that as well. What was she to do?

Bunky had silently and decidedly appointed himself her caregiver and whenever he had a moment from his duties on board, he saw to her comfort, offered her a piece of stale bread, a piece of cheese, and a slice of an apple. She had no doubt he was sharing his own rations with her. He untied her hands at her back and said, "Colin says I can untie yer wrists so ye can eat. He says to tell ye that ye shouldn't think of jumping overboard, we are too far out for ye to make it back to shore."

She knew she had to stay strong if she was going to escape, so she ate the bread and cheese and thanked him.

She worked her ankles and was determined to stay limber. She had to maintain her strength, she told herself, strength and an opportunity to escape was all she would need. It was the only hope she still held.

Bunky returned from his job at the rigging and sat beside her a moment. "Lookee...I've been thinking, miss, that well...if I could, I would help, and mayhap I can somehow if only..."

She interrupted him, "I know. 'Tis a job, like the hangman, you are only doing your job."

She knew this was cruel after all the kindness he had displayed towards her.

His face took on a stricken look and even in the dim light, she saw his cheeks darken. "Ye ain't going to the gallows."

She interrupted him again, "No. No, far worse...you are allowing your captain to sell me to a place where they will sell my body against my will." She lowered her head.

"No, miss, ye must let me finish...I don't mean to let that happen if I can stop it," Bunky said.

"Bunky, you don't have any way to stop him. I know that," Heather said, and sighed.

Heather thought of Godwin, who she would never see again. She thought of her baby. What fate lay ahead? Her heart took in the enormity of what she was about to suffer.

He hung his head and when he looked at her again, he saw the tears fall silently down her cheeks. “Lord love ye, miss...I have never been so miserable...that is the truth.”

She believed him, but would he really be able to help her?

“Ye call no attention to yerself. Ye sit there brave and quiet instead of wailing away. Never mind. France is still hours away and I will think of something.”

“Yes, France and the Reign of Terror,” she said, suddenly brightening. Englishmen were forever secretly crossing the channel to head for Paris and save the French aristocracy from Madame Guillotine. The tales of their bravery were legendary.

“Aye, we been dealing with it, we have. The revenuers been scouring the seas because of it, going after any boat crossing they can find.” He eyed her. “Ye might get lucky if they stop and search us.”

“Oh, Bunky, if only that could happen without *you* getting into trouble,” Heather whispered.

“Aye, there would be hell to pay,” he said, and rubbed his chin. “Colin won’t be taken easily.”

The time passed slowly as they sailed under the cover of darkness into French waters.

Bunky returned to his chores and after a time she saw him again. He plopped down heavily beside her and said, “We’ll be pulling into St. Pol-de-Léon early morning, miss.” He shook his head. “Careful we have to be. The Frogs... revolutionaries, don’t like the English any more than they do the gentry.”

Heather saw Colin approaching. He had an odd look on his face as he studied her and Bunky sitting beside one another. In fact, as he got closer, she saw his eyes narrow and became worried for her new friend.

“Look at you two. Fancy her, do you, Bunky? Well...forget it, her sort will break your heart.

I know. So unless you mean to take her here in front of all the crew, best leave her be and forget her now.”

Bunky shook his head and his voice sounded agonized. “Colin, don’t.”

Colin laughed and moved off. A few of the crew members looked at Bunky and one said,

“Sad times. Don’t hold with this, don’t let him get on ye, lad.” This seaman couldn’t or wouldn’t look at Heather as he added, “Tell the lass none of us are happy about this.”

“It’s good ye keep her company, lad,” another crew member said, and glared at Colin’s retreating form.

Colin evidently heard his men at his back and shook his head as he stomped off.

Heather leaned into Bunky and said, “Do you think I could have some water, Bunky? My throat is parched.”

He jumped up and she watched the lad stumble as he rushed off towards the water barrel.

He filled a mug and she saw him stop short as he looked out onto the bustling docks with its traffic of wagons, carriages, and pedestrians.

She sighed, and watched as everyone got busy docking, and wished there was some way she could get off the sloop, make a run for it, and vanish into the crowd.

The day was grey, and there was a promise of rain as market peddlers hawked their wares, servants rushed about buying supplies, and if matters hadn’t been so dire, Heather would have smiled at all the bickering and haggling over goods taking place.

Bunky, however, seemed riveted in place as he stared into the horde of people.

Heather frowned, wondering what he saw and then following his line of vision, she realized. He was staring at a young woman, probably not much older than she was herself. Heather's heart sank when she realized what the girl was. There could be no doubt. The girl was a harlot, obviously on the prowl for a customer. It was early morning and Heather thought it an odd time for the poor woman to be looking for a customer.

A passing seaman stopped to give the woman a grin and pat her on the rump. She slid closer to him and drew his hand into her bodice, but what struck Heather was the look of horror on Bunky's face. He went white.

She saw him watching the woman with dread as she led off her client towards a nearby inn.

He swallowed hard and came to Heather, shoving the mug of water at her and saying, "That's it, I can't and won't be a party to this. I can't let him sell ye off to sech a fate. *Bless and preserve me*, for I can't do it."

She sipped at the water, getting her thoughts together. She trusted the young man, but would he be capable of getting her away? "Bunky...how can you stop him?"

"All I know is I promise ye and the Almighty I'll get ye away. I know two or three of the men who will look the other way when we make our move, aye, they will. They don't hold with this and...I'll get ye off and away."

"Bunky, he'll know. You won't be able to free me and remain with him and the crew."

Heather was concerned for the lad.

He shrugged, and shook his head. "Looke at that. Ye are in a terrible fix and ye are worried about *me*? No. I don't mean to let Colin do this to ye, I don't. If this is the kind of business he means to foist on us, I'm thinking I don't want to stay in his employ—that I don't. Looke, this is what I'm thinking. Colin will be off any minute now. His first concern is getting a shipment to sell to the land runners. They'll be waiting on it, ye see. They is the ones that take the brandy overland to the largest taverns. Some take the brandy to London if they have a

mind. So he'll be busy for a bit. He won't take ye to that...that place 'til evening as we sail through cover of darkness, ye see. So I'm thinking he can't very well tie and gag ye on the open street in daylight, can he? No, so he'll do it at night with a hood pulled low over yer head. That's what I'm

thinking. So we'll wait and make our move then. So then it is settled, we wait 'til then and by the Divine Power, we'll make a run for it."

"But..." Heather started.

“Hush, now. I’ll tell the men to start hollering after me. That will keep them from getting into trouble with Colin, and it will draw a crowd. The crew won’t follow us, I know they won’t. I can tell. They’ll send Colin in another direction. They be good blokes. Smugglers, aye, but good men all the same.”

“Where will we go?” Heather asked, excited now.

“I don’t know, miss. But we’ll figure it out,” Bunky said, and sighed as he sat back against the bulwarks.

Colin returned to the sloop with the dusk, and he was in very good spirits. He preened over the purchase of brandy he had concluded and shot a leering eye towards Heather and Bunky.

Heather was sure he was well into his cups as he slurred and swaggered.

“Eh, lad, I don’t want you pining over this mort. I can see you fancy her. So what I think is you need to get her out of your system. Fair enough,” Colin said, and took a long swig of the brandy he had been sampling a good part of the afternoon.

“What are ye saying, Colin?” Bunky played along.

“I’m saying if you want her, take her,” Colin answered.

“Aye, sure I want her and I know she likes me,” Bunky said, touching Heather’s hand as though to reassure her. “But what can I do about it with all the crew gawking at us?”

Colin laughed. “Why should that matter? Right then, you’re young, so I’ll allow your shyness, but you need to get over that. Learn to take what you want when you want.”

“Well...this time...?” Bunky hemmed.

“Very well, very well, go ahead, take her down dockside, in the tall grass...she knows what it’s all about. She is no virgin, so...go ahead, pleasure yourself,” Colin said, and snickered.

Heather was astounded. Colin was offering them a way to escape. Yes, he was drunk, but even so, he wasn't stupid. What was he doing?

Bunky was on his feet and helping her up by holding her upper arm. Colin stepped up to the two of them and said, "Hold on now, why don't you just take her to the brothel and tell them I said that part of our selling price *is you being her first customer*. Then you could take her in comfort and for a good hour, as we don't set sail for another two hours. How is that?" Colin put up his hand. "But tie her wrists again. I know you'd like her to use her hands...but not this time, lad."

Bunky's fists clenched at his sides. He had never realized how truly low his captain had sunk over time. However, he did as he was told, turning Heather as she quietly stood, and fixing her wrists lightly with the rope. When this was done, he looked at his captain and said, "I'm not a fool, Colin. I'm young, a stripling, aye, but not dumb. And as to the rest, I won't be sent about like that. I don't hold with brothels and I don't mean to take her there."

Colin broke out laughing. "Go on then, lay with her in the weeds, doesn't matter to me, but when you are done, bring her to me, and I'll take her to the brothel so you won't have to. How is that?" his voice trailed off as he watched one of his men cackling to a passing woman, and moved off to shout at him to get back to work.

"Hush now, miss," Bunky said as he led her off the boat. "We have to make it seem we are headed for the weeds. Colin is good and bosky he is, or he wouldn't let us do this."

"Then what?"

"We make a run for it, that's what," Bunky said, and grinned wide. He helped her off the boat, and pulled her along. She was shivering and he stopped a moment to tie her cloak tightly about her.

They used the cover of darkness to duck first into the tall grass, rush across the paved avenue, and take a dirt footpath towards the upper street that ran parallel and overlooked the harbor docks.

Out of breath, Bunky and Heather paused before they rushed into an alley between the two streets and leaned against the side of a wood building.

The odor of urine permeated the air and Bunky grimaced. “We have to move fast, we do, before some drunk comes this way.”

They hurried towards a more populated part of town. Everywhere Heather looked she saw bawdy women and rough looking seamen. One in particular cursed in French and took out his member to relieve himself in the street while the woman he was with laughed raucously.

Heather didn't have time to dwell on the fact that she was in the worst environment she had ever encountered as the thought skipped through her brain. Just what were they going to do?

How would they hide amongst such a crowd? They were so different and stood out in such a crowd. “Bunky, hold my hand, we have to look like lovers out for a bit of fun and adventure, nothing more.”

“Aye, ye be in the right of it,” he said, and clasped her fingers.

She knew they were racing against time with no clear destination. “Where are we going? We have to have a plan.”

“First, let me undo your wrists.” He moved her cloak aside and that done, he clucked his tongue. “As to plans, only have one. We stay out of sight and don't get caught. We'll figure out the rest after Colin sets sail. He won't delay his sailing. He can't, not with all that brandy they are loading on board. All we need to do is lay low until morning. I have some money, not much, but mayhap I can offer my services if they take us both.”

“I have enough, I think, for the two of us to buy passage home,” Heather said.

They moved slowly into the hub of the town and stayed close to one another as they hid their faces. They did all the right things, hugging when someone looked their way, and keeping to the shadows.

Bunky spotted someone he thought gave them too long a glance and he pulled Heather into yet another alley. “Let's just stay here a bit...ye catch yer breath.”

“Yes, yes,” Heather agreed, but then they heard someone at their backs.

“Eh, what are you two up to?” a man shouted in French as he poured out a pale of dirty water.

“Naught,” Heather answered in French. “We are leaving now.”

They picked up their pace as they rushed away with no clear notion where they were going.

Finally, the two fugitives came to a fork in the road and stopped.

“Which way, do you think?” Heather asked.

“Not sure, ye see, I never have a chance to go farther than the bake shop,” Bunky answered, and grinned. “I’m always hungry.”

She laughed. “You must be hungry now as well. Oh, I promise you, Bunky, when we get home, you will work for Godwin and me and never be hungry again.”

He smiled. “I would work for ye forever and go hungry to do it.”

She pulled him along, taking the left fork, which she thought a darker better avenue. It turned out that it led to a quieter wharf overlooking a less traveled but deep canal.

Only one vessel slapped against the padded docks. It looked like all its crew was on leave.

Bunky and Heather gave each other a look because at their backs they heard Colin screaming.

They also heard the sound of two Frenchmen that Colin must have enlisted to help him in his search.

Bunky’s voice held desperation as he said, “We can hide on that boat...come on.”

There was no one about as Bunky led Heather across the plank, onto its deck, down its waist, and into the storage hatch. The hatch door clanged above their heads and Heather sank to her knees, exhausted and wishing that Godwin would suddenly appear and come to their rescue.

Bunky fell upon sacks of grain and put a finger to his lips for quiet, realized Heather could not actually see him in the dark, and whispered, “No talking.”

Above them, they realized the boat was not empty as they heard Colin speaking in French and asking if the seaman had seen anyone nearby. The crewman told him no, apparently asked yet another crewman who agreed they had seen no one.

Bunky whispered, “What are they saying?”

“Colin wanted to know if they had seen us—they said no.”

The boat went quiet then and Bunky whispered, “We better stay put for another hour. Colin will have to set sail by then. He’ll make enough on the brandy...so he won’t keep looking.”

The boat gently rocked and Bunky said, “I can still hear Colin shouting at those Frogs. I can’t believe he is bothering about us this long.”

“He is angry, Bunky, not only about losing a fine purse, but because he feels you betrayed him for a woman. That he cared for you was evident to me. That might make him look hard for a bit longer than you think.”

“Aww, that can’t be. Colin don’t care for no one but himself. That much I have always figured.”

“Well, at least for now, we are safe here. We’ll give it another hour and then see if we can slink off in the dark with no one the wiser.”

“Aye, agreed.”

Heather sighed and put her head back. Hope filled her mind and heart. Another day and she would return to Godwin and he would know the truth. Whatever was she going to do about Sara?

That woman would always pose a threat.

The sound of scurrying little feet made Heather begin to squeal. She clapped a hand over her mouth and then tugged at Bunky's wool seaman's coat. "Bunky... rats, rats!"

"Aye, I know. Don't think on it. I'll kick 'em off if they come near us. Don't ye worry none, miss."

"Oh, oh, I don't know if I can bear it sitting here in the dark with rats."

He patted her hand. "They won't bother us. They have enough food down here... grain bags everywhere." He sighed. "I think we best stay here 'til the wee hours...just in case."

"Yes, I quite agree, but I think we can stay out of sight...only let's get out of here," Heather said.

"Well, at least not yet," Bunky disagreed. "We'll lope off and see how much coin we have between us later. If we don't have enough, there is no telling, but we might stowaway on a boat headed for..."

"Stowaway? Back to England? Do you think we could manage that?"

"If we don't have enough coin, we'll have to, aye, miss," Bunky said, and sighed.

"Oh, Bunky, I have embroiled you in a mess, haven't I?"

"No, miss. I did that to m'self when I accepted to follow Colin's orders. I should have ridden off with ye, right off. I should have taken ye to town for help. This is on me."

She patted his arm. "We'll find a way."

"Aye, that we will," he agreed.

* * * * *

Godwin returned to his castle near the hour of midnight. He was weary and looking forward to climbing into bed. The day had been overlong and his thoughts were for Heather. He longed for her arms, her voice, her smile. Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough, he thought as he shrugged off his blue superfine and dropped it on a nearby chair.

How had he been so lucky as to find her? It was as though their spirits were bonded to one another. She was his dear-heart and she was carrying their child. He wished she was in his room, waiting for him...in his bed. They were meant.

Oh god, he thought jubilantly. Was such happiness possible? Was it really true? Had life finally turned around for him? He had his true love and would soon have his very own child.

It was at that moment, at that very moment that he discovered a folded paper propped on his nightstand. For some reason, the sight of it filled him with dread. He reached for it and a shiver scurried up his spine. Something was wrong.

He ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes before he unfolded the notepaper. As he read the words, the room began to spin.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reread the words. *It was in Heather's own hand.* They had exchanged enough love letters for him to know.

He wouldn't believe it. Heather would never leave him, not of her own accord, and she would never write such a cold, unfeeling letter. She was with child, with no means to support herself alone. She would not do this to herself and to him. They loved one another. They loved...

"No!" the shout was torn from his gut. "No." He turned to his door. He knew whose real hand was in this. "Sara!" he shouted as he marched out of his room. "Sara, you devil." He meant to wring a confession out of her.

He put distance away as he raced down the long hall to her suite of rooms. "Sara!"

He slammed her bedroom door against the wall and yelled, "Sara!"

Sara sat up in bed and she looked frightened. He was on her, dragging her out of

the bed by her arm, tearing her nightdress in the process as he forced her to stand and face him.

He couldn't bear the sight of her.

He knew what she had done. His heart told him that she was behind it all. He was in a fury and even as he looked at her, he pushed her, thrusting her away from himself. He knew a moment's madness, and thought if he had his pistol, he would have shot her.

He had to control himself. He took a moment and shook the note at her, finally telling her,

"This is your doing!"

"What are you talking about, Godwin?" she feigned ignorance, but he was not fooled. Her attitude enraged him once again.

He took her arm and shook her violently. "Are you trying to tell me you did not put this in my room?"

"No, I don't know what it is," she said, but her voice trembled with her lie.

He was enraged beyond anything he had ever felt before. He slapped the note from his hand into hers. "Look at it and tell me you are not behind it."

She didn't look at it but put up her chin. "I had nothing to do..."

He cut her off, taking the note back and shaking it in the air. "Shall I call out each and every servant in the castle, Sara? Shall I ask each one if they delivered this note to my bedroom? Shall I, Sara?"

He could see the fear enter her eyes and screamed, "Shall I do that now, Sara?"

"I...I..."

"How did this find its way to my room? Answer me now," he demanded.

"If you must know, Mrs. Abernathy delivered it to me, and then yes, I put it in

your room,”

she said.

He saw the lie behind the words. “Mrs. Abernathy,” he scoffed. “What farfetched tale is this?”

“The vicar found out about your sordid little affair with his niece. He convinced her to go away. *She* gave the letter to him, he gave it to Mrs. Abernathy, who then gave it to me!”

Godwin heard the tale and decided some of it was true, some of it was not. He shoved her away and said, “*Liar!* Do you take me for a fool? I have learned your style, and your methods over the years. You and Mrs. Abernathy had this arranged between you. You made certain the vicar would know, and he, *this marvelous man of God...* what has he done with Heather?”

“I am certain I have no notion. Now let me be,” she said tremulously as she tried to bypass him and leave her room.

He thwarted her efforts by grabbing hold of her shoulders and forcing her to stand before him. “Look at me, Sara. Look and see not a man, but a man goaded beyond his humanity. You have trampled on my youth with your lies. You won’t do so on my future.”

“Oh, but I shall,” she said, and smirked.

“Bitch! What have you done?”

“What cannot by now be undone,” she said.

For a moment, Godwin thought he was looking at a devil. “I shall see you in hell!” he said, and turned. He knew, all at once he knew Heather was in serious trouble.

He made for the stairs and stood there at the landing as she chased him and grabbed his arm.

“Godwin, you can’t do anything to help her. It is over. Your horrid little affair is

over.”

“Is it, *by god!*” he shouted. “We’ll just see about that. I will trace her movements. I will find her, and I will expose you for the demon that you are.”

“But...what of Roderick? You can’t do this to him,” she pleaded. “He is your son!”

The words were out before he could stop them . “*My son?* Your bastard...not mine!” The words tasted ugly on his tongue, but they were out, and in that moment, his fear for Heather prevented him from seeing himself.

He was on the first step, Sara was on him, holding his shirt sleeve, yelling for him to stay.

“No, Godwin, you can’t do anything. She is gone...”

Her words frenzied him and he yanked out of her hold, shouting, “Get thee gone from my sight!”

It all happened so fast, too fast.

He heard her screaming hysterically as he stood in mute shock and watched her bump and roll down the entire length of stairs to the marble floor below.

He took frantic steps after her, bent over her. “Sara?” he called her name, and knew he had sunk to her level. He wasn’t relieved when he saw her lashes flutter, and realized he wished her dead.

“*Mama?*” a young boy’s frightened voice came from the top of the stairs.

Godwin stared with disbelief to find Roderick glancing accusingly down at him. How much had the dear lad heard? He looked into his son’s eyes and had the answer, and he felt a storm of self-hatred engulf him. What had he done? His boy? Had Roderick heard him disclaim him?

He knew that his son, his heir, was too young to understand all of what he had heard, but he had a notion of what it all meant. He would understand in later years and for that, Godwin felt wicked and low.

Roderick had heard his father disclaim him. Godwin knew Roderick adored him. Godwin knew that Roderick, who depended on him for attention, attention he rarely got from his mother, had heard him shun him. *What had he done?*

The servants appeared and he shouted, "Fetch the doctor...at once!"

Sara had attempted, perhaps successfully, of robbing him of the lady of his heart and now...now his son.

Sara opened her eyes. "What...what happened?"

"You fell, Sara," he said kindly.

"I...I want to get up," she said suddenly. "Help me, Godwin, help me get up."

He attempted to do so when she screamed, "Godwin... *my legs*. I can't move my legs!"

~ **Nine** ~

THE LIBERTÉ CHISELED ITS PATH through a choppy bay. Its sails were full with the wind. Its captain, Maurice de Brabant, stood bent over the bulwarks staring at the receding shoreline, now barely visible in the night.

The moon lit up his face and he saw that his men exchanged glances with one another. His sadness was all over his countenance. It was difficult for all of them, he knew. This was his, and because of their loyalty, their last break with France. He had been given no choice in the matter.

Robespierre, who he had once called friend, had given his captain no alternative.

Thus, the Comte de Brabant and his men would never return to their homeland. His ancestral home had been savaged and absorbed into another way of life in France. The government had taken the small estate he had as a second son, and thus, he and the people who had always served his family had become homeless as the 'new regime' took over.

No matter, he told himself. His home now was in Barbados, well out of the Reign of Terror's reach. He sighed into the wind. Indeed, he had jumped at the

opportunity when his older brother had gifted him with his schooner, Liberté, eight years ago. He had, in fact, relished the idea of creating a life on the tropic isle.

Barbados! His brother had made certain he was granted a charter from the English King to begin a sugar plantation, and he had luckily been successful and his plantation thrived.

When the letters from home, from his beloved brother began slowing down, he had become concerned. He knew what the political climate was in France and he was filled with fear for his brother, his family, and all their close friends.

When he received the news that his older brother, the comte, had gone to the guillotine, he had been devastated. Thus, he lost no time in making sail for France, as he still had a dear and beloved sister in danger. He could not allow her to go the same route as his brother.

As it happened, he and Robespierre had an old friendship—and he was determined when he went before the powerful man. So it was he stood before Robespierre, who held the blade between life and death. He fought for his sister's freedom, he drew on their long friendship and in the end, Robespierre granted him his sister's life. One condition had to be met. He and his sister had to leave France forever. Gladly, he accepted. After all, his sister had been made a widow by the guillotine, and both their ancestral homes had already been deeded to the *citizens!*

He had no choice. He agreed.

Thus, it was, the present comte and his widowed, childless sister, made for the haven of an English island.

What would become of France, he thought as his schooner cut through the sea and into the open ocean.

* * * * *

“Bunky! Bunky!” Heather whispered directly into her companion's ear as she nudged him.

“Wake up!”

“OW...no need to shout,” he grumbled as he ran a hand over his face and then rubbed his eyes.

Heather was beside herself.

They had talked long into the night, telling each other about their lives, their pasts, and their hopes until they had each fallen asleep.

Something, she wasn't sure what, had roused her.

As she stretched, she realized with a sinking heart it was the slapping of the waves against the hull. The boat was on the move!

“Not shouting, but, Bunky... *we are in trouble,*” she said on a hushed note.

It was still too dark to see anything in the storeroom, but Heather was certain because of the strips of light filtering through the cracks above that it was day.

Bunky came to life and exploded with, “What the devil?”

Heather smacked a hand over his mouth. “Hush.”

“We are moving!” he said on a groan as she slowly removed her hand from his mouth.

“Indeed, and I rather think we have been for some time,” she said on a heavy sigh. She had lost all control of her life. Nothing she had done had brought her any closer to Godwin.

“Saints preserve us,” Bunky said woefully. “They'll throw us over, they will. Make no mistake, 'tis what they do with stowaways.”

“But we are not stowaways. We are here by accident. We can explain it all...oh, Bunky. If we explain that you saved me...that we only wish to get back to England, perhaps the captain will be kind?”

“Nay, ye be daft if ye think that. Ye don't know the ways of these things. If this

is a Frenchman's yawl, they'll never set us in Cornwall. What's more, they might do much what Colin had in mind," he said, and shook his head. "They might sell us into servitude."

"We fell asleep. I can't believe we didn't get off before we fell asleep," Heather said, and put a hand to her eyes. She had to be strong. Crying would not help. She put up her chin and said, "Time we faced them above and beg for some mercy."

"No...they ain't got mercy in 'em. Don't ye see, Miss Heather? They ain't never had it easy.

They give what they got, the seamen. No...no, we won't see mercy. Not blaming them either.

It's a hard life and they work and work for their bread, they do. I know."

"And yet you are good and kind," she said softly.

He shuffled in place. "If I had been good and kind, I would have run towards town with ye when I had ye on horseback...that's what I should have done."

"No matter. Here we are and they will find us when they open the hatch for supplies,"

Heather said matter a fact. "So, I say, let's open it ourselves and face them with our story."

Godwin would never find her now. Would she be able to find her way back to him? And if she did, how long would it take? Then there was Sara. Would Sara attempt to murder him if she returned?

"What I suspicion is this, Miss Heather. If this be a French yawl, she may be putting in for one of the islands. We might yet be able to slip away when she docks if we can stay hidden here behind the grain bags."

"Oh, Bunky, I don't believe you have thought this out. We can't stay holed up here for days and perhaps weeks on end. We shall starve...and we need drinking water. We must present ourselves to the captain and pray he is a merciful man."

“That be a queer start if ever I heard one,” Bunky snorted. “They ain’t merciful...these Frenchmen. Didn’t ye hear what they be doing to their own? Taking their heads off without a care. Danged if I know what we can or can’t do, but I ain’t showing meself any time soon.”

He was adamant and she could see he had made up his mind. She decided to let it go for a bit longer. Sooner or later, his thirst and hunger would ease his resolve.

She waited another twenty minutes as they sat in silence and listened to the seamen above them rattle off in French. They seemed a jolly crew and she tried again. “Bunky...I think these sailors will be kind, and you must be hungry by now. I know I could eat an entire table full of food.”

“The sharks are hungrier...and that is all we’ll end up as, food for the sharks,” Bunky insisted.

Heather sighed and gave it up. She would not go against his will. If he was right, it would mean that she would be the cause of whatever harm was done to them. “Very well. We will try it your way.”

Soon, for the lack of better activity, they both drifted off again and when they next woke, no more light showed through the cracks of the hatch door.

* * * * *

Chaos reigned at Ravensbury Castle. Godwin couldn’t get himself together. Sara wasn’t feigning her injury. She couldn’t walk. Her fall had crippled her.

The doctor came and went, but in the end, he gave it as his considered opinion that her ladyship would probably never walk again.

Godwin’s hate for Sara permeated every ounce of his being, but he was a compassionate man, and this news was a terrible blow.

His plans, his life was over.

He could not divorce Sara now. He could not do that to a disabled woman, no matter how much she deserved it, no matter how much he hated her.

Still, he would find Heather and he would bring her back, and if they had to live in sin, providing Heather did not object, so be it.

As soon as he was able, he made his way to the vicar and discovered not from Heather's uncle, but from Mabe the cook that Heather had been sent out alone and without very much money.

She would go to the cottage, he thought immediately. Hope rose in him. All he could think was let her be safely at the cottage, waiting for me.

She simply had to be at the cottage. It was with joy that he galloped his horse across the downs to the small creamy colored stone building with its thatched roof.

He jumped off his horse while the animal was still moving and hurried to open the door, but Heather was not there.

Sara, however, had made an error. She had forgotten to dispose of Heather's portmanteau.

Her baggage sat still where she had left it, unpacked and untouched.

He ran his hand through his hair and his thoughts were frenzied. Where was she? Had someone taken her? Footprints in the dust told him that was indeed the case. Who had done this?

Where had they taken her?

He went outside and found tracks in the soft earth. A woman's boot... Sara no doubt, and two men had been here. *His beloved had been abducted.*

He took to horse, slowly making his paces this time, and was hailed by Farmer Burns, so he stopped for the man, though he was impatient with distress.

"Well, now, yer lordship. 'Tis that glad I am to see ye."

"Yes, thank you, how is the family, Burns?" Godwin returned absently.

"Well, they be well, aye, that they be. Wanted to let ye know, I saw her ladyship

the other afternoon, riding over the downs toward Land's End, but she didn't note me as she passed," he mused out loud, and scratched his weathered beard.

Godwin turned his head sharply. "You say you saw her ladyship...here...?"

"Aye, going in the very direction ye jest came from...where that pretty little cottage sits. She had two sailors with her," the farmer answered, and gave him a very direct look. "I had an uncomfortable feeling about it, *that I did.*"

Godwin's heart sank in his chest. This confirmed it. Sara had abducted Heather. The information that two seamen had been with her was unwelcome. Had they taken Heather to the port, and if so, what had they done with her?

"Thank you, Burns, thank you," he said as he turned his steed sharply for home. The port was too large to offer answers without more information. He had to see Sara and get to the bottom of this before he could hope to find Heather.

He was burning with anger, but this time, he was in control. He had no choice. If he was to find his Heather, he needed to think clearly. He made his way up the main staircase to his wife's room, and there he entered.

Sara was sitting up in bed, reading. She put down the book at his entrance and demanded harshly, "What do you want?"

"Where did they take her, Sara? I know most of it now. You were seen. You might as well tell me the rest."

She laughed, and her tone lashed with bared claws. "Oh, very well, why not? I should like to see the look on your face when I tell you...because, by now, your precious tart has been bedded by a dozen men!"

Godwin closed his eyes. The meaning of this was not lost on him. Heather had been abducted and sold. His instinct was to kill Sara and relieve his pain. He wanted to throttle her until her eyes bulged. He wanted to pick her up and throw her out the window.

He controlled himself. His hands formed fists at his sides and his voice was low and rasping.

“Indeed, do tell me more.” He needed the details if he was to find his dear-heart and bring her home.

“She was taken by Devonshire smugglers to France. There she was sold to a bordello.” Sara eyed him with glee.

Shooting stars took over Godwin’s vision. His precious Heather, carrying his child, subjected to such treatment. Would Heather be forever scarred? He would save her, he would bring her home and cherish her...he would drive the memory of the bordello out of her head. He would go to France and save her.

A buzzing sound drummed in his head. A sensation of nausea threatened, and his powerful legs nearly buckled beneath him. The thought of his Heather being subjected to this treatment was on him. *All of it on him*. His fault, all his fault.

And then he saw the sneer on Sara’s face. How could he stand for it? It was more than flesh and blood could bear. He took a step towards her and saw fear cross her face. She knew he was going to kill her then.

A small voice, a boy’s voice at his back called him to order, “Sir...sir,” Roderick cried out, and this got to Godwin as nothing else could. Roderick had, until the fateful night he had heard that he was a bastard, always called him papa...now it was always sir.

Godwin loved Roderick, but saw the lost look in the boy’s eyes and was saddened by it. He turned away completely from Sara and touched the boy’s fine head of black curls—gypsy curls, but it didn’t matter. The boy was *his son*.

He had to get away. If he didn’t, he believed he would actually kill Sara, and that was something he could not do to Roderick. She was an awful mother, but he couldn’t take her away from Roderick.

Godwin left the castle that night. He had but one person he could go to for help. They had been friends since childhood. It was to Captain John Pearson he went to. He stood pounding down John’s door, near to breaking it, blasting his friend’s name for both heaven and hell to hear and bear witness to his pain.

“John, for mercy’s sake, John!” Godwin raged outside the door.

His friend appeared and Godwin broke down.

* * * * *

Roderick was but a boy. He watched Godwin's departure from the castle with something akin to longing. He adored the man he had believed was his father. Truth to tell, he loved him a great deal more than he loved his mother.

He knew more now, understood more. He heard the servants talking and listened to every word. He realized his father loved another woman outside their home. He knew that his mother had done something awful to that woman—wicked even.

He wasn't sure what a bordello was, but he felt bad, very bad that his mother had sent this woman against her will to a place his father...who was not really his father, thought was evil.

He had heard it all and had understood a great deal for a boy his age.

He had seen pain on Godwin's face. Godwin may have called him a bastard, but he still treated him like a son. All these facts swirled around in the young boy's brain and came to rest in one place. Godwin was a good man who had married his mother and had loved him like a son, but he wasn't Godwin's son.

Roderick stared at his mother. His mother was to blame for everything, but she was now helpless and crippled. He had a young boy's innocence and went toward her to comfort her, hoping to derive some comfort himself. He took on a man's work that day saying, "It is all right, Mother. He will forgive us."

She stared blankly at him for a long moment, incapable of understanding what he felt, what tortures he was himself experiencing, and her voice was cold with contempt when it came. "Your father was a gypsy, *you need to know that*. How dare you wish for Godwin's forgiveness? You stupid little bastard. *Get out!*"

And thus, it was confirmed.

His mother had never really loved him. In the past, he had an overabundance of Godwin's love...and it didn't matter how little attention he received from his mother. Now, however, he saw a future with a coldhearted mother who did not

love him, and hoped that come what may, Godwin would still go on loving him.

His young heart split open and a scar formed as he ran out of the room. He would not let her see him cry. He ran outside and into the weather, brokenhearted, rejected, lost, and a part of who he would be as a man took shape that night.

~ **Ten** ~

THIS EXPERIENCE HAD TAKEN THE gentle spirited Heather and reshaped her. She felt an anger spur her into bravery. She was ready for a fight, come what may. It was with some authority that she finally said, “That is it, Bunky, no more. We shall suffer no longer.”

“What mean you, Miss Heather?” Bunky grumbled as he tried to stretch out in his cramped position.

“Listen to me, young man. Night has turned into day and day into night. We are weak with hunger. There is a stench...even our own stench in this awful compartment. We will die of starvation and thirst if we stay here, so we will not stay here any longer. Do you hear me? Will they make us walk the plank? My instinct says no. This is not a smuggler’s vessel. If it was, we would have already reached an English port and been done. No, this is a private vessel bound no doubt for the Indies. We cannot stay here any longer. Sooner or later, they will need grain, so we might as well show ourselves now.”

“Aye then, I’ll not argle-bargle with ye if ye be that determined. Might as well get it all over with. Like ye say, they are bound to find us here anyway. Mayhap if we come clean and offer to do a fair share of the work above?” he answered in a resigned tone.

“Indeed, for if we are to be fed to the sharks, so be it, but I think, as you say, we can offer to work.”

Bunky climbed up on a pile of sacks and pushed the hatch door. It opened wide with a loud squeaking sound and then thumped onto the decking.

Evening was upon them, but even so, there was still enough light that came through the opening, causing both he and Heather to shield their eyes for the

moment. After he acclimated to the dim light, Bunky pulled himself up by his forearms and peered out. He released a sigh of relief to find no one in their immediate vicinity. He slid back down and turned to Heather and whispered, “There now...” He gave her his hand. “Use me knee as ye pull yerself up.”

Heather was determined not to show any signs of the fatigue and weakness she felt. She took hold of his hand, noting to herself how tightly he held her, how determined he was to make certain he aided her ascent. He had such a good heart, she thought.

She hoisted herself up by planting a foot on his thigh and allowing him to shove her upward.

She slapped her hands onto the decking and dragged herself the remainder of the distance, lying flat there as she recouped. Luckily, she lay in the shadows and knew she looked more like an eerie blob than a woman.

A French crewman standing some space away made a sound and Heather knew he would find them. She watched as he put a hand to his heart and said, “*Nom de dieu!*”

Heather closed her eyes as she scurried backwards, further into the shadows. This was the moment of truth. Would the Frenchman shoot?

Her swift and unexpected movement sent Bunky off balance. He let go a howl, quite unnerving to her ears, as he fell back into the hole.

In French, the crewman exclaimed that only a demon could sound like that, while Bunky’s fall left him face to face with a rodent. He exclaimed indignantly that he was ready, quite ready to meet his maker, as this had become more than flesh and blood could bear.

Heather hushed him.

Bunky found renewed vitality and left the rodent behind him as he scurried out of the open hatch. He landed on his belly beside Heather with an “*oomph.*”

“Oh, do be quiet,” Heather said on a hushed note.

This series of unexpected and unprecedented phenomena astonished and horrified this particular crewman, who apparently, Heather discovered from his exclamations, was superstitious. He seemed riveted in place, his hand still on his heart and screeching enough to bring down sailors from an ocean away, “*Ici! Bon dieu ! Ici! Capitaine! Ici, Louis...Satane!*”

Apparently the Louis he called had heard him and came hurriedly towards him. Louis, taking no chances, called for others to join them.

Other crew members came jesting with one another, robustly teasing their screeching and horrified mate.

Louis, a large and amiable looking sailor, said with some affection, “*Eh? Saucisse...what is the matter? You will disturb the captain while he dines.*”

Heather’s schoolroom French was something she had on occasion practiced with her father.

She was quite good and was fortunate enough that his words immediately translated themselves in her brain.

However, Bunky was roused by the commotion to ask, far too loudly, if they were done for.

She put a hand over his mouth and whispered, “Not yet.”

“Aww, miss...they be laughing. No doubt in their cups and even more ready to throw us to the sharks. That is how it goes,” Bunky declared as soon as she removed her hand from his mouth.

“Oh, Bunky dear, do be quiet.”

It was then that two other crew members pointed and told the others that there were indeed two devils crawling about on their bellies in the dark.

It was then Heather noticed a change in the gathered assembly of crewmen, a change in their jesting demeanor. One of them pointed and said, “*Mon dieu... mais non!*”

Heather started up. They had been seen. No sense trying to hide in plain sight.

“*Capitaine!*” another sailor shouted, looking at Heather now standing only a few feet away and breathed with disbelief, “*Mon dieu...I think it is...non, but it is... a woman!*”

“What did he say?” Bunky, now at her side, asked. “Are they going to throw us overboard?”

“Not yet,” Heather answered as she moved closer to the sailors, who were obviously afraid and crossing themselves, stepping backwards.

She spoke in French to them, “Sirs, I think it best that you indeed call your captain calmly, or if you prefer, you may take us to him.”

The three Frenchmen gazed at her as though they thought themselves seeing and hearing what couldn't be right in front of them. Louis' eyes seemed to pop, Heather thought as she watched and waited.

They turned to one another and began arguing heatedly, but this was cut short when their captain, looking irritated and impatient, stepped forth and demanded to know what all the howls and commotion was about.

He appeared to Heather as no less confused by what he saw than his men had been, but as he immediately took charge, she assessed him as far better able to cope with their sudden intrusion on his peace.

“What have we here?” he asked in his native tongue as he looked over the two stowaways.

Heather braced herself, drew a breath, and answered in French, “I beg your pardon, monsieur. My friend and I have had a series of mishaps, and quite unintentionally came to seek

momentary refuge on your vessel while you were docked in port. Tired from our...mishaps, we unfortunately fell asleep and...well...” Heather began to falter at the captain's utter look of incredulousness.

“Aha,” the captain offered and then in English, “allow me to address what is

obvious. You are English, though you speak a decent French, still that I can say. Also, though you are ragged, it is obvious that you are not a peasant, but born to the English gentry...is that not so?"

Heather inclined, "Yes..."

He hurriedly interjected, "You are also quite exceptionally beautiful...even in your dirt, so that lends the question, what kind of mishaps and what the devil are you doing on my schooner?"

"Here is the thing. We don't want to be here," she offered. "But..."

Irritated, and already envisioning a problem, no doubt with her family, he cut her off, "Nor do I want you here. Are you trying to say that someone on my vessel has taken you against your will and kept you here?"

Heather was now close enough to see his eyes in the dim light of the nearby torchlight.

There was a kindness in those depths. "Indeed, how unhandsome it would be of me to suggest such a thing. No, I merely meant that through awkward circumstances we have come to a point where we are at your mercy."

He chuckled and shook his head. "What utter nonsense to be sure. However, allow me to proceed with first things first. I, mademoiselle, am the Comte de Brabant and captain of this ship." He turned at that point as Heather's eyes shifted towards a sound.

That sound—the rustle of a silk skirt.

The captain's brow rose and he grinned at his sister's expression. Louise Davenant stood, her cashmere shawl tightly wrapped around her well-shaped shoulders, and her expression of doubt quite evident as she said, "Maurice? Who is this woman and this boy?"

"As it happens, my dear," he answered her in English, and Heather noted the surprise on the woman's face. "I have not as yet discovered the answer to such a pertinent question. Come, let us all retire to my cabin and uncover the secrets of this affair."

Heather turned to Bunky and smiled reassuringly, for she could see her companion was still looking about himself with some trepidation. “There now, Bunky, they won’t throw us to the sharks after all.”

The captain evidently heard this remark, stopped and roared with laughter. “Indeed, resty easy...er...Bunky, I have no intention of feeding you to the fish.”

~ **Eleven** ~

SO IT WAS THAT WHILE Heather Martin’s future took shape on the high seas, Godwin near lost his mind on land.

He took up residence with his friend, Captain John Pearson, in those first early days. Afraid of the hatred he felt for Sara. Even in her present condition, he thought it best to remain as far away from her as he could.

His friend cast a knowing eye and finally took Godwin in hand. They set sail on his yawl and made for St. Pol-de-Léon. The information they received allowed them an educated guess.

This French port was known to house smugglers, and by this time, he was sure that a crew of smugglers was behind her abduction.

Together, they arrived in the little French town and set off to find more information about Heather. The town housed two bordellos, and sick at heart, they searched both.

Captain John held his friend steady when they left the second of the two brothels where they were told that a girl had been promised to them, but evidently had run off before she could be delivered.

“Thank the fates...she seems to have escaped, but where did she go, John? Where?”

They hoped beyond hope and Godwin dreaded the worst, then miraculously they found someone who had noticed Heather.

He was an elderly sailor versed in the English tongue, for he told them that he had learned the language in better times.

“*Tiens*,” he remarked. “A man could not help but remember that one. *Oui*, I saw the little flower running and ducking, and knew she was in trouble. She had some young lad with her, looking more frightened than she. *Mon dieu*...sad, she looked so sad. I thought to offer my help, but they vanished before I could do so.”

Godwin pressed a gold coin into his hand. “More...what more can you tell us?”

The old sailor smiled, displaying teeth that were worn and yellowed in his withered mouth.

He shook his head. “I know nothing more.”

Godwin shook his friend’s shoulder. “She escaped them. My little treasure must have gotten one of the young seamen to help her, and she escaped them. Do you hear, John, it is certain now.

She escaped them.”

John was a big man, and still had to look up to study Godwin’s face. “Aye, but I have to say it, my friend. She escaped them, but never returned to Cornwall. And Godwin, there is every chance that she won’t.”

“Why would you say that? *Why?* ”

“She loves you. She is carrying your child, but Sara arranged for her to be abducted and sold. She won’t put her baby at risk.”

“I know Heather. She will not give up. She will try to find a way home to me. She knows I am nothing without her. She knows how much I want this child with her.”

John said nothing to this, and Godwin knew that his friend did not agree. They returned to Cornwall and to Captain John’s small estate.

Godwin’s nights were spent in dreaming and praying, “Let her be safe, let our child she now carries thrive. Let me one day see them both alive and well.”

Captain John, who watched over him, kept him occupied with other matters,

helped him search for word that Heather Martin had managed to return to Cornwall, knowing this was something his friend would never get over.

Godwin visited the cottage daily, in the hopes that if she returned, she would go there.

More than a month went by, and they had discovered no further clues as to where Heather could be. Godwin sank into depression. “John, my life is over if her life is done.”

“I have been thinking, Godwin,” his friend said. “So hear me out. Heather and this young smuggler who helped her escape may have hidden themselves not on land, but on a docked vessel. It is possible that while they were being chased the two took refuge from her abductors on another boat.”

“Then why did she not get off that boat and find a way home to me?” Godwin shook his head. “Only death would keep her from me.”

“No, now and then, the fates do us unexpectedly. What if they were unable to get off this haven of a boat...what if it sailed and they were too frightened to immediately show themselves?”

Perhaps it is only time that keeps you apart. *Perhaps she will* still find a way?”

Space and fear for Heather had brought Godwin low. He believed his friend was merely trying to give him hope. “Thank you, John. I know what you are doing, but that is a farfetched notion. No. My heart is dead, my life is over,” Godwin said, and poured whiskey down his throat.

* * * * *

Summer’s warmth enveloped the *Liberté* as it sliced waves of dark blue. Heather stared at the white horses of the deep, turned away and leaned into the stern. Ahead, she could see the water’s shades become aquamarine.

She squealed to see dolphins swim near the boat as they played with one another. Oh, it would be all so glorious, would be so if only she were sailing back to Godwin. The comte had promised to help them and he was a good, kind man. She had no doubts on that score.

Their destination, she now knew, was Barbados, the isle of sugar cane and rum. Maurice had also told her it was the isle of song, of long sweet nights and gentle charms. He had told her it was a haven, and his sister had clapped her hands with excitement at the thought of such an isle after he had told his stories.

Heather's sadness would have engulfed her had she not believed she would soon be traveling back home.

She had no interest in going to this tropical island, though she admitted some curiosity about such an exotic sounding place. Heather worried and wondered about Godwin and what he would think of her disappearance. Would he believe the words Sara had made her write?

Maurice and his sister had heard her tale in its entirety. Louise had exclaimed 'mon dieu'

many times, and Maurice had once run a hand through his fine auburn hair and said,

"Barbaric..."

Indeed, she had held nothing back. She had told them how she and Godwin had met, how unhappy Godwin had been, how Sara had cunningly tricked him into marriage. They knew it all and while she had believed they would hold her actions in contempt, call her a jade, they did not.

They were completely sympathetic. Louise had, in fact, taken her into a passionate embrace and cried for her.

"Love...we French hold true love as all important," Louise said. "We must right this wrong."

Maurice had said nothing to this as he watched the two women put their heads together in sorrow.

His sister turned to him. "Is that not right, dear brother?"

"Of course," he said at last. "We shall make arrangements for Miss Martin...our dear Heather, and her manservant, her Bunky," he smiled sadly, "to return to

England on the first passenger vessel available.” He inclined his head and said with a small smile, “This time as first class passengers, not stowaways.”

Heather smiled warmly as she squeezed Louise’s hand and gave him a thankful look.

“Thank you. I will repay you as soon as I may.”

He waved this off impatiently. “Not necessary, my dear,” he said softly. “It is a simple thing, and I can well afford it.”

“I have discovered there is nothing simple about this life,” Heather said in a voice touched with bitterness.

“Indeed, I quite agree, with all the multitudinous complexities, I am certain that is quite true.

However, in this case, getting you home safely is a priority *if* that is what you wish. Money...my dear, is of no consequence,” he answered gently.

Heather could not stop worrying about Godwin and what Sara might have done during all the time that had fled by. She could not prove what Sara had done to her, which would leave Sara free to harm her again when she returned. Sara might even be wicked enough to harm her child when it was born on English soil? Oh, but it was all so complicated. Could Godwin keep her, their child, and himself safe from such a ruthless woman?

Then there was Bunky to consider. Sara was just the sort to do him harm for helping Heather escape. Her mind was full of thoughts and concerns that gave her no rest. At last, she silently decided she would have to put such notions aside or go mad.

However, the question remained...and what of Roderick? They should have put more thought into Roderick, thoughts that grew stronger as her belly began to swell. The boy believed he was Godwin’s son. She wanted him to go on believing that...she wanted Roderick to be unaffected by the love Godwin and she had for one another. Was that even possible?

If she accused Roderick’s mother of such a crime... *what of him?*

She had to face the facts. She was a woman plucked from all nearer ties, and wounded by the force of another woman's cunning wickedness. She was confused by her own needs. In the past, she had never seen herself as a fighter. A fighter had never been in her nature, so how could she call on such a trait now? How could she return and stand up to Sara?

She confessed all these doubts to Maurice and discovered, for she was a woman and knew the signs, for he had fallen in love with her.

What had she done? She saw it in his eyes. No. Oh no. Hurting Maurice was the last thing she wanted to do, and she could see that was what she was about to do.

He was good and kind and she was doomed to hurt him! She was a devil, she suddenly thought. She hurt everyone she touched.

* * * * *

Maurice watched Heather from the far end of his vessel and he longed to tell her how he felt.

She was so young. He was eight and thirty. He was too old for her, and surely, he could fight what he felt?

He had squandered his youth in his studies, in his love for sailing, and in his shyness. Ah, he had been useless in the art of romance. He remembered his first *affaire du Coeur*. His brother had dragged him to the French court and a young beauty had captured his eyes and held him riveted. She had teased and flirted with him, wrenching his heart from his chest and easily making it her own.

He was a second son. Only a second son. His brother held the title, the estates, and the bulk of the money. His brother was married and all these things would pass to his brother's first born son. This was common knowledge. The beauty knew this.

No one at the time reckoned with the Reign of Terror.

His beloved gave her hand to another. He did not blame her. He had nothing but love to offer her. His income would never be enough to keep her in the style to which she was accustomed. It was the way of his world.

Still, he pined for her a very long time. And now, much against his will, he was in love again. This time, the woman of his dreams carried another man's child and thought of no one but that particular man. Why had the fates treated him thusly?

She was exquisite. She leaned against the bulwarks, her long flame colored hair blowing in the wind, as was the blue silks borrowed from his sister.

She shaded her eyes from the sun as he approached, then she turned to give him a welcoming smile.

"I know you have been giving a great deal of thought to your situation. What have you decided?" he asked.

"Oh, don't ask me that, dear sir." Heather hung her head.

"Why, don't you know? Could it be your feelings...have changed?" he asked, and she heard the hope in his tone.

How could she hurt him? "It is so very hard to know the answer. You see, I am aware that our love, mine and Godwin's, was in some ways quite wicked." She stalled him from objecting.

"I make no excuses for us. I tell myself that his wife is evil and hurt him from the start. But it is more than that. I think if I returned to him...it would put Godwin's life in danger. You cannot know the look in her eyes when she cast me on the smugglers. You cannot know the determination she is capable of wielding."

"Indeed, but she committed a crime, you can bear witness against this Sara person," he answered. He took her arms and held her in place. "Heather, my sweet Heather. I don't want you to have regrets."

"How can I make the right decision? If I bore witness against her, it would ruin Roderick...he is but a boy."

"*Mon dieu, mais oui*, but that is on her, *not you*," he offered, and shook his head. "You are too good."

“That doesn’t matter, does it? The boy would still suffer the consequences of her actions...perhaps forever. His name would be blighted by her actions.”

“But what of *your child*? Should not l’enfant you carry...bear a name?” he persisted.

They had hashed this same conversation out many times. She was weary. Her conclusion was always the same. She could not keep her child from Godwin and yet...how could she return?

She didn’t have an answer. She turned her back to Maurice and stared at the lovely waters.

The voyage had taken over a month. They had hit some bad weather, which had stalled them a few days, but now she was about to embark on another chapter of her life. She had two choices.

Maurice had given her two choices. What was the right one?

How she loved her baby already. The right thing for her child and for her was to be with Godwin. Should she write him...tell him what happened? How could she be sure he would get her letter with Sara in the house?

While she silently argued with herself, and kept her eye away from Maurice, he turned her to face him and whispered desperately, “Heather, don’t go back , *ma chérie*...you know in your heart, *oui*, you know life now for you has changed. Stay with me, *be my wife*. You must know how I feel?”

She looked directly at him. His grey eyes were full with love and that drove a knife into her heart. Whatever she decided, it would hurt him. She did not love Maurice. She loved Godwin, thus, if she stayed with him, he would never know true love. If she left, it would hurt him...she knew for a very long time.

“Maurice, listen to me,” she said softly. “I carry another man’s child.

I carry the dreams of another man’s arms...I...”

“*Non*, I tell you, I will make you love me,” he begged.

“You deserve better than I,” she pleaded. How could she ever give herself to

anyone other than Godwin? She would go back and live in secret, on the outskirts as Godwin's mistress. No one need ever know, she told herself. That way, he could watch his babe grow up.

"*Mignonne...*" he pleaded. "Have you no notion how *ravissant* and wondrous you are to me? I would be husband to you, father to your child, live to make you happy. Believe me," he begged.

Heather's heart cracked for him. She cared for him because he was dear and good, and did not want him to throw himself at her feet as he was doing. "How could I do such a thing to you?"

I do not love you that way, Maurice. You know that."

"Give me the opportunity, the time to make you love me that way."

She knew this was the 'call' of all unrequited lovers. "No, my dear Maurice. You are not presently thinking clearly. I could not take such advantage of your kindness. How could I be so cruel to you? No."

"Cruel? My dear, to call you wife would be a joy. Take advantage? My sweet life, I am years older than you. It is I that would be taking advantage of you."

"And what of Godwin?" she answered after a long pause. "Should I leave him to think I abandoned our love...stole his child from him?"

"He believes you are lost to him by now. He will forget. Time has a way of dulling the senses, and he has his family."

"No, he will never stop loving me. I know that as a fact. My brain and my heart tell me that.

No, Maurice, no."

Heather could see him grapple with his emotions. He took her shoulders in a desperate attempt to change her mind, and shook her ever so slightly. "Heather, what of the enfant? Have you the right to bring a fatherless child into the world when an alternative is offered?"

She did not speak.

“Answer me, Heather!”

It was as though his words had formed an open hand and slapped her. She was surprised by his vehemence and taken aback. A tear formed and spilled over. She saw her dream of getting back to Godwin singed with all the impossible truths. An inner voice told her that Godwin was a beloved memory that she had to put away for the realities of life.

The horror of this idea flashed through her and she yelled, “No...no...” She was about to run from him.

Ashamed, he reached for her arm and stayed her. “Forgive me, Heather. All I want is to protect you and instead, I am causing you pain.” He had to allow her to make this decision on her own. He took her into his arms and whispered, “*Ma belle, non, my petite*. I will see you through this...and it shall be as *you direct*.”

She allowed him to hold her tight, admitted to herself that there was comfort in the safety of his strong protective arms. She was, she knew, in the grip of treacherous waters, and he was the only life raft in sight. “You understand, Maurice, you understand why I cannot marry you?”

“I understand, my love,” was his sad answer.

~ **Twelve** ~

BARBADOS! HEATHER STOOD ON BOARD the *Liberté* as it was safely docked in Bridgetown Harbor. The market was full with color. Women carried baskets on their heads filled with produce, hawking their wares as they made their way down the busy avenues.

Sailors laughed and jested with one another. Wagonloads of products were being loaded onto ships that would travel back to Europe. The warm air enveloped her, and Heather found herself mesmerized by this new and vibrant land.

Swan and Broad Streets dominated Bridgetown, as did the central marketplace, which was constructed in a spacious quadrangle. Hucksters took up their places there and their cries of

“fish, hey, dolphin, useful limes” could be heard even over the noise of turning wheels.

Mingling bodies, men and women calling out to one another in good spirits captured the eye and Heather thought she had entered a fantasyland.

She watched shoppers enter an open center, which accommodated the more bulky foodstuffs, such as red and yellow yams, potatoes, coconuts, and so many exotic things she couldn't count them all. This center afforded both sellers and shoppers shade from the burning sun because of rows upon rows of bearded fig trees. It was from these trees, Maurice told her, that the island received its name from the Portuguese. He said that when they found the island abundant with these fig trees, they christened it Los Barbados, meaning *The Bearded*.

Heather absorbed it all, noting the scantily clad black women. They appeared beautiful as they gracefully managed the crowded avenue in their charming and colorful dresses.

She watched fishermen in the harbor as they put away their nets, pocketed the cash they had earned from the day's catch, and made their way towards a tavern down the street.

“Maurice, where is Bunky?”

“I sent him ahead with my man. Bunky tells me he has a way with horses. I asked them to buy a couple of gentle mares, for my sister and you to use while... you are with us.”

“Oh, how kind you are, Maurice, and thoughtful,” Heather said on a sigh when something caught her eye and riveted her in place.

Heather's eyes opened wide then and she found herself horrified as she saw human flesh, black human flesh, being peddled on a stage as though they were products for sale.

“Ah, my man has seen us come in and sent out the carriage,” Maurice said as he took his sister and Heather in hand.

“Maurice!” Heather objected. “Do you see that? They are selling people. We

must do something. We must put a stop to it. Maurice, this is wrong. It is indecent and certainly not Christian. You—we must do something.”

She was stunned by what she saw, but Maurice seemed to ignore her as he ushered her and Louise into his curricle with the Brabant crest emblazoned on its doors.

“Jem, my dear Jem,” Maurice greeted the driver warmly and introduced the females to him,

“Jem Starkes, my sister, Louise, and our good friend, Miss Heather Martin.”

The Englishman was young and nodded shyly as he held the door open for them and said,

“It is good to have you home again, my lord.”

Heather sat beside Maurice, Louise sat across from them and spread her skirts.

Louise had been watching the sale of black men and women and turned to her brother, an accusation in her tone. “Heather is quite correct, *mon frère*. This situation is unacceptable.

Maurice. I never thought you of all people would turn a cheek to such practices. Slaves. They are selling slaves in the market. Non. Can it be you approve?”

Heather waited for the answer, glad that his sister had taken up her cause.

“It is not what you think,” he said softly. “Nothing is ever just what it seems.”

“What is it then?” Louise interjected. “Slavery is not what I can ever approve of.”

Heather gasped. “Oh no, never say you are a slave owner?”

“I am *not* a slave master as are the other plantation owners. I bought my people, *oui*, but I do not treat them as slaves. I had no choice, as here in Barbados it is a way of life that one cannot fight. I would not have been allowed to farm my plantation had I put up an argument against slavery. So, instead, I don’t take as

much profit and I pay my workers small amounts...nothing that the other plantation owners would notice. I allow them to be married, and argue this with the leading ministers who are beginning to agree with me. I even allow them and their children some schooling. More than that, I cannot do in this environment and still run a plantation here.”

“You must try and make the other owners see they are wrong—that slavery is indecent. You must,” Heather cried out.

Maurice hung his head. “I have tried, and I do believe some of the better plantation owners are beginning to agree, but financing a plantation always wins out, and slavery goes on and on. I am *but one* man, and at the moment, the political climate would not allow me to win this argument. If I continue to balk the system, the council would revoke my permit, and it would be the end of my plantation. What then of the people who work for me? *Non*, I do the best I can.”

Heather sat back and silently contemplated what he had said. He was right. One man alone could not win. How then to evoke change? With a movement? With women who felt the same as she and Louise? With Christian ministers who might sympathize with this point of view? If she lived here, she would work to abolish slavery, yes, she would.

But you have decided to return to England, she told herself. She would leave Louise to take up the cause, that is what she would do.

She took to watching the passing scenery as her mind mapped out a way to begin the process to abolish slavery. She was not uninformed. She knew that many of the plantations in the Indies used slaves to work their crops.

In the past, it was only a story. It was words that she had heard, but now, now up close, she was utterly dismayed. It wouldn't be easy for a woman to effect change. As it happened, women did not have any rights. What could she do but organize the good wives to plead their case with the men in their families? Yes, but Maurice wasn't family? She had no right to criticize his way of life. She went back to concentrating on the scenery, the wide fields covered in sugar cane, not yet fully grown. The land seemed browner, flatter than she had imagined it would be.

As though reading her mind, Maurice said, “Our rainfall occurs from June to November, *petite*, and even then, we are not drowned with rain as are our neighboring isles. The land is low, and much of it was deforested over one hundred years ago by your own countrymen.” He reached over to Jem driving the horses forward and touched his shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Jem?”

“Aye,” Jem answered happily. “What trees there were have long been felled to make way for our main crop...the sugar.”

“But what a waste...?” Heather cried.

“No, ma’am,” Jem answered. “No waste. We shipped tons of Barbados cedar, fustic, and logwood to England.” He stopped himself and shyly returned his attention to the horses and the road.

“Go on, Jem,” Maurice encouraged.

“Scuse...I did not want to overstep,” he answered.

“Nonsense. Tell my ladies more,” Maurice scoffed.

“If you look there, my lord...ladies,” the lad pointed to a lowland field sprouting sugar cane no more than two feet high, “I think, my lord, you will be pleased.”

“Mon dieu, Jem. You did it,” Maurice said with some excitement, evidently well pleased.

“It was as hard as I expected, but, I think, worth the sweat.” Jem turned and grinned at the comte. “Getting rid of some of those old stumps took a bit of time, but everyone pitched in and we got it done.”

Heather listened quietly to their continued exchange. Everything about Maurice convinced her that he was a good man. She had known that from the start, and thought his only fault was pride. She realized she was wrong. Yes, he was proud of his heritage, of his capabilities, of the home he had built here on the island, and it must have hurt him to beg her to be his wife, and then be rejected, yet he took it with grace and composure.

Was she a fool? Any other woman in her predicament would have jumped at the

chance.

What did the future offer her child? If she managed to make it home safely, and before the baby was born, what would they face?

She wasn't concerned for herself, but that was selfish. Her child would be illegitimate and ridiculed as such. How could she do that to her baby?

Maurice was such a fine man and life here with him would be peaceful. Something in her logic and heart shifted. Her heart still cried for Godwin, but the babe kicking in her belly told her she had to think of only that child.

Maurice looked her way and she saw his eyes light up. Could she learn to more than like him? Was that possible?

* * * * *

The comte felt a warmth engulf his heart. Was it a trick of the mind? He looked into her eyes and saw something there, was it merely friendship, or something more? Dare he hope?

She did not look away but met his gaze. He stared into her violet eyes, those magnificent eyes that said so very much, and his hopes lifted. Silently, gently, imploringly, he made love to her in that glance. He wanted her both physically and spiritually. He wanted her in a way he was certain no man had ever wanted a woman before. Ah, she knew and turned away. She did not want to lead him on, he knew this and still, he had hope.

His sister raised an eyebrow at him and gave him an encouraging smile. "Mon frère, c'est bon," she said, getting their attention. "Can it be I am here with you, away from the Reign of Terror? Life takes its turns, does it not, m'belle?" she said to Heather. "One moment, we are headed for...a fate most horrific, and then the fates take us to a better place. Here, *m'belle*," she leaned over and patted Heather's hands, "is a better place."

The comte knew his sister adored Heather and wanted her to be his bride and her sister. She had made this clear. He appreciated Louise's concerns, but did not want Heather pushed. He wanted her of her own accord.

“Ah,” he said, taking attention away from his sister’s obvious attempt to help him in his effort to win Heather over. “Our home...Brabant Plantation!”

They had turned onto the drive that began its long approach to Brabant. Heather stared at the large island house which sat high on the crest of a rolling hill.

“You see its position?” he said with absolute love. “It was the first thing to catch my eye.

Eight years ago, it was a run-down and bankrupt estate. I knew at once what it needed when I

purchased it. When we arrive...when you look out from the windows, you will see a great deal of the land we farm. I learned from my brother the need to view one’s land from one’s home, but also...the satisfaction and enjoyment one can derive from watching an investment succeed.”

“Why, Maurice, it is magnificent,” Louise said as she stared.

“Indeed, if you say it was run-down, you have managed to succeed beautifully,” Heather said as they neared. She could see the tropical flowers in garden beds and the exquisite landscaping around both the house and the courtyard.

The house itself was a Bordeaux Chateau. Its paned windows, its smoothly elegant lines, its mellow butter-colored sandstone, and its foundation plantings certainly caught and held the eye.

However, it was the plantation’s whole that caught, fascinated, and securely riveted both women’s attention as they stared.

Two windmills, also on the peak of the hill, caught the wind and loomed large but charmingly so in the distance.

Maurice pointed and explained enthusiastically, “The wind turns the blades and creates the power to grind our grain, and gives us fresh water as well. And look there, the carts we use pulled by our oxen were made from trees we felled to clear the ground for planting. No waste, you see, no waste. Here at Brabant we train those who have shown an aptitude to be blacksmiths.

One day, when voices like mine are heard and slavery is at an end...my people will have skilled jobs to fall back on.”

Heather smiled as Louise remarked on her brother’s beautiful plantation. She saw a young boy at the oxen’s head, steering the animal and calling, “Gee, cum, cum hai!”

“He is so young,” Heather objected. “Surely too young to work?”

“He is a leader boy, and enjoys his time with the oxen. He also has school time, where though it is against the law here in Barbados, we quietly teach the children their letters. We also make certain all the children have free time here on the plantation, with none the wiser. Such things must be kept secret.” Maurice was proud of his accomplishments and this was displayed in the tone of his voice. “On the last day of the crop, he and the other oxen will wear necklaces of flowers. The children enjoy it immensely.”

Heather could not help but feel some fascination for it all as she looked out on the working plantation. She was dazzled with the beauty as she saw coconut palms stretched out thirty feet into the air and neatly laid out, as were lush hibiscus plants, their flowers in vibrant bloom.

The house loomed as they got closer, but Heather stared at the rows of cabins that eased through the landscaping. She realized, at once, the cabins housed slaves. She was leaving this fascinating island, and this way of life would be left behind her. Yes, but the slavery would continue to be a way of life. Someone had to stop it. She had to trust Maurice, who was a good man, to fight the use of slavery for financial gain. It was unchristian, it was inhuman. Indeed, but she would not be here to take up the fight.

It occurred to her that Brabant was a thriving community, a self-sufficient place, just as any feudal parish in England had been four hundred years past. She thought that if she stayed, Brabant could be held up as an example to other plantations. Indeed, if she stayed, she would begin her work to free the slaves.

~ **Thirteen** ~

A WEEK THAT HAD BEEN lovely, lazy, and strangely stimulating passed for

Heather at Brabant. She was just entering her fourth month of pregnancy, and her belly had hardly begun to swell.

Maurice took her for a gentle ride over his lands. They spent a great deal of time walking along the creamy sands, talking about nearly everything. She found herself laughing more and more while in his company.

Louise, too, was such a comfort and a great deal of fun, free now from the fear of the guillotine.

Both, she realized, were reluctant to talk about her trip back to England. Finally, Maurice brought up the subject and told her if she still wanted to leave, and he prayed she didn't, there was a ship leaving soon for Cornwall.

She saw the pain in his eyes and took his hand. "Come...let us walk."

She led him down the garden path to the wooden steps that would take them to the ocean.

She loved the sound and scent of the ocean. It reminded her of Cornwall and Godwin.

It was a night for lovers. The moon was full and the island sky was alive with the twinkling of stars. The sound of the ocean waves crashing on rocks was exhilarating as they found their way past the boulders to the firm white sand. She laughed and removed her slippers, leaving them at the bottom step.

Godwin's image filled her dreams, as did her doubts. Maurice had started to infiltrate those dreams. He was real, he was good, and he was present.

She had to admit to herself that she needed Maurice, had come to rely on him for so much.

She knew she was physically attracted to him and wondered at it. Had her love for Godwin slipped into the past? Was he a forgotten hope?

Did she love Maurice? If only she could. Safety for her child was here with Maurice. The unknown lay across the ocean in Cornwall. In England, her child would be scorned. Here...not so.

The roar of the breakers against the long reef played out its willful song. The warm breeze took her hair, as did Maurice, who suddenly drew her into his arms.

“Even in the dark, those violet eyes of yours slay me,” he said softly.

She pushed off him and suddenly began undressing. “It is so warm...let’s take a swim.”

He looked momentarily astonished, but lost no time in throwing off his clothes.

In the shadow of the moonlight, Heather wondered at herself. She felt no shyness as she looked at his hardened manhood. She knew what restraint it took for him not to reach out and touch her.

She laughed as she turned and ran towards the spray.

He joined her and they fell in the shallows. As he helped her up, he said, “Heather...” And no longer held back as he held her wet and naked body against his own.

His kiss was long and stirred Heather’s passion. She allowed it, but then pulled away.

He did not try and stop her as she ran back to where she had left her clothes. He followed.

As she dressed, she looked away from him.

“Heather?” he said softly.

She turned and saw he had his britches and boots back on. “Yes?”

“I will speak as always, plainly. *Chérie*, between us it is possible to speak plainly, oui?”

“Oui,” she said softly. She was torn up with guilt. She was turning away from Godwin, the love of her life, and she knew it. How could she do such a thing?

“In many things, you are a good woman. Do not shake your head. You are so

good, and that is why I am puzzled. You have been honest with me, so I must speak. How, Heather, can you, a good woman, destroy the lives of so many?"

It was as though he had stuck a knife into her. "What? What are you saying?"

"Ah, you don't want to see, do you? This worthless woman, Sara...but if you go back, you destroy her. I care nothing for her, but the boy, what of him? And Godwin will be at risk from Sara, as you will be again. Your child...it will be born illegitimate. He will never be able to marry you in time, if at all."

Heather's face contorted with pain. "Oh God...what have we done?" It was all so ugly because they, she and Godwin, had been selfish and careless. "But what of Godwin? He has a right to see the child he wants so very much."

"You are stubborn or blind...or both. This Godwin is a man. In the end, he will take another woman. It is the way of men. He will father another child. You must see to the future."

"No. Enough! I can't listen to this," Heather shouted, and put on her slippers. She rushed ahead of him up the wooden steps and out of sight.

* * * * *

Heather lay in bed in an anguish of indecision. She cared for Maurice, perhaps on some level, she loved him. If she had never known Godwin, perhaps she would have loved Maurice completely and accepted to be his wife? Perhaps.

She adored her unborn child. If she stayed with Maurice, would it be best for her child?

Perhaps. It would be a lie, though. One day she would have to tell her child...or would she? Oh, what to do?

A knock on her door brought her head up. "Yes?"

"Heather...I cannot sleep. I was awful to you...I...please, would you come to the door and allow me to apologize?"

She jumped out of her bed. It was dreadful that he thought he should apologize.

She was the one at fault. She opened the door wide. “Maurice...no. You didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

He stepped inside. “It wasn’t my place to tell you how to live your life. You must do what you think is right for you.”

“Oh, Maurice...my dear Maurice,” she whispered, not knowing what else to say, what else she could do. She could see him shatter right before her eyes. He was breaking...over her. How could she do this to him when he had offered her his world?

He took her shoulders and before she knew what she was doing, or perhaps if she was honest, really honest with herself, she would admit that she did know exactly what she was doing and why. She knew he needed this and she was so eternally grateful to him.

His mouth sought and won her own. Hungrily, ardently, feverishly he kissed her, long and with a passion he seemed unable to hold back. She was, in fact, surprised how welcome his delicious kisses were, and responded in kind.

She was absolutely incredulous about her level of arousal. She had believed no other than Godwin could please her, but Maurice’s touch was welcome, very welcome.

Heather was driven by gratitude and deep affection. Also, she just couldn’t reject his advances. How could she do that to him? She was torn in so many directions in that moment, and the kisses seemed to ease all thought.

She believed, truly believed that if she allowed him to bed her, she would no longer be a challenge lost and he could then be able to move on when she left for home.

Thus, she allowed him to manipulate her nightdress even as he backed her towards her bed.

A moment later she felt a rush of sensation as he dexterously teased her nipples until they were taut and ready for his mouth. Swiftly, urgently, he discarded her nightdress, and groaned as his hands roamed over her beauty and his tongue teased one nipple and then the next.

Heather was shocked at the flood of happiness surging through her. Finally, she was able to give him something of herself. His kisses—his touch, were pleasant enough to arouse the woman in her, and she moved willingly to Maurice’s fingers as he sought the fluff and then the wetness between her thighs.

She smiled warmly, encouragingly, when he looked into her eyes with hope. She whispered sweet words of affection and admiration as he dropped his open neck shirt and britches to the hardwood floor.

He laid her back on the bed and his voice was hoarse with passion as he told her, “Spread wide for me, my *petite*... spread wide.”

She did as he asked and he bent his head to nibble at her sex. She arched with pleasure, for he had a certain expertise as he worked her, and it didn’t take long before she cried out his name as he brought her to relief.

His voice was joyful then as he got into position and deeply, ravenously plunged into her.

Their time, that night, was filled with the wonder of passion, but even as he took her, she knew she would always dream of Godwin, and kept her eyes tightly shut.

~ **Fourteen** ~

LOUISE’S HAND ON HEATHER’S SHOULDER startled her. She had been deep in thought as she went over in her mind everything she and Maurice had shared last evening.

Louise laughed. “*Mais non*, so nervous? It is only I, chérie.”

Heather smiled. “I was daydreaming.”

“Ah, of course. But why do you sit alone? Do I intrude?”

“No, Louise, of course not. You could never intrude. Shall I make room for you here in the shade of this lovely tree?”

“On the grass? *Mais non*. I am not such a, what is it you English call rough girls...ah, yes, hoyden. *Non*. I will not ruin my dress with the grass stains.” She looked around and found a set of wicker chairs and dragged one over and into the shade of the palm. She sighed and said, “It is no use to try and talk around this. One should always get to the heart of the matter, *oui?*”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Heather said cautiously.

“Ah, well, never mind. I am aware you sent Maurice to Bridgetown this morning. You sent him to book you and your Bunky passage to England.”

“Yes,” Heather said, and managed to meet Louise’s disapproving eye. She remembered the stricken look that had crept into Maurice’s eyes, and how she hated herself. Allowing him to bed her had only made matters worse for him, given him false hope. Why was she always doing the wrong thing?

She remembered how he had stepped back, as though she had struck him, and said, “Then last night, last night meant nothing to you?”

“It was goodbye...only goodbye,” she had answered quietly as she looked away.

He turned sharply from her and left the room. She saw it all so vividly. His hurt, his anger, and yet he went to do her bidding. She watched him leave and saw that his shoulders had been slumped as never before.

“Heather...? Heather, are you listening to me?” Louise demanded.

“What? Oh, yes,” she said, her voice scarcely audible even to herself.

Louise put a hand to her forehead. “Ah me.”

“You were not feeling well yesterday...are you not better?” Heather asked worriedly.

“It is nothing. You know I took an early ride the other morning with Maurice. He wanted me to see a piece of land he means to purchase. I thought then it was the heat...but I have these insect bites, and so perhaps it is that?” She waved this off and said firmly, “We must speak plainly, *you and moi.*”

“Right then,” Heather said, bracing herself.

“Then do not be angry when I tell you this. In many things you are a reasonable woman and thus, I am puzzled. You have told me everything, and now after you hear me, you may regret your honesty. But I must speak. How, *chérie*, how can you destroy my brother so when he loves you to distraction?”

Heather folded her hands in her lap. “I did not encourage him to love me. Quite the opposite, Louise. You know that. He knows that. From the start, I told him Godwin was the father of my child and that I had to find a way back to him...to England.”

“You love this Godwin...oui, so think of him and the danger *you put him* in if you return.

The threat from the wicked Sara will still be there...and the threat to your child. *Think of that!*”

Heather had considered that over and over. She had convinced herself that she and Godwin would handle Sara together. Also, as despicable as Sara may be, Heather could not believe that Sara would harm her baby. “No...nooo...”

“Oui, I tell you. This Godwin will not allow his child to be a bastard. He will name him legally as his own. The poor Roderick will take second place...it is natural. Sara will not like that. Do you see? What then of your child’s safety?”

Heather buried her face in her hands. “Oh no...Godwin will protect our child.”

“At what cost, my dear Heather, at what cost?” She shook her head. “You are both stubborn and blind. You do not look to the future. Scandal will follow your baby through life. It is not necessary. Maurice loves you. You have great feelings for him, and in time, you will love him. I believe that.”

“No...”

“Heather, you are being a fool. Ah, *mon dieu*. Be a fool if you must, but not when it involves the baby. You care so much for my brother. I have watched you together. He makes you happy.

He even makes you forget.”

“No, he does not. Yes, I love him, but no, I am not in love with him. My child has a right to know its father.”

Louise clapped her hands together in her agitation. “I don’t feel quite up to this...” She loved Heather and adored her brother. “How do I make you see?”

Heather was on her feet and bending over Louise. “You don’t look well, Louise.”

“Oui...perhaps I should go inside,” she said, and stood.

Heather put an arm around her friend to steady her, but all at once, and without warning, Louise made a little sound and collapsed. Heather could not hold her up but eased her friend’s fall to the ground.

“Louise, darling?” Heather cried.

“Ah, what have I done...my gown.” Louise said, and moved her head from side to side.

Heather felt Louise’s forehead. “Oh no...you are on fire!”

Bunky, who had been given a job at the stables, was, at that moment, walking out two horses towards the pasture. Heather saw him and waved as she called, “*Bunky...hurry!*”

He handed off the horses to a black groom and started to run towards them. Another servant, a huge black man, saw him running towards the women and joined him.

“Aye then...what, what is wrong with her ladyship?” Bunky asked as he leaned over her.

“Roan,” Heather said to the large black man, “will you lift her and bring her into the house?”

Bunky, please find out where he is and fetch the doctor, do.”

“Aye, as it happens, he isn’t far. Heard tell he is at the plantation that borders ours. Right then, I’m off,” Bunky said, and left them straightaway.

“As much as I wish to help her ladyship, who is kindness itself, I...we...we may not touch a white woman,” Roan responded.

“Nonsense, we have to get her inside.” Heather had learned about all the annoying and stupid rules about blacks and whites, and once again thought that if she stayed, she would work to abolish such stupidity and free the slaves. How could people be so savage in their notions?

She couldn’t understand it.

“Right then,” Roan said bravely. “I will do as you ask, but know if another white man, one other than my master, should see me carrying a white woman, I would be brought up on charges.”

“Not if you are following my request, hurry, Roan. We must see to her,” Heather answered.

Roan lifted Louise cradle like and started for the house.

* * * * *

Maurice guided his horse through the hubbub of the busy town towards the main pike, southeast, which would take him to Brabant. He had always loved Bridgeton. Not today.

Today had not been a good visit.

Inside the inner pocket of his pale blue riding jacket, near his heart, were two tickets for passage on the *Southampton*, leaving for Cornwall in five days. He was wounded, deeply wounded. He had actually believed Heather might stay.

The feel of Heather’s body in his arms, beneath him, giving, taking...was vivid in his mind.

The sensations she aroused in him making him feel as though he should betray her trust and tell her there wasn’t a passenger ship leaving for Cornwall for

months. He could do that, but...no, he could not.

What a fool he had been to think his tender lovemaking had actually made her love him.

Who was this Godwin that she could not give him up?

“Ah bah,” he told his horse. “I am nothing to her. Nothing. It is because I am naïve. I should have known she was giving me the only thing she could in her goodbye.”

She felt friendship, oui, she felt gratitude, of course, but nothing more.

He felt old and worn and totally devastated. How does one part with one's life and yet go on living? Heather had become his life.

He was a fool to let her go.

He was a fool to give in to his own gentle nature and purchase her the means to leave.

Damn, such a fool!

He thought about the day she would leave and go to the Englishman, this Godwin, the father of her child. Would this Godwin keep her safe this time? He had failed her before. What would Heather do if she returned and Godwin was a cad and rejected her?

Ah, impossible. No man would reject such as Heather. How could they?

Heather was his love and she would soon be lost to him. *All hope was gone.*

* * * * *

Across the Atlantic, at a place Godwin and Heather often met and called their Windmera, Godwin stood and stared out to sea. For no reason at all, he was sure Heather was alive. If she was alive, he would see her again. How could he not?

Heather had escaped the brothel, and surely she would find a way to return to

him.

Was he just hoping against hope?

His friend put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Come along, Godwin."

They both turned at that moment because of the sound of a pony's hooves on hard ground and Godwin sighed. "It is Roderick."

"The boy has been through a great deal," Captain John said gently. "He needs you."

"Aye, that he has, and didn't deserve what he has suffered. He is the innocent in all this. He is a good lad," Godwin said sadly.

Roderick jumped nimbly from his pony and hurried over. The boy looked up at Captain John. "Please, sir, could I speak with my...with his lordship for a moment?"

"That you can, lad, that you can. Maybe you can distract him from himself," the captain said, and moved off.

Godwin looked at Roderick with affection. He loved the boy. All that had taken place had not diminished his feelings for him. *Damn*, but he had been neglectful at a time when Roderick needed him. He would have to change that. He gave the boy a warm smile and ruffled his black curly hair. "Son...what is it?"

Roderick eyed him and Godwin realized just how hurt the boy was and opened his arms wide, saying again so the lad would understand, "Son, *my son*."

Roderick was in his arms and clinging with all his might.

Godwin sighed. What had he done? Roderick's years had not equipped him to handle the flight, withdrawal of one parent and the coldness of a mother who never thought of any but herself.

"Please, sir." Roderick suddenly began to cry, as tears slid down his smooth cheeks. "Please forgive us, come home."

Godwin stiffened. The thought of forgiving Sara was repugnant. The thought of having to hear her voice, look at her face was intolerable. He felt no pity for her circumstances—none, and he knew that was wrong, but he still hated her too much to have empathy for her.

Roderick, however, pulled on all his emotions. “Hush, lad. Your mother and I have differences that cannot be breached. Do not fret what you cannot change. It has nothing to do with you or how very much I love you. Roderick, you are my son, *you always will be*. You are the child of my heart. That is what matters. I will return to Ravensbury with you because you need me and I want you to know how very much I love you.”

The lad clung to him and cried his heart out.

Captain John walked over and put a hand to both of them and together they stood in the windstorm.

Godwin looked out to sea and prayed for Heather to find her way home to him.

~ **Fifteen** ~

LOUISE TOSSED FITFULLY IN HER bed, lost to the fever.

Heather wiped her brow with a cool wet rag and whispered soothing words. She applied rosewater to her face and stepped aside when the doctor arrived.

However, when the doctor produced a glass bottle and produced a pair of tweezers, Heather stepped up, quite horrified. “You are not going to put those slimy creatures on her!”

The doctor sighed. He was old and tired. “Don’t be hysterical about it, miss. Leeching must be done.” He proceeded to pluck a leech from the bottle. “I understand your concerns, but rest assured, I do know what I am doing. You are not the first to object to this method and I am certain you won’t be the last, but it is tried and true.”

Heather put herself between the doctor and Louise. “No.”

“Now see here, miss. She must be bled,” the doctor insisted.

“No, neither Louise nor I believe in leeching. She has often said so, and I won’t allow it to be done to her.”

“Look, my dear, it will ease the fever, make her rest more comfortably,” he persisted.

“No, it will not. It will only drain her of her strength.” This was something Heather’s father had believed, and she did as well.

The doctor was exasperated. “You have not the authority to interfere...”

“Oh, but she has,” said a firm strong voice from the doorway. “Miss Martin has as much authority here at Brabant as I do.”

Heather ran to him. He was here, she thought thankfully, finally he had come. “Maurice, Louise collapsed in the garden. It appears as though she has contracted some kind of fever and the doctor wants to leech her.”

Maurice turned. “Doctor?”

“Indeed, as Miss Martin says,” he said somewhat testily. “Your sister has contracted a fever not unlike malaria. However, at this stage, I cannot be certain what it is. I am certain only of one thing, it is quite serious. We have had a few cases break out farther inland, and I have already lost two patients who have had similar symptoms.”

“Indeed, you say!” the comte snapped.

Heather could see he was seriously shocked and worried. “Maurice...you and she visited a place with a stagnant pond the other day. Could it be the water? Louise dipped her hands and handkerchief into the water when she was overheated. I recall her mentioning that to me. *Could it be that?*”

“If you won’t allow me to bleed her, you must keep watch, keep doing what Miss Martin has been doing with the rosewater and the soft damp rag. We can only hope the fever breaks.” He put a container on the night stand. “A little laudanum might help, but I wouldn’t depend on it. I shall look in on her tomorrow.”

“I will see you out,” the comte said as he politely led the doctor from the room.

Louise began to mumble. She opened her eyes and cried, “Blood... *my husband*...blood...”

Heather knew she was referring to the guillotine. Louise had confided in her about her grief, her fears, her dear husband, and her lost brother and his family.

Heather shooed the nightmare away with gentle words, and reapplied the cool rosewater. It seemed to calm Louise down and she rested quietly again. However, when the comte reappeared, he inclined his head to her and said softly, “I will see to her now.”

“Maurice, I will go down and brew her some sage tea. Papa often used it in the school whenever we had a child down with a fever.”

“Thank you, Heather,” Maurice said, and pulled up a chair to sit beside his sister.

She eyed him before she left the room and was filled with worry. Louise had to get well. She simply had to. How much could one man bear?

* * * * *

The kitchen was a huge rectangular room lined with pantry shelves and open shelving. One wall was totally dominated by a huge fireplace used as a stove. Within its crevices were niches holding copper kettles. Across its middle was an ingenious wrought-iron rotisserie, whose turning spit operated on the principle of heat and air. The heat would rise up the chimney and the rush of hot air would cause a blade within the height of the chimney to rotate, which in turn would cause a chain to revolve on its course, and *voilà*, an excellent rotisserie.

Heather had already met the cook, a large, round black woman with a floppy cap that always seemed to sit askew on her short dark curls. As Heather entered, the cook stood over an enormous pot of slowly simmering cherries, which she was preparing for jam.

The cook stopped her ministrations, left the wood ladle in the pot, and opened her eyes wide when she saw Heather.

“Ah, child, what is it?”

“Belle...her ladyship is ill, so ill,” Heather cried, and went into Belle’s waiting arms. They had become very close almost at once.

“Bless ya child, it is in the Lord’s hands.”

“Do we have sage?” Heather sniffed. “My father says sage tea does wonders.”

“Yessum, I’ll get on that right now. Her ladyship has been all kindness, and we’ll make her right, that we will.” Belle hurried about pulling out what she needed from the cupboard as she set the water to boil.

“Honey and lemon...yessum, we’ll add that,” Belle said as much to herself as she did to Heather. “It’s the swamp fever, it is. I’ve seen it afore, I have.”

“And did you...do you know of anything that was used that actually helped?”

“Yessum, but if I tells you, and then somethin’ goes wrong...?” Belle said uncertainly.

“Belle, do you trust the comte?”

“Yessum...we all does, but...the other white men?” She shook her head.

“Then I shall say I knew of this remedy from my books and asked you to prepare it. You have naught to fear. Only, what is it?”

“It grows right here at Brabant, it does,” Belle said.

Heather took her hands. “What is it?”

“Tamarind pulp,” Belle said tentatively.

Heather took up the tray Belle had prepared with the sage tea and said softly, “Belle, if her ladyship doesn’t improve...we’ll have to get a hold of this Tamarind pulp, so you think about that, yes?”

“Yessum,” Belle said, but looked worried all the same.

* * * * *

Abovestairs, Louise tossed violently. Now and then whimpering, calling for her dead husband, cursing Robespierre, and then sinking back against her pillow in a wretched sweat.

Maurice's heart was wrenched and twisted as he wiped down his sister's face with the cool rosewater, and spoke softly to her in his attempt to soothe her fitfulness.

“Non, ma petite soeur. Non...it is over, it is done. You are here with me. You must get well, be calm and rest. I need you, Louise. Please, for me, be calm,” he said quietly.

He settled back in his chair, feeling strangely exhausted. He put a hand to his face, as he was experiencing a great deal of discomfort. The breeze from the open windows did nothing to alleviate the fact that he felt hotter than usual. What was he going to do? Louise was fitful, and he couldn't bear it if he lost her.

He stood from his chair in an attempt to walk to the balcony and get some air, but a dizziness took control of his limbs and he fell back onto his chair with a thump.

“Ah, no...” he said out loud as he realized he was dangerously ill. *Not now.*

Heather opened the door and started inside. The tisane with some crackers on a plate rested on the tray she carried towards Louise's nightstand.

What met her gaze made her gasp and stop in place. She saw Maurice collapsed and unconscious in the chair beside Louise's bed.

She called, “Maurice!” and hurried towards him, putting the tray down on the nightstand so she could reach and pull the bellrope. She yanked hard several times before she hurried back and knelt beside the comte. She touched his wrist and noted his pulse was slow, very slow. “Oh, no...Maurice.”

Bunky, who had been talking with one of the household servants, was the first to appear.

“Miss Heather. What is it, what has happened?”

“He has the fever. Bunky...we need to get him to his bed,” Heather cried, and then watched the big black man, Roan, and Bunky manage the come between them.

“Aye, we’ll see to him, get him into bed, and then what do you want us to do?” Bunky asked worriedly.

“I will be there in a moment. Take off his shirt and boots...make him comfortable, and I will be there as soon as I can get this into Louise.”

As she sat beside Louise, she felt a fear clutch her heart, but pushed it aside as she helped Louise lift her head so she could pour some of the lukewarm tisane into her.

Louise choked and cried out, “No...you are killing me. NO.”

“It will do you good,” Heather said. “Now...just a little more, darling, just a little more.”

Louise did manage to get some of the brew down before she fell back against her pillows.

Heather jumped to her feet and ran towards Maurice’s bedroom. Her beloved Louise and Maurice were in trouble, serious trouble, and she had to do something to make them well. She simply had to!

~ **Sixteen** ~

TWO DAYS DRAGGED BY AND neither Maurice nor Louise showed any signs of improvement. Heather was near exhaustion as she worked between them.

Bunky, ever ready to help, had relieved her so she could get some sleep, but she felt this overwhelming need not to be far from their side, and sleep did not come easy or enough.

It broke her to hear Maurice call her name. She whispered calming words as she

wiped his burning forehead with the cool wet rag. She reassured him as best she could. "I am here, Maurice...dear Maurice, *I am here.*"

"Don't go," he said in his delirium. "Heather—stay... *s'il te plais.*"

Bunky had arrived and heard this. He touched Heather's shoulder. "Miss...ye know he purchased two suites, one for each of us, on the passenger ship back to Cornwall. He told me and bade me keep the tickets safe when he got back from town. It leaves in three more days."

"You take your ticket and return home, Bunky, but I cannot leave them like this. I simply cannot," Heather said.

"No, I go where ye go. That is the long and the short of it," Bunky said. "And if ye gave me my druthers, I love it here at Brabant. I do."

She squeezed his hand and returned to wiping Maurice's face, neck, and chest.

Belle appeared with a tray of crackers and sage tea, which Heather had been forcing down both her patients' throats to no avail. The cook eyed Bunky, who was forever in her kitchen, always hungry and stealing something to eat. He had quickly become a favorite. "Eh, no change?" Belle asked.

"None, the sage tea is not helping at all, and I am at my wits' end." Heather was near to sobbing.

"Mistress...m'instincts tell me to trust ya, so I will. This tisane won't help. It jest won't, cuz it be the swamp fever, that is the truth of it. M'master and his sister have to get better. I knows I said there was something that might help the swamp fever...but, I'm well...there are those that will hold me to it if it goes wrong."

"No, that isn't so, Belle. I have made you a promise and I keep my promises. Anything we do will be completely on me," Heather said on a hushed note. "Will you make the potion? Will you make it now?"

"Yessum, as I told ya, we grows it right here at Brabant and I have already mashed and brewed it. If ya want...mistress, I can have it ready in jest a few minutes."

“Of course, oh, Belle, thank you for trusting me. You will never regret it,” Heather said.

Belle smiled broadly as she threw her hands excitedly about and started out of the room, calling over her shoulder, “Jest a minute, mistress, and I’ll be back.”

Heather and Bunky watched the cook as she left and turned to one another. “Do ye think this potion thing will work, Miss Heather?” Bunky asked.

“What I think, Bunky, is that thus far nothing else has worked and so we must give it a try,”

Heather answered.

It seemed a very short while and Belle was back with a plate of the dark pulp. Heather watched as Belle put a pot of boiling water on the nearby table and dropped the pulp into it. “We got to let it sit, then we’ll strain it. After it cools, we can make ‘em swallow it every two or three hours. That will break the fever, Lord help us, let it break the fever.”

“Oh, Belle, you are a miracle worker. I know that this will work. I feel it,” Heather cried hopefully.

Some hours later, neither one of Heather’s patients seemed any better. Heather sank into her chair and began to weep. Both Louise and Maurice were so pale and rarely opened their eyes, and then only when they were fitful and tossing.

What was she going to do? If this continued, they could die. They could die. Louise, who she adored as the sister she had never had. Maurice, who was friend...more than friend, not Godwin, but a man she did love.

She left Maurice’s side and went to Louise’s room, where she dismissed the maid to go for something to eat.

Heather sat beside the bed where Louise seemed to be sleeping more peacefully than usual.

Heather reapplied the wet rag and whispered, “Oh, darling, my dearest friend in all the world, please, please, Louise, do get well.”

Heather was joyfully startled when at that very moment Louise's eyes suddenly opened wide and a faint smile flickered over the woman's face.

Heather cried out, "Louise, oh, Louise...no, no, don't try to speak." She picked up the bowl with the Tamarind soup and urged her, "Please, sip some more of this soup...do." She held Louise up slightly and in position, and saw how weak the woman was as she helped her get down some of the dark potion.

Louise smiled and drifted off to sleep again, but Heather, feeling her friend's head, was sure the fever had broken. She nearly ran to Maurice's room and met Bunky in the hall. "Dear Bunky, I sent her ladyship's maid to go and get something to eat. Call her back. I must attend Maurice.

Louise's fever has broken... *she is better.*"

"Aw, right glad I am of it. Aye...I'll go fetch her maid to stay with her and meet ye in his lordship's bedchamber in a few moments."

"Yes, Bunky, yes. We need one more miracle now."

Heather ran to Maurice's room, but her heart sank to find his head still burning. He seemed no better, no better at all. Why was that? She and Bunky had gotten the Tamarind soup down his throat, he too should be better.

"Please God," she prayed out loud. "Just one more miracle, please. If you spare him, I will stay, I will marry him...I will put my love for Godwin aside. Please, just don't let Maurice die."

Maurice was good and kind. He was a wonderful man, and he would be a superb father to her unborn child. She had been wicked to fall in love and bed a married man. What could have possessed her? This was her punishment. She was being shown very clearly how awful she had been, and how good she could be if only Maurice would not die.

"Maurice, this is my fault," she told him as she held his hand. "You don't want to get better.

You were in a terrible state of mind and that is all my fault. *I did this to you.* Please, my darling, hear me. If you get well, if you try harder and you get well, *I*

will stay. I will marry you. I promise. Maurice, hear me, get well and make me your wife. Please, Maurice, hear me.”

His body was ravaged with the swamp fever. He tossed fitfully in his bed as Heather continued to tend to him and whisper her promise.

Bunky had stopped at the doorway and sighed as he approached. “I’m sorry for it, Miss Heather, I overheard ye as I came in. I’m sorry for it. I know better than anyone else what ye have been through and how much ye want to get home, and I know *ye think* ye are doing the right thing, but I don’t know for certain that it is. I know that I wish we could stay on. I wanted ye to want to stay, but ye are doing it for all the wrong reasons, and that is because ye are a good

woman, not because ye are wicked. I am sorry for it all and I make ye a promise that I will stand by ye always. If ye go, so do I...and if ye stay, though I don’t think it is right for ye to do so, I stay. That is the way of it.”

“Thank you, Bunky,” Heather said after a long moment. “Now help me hold his head up so I can get more of the potion down his throat.”

Heather spent the night tending to Maurice and repeating her promise to him, whispering in his ear, even telling him that she loved him.

Bunky stayed with him whenever she left the room to look in on Louise, who slept peacefully.

Bunky refused to leave Heather to catch some sleep and helped her tend to the comte as she forced the Tamarind down his throat.

During the small hours, Heather fell asleep in her chair, Bunky in his, until the morning sun’s rays filtered through the palms and into the room.

Heather woke with a start and sighed to see Bunky rubbing his eyes in the chair by the window. “Dear Bunky. Go on, get washed up and have a bite to eat below.”

“Aye, but what of ye, miss? I haven’t seen ye eat proper in days,” he answered worriedly.

“Yes, yes, if you like, you may bring me some tea and a pasty. I am hungry,” she said absently, and watched him depart.

Heather’s face went into her hands and then she drew a long breath before she approached Maurice and applied rosewater to his forehead and said, “Maurice, hear me, please, come back to me, *be my husband*...Maurice? I will marry you. *I will marry you.*”

He stirred and she cried out, “Maurice, darling...Maurice.” She realized then that his forehead was no longer burning and whispered, “You heard me, darling...you heard me.”

He choked as he tried to speak, his eyelids fluttered open and he finally got the words out,

“Will...you?”

Heather dropped to his chest and sobbed. “Oh, thank God, thank God. Yes, yes, I will marry you, sweet man. All you need to do is get well. Concentrate on getting well.”

He smiled and fell asleep.

Bunky returned with a tray and suddenly Heather turned to him joyfully. “Bunky, his fever has broken. He heard me. We are staying.”

“Aye then, Miss Heather,” Bunky said, but Heather saw the doubt in his eyes.

She took the tray from him and set it down to give him a hug. “My dear friend, Bunky, don’t look so glum. I shall do very nicely.”

“I think ye are sacrificing one life for another, and I’m not certain ye will ever get over it,”

he said, and shook his head. “I’m sorry for it, miss...bless ye, I am sorry for it.”

* * * * *

Some hours later, washed, refreshed, and fed, Heather returned to Maurice’s

suite and found him comfortably resting, but awake.

Bunky had brought him some gruel, but he had not yet touched it.

She pulled a chair close and nodded to Bunky. “Go and get some much deserved rest, Bunky dear.”

He grinned. “Aye...but first I think I’ll get some of Belle’s delicious bread and ham.”

Heather watched him go and returned her attention to Maurice, who had reached for and taken her hand. His grip was weak, and she knew he had quite a few more days to full recovery.

“Will you eat the gruel now, sir?” She dimpled at him.

“Oui...I will eat the gruel,” he answered, and allowed her to place a small spoonful in his mouth.

“Is it most horrid?” she asked on a tease.

“Non, not so very. Belle has laced it with honey,” he said, and gave her a weak smile.

She gave him another spoonful and he allowed it, but said before she could raise the spoon to his mouth again, “My Heather...I was trapped in a dream, an awful dream.”

“It is over,” she said.

“It will be over...but let me tell you of it. We were at the French court. You were there—

naked with only jewels around your neck and jeweled slippers on your feet. I wanted to shield you from the dirty glances you were getting. *You would not look at me.* You would not allow me to approach, and then all at once, I heard your voice calling and I was able to cover you with my coat and hold you close. I heard you, Heather. Through it all, I heard you say you will marry me.

I heard you say you love me. Is it true?"

Heather took his hands to her face and silently cried. She was so thankful that he had heard her and come through the fever. She was so thankful he was well. It was all she could think about in that moment. "Yes, Maurice. When I thought I could lose you to the swamp fever, I realized...I love you, and my place is here with you." It was, she told herself, a half-truth.

She would marry Maurice de Brabant and give him all she had to give. She wanted him, she needed him, and she even loved him. Passionate love? No, but...perhaps one day Godwin would be a youthful memory and Maurice would be her passion. She could only hope.

Cornwall was an uncertain future and certainly with Sara lurking to do her worst, not the place to expose her child. Sara had finally won. Sara, who would be there in the wings, a threat to her child and even to Godwin, had won the battle.

Heather sighed, but she was not unhappy. She would stay and make Maurice's life full, and she would make a life here on this beautiful island. He would be husband to her and father to her unborn child. Louise was right, this was the only way—the decent way to go forward.

Thus, it was that Heather made her fateful decision that day and kept her promise to God. In so doing, a portion of Heather Martin was put to rest, perhaps never to be recalled.

Such was the joining of Heather Martin and the Comte de Brabant.

Across the ocean, at Windmera in Cornwall, Godwin felt as though a knife had sliced through his heart and hopes. She wasn't coming back. His life, his hopes, his dreams were over.

He heard a pony's hooves approach and watched as Roderick jumped off and approached, eyeing him worriedly. "Come, sir, the horse auction in town will be starting soon. We have just enough time to get there."

"Yes, son...off we go," Godwin said, and as he left, he turned again to look out to sea.

And so a chapter ended only to be reopened in later years.

Look for **Windmera-Illusion (Part Two)** coming in July

An excerpt:

Windmera—Illusion

By Claudy Conn

When we left Heather Martin in Windmera-Desperation, decisions that would affect all their lives had been made.

Thus, it was that Heather made her fateful decision that day and kept her promise to God. In so doing, a portion of Heather Martin was put to rest, perhaps never to be recalled.

Such was the joining of Heather Martin and the Comte de Brabant.

Across the ocean, at Windmera, in Cornwall, Godwin felt as though a knife had sliced through his heart and hopes. She wasn't coming back. His life, his hopes, his dreams were over.

He heard a pony's hooves rumbling across the hard earth and watched as Roderick jumped off and approached, eyeing him worriedly. "Come, sir, the horse auction in town will be starting soon. We have just enough time to get there."

"Yes, son...off we go," Godwin said, and as he left, he turned again to look out to sea.

And so a chapter ended only to be reopened in later years.

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,

Brief as the lightning in the collied night,

That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,

And ere a man hath power to say, "Behold!"

The jaws of darkness do devour it up:

So quick bright things come to confusion.

Shakespeare,

A Midsummer Night's Dream

~ **One** ~

February 1812

VARIEGATED SHADES OF GREEN OSCILLATED at her side, rising heavenward in a sky that seemed to meet and stroke the earth. Ahead, a creamy sand stretched beneath bare feet.

Huge boulders of aged grey coral rock traced a path to the translucent sea of aqua and deeper blues. It was as though an ancient God had painted the scene and then brought it to life.

It was perfection. She walked amongst the isle's offerings, her roan doggedly following her steps in the sand.

Her hair of thick black silk blew around her face in the wind, and she had to constantly remove it from her eyes. She stopped at a pool of water left by the receding tide and thought as she gazed into its clear stillness.

She could recall how many times her father had called her an English hoyden.

He had also been fond of telling her she had her mother's violet eyes and exquisite face, the only difference being her black hair. Her mother had been a redhead.

Windmera gathered her skirts, hiking them up and tucking the hem into her waistband, before she stepped into the shallows of the beautiful aqua colored water. She was sure that her father, had he been alive, would have scolded her to take care for the proprieties.

She was Windmera, Mistress of Brabant, and her flighty Aunt Louise agreed with many of her notions that a woman should have the same freedoms as a man.

Windmera had been born to Heather and Maurice nineteen years before. Her life had started on a wild winter night. The island had been struck with the tail of a hurricane. The gale blew fiercely, making it impossible to ride for the doctor, but it was her time to be born, and born she was. She arrived fighting for breath, determined to take her place in the world, and so she had.

Her parents and everyone at Brabant Plantation lavished affection on her, thus, she grew into a maid full of willfulness. She was headstrong in everything and yet modifying such faults were her capacity for compassion, her ability to love the smallest and meekest of God's creations, her scampish charm, and her naughty wit. She was a fighter, a rebel, and even the passing of first a mother she worshipped, and not long afterwards, a father she adored, she remained unbroken.

She had turned to her Tante Louise who had been a light in her life. And, of course, Bunky.

After her father had passed three years ago, those two had seen her through the crisis of a grief that had sorely challenged her.

Dear Bunky, who had come with her mother to Barbados. Bunky, her cherished uncle,

'never a servant', her mother had often objected when he called himself head groom.

She could hear her mother laugh and say, "Head groom? No, you are a brother, always a brother."

Between Bunky and her Tante Louise, she found much joy and laughter, each she thought funny in their own way. They had been there for her when her mother died because her father had been so stricken with grief that he took to spending much of his time away from the house.

Her mother's memory, beloved and dear, often troubled her. During the last moments of her mother's life, she knew her mother wanted to tell her something

and kept looking at Windy's father as though asking for help in that regard.

In the end, Windy had to lower her ear to her mother's lips and she heard only one word,

"Godwi..."

And her mother passed.

Now, shoving the dulled grief away, she waded into the aqua ocean's stream, when the sound of a man's voice called out and caught her attention.

She shaded her eyes to see a sailor in a captain's hat and a billowy white shirt walking her way.

He was an older gentleman and oddly enough, he called her by her mother's name.

"Heather...Heather Martin?"

* * * * *

Windmera stared at a man she did not know. Why was he calling her by her mother's name—maiden name at that? Had he known her mother before she came to Barbados?

He was tall and wore a merchant's captain's garb. His captain hat was tilted over a bulk of thick grey hair. His beard, also grey was short and neatly cropped around his pleasant face. As he approached, she saw that his blue eyes were warm and his smile broad.

"What did you say?" she asked just to be certain she hadn't heard incorrectly. "What did you call me?"

He was only a few feet away and his smile faded into a frown as he answered, "Er...my mistake, miss. You look so much like a young woman I knew many years ago in Cornwall," he answered doubtfully.

Windmera beamed, and clapped her hands together, "Oh, then you did call me

Heather Martin,” she extended her hand. “Heather was my mother.”

He took her hand almost reverently and Windy was surprised by it. As he didn't speak, she broke the silence, “I am told I am much like her.”

“Yes, yes, you are, the very spit and image of her, and though I met her only once, she was not the sort you forget. Aye, but...I am being rude. What is your given name?”

Windmera could see he was more than usually excited at discovering the daughter of an old friend. He seemed absolutely gleeful. He must have been a really close friend of her mother's though she could not remember her mother ever mentioning a captain in her past. She smiled and said, “I am Windmera de Brabant, sir...and you are?”

His smile vanished abruptly as he said sadly, “Windmera, of course your name would be Windmera, but you said, de Brabant?”

She laughed just a bit confused. Why did he say of course her name would be Windmera?

Had her mother been close enough to him to tell him about a cliffside she loved? She knew she was named for that. “Why, yes. My father was the comte de Brabant. But please, who are you?”

“Captain John Pearson,” he said and inclined his head. “But, your mother? Is she at home?”

May I call on her?”

Windmera's eyes darkened with sadness, “I am sorry...I lost my mother some years ago.”

His face dropped and she could see he took this news very hard. She reached out and touched his arm. “I am so sorry to give you this news just when you thought you had found her again.”

He stared at her and said, “You are so much like her...those violet eyes, your face...but your hair is much like your father's.”

“Oh, did you know my father?” she frowned then. “But...my father’s hair though turning white was auburn...not black.” She beamed, “I often asked my mother where I got my black hair from and she would say ancestry is a funny thing.”

“Forgive me...this has all been such a shock,” the captain said slowly.

“Come along,” Windmera said taking command of the situation in a way that was all her own. “You and I should walk this lovely beach and talk. I am certain you have many questions.”

“You are most perceptive and kind...again, much like your mother,” he answered as he fell in step beside her.

She had so many questions and started by asking, “My mother often described Cornwall.

She loved the rugged landscape there.”

“How did she happen to find her way here?”

“Ah,” Windmera frowned for a moment. “Apparently my father was in Cornwall on business. They met, went to France where he rescued my aunt Louise and came here...they were married here.” She frowned as this had been a question never answered properly by her mother.

How is it they did not marry in Cornwall where her mother had a vicar for a relative?

She had always dismissed it, but it was a part of a puzzle that had never fit.

“Did she ever mention me or any of her friends back home?”

“No...I don’t think so. I would have remembered because I always wondered about that,”

Windmera answered.

He touched her face, “You have never heard the name Godwin?”

“No...wait, in the last few moments, my mother whispered part of a name... Godw. I just assumed she was calling to God,” Windmera eyed him. “Who is this Godwin? A relative I should know?”

He shook his head, “Ah, no, not really.”

She eyed him, thinking there was something he was holding back.

Be sure to look for Windmera-Illusion:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07DKRFD9T>



Claudy Conn, a native New Yorker, now lives with her husband, Bob; Rocky Man, who weighs in presently at 190 pounds and their horse, Southern Pride.

She loves horses and riding and raised her ten-year-old gelding Southern Pride from the moment he was born. She also loves gardening, swimming, skiing, hiking, and travel—and of course, reading, writing, but no, she says, no arithmetic!

To get her monthly news, her reviews for all her new paranormal romances, and excerpts, come on and visit her at her website.

To see pictures of their hybrid wolf and his mother Cherokee now gone, have a look at her Facebook page!

For all her titles check out her amazon page: Claudy Conn