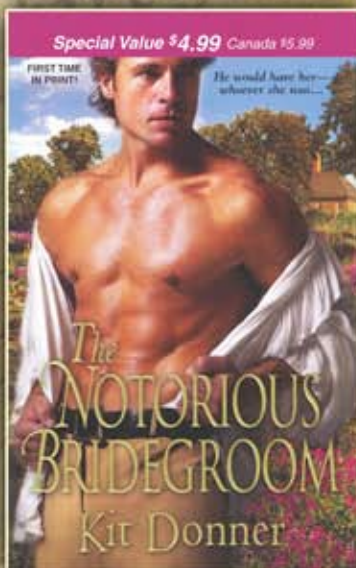
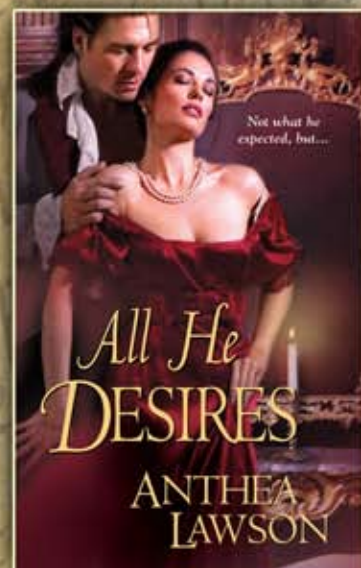


# ZEBRA AUTHORS

a collection of 1st *Ch*apters



# HIGHLAND DRAGON

*A love born of fire...*

KIMBERLY  
KILLION



**“Fascinating...well-crafted romance. The appeal of Killion’s characters comes from their honor, intelligence and humanity.”**

**–Romantic Times, 4-star review**



# Highland Dragon

by

Kimberly Killion

[www.kimberlykillion.com](http://www.kimberlykillion.com)



October 2009

ISBN-10: 1420104411

ISBN-13: 978-1420104417



ZEBRA BOOKS

Kensington Publishing Corp.

[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)



## Prologue

### SCOTLAND HIGHLANDS, 1484

Hidden behind a false panel, ten-year-old Calin MacLeod covered his ears with sweaty palms. The screams echoing throughout Brycen Castle were loud enough to loosen his teeth.

Lena Kinnon cried for mercy with every gut-wrenching contraction, but didn't receive the slightest morsel of compassion from the many men present. Her position held no dignity, sprawled atop the council table like a sacrificial lamb. The wool of her soiled sark draped between her raised knees and provided her little privacy. No one wiped her brow or offered soothing words of comfort.

A woman was supposed to suffer during childbirth to pay for the sins of Eve. Even at his young age, Calin knew the laws of the church. He also knew Lena had already suffered more than any woman in Clan Kinnon. The bruises speckling her pale skin were evidence of the constant torture she endured at the hands of her ruthless husband.

The sliver of space between the wooden planks where Calin hid was no wider than the trunk of a sapling, but provided a view of his da, Laird MacLeod, who stood against a stone pilaster opposite Laird Kinnon. Da's dark hair had grayed at the temples over the recent months, and his face sagged in weariness, but his rigid stance displayed his contained rage. With his eyes narrowed, Da stroked the golden bull's head engraved into the signet ring he wore and glared at his enemy.

Two pairs of MacLeod warriors flanked each side of his da, while four Kinnon warriors surrounded Laird Baen Kinnon. All were unarmed as was previously agreed upon by both lairds.

"Ye keep screamin', wife. It'll cleanse your black English soul." Laird Kinnon paced the council chamber, a sneer twisting his pitted face.

Calin hated the chieftain of his neighboring clan as much as Da did. Laird Kinnon

was a cold-hearted demon. Anyone who would beat his lady wife during her childbearing time walked upon this earth with the devil's black blood flowing through his veins.

“Ye bear me another bitch and it will be your last.”

“Please, Baen, have ye no mercy? Send for the midwife, please.” Lena gripped the sides of her belly and arched her back.

Laird Kinnon slapped her across the face with an open palm. Sweat sprayed over the tabletop. “Still your tongue, wife, or I'll cut it out.” He spread his arms wide, gesturing to the many warriors present. “There be plenty o' eager hands awaitin' to catch my male bairn as soon as ye free him from your spoiled womb.”

Calin bit his tongue to avoid cursing the man as venomously as his da always did. Calin had lived his whole life without a mam to kiss his cheek or offer him praise. Over the past few months, Lena had been like a mother to him. She was kind and gentle and Laird Kinnon should burn in the deepest pit of hell for the way he abused his lady wife. Calin didn't have to be an aged warrior to know this was wrong. Lena's child was nothing more to Laird Kinnon than a binding contract.

A contract that affected Calin's future. Which was precisely why he'd disobeyed Da's direct order not to follow him to the Kinnon keep when word of Lena's lying-in arrived. If Lena bore a daughter, the babe would become his betrothed.

Calin and his friend, Kendrick Neish of Clan Kinnon, had discovered the secluded compartment just two months past after stumbling into the pitch-black caverns beneath the castle. Since then, they had become privy to every council meeting between their clans. They knew of war and how the English wanted to reign over Scotland. Both had heard the gruesome tales of entire villages being slaughtered. Neither he nor Kendrick wanted their clans to suffer such a fate. Calin knew they were supposed to be enemies, but they wanted the same thing—an alliance.

For five hours, Calin had hugged his twisted limbs in the narrow space while Lena labored in the corner. His arse tingled, and his toes had gone numb hours before inside his leather brogues. The dank odor of moldy floor rushes drifted into his hiding place. A prayer floated into his ear.

*“Fàilte dhut a Mhoire, tha thu lan de na gràsan...”* In the Gaelic tongue, Father Harald prayed to the Blessed Mother while he paced the edge of the chamber. The granite beads of his rosary clattered with his every movement. The young priest had been summoned to perform the baptism or to administer Last Rites in the event this child didn't survive—as Lena's previous three babes had not.

Lena pushed and Calin sucked in air.

He exhaled when she did. Her whole body convulsed, his shivered. Wet ropes of black hair clung to her face and neck. Propped on her elbows, her head fell back. Her

mouth opened, and she screamed in agony.

One of the warriors caught the babe just as it slid from Lena's body.

Calin held his breath awaiting the outcome.

"A lass, Laird Kinnon," the old man announced grimly while he held the babe by the ankles and slapped her rump. He then laid her atop Lena's quivering abdomen.

Lena pulled the crying child to her breast and stroked her newborn skin. Relief washed over her face and tears spilled over her cheeks when she smiled at Da. All would be well now.

"Seal off the hall and bring me the other child." The cord still attached his infant daughter to his wife when Laird Kinnon commanded his seneschal. His dark eyes blazed with contempt as he stared directly at Da. "Ye will ne'er hold claim to my land. Nor will ye e'er touch my wife again."

"I have ne'er wanted your land." Da stepped closer to Lena.

"But ye dinnae deny touching my wife."

Da glanced at Lena.

A dozen broad-shouldered men materialized from the darkened recesses of Brycen Castle. Their weapons flickered beneath golden wall torches. A raw-boned nursemaid, escorted by another warrior, entered the chamber, her fear evident in sunken wide eyes. In her arms, she held another babe swaddled in stripped wool, its fists swatted the air. With trembling hands, she placed the babe in the crook of Laird Kinnon's arm.

Confused, Calin studied the exchange. Laird Kinnon had agreed to unite their clans if Lena bore a daughter.

Laird Kinnon turned to his warriors. "Send their miserable souls to the devil. All of them." His tone was devoid of mercy. Of compassion. Of any emotion except contempt.

He stepped out of the keep onto the stone rampart. "I have a son!" he shouted.

The villagers of Dalkirth roared their approval while the words echoed in Calin's ears.

*Nay! 'Tis a lie!* He gawked in horror as the shadowed knights charged his clansmen. Da's devoted seneschal used a flaming pitch-pine torch to defend the attack. His efforts were futile. With one swing of a halberd, a Kinnon warrior beheaded him. Another fiend slashed one of the MacLeod warriors from gullet to navel. Fists clutched enemy plaid as he fell to his knees.

Calin's heart tripped. His hands flattened against the panel. His nose pressed into the crack. *Oh saints, help them!*

The saints could no more help his kinsmen than the bits of wood they used as shield

and sword. The Kinnon warriors buried the steel of their weapons into the MacLeods' flesh, spreading pools of dark blood over their crossbarred plaids. Slaughtered before his eyes were his Da's most loyal kinsmen. Calin's stomach convulsed and saliva grew thick in his mouth. He wanted to run and hide his eyes from the nightmare.

Standing amid the four fallen men, Da was trapped. His hand slid to the empty scabbard at his hip. There was no weapon. No claymore to defend himself against this preplanned attack. Six Kinnons surrounded Da. He turned toward Lena.

Calin froze. Unshed tears scalded his eyes. *Run, Da!* he screamed in his head, but instead, Da fell upon Lena. He brushed the tears from her cheeks then pressed his lips to hers.

A single warrior cast a shadow over Da like a demon cloaked in black mist. Leather-clad hands gripped the hilt of a battle-axe and raised the lethal weapon over his head. In one thrust, he buried the steel between Da's shoulders.

Lena screamed as his body slid off her and crumpled to the floor.

Calin choked on the knot in his throat as the bloody massacre branded an image in his mind. His pulse pounded in his neck, making his cries hard to swallow. Terrified they would find him, he splayed his violently shaking fingers over his eyes, all the while chastising himself for cowardice. His world went black, along with his mind, his heart, his soul.

The dying groans of suffering drummed through his ears, but the scream slicing through the air brought sight back to his eyes.

*Lena.*

Shame flooded Calin as he watched the same warrior unsheathe a black dirk from his stocking. He held Lena's chin while he slashed the sharp *sgian dubh* across her throat. With her infant daughter nuzzling at her breast, Lena's head fell to the side, giving Calin one last look into crystal-blue eyes before the terror in her face vanished along with her spirit.

The warrior's leathery hand hovered over the nape of the babe. His other hand held the weapon that would end her short life. The coppery taste of blood pooled on Calin's tongue from where he bit the inside of his cheek.

Father Harrald dropped to his knees at the warrior's feet. "Save your soul and cease. Please, cease. I beg of ye. The others had been baptized. She must be baptized."

The Kinnon warrior hoisted the priest up by the hood of his habit and pointed his dirk at one of the other warriors. "Confess." The clansmen gave their confessions one by one, binding Father Harrald to clerical secrecy. After the last warrior reconciled his sins, he shoved the priest toward Lena. "Ye may proceed with the rites. Someone will return to collect the babe."

The men vanished into the shadows from whence they came.

The violent turn of events had Calin near to retching. He gripped his churning gut with clenched fingers and stared at the babe still nestled atop her dead mother's bosom—daughter to the demon who murdered his father, but also his betrothed. He didn't know whether to hate her or protect her. He had nary a doubt her brief life would tragically end in much the same way as Lena's first three daughters.

The fire's reflection flickered off the blade Father Harrald used to sever the cord binding the babe to her mother. The priest washed the remnants of birth from her skin and laid her in a pile of linens next to Lena. His voice quavered with the administration of blessed sacraments. "*An tAthair, An Mac, An Spiorad Naomh.*" Signing the cross over the babe, he blew breath upon her, and baptized her with holy oils.

Calin crawled from his hiding place, wiping the wetness from his cheeks. He raked the patch of brown hair falling loosely over his brow, while stepping over the blood and carnage. Unable to tear his gaze from Da's body, he let the sickly sweet stench of death fill his nostrils and revive his spirit with the promise of vengeance. The metallic acid thickened in his throat, but he swallowed his fear, his grief, his newfound hate. He had but one purpose now—avenge his father's death. And to do so, he needed the babe.

Father Harrald flinched. "Young Calin, ye must not be here."

Ignoring the priest, Calin knelt at Da's side. He brushed a lock of graying hair from Da's damp brow and willed him to stand, but his skin paled as a pool of blood welled beneath him. Calin bent to his ear. "Blood of my blood. I'll not fail ye, Da. I vow it."

Father Harrald's hand rested on Calin's shoulder. "They'll murder ye, just as sure as they will the babe. Ye must go."

"Father Harrald, ye will see that Da and these men are returned to MacLeod soil. Get word to Uncle Kerk. Tell him I am weel, and I'll be home soon." Calin wished his voice didn't falter. He needed to be a man, a warrior. He swallowed hard then pulled the signet ring from Da's limp hand and set the engraved crest against a glowing ember in the hearth.

Calin couldn't meet the priest's eyes. "An eye for an eye. She's the key to the alliance, and she belongs to me." He spoke with defiance as he handled the squirming babe. He carried her to the hearth and set her atop a wooden basin. Using a strip of heavy wool to retrieve the signet ring from a hot coal, he rolled her onto her side and branded her bottom with the MacLeod crest. She let out a shrill scream, followed by shuddering sobs. He wrapped the babe in linens, then secured her in Lena's stripped *arisaid*, fastening the wool with her family brooch. He held her close and attempted to soothe her into submission. One day he would tell her about her mam and how kind Lena had been to him.

So many questions stirred in Calin's troubled mind, but one in particular needed answering. "I know ye heard Da's confession last week. I also know ye are bound by the seal o' the confessional, so I'll understand if ye cannae answer my question."

"What's your question, my son?" Father Harrald scanned the entrance to the chamber.

"Da loved Lena." Calin paused with his gaze fixed on the newborn bundle. "Is this babe of my own blood?"

"Nay. Lena was swollen with her fourth child before she ever met your da. Rest assured, your young bride is not your sister. Now ye must go, quickly."

Retrieving a torch from a wall bracket, Calin reentered the nook. The babe whimpered against his chest. A tiny hand swatted his chin. She was warm and smelled of innocence. He glanced over his shoulder at Da's body, his eyes lowered. He should have done something. At least tried to stop them. He was weak, spineless. A coward.

Calin's eyes found Father Harrald, his skin gray with worry. "What will ye tell them when they return for the babe?"

"I'll tell them a warrior took her. 'Twill not be a lie."

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of intricate scrollwork, floral patterns, and a central cross-like motif, positioned below the chapter title.

AUGUST, 1502

How can Hell be so cold?

Akira Neish inhaled gulps of icy air as she struggled to keep pace with the guard's strides. She clutched the rope binding her to the warrior in an effort to ease the pain pulsing around her bruised wrists. As she stumbled down a stone stairwell behind him, she prayed her weak legs wouldn't collapse beneath her. She felt certain this passageway must lead straight to Satan's realm.

They reached the end of the tunnel where a single pitch-pine torch illuminated a door. The rock walls glistened with seepage, and the smell of soot burned the flesh in her throat.

Her guard stopped abruptly. Akira caught herself just before she might have crashed into his back. The screech of scraping iron sent a jolt of dread up her spine as he slid the crossbar to release the door. Akira swallowed hard, fearing the fate that awaited her on the other side. The warrior ducked beneath the doorjamb and pulled her into a room lit by firelight.

Whispers flitted through the air.

Akira's breath hitched when she saw the women. They were everywhere—old and young, chained to the floor, huddled in groups. Their haunted eyes glowed in the torchlight, and all wore yellow shifts, thin enough to see through. Who were they? What was this place?

Before she could study them further, the guard roughly hauled her up beside him. Her black hair webbed over her face with the abrupt movement.

He bent to her ear. "Think ye the MacLeods who brought ye here are evil? Wait til ye meet the MacLeods of the outer isles." He licked her cheek. His vile odor made bile rise in her throat, but she refused to let him see her fear. His dark brows rose and his lips curled into an ugly snarl. "Now 'tis time ye pay for kicking me in the bollocks, lass."

Placing his booted foot atop a barrel, he forced her to bend over his leg. She had to stand on her toes to lessen the crushing of her ribs against his thigh. His fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, holding her in place. Akira knew what was about to happen and braced herself for the humiliation.

“I advise all o’ ye to keep a distance from her. She’s a witch,” he hollered to the captives. The mockery in his voice brought familiar tears to her eyes. She’d been dragged across the outer isles behind her captor’s foul-smelling horses only to be tormented by her secret.

Cold air crept up her thighs as he raised the skirt of her kirtle, exposing the mark on her backside for all to see. The devil’s mark. Gasps echoed through the cavern, warning Akira she would find no pity here, nor friends or allies.

Shame heated her skin, and an age-old anger erupted within her just as it had when the children of her clan had cast their stones and taunts. She refused to be displayed like an animal, regardless of what it might cost her. She pulled back, opened her mouth wide, and bit the heathen’s thigh so hard her jaw pinched.

“Ach! Ye bitch!” Grabbing a fistful of her hair, he jerked her upright. The tip of his dagger made a painful dent in the base of her throat. “Fortunate for ye, ’tis against the code to mark the captives.”

He led her toward the darkest nook in the cavern. Her struggles were futile against his warrior strength. He clasped an iron shackle to her ankle and chained her to a spike in the stone floor, then held her chin between his filthy fingers. “Mayhap I’ll return to dress ye instead of Auld Nattie.”

He was vermin. A blood-sucking leech. She sorely wanted to bite him again or, better yet, gut him with his own dagger, but he turned on his heel and swaggered to the door. The bar clanked, and his fading footsteps left her in welcomed silence.

Her body ached from days of being bound, and the stone floor offered no comfort. She cupped her cold hands to her mouth and blew into her palms. Akira didn’t have to scan the cavern to feel the women’s accusations. This wasn’t the first time she’d been treated like a leper, nor would it be the last, she suspected.

Why was this happening to her? Why had the MacLeods taken her from her clan’s homelands? She bowed her head and prayed Kendrick would come to her aid. But in the three days it took her and her captors to make the journey, she hadn’t once seen any sign of her brother. Akira’s only solace was that the men from her neighboring clan hadn’t delivered her sister into the hands of these demons. Isobel would have never survived the journey across MacLeod soil.

Kendrick would come. He had to.

\* \* \*

Calin studied his childhood friend's size from the thick foliage of late summer. The wee runt grew up brawny.

It would take a man of great force to take Kendrick Neish down—over six feet of raw muscle covered with tufts of dark red hair. Kendrick outweighed him by two stone as a lad, but Calin now matched his height and weight. He could take him.

Calin emerged and cinched a forearm around his old friend's bearded neck.

Kendrick jerked, but quickly checked his initial shock and clutched his hands behind Calin's head. Blue sky and green pine branches filled Calin's vision as he found himself somersaulted over Kendrick's back and into the thin trunk of a birch tree. It snapped. At least he won the battle against the tree, but he'd sorely misjudged his old friend's strength.

He jumped to his feet and swiveled. Kendrick's attention diverted to his sisters frolicking beneath the pelting sprays of a thunderous waterfall. As soon as Kendrick conceded defeat, Calin would figure out which one of the lassies was his bride.

He drove a clenched fist into Kendrick's gut, doubling him over with a grunt. Before Calin could act again, his feet were hauled out from under him, sending him sprawling to the ground on his backside. The air whooshed from his lungs. His eyes flew open in time to see Kendrick lunge for him. Calin dodged, rolled over the forest debris and regained his position. Just once, he wanted to win a brawl against Kendrick. But Calin battled in play and his bride's brother fought to protect his sisters. According to her missives, there were six sisters in all.

Kendrick's color turned red, his nostrils flared, and his pose took on the stance of an angered warrior. Calin suspected he would lose this battle just as Kendrick dove at him. Calin held one hand out as a shield, but Kendrick twisted that arm behind him. Within a blink, Kendrick cradled Calin's head in the crook of his arm, constricting the air in his throat.

"Ye be on Kinnon soil, mon, and it would take verra little to snap your wee neck between my brawny arms."

His comment was delivered with such force Calin couldn't help but laugh at the man.

Kendrick leaned to the side to study him. "Are ye addlebrained, mon? Mayhap a wee bit light in the head?" Kendrick released him with a forceful shove into a bed of prickly pine needles.

From a squatting position, Calin offered him a crooked, ornery grin. "Ye wound me, Kendrick. Ye'd forget the face of an auld friend?"

"I'll rot in Hell afore I claim a mon who attacks me from behind as a friend." Kendrick's burr lifted with his agitation while his arms crossed stubbornly over his broad chest.

Brushing pine needles from his bare thighs, Calin stood, wrinkled his nose, and sniffed the air in jest. “Ye reek like two-day-old haggis, but not rotten yet.”

Kendrick eyed him warily. His jaw tilted.

Calin couldn’t stop the smug grin from lifting his lips while he waited for Kendrick to recognize him. After all, a decade had passed since last they’d seen each other.

Only seconds later, Kendrick pummeled him to the ground in a roar of merriment. “Ye randy, pigheaded, arrogant, wee *bastaird*, ye, Calin MacLeod.”

Calin wrestled with the giant in a heap of fists and feet. He took three blows. One to his nose, the other two connected with his ribs. Eight and twenty was too old for such frivolous horseplay, especially on his wedding day.

Kendrick pinned him. “Ye concede, mon?” he asked an instant before Calin straddled him.

“Nay. ’Tis my turn to win.”

But Kendrick didn’t accept defeat. They rolled in a tangle of limbs, both bleeding from the nose, knuckles maimed and raw, and bare knees in much the same state. Sprawled on his back, Calin clutched his bruised ribs, now suffering from his laughter.

“’Tis been too long, MacLeod,” Kendrick said with a bit of resentment in his voice. “Far too long.”

“I could’ve gone another decade without seeing your ugly puss.” Flashing a smile, Calin struggled to his feet then extended a hand to his friend.

“’Tis time?” Kendrick asked.

“Aye. I met with the Donalds on the Sabbath. They’re in agreement. Laird Kinnon’s throng of thieving warriors has stolen the last of my chattel. Laird Kinnon has made many enemies over the years. No one will aid him in protecting these borders if the English invade our coastal waters.”

“Then we gather the Isle’s council and Laird Kinnon will reign nay more. And Clan Kinnon will be cleansed of his bloodied hands. I’ll send a spit-boy to ride with the torch at twilight and gather the rebels. When do ye wish to meet?”

“Soon, Kendrick. Soon your laird will pay for his crimes against both of us.” Calin clapped Kendrick on the back, grateful he remained dedicated to their cause. So many years had passed since they’d stumbled into each other in the pitch-black caverns beneath Brycen Castle. They’d bonded in secrecy knowing they were supposed to be enemies, but they had wanted the same thing—an alliance.

Pulling back a pine branch, Calin peeked at the bevy of beauties skipping around the waterfall. In their gaiety, they twirled and danced, dragging the hems of their kirtles through the water. He couldn’t contain his enthusiasm. Eighteen years had passed since

he'd entrusted Kendrick with his wee bride, and by dusk he had every intention of taking the lass back to Cànwyck Castle and making her his wife. He prayed he could look upon her face and just see a woman, and not the daughter of the man who murdered his father. Regardless of how he saw her, he had a vow to fulfill and a clan to protect.

A clan that was currently preparing for his wedding.

When he'd left MacLeod land earlier today, the bailey was abuzz. The clan's matrons spent early morning filling the chapel with fresh-cut bluebells, yellow saxifrage, and wild primroses. MacLeods had been trickling in for two days to attend the festivities. A handful of brutes had been warming whisky and ogling the village maidens. An onslaught of babes was sure to arrive in nine months, and he hoped one might belong to him and his new bride.

Haunches of wild boar, venison, and mutton sputtered and hissed over the spits and filled the halls of Cànwyck Castle with a savory smell. All the while, Father Harrald worked feverishly on writing the personal blessing he would deliver following the evening ceremony.

The only thing missing was the bride. His bride. Akira Neish.

Calin had intended to retrieve her a day or two in advance, but he'd assured himself she would be compliant. To date, there hadn't been a woman to refuse him, and he held confident that his bride would melt beneath his charm. Mayhap there would be time on their way back to Cànwyck Castle to woo her a wee bit before making her his lady wife.

"Which of the lassies is she?" Calin scanned the beauties cavorting around the pool of water. "Please, tell me *that*—" he pointed, "—is not her. She looks to be a healthy eater."

Kendrick's wrinkled forehead expressed confusion, but he answered. "*That*—" he pointed at the plump redhead, "—is Maggie, and she and her husband, Logan Donald, are expectin' late autumn."

"Then how about the tall beauty?" Calin raised both eyebrows, hoping he chose correctly.

"That's Neala. She's wife to the smith's brother. Did Akira send—"

"Ach!" Out of nowhere came a blast of icy water to Calin's backside. He sucked in air. The warmth of August had done little to take the frigid sting from the water. He spun on his heel to capture the assailant. The roar of the waterfall may have drowned out their footsteps, but the shrieking nymphs holding two empty pails behind him didn't stand a chance of escape. Kendrick held one girl by the wrist, while Calin grabbed the other around the waist. The girls slithered free of their captors, collapsing against each other in a fit of giggles.

Calin shook his muddled head. They were identical in every way—from their

strawberry-blond ringlets, to their slender noses, and moss-green eyes. If he'd the time to count, he suspected he might find the same number of freckles atop their noses. He faintly recalled Akira mentioning the twins in her missives, but at least eight years separated those memories. He never knew why she stopped writing to him.

"And this pair o' lassies would be Riona and Fiona," Kendrick introduced the two-some. "Everyone just calls them Iona, cause ye cannae tell one from the other."

"'Tis a pleasure to meet such a bonnie fine pair of lassies." Calin bowed with grace before brushing chaste kisses across their petite knuckles. Their giggles increased and they blushed simultaneously. When he returned his attention to the waterfall, his eyes landed on the innocent young woman sitting beneath the protective foliage of an old ash tree, both ankles tucked neatly under her kirtle, and a book held just beneath her chin.

He motioned at her. "That's her. I knew my bride would be the bonnie smart one."

Kendrick's smile faded, his stature stiffened. "Enough, MacLeod! Girls, fetch up your sisters. We head back at once." Kendrick's tone turned ferocious. "Why are ye here, MacLeod?"

Calin speculated on Kendrick's change of mood. He thought his missive had been very clear. "I wrote a month ago to inform ye I was coming for Akira."

"And ye wrote a year ago statin' the same thing. I started forming the rebellion when ye sent the first query, and Laird Kinnon's suspicions o' betrayal have only mounted during your delay. Do ye know what 'tis like trainin' alongside that bastard? Where in all o' Scots have ye been for the past year?"

Calin had spent his first year as chieftain in regret. He broke eye contact with Kendrick as he recalled the deceptive woman who had deluded him and prevented him from coming sooner. Bitterness held thick on his tongue. "I was detained, but I am here now and ready to form our alliance as promised." Gesturing once again at the girl beneath the tree. "Is that Akira?" he asked with more persistence.

"Nay. Her name is Isobel, and she is not your precious bride either and ye weel know it. Why do ye toy with us, MacLeod?"

Calin tried to understand Kendrick's sudden spike in mood. "I know 'tis been a long time, auld friend, but—"

"Enough games!" Kendrick cut off his words, eyeing Calin cautiously. "Two MacLeods came here a sennight ago. I was tendin' the herd while the girls went to pick berries. Your men were proddin' at Isobel when Akira jumped onto one o' their backs. The girls said she beat your mon with a switch like a wild animal. The one MacLeod grabbed at her waist and ripped the wool o' her kirtle. When they caught sight o' the birthmark on her backside, they called her a witch, and then hauled her over the back o' their mount onto her belly. One o' them told Isobel to inform me that 'twas time." Kend-

rick's tone grew bitter. "Ye could've at least made a place for her kin at the weddin'."

This revelation enraged Calin. The flesh beneath his eye began to pulse. None too gently, he pushed Kendrick into a sticky pine branch. "Ye dunderheid. There has been nay wedding. I dinnae send for her. Hell and damnation!"

Kendrick's eyes narrowed and his head cocked. He shoved Calin back, hard enough to set him off balance. "They were MacLeods. If ye dinnae send them, then who took her and where?"

"The MacLeod warriors are loyal to me. They wouldnae betray me, nor would any of them steal my bride." Calin defended his kinsmen, but he trusted Kendrick as one of his own. What would any MacLeod gain by taking her? He struggled with the question, but he had neither the answer, nor the time to contemplate the issue. A sennight fell between him and Akira's captors, making any trail impossible to track. A sickly sensation attacked his gut when he thought of the place they might have taken her. How the hell would he ever find her there? He wouldn't know Akira if he saw her.

Calin made a gesture in the air with the quick jerk of his wrist. Three of his warriors emerged from the grove on horseback. Sirius came to a halt at his side, just as the black stallion had been trained to do. "We must ride at once. Can your sisters see themselves home?" he asked and mounted the warhorse.

"Nay. They cannae." Kendrick tossed a sideways glance at the girls gathered around Isobel. The eldest held the reins to a chestnut-colored roan and waited.

"If I've been informed correctly, the cot-house ye moved into is not far from here. They look plenty able to see themselves home."

Kendrick turned to walk away.

Irritation mounting, Calin wondered how Kendrick could be so apathetic about the sister he'd fostered since birth. "Have ye nay interest in the welfare of your *other* sister, or is she of nay concern to ye now?"

Kendrick rounded hastily and shot him a look of disdain. "I am nay an idiot! Ye dinnae care about Akira's welfare. Your first concern is the alliance and we cannae unite the clans without her. So ye can quit the play-actin' and just admit it. Ye wouldnae know the lass if she bit ye on the arse."

Calin ignored his statement, though it galled him to acknowledge Kendrick spoke the truth. He steadied Sirius. The beast must have sensed his exasperation.

"I intend to ride with ye only because I know Akira, and she'll not go with ye of her own free will."

*Why the hell not?* He'd provided for her over the years and sent private monies to the Abbot at Beaulieu Priory for her education. He'd seen the secret of her lineage protected.

Besides Uncle Kerk and Aunt Wanda, only Kendrick and Akira's foster mother knew Laird Kinnon had sired her. He had hoped Akira would enter their union without protest. Arguing these facts with Kendrick now seemed a moot point. "We've nay time to tarry. We ride at once."

Kendrick's face reddened and his fingers curled into fists. "Though Akira's safety concerns me, I've five more to care for first. Isobel cannae walk. She's been crippled most of her life. Since Da passed, there is nay one strong enough to carry her except myself, now that Akira's gone."

Calin felt like a complete arse. Now he understood why Isobel wasn't up skipping around the loch with her sisters. "Ye tend to your kin. I have to return to the keep and petition the council for monies. We'll meet at dusk where our soil borders the Donalds'. Come alone. She is on MacLeod soil."

Kendrick's harsh features softened. "Do ye know where they've taken her then?" he asked, his tone hopeful.

"Aye. If what ye say is true, there's only one place a MacLeod would take a woman believed to be a witch—*Tigh Diabhail*." Calin kicked his stallion into a full-blown gallop and prayed silently he wouldn't be too late. *Tigh Diabhail* was hell's den and appropriately named the Devil's House. He'd been there only once before, but the conduct of his brothers-in-arms repulsed him to the point he never wanted to return. Formerly, the isolated port had served as a weaponry exchange for King James' predecessors, but now they only bartered female captives.

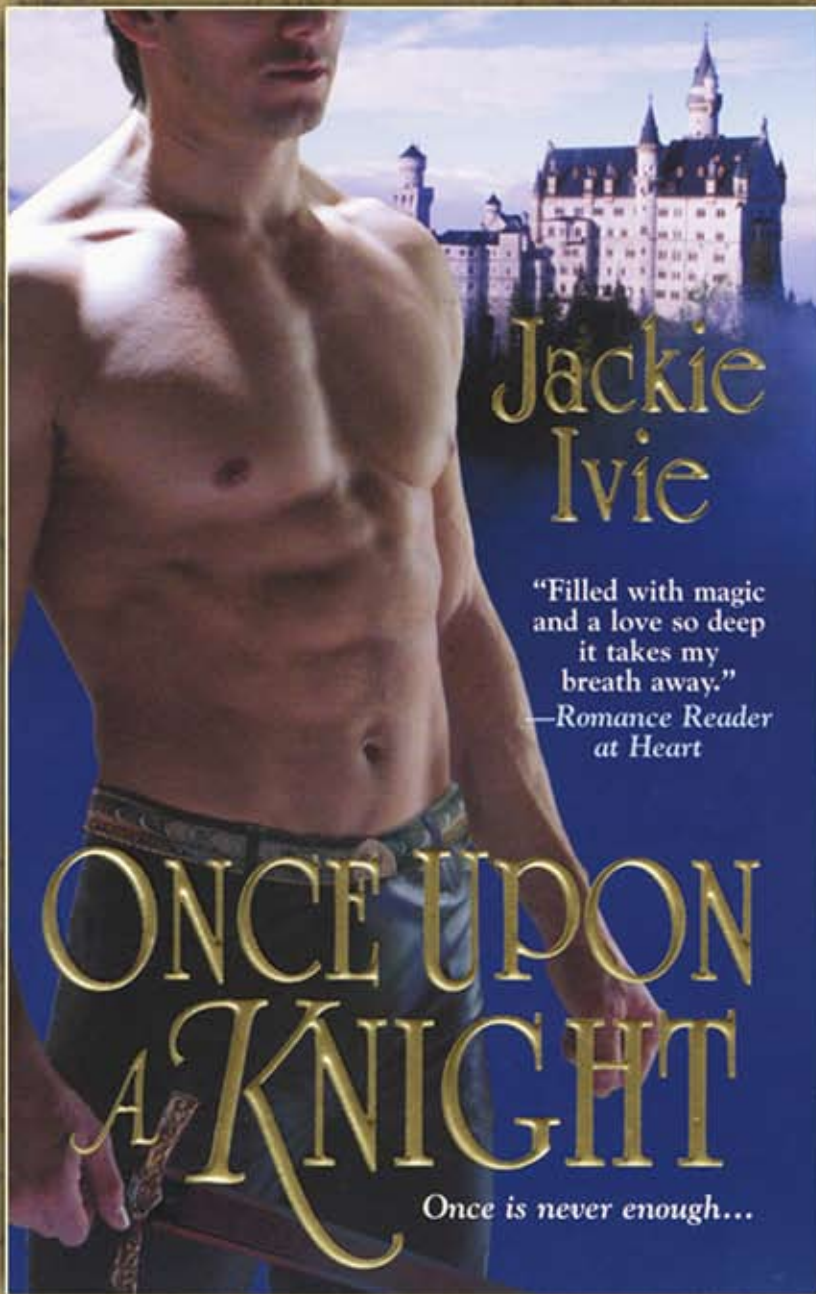
And what they did to the virgins was horrific beyond imagination.



Visit

[www.kimberlykillion.com](http://www.kimberlykillion.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**



Jackie  
Ivie

"Filled with magic  
and a love so deep  
it takes my  
breath away."

—Romance Reader  
at Heart

ONCE UPON  
A KNIGHT

Once is never enough...

**"Ivie is destined to become  
a reader favorite!"**

**—Romantic Times**



# Once Upon a Knight

by

Jackie Ivie

[www.jackieivie.com](http://www.jackieivie.com)



October 2009

ISBN-10: 1420101668  
ISBN-13: 978-1420101669



ZEBRA BOOKS  
Kensington Publishing Corp.  
[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling vine-like patterns with small leaves and berries, framing the text below.

A.D. 1466

This one was too easy.

Vincent Danzel tucked a stray lock of hair back behind his ear and sucked in on his cheeks as he watched the cloaked figure dart beneath a shrub. Then he shifted slightly from one foot to the other in his crouch, listening for the slight groan from the tree limb he was perched on. Then he was fussing with the stopper on the sporran he'd pushed to one side. It was still full. Mostly full, he clarified for himself. He wasn't dulling any of his charm with drink.

He was going to need it.

He slid a finger along his upper lip, scratching at the stubble there. He should have shaved, too. Then again, it would give him a rakish air. He might need that, as well.

Vincent sighed and shifted again, this time moving a foot farther forward in his crouch. The limb protested that exchange of weight, but it had complained the entire time he'd been atop it, watching the little wench waste time looking for her toads. Vincent wrinkled his nose. No one had said anything about such strangeness. Toads? He watched as she spied one, knelt at the edge of the pond glimmering beneath them and started reaching for the fifth toad so far.

He almost felt sorry for the little creature. Once she got her hands on it, she was shaking and slapping and making all sorts of strange noises until the toad would respond as she must want. Then she was making little chirping noises as she reached into the folds of her cloak so she could get a cloth to wipe at its back. He didn't know what substance she hoped to gain, but once she had the toad wiped clean, she'd release it back into the pond, setting it gently back on the surface, where only a ripple betrayed the creature's immediate plunge of escape.

Vincent watched her fold the piece of cloth she'd wiped the toad with into a small triangular shape, pull out a jar and shove the piece in it before replacing the cork and sealing it in with the four others she'd already gained.

Someone was paying for this insult, Vincent decided. And it wasn't enough. That was certain. This wench had nothing to recommend her. She was small, with no shape that he could decide. She was also plain, if the way she shrouded herself was any indication. And she was strange. Worse than strange. She was odd-strange. Vincent ran his fingers along his eyelashes, separating them to a lush fringe, for the effect. He was going to need that, too.

She stood, making little difference in her size since it was seen from the height he was at. Vincent reached forward, gripped the tree limb in front of his boots and swung forward, rolling into a dead-weight hang so he could drop to the ground to the right of her. He ended up directly atop the soft, water-soaked edge of the pond. Due to the volume of his weight, the ground forfeited, leaving him ankle-deep in muck while she tipped her head away from him and giggled.

"You should na' spy," she said finally, once she had her mirth under control.

Vincent frowned. She didn't even act surprised at his abrupt entrance. "I was na' spying," he replied.

"What was it you were doing, then?"

"Granting a wish."

She still hadn't looked toward him, and water was seeping through his boots now. Vincent backed a step, then another, searching without looking for the firm ground that he already knew was at the pond's edge.

"What wish was it I've made?" she asked.

"A prince. 'Tis what kissing a frog is for. Gaining one."

"I've kissed nae frogs," she replied.

"That probably explains why you've na' received a prince."

"You're nae prince?" she asked.

"Vincent Danzel. Knight. At your service." He bowed for effect.

"Pity," she replied before she turned and started walking away.

Vincent was stunned. He sucked in a breath. Not only had she not even looked his way, but she was leaving? Women didn't react so to him. Never.

Well, mayhap the Sassenach taxman's wife had, but she'd been worshipping gold rather than the flesh. Then again, she'd had poor eyesight.

Vincent pulled his feet free of the muck, ignoring his wet boots, and moved

around this female, blocking her path.

“You’ve a reason for staying me?” she asked, directing her question to the region of his knees.

The wench was diminutive, barely reaching midchest. Vincent put his hands on his hips and regarded her. “Someone has to speak for the poor devils,” he replied, finally.

“Who?”

“Me.”

“I mean, who are the poor devils?”

“Oh. Toads. Nary a one has done aught to receive treatment such as you give. I’m protecting them.”

She giggled again. Then she lifted her head, tipped the edges of her cloak open with her hand and met his gaze. Vincent regarded her solemnly, waiting for the reaction. And missing any. His world didn’t rock. It didn’t even shiver. Nothing. This wench had nothing to recommend her and nothing to tempt him. It was a good thing he was being paid, he told himself.

“I’m na’ harming them,” she said.

“That is na’ what they tell me.”

She cocked her eyebrows up, showing a glint of silver in the light blue of her eyes. That caught his attention for a moment. She had pale perfect skin and very black eyebrows. He wondered if that was the color of her hair or even if she had any to claim. He tipped his head to one side and waited.

“What is it they tell you?” she asked.

“That a pond is meant for swimming and catching sup. Na’ for the torment of a wench’s hand.”

He reached out and grabbed for her hand, surprising her with the swiftness if her intake of breath was any indication. Her hands were fine-shaped and delicate. Her entire form looked to be that way. He’d been ordered not to touch her or make her his. The warning wasn’t necessary. She wasn’t his type, she wasn’t the right size and she was too easy. Even without his fee.

Her hand trembled within his. Vince stepped closer and dipped his head slightly, looking at her with dark eyes through black lashes that had always looked incongruous with his blond hair. He knew it made women swoon. He’d been told often enough of it. That was why he’d made certain the lashes were each separated and defined.

“Torment?” she whispered.

“Aye. And shaking. Such things belong...elsewhere.” His voice deepened exactly when he wanted it to. He licked at his lip, too.

Her mouth quirked, and then everything on her features went bored and disinterested. “You need a bath,” she replied.

Vince straightened slightly. “I bathed this morn. In the loch.” He kept the defensive tone from the words with difficulty. Much difficulty. And then he was mentally doubling his fee.

“You forgot to wash your mouth.”

She shocked him further by slipping her hand free and tipping her little chin in a gesture of dismissal. His mind was blank. He didn’t know what to say. She didn’t act like she was expecting him to say anything. She picked up one side of her skirts with the hand he’d recently claimed and used the wad of material as a buffer between them as she passed right by him. His mind was stalled, his mouth was dry and made drier by the slack-jawed effect of being so summarily passed over. His eyes were still focusing on the spot of ground she’d barely made a dent in, while he was making water-filled holes the size of his boots from standing in sodden ground.

That lasted four or five heartbeats. Since he hadn’t been counting, he couldn’t be sure. No wench treated Vincent Erick Danzel in such a fashion. And if they did, they could just reap the punishment for it. Wenches didn’t turn him down, they didn’t tell him no, and they didn’t ignore him. It was a matter of pride now.

He reached her with little more than a lope of movement, crossing ground with strides she couldn’t possibly match. He blocked her path again, ignored how the ground was even marshier here, causing him to sink more quickly, and folded his arms to make it official. She wasn’t getting past him that easily! And certainly not without an explanation.

“What is it now, Sir Knight?” She had her head cocked backward and wasn’t moving the shawl to make anything more easily seen. That posture shadowed her upper face and highlighted her lips. They were pursed sweetly and appeared to have the color and texture of a ripe plum, he decided.

“You,” he replied.

“Me?”

“Aye. You.”

“You are determined to disturb me?”

“Disturb. Aye. In a word.”

“Why?”

“First tell me why you shake toads.”

The spark of interest was back in her eyes, making them look akin to liquid silver again. Vince sucked on one cheek while he considered that.

“I need their sweat,” she said finally.

“Toads...sweat?”

She giggled again. He could grow fond of that sound, he decided. If he kept his eyes closed to the rest of her.

“A toad releases a substance when it’s frightened. ’Tis akin to the strongest of brews.”

“It does?”

“Aye. And ’tis a powerful thing, too. Makes a man weak and seeing things that could na’ be.”

“Truly? What does it do for a woman?” he asked, matching his whispered tone to her own.

“Makes labor easier to abide.”

“Labor?”

“Bringing a babe into the world is labor, Sir Knight. A woman suffers. I assist with relieving it.”

“This toad sweat...is that powerful?”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows several times. Then she stepped nearer to him as if they were conspirators of some kind. She was also closer to his height for some reason. Vince didn’t notice the reason was that he was sinking farther into mud that was thick with pond water.

“That and more. ’Tis also known to create a thrill.”

“Thrill?” he asked. The center of her eyes wasn’t silver at all, but an aqua blue. Vince found himself staring into that center...being drawn into it, singed and yet enthralled by it. He shook his head once to clear it and stepped back. His feet didn’t make the move, only his body did.

The spray from his fall glittered in the air for a moment before it started settling, acting like it was applauding him. Vince sat, stunned, knees bent, and feet stuck solid, nearly to his calves. The ground was just as wet and slimy and muck-filled as it had looked while standing atop it. Now that he was seated in it and feeling it leach through the fabric of his kilt, he knew it was miserable-feeling as well. The wench wasn’t just giggling, either. It was an outright laugh.

Vince put his hands to either side of him, but they just sank into the muck, too. He pulled them free with a distinctive sucking noise, leaving two fist-sized holes that

immediately filled with water, reflecting back the grimace he was giving first one and then the other of them.

“You do your creed well, toad prince,” she said, once she had the laughter under control.

“Toad prince?” he replied. And then he said it again, louder than before. There was nothing for it. He looked at both hands, blew a sigh of disgust over them to warm them slightly, placed them atop his bare knees, and grunted himself upright. It took every bit of his strength and made muscles bulge from his thighs and stomach, and there was a moment when he didn’t think he was going to be able to gain his own feet, but it was done. The hole he’d made with his buttocks immediately filled with water.

“You see?” she said. “I am right again.”

“About what?” Vincent went to a twist and busied himself with pulling the tree-mash from the back of himself. All that managed to do was make his lower arms a mess of mud as well.

“You. And a bath.”

And with that, she turned and left him.

. . . Want more? Click [HERE](#) to read an interview with Jackie and a small sinppet.



Visit

[www.jackieivie.com](http://www.jackieivie.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**



Heather  
Grothaus

It takes more than a woman's  
beauty when it comes to...

# TAMING *The* BEAST

**“Grothaus definitely has talent and a true feel for the era...she has what it takes to become a strong voice.”**

**—*Romantic Times***



# Taming the Beast

by

Heather Grothaus

[www.heathergrothaus.com](http://www.heathergrothaus.com)



November 2009

ISBN-10: 1420102435

ISBN-13: 978-1420102437



ZEBRA BOOKS

Kensington Publishing Corp.

[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns extending from both ends.

TORNFIELD MANOR, ENGLAND - MAY, 1103

It was a lovely feast, save for the pointing and whispering. And the way she was repeatedly jostled out of line when she tried to join in a dance. Or that wretched woman who had stuck out a slippered foot and caused her to fall into a serving maid, spilling half the puddings and breaking most of Lord Tornfield's beautiful little painted bowls.

As if she needed assistance making a fool of herself.

So now, Michaela Fortune hid herself away near the musicians, where she could be close to the music that would drown out the hateful things being said about her. And, seated on the stool, she could hide the glommy white stains of pudding spilled down the skirt of her only good gown. Here, she could become lost in the melody and hum along if she wished, and she could convince herself it was *truly* a lovely feast, when what she wanted to do was find that miserable woman with the spastic foot and snatch at her hair.

*Turn the other cheek*, Michaela reminded herself, as if her mother had whispered in her ear. *The meek shall inherit all the earth.*

As if to drive home her mother's tireless lessons on gentleness of spirit, Michaela caught a glimpse of her parents across the hall. Lord Walter and Agatha Fortune stood against the opposite perimeter of the chamber, closely linked together as usual. Michaela's father's kindly face was turned to look down upon his wife, as if only waiting for her to express any wish he might fulfill. It was satisfying to see them enjoying themselves—they so rarely left their small holding.

Like Michaela, Agatha Fortune was often the brunt of whispered gossip, although the mother was spared the indignity of the self-conscious clumsiness which plagued her daughter. The older Lady Fortune was dismissed as ineffective and a bit loose in the brains, while the younger was treated with scorn and avoidance.

*Devil's Daughter.*

*Hell's Handmaid.*

*Sister of Satan.*

Or, the very worst of all, Mistress Fortune.

*Miss Fortune.* A clever play on words, Michaela had to admit, and of all the hated nicknames she had been cursed with, likely the most accurate. Misfortune, oh my, yes.

Her fingers pressed the warped link of metal on the fine chain resting under the bodice of her dress out of habit. For such a tiny object, it's burden around her neck was as immense as any oaken yoke.

"Song!" a man's voice rang out, interrupting Michaela's self-pity. Alan Tornfield, the Fortune family's overlord and host of the feast, raised his chalice toward the trio of musicians near Michaela's hiding place. He was a handsome, mustachioed blond man of one score, ten and five, his wife's death last year leaving him and their young daughter alone in the modest manor. Michaela had never met the now-motherless Elizabeth—indeed, she'd never so much as spoken directly to Lord Tornfield. This feast was only the second time Michaela had visited the overlord's home in the whole of her score of years, although she couldn't recall the first instance, as she had been but a young child herself.

"I must have a song immediately! Who is sporting enough to lend their voice to yon strings?"

The crowd "hear-hear"-ed with enthusiastic agreement, and Michaela cringed as she spotted her own mother leaning this way and that, trying to pick out Michaela in the crowded hall. Michaela closed her eyes, as if it might make her invisible.

She was saved when Lord Tornfield announced his chosen candidate, and Michaela opened her eyes with a relieved sigh.

"Lady Juliette of Osprey, won't you indulge us?" he fairly shouted, and in a moment a tall, striking brunette dressed in rich green stepped from the crowd, a humble smile on her lovely face.

It was the woman who'd tripped her. Michaela slid her stool more fully behind the curtained backdrop.

"Do you know *My Love Calls the Sea*?" Lady Juliette sweetly queried the trio, and the man out in front of the group bowed. In a moment, the song started.

When the woman's voice came forth, sharp and warbling, Michaela cringed again. By the time the refrain and second verse were through, she checked to see if her nose might be bleeding. She saw several of the guests wince as notes were overshot toward heaven, Lady Juliette nearly screaming to reach such heights. Michaela opened her mouth and forced her ears to pop.

"Oh, make it stop," she said loudly. No one could hear her any matter over that

terrible shrieking. At any moment, she expected Lord Tornfield's hounds to add their voices to the noise. It would have improved the tone immensely.

At last the torture was over, and Michaela could almost hear the relieved sigh of the guests before they broke out in ridiculously exaggerated applause for the obscenely wealthy Lady of Osprey.

"My God, they must be deaf," Michaela muttered. Then she gasped as she felt a tug on the back of her hair. Michaela spun around on her stool.

Shadowed by the curtain Michaela also hid behind stood a beautiful girl, perhaps ten years old, with long, shiny blonde hair pulled away from her forehead and cascading down her back. Big, wise brown eyes gave her the look of a gentle woodland doe, and her impish smile brightened her otherwise pale face. She was nodding enthusiastically.

"Oh, hello," Michaela said.

The girl's smile grew a bit wider. She pointed at the curtain, indicating the guests gathered beyond, then tugged at her ear.

Michaela couldn't help but laugh. "Well, if they weren't deaf before, I daresay they are now."

The girl covered her mouth with both of her hands, and her eyes crinkled merrily.

"I am Michaela Fortune." She held out her hand and the young girl immediately took it, sinking into a curtsy. "Who are you, pretty one?"

The girl smiled at the compliment then pointed at the crowd again. She drew her pointer fingers away from each other on her upper lip, then placed a hand on her flat chest.

Michaela thought she understood. "Lord Tornfield is your father?" The girl nodded, obviously happy that her pantomime had been successful. "Well, how do you do, Lady Elizabeth?"

The girl curtsied prettily again, and Michaela wondered at her lack of speech. She had heard of mutes, but never met one, and decided not to bring up the matter lest the fragile-looking child be humiliated.

Michaela knew all too well how that felt.

"Are you forbidden from the feast?" she asked instead.

Elizabeth shrugged, and then pointed past Michaela, her eyes wide and her mouth shaped into an O.

It appeared as though Lady Helltongue was preparing to torture the guests with another butchering of voice. Michaela groaned and dropped her head, her hands covering her ears.

“Can one *wish* oneself deaf, I wonder?”

Elizabeth Tornfield covered her own ears and bent at the waist, her mouth open in a silent guffaw and Michaela giggled. But she and her new young friend were spared from the lady’s imminent screeching by Alan Tornfield himself.

“A moment, if you please,” he interrupted with a handsome bow in Lady Osprey’s direction. “I have an announcement before the festivities continue.” Alan stepped onto the dais which held the lord’s table with only a slight wobble and then smiled broadly at the crowd.

“I feel I must take this opportunity to address the sad news of our liege, Lord Magnus Cherbon’s, passing, more than a year ago.” Not even a murmur of sympathy answered the announcement, and Michaela was not surprised. It was no secret that all within the demesne had detested the Cherbon Devil and his greedy, merciless rule, and most had looked upon his death as a blessing. Elizabeth inched closer to Michaela’s side and peeked around the curtain at her father as he continued his speech.

“Our lands have been without a master for too long a time, and so it is with a happy heart that I follow such sadness with a bit of a miracle: Lord Cherbon’s son, my cousin, Roderick, is expected to return from the Holy Land any day, to take his father’s place at Cherbon Castle.”

At this, excited murmurs raced through the hall. Michaela caught only snippets of exclamations.

“Roderick, Lord Roderick!”

“So handsome...”

“...not at all like his sire.”

“*However*,” Lord Alan said crossly over the animated whispering, “due to some rather...devastating injuries he suffered while on his pilgrimage, and dare I say, lameness of body”—the crowd gasped—“as well as terms of the inheritance set forth by Magnus himself, it is possible that the bequeathment of the demesne could fall”—Alan paused, and the crowd seemed to lean forward eagerly—“to none other than yours, truly.”

The hall erupted in surprised shouts and applause, and Lord Tornfield’s smile was not a little prideful. He let the praise go on for several more seconds before raising his hands for silence once more.

“While I am, of course, saddened by the losses my cousin has suffered, I feel that tonight is a cause for celebration and merry-making. After all, it could only be a matter of weeks before I am removed to the northern part of our lands.” The crowd responded with a collective moan. “So! Let us make the most of our time together with a bit of sport—a competition, if you will, of song. I shall grant a boon to the most accomplished singer.” The crowd cheered. “We have already gratefully received Lady Juliette’s offer-

ing.”

Lady Juliette smiled widely about the guests and gave a saucy wink.

“Who dares challenge her?” Lord Alan looked over those gathered. “Oh, come on. Who will give it a go?”

For the better part of an hour, more than a score of guests, male and female, took their turn in the fun of the challenge. None were truly accomplished in their talent—a few even deliberately mocking themselves by singing bawdy limericks or reciting silly lines of verse—but none were nearly as bad as Lady Juliette, Michaela was relieved to hear. She and little Lady Elizabeth enjoyed each performance, hidden away behind the curtain, dancing each other in a circle with joined hands.

The most recent contestant, a young man of good family, took his bow amidst roaring laughter and applause and Lord Tornfield claimed the dais once more as Michaela fell back onto her stool panting and giggling.

“Oh, well done, *well done!*” he laughed and raised his ever-present chalice in salute of the young man. “Who else? Who will be next? We can’t let the fun end now!”

Michaela felt a tug on her hair again and turned to see Elizabeth pantomiming a palm away from her open mouth. Then she pointed at Michaela.

“Oh, no. I think not.”

Elizabeth gave a mock pout then clasped her hands before her chest in a plea.

“Before all these people? They would devour me whole, Elizabeth. I haven’t the talent for—”

“Lady Michaela Fortune shall sing!”

Michaela’s stomach dropped into her bottom as her mother’s warbly voice rang out through the hall.

“My daughter, where is she? Michaela?” Agatha’s calls sounded ever closer, and Michaela could already hear the snickers and whispers from the crowd. “Michaela?”

Elizabeth gave her an unexpected—and surprisingly forceful—shove, and Michaela sprang from behind the curtain, stumbling, stumbling, catching herself with one outstretched hand, nearly standing, before at last sprawling facedown on the flagstones.

“Oh, Michaela, there you are, dear,” Agatha said in delight.

The guests made no effort to quell their laughter.

Then Agatha was at her side, pulling her daughter up by the arm. “Here we are, do get up, dear—and what has happened to your gown? No matter. Go on then, you have such a lovely voice.” Then she leaned in close to Michaela’s ear to whisper, “Think of the *boon*, Michaela! Mayhap a bit off the taxes...”

“Oh, yes, Pudding—give us a song!” someone from the crowd goaded.

Michaela was very aware of her soiled dress, of Lady Juliette smirking in her direction, and of her mother’s reminder of the Fortune’s growing poverty. Mayhap Lord Tornfield would grant a small reprieve, but...

Meanwhile, the crowd egged each other on.

“I dunno if we should have a verse from Miss Fortune—the devil might strike us all deaf!”

Michaela flung her hair out of her eyes and spun on the heckler. “I vow that if you can still claim even a bit of your hearing after that monstrosity of sound”—she said and glanced at the shocked Juliette—“your tender ears should be quite safe for the rest of your life, devil or nay.”

“Michaela!” Agatha gasped and patted her daughter’s arm. “That was unkind.”

Lady Juliette had regained her composure and now stepped from the crush with a malicious look. “Verily, Miss Fortune? ‘Monstrosity of sound’, was it? Well then, if the crowd judges your voice more worthy than mine, I shall grant you my own boon. Anything you wish.”

Michaela raised her eyebrows. “Anything I wish?”

Lady Juliette looked to Alan Tornfield. “Do you consent to this wager, my lord?”

The lord was looking at Michaela as if he’d never seen her before, which was unlikely since she’d made such a scene of slippery pudding and broken pottery.

“By all means, ladies,” he said in an amused voice. “Please, proceed.”

For a moment, Michaela was frozen in the quiet, expectant hall, the guests regarding her blatantly. All eyes were pinned to her, the center of attention—a situation that never, ever turned out to Miss Fortune’s advantage.

Someone coughed. Agatha Fortune smiled encouragingly at her daughter.

“Will you name a tune, m’lady?” the leader of the trio asked politely, if pointedly.

Michaela looked back at Juliette and saw the woman’s smirk, as if she could sense how close Michaela was to forfeiting.

*Think of the boon, Michaela. Mayhap a bit off the taxes...*

“We’re waiting, Miss Fortune,” Juliette taunted.

Michaela took a deep breath. “No music,” she said to the lute player.

“Oh-ho!” Juliette laughed and clapped her hands.

“There was none written for this piece.”

Juliette abruptly closed her mouth.

Michaela took a deep, deep breath as her mother stepped away, leaving Michaela in a circle of expectant guests. Alone.

Then she opened her mouth and sang as best as she could, her eyes closed, moving herself out of the smoky, humid hall of Tornfield Manor and imagining herself flying through the clouds, her arms outstretched like wings.

The tune had been taught to her as a young girl by the friar who traveled through the Cherbon demesne, originally written as a chant for monks. But Michaela turned it into a high song of sweet mourning, pouring all of her wishes and dreams atop the hurt and humiliation she'd been dealt—not only that night of the feast, but throughout her entire life—and creating a confection of song so pure and personal that she could feel her own tears press against her closed eyelids.

It was a longish piece, but she did not shorten it, relishing these few moments when, locked away in her own mind, she could give free rein to the one thing she did even passably well. The hall was wide and deep and tall-ceilinged, and each note ricocheted off the stones as she sang them, circling around and meeting each other to make a chorus of voices, it seemed.

As the last drawn out word hung and then faded, Michaela reluctantly brought herself down from her fanciful flight and opened her eyes.

Everyone in the hall was staring at her as if the song had caused her to grow an additional head. Even the servants had stopped, frozen in their tasks of clearing the long tables and ferrying trays, and the silence following Michaela's song was perfect. Not even a breath stirred the air.

She felt her face start to heat and turned quickly to focus her attention on Lord Tornfield. He, too, was staring at her as if she were some strange creature who had slinked into his home, his mouth agape, and he didn't seem to notice that the chalice in his hand was loosing a stream of wine onto the toe of his boot.

Michaela said nothing, only waited for her judgment in the contest, feeling naked, vulnerable. As if she'd bared her very soul before all gathered.

Still, no one made any sound or movement as slight as a sniffle or the shuffling of a foot. Michaela felt her throat closing.

Then, suddenly, the sound of two hands clapping vigorously cracked the awkward stillness, and Michaela turned her head to seek the applause.

Elizabeth Tornfield had stepped from behind the musicians' curtain and was clapping as if attempting to break off both her arms. Her smile was the warmest Michaela had ever received from someone not of her relation, and the sight of this little girl, bravely risking reprimand at showing herself at the feast in order to praise her new friend, caused Michaela's heart to expand.

At least *someone* had liked her song.

His daughter's appearance obviously affected Lord Tornfield, as well, for he shook himself after a quiet gasp, dropped his now empty chalice to the floor with a clang and joined in his daughter's enthusiastic applause.

"Well done!" he shouted. "Oh, yes, well done, indeed!"

The rest of the hall added their own lukewarm praise immediately, and Michaela looked around at the guests, whispering to their neighbors while clapping and regarding Michaela from the corners of their eyes.

And then Lord Tornfield was off across the hall, still clapping, until he dropped to his knees before his daughter and embraced her, speaking in a low voice that was drowned out by the dwindling applause. In a moment he rose, and led Elizabeth back to his place on the dais, helping her up the step as if she were an invalid. The murmurs of the crowd increased, and Michaela had the distinct impression that she was no longer the topic of gossip. She tried to squelch the traitorous relief she felt.

Alan Tornfield addressed the hall once more. "Do we have any other contestants?" After only a breath of a pause, "I should think not, after that stunning, *stunning* attempt. I would declare Lady—Michaela, is it?—Fortune champion, lest there is any foolish enough to challenge her. No?" He asked looking over the hall. Then his eyes, crinkling happily much like his daughter's, found Michaela and his blonde mustache twitched. "I believe you have earned a pair of boons, my lady." He held forth a long, courteous arm and bowed slightly. "Collect at your discretion."

"This is outrageous!"

Lady Juliette, of course. The woman stepped from the crowd once more with a swish and flounce of her fancy skirts and walked directly up to Michaela. "I'll grant no boon to a girl who gleans her talents from Satan! That song was clearly devil's trickery!"

Michaela felt her eyebrows draw downward, and her fingers curl into fists at her sides. She had never before struck another human being, but in that moment she seriously considered it.

"Now, Lady Juliette," Lord Tornfield said mildly. "Certainly you knew the identity of the woman you challenged before she gave her try, and clearly, it is not Satan who stands before you now. This was all done in good fun, any matter. I'm sure Lady Michaela's boon will be a reasonable one." Although his words were friendly and advising, his tone indicated that the matter was not open to debate.

Lady Juliette's face glowed ghastly white. "Very well, *Miss Devil's Fortune*," she fairly spat. "What will your wretched prize be? And should you request something ridiculous, be forewarned that I will slap your face."

"Oh, my request will be very fair," Michaela rejoined and moved even closer to the

fuming lady so that her next words would be heard by Lady Juliette alone. “And *you* be forewarned that, should you dare strike me, I will drag you from this hall by your hair and call down the Hunt to steal your soul,” she hissed, malicious glee filling her at teasing the woman so ruthlessly.

*Devil, indeed. Good heavens.*

“Name your prize, heathen,” Juliette demanded through clenched teeth.

“Well, then,” Michaela stepped back and looked down upon herself. “Since it is through your fault that my gown is hopelessly stained”—she let her eyes roam over the fine green velvet draping her rival—“I will have the one you are wearing.”

Juliette laughed. “You’re daft! This gown cost more than what your piddling hold brings to the demesne in a year!”

Michaela shrugged. “Mayhap you should have considered the value of your own possessions before you set about ruining another’s.”

“I’ll not do it!” Juliette shrieked, looking to Lord Tornfield. “This is absurd!”

“It seems reasonable enough to me,” the lord said. “And it was your challenge, Lady Juliette. I’m certain Lady Michaela will accept you sending the gown to her home by messenger. Surely she does not expect you to turn it over this night?” Lord Tornfield raised a questioning eyebrow to Michaela, and her heart pounded.

“Of course,” Michaela acquiesced. “I shall look for it within the fortnight.”

Juliette stammered. “I-I—” She stamped her foot, and set her mouth in a pinched frown. “Very well, then. You shall have it.” She made no attempt to mask her glare for Michaela. “Now, I’m certain you will understand if I bid you good night.” She spun on her heel and swept from the hall, a few quiet snickers from the other guests escorting her out with her personal servants.

Lord Tornfield’s commanding voice rang out again. “Have my fair musicians quit me as well? The night is far from over, my good men—let us continue the festivities in earnest! I have much to celebrate!”

The music immediately bloomed forth once more, and the crowd drifted away to refreshments or more private conversation, while Lord Tornfield beckoned to Michaela to join him and his daughter before the dais.

Michaela curtsied. “My lord, I am honored by your decision.”

“Nonsense!” The blonde man smiled, still keeping an affectionate hold on his daughter. “You fairly bested any and all—”

Elizabeth suddenly broke free from her father and threw her slender arms around Michaela’s waist, nearly toppling them both.

“Oh my!” Michaela laughed and squeezed the pretty girl, partly out of affection, and

partly to keep the pair of them upright. Elizabeth continued to cling and so Michaela let her be. It was nice to be embraced.

“She seems to have taken to you rather quickly,” Lord Tornfield observed. “How long were the two of you hidden away?”

“Not long,” Michaela rushed to assure him, and wondered if the little girl was not clinging to her in order to avoid punishment. “I do hope you’ll forgive Lady Elizabeth for disobeying you, my lord.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Beneath Michaela’s forearms, Elizabeth’s shoulders shook.

“I shall...I shall forfeit my boon if it will prevent her from being reprimanded.”

“Why on earth would I reprimand Elizabeth?”

Michaela felt her face heat. Must she always feel the fool?

“For...ah, attending the feast without your permission?”

Elizabeth drew away slightly and Michaela saw that the girl was *laughing*.

Alan Tornfield frowned at Michaela for a moment and then burst out in his own merry chuckle. “Lady Michaela, it has been my fondest wish for some time now that Elizabeth join the festivities of Tornfield. I assure you, she was hiding away of her own accord. Verily, this is the first time she has shown herself to anyone other than myself or the household staff since her mother passed.”

Michaela knew she must look like a stunned ninny, but there was nothing for it. “Oh,” was all she could think to say for a moment. “Oh. Well, then, I am pleased that she decided to appear, as well.”

Elizabeth returned to her father’s side and Alan Tornfield smiled as he drew his arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Now, as for your boon—”

“My lord, if you please,” Michaela interrupted. “I would request that my father’s hold be granted some sort of small reprieve. Our harvest was scant last year—our village seems to be shrinking. I’d not ask the whole of our debt be forgiven, of course, but perhaps a small portion? Or an extension for payment in full?”

Lord Tornfield looked at her thoughtfully. “I am well aware of the state of your parent’s distress, Lady Michaela. Indeed, all the land felt the pinch of Magnus Cherbon’s rule, myself included. We were granted an unexpected reprieve by his passing, but now that Lord Roderick has returned, I do wonder for how long.”

“I see,” Michaela said, hearing the man’s answer in his tone, if not his words.

“But perhaps we can reach some sort of arrangement,” Lord Tornfield said suddenly, his thoughtful gaze flicking to his daughter. He looked back to Michaela’s face and his

eyes sparkled. “I am not an unreasonable man, after all.”

Michaela didn’t know what to say, so she said nothing. After a moment, Lord Tornfield spoke again.

“Perhaps you would consider taking a position in my household, in lieu of your parent’s debt,” he suggested slowly, and Michaela thought she might have seen Alan Tornfield’s eyes take a quick appraisal of her body. Her stomach fluttered. “As Elizabeth’s companion, of course,” he added quickly. “I would not wish your reputation harmed.”

Michaela wanted to laugh. Her reputation could be no further tarnished were she to walk through the streets of London stark naked. But then the essence of Lord Tornfield’s suggestion struck home.

“My lord, are you proposing that the whole of my parents’ debt would be forgiven, only for my companionship for Elizabeth?”

“I think...I think, yes. Yes.” His words grew surer. “Lady Michaela, my daughter’s happiness is most important to me. If she has some sort of quick affection for you, if you can draw her out of her shell—perhaps even coax her to speak once more—it is worth all the tithes in my holding.” With these last words, Michaela saw the lord’s throat constrict. “For each quarter that you reside at Tornfield Manor as Elizabeth’s companion, the Fortune tithe will be dismissed. I know it is terribly boorish of me to reap favor from a boon that is yours, but will you accept?”

Michaela wanted to weep. Instead, she let a shaky smile curl over her face as she suddenly realized how terribly handsome Lord Alan Tornfield was. At his side, Elizabeth’s face turned toward Michaela, hopefully expectant.

“I will,” Michaela breathed.



Visit

[www.heathergrothaus.com](http://www.heathergrothaus.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**



**SPECIAL  
PRICE**  
**\$4.99**

*\$5.99 CAN*

**“A first-class debut.”**  
—Hannah Howell

*Unleash the passion ...*

# *Wild Heart*

**LORI BRIGHTON**

**“A first-class debut”**

—**Hannah Howell,**  
*New York Times* Bestselling Author



# Wild Heart

by

Lori Brighton

[www.loribrighton.com](http://www.loribrighton.com)



November 2009

ISBN-10: 1420108654

ISBN-13: 978-1420108651



ZEBRA BOOKS

Kensington Publishing Corp.

[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling floral and vine patterns that frame the text 'Chapter One'.

SUSSEX, ENGLAND - 1855

Surely God was punishing her.

After all, hadn't Lady Buckley reminded her again and again, no good would come to those who had the devil's ability? Ella plucked at the tattered lace on her cuff, her morose thoughts getting the better of her. As if she had any control over her powers. As if she had any control over the devil. As if she had any control over her life.

*Do not tell anyone what you are capable of,* Lady Buckley's words whispered through her memory, bringing with the heat of shame.

Too nervous to stand, Ella sank onto a window seat and focused on the garden, attempting to glean comfort from the cheery daisies. Truth be told, she should have been ecstatic to have been given the post. From the crystal chandeliers, to the soft carpets that covered the floorboards, the home reeked of money and privilege. A privilege now extended to include her. So why then, wasn't she thrilled to leave Lady Buckley's noxious company?

"You don't look well," Fran whispered, stepping close to her side.

She didn't feel well either, but Ella forced a smile to her lips. She hadn't felt right since their carriage swept through the impressive iron gates of Sodalitas Castle. Was it nerves or something more? Blast it, but she couldn't tell.

"I'm well. Merely anxious."

Fran patted her shoulder. "And understandably."

From her position near the walnut fireplace, Lady Buckley cleared her throat. Slouched in the chair, she resembled an albino toad keeping watch over her minions. Her glare received the desired effect and Ella and Fran fell silent.

"She'll mind her manners, no doubt," Lady Buckley said, giving the old man across from her a confident smirk. "She knows the value of being a governess for a real lord."

He darted a glance at Ella, a flush to his wrinkled face as if he were embarrassed by Lady Buckley's remark, when the comment had been made at Ella's expense. If anyone should be blushing, she supposed it should be her, but she was too bloody nervous for such trivial matters. She'd been in the Buckley household since she was a mere child. In all honesty, she thought she'd always live there.

"I was delighted to hear that you took the post," Lord Roberts said with a gentle smile that put her at some ease. With his silver hair and soft blue eyes, he was every bit the gentleman. Yes, she should be grateful.

Ella forced her lips up. "Yes, my lord. I was surprised and delighted—"

A loud crash sounded from above, vibrating the floorboards and interrupting the speech she had practiced all last eve. Fran gasped and latched onto Ella's arm. The crystal drops on the chandelier tinkled together like fairy wings. Neither Lord Roberts nor Lady Buckley seemed to notice, but lifted their teacups in unison and sipped.

"What was that?" Fran whispered.

Ella shook her head. "A maid?"

She knew better than to comment on the noise and embarrass poor Lord Roberts. But really, what sort of man allowed such disrespect from the servants when visitors were at hand? Lady Buckley would have demanded an explanation and punishment for such a commotion. Ella knew first hand.

*Servants are not to be seen, nor heard.*

But instead, Lady Buckley set her teacup down with a soft clank, drawing their attention back to her. If the servants could get away with such rude behavior, what would the little lord of the manner be able to do? Her interest piqued, Ella studied Lady Buckley. Was the woman setting her up for a disastrous fall?

But there was no cause for suspicion upon her round face. Although, the firelight did make the woman's skin glow an eerie white from rice powder, bringing forth thoughts of specters haunting castles. As if Ella needed any more reason to be leery of the situation she found herself suddenly in.

"Should be on your knees thanking Lord Roberts, you should," the old biddy said.

Perhaps it was the red glow of the hearth, or the leering shadows that danced against the paneled walls like cavorting demons, but a chill snaked over Ella's back. Something wasn't right.

"A brilliant opportunity to gain entry as a governess into a privileged family," Lady Buckley had said. But since when was Lady Buckley eager to assist her? Never had the woman cared what Ella wanted before.

Lord Roberts cleared his throat. “Yes, well, we’re both grateful, of course.”

The sudden racket of coughing forced everyone’s attention to Fran.

“Contain yourself,” Lady Buckley demanded, as if the condition was something Fran could control. She leaned closer to Lord Roberts, her immense bosom nearly falling from her low neckline. “Impossible to find a decent lady’s maid.”

Ella resisted the urge to respond. She would certainly not miss the woman. Fran wheezed between gulps of air, her face red with barely concealed effort. Ella reached out, taking her hand. How much longer could the girl last, forced to work as hard as she was? *Blast Lady Buckley and her uncaring soul!*

“And how was your trip?” Lord Roberts asked, obviously trying to change the subject, thank the Heavens someone had sense.

Lady Buckley sighed. “Quite uneventful. Still, I am rather exhausted. If I may be shown to a room where I may rest?”

“Of course.”

Ella felt a moment of panic and the insane desire to bring up the weather, anything to delay their departure from the room. No, no it couldn’t be over, not already! She tightened her hold on Fran’s thin fingers. “I want you to keep my necklace,” she whispered as Lord Roberts assisted Lady Buckley from her chair.

Fran shook her head, wisps of her red hair swaying around her pale, narrow face. “No, absolutely not. You know ‘ow I am. I’d lose it and I know ‘ow important that piece is to you.”

Ella pulled the necklace free from underneath her collar. “But Fran-”

Fran sighed and rubbed the silver pendant with the pad of her thumb, tracing the foreign man. “Ella, I won’t take it. Your uncle sent that pendant to you all the way from India.”

Hesitating but a moment, Ella slipped the necklace back under her dress, the heathen piece hidden from Buckley’s beady eyes. “Who will tame my hair in the morning? Who will I talk to about my silly problems? Who will I go to if the servants are cruel?”

Fran smiled, took one of Ella’s golden-brown curls and tugged on the strand, letting it bounce back into place. “You’ll do fine on your own.”

“Francine,” Lady Buckley snapped. “Come.”

Ella stood and hugged Fran, forcing herself not to worry over her friend’s frail condition. “I’ll save my money, won’t spend a cent. Someday we’ll open the millinery shop your mum always wanted you to have.”

“I know you will. Friends,” Fran said and moved from Ella’s grasp. Before she could hear Ella’s response, Fran was at Lady Buckley’s side, both disappearing out the door.

“Forever and ever,” Ella whispered.

As if mocking her inner turmoil, a low rumble of thunder shook the building, rattling the window panes. Ella’s fingers curled into her soft muslin skirt as she resisted the urge to run after her friend.

“Miss Finch.” Lord Roberts shuffled toward her, a smile lighting his weathered face. The thump of his cane was the only sound in the otherwise quiet room. Too quiet, too lonely after the loud commotion from upstairs.

She curtsied, refusing to give into the sting of tears. How could Lady Buckley do this to her? She was not a carriage to be borrowed by the neighbors when the need arose. “Lord Roberts.”

“Do you believe in fate, Miss Finch?”

Her lips parted to speak, but confusion held her silent. Of everything she’d expected him to say, this was the last on her list. How, exactly, did the man wish for her to respond?

“You see,” he said, stilling in front of her. “The fact that I needed a governess just as Lady Buckley’s children had grown is all very serendipitous. Do you not agree?”

“Of course,” she murmured, knowing better than to disagree.

“I’ve had a bit of trouble finding a tutor for my grandson. And then I heard from Lady Buckley and I just knew you’d be perfect.”

“My lord, you do understand that I was merely a companion to Lady Buckley’s daughters, not exactly a governess.”

He waved his hand through the air, dismissing her comment. “Of course, but she explained you did quite well with the younger children.”

It was true she’d taught Lady Buckley’s youngest daughters more than any governess would, but still, she had no experience with boys. Dare she tell Lord Roberts, or should she keep her mouth shut?

“Come, I’ll show you to your room.” Lord Roberts took her arm and they started toward the doors. “You will love it here. The countryside is a pure delight. And the ocean...you do like the ocean?”

“Yes, very much,” she replied.

She tried to slow her racing emotions, but the moment they stepped into her foyer, her stomach clenched. She bit her lower lip as if the act could prevent her from getting

sick all over his marble floor. Not right. Something was definitely not right. Her footsteps echoed up the stairs, the sound slamming against her head, like a hammer against stone. The feelings were so familiar she'd never mistake them for nerves.

"No, not now," she whispered.

"Did you say something, my dear?"

She shook her head and focused on the foyer, desperate to think of anything but what was bound to happen. Compared to the Buckley's golden Georgian home, this castle felt oppressive. The dark stone walls seemed to press down on her, suffocating, watching.

A loud crash sounded from above. A crash similar to the one she'd heard only moments before. Ella gasped, her hand tightening on Lord Roberts's arms.

"The sea is but five minutes' walk from the house. There's a trail that leads from the back of the estate to the shore," he added as if he hadn't heard the loud sound from above. Dear lord, was he hard of hearing? Or was she insane?

"The sea? Lovely," Ella murmured, feeling she ought to say something. She rested her hand on her chest, taking small comfort in the familiar hardness of the pendant underneath her bodice. But the moment her foot hit the first step the vibrations flared, thrumming under the surface of her skin, growing stronger with each step.

"I've known Lady Buckley for..."

Blood roared into her ears, drowning out Lord Roberts's words. She knew what was happening, she knew it was wrong, but God help her, she knew she couldn't stop the torment. As always, the hum started deep inside her core, a soft vibration that pulsed up her body until it burst into a cry that clenched around her heart. "The gift," her mother had called her powers. "The curse," Lady Buckley had condemned.

Lord Roberts continued to ramble, his voice a hollow murmur she couldn't quite comprehend. He led her down a dark hall, past door, after door, after door. She was barely aware of where they traveled, if her feet touched the ground, if she still stood in her own body.

"Here you are." His words roared through her ears like crashing waves breaking through the silence. "The room has a view of the back gardens and on a clear day, you can see the ocean. I hope you find the accommodations to your liking." He smiled and used his cane to nudge open the last door in the hall.

The large room wavered, before finally focusing into a fairy forest of gold and green.

"Your things should be waiting. If you need anything, just ring. I'll be up in a bit to escort you to my grandson."

With that said, he bowed and left. Eager to be alone, Ella stumbled into the room,

closing the door behind her. Her heart raced in her chest, her mouth dry. Familiar feelings, but completely inappropriate at the moment.

“Why now?” she whispered, looking heavenward.

She took in a deep breath and moved to the narrow windows, pushing them wide. A crisp breeze swept inside, rustling the thick, green curtains and providing relief to her fevered skin. Below, a rich and colorful garden thrived. There wasn't enough light to see the ocean, but the flowers below would be a merry sight to greet her every morning. She leaned forward and breathed deep. The perfumed scent of roses wafted in from a vine that crawled up the house to her window. Taking comfort in the blooms, she closed her eyes and focused.

An animal, desperate but not crying out for help. She didn't understand the mixed signals, had never experienced such a confusing blend before. Fading and then pulsing to life as if the poor beast weren't quite sure if he needed assistance or not. A trapped hare? A sickly bird? But it felt larger. A hunted deer?

She pulled the necklace from her collar, running the pendant up and down the thin, silver chain. Frustrated, she started to turn away when a sudden movement caught her attention. A man stalked from the house. The wind teased his hair, brushing the strands across his neck—strands much too long for any decent gentleman. Was he the culprit? The man responsible for tormenting whatever animal was in need of help?

Stunned and curious, she pushed the curtain further aside and peered into the evening. In his hand he dragged what looked to be a framed canvas. How odd. Was he real or some mythical beast made visible by the magic of twilight? Her gaze slid from his face, hidden by his long hair, down to the sleeves of his white shirt, which were rolled to his elbows. Even from her vantage point she could see the corded muscles flexed in his forearms.

An unfamiliar heat pulsed through her body, pushing aside the familiar hum of her powers. The subject of her fascination stopped and threw the canvas in a wide arc. The painting sailed through the garden and landed on a yellow rose bush.

“Rather peculiar,” Ella whispered.

He spun around as if he heard her comment. Ella squeezed back behind the curtains. The small, porcelain clock on the fireplace mantel ticked the time by. Unable to control her curiosity, she finally peeked between the folds of the drapes. His gaze lingered directly at her window. For a few seconds he merely stared. Surely he couldn't see her. Her heart hammered in her chest as she waited...waited...waited.

Finally, he dropped his attention and disappeared into the house. Ella raced across the room and bolted her door. Safely ensconced, she leaned against the thick, wooden panel

and breathed a sigh of relief. By God, who was he?

\* \* \*

“This castle has been in our family for three hundred years,” Lord Roberts explained.

Portraits of dour relatives glared down at Ella, as if demanding to know how she had been allowed access to their privileged family. She studied each picture looking for a familiar man with dark hair. All afternoon he’d commanded her thoughts. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask about the strange garden visitor. Perhaps he’d been a disgruntled servant? But the cut of his clothing and arrogance of his stance did not suggest servitude.

“My elder brother.”

Lord Roberts’s voice broke into her thoughts. Feigning interest, she looked up to a tall portrait of a man with tousled brown hair and a wide grin.

“He looks cheerful,” she said.

Apparently, it was not the correct response.

Lord Roberts frowned and shook his head. “Disrepute. Unfortunately, the man was wild and uncontrollable. He held no interest in his heritage, or this castle. It is by his own careless selfishness that he died.”

Ella looked at Lord Roberts out of the corner of her eye, pressing her lips tightly together to keep her mouth from dropping open. She hadn’t expected such harsh damnation from a seemingly gentle man. But then there were many odd things about the Roberts household. The way her powers reacted, for one. And, of course the garden stranger.

Lord Roberts said nothing more but turned and started down yet another endless hall, and Ella was forced to hurry after him, worried she’d lose her way. “My lord, I’d like to make my good-byes to Lady Buckley before she leaves.”

He didn’t bother to look at her as he responded. “My dear, Lady Buckley left over an hour ago.”

The blood rushed from her head and Ella stopped, swerving on her feet. Alone? Utterly alone? Fran was gone? Lady Buckley had left? Was there to be no farewell? No words of encouragement or admonition?

“My dear?” Lord Roberts called out, glancing over his shoulder. Her face flushed and lifting the hem of her serviceable gown, she rushed to his side.

His bushy gray brows drew together. “Are you well?”

“Yes.” She forced a smile upon her lips and forced her mind to think of thoughts

other than her sudden solitude. They were gone; there was nothing to be done. “It must be lovely, to have a family, a sense of history.”

“It is,” he said, but she didn’t miss the clouded look that crossed his faded blue eyes. “’Tis why you are here, Ella. My grandson is the next in line. I need him to be as well educated as possible when the time comes for him to take his place.”

“Of course,” Ella replied.

But the lanterns on the rock walls cast wavering shadows against the floor, demanding her attention and increasing her anxiety.

“Still, I feel I must warn you. My grandson,” Lord Roberts said, “has had a difficult life. He’s not exactly...normal.”

Ella tore her gaze from the dark hall to focus on Lord Roberts. His face was passive, but his eyes still held a sense of sadness that worried her. Against her will, her heart skipped a beat and she had to force her feet to continue forward, wondering over his ominous words.

“But I promise you, if you persevere, the reward will be well worth the effort.”

She parted her lips to question him further when he stopped outside double wooden doors carved with mystical beasts. Unicorns, dragons, elves all fought for attention like a children’s fairy tale come to life.

“Any family will hire you, Ella, upon learning you worked for me,” Lord Roberts said. “Just think, even royalty.” Before his words of promise could sink in, he reached out and pushed the doors wide.

A rush of apprehension washed over her like a chilly breeze. That feeling she’d had when she first arrived...that same feeling that had seeped in through her bedroom window. Her heart raced, but her mind stilled. Her entire body focused on the hum that started vibrating in her core. A beast, a beast in dire need, a beast confused, angry, hurt.

“Do not be afraid, my dear,” Lord Roberts said, slipping her arm through the crook of his elbow and leading her into the room.

Afraid? Afraid! Why should she be afraid?

A crash made her jump. Even Lord Roberts tightened his hold. Blimey, is that where the noise had come from? Lord Roberts’s grandson?

“My lord, I do not have great experience with children.” Her face heated at the lie. “I mean, of boys, in particular.”

“Oh, that won’t matter much, my dear.”

He pulled her further into the gold room, her slipped feet whispering their resis-

tance against the cold, marble floor.

“W—where is he?” Her gaze swept the pastel landscape murals on the walls, up to the ceiling where fat cherubs grinned down at her, demented sprites mocking her plight.

Her mind buzzed as a rush of emotion swept into her, then back out, like waves at sea. She couldn't seem to catch hold of anything, merely hints of anger, frustration, sorrow, and resentment. Another crash resounded from beside her. Ella spun around. An empty easel was propped in the corner of the room, under the glow of wall sconces. Movement near the windows caught her attention.

A man. The man from the garden.

Dark hair glistened in the low candlelight, his broad back to her. Her body froze, her thoughts spinning.

“I thought I'd created him in my mind,” she whispered.

“You've met?” Lord Roberts turned to her, confusion in his eyes.

“No, I saw him this evening. He seemed to be...” What was the right word? “Overwrought about something.”

With what could only be called a growl, he tossed a paint-splattered canvas outside.

“Oh my,” she gasped. “He seems rather upset now, too. Who is he?”

“My grandson, Leo.”

Ella's stomach sank. “I see. And your other grandson, the one I will be teaching, is he here?” She pulled away and studied the room. It was empty.

The old man's face flushed a telling shade of red. “Ah, yes. Well, you see—”

“My lord,” a servant whispered from the hall. He darted a glance at Lord Roberts's grandson and scampered back, cowering behind the doors.

“Yes? What is it?” Lord Roberts strolled toward the hall. Ella resisted the urge to cling to the man, to beg him not to leave her alone, to beg him to send a rider for Lady Buckley.

As if sensing her vulnerability, Leo spun away from the window and faced her. Ella's heart jumped into her throat. The set of his square jaw made him appear fierce, yet she could not ignore the handsome features that pulled together in a face that would inspire Michelangelo. His attention swept over her form, leaving behind a trail of heat that pulsed unwanted through her body.

Dear Lord, he wore only trousers and a white shirt, spattered in paint and completely unbuttoned. She couldn't stop her gaze from traveling the trail of hair that swept down his muscled chest. Her body tingled and her gaze jumped back to his face. His wavy

locks hung wildly about his shoulders. His body was tight, tense— like a beast prepared for an attack. Surely he wouldn't harm her.

With long, purposeful strides, he shortened the distance between them. And she couldn't move, couldn't move a bloody step, fear and something else holding her captive. Nearer...nearer. Would he stop or knock her over?

Then their gazes met and any thought of escape fled. Suddenly nothing existed. Ella fell into a warm pool of gold. An eerie gold that glowed from his eyes, pulling her under, drowning in emotion and leaving her gasping for breath. It was coming from him...the emotion...the need...the pain.

Birds, rabbits, even a fox, but never had she been able to read a person's emotions. Mesmerized, she didn't move a muscle when he stopped only a foot away, looming over her like some archangel come to take her soul. Was the floor still beneath her feet or was she falling? The room seemed to spin as his scent swirled around her: sea salt, pine and male; him.

"It is nice to meet you," she somehow managed to get past her lips.

His eyes narrowed into slits and his nostrils flared, his breath a soft whisper as he inhaled deeply. Slowly, he moved around her as if she were prey and he the hunter. He stepped close, too close. With his chest hot to her back, his essence seeped into her skin. His fingers brushed her nape, wrapped around a loose lock, and the fine hairs on her neck stood on end. She heard the distinct intake of breath, as if he smelled the strands. Paralyzed from fright and from another foreign emotion, Ella couldn't move. Her heart hammered in her ears, drowning out every sound but her own harsh breathing.

He leaned forward, and the side of his face, rough with a day's growth of whiskers, brushed against the sensitive skin of her neck. She closed her eyes, feeling every muscled contour of his body, every heated limb, every soft breath he took. Strange physical sensations pulsed through her veins, a deep aching need for only God knew what. Want, desire, anger so intense, her knees quivered and she feared she would sink to the ground in a dead faint.

"Leo," Lord Roberts called out. The tap of the old man's cane sounded muddled through the fog of her exotic reality. Part of her was weak with relief when Lord Roberts appeared, yet a small part, deep down inside, was strangely eager to see what this Leo would do next.

"I see you have met your new governess," Lord Roberts said.

*Governess?* As if Leo were a boy when in fact he was a man, a very grown man.

His hold on her hair tightened, and she resisted the urge to squeak.

The old man's eyes flickered uneasily from her face to his grandson. "I believe Miss Finch would like to rest."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ella studied her ward. His jaw clenched, but he released his hold on her hair. With a curl of his lips and a stiff jerk of his arm, he pointed toward the hall.

"Right, of course, you would like some time alone. Well then, shall we?" Lord Roberts tugged her toward the open doors.

Her shoulder brushed against Leo's hard chest, and shivers raced all the way to her toes. Confused by her strange reaction, she stole a glance back as Lord Roberts led her from the room. Leo stood there, his hands on his slim hips as if sizing her up for the kill. As Lady Buckley had promised, she was indeed being punished by God.

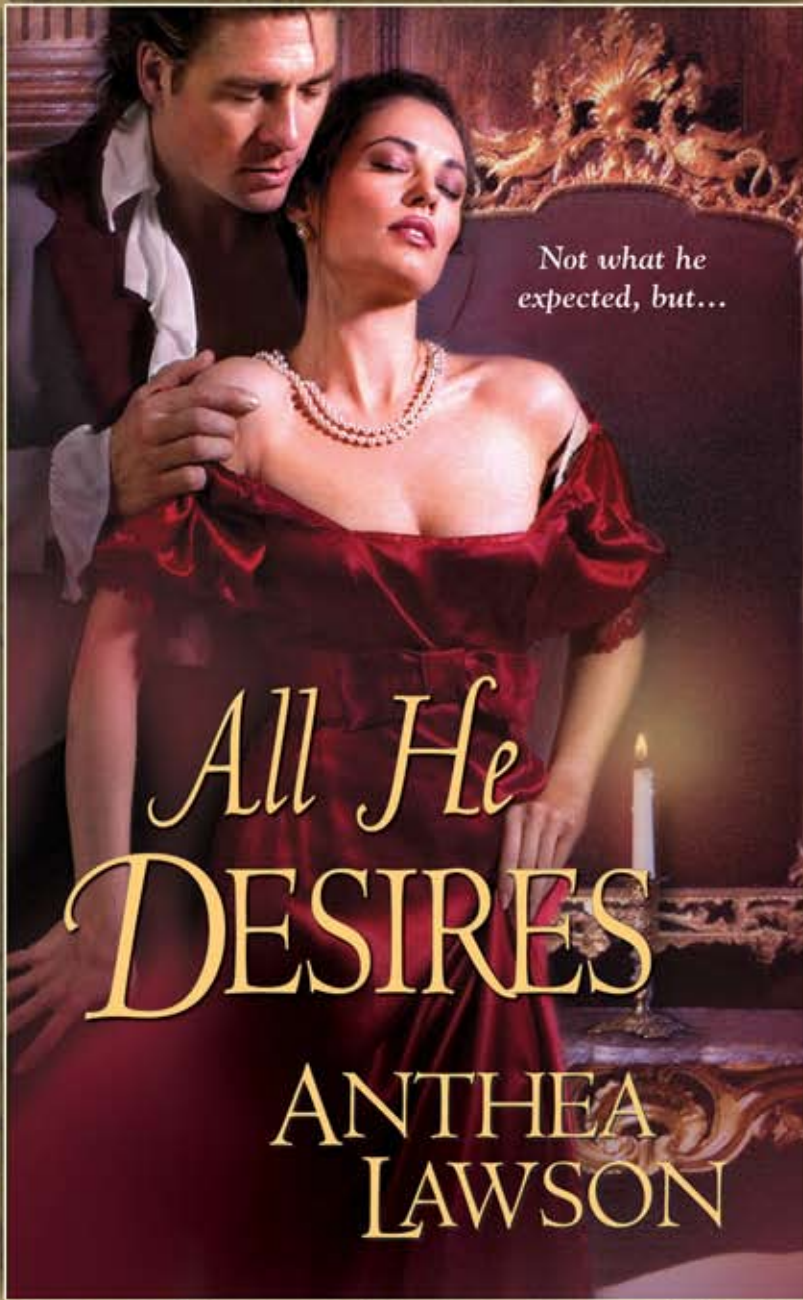
Lord Roberts closed the doors and shut the man from view. The surge of emotion and heat receded, leaving her trembling and cold.



Visit

[www.loribrighton.com](http://www.loribrighton.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**



Not what he  
expected, but...

*All He*  
**DESIRES**  
ANTHEA  
LAWSON

**“A lush, exotic tale of  
romance and adventure.”**

**—Sally MacKenzie,  
USA Today Bestselling Author**



# All He Desires

by

Anthea Lawson

[www.anthelawson.com](http://www.anthelawson.com)



November 2009

ISBN-10: 1420104578

ISBN-13: 978-1420104578



ZEBRA BOOKS

Kensington Publishing Corp.

[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns extending from both ends.

CRETE, MARCH 1848

Caroline Huntington was falling.

The distance from saddle to ground took on a dreadful expanse as her horse reared. Flung backwards, heartbeat doubling in her throat, she clutched at the pommel, but the smooth leather slipped beneath her palms. For a sickening moment she hurtled down through empty air. Then the earth rushed to meet her, clouting her head and sending a rough pain jolting down her outstretched arm. She swallowed, sudden darkness hovering at the edges of her vision. From far away she heard the throb of hoof-beats receding.

“Help...” It came out a moan, and who would hear? She had left the village far behind, drawn too far up the track by the promise of a dazzling view from the hillside, the scent of dusty herbs in the clear air.

How quickly the world had upended. One moment riding above the olive groves, the next...

She drew in a shaky breath and tried to sit, the world spinning at the motion. There was no sign of her skittish mount, no sign of any other living creature besides herself. The air was still and quiet, the late-afternoon light fading to red even as she lay on the path. She was alone, a stranger surrounded by silent hills.

Her arm hurt far too much, the ache magnified by the throbbing in her head. Would anyone find her out here? She thought of her uncle back in London, her brother—they were so terribly far away. Her mind veered from the notion she might never see them again. No. She only had to get up and start walking, keep breathing through the pain, but she felt tired, so tired...

When she opened her eyes again the world had darkened and there were stars above her, cold and distant. She stared at the sky as the constellations spun and wavered. The ground was hard and chilly beneath her, and the joint of her elbow felt as though it

were on fire. Clenching her jaw she forced herself to her knees, then made a staggering lurch that brought her to her feet. Her legs seemed barely connected to her body and she fought for balance, breath scraping her throat. The world tilted, then steadied.

Right arm cradled close, she began to pick her way back down the path. Every step jarred and made her want to sit down again, or better yet, lie down and give in, but she pressed her lips together hard and kept on. One step. Then another. One breath. Then another.

She did not know how long she had been walking, but the stars had come down to earth and seemed to dance in front of her. She blinked, blinked again, and the points of light resolved into fires. No, torches. She could hear voices, calling something that sounded like her name.

“I’m here!” she cried, lifting her good arm, eyes hot with relief. In moments they were there, her rescuers, dark-eyed olive farmers, talking excitedly and waving their torches.

“Caroline! Thank heavens we found you.” Maggie Farnsworth pushed to the fore, her normally neatly coiled hair straggling from its pins, her face lined with worry.

How odd. When had her traveling companion ever appeared less than tidy? Caroline swayed and Maggie caught her.

“Quick, someone help me,” Maggie called. “She’s about to collapse.”

“Allow me to assist you.” A silver-haired gentleman with a French accent stepped forward, reaching for her.

Caroline flinched. “Not my elbow—”

“Pardon me, mademoiselle. We must get you to a doctor immediately.” He turned and shouted in Greek. Two men hurried back down the track, their torches leaving smears of light against the darkness.

“Manolis will bring the cart,” the Frenchman said. “It will not be long.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Legault,” Maggie said. “Your assistance tonight has been invaluable. When Miss Huntington did not return from her ride...” Her breath caught on the words.

“There now. We foreigners must look after one another, is it not so? Though without the help of these good men we would not have found your friend.”

“But we did. We did.” Maggie supported Caroline, holding firmly to her uninjured arm. The flames reflected off Maggie’s gold-rimmed spectacles. “When you had not returned by supper, I knew something was wrong. The owners of the villa directed me to Monsieur Legault, and he helped organize the search.”

Caroline swallowed. “I’m so glad.” She leaned against her friend and closed her

eyes. How could she have been so thoughtless, so careless? She would make it up to Maggie, somehow.

“Ah,” Monsieur Legault said. “Here is the cart. It will not be comfortable, but the aid we seek is not far.”

Maggie led Caroline to where the rustic vehicle waited. “I would not think a village of this size boasted a doctor. How fortunate.”

The Frenchman smiled, though there was something cautious in his expression. “We shall see. Come.”

The cart rolled forward over the rough track, and it did not take long for Caroline to fall into a hazy, pain-filled daze. The night sky, the flaring torches, the jolting ride wove together into a disjointed tapestry. She did not realize they had halted in front of a cottage until Maggie coaxed her upright and helped her from the cart.

Monsieur Legault went to the door. He pounded, and pounded again until at last it was opened by a figure who remained in the shadows. Caroline blinked, her vision still blurred. A tall man, she thought.

“What do you want?” His voice was gruff.

“Mr. Trentham, we require your help.” The Frenchman waved to where Caroline stood, supported by Maggie. “The mademoiselle is injured.”

The man shook his head. “I cannot help you.” He began to close the door, but Monsieur Legault set his foot in the jamb.

“I ask you not to be stubborn. She is hurt—she must be seen.”

The shadow moved closer to the light. He *was* tall, his hair the color of night. The torchlight painted hollows under his cheekbones and cast his uncompromising nose in sharp relief. He did not look like a doctor, not with his creased clothing and untamed hair, a scowl making his face even more forbidding. When his gaze moved to her, Caroline *felt* it, a nearly physical sensation, like standing under a storm cloud just before the fury of wind and rain lashed down. She shivered.

He regarded her for several moments, measured by the rapid beat of her heart. His eyes seemed black in the flickering light. That intent gaze moved down to her dusty boots, then returned to her face.

At last he turned to the Frenchman. “The woman is on her feet. She looks well enough. Take her to Rethymno.” He stepped back and made to close his door again.

“You must help us,” Monsieur Legault said, a pleading note in his voice. “Rethymno is too far, and you know how little talent the doctor there has.”

“Enough to care for an injured arm. Good night.”

“Wait!” Maggie stepped forward, bringing Caroline with her. “You cannot refuse—

you are English!”

“Oh?” He paused with one hand on the door frame, his lips twisted as though he had tasted something bitter. “I don’t see that it signifies.”

“Of course it does. This is Miss Caroline Huntington, the niece of the Earl of Twickenham. How can you consider yourself a gentleman if you turn her away?”

“Who says I consider myself a gentleman?”

Caroline took an uneven step forward, ready to add her voice to the argument, but the world tilted. She heard Maggie gasp, but Monsieur Legault was quicker. He spun, bracing Caroline before she fell.

“You see?” He glared back at Mr. Trentham. “It is more than her arm.”

The dark man said nothing for a long moment, then with a curse he turned on his heel and stalked back into the cottage. Light from inside spilled across the threshold.

“Come, little one.” Monsieur Legault aided Caroline into the cottage while Maggie followed behind.

“Put her in there.” Mr. Trentham gestured down a short hallway but made no move to follow.

Caroline allowed herself to be led and was dimly aware of sinking down on a bed, of Maggie removing her riding boots and helping her lie back. The room whirled behind her closed eyelids.

“Do not worry at Mr. Trentham’s manner,” Monsieur Legault said in an undertone. “He was a very skilled doctor—even if he refuses to acknowledge it.”

“Why is that?” Maggie asked.

“He will not speak of it. But your companion, she is in good hands. Come, madame, you must sit too—the events of the evening have unsettled you. Look, you are trembling.”

Caroline heard her friend’s sigh, the weary rustle of skirts settling. She wanted to apologize, but all strength had left her. Her head hurt, and it was easier to simply lie still, eyes closed, and try not to imagine what would follow. Would she have to return to England? Maggie would insist on accompanying her, but that was unthinkable. Her friend’s mission in the Mediterranean would have to be abandoned if she did so—and it would be Caroline’s fault.

“I see you’ve made yourselves at home.”

She opened her eyes to see Mr. Trentham standing in the doorway. His dark hair looked as though he had roughed his hands through it before entering the room. It gave him a wild, untamed air.

“Really, sir.” Maggie started to rise, but he waved her back to her seat.

“Calm yourself, Mrs....”

“Farnsworth,” she supplied.

He gave a nod, then turned his scowl toward Monsieur Legault.

“*Bien*,” the Frenchman said. “I knew we could rely upon you, Mr. Trentham.”

“You presume too much.” The black-haired man stalked to Caroline’s bedside. He moved with an almost imperceptible limp, favoring his left leg. He bent and looked into her eyes, forcing her to meet his gaze. Caroline stared back into deep indigo—the color of the sky after sunset, just before it shades into night.

“My elbow,” she said, trapped by his gaze. “I landed on my arm when I fell.”

“Here?” He set two fingers to the inside of her elbow, where the fire burned.

She flinched. “Yes.”

He took her hand and she felt the roughness of his palm. “Can you move your fingers, Miss Huntington?”

She could, her fingers brushing lightly against his.

“Good.” Despite the difficult introduction and his obvious unwillingness to care for her, his touch was gentle. Steady competence radiated from his hands, an odd contrast to the rest of his demeanor.

“The blood flow doesn’t appear to be compromised, but your elbow. . . . Take a deep breath.”

Caroline obeyed as his large hands moved up her arm. When he touched the joint she stiffened in pain and could not help her quick, indrawn breath, but she refused to give voice to the lightning slicing through her. She would bear whatever came in silence, for Maggie’s sake.

His touch moved back down to her wrist. “Move your fingers again. Yes, that’s it. Any tingling? Loss of feeling?”

“No.” It came out a strained whisper.

He glanced up. “Mrs. Farnsworth, I require your assistance.”

Maggie came and stood at Caroline’s shoulder. Her face was pale and she was breathing quickly. “I am not certain...”

“Grasp her arm here, above the elbow. Firmly. I am going to apply a downward pressure and lever the arm so the bones can return to their proper alignment.”

“Lever the arm?” Maggie’s voice was faint.

Mr. Trentham looked impatient. “That’s generally the accepted procedure to reduce a

dislocated elbow.”

“Shouldn’t you administer something for the pain?” Maggie sounded as though she were the one in need of medication.

Caroline glanced at her friend. “I will be all right.” She forced a smile past the throbbing ache.

“Please, Caroline. I can’t bear the thought of you suffering.” Maggie swallowed.

A sudden, dangerous edge leapt into Mr. Trentham’s voice. “She said she would be all right.”

“You don’t know my companion as I do,” Maggie said. “She won’t admit...”

He leaned forward and stared into Caroline’s eyes. A ghost of something like panic shadowed his expression. “I do not run an apothecary. And I do not administer medications.” His tone was harsh. “You have no right to ask.”

“Mr. Trentham.” Monsieur Legault spoke from his place at the end of the bed, his voice soothing. “A small dose of laudanum. It will not hurt, surely. She seems to be in some difficulty.”

“Please.” Maggie’s voice held a touch of desperation.

Caroline wanted to argue that she could bear it, but she was not certain she could. Just the thought of him straightening her arm brought her perilously close to tears.

Mr. Trentham stood, hands balled into fists. “You don’t bloody know what you’re asking.”

Tension vibrated from him, and Caroline was reminded again of a storm about to break free, some elemental force barely chained.

“Now, my friend,” the Frenchman said softly.

“No.” The doctor spun, mouth tight and furious, and strode from the room.

## Chapter Two

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns extending from both ends.

The door banged against the wall in Mr. Trentham's wake, the noise underscoring the shocked silence that descended. Maggie turned a distressed look to Monsieur Legault, but he only shook his head. No one spoke.

Long minutes passed, and it did not seem at all certain Mr. Trentham would return. Caroline began to think the strange man had fled into the night, abandoning them.

Then, as abruptly as he had left, he returned, carrying a brown glass bottle and a spoon. After opening the cap, he wetted the tip of his finger with the medicine and tasted it, then thrust the bottle into Maggie's hands.

"Here. If you feel it's essential, you administer the dose."

"But... how much would you recommend?"

"None. The outcome is upon your head." He made for the door again, then paused and looked over his shoulder. "One spoonful."

Maggie poured out a measure and gave it to Caroline. The bitter liquid tasted dreadful, but she was beyond caring.

"How long until it takes effect?" her friend called.

"Soon." Mr. Trentham's voice from the other room was strained.

Caroline listened to the sound of his pacing until it became impossible to concentrate. The room seemed to be filling up with soft white clouds, or perhaps it was her head filling up, she was not sure. Either way, it was a welcome whiteness. The pain felt muffled and very far away.

"Miss Huntington?" Mr. Trentham's words pierced through the clouds. He had returned to stand at the bedside.

She blinked. "I... I am ready. I think."

"Good. Mrs. Farnsworth, take hold of her arm."

Caroline closed her eyes. There was a gentle, steady pull and someone screamed.

“Madame!” The urgency in Monsieur Legault’s voice made Caroline open her eyes, but he was not speaking to her. Both he and Mr. Trentham were kneeling on the floor, the younger man supporting Maggie.

“For pity’s sake.” Mr. Trentham lightly slapped her cheek. “Wake up, Mrs. Farnsworth. Let me remind you that you are not the injured one.”

Caroline giggled; she could not help it. The two gentlemen glanced up at her.

“I’m glad you feel no pain, Miss Huntington. Do not attempt to move your arm. I will splint it—as soon as I manage your squeamish friend.” Mr. Trentham frowned down at Maggie, who still lay unmoving in his arms. “Legault, you’ll find brandy in the cupboard beside the sink. I think Mrs. Farnsworth requires a restorative.”

The Frenchman rose. “Will she be all right?”

“She’s fine—though useless for nursing. As soon as she regains consciousness I’m sending her back to the village with you. Kindly ask if Madame Legault will come in the morning to tend to Miss Huntington’s needs. And now, sir, if you will have the courtesy not to faint, you may assist me in splinting her arm.”

\* \* \*

Alex Trentham stood in the doorway, watching until the lantern-lit cart carrying Mrs. Farnsworth and Monsieur Legault dipped down the path and out of sight. His shirt was damp with perspiration. The night air was chill, but he did not retreat from it. There was nowhere to go. His solitude had been torn away, his peace disturbed, he had had a patient thrust upon him—it was all one great, bloody nightmare. He glanced back at his bedroom, the irrefutable evidence asleep in his bed.

Damn Miss Huntington for carelessly injuring herself. Damn Legault for his insistence. And damn his own miserable history for haunting him here, over a thousand miles from England.

He slammed the door against the darkness outside. There was nothing to be done now—except wait, observe her condition, and get her out of his house as soon as she could be moved. When she had gone he would forget, once and for all. He must never allow this to happen again.

Legault had left the brandy on the sideboard. Alex poured a glass and went to the kitchen table, which was pushed against the wall and had wooden crates stacked beneath it. He took a long drink, then removed the cloth draped over his latest project.

Bones, compliments of Legault’s archaeological dig. Large ones and small, the remains of the ancient inhabitants of this island, markers of a civilization buried for cen-

turies. Legault dug them up and Alex pieced them together. There was much that bones could reveal to a trained eye: the age of the deceased, whether their lives had been ones of brutal labor or pampered ease.

There were distinct advantages to working with the dead. The souls had fled and there was nothing he could do to harm them. Nothing at all. Alex lifted his glass and drained it, then selected a metacarpus and held it to the light. A number at the bottom, inked in his own neat hand. Setting it aside, he made a notation in the book that lay open beside him.

“Hello?” Miss Huntington’s voice drifted from the bedchamber, soft and uncertain.

He held very still, willing her to fall back asleep. But no, he heard her stirring, and then she called again. “Is anyone there? I’m so thirsty.”

He pushed back his chair and fetched a cup, filling it. The soft light of the lamp he carried preceded him into the bedroom, illuminating his—no, he would not call her his patient. Her brown hair was loose against his pillow, her eyes wide and dreamy. The flame pricked glints of gold in her brown eyes, gilded strands of her hair.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you an orphan?”

“I beg your pardon?”

She gave no response, still clearly under the effect of the laudanum. Thank God she had suffered no ill effects from the dose. For a terrible moment he had been so afraid... but she was safe. And had shown a great deal of courage. In the morning there would be pain, but tonight her face was open and serene.

“I’ve brought water.” He set the cup down and slid one arm behind her shoulders, boosting her up. The bedcovers slipped down, revealing a silken white chemise that followed the curve of her breasts, and Alex felt a sudden leap of physical awareness.

He had not practiced the role of physician, nor seen a woman in a state of undress, in a very long while. The detachment that used to serve him so well was gone. It was impossible not to notice her feminine shape, the smooth column of her neck, the softness of her full lips as he held the glass against them. The scent of her. Despite himself he dipped his head, inhaling. Her warm weight rested against him, the softness of her hair brushing against his throat.

“Drink.” His throat felt tight.

She took a long, thirsty swallow. “Good,” she said, a single drop of water glinting on her lower lip. “How did you lose your parents?”

It was a question asked in innocence, and he felt oddly compelled to answer. “My father died years ago, and my mother...” He barely allowed himself to remember what his life had been, before. “She was alive when I left.”

She laid her head against his arm, and he let go the shreds of memory. With steady hands he helped her lie back, then pulled the covers up, restoring her modesty—though that brief contact with all that was warm and female still flared within him, not so easily obscured.

She sighed. “I suppose your mother abandoned you. Maggie says some do. I wish I had known mine.”

She seemed determined to share confidences. Alex pulled a chair over and settled himself next to the bed. It was unlikely she would recall anything of their conversation in the morning—there was no harm in it, and he could humor her until she fell asleep again. Her secrets were safe with him. And despite the disruption she had caused she was here now, and a part of him sorely missed having company—some conversation to keep back the dark night.

“What happened to her?” he asked gently, as much to escape his own thoughts as to learn hers.

“She died giving birth to me—a life for a life, I suppose.” Her expression was tinged with sorrow. “And then my father, when I was a young girl.”

“So you are truly an orphan.”

“Yes.” A delicate shiver ran through her.

He took her good hand in his, wanting her to feel less alone. “I know loss as well. The world changes forever.” His own words surprised him—he had never spoken like this.

She met his gaze and he recognized in her amber-flecked eyes an expression he had seen often in his own mirror.

“Then we understand one another, sir. That is a rare thing.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” Her face was serious.

Her warm hand gripped his, and Alex felt it, a tenuous connection. It frightened him beyond words, made him want to shove his chair back and leave her, to retreat far enough to stretch that slender thread to the breaking point. But he remained where he was.

When would he ever experience this again—the chance to sit in the lamplight and hold a beautiful woman’s hand? And she was beautiful, her eyes brimming with memory, her hair falling free, her hand strong and alive and holding on.

“You should rest now,” he said, his voice thick with an emotion he did not understand.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “Yes.”

A few moments later her eyelids drifted shut, but she did not release his hand, and he made no effort to free himself.

\* \* \*

Grey light seeping from behind the linen curtains woke him—that and an ache in his leg that protested his spending the better part of the night in a chair. Miss Huntington was deeply asleep, the hand that had held his through the dark hours now curled, relaxed, against the pillow. For a long moment he gazed at her, marking the regular rise and fall of her breath, the healthy color, the serenity her face held in dreaming.

Muttering an oath, he levered himself out of the chair and walked stiffly to the front room. He should have spent the night beside the fire, wrapped in blankets, not dozing beside some woman who meant nothing to him.

He was forever outside that world of sweetness. It was his fate, and here on Crete, the birthplace of ancient myths, fate was something that could not be escaped. It could only be endured. The pain in his leg reminded him, the sharp twinge returning him to reason with every step.

Miss Huntington would be gone soon enough, and he would be glad to see her go.

The ancient bones on his table gleamed hard and white in the growing light. With quick steps he crossed the room and drew the cover over them.



Visit

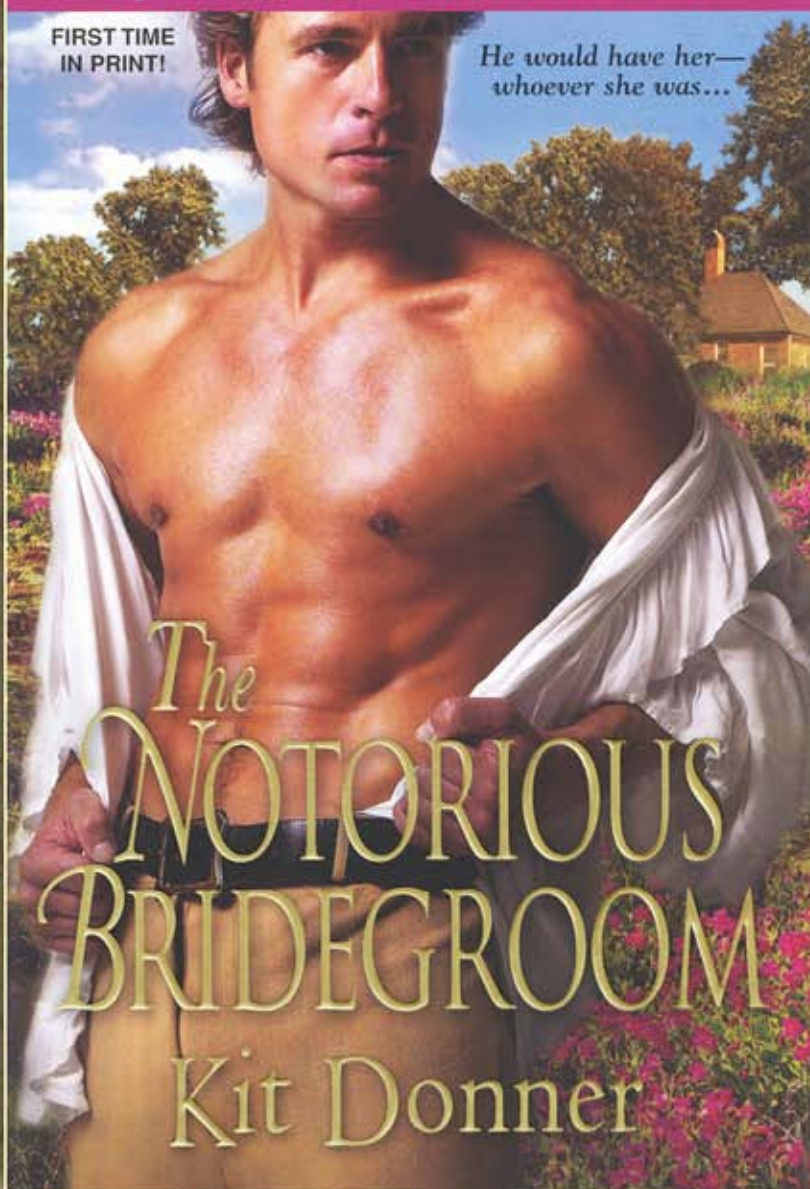
[www.anthelawson.com](http://www.anthelawson.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**

**Special Value \$4.99** Canada \$5.99

**FIRST TIME  
IN PRINT!**

*He would have her—  
whoever she was...*



**“An intriguing and unusual debut...  
with a cast of well drawn and  
colorful secondary characters.”**

**— Nicola Cornick**



# The Notorious Bridegroom

by

Kit Donner

[www.kitdonner.com](http://www.kitdonner.com)



August 2009

ISBN-10: 1420108468

ISBN-13: 978-1420108460



ZEBRA BOOKS

Kensington Publishing Corp.

[www.kensingtonbooks.com](http://www.kensingtonbooks.com)

# Chapter One

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns extending from both ends.

WINCHELSEA, SOUTHEAST ENGLAND, SPRING 1803

Patience Mandeley considered the wisdom of her plan, and determined that either she was very courageous, believed in guardian angels, or was quite tetchèd in the head. At the moment, she leaned toward the latter. But what else could she do? She could think of no other way to save her younger brother Rupert, from treason charges.

“Miss Patience, quit woolgathering, and let us be off to the fair,” her companion of two days, Colette, told her, smiling. “Time enough to worry about your new position later.”

Patience started, suddenly awakened from her reverie. She slowly rose, gathered her bonnet and matching shawl, and followed her friend out the door of the inn. *Her plan had to work.* There wasn’t much time to help Rupert before the constable found him.

Against her better judgment, Colette had convinced her to enjoy Winchelsea’s Mop Fair before they began their work in the morning. Colette, attired in a black walking dress with light gray mantle, and Patience in deep blue with a light blue cashmere shawl, strolled down the main street joining the other fairgoers.

Patience kept watch for her brother, who might be lurking in the shadows of the lively crowd. She had to get word to him about her plan that would save him.

The twilight hours of the fair cast a dusky rose on the street choked full of locals, travelers, merchants, and farmers. Most of the noisy rumble headed towards the market square, where a bonfire blazed merrily near rows of oxen on spits wafting a delicious aroma to the hungry crowd.

The women made their way to the merchants’ tents, hearing the vendors shouting over each other to entice their customers with exotic perfume from the Far East, bright-colored linen, or a sweet orange. The Annual Mop Fair brought a variety of folk from several miles around who looked forward to this spring event. Crowded streets slowed the ladies’ walk as Patience searched and worried about her younger brother and his

troubles.

Examining the softest of silks and delicious gingerbread occupied the ladies for a time until they heard a loud voice halloing the multitude to the Wild Beast show. The crowd surged forward, pulling Colette in its wake. Patience started after her friend but stopped suddenly.

Someone tugged on her skirts. "Lady, can ye help me find Bella?" a pitiful little voice asked.

Startled, Patience glanced down to find a forlorn small child with tear-stained cheeks, clutching a wooden doll. Four or five at the most, the girl peered at Patience from beneath her tattered gray day cap. She looked to be a sweet tyke, dressed in a faded blue frock, well-worn shoes, with long, disheveled gold curls bobbing down her back. Patience was always lost when it came to children and animals, and the little girl caught at her heart.

"Hello, little one. What's your name?" Patience inquired, removing a handkerchief from her reticule. She knelt down, and after wetting a corner of the lacy white square, she rubbed at the child's dirty face and wiped away her tears.

"Me name's Sally, and I need to find me Aunt Bella. Do ye think she's lost too?" the girl sniffled.

Patience smiled. "No, your aunt must be very worried and looking everywhere for you." Confident they would find the child's relative somewhere nearby, she tucked the handkerchief in her sleeve and held out her hand.

"Come, let us see if we can find her," she told the small girl as they walked together towards the bonfire.

"What's yer name?" the little girl asked, her head cocked to look up at Patience.

Patience hesitated before revealing the name she had chosen for this masquerade. It simply wouldn't do for anyone to learn Patience's true identity. Looking down at the small child, she told her, "Patience Grundy." She noticed Sally clutched something to her chest. "Is that your doll?"

Sally's eyes opened wide and an innocent smile hinted at missing teeth. "Me baby is Jane. See here, Miss Grundy," she said as she held her unclothed wooden doll for Patience to get a closer look at four sticks and a wooden ball for a head.

Patience's eyes widened in consternation. "Does your doll have any clothes?"

"I couldn't find any." Sally shrugged her thin shoulders. "Someday, I'll ha' a baby with lots of clothes and hair. But me aunt says I ha' to be a good girl. But I'm always a good girl." She frowned, obviously confused by adult logic.

They reached the boisterous crowd in the square who were enjoying the fiddle music,

shared ale, and succulent dripping roast pig and oxen meat. But though Patience examined the merrymakers intently, no one appeared to be looking for lost kin. The tiny little hand in hers firmed her determination.

She was about to ask Sally to describe her aunt, when they reached the fiery pier surrounded by those seeking warmth on this damp spring night. Just as Patience released the little girl's hand briefly to adjust her bonnet, a foxed young man pushed past them and knocked Sally towards the flames.

Patience uttered a shriek and lunged for Sally but a gentleman nearby proved faster. He grabbed the child before she could feel the heat's sting. As the stranger lifted the child up and away from the blaze, Sally squealed in delight.

Breathless with relief, Patience watched the gentleman set the child down safely and told her, "You must be more careful, little one."

His concerned voice invoked a warm smile of gratitude from Patience. Before she could express her appreciation, a young man interrupted them, handing a black cane with a gold tip to Sally's rescuer.

"Lord Londringham, you dropped your cane, over there." The pale pleasant-featured man gestured over his shoulder to the firepit.

"Thank you, I had forgotten it."

Patience dropped her jaw.

It was him, Lord Londringham, her new employer and her enemy. What was he doing at the fair? Patience had assumed that gentry would have no interest in local events. She was obviously proved wrong.

Once in his household as the new still-room maid, she would need to try to be inconspicuous if she was to complete her mission. Given her purpose, she wanted to spend as little time as possible with him this night.

The earl, dressed in black, returned his attention to Patience with a quick nod. "If you'll forgive these circumstances, my name is Bryce Andover, the Earl of Londringham. Madam, you should watch your daughter more closely. She could have been seriously injured." Censure was implicit in his tone and manner.

Still shaken by his presence, Patience could only manage to sputter indignantly, "I, I assure you, sir, I *am* in the habit of taking care of those in my custody, but a man—"

"Where's Jane?" Sally cried, effectively suspending Patience's defense.

Lord Londringham looked inquiringly at Patience.

"Her doll," she responded flatly as the child tugged on Patience's skirts.

With a quick look around, the earl spotted the ravaged wood figure by the fire. He picked it up and showed it to the child.

“Was this your doll?” he asked. At Sally’s sad nod and trembling lower lip, the earl told her gently, “She could not be rescued, but might your mama allow me to purchase you a new doll?” He raised his eyebrows at Patience, his gaze inscrutable.

Patience stared in amazement, her lips dry at his intense stare. The man was a chameleon, either gentle and soft-spoken or an arrogant toad. He really should tread the boards with his talent, she thought. He was certainly handsome enough with dark brown hair, penetrating blue eyes, a lean face and square jaw. Oh, but she was becoming distracted. She must keep her mind on her plan. Nothing else mattered.

“Madam, do I have your permission?” He threw the charred remnants of the doll back into the fire and turned to Patience for acquiescence.

His dark face impassive, she knew why he made such a good spy. She blinked in confusion. What had he just said? Something about her *daughter*? “Oh, but-” belatedly she began to explain.

“Of course ye may, right *Mama*?” Sally smiled innocently up at Patience, who raised her eyebrows and dropped her jaw. The little minx wanted to pass off Patience as her mama in order to get a new doll.

She hesitated to admonish the child, then well aware the earl stood nearby quietly watching, told the little girl sweetly, “Sally, I told you I would buy you a doll. And we really must not detain this kind gentleman any further. Remember, we must search for Aunt Bella.”

His smooth voice disrupted her thoughts, startling her. “Perhaps I could assist you in purchasing a doll for the child *and* your search for Aunt Bella.”

Patience put a hand to her head. How ever was she to endure his company, even for one moment? He was not truly considering *joining* them. Did he not have any spy work to do?

She hid her trembling hands in her skirts’ pockets. Being so close to the one who possibly was guilty of causing harm to her brother, she had to bite her lip to stop from pronouncing him the rogue she knew him to be. Before Patience could reply negatively, Sally answered for her, running to his side.

“Oh, please, me lord. I would really love a new doll. E’en though I’ll miss Jane. And ye can help us find Aunt Bella too.” Her sweet supplication would have felled Goliath faster than David’s stone.

Patience watched in surprise as he bent down towards Sally.

“Then we are agreed.” When the earl smiled at Sally, Patience saw the child’s face light up.

“Oh, yes, please, sir,” Sally whispered, then turned to Patience with a smug look.

“Coming, *Mama*?”

Patience uttered, “Of course, sweetheart” through gritted teeth while following the little lamb leading the big bad wolf off to find a doll. Patience was beginning to believe Sally didn’t even have an aunt.

Surely this evening was getting a bit out of hand. Resolved to once more control the events, Patience hurried after Sally and the earl, noting they had already exchanged names. She had to admire the undivided attention the earl showed the child. But she was not fooled. She knew the man would have helped sell Joseph to the merchants. Her brother James’s sermons not forgotten.

After the little girl had tried repeatedly to pronounce his last name without success, she announced decidedly, “I’ll call ye ‘Mr. Long.’”

The earl threw Patience in a panic when he turned his dark blue study in her direction. “Might I know your name, madam? Surely I cannot call you ‘Mama.’”

She knew his smile was deceptively pleasant for Sally. Sally cut in. “Me mama’s name is Miss Grundy.”

Trying to remember her “new” last name and hearing the word “mama” in the same sentence disconcerted Patience but not as much as the earl’s thorough scrutiny of her before inquiring, “Should that not be *Mrs.* Grundy?” in a low voice that sent warm sparks to her cheeks.

Mortified, her mouth dropped open before she quickly recovered. “Of course. My husband died, soon after we married.” She wet her lips in despair. That didn’t sound right. “Sally is really my stepdaughter.” *Yes, much better*, she thought. She really needed to be rid of his presence and to regain her composure.

Thankfully, he chose not to pursue further inquiry. “Mrs. Grundy, what does Aunt Bella look like?”

“Look like?” Patience asked distractedly, trying to think of an answer.

He chuckled softly, causing her to stare at the softening of his features. “Yes, Aunt Bella. Surely you know what the woman looks like?”

Shoulders back, she bluffed her way into a response. “She’s rather difficult to describe, rather ordinary.” Desperate, Patience searched the crowd looking for anyone who could pass as Sally’s aunt. She determined to carry Sally if necessary into the crowd, hoping to lose the earl and his interest in them behind.

She spotted a middle-aged woman in black and pointed to her. “Sally, I think I see Aunt Bella over there. Come along, dear.”

But the child frowned in confusion. “But, Mama, that’s not Aunt Bella.” Suddenly, the sound of the merry-go-round caught Sally’s attention, and immediately dolls

and aunts became yesterday's candy. She pulled at the earl's arm. "Can we go on the merry? Oh, please! Please, Mr. Long?" Sally pleaded.

"I don't see why not, as long as your mama approves," he told her, looking back at Patience a few steps behind them.

She stared at him in bewilderment and found herself nodding. She should have been content to have the opportunity to study her enemy this closely, but could not quite reconcile this man with the image of the purveyor of evil. But what did she really know of him? Unnerved, she could not suppress a shiver.

Unfortunately, the earl must have seen her tremble, for he immediately removed his coat and placed it around her shoulders. "It is certainly a chilly night after the recent rainfall. Let us take the little one on a ride. Then we will look for Aunt Bella."

Sally and the earl walked over to the ride, while Patience followed slowly, enveloped in a musky cocoon of warmth in his greatcoat. His strong, clean scent disturbed her, and she knew not why. It worried her. The sooner she discovered proof of the earl's guilt, Rupert could be free of the treason charges, and they would see the last of this devious man.

At the merry-go-round, Lord Londringham handed coins to the proprietor and lifted Sally onto the wooden platform, already crowded with other children arguing over who would have the best chargers. Sally eagerly climbed onto a small brown pony and turned to look at the earl with a smile.

As Patience dug deep into her pocket for her lucky onyx, she watched the child, aware that her ordeal of pretense had only just begun. When she turned to look for Colette, she suddenly felt strong hands at her waist easily lifting her onto the brightly painted horse beside Sally.

She heard him whisper in her ear, "Thought you might also enjoy a ride."

It all happened so quickly, his touch, his whisper, then he was gone. On her gray and yellow wooden charger, Patience sputtered like a candle at the end of its wick, for she had no notion of taking a ride. But before she could climb down, the carousel jerked into motion. With a firm hold on her horse's pole, she shook her head at the man's audacity. Next time, she would certainly be ready for him. She hoped.

Her contemplation was cut short when she heard Sally's peals of glee as they spun around and around. Thankfully, Patience's charger was wooden, given her fear of horses. But after a few more revolutions, she was ready to exchange her seat for solid ground, while Sally protested her ride had ended much too soon.

The earl stood ready to help them down from the platform, a package tucked under his arm. He plucked Sally down first, then reached for Patience, who tensed, feeling his sinewy hands about her waist. The heat of his touch ignited a strange warmth in her

belly and a flush across her cheeks. She did not have to look up to know he watched her as she clung to his hard forearms in an effort to regain her balance.

Finally, when able to stand without his assistance, he seemed oddly reluctant to let her go. She told him succinctly, “Sir, the next time, I will advise you if I wish to take a ride.” She must remember to keep her wits about her, and her feet firmly planted on the ground when dealing with the man.

“Mrs. Grundy, I sincerely hope you do,” he returned pleasantly.

The gleam in his eyes confused her, and she quickly looked away, finding her bonnet needed adjustment again.

“Oh, that was fun! Shall we try again?” Sally cried, as she spun in circles, her arms flung out as if to fly.

“No, little lady, we shall find your aunt,” Patience stated firmly.

Her authoritative tone brought the child to a slow halt. A grin suddenly lit Sally’s face as she spied another amusement. “A puppet show! Let’s see the puppets!” She grabbed the earl’s hand and began to pull him in the direction of the little curtained box where a group of children were laughing at the antics of *Simple and Master Simon*, a comedy about a hopeless servant and his hard-to-please master.

Patience sighed and reluctantly followed her companions, suddenly suspicious that both Sally and the earl enjoyed themselves at her expense. She saw the earl purchase the child an orange from a merchant, but declined when one was offered to her.

“Really, Mrs. Grundy, that disapproving look on your face surprises me. Do you not like to see your daughter, your *stepdaughter* enjoy herself?”

Startled, she blinked up at the earl, standing a little too close for her own peace of mind. She swallowed. Hard. “Yes, I only worry about finding her aunt. And it is growing quite late. Surely we must be keeping you from something or someone?” She watched his guarded expression carefully.

He pulled out his watch fob. “Yes, I am due to meet someone. But they shall wait.” He returned the watch fob to his pocket and leaned idly on his cane seeming to mask his predatory nature. “I believe you are unfamiliar to Winchelsea. Where is home?”

Alert, she replied, “A good two-day journey from here, my lord.”

Watching the performance, he asked her, “And what brings you to Winchelsea? A new position? A suitor?”

Patience turned to stare at his hard profile, then quickly focused on the show when he glanced her way. *Think quickly. I must think quickly.* “Ah, visiting. Yes, visiting my cousin for a short while.”

Preventing anything further along this line of inquisition, she smiled brightly. “And

where is the woman for your arm?” Her question edged in flirtation, hoping to distract him. She observed him intently, waiting for his answer.

When he shifted his stance to face her, his smile almost charmed her. “Madam, fate has not seen fit to provide me with a wife, and I must take my pleasure like this evening when it is afforded me.”

Patience blushed, wondering if he lingered a little too long over the word “pleasure.” She remarked hurriedly, “You seem to enjoy children, you must wish for your own.”

His blue gaze grew deeper as he gave her an amusing smile. “First a wife, then children. Are you quite sure this is not some kind of proposal, Mrs. Grundy?”

Horrified at his pronouncement, albeit in jest, she clasped her hands to her now-scarlet face. “My lord, I intended no such liberty.”

He laughed at her expression, then as if he remembered something, said softly, “I almost wish—”

Sally interjected, “Please, I want to see the tigers and unicorns and, and ponies!” as they left the puppets for the Wild Beast show.

Wearily, Patience told her, “Ponies, my dear girl, are not wild beasts, and I do not believe there are any unicorns around here.”

“Where’ve ye been, Sally?” a thunderous voice commanded from high above.

Startled, they looked up to find a tiny woman clad in a sparkling bright-red dress climbing down the ladder from a tightrope. She hurried over to Sally, who stood subdued by Patience’s side.

“Where ye been? Answer me! Ye should ha’ been back over an hour ago,” the woman scolded, with a jerk on the child’s thin arm.

At first, Patience could only stare at the scarlet-clad woman who must be Sally’s aunt. An acrobat? Small wonder they could not find her on the ground.

Lord Londringham stepped forward. “Madam, we have been searching for you for some time. Do not be harsh with the child. She only wanted to enjoy the fair.” His intercession acted like cold water on a fire, and the aunt’s anger slowly died.

The little woman stared in surprise at the earl. “Sir, I do beg ye pardon. I hope me gel hasn’t caused trouble.”

The whiny voice grated on Patience’s frazzled nerves, and she told Sally’s aunt, “Little Sally was no trouble at all. We were only concerned we would be unable to find you.”

“Well, ye did, and I’m much obliged. I’ll take care of her now,” her aunt ordered, giving a second glance to the gentleman in front of her.

Quiet during the reunion with her aunt, Sally now gazed up at Lord Londringham. "I never had near so much fun before. Thank ye, Mr. Long, for the orange and the rides and the puppets and everythin'." Her voice floated sweetly up to him.

Patience watched as the earl knelt stiffly beside the little girl. "You are welcome, child, and I did not forget. For you." He offered her the brown-wrapped package he carried under his arm.

The child eagerly ripped open the paper and discovered a pretty wooden doll dressed as a shepherdess, with long flaxen hair, rosy cheeks, and holding a tiny crooked staff.

Sally looked in awe at her present and then at the earl. "Oh, thank ye, sir. I'll take good care of her." Her small face turned pale, and she leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

The earl nodded and rose to a stand, his eyes unwavering on Patience.

Hesitantly, Sally approached Patience, who sank to her knees. "I'm sorry about pretendin' ye was me mama. I did want the doll. I guess I wanted a mama too. I hope yer not too mad."

Patience smiled at the child's honesty. "I am not mad, but lying is seldom rewarded, except perhaps this time."

Sally nodded before smudging a shy kiss on Patience's cheek.

"C'mon. Ye be 'nuff trouble for three children."

The woman's brusque coldness chilled Patience's warm heart. She wished that there was something more she could do for the child.

When the woman would have dragged Sally off, Patience called, "Please wait." She quickly slipped the earl's coat from her shoulders and offered it to him with a short nod. "I must go. Thank you for your kindness. I know Sally truly enjoyed herself."

She turned to leave, but a firm hand on her thin sleeve prevented her. "And Mrs. Grundy? Did she enjoy herself as well?"

His face again in the shadows, somehow she felt her answer important to him.

"Of course. You, you proved to be an amusing as well as considerate companion." She thought her praise high, in view of the circumstances.

His smile widened to a grin. "I suppose the same can be said for Gulliver."

"Gulliver?" She knew she should not have asked.

"My dog."

While studying her flushed face, he raised her hand and softly kissed her glove, his warmth penetrating through to her skin.

"Mrs. Grundy, you do interest me, a great deal. I'm confident that we will meet

again,” he told her and bid her good evening with a touch to his beaver hat.

Patience froze looking after him. His sentiments seemed ominous. Perhaps they would meet again, right before he was hung for treason.

Sally interrupted her troubling thoughts, tugging on her hand for attention. Looking at Sally’s aunt’s suspicious countenance, Patience was aware she needed to explain a few things to the little woman. A few bob, and she gained the aunt’s silence.

After matters were finally remedied, and Bella had taken Sally home, Patience could search for Colette. Since most of the fairgoers had wandered into the night, only a small handful of people remained near the dying bonfire. To her relief, she soon found Colette at the square, looking for her too. They strolled back to their lodgings, along with the rest of a tired crowd. Patience could only hope her disguise as a still-room maid in Lord Londringham’s house would hold up to scrutiny after this night.

\* \* \*

Back at Paddock Green, Bryce lay awake for a long time reflecting on the sweet countenance of one Mrs. Grundy. He knew Grundy was not her last name. Who could she be? He wished had inquired as to the cousin’s surname.

The bright flames of the bonfire around Mrs. Grundy had created a vivid aura against her soft chestnut hair. He remembered the tiger-lights sparkling in her lovely hazel eyes, and the warm look she unknowingly had sent him when he had given the child a new doll. He rose from the bed to walk over to the chair where he had laid his coat. He could still smell her lavender perfume on it. And a faint odor of peppermint.

The lark awakened him outside his window with the morning light pouring onto his bed in uneven lines. He had not slept this deeply in months, and it took him a few minutes to realize the cause.

No nightmares. It was because of her. Mrs. Grundy. He knew little about her, but sure as the world held hope and regrets, he would find her again. Unfortunately, he had to find his brother’s murderer before he could enjoy her tempting pleasure.



Visit

[www.kitdonner.com](http://www.kitdonner.com)

**READ ANOTHER EXCERPT**