1

AT THE SOUND of heels clicking against the flagstones of the terrace Margaret drew up her slippered feet and pressed herself deeper into her hiding place. She did not wish to be caught truant from the drawing room the one evening the earl had invited other guests to join them. The great chair's full wings must hide her face, and its cream silk upholstery must conceal her pale muslin should one of those passing outside the library glance through the open windows. She tucked the little book she had found into the folds of her gown.

"The man's plagued with brothers!" came the old earl's gruff voice through the window. Margaret held her breath as he developed his favorite theme—the obstacles to Wellington's success in Spain. "If Richard were not so busy whoring and Henry so pathetic over his lost wife, Arthur would get the support he needs for this spring's campaign."

"They are a sad pair," Margaret's father agreed.

"A man should be allowed to see how his sons turn out before he gives his title or his blunt to any of them," replied the earl, his voice swelling with indignation. The two men came into view, and passed the first of the library's tall windows: the Earl of Haddon, tall and gaunt, Margaret's father of more modest height and substantial proportions. Margaret held herself perfectly still.

"Seeing any son inherit, however, must be preferred to seeing the title go to a nephew or cousin," her father said. In two strides the men passed from sight behind the next portion of the

library wall.

"Never say you are disappointed in that girl of yours, Spencer," exclaimed the earl.

"Not for a minute," her father replied. "Apple of my eye and all. Didn't take this season, though. Speaks the plain truth, you know, no flash to catch a man's eye." They reached the second window, and there was no softening or indistinctness in her father's next words. "Her mother is very disappointed. All that fuss for nothing, you know."

"Why, Spencer, that girl of yours is a Trojan! You saw her on my roan mare yesterday. What a seat, what courage! Sensible too."

"Can't take a horse into Almack's," her father said bluntly. "Maybe if she had been a son. No fuss to getting a son off, you know." Her father's words faded as the men's steps again took them behind a portion of wall.

"Never say so," came the earl's voice. "There's nothing like town to ruin a young fool."

"The boy will come about, Edmund," said her father quietly.

"So you have been saying these two years, Spencer. You don't know what it is to have a worthless son," answered the earl. There was an interval of silence between the two men as they passed before the last window, then the earl's faint words, sad but resolute: "Well, he's no son of mine any longer."

"But you still have one son," came her father's reply. The rest of their conversation was lost in the mild evening air, and Margaret knew they had rounded the corner. She stared at the open window. Her father's words shook her. *All that fuss for nothing*.

It had been a great fuss, preparing for her season. Margaret and her mother had begun by studying *La Belle Assemblée* for hours and visiting all the the neighbors whose daughters had made great successes of themselves, at least in their mothers' eyes.

They had traveled from Wynrose to Bath as often as the weather permitted, to choose Margaret's fabrics and stand for fittings. Her mother had insisted on one satin and one sarsenet for balls, several crepes and jaconets for Almack's, and a variety of figured muslins and cambrics

for morning wear, all predominantly white of course, for what could be more elegant? Then it had been necessary to acquire gloves and hats and shoes, and Lady Somerley herself must have some new finery for the season, so as not to embarrass her daughter. Later they would shop in town for those last touches of elegance required of a baron's only daughter at her come-out.

For weeks as the gowns were being made, their only topic had been the season. Her mother had never been happier than when she spoke of London, and she was most voluble on the subject of Margaret's anticipated triumph, the notice Margaret would receive, the beaux who would call, the one, more distinguished than the others, who would request an interview with the baron. Then Margaret's gowns had begun to arrive, each to be tried on with a little ritual of sighs and hugs and paraded before her father for his mild "How fine you look, Margaret."

Margaret tried to return to those happy hours. She could not remember a time when she had thought her season would be anything other than wonderful, for she was meant to be a heroine. She had known it the first time she had read the story of Tom True.

Gingerly she pulled the little book she'd found from its hiding place in the folds of her gown. The spine was broken and some of the pages were loose, as if whoever had owned this copy had loved it well. Inside was Tom True in his brown jacket, green cap, and green nankeen britches. With his bright eyes, his fair locks, and his hands thrust in his pockets, he looked as carefree and ready for adventure as he had always been in Margaret's youth. She smiled. It was comforting to find her hero again, for she had not seen his like in London.

She turned the page and saw Tom bidding farewell to his aged parents. His periwigged father and his mother in her panniers waved from their cottage door. The next page showed the young hero choosing two sturdy, sober youths as companions. These two, called Reason and Conscience, promised never to desert their friend, and with another turn of the page, Margaret found them introducing young Master True to Prudence.

It was Margaret's childish resemblance to this character that had prompted her father to give her the book. Prudence wore a bright blue dress, blue stockings, and black shoes with silver

buckles. Glossy brown curls peeped from beneath her white cap, and frank gray eyes regarded the hero unwaveringly.

At ten Margaret had readily believed herself the fortunate heroine chosen to guide Tom True through all his adventures. At sixteen she had believed she would meet him at the very next assembly in Bath. At seventeen she had looked for her hero in the ball-rooms of London. Alas, she had found no sign of him there.

Their first week in town Lady Somerley was inclined to fault Margaret's wardrobe. It had been a mistake to purchase so many items in Bath after all. They sought a reputable modiste and pressed the woman to produce a half dozen new gowns, far more costly but otherwise indistinguishable in Margaret's eyes from those she already possessed. In the second week her mother faulted the instructions she herself had given Margaret. Town ways had changed more than Lady Somerley had imagined. She consulted her friends and passed on to Margaret a bewildering and contradictory array of new strictures on appropriate topics of conversation, the use of the eyes and the fan, and all the other ways to fix a man's interest.

In the third week Lady Somerley faulted her daughter. At the kind recommendation of several mothers of acknowledged beauties, a variety of creams and ointments were applied to Margaret's face. Her diet was altered to produce a wan and delicate air. Her chestnut hair was cut in short curls. Apparently the lessons of her youth were of no use in London, so she struggled to learn a new primer. But she could discern no principles in the contradictory instructions her mother repeated. She never knew when to flutter her fan, arch an eyebrow, or toss her curls. Witty phrases tangled themselves into incomprehensible nonsense on the tip of her tongue, or she fell silent. She was to be pleasing rather than wise or good, and she could not even please her mother.

Then, at Almack's, Lady Somerley took matters into her own hands, foolishly courting Brummell's notice. "My dear Lady Somerley," the Beau replied, "if you wish your daughter to be married, you must address your remarks about her merits, if indeed she has any, to some

gentleman in the market for a wife." This remark, which was widely repeated in several humiliating variations, had caused her mother such acute distress that her father had packed them off, height of the season or no, for the Earl of Haddon's country seat.

Margaret would have welcomed the change, the quiet and the pleasures of the country, but her mother had not stopped talking about her daughter's failure. Into each sympathetic ear Lady Somerley poured the story, ceaselessly asking where she had failed, what she might do, what was wrong with Margaret?

Then the old earl announced that his heir, Lord Lyndhurst, would join them for a few days. Margaret could not remember Lord Lyndhurst's face, but she recalled well that he had been one of the most intimidating of the eligible males to whom she had been introduced in the few weeks of her season. As the moment of his arrival neared, Lady Somerley's complaints diminished, and her former hints to Margaret about proper dress and manner increased until at last this evening as the party moved languidly from the dining room to the drawing room, Margaret had fled from her mother's voice, seeking the earl's library at the far end of the west wing of the hall.

The quiet library was wonderful, and Margaret would be content to linger at the Earl of Haddon's estate all summer. Though her father had often been the earl's guest for hunting, she and her mother had never come to Haddon before, the old earl being a widower and having little inclination to entertain female guests and less patience for their conversation. Her host's gruffness could not spoil her pleasure, however. At Haddon they were close enough to the Dorset coast to feel the sea's cooling breeze; the library would entertain her for weeks; and the horses, particularly the little roan mare, were all that Margaret could wish for.

And the great task of capturing a man's attention, to which she had proved so unequal, could be put off for a while. Here, Wynrose, her home, where the story of her dismal season would be told again in the drawing rooms of all her mother's friends, was so remote as to be forgotten, and London, which her mother spoke of with every breath, could be forgotten too. She could be the Margaret Somerley she had always been and not be found wanting by any man.

The April sky was pale as robins' eggs, the trees black against it when the window through which she had been staring opened a bit wider as if on its own. A man's boot, followed by a long, well-muscled leg sheathed in buckskin, slipped over the sill, seeming disembodied in the growing darkness until above them appeared a broad shoulder and a head of fair curls. The stranger shifted his weight to the foot in the library. His face was turned from Margaret as if he were looking to see if anyone outside the library had observed his entrance. Margaret felt her mouth open in surprise, but no sound emerged. The stranger drew in his other leg and without so much as a glance around him strode to the earl's desk in the center of the long room. There he lit a lamp and from his waist-coat pocket removed a key.

In the glow of the lamp Margaret could see his face, the eyes deep-set under straight dark brows, darker than the thick curls on his forehead, the cheekbones high and the narrow-bridged nose fine, the jaw tapering to the firmly squared chin, the lips compressed, every feature golden in the lamplight. No such face had appeared before her in the ballrooms of London, and she could not help but stare. The stranger's expression was grim, but Margaret thought his eyes and mouth were made for laughing.

Then he bent away from her behind the desk, and she heard the small metallic scrape of the key thrust into a lock, the low rumble of a drawer sliding open, and the rustle of papers. He straightened and held a thick packet of papers to the lamp, unfolding it and perusing the contents.

Margaret knew she should say something. She should not watch helplessly as the stranger examined the earl's papers, but his movements were so deliberate, so sure rather than nervous or furtive, that she felt more curious than alarmed. He has a key, she told herself. He did not look up; apparently he did not expect anyone to be in the library. When he had examined the papers in the packet, he replaced them and picked up a similar one. She knew at once by a subtle change in his expression that he had found whatever it was he was looking for. Again he leaned over the drawers, opening another without the key, an unlocked drawer, she guessed. From this second drawer he took several sheets of clean paper, weighed them briefly in his hands against the first

packet, folded them to match the ones he had removed, placed the altered packet in the drawer and the earl's own papers in an inner pocket of his jacket. Again Margaret heard the key turn. He blew out the lamp, rose, and turned to the window. In a minute he would be gone, as quietly and mysteriously as he had come. Prompted by her stunned conscience, Margaret bravely whispered a single word. "Thief."

The stranger whirled, and his gaze caught Margaret instantly. For a moment they regarded each other in silence. A stung look in his eyes faded so quickly, Margaret could not be sure she had seen any expression in them at all save one of cool appraisal.

"Thief?" he questioned.

She had to admit to herself that the appellation hardly fit the man standing so coolly before her, but she knew what she had seen. "You stole a packet of the Earl of Haddon's papers," she accused with more truth than eagerness.

"So it appears." He advanced toward her so that she felt ever so slightly unsettled—not exactly frightened, but wary. In the fading light she could not judge his expression, but she could feel his gaze upon her face. "Do you never doubt your own eyes?"

"Seeing is believing," she replied firmly, drawing herself up tall in the chair, sure of herself on this point at least.

"But so often we see what we think to see, rather than what really is." He moved very close to her now so that she could see nothing beyond his broad shoulders.

He was a clever thief to be sure, she thought. "You mean to confuse me with sophistry," she retorted, holding her gaze steady under his.

"Were you never taken in by a conjurer's trick at a fair?" he asked.

"Yes, but you cannot say that what I saw here tonight was mere sleight of hand, and you cannot deny that the earl's papers are in your coat pocket." She felt, rather smugly she knew, that she had won the point.

"What do you mean to do about it?"

The question embarrassed her, for she had not thought beyond the necessity of stopping him, and now that she had, she was uncomfortably conscious that her reasons for doing so had perhaps little to do with the earl's papers.

Before she could reply, he patted his pocket and said, "Come, take them back."

She really ought to. She ought to end their whole unorthodox conversation. She, who had not been alone with any of the young men she met in London, should not prolong a tête-à-tête with a thief.

"If I take them," she offered, "no one need ever hear of this incident." She sensed rather than saw his smile. Resolutely she stood, but the long period she had spent curled in the chair made her legs a bit unsteady, so that she tottered. With the same quick deliberateness of motion that she had seen in him from the beginning, the thief caught her. He clapped a warm, firm hand across her mouth and with his other hand captured her about the waist and pulled her up against him.

At the thief's unexpected use of force, Margaret gasped. She pushed against his chest, and shook her head in a vain attempt to free her mouth from his hand. Her brief, silent struggle merely left her breathless, her arms trembling. She had not the strength to break his hold, and he had stopped her words. She drew a steadying breath and raised her gaze to his.

His eyes, blue and vivid and solemn, met hers in a look that held her more firmly than his grip about her waist or his warm hand across her mouth.

Margaret summoned all that she knew of courage and conscience and let her eyes speak, but the force of her principles seemed as weak as straw against the fire of some unshakable purpose in him.

"My girl," he whispered hoarsely, "I do not know who has greater cause to regret our meeting tonight. I do know we have tarried long enough. I must have the earl's papers, and you, alas, must come with me." Even with one hand the stranger had no difficulty restraining her movements as he removed his neck-cloth. With it he covered Margaret's mouth, muffling further protest. He swept her along to the window as if she were a mere doll in his arms, apparently

indifferent as she twisted helplessly in his hold. The low sill hardly presented an obstacle as he slung her over his shoulder and stepped out into the night.

2

MARGARET REACHED FOR the cloth that bound her mouth, but her fingers could not loosen the knot, and her chin collided with the stranger's back, jarring her teeth. She clutched his coat to keep from being jounced senseless. She must protest, but she could not speak. She must act. No gently bred young woman should suffer herself to be carried off in the arms of a stranger, but it was impossible to determine what to do when one was being borne along at such a giddy pace and by such an odd means of conveyance. It was something like being carried by sedan-chair bearers in Bath who had suddenly gone mad and overturned their passengers. As they crossed the terrace, she willed herself to consider the practical difficulties of escaping the thief's hold.

Then they were dashing down the long steep hill which fell away from the west wing of the earl's hall, and any struggle on her part would likely send them both tumbling dangerously. She counseled herself to wait for the right moment to escape.

They reached the edge of the woods at the bottom of the hill even as she considered other ways to check their flight. The thief seemed to know exactly where they were going, and it occurred to her that he was acting according to some plan. She was not surprised when a path opened up before them in the woods. He lowered her feet to the ground and gently removed the cloth from her mouth. Before she could move an inch, his hands closed about her arms. She opened her mouth, but his words forestalled her.

“You may scream, if you like,” he said, “but as a practical means of effecting an escape, I cannot recommend it. We are now quite distant from the hall.” He whistled a low two-toned note, like a bird’s call, and she thought she heard a horse nicker and stamp in reply. There was an answering whistle, and then her companion pulled her forward. A single long ray of light appeared to bob toward them in the darkness.

The thought that the thief might have an accomplice strengthened her resolve. She had been resisting the thief’s pull on her wrist so that their arms were extended like a taut rope. As the beam of light bobbed closer, she darted forward, slackening his hold on her wrist. Instantly she twisted free and spun about, intending to slip into the brush, but branches caught at her skirts.

“Drew?” said a voice that sounded familiar.

“Here, Ned,” her abductor answered. As quick as she had been, he was quicker and captured her about the waist, pulling her up against his body, and securing her flailing arms behind her back. She dug her heels into the ground, but the thin slippers slid over leaves and loose earth as the thief pushed her forward.

“What kept you?” the other man asked. “You’ll have the devil’s own time making it to Highcliffe before Cy does.”

“So I shall,” replied her companion with what she suspected was characteristic calm. In a little clearing they paused at last, Margaret quite breathless. There the other man withdrew the cover from the lantern he carried. At seeing him Margaret started, for he was one of the earl’s grooms, a jolly, handsome fellow not much older than herself, with the sort of red hair one could see a long way off. As they stared at one another, the thief laughed and released Margaret. She distanced herself from him at once, but the look in his eyes persuaded her she could not escape. She paused to catch her breath and think what to do.

“Lord, Drew, what’s she doing here?” asked the groom. Plainly he was as surprised to see Margaret as she to see him and much more troubled.

“I discovered too late that the library was occupied,” her companion replied. “You seem to

know the lady, Ned. Who is she?"

"She's Margaret Somerley," said the groom. "She's your . . . she's the old earl's guest."

The thief swore. The two men stared at each other, and Margaret thought she might laugh at their dismay. Then they laughed themselves, and, looking at her thief, Margaret decided she was right, his mouth and eyes were made for laughing. He returned her look, and his laugh faded, his expression becoming grave again.

"Well, Miss Somerley, what do you say to a moonlight ride?" As he spoke, he restored his ruined cravat to a surprising degree of neatness and intricacy.

"You don't mean to take her!" Ned exclaimed.

"Take me where?" Margaret asked.

"I can't leave her with you, Ned," said the thief, ignoring Margaret's question. "She has apparently an excess of conscience, and I don't mean for you to hang for this night's work."

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Hanging. The suggestion of it sobered her, but she stood firm, refusing to shrink from her captor in spite of a very small but very sharp fear. She realized she had not felt particularly afraid of him. He had shocked her with his use of force, but her resistance to him had been a matter of affronted dignity. They had been talking, and he had used an unfair advantage, and she had been unable to reason with him. Now she considered that perhaps he had stolen something so valuable that she might be in danger because she had witnessed his crime, but she could not credit it. After all, his accomplice was not some villainous criminal, but the friendly and familiar groom of the Earl of Haddon. It was all a trick or a game, something Tom True would have dreamed up, and she had only to remind these men of their proper roles and this foolish episode would end.

She turned to the groom. "Are you going to allow this man to steal papers from your employer?"

The red-haired young man looked from her to his friend with some confusion and closed his mouth tight.

"Well, shouldn't *you* attempt to rescue me?" she asked him.

"Rescue you?" he said, as if he did not comprehend her meaning. "Oh, you mean from Drew."

Margaret felt that however patient she might be obliged to be under ordinary circumstances, she was not obliged to be patient in this one. "This is an abduction, isn't it?" she pointed out.

"Only because I forgot about you when I gave Drew the all-clear," he retorted. "You're in no danger from Drew, at least not the sort of danger you're worried about. He hasn't touched a woman in two years."

The thief named Drew laughed. "Thank you, Ned, for making Miss Somerley a gift of my ill luck as a lover. I hardly think your revelation reassures her."

"Well, she ought to see you're a gentleman. And you couldn't stop being one just because . . ."

"Is one gentleman allowed to steal from another?" asked Margaret.

"Steal? You think he stole . . ." began the groom.

"Enough," said the thief. He gave his companion a look that Margaret could only describe as a warning.

Ned shrugged and brought forward the horse he had been leading. The horse, a gray stallion as fine as any in the earl's stable, nudged the thief playfully.

"Which horse has Miss Somerley been riding?" her thief asked.

"Cinnamon." Ned named the roan mare Margaret liked so much.

"Then take Cinnamon to Upton for the night, and keep your ears open for how they take Miss Somerley's disappearance at the hall."

At the word *disappearance* Margaret glanced around for an opening in the trees, but the thief anticipated her flight and tossed her up to the gray's saddle. She dug her heels into the horse's

side, leaning forward in a message of urgency the dullest nag could understand, but the great gray beneath her only flicked his ears as if to rid himself of a fly. Margaret righted herself. She might have guessed the man's horse would be as loyal as his red-haired accomplice.

"I'll see that no one knows of your involvement in this, Ned," the thief was saying.

"Don't worry about me, Drew," the other replied. "Take care of yourself with that damned Croisset."

"I mean to." The thief mounted behind Margaret. He leaned forward, stroking the horse and speaking softly. A slight touch of his knees to the horse's flanks set the animal in motion. Margaret shivered, suddenly cool in her thin muslin with her arms and throat bare, cool except for the warm proximity of the man behind her. His chest against her back, his arms on either side of her, the linen of his neckcloth against her bare shoulder—these were oddly distracting sensations, but she must not be distracted by them, for she had quite lost control of her situation. She was not Prudence, persuading Tom True to choose a wise course. She was Margaret, being carried through the dark wood farther and farther from the hall and those who would care what became of her. With her favorite mount gone her parents would probably believe she had run away. Her absence during the evening, indeed, her withdrawal from her mother ever since they had arrived at Haddon, would lend credence to the idea. She straightened and leaned forward, achieving a slight distance between them. She had to think.

"Cold?" he asked.

"No," she lied and thought he laughed.

"So you do know how to lie," he said amicably. "If it makes you less rare, it is, nevertheless, a useful accomplishment."

"It must be in your line of work," she replied, annoyed at being seen through again. The pause before he answered her was the tiniest bit too long, she thought.

"Oh, yes," he agreed, "but the trick is in knowing what to lie about. You, it seems, know the London lie—that is, you know how to deny what is perfectly obvious to your companion in order

that both may be saved from embarrassment." He paused, and in a changed voice said, "My Lord Leadfeet, nothing would please me more than to dance with you, but the room is so warm, do you think you might bring me some refreshment first? Lady Loosetongue, so good to see you again."

Margaret had to laugh at his mimicry, but it confused her too, for he was talking as if they were partners in a ballroom. She could not reconcile his light words with his acts. Her mother had certainly never advised her on the subject of polite discourse with a kidnapper.

She shook herself, not deigning to answer him, and stared ahead. At the very next opening she would slip from the horse. Though her pale gown must show against the black brush and tree trunks, this time she was sure she could lose her abductor. Then she would simply climb a tree and wait for dawn. At first light she would find her way back to the hall. Then she would show the earl the drawer that had been opened. However angered the thief might be at her escape, he was unlikely to pursue her for long, because he had miles to go to keep the appointment the red-haired groom had mentioned. She tensed for the effort she must make.

Just as she saw a widening in the path ahead, he encircled her ribs with one strong arm and pulled her firmly against him.

"Oh," she exclaimed. Once again he had anticipated her actions and thwarted her. What was she to do?

"You know," he said, "I am inclined to think that my removing you from the hall should be considered a rescue rather than an abduction."

"A rescue?" She could not think as clearly as she wished to, conscious as she was of his fingers over her ribs and the way the horse's easy movement caused her bare arm to slide up and down against the silk of his waistcoat. "Did you think I was a prisoner there?"

"What else could explain it? A pretty girl, immured in a library in the country when there must be three balls and a Venetian breakfast to attend in London. Confess, I did rescue you—from boredom."

"No," she said, momentarily disconcerted by his phrase "pretty girl." He was offering

Spanish coin, of course. “No, not from boredom, from my own thoughts perhaps.”

He laughed at that, and his breath stirred her hair. “You *are* an honest girl, Meg Somerley.”

“Miss Somerley to you,” she said.

“Never Meg?”

“Never.”

“But tonight you must be Meg, for you are having the adventure Margaret Somerley merely dreams of.”

It was a conjecture so accurate and penetrating that she wondered if he had seen the little book in her lap, had guessed her dreams.

They had come to the edge of the wood, and the horse lunged up a short embankment to a road bathed in the light of a quarter moon rising to their left. The horse pranced and sidled, but her companion stilled the powerful animal and held him lightly in check.

“Now, Miss Somerley,” he said, the playfulness gone from his voice, “you must swear not to make any attempts to escape before we reach Highcliffe.”

Margaret said nothing. She had determined on no safe means of escape, yet he seemed to anticipate her every thought.

“Swear it,” he insisted. “I mean to give Phantom his head, and it would likely cost you your pretty neck to slip from him along the road.”

“I swear,” she said with grudging acquiescence.

“Not good enough, my girl.”

Margaret remained stubbornly silent. The horse shifted restlessly beneath them, and the movement rocked Margaret’s body against the thief’s from knee to shoulder. The words she had heard earlier in the wood came back to puzzle her. *He hasn’t touched a woman in two years*. He certainly had touched her.

“I swear to make no attempt to escape before Highcliffe.”

“Good,” he said. He released his hold on her ribs, and she felt him stretch and twist behind

her. In a moment he had draped his jacket about her shoulders, the blue superfine warm and softer than she thought a man's garment would be, the papers in the inner pocket heavy against her arm.

"It is not me you are taking. It is these papers. Could you not leave me behind?"

"You underestimate yourself, Meg. It gives me no pleasure at all to carry off the earl's papers."

Margaret made no reply. It was plain he meant to offer her flattery, not reason.

"Slip your arms into the sleeves," he commanded. When she complied, he tightened his hold on her waist once more. With less impatience he continued, "In Highcliffe there is a kind soul who will keep you for the night and restore you to your family in the morning." He pressed his knees lightly against the horse's sides, and, thus encouraged, Phantom broke into an easy canter.

Margaret knew at once that her promise not to escape was superfluous. She could not escape now. The rider at her back urged and checked, encouraged and steadied the animal so that they seemed to fly along, man and stallion apparently relishing the risks they were taking. In the movement of the man's thigh against her own, in the steady arms about her, and in the voice at her ear, Margaret felt every message of rider to horse, and always Phantom responded. They passed through startling alterations of light and shadow along the road, crossed glittering creeks, and flew by oddly contorted black shapes which, Margaret believed, must be gorse bushes by day.

Though she was insensible of anything so ordinary and rational as thought, Margaret felt she knew the stranger's mind as she had when she first looked into his eyes. From his very proximity she seemed to catch his thoughts, his urgency and intensity, his reckless courage. Every feeling of the sort was absurd, for how could she have the least idea of his mind when they had not exchanged a word for miles? Yet her body could not help but move with his in the impatient, drumming rhythm of the canter.

When at last they left the road for the merest lane, she was embarrassed to discover how tightly she was pressed against him and would have pulled forward at once, but his arm held her.

He halted Phantom and dismounted.

"Miss Somerley," he said, holding up his arms to her. She hesitated only long, enough to think herself foolish, for she had already allowed greater intimacies between them. Again she felt the strength in his arms and shoulders. He took her by the hand and began walking at once. It was this unwavering advance of his, rather than their actual speed, that gave Margaret a sense of his haste.

The lane was nearly overgrown with trees and tangled vines so that the moonlight scarcely penetrated, but a turn or two brought a light in view and a fenced garden before a snug cottage. A path to their right led to a modest stable toward which Phantom moved eagerly, showing all the impatience of a horse who has done well and knows he deserves the rewards and comforts of the stall. The thief lifted the latch, allowing the heavy door to swing open. The stable was lit as if they were expected, and a horse in one of the stalls nickered at their entrance.

The thief turned to Margaret. "Whatever you think of me, Miss Somerley, you must agree that Phantom deserves my attentions for his efforts tonight. I must rely on you to remain where you are for a few minutes. Your adventure is nearly at an end. Can you be patient a while longer?"

Margaret shook her head. She did not trust herself to speak.

"I thought not," he said. In an instant he stripped the linen from his neck and bound her hands. He set her up on a partition between the stalls and, his hands still on her waist, looked directly into her eyes. "You *will* wait for me."

She looked away, but soon turned back to watch him. She could not help but admire the quickness and sureness of his motions, the care and skill of his attentions to the horse. He talked to the horse, praising and teasing, and she felt the calming influence of his voice. The thought occurred to her that she had not watched a man so closely before. When he spoke, assuring her that his tasks were nearly complete, she shifted her weight upon her narrow perch and looked down at her bound hands. The movement brought the papers in his jacket up against her ribs.

Really she was behaving witlessly. She ought not to have been staring, ought not to have been admiring the appearance and strength of a thief. If she could not escape, perhaps she could at least hide the earl's papers.

But the thief turned from his horse and reached to lift Margaret down. He pulled her after him, though her strides could hardly match his long, quick ones. At the cottage he called, "Humphrey, where are you, man?"

They entered a low-ceilinged parlor, the striking feature of which was stacks and stacks of books, like staircases about to topple, so many that Margaret and the thief had to pick their way with care. Before the fire, like an island in the chaos, was a conspicuously empty wing chair, with a table anchored to one side.

"Humphrey," her companion called again, but received no answer. He led her through the maze of stacks to a door in the far wall of the parlor, and Margaret sent a pile crashing to the floor, taking two others with it so that in one corner there was now a heap of books.

"Don't worry," her captor assured her, "Humphrey will not notice for weeks." A hall at the rear of the cottage led them to a room, black except for the patch of moonlight admitted by a window. The thief found a tinderbox in the dark and lit two candles, revealing a spare order in startling contrast to the main parlor. He led her to the bed, bade her be seated, and released her hands.

"It seems your adventure continues," he said as he removed a watch from his waistcoat pocket and glanced at it. Margaret studied him further, this thief named Drew. She had kept herself from saying his name, for she meant not to be on terms of any familiarity with such a man. She was beginning to recognize the cold alteration in his voice and features whenever he spoke of the meeting toward which he was hurrying.

"There are a few changes I must make; let us hope Humphrey returns," he concluded in the same brusque tone. He closed the door of the small room and began to unbutton his waistcoat before her startled eyes.

“My girl,” he warned, a sudden smile lighting his eyes, “if your sensibilities are at all delicate, you would do well to take a book from that shelf and peruse it earnestly for the next few minutes.” Margaret turned to a shelf above the bed and snatched the volume on the end. To her dismay it proved to be a work in Latin, but she held the slim volume before her burning face and worked at the lines.

“Do you have a taste for Horace, Miss Somerley?” he asked a few minutes later. She made the mistake then of dropping the book to her lap and looking at him as he tucked the tails of a fresh shirt into his inexpressibles.

“Perhaps I ought to wait for you in the other room,” she said, wishing her bright cheeks did not reveal her embarrassment so plainly.

“Alas, Miss Somerley, I cannot trust you to remain there, can I?” She shook her head, and he went on, “Then I recommend ‘Ode to a Debutante,’ page nineteen.”

Margaret turned to it. Without looking up again she said, “This is not your home, is it.” There was a pause in which she could hear the little indefinite rustle of clothes that meant he continued to move inexorably toward his objective.

“No, it is not,” he answered.

“But these are your books?” she persisted. The book had opened so readily to the page he recommended that she could not doubt his familiarity with the volume.

“Yes,” came the reply. “And that is my bed, Miss Somerley.”

She looked up then. “You say that merely to disconcert me,” she began, and stopped at the sight of him. He had brushed his hair forward in a style she had often seen in London and had somehow darkened the color, subdued the gold of it to a pale brown. The coat he now wore was bottle-green and cut differently, to exaggerate the contrast between the broad shoulders and narrow waist. He had added fobs and rings that made him look quite the exquisite. The transformation was surprisingly complete, her teasing companion as thoroughly obscured in the haughty figure before her as if he had donned a mask and domino.

She looked away. She had meant to tell him he was an uncommon thief, but now it appeared he would steal anything. She gazed at a case on the lowboy in which a tangle of jewels sparkled.

"I meant to leave you with Humphrey, who is as kind as he is old," he said, and his words recalled her to her own awkward position. "But it seems Humphrey has been called away, or more likely wandered away, on business of his own; thus you must continue with me." He pulled her to her feet and removed the book from her unresisting fingers.

"You could not trust me to wait here? We are far from the hall." It-was reasonable and sensible to ask, and of course she wanted him to leave her behind so that she might escape and alert the earl. So she held herself perfectly still, allowing her fingertips to rest lightly on his, meeting his clear gaze steadily. She felt an unaccustomed tautness in her body as she waited for his decision.

He studied her for a long moment; then, as certainly as if he had spoken, Margaret knew he had decided to take her with him. The change was in his eyes, and Margaret, who had sided with Prudence and Reason and Conscience all her life, knew that he had discarded the advice of such wise companions, had decided to take her because he wanted to. She dropped her gaze from his lest he should discern the perfectly unreasonable thrill that knowledge gave her.

"You would not wish to miss the end of your adventure, would you?" he asked lightly. "But you must not appear as Margaret Somerley in my company tonight."

She allowed him to remove the borrowed jacket, but when he again put the earl's papers securely in an inner pocket and tossed the first jacket aside, a pang of conscience made her appeal to him once more.

"Must you do this thing?"

"I must." He studied Margaret with a critical air. "No doubt your mother selected this gown," he said softly. "And we've no modiste to turn to." Margaret felt the briefest twinge of resentment at her mother's taste. Then he reached for her. She retreated, and the backs of her knees collided with the hard edge of the bed. In one of his quick, startling moves, he slid the tiny

sleeves off her shoulders so that her chest and neck were suddenly more exposed than her mother could have approved of.

"No," she protested, hugging her shoulders, pushing against his hands, trying to restore the modesty of her neckline.

"These bows must go," he said, ignoring her attempts to right the gown. "Too demure by half for the company we'll be keeping".

Ruthlessly he plucked a row of corded ivory bows from each sleeve. Margaret pulled the poor bare puffs of muslin back up over her shoulders, but his hands met hers and stilled them. His thumbs lightly traced the line of bone from her shoulders to the hollows of her throat. She stared at him, appalled and fascinated.

"You miss your finery?" he asked abruptly. "No matter. You need another sort of ornament for your disguise."

From the sparkling array in the case on the lowboy, he drew a strand of sapphires and fastened it about her neck, his fingers tangling briefly in her curls.

"A reward for your courage," he said. She thought: How carelessly he takes and gives.

"There," he whispered, turning her so that she could look in the mirror, "Margaret Somerley becomes . . . Meg Summers." For an astonished instant Margaret gaped at her own appearance, the tumbled chestnut curls, the wide eyes more black than gray in the dim light, the flash of jewels above the white swell of her breasts.

Then her gaze met his in the mirror. He grinned. "If anyone asks where you've come from, you may say that you just left my bed."

3

ONCE MORE THEY hurried through the night. The cottage, which had seemed so remote, proved to be just steps from the main thoroughfare of a coastal village. As they emerged from a wooded path, the sea lay to their left with a stripe of moonlight on it like a glittering extension of the street. To their right shops lined the steep ascent to an inn that clearly served as a coaching stop, for even as they moved toward it Margaret heard the guard's blast on his yard of tin and saw the stage pull in.

As they entered the inn yard, the ordinary and familiar bustle of stableboys attending horses and weary travelers descending from the coach had the effect of rousing Margaret as if from a daydream. The world of ordinary action, which had seemed so remote since the thief had carried her off, now appeared accessible. She did not doubt that the unknown Humphrey would restore her to her family as the thief said, but surely here *she* could find someone kind enough to help her. Her thief appeared to be intent on his own errand and for the moment unaware of her on his arm. She had only to approach some reasonable person and explain who she was. But no one seemed to remark them. Margaret caught no one's eye.

When they entered the inn itself, her sense of familiar and comfortable surroundings was immediately dispelled. Her parents patronized only the most respectable posting houses on the Bath road, establishments that catered to the quality, to whose proprietors Margaret's father was

well-known. How easy to explain her situation in one of them, how impossible here. The main taproom was plainly visible as she and the thief stood in the entry, waiting for the host to serve them. The room was dim, and a haze of pipe smoke drifted sluggishly on currents stirred by the movement of the waiters. The sober faces at the ends of the pipes appeared as unalterable as the carvings in the heavy paneling. To Margaret the inhabitants seemed not precisely evil but peculiarly indifferent. She doubted they could be moved to anything stronger than idle curiosity. She could hardly appeal to one of these.

She turned to the innkeeper, whose professional cheer and white apron made him seem a more likely rescuer, but he had eyes only for her foppishly dressed companion. She did not receive the least deference from him, and suddenly she realized the effect of her altered appearance. The borrowed cloak did little to conceal her bedraggled state; her arrival unattended by an abigail hardly suggested that she was a lady of quality. To convince anyone that she was a lady, let alone a baron's daughter, would be impossible. Her thief had not asked for any further promises from her, and now she understood why. She felt her cheeks burn, but she lifted her chin and looked disdainfully upon the innkeeper. She averted her gaze from the thief, but he stayed her in the hall some steps behind their host.

"Would you believe I did it to protect you?" he asked softly, as if he had read her discomfort and embarrassment. She refused to answer. "No one must ever know Margaret Somerley was here; no one must ever connect you with me."

The smiling proprietor had stopped and with a flourish indicated a door near the end of the hall. When he moved to open it, the thief stopped him, offering a coin. The man's hand closed over the gold, and he bowed and left them.

In another of his swift, unexpected moves the thief encircled Margaret's waist with one arm and pulled her against his side. He tilted her chin up, compelling her to look at him. "Now, Meg Summers," he whispered, giving her the name he had invented. "Croisset must never guess who you are, so keep silent and lean against me, and I warn you, lie if you must, for he is a dangerous

man." His gaze held hers, and she knew he waited for her to acknowledge that she understood. Harsh laughter burst from the taproom behind them, followed by the scrape of chairs against the floor, shouts, and jeers. In these surroundings who could she trust but her thief? Reluctantly she nodded her compliance, and they entered the parlor.

At a long table lit by a great branch of candles sat an enormous man before whom were several platters, empty except for streaks of sauce and piles of bones. Margaret's first thought was of the prince, for the man's girth was as great or greater than the regent's, and the room was uncomfortably warm, like all the rooms in Carlton House. Yet this man had none of the prince's amiability about him. His complexion was mottled, and the skin appeared like a sausage casing stretched taut over the folds of flesh. It was not a skin in which a man could be comfortable. His unblinking gaze suggested a snake's readiness to strike. Croisset's look told her he would never forget her face, and under that gaze she could not resent the thief's arm about her waist.

"So we meet at last. You are more than prompt, my lord," the enormous man said to her companion in a thin nasal voice which was at odds with his size. "It is well—" He paused. "—but you bring a woman."

"A necessary convenience, merely," the thief replied in a voice Margaret hardly recognized as his. She wondered at the title with which he had been addressed, but the pressure of his hand at her side warned her to show no surprise.

"Perhaps she could wait for you elsewhere while we talk," suggested the other with a careless wave of his hand.

"In this neighborhood there is no suitable location where a prize of her delicacy might be left alone, Croisset. I do not share what is mine." He led Margaret to a bench built into an alcove. Then he removed their cloaks and settled Margaret next to him as if he were making the most ordinary of visits.

"You are not as I imagined, my lord," said Croisset when they were seated. Again Margaret wondered at the title. Who was the man at her side? Was he lying to her or to Croisset?

“I did not think you fanciful, Croisset,” he replied.

“You are more handsome, more the ladies’ man than you are reported to be, I think,” continued the other, looking pointedly at Margaret.

“As I said, a necessary convenience.”

“But such an innocent one.” Margaret could not look away from the man’s stare until she felt her thief’s hand once more under her chin, tilting her face toward his.

“Innocence is a charming quality, don’t you think, Croisset?” he said, looking at Margaret. “Usually overpriced, but with this one, no.” He stroked Margaret’s cheek with his thumb. Her skin tingled and she felt the heat of the blush his touch evoked. “Did you wish to discuss her charms—I assure you she has many—or must we turn at once to the more pressing business of the evening?” He shifted his gaze back to Croisset, and there was a pause. Margaret willed her cheeks to cool, knowing the big man was deciding whether to accept her presence or not.

At last he said, “So you have brought the information we wished?”

“Of course,” her companion replied, with a languid calm that Margaret could see was maddening to the other man.

“You have the numbers, dates, objectives?”

“You doubt me, Croisset? My lord Haddon is the most trusted of Wellington’s supporters. While others receive only fragments of plans, Haddon has the key to the whole, that he might influence those in our government who are reluctant to supply the army’s needs.”

“Indeed, the information from your source has always been reliable.”

“More than reliable, Croisset—and perhaps, at this time, it is invaluable as well.”

“Invaluable, my lord? I thought we had agreed on a generous price.” With that Margaret stiffened in the circle of her companion’s arm. She understood at last and too well her thief’s aim. She should have realized at the hall that the earl’s papers would contain information about Wellington’s plans, and she should have acted to see that the papers never left the library. Words had been far too weak to stop the thief.

“After Moscow your emperor’s fortunes are not what they were; this spring’s campaign is perhaps critical,” her companion suggested, his hold on her as firm as ever.

Again Croisset’s black eyes glittered menacingly. “The emperor will prevail,” he asserted.

“Then no price will seem too much, I think, to the men who mean to rule Europe.” At this Margaret felt her throat tighten.

“Alas, my lord, I am merely the emperor’s courier and cannot pay more than the agreed-upon sum.”

“Then our dealings are at an end, Croisset,” said the thief. “You will excuse us.” He stood, drawing Margaret up after him.

“My lord,” said the other quickly, “if it were a simple matter, I could perhaps accommodate you. Perhaps an additional five thousand pounds?” he added.

“Really, Croisset, you underestimate the value of my information.” In the pause that followed this remark the thief put Margaret’s cloak gently about her shoulders.

“My lord, perhaps it was unwise of you to keep this engagement. In this neighborhood a man of your lordship’s wealth presents an irresistible temptation to thieves. One could, perhaps, arrange to have your information for nothing.”

“I think one will not, however, for one has spent months cultivating me as a source. One would have to begin the process again, a delay the emperor would not tolerate. And, if I believed one might try such a thing,” he said, moving slowly toward the long table, “it would be easy to destroy the information here and now.” With a sudden quickness and grace, the thief drew the papers from his pocket and held them over the flame of a candle so that the edges began to blacken. Croisset’s protest was an inarticulate cry at which the thief removed the papers from the flame without apparent haste.

“My lord,” said Croisset, regaining his calm, “if you wish to haggle like a shopkeeper over the price of your wares, you must see the Viper. Only he has the authority to pay you a larger sum.”

"Very well, Croisset, then I shall see him," the thief replied, returning the papers to an inner pocket.

"Ah, but he is in Portugal, my lord," came the smug reply.

The thief did not answer, but Margaret felt him give the slightest start.

"Perhaps you shall accept what I have to offer after all," Croisset concluded.

"If I do, you mean to take the information to the Viper yourself? You have a ship waiting?" His tone was merely curious, but Margaret felt the tension gathering in him.

"I do."

"Then I have a mind to take your place, Croisset. May not one courier deliver a message as well as another?"

"You are unprepared for such a journey, my lord."

"One may make purchases."

"And the young woman? It is hardly a journey on which to take such a delicate morsel."

"Some men, Croisset, travel with their own sheets, not trusting every innkeeper along the way to be as fastidious as they themselves are. Should I take less care about what I put between my sheets? My taste in such matters is particular."

There was a pause as the two men regarded each other. "Very well, my lord," said Croisset with an unpleasant agreeableness.

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The proprietor was summoned, and hastened to do his large guest's bidding. Margaret was stunned. Her thief could not mean to take her to Portugal to deliver the army's plans into the hands of the French. He was going to return her to Humphrey's cottage. Surely.

She considered running to the taproom, but the denizens of that place would hardly believe that two such gentlemen as these appeared to be—the London dandy and the fat merchant—

meant to betray their country. She could perhaps make use of some womanly excuse to leave the room, but her thief would not be deceived by such a ruse. She could kick and scream, but if she aroused Croisset's suspicions would he not kill them both? He had already threatened her companion's life. The man at her side was not Tom True, but if ever a man needed prudent counsel, he did.

"My lord," she ventured, using the title Croisset had, "is it prudent to undertake such a journey in haste?"

He turned her toward him so that they stood face-to-face, a little in the shadows, beyond the light of Croisset's candles. She felt the impatience in him, the restrained force, and willed herself to remain steady in the face of it.

"Readiness to seize the prize is not haste," he replied. He put a finger to her lips as if to silence her, but she pushed it aside.

"Is it readiness to go so unprovided into danger?" she whispered.

"Is readiness in things or in the will?" he asked. Tom True had never spoken so; the hero had always listened to Prudence, altered his course, avoided danger. This man, quick and bright as a flame, meant to plunge them headlong into danger.

Their talk had come to just this unprofitable point when the proprietor returned, announcing that Mr. Crossey's carriage was waiting. Their party moved at once down the hall toward the entrance to the inn. When they came in view of the taproom, its stolid inhabitants, who had appeared so cold to Margaret earlier, cheered and toasted Croisset, inviting him to tip a cup with them. Outside, a great black traveling chaise waited with two stableboys at the horses' heads and two men on the box, apparently servants of Croisset though not in livery. Croisset was assisted into his carriage by another man at the chaise door and the innkeeper himself. The carriage tipped precariously as he put his weight upon the first step, and righted itself as he settled inside. Then Margaret was handed up by the proprietor, and the thief climbed in after her, all in a minute's time.

Though the carriage was clearly designed for Croisset, there was no room to spare and Margaret could not move without touching the man across from her or the man at her side. Escape now seemed to call for some action on a scale quite out of her experience. Her throat ached with sobs she must not release, and in the close confines of the carriage she seemed to choke on the odors of sweat and onions and wine.

The driver did not spare the whip, and after but a short interval of swaying and bouncing, the chaise turned from the main road down a lane toward the sea. Suddenly Croisset pounded the roof with his hand, and they stopped. When the clop and rattle of their mode of travel faded in her ears, Margaret could hear the hiss of waves upon the shore, and the sound of pebbles tumbling over one another as the breakers rolled them. The thief opened the chaise door, let down the steps, and handed Margaret out, keeping a grip on her arm. Margaret breathed deeply of the damp, fresh air. They had halted before a wood, which was revealed by the moon, more than halfway toward setting. Croisset's quick orders to the two servants on the box brought one of them to his assistance and sent the other scurrying ahead with a lantern.

"You still wish to meet the Viper, my lord?" Croisset asked when he had stepped down. "You do not wish to accept the sum I offer?"

"You need only to inform me how I may find this Viper, Croisset," came the reply.

"Ah, my lord, the Viper will find you. His messengers will meet your ship."

Croisset waved his hand in a gesture that might have been polite except for a certain sinister cast of his features in the moonlight, and Margaret began to descend the path taken by the servant with the lantern. The path was scarcely wide enough for her and switched back and forth sharply, making their descent quite steep. Behind her she could hear the thief, quiet and sure in his steps, and behind him Croisset, breathing loudly from his exertions and brushing the branches along the path with a noisy rustle like a dog pursuing a scent through the undergrowth. At a turning in the path where it nearly doubled back upon itself, the thief caught her arm and whispered, "Not a sound now, Meg, no matter what you hear."

He released her arm, and there was an ominous crack of a dry branch breaking. Even as she identified it in her mind, she heard a second sound which she could not identify, a sound like a bucket hitting the sides of a deep well, and a third sound, like a great bellows slowly settling. Thus, before she turned, she knew Croisset had been felled. Relief made her knees weak; her thief did not mean to go to Portugal after all. The servant ahead of them had halted, too and peered back at her, lifting his lantern high. Of the thief there was no sign.

"Monsieur?" called the servant hesitantly.

"I think Mr. Croisset has fallen," said Margaret.

The servant looked at her suspiciously as if he thought her words a trick. Margaret backed against the bushes as he made his way gingerly past her, repeating, *"Monsieur?"*

She held her breath, wondering where her thief was and what he meant to do. When the servant reached the turn in the path, she heard a thud and the merest squeal as if some animal's cry had been cut off before it could escape the throat from which it came, then a rustling of leaves and a tumbling of dirt and rock and then silence. She waited. Another breathless moment passed before her thief appeared with the lantern and a fat purse. His coat and breeches showed no signs of what must have been a struggle in the grass.

"Croisset and his henchman are sleeping, Meg," he said. "We need not fear that they will plot against us with the captain of this vessel."

"But surely you do not mean to go to Portugal now?"

"But I do," he answered. "I confess it was not my plan, but 'tis a better one."

"Then I must leave you," she said, backing away, hopelessly trapped on the narrow path between the approaching dinghy and the determined man before her.

"Ah, but I cannot let you go," he said, catching her hand and pulling her with him along the path. "Even if our sleeping friends did not wake to do you harm, there is no safety for one like you along this coast."

When they reached the bottom of the path, the dinghy touched the pebbled shore, crunching

rocks and sand. The two men inside bounded over the gunwales and rapidly pulled the boat up where the surf could not dislodge it. The taller of these began to speak in French, not the French that Margaret had learned from her governess, but a rapid, peculiarly accented French full of terms Margaret had never heard. She knew just enough to understand that her companion was once again lying. He seemed to know the peculiar argot of the sailors, and when he drew glittering coins from the fat purse, she knew his lies would be accepted. She was handed into the boat, and sat upon a damp bench, pulling her cloak about her.

The brawny sailors in their soft caps pushed the boat into the surf and again took up the oars. The small craft dipped and slapped over the breakers toward a larger boat anchored in the bay. This was a vessel unlike any Margaret had ever seen, with a highpointed prow, bright with stripes of red and yellow and blue, the colors vivid even in the moonlight. There was a single tall mast amidships before a boxlike cabin over which extended a long boom. When their dinghy pulled alongside the larger vessel, they were accosted in an unfamiliar tongue by a man Margaret took to be the captain. Again her companion spoke with languid assurance; again a glitter of gold gained compliance.

Once they were aboard, her thief led her to the central cabin, and they descended two steps to an inner door, which he opened, revealing a compartment apparently prepared for Croisset himself with a wide berth built into one wall, a lamp and chest, and other necessary accoutrements.

“Croisset meant to be comfortable, I see,” he said. “I hope you will make yourself so in his stead, Meg Summers.” She thought he waited for some sign of approval from her, but she felt only sobs welling up irresistibly inside her so that she could barely speak. As she did not wish to cry before him, she turned and took hold of the door handle. Only one word came to mind.

“Traitor,” she said. Though it was no more than a whisper, she thought he flinched at it. She slammed the door as hard as she could, and it banged shut in a very satisfactory way. But when she looked to lock it, there was no key. A glance around the narrow cabin in which she was to

make herself comfortable confirmed that she had no means of escape. Since he had carried her from the earl's library—how many hours ago?—she had been telling herself she should escape at the very next chance. Now no further chances would come. Through delay and hesitation she had allowed herself to become party to the betrayal of her country. She stood very still as the tears of weariness, frustration, and loss came at last. The ship lurched forward, and she stumbled into the berth and curled up in her cape, and very soon Margaret Somerley slept.

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For a few minutes there was a bustle on the deck as all hands worked to trim the sails and get the ship underway. The young man in the green coat observed it all quite carefully. When they reached open sea and the breeze picked up, he made his way around coiled lines and nets and strings of cork and wood, away from the steersman to the prow of the boat. He leaned over the side and drew from an inner pocket a thick bundle of papers. These he unfolded and tore to pieces, allowing the white fragments to fall like leaves shaken loose in a gale. They drifted down to the inky waters and disappeared one by one in the vast blackness of the sea.

4

MARGARET WOKE TO strange sounds, not the birds or horses or dogs of Wynrose, nor the rustle of maids' skirts outside her door or the clatter of wheels outside her window in London, but to creaks and groans and sudden, sharp snaps, and a whistle of wind above her and somewhere below her a whispering rush of movement. The movement was a slow, rolling rise, a trembling pause, and a swift, sliding descent. She opened her eyes. Above her were the rough beams of the cabin to which she had been led late the night before. It was impossible that she should be here, yet here she was.

The lamp no longer burned, but a sort of gray daylight entering from two small windows illuminated the narrow compartment, only as wide again as the berth on which she lay. Against the wall opposite the door was a stand with a pitcher and basin set into holes in the top to keep them steady. Across from her were a low chest and a commode and above them several hooks on one of which she saw the thief's greatcoat and on another her cape, the cape she had been wearing when she had curled up on the berth. She felt the rough blanket that lay over her. He had entered the room as she slept, had done this simple thing for her comfort. At the thought of how he might have looked at her, at how he might have touched her, she sat up abruptly, flung off the blanket, and swung her feet over the side of the bed. Where had her slippers gone?

In her agitation she wished to move, but though the berth was wide enough for Croisset, the

confines of the narrow cabin allowed her no more than a few lurching steps in either direction. How very foolish she had been in all that had to do with her thief and how selfish as well. What were her parents enduring in her absence? She had hardly spared a thought for them during the adventures of the evening before, but by now they must be distressed at her disappearance. Would they believe she had run away? Her father would be very hurt if he thought so, but how could they guess that she had been abducted? Her mother would consider only the embarrassment to the family before the Earl of Haddon and would even now be apologizing for Margaret's rudeness or lamenting Margaret's lost opportunity to meet the earl's son. At the disloyal thought, a recollection came to contradict it, a memory of her mother sitting beside her after she had broken her arm riding a forbidden colt. There had been no blame in her mother's words or looks, only comfort and reassurance. How had she come to doubt her mother so in just a few short weeks in London?

There was a knock on the door. She felt unprepared to meet him, but there was certainly no place to hide in the cramped cabin. "Come in," she said.

The handle turned and the door swung toward her. Her thief stood on the threshold with a rough wooden tray. A stirring of the air in the room brought her the smell of bread and strong coffee, and she was at once ravenous, cold, and conscious of all the needs of her body. It would be sensible, she knew, to accept the comforts and necessities the thief offered, but how could she? Her parents must fear dangers and discomforts which she had not the merit of suffering.

He stepped forward, and she stepped back. A pained look crossed his face. "Last night," he said, "you advised me not to go unprovided into danger. This morning, let me return the favor." He set the tray on the bed, turned, and was gone, and Margaret knew a moment of regret.

In the end, she did what she must, and settled herself on the berth with the tray before her and the blanket about her shoulders. A little curl of steam still rose from the coffee. With a sigh she took the heavy cup and sipped the hot liquid. From above she heard muffled shouts and footsteps, and the regular creaks and groans of wood and rope, and the flutter and snap of canvas.

Was he up there or in some other cabin below? She resolved to remain in the cabin, to avoid him in thought as well as in person.

It was a resolution more easily made than kept, for during the long day she could not but reflect on the events that had brought her to such a pass. Try as she might to condemn her companion entirely, she could not escape the thought that some of the blame was hers. Surely she could have stopped him somehow.

With the gray light of a second morning, she woke to her duty. The only right action in her situation would be to stop the thief from selling secrets to the French and to escape as soon as she reached Portugal to return to England, however unwelcome she might be there when her adventure was known. She would not waste another day in thought.

After she had fortified herself with bread and coffee, she attempted to put to rights her rumpled person. There was no mirror to guide her efforts, but she brushed and shook her skirts and ran her fingers through her hair. The results could hardly be acceptable to her mother. Indeed she laughed ruefully to herself; her mother would be horrified at the limp, soiled muslin. She had pulled her cape from the hook when she stopped to consider her stockinged feet. Then she saw that her captor's coat had disappeared in the night. When had he come? And why? She turned to the door. Beside it were her kid slippers, fresh and clean, though she knew they must have been quite dirty when she had come aboard. She stepped into them, pulled her cape tightly about her, and opened the door.

Then she could see other doors and steps leading to the hold and to the deck. She chose the latter, ascending to the deck, stopped momentarily by dazzling light that brought tears to her eyes. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked about. Two sailors regarded her with leering interest, and she turned and made her way over ropes and nets to the bow of the boat. Light bounced off the water in blinding sparkles. The sea itself was a deep purple, almost black, except for the frothy caps of the waves. For some minutes she watched its changing surface with no other thought than how beautiful it was. But the breeze whipped at her skirts, chilling her so that she

turned away from the water to find herself face-to-face with her mysterious companion.

He sat with his back to the cabin, his legs stretched lazily in the sun, and the very ease of his manner fired Margaret's determination to do battle with him.

"Care to join me, Miss Somerley?" he asked. "It's quite a bit warmer here out of the wind." He patted the deck beside him in invitation. Briefly, she considered her tactics. To remain standing and aloof was no doubt the wisest course, but she would hardly be able to question him with her teeth chattering. So she huddled down on the warm boards, keeping as much distance from him as she could in the small patch of clear deck.

In planning to confront him, she had forgotten how unsettling was his smile. She looked away, mastering the temptation to gaze at him, and attempted to frame a question so penetrating that he would instantly confess his identity and his plot. In this she was hampered by the impropriety of addressing him by the only name she knew.

"Mr. . . . ?" she began.

"Drew," he countered.

"A name from your childhood?" she asked, recalling the friendly familiarity of his exchange with the earl's groom.

He laughed. "You do not trap me so easily, Meg," he said.

"Croisset called you *my lord*," she accused, the more sharply perhaps because she had turned to him and found his laughing blue eyes likely to weaken her resolve. "Are you a lord?"

"No," he answered easily, apparently undismayed by her question.

"Then who did you pretend to be?" She sat up straight, adjusting her position slightly so that she might confront him directly and compromising with the chill wind so that she might not be lulled by his smile. "There must be another spy, a *lord* who intended to steal the earl's papers and sell them to the French." The idea was exciting. Her thief might not be as wicked as he seemed.

"Perhaps Croisset merely flatters all Englishmen with titles," he suggested, to Margaret's frustration neither confirming nor denying her suspicion.

"No," she said, "that's not it. You were . . . are impersonating someone. That is why you changed your hair and clothes and voice before you met with Croisset. But why?"

He pulled Croisset's purse from an inner pocket and hefted it lightly in his palm, suggesting its weight. Money of course, she thought, and her spirits sank at the evidence of his greed. He had wanted more than Croisset offered; he had taken Croisset's purse; and he meant to be paid yet again by the Viper.

"But surely," she said, reasoning aloud, "the sapphires you gave me are worth as much as any papers the French might buy." The glances of the rude sailors had cautioned her to tuck these away in a pocket of her cloak.

"Then you see why I must replenish my coffers," he replied.

"I don't see at all," she answered. "You could take back the sapphires and be rich, and then you would not need to sell any papers to the French. You and I could return to England, and I could slip the papers back into the earl's library with no one the wiser."

"Except Croisset, of course," he said dryly.

Of course. Margaret did not like to think of Croisset's rage when he woke and found them and his money gone. His vengeance would be terrible if he caught them, and she was sure he would try. And if the angry Frenchman did not kill her thief, surely English justice would. But, she reminded herself, if she could recover the papers or prevent their sale to the French, he would not be guilty of treason after all. It was no more than Prudence would do for Tom True.

"But you have fooled Croisset once and gained a fat purse. Might we not fool him again?"

"And what would be the gain?" he queried coolly.

"Your life," she answered, and blushed for the intensity with which she had said it, hurrying into further speech. "And the good of your country and the respect of all good men and women."

He laughed, but it was not the teasing laugh she found so pleasant. "At least one of those rewards might be worth something," he said, "but no gold?"

"I can hardly promise you gold," she retorted, affronted that he had shown greed in the face

of her concern. She turned her head away so that he would not see her bitter disappointment.

"Alas," he said, "without gold, what will I do when I want to give some brave girl a bauble?" Margaret felt his fingers touch her chin and yielded to their gentle insistence that she turn back to him. He was kneeling beside her on the deck. "And if I give up my wicked ways, will I win your respect?" he asked quietly. Untrusting, she studied the handsome face so close to hers. She could detect no deceit in its clean lines and fair features. But if she offered her respect, something of herself, would he really abandon his treason?

"Yes," she said, "if you will turn the papers over to me and allow me to restore them to the Earl of Haddon, I will respect you." In her eagerness to persuade him she swayed forward slightly.

"I can't," he said.

"Oh," she cried, in the grip of an emotion quite new to her. He had played upon her hopes. The brightness of his eyes had deceived her again. While she took it for the fire of purpose, it was merely the gleam of greed. She pulled at her skirts and cape so that she might rise and flee, but he caught her by the shoulders with his strong hands and subdued her resistance by the simple expedient of wrapping his arms about her in a tight embrace.

"Meg," he began, speaking down at her averted face, "I said *I can't*, not *I don't wish to*. I do what I must do, and when I have done it, I shall restore you to your family. Now," he continued, "I shall go below so you may stay here to enjoy the sun and breeze, but it would be well if you were willing to negotiate a truce with me." He released her, and she felt his gaze on her as he waited for her reply. She held herself rigidly still and refused to look at him until she could command her voice properly.

"I may be forced to accompany you," she said, "but I do not choose to be on familiar terms with a thief and a traitor." He was gone almost as soon as the words were spoken, and if, after he left, she found her cape inadequate protection from the chill breeze and occasional spray, she would not admit it, even to herself. When the sun set on her second day at sea, she numbly made

her way back to the cabin.

On her return, changes in her cabin were immediately evident. Someone had straightened the berth and brought fresh water and made other arrangements for her comfort. Across the blanket lay a man's cambric nightshirt. When she lifted the article and examined it she found it had been peculiarly altered, the sleeves chopped short and a hasty seam taken up the back in regular though unsightly stitches. It was too small a garment for any man she had seen aboard the ship, so it must be intended for her, strange as that seemed. She hung her cape upon its hook and saw once again her rumpled muslin. What a pleasure it would be to doff her limp, soiled dress. She had reviled her captor, and he had provided for her comfort. Her last thought that day was that she did not hate him as she should.

The third morning of her voyage new sounds and rougher motion woke her. It was rain she heard, passing in driving gusts across the roof of the cabin. Where was he, she thought, and immediately reproached herself for not wondering instead how her parents were taking her disappearance. Yet the otherness of her circumstances, the unfamiliarity of everything around her, made her parents seem impossibly remote. She had a vision of them making calls, entertaining guests, sitting in their drawing room, her mother at the pianoforte, her father with a book, as if she had never existed at all.

For the first time in her odd journey, the hours seemed to drag. She huddled in the berth or paced, while new thoughts distressed her about what would happen when they reached their destination. If she were to recover the stolen papers and escape her captor somewhere in Portugal, how would she find someone trustworthy and willing to undertake the trouble and expense of restoring her to her parents?

In the unsettling darkness of the storm she could not tell the time and believed the day would never end. When at last a leering sailor brought her evening meal, she found that even the wine could not make her sleepy. She squirmed and stretched upon her bed and thought the same thoughts repeatedly. Only when the storm subsided a bit and the boat resumed its steady rocking

did she fall into a restless, dream-disturbed sleep.

She dreamt a swirling scene of confusion in a great London ballroom where she must perform all the steps in the sets with no partner until at last a partner seemed to come for her. Her mother smiled at her from among the chaperones, but as the other gentlemen made way for her partner, she saw that it was Croisset, and she turned and ran out into the garden. Yet there was no garden, only a noisy street where the mob pushed and shoved so that her feet could not touch the pavement and she was carried forward against her will. The surging crowd stopped at last, and she looked up to see a gallows, and with the strange prescience of a dreamer she knew for whom it stood. Two officers of the law roughly pulled forward her thief. In waistcoat and breeches, he looked as he had in Humphrey's stable, save that his arms were bound behind him. His eyes seemed to meet hers at once. When they lowered the rope around his throat, Margaret's own cry woke her.

She sat up in the dark, gasping, her heart pounding, and willed away the horror of it.

"Meg," came his voice, wondrously near, from the floor, she thought. "You were dreaming. You are quite safe for the moment." She could not get her breath to answer at once. "If not *quite* safe, at least somewhat safe," he continued. "The captain assures me his boat has made the crossing in far rougher weather."

"You, here?" she managed to say.

"Have our adventures frightened you?" he asked.

"No, it was something else entirely," she replied. She could not tell him she had cried out in fear for his life.

"Croisset did not frighten you?"

"Croisset? Yes, but truly, I . . . I was dreaming about the season," she said. There was some truth in that.

"You cried out in fear of Lord Leadfeet and Lady Loosetongue? I cannot believe it." From the gloom below she heard his low laugh.

“It was my first season,” she said, wondering at herself that she could once again enter into conversation with him so easily. Nevertheless, she rolled onto her side and propped herself on one elbow to talk to him. In the blackness she could see nothing, not even an outline.

“Of course,” he answered, “had you made your come-out a year ago, I would have . . .” There was a pause in which she found herself listening most intently.

“Would have?” she prompted.

“Would have found you less honest now,” he concluded.

“Me, less honest? When you . . .” She could not finish.

“Do you wish to call me names again, Meg? Did I tell more lies in Dorset than you did in London?” The bitter tone of this remark made her wish she could see his face, and yet she was grateful he could not see hers.

“I did *not* lie,” she protested.

“Ah, then you cannot have had a very successful season.”

“It’s true.”

“Forgive me,” he said, “I had no cause to abuse you with such a comment. You must have attracted your share of admirers?”

“Not one. I was quite unnoticed, I assure you. My mother . . .” She fell silent, remembering her parents’ disappointment in her. Her companion did not press her. After a time she asked, “Who are you?”

“You know my name, Meg.”

Again she wished she could see his face. “I know the name your friend called you.”

“And you will not use it. You prefer *thief* and *traitor*?” His voice was cold.

At the harsh words, she blushed in the darkness. She remembered the flash of something in his eyes each time she had reviled him. He was those things; he deserved her contempt and the contempt of all loyal Englishmen, and yet she wished to go on talking to him in the close darkness, did not dislike him as she should.

“I shall not revile you again,” she promised, but she did not say she would use his name. “Croisset believes you to be a London dandy, a peer; that is who you pretend to be among these men.”

“You think I am something else?” He sounded amused now.

“Yes, but did you not say that we see what we expect? Perhaps I am deceived as well,” she admitted.

“If you have learned that lesson, then I am afraid I shall not be able to deceive you long, Meg.” He laughed. “Best sleep now; we reach Portugal tomorrow.”

“You mean to sleep here, with me?”

“With you?” he asked. “Is that an invitation?”

“No,” she said at once. Although his voice had been teasing, she clutched the blanket around her.

“Then I must continue to make a bed of this floor, for I have no other place, and our companions believe me to have very good reason to sleep in this cabin.”

She knew he was grinning. All the puzzling circumstances of her nights and mornings were suddenly explained—his coat, her shoes.

“One last word,” she pleaded. “If you wish me to call you by name, you must tell me your family name.”

There was silence for such a long moment that she doubted he was there at all. “I have no name,” he said at last. “I am no man’s son.”

“Forgive me,” she whispered, understanding not at all, knowing only that she had touched upon some profound sorrow.

“Go to sleep, Meg,” was all he said.

On the floor of the cabin the young man who called himself Drew lay still until he heard the girl’s even breathing. Though he had slept little in three nights, he found it impossible to do so now. For some time he told himself that it was the discomforts of his cold, rocking bed that kept

him awake; but when he had lodged one shoulder against the base of the berth and one booted foot against the chest, he acknowledged that he had suffered worse discomforts. The truth was that the novelty of sleeping so near a young woman whose beauty and courage he admired and yet not sleeping *with* her was a bit unsettling. He had cause now to regret all the touches of that first evening.

He had avoided her for most of three days. She had much to complain of in his treatment of her, and the worst of it was he meant to expose her to greater dangers yet. He had entered the library with a reckless disdain for what might become of him and a fierce desire to check his enemy, and she had stopped him cold with her honesty. Her gaze, clear and uncompromising, had been like no other woman's gaze. There had been nothing of seduction and everything of herself. And he had seized her. He had not considered his motives in the event; he had been, as he always was, caught up in the exhilaration of the game. Well, he had played desperately and won. Until she had called him traitor he had not realized that he had also lost.

He had compromised a young woman of noble birth and remarkable character to whom he could offer nothing—not position, not fortune, not name. To protect her in the weeks ahead, he must claim her as his mistress, yet he meant in time to return her to her parents, heart-whole, as innocent as she now was. And somehow he would preserve her reputation as well as her life.

Once, on a dare, he had climbed into the ring at Grantham with one hand tied to his side, and faced the local champion. He had won the match to the cheers of all his friends, but his ribs had ached for weeks. On that thought his eyes at last closed.

Margaret's first conscious act was to prop herself up so that she might see the floor. Had she dreamed her encounter with him? To her surprise he had not wakened before her but lay wedged between her berth and the opposite wall in what could hardly be a comfortable position. No light from the windows above had yet reached his face to rouse him. With his eyes closed, his hair tousled, and his limbs sprawled, he looked less the man and more the boy. But there were shadows under the eyes and a darkening of beard on his chin that dimmed the luster and vibrancy

of him. His energies were not inexhaustible after all, she thought. His chest rose and fell with the steady rhythm of his breathing, and she recognized the opportunity she had wished for. She slipped from the bed, gathering the nightshirt about her, and stepped lightly over him so that she might reach the bottle-green coat upon its hook. The papers were not in any of its pockets. There was only a small pistol which she had not realized he carried. While it might be useful to him, she had never fired a gun and did not know the first thing about guns. She stepped back over him and knelt on his left in a tiny patch of-floor. His head was awkwardly pillowed on his greatcoat, but she doubted the papers were there. No, the papers could only be on his person somewhere.

She examined the folds and creases of his waistcoat for any hint of the packet. She could detect nothing. The taut lines of the breeches about his hips and thighs could only be the contours of his body, from which she looked away. Still he had not stirred. Did she dare to unbutton the waistcoat itself, to feel along the ribs? It was unthinkable that she would touch him so. Though he had touched her often that first night, his touches, distracting as they had been, had always furthered his plan. Well, she must accomplish her own plans. She must stop him from betraying England and save him from the gallows of her nightmare or worse.

She sat back on her heels and clenched and unclenched her hands, nerving herself for action. As lightly as she could she slipped the first button free of the restraining silk. She glanced at him; his eyes remained closed. Again she reached for one of the tiny buttons. She had unfastened five when she paused in her labors. She had opened a distinct gap over his heart; but so many buttons remained, and her progress was so slow. She could not expect him to remain asleep much longer. In desperation she leaned over him, the fingers of her left hand spread and pointing toward his waist. Lightly she rested her palm against his chest, allowing her fingers to feel delicately for the upper edge of the packet.

“Good morning, Meg,” he said. He did not move. “Do you care to explain yourself? Or may I place whatever interpretation I like upon the present circumstances?”

She withdrew her hand at once, her face burning, feeling oddly conscious of her body under

the loose-fitting nightshirt. “I hoped to find the earl’s papers,” she admitted.

“You searched the green coat?”

“I did,” she replied, unable to look at him.

“I trust you left me my pistol, in case we should need it.”

“Yes.”

“Well then, you must satisfy yourself that the stolen papers are not on my person.”

At that she looked up. “Oh, no, I could not,” she said, shaking her head emphatically.

“But I insist,” he replied. “It will be good practice for the role you must play in Portugal.”

“Role?” she questioned.

“You are safe in this company, Meg, only as long as our companions believe, as Croisset did, that you are my mistress.”

“But I could never be your . . . I could never touch . . .” Why did she hesitate? Why did the words seem like lies?

“Not *be*,” he said quietly, “*play*.”

“But I do not know the least thing about mistresses or what they must do or say, and surely I do not look . . . look . . .” She faltered.

“In that garment, I assure you do look . . . quite.”

She was watching his face now, and only his evident amusement at her expense enabled her to regain a bit of composure.

“Very well.” She leaned over him again and pulled at the remaining buttons determinedly, but her haste made her clumsy so that she lost her balance and would have fallen on him except that he caught her by the shoulders. To her great discomfort he held her there, her face just inches from his, his heart beating against her hand, his eyes, blue as deep water, urging her closer. Abruptly he pushed her back onto her knees and rolled away from her. He rose and turned from her to gaze out the window above the water stand, his fingers deftly fastening the buttons she had released. She retreated to the berth and pulled the blankets about her. She thought she heard him

say something. “Fool” it sounded like, but the word was too faint for her to be certain.

Without turning he spoke again. “Do not be alarmed, Miss Somerley; I shall not require another such show of desire from you. You have only to dress the mistress’ part and allow me to do the lying.” More quietly he added, “I believe our lives depend on it. Can you do it?”

“Yes,” she said. In the same quiet voice he explained what he had gleaned from the captain and crew about the men the Viper would send to meet them and how Croisset managed with such escort to convey messages beyond the English lines. In parting he urged that she wear the sapphires.

“If anything should happen to me,” he said, “the jewels will buy you protection and a safe passage home.”

“I could never sell them,” she protested. “They must be returned to their rightful owner.”

“The woman who owned them is dead, Meg.” He paused. “Until this afternoon, then.” He bowed and turned.

“Wait,” she cried, as a new thought occurred. “What am I to call you before others?”

“My lord, of course.” She was relieved to see him grin again and offered him a smile of her own.

5

FROM THE SOUTH railing Margaret watched the shore where cream-colored buildings with red-tiled roofs climbed steep hillsides. She had taken her position hours before when the land was no more than a blue outline above the eastern horizon, and had watched through all the transformations their approach had wrought, through an hour in which everything before her had been rosy in the setting sun's light, the windows flashing gold, then through still another until she could see browns and greens and the cream of the buildings and at last people on the beach. All hands were now on deck, each with some task necessary to maneuver their craft through dozens of others of every description. Margaret knew Drew would join her at any moment. Imperceptibly she had accepted the name in her own mind though she refused to speak it.

Since morning she had berated herself repeatedly for misusing an opportunity to stop him and for being so foolish as to smile at him. Eager to escape the scene of her weakness, she had dressed with haste and left the cabin. Now she meant to be strong-minded, to remember at every moment that he was a thief and a traitor, to keep her reserve and to be awake to any chance to recover the earl's papers. She must not allow him to leave the port with them.

"Meg," he said at her side, catching her by surprise in spite of her determination to be on guard. "Do you like this view of Oporto?" She turned to him, but did not answer. He was once more the dandy he had been for their meeting with Croisset, his greatcoat giving him an

impressive breadth of shoulder. He had shaved, so that his face was boyishly smooth and fine. She looked away at once, repeating to herself the words that ought to condemn him. *Thief, traitor*. As if he sensed her reserve, he began to speak inconsequentially about their surroundings, pointing out ships and rigging, birds wheeling overhead and black-shawled women hunched on the beach.

"You have been here before?" she couldn't help asking.

"Some years ago," he replied in the guarded way he had when she asked for something of the truth from him.

Their vessel now passed between other larger ships in a long row and, at an opening among these, turned into the wind. With a sudden flutter the great sail went slack and came down, and the sailors scrambled to tie it to the boom, to drop the anchor and tie a line to another vessel. The captain accepted more of Croisset's gold, ordered the dinghy lowered, and led his men over the side.

When they were alone, Drew took Margaret's chin in his hand, turning her face to his. "Our escort will come for us now. Remember, you are Meg Summers, my mistress." His eyes, deep blue in the twilight, were cold with command, with the haughty air he adopted with the dandy clothes. "Your life depends on it."