

## CHAPTER TWO

“Good evening, my lord,” Lieutenant Harding greeted Derek as he arrived at the safe house well past midnight.

“Lieutenant,” Derek nodded curtly. Harding held Goliath while Derek lowered himself to the ground. Derek untied the cane and removed the two pistols. “The prisoner?”

“Upstairs, my lord. She’s a right fetchin’ lass.” Derek nodded and paused giving Harding a look that had the man looking sheepish. “Pardon me, my lord.” Derek prominently limped as he moved toward the stairs, leaning heavily on his cane. His leg was beginning to throb and become thoroughly uncomfortable. He silently reprimanded himself for not taking a carriage.

“Has the physician arrived yet?”

“No, my lord.”

“Show him up as soon as he arrives.”

“Yes, my lord.” Derek climbed the short entrance stairs and saw the guards standing at the far end of the hall. He gave a short nod before entering the chamber where the prisoner was held. The guard opened the door for him and closed it firmly after he entered. There was a slight figure lying on the bed in the shadows. The fire burned cheerfully in the grate belying the seriousness of the situation. Derek stopped in front of the fire and removed his coat, waistcoat, and cravat. He knew from experience it would be a long evening and decided to get as comfortable as possible. He wished for a draught for his leg, but needed all his wits for questioning the prisoner.

Derek lit a candle from the fire. The glow showed the cracks in the ceiling and the stained walls. If this were not more of a prison, it would be a slum. He moved towards the bed and noticed the prisoner was dressed as if she resided here. She looked more like a street urchin than a woman with traitor’s secrets.

Her feet and good arm were manacled to the thick bedposts by long chains. Her other arm lay at a slightly odd angle from the shoulder, and her skin looked pasty and was beaded with sweat. Her auburn curls caressed her sunken cheeks. She looked to be in desperate need of food. A light blanket covered her, but her teeth were still chattering. He attributed the action to shock.

Derek lowered the candle to get a look at the woman’s face. There was something familiar about her. He studied her more intently, trying to see past the grime that covered her. His heart picked up an unsteady rhythm. His hands shook

and he tried to calm himself, placing the candle on the side table with a thud before he dropped it and caught the whole bloody house on fire.

She turned her eyes away from the candlelight, and a moan escaped her lips. Her hair was matted at the base of her skull and when he lightly touched the area there was a huge lump and his fingers came away covered in her blood.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped at the red staining his hand, unable to remove it completely. He lectured himself about look-a-likes and imposters. She could not have survived. No one had survived. He had been assured over and over. Derek grasped her pointed little chin in his hand and turned her face towards him once more. She cried out at the movement. He focused on the freckles scattered across her upturned nose and the lush bow shape of her lips. Her brow was furrowed in pain, and her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

There was a small crescent-shaped scar under her right eye that she had received as a child. Auburn hair, a crescent scar, and that familiar spattering of freckles – it could not be, yet the evidence said otherwise. He fell heavily onto the ladder-back chair that sat next to the bed. His heart thundered until he thought it would leave the confines of his chest at any moment. He grasped the hand of her uninjured right arm, not noticing the blood that covered it. He chaffed it gently between his own.

“Open your eyes,” he commanded.

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She heard the commanding voice and moaned as the pain filtered into her unconsciousness. She heard the command again. *I'm trying*, she thought. She fought her way out of the darkness to hear the voice she thought was forever lost to her. The pounding in her head was so great it almost caused her to give up. She tried to move her hands to her head, hoping to ease the pain. One was stuck and she cried out at the pain that radiated from her right shoulder. *Oh please, just let me die*, she thought as the throbbing intensified. No, she would not give into death, not when so many others had been taken from her.

The voice called to her again. Perhaps he was her angel, come to take her to heaven. She had always thought it would be her mum to do that, but as long as she was with him again, she didn't care. Her eyes fluttered open, but the light from the fire and small candle on the bedside table were too much for her to bear, so she quickly closed them again. She was almost certain she was going to be sick.

“No, open your eyes now,” the voice demanded again. Sometimes he could be so high-handed. Nevertheless, she obeyed this one final time and opened her eyes. She knew either he would not really be there or she was dead. She had dreamed

of him so many times and woken up certain he would be with her, but there had been no one. So, she decided, she must be dead, but she hurt too badly.

Derek watched intently as her emerald eyes shown brightly from behind fluttering lids. They had a fevered look to them. Her face was so dear to him. He brought her manacled hand up to his lips and brushed a kiss over the knuckles covered in dry blood.

“Contessa,” he whispered softly.

“I must be in Heaven,” she said hoarsely, “but it feels like Hell.” And with those words uttered, the ragamuffin prisoner smiled at her jailer and then let the darkness carry her away once more.

Derek stared dumbfounded at the limp hand that he held in his. In his earlier inspection he had missed the signet ring that encircled her ring finger. He gently caressed it. She looked malnourished. What had happened to her in these last six months? How could Gabe think that she was a traitor? What possible causes did he have to even consider it?

He stood painfully and leaned over her letting his lips lightly caress hers. Derek stood watching her and raked his hands through his golden brown hair giving it a decidedly rakish appearance. He paced the room like a caged animal forgetting about his throbbing leg. The Earl of Blackburn alternated between thanking God that He had seen fit to bring her back to him, and cursing the circumstances all in the same breath. He limped to the door and jerked it open. The guard jumped to attention.

“Have you heard from the physician yet?”

“Yes, my lord. He sent the lad back with word ten minutes ago. He will be at least another half hour.”

“Damn,” he paused and rested his head against the hand tightly gripping the door. “Send the lad for Lord Hawkescliffe. Tell him it is an emergency,” Derek barked the order. “Give me the keys to the manacles,” he held out his hand and his tone brooked no argument. The guard handed over the keys reluctantly and Derek slammed the door in his face. He knew the man was only doing his job, but he had to take his frustration out on someone.

He limped back over to the bed and released the prisoner from her restraints. The chains dropped to the floor with a loud metallic clank. He sat and stared at her, his thoughts chasing each other. How could it be? Everyone was supposed to have perished, except the handful that had been severely wounded. Nearly an entire village had been wiped out. There was a disturbance outside the door before it flew open.

“All right Blackburn, what was so damned important that it could not wait until morning?” Hawkescliffe demanded as he strode into the room. Derek was at a loss as to how much time had passed while he watched her and thought. The doctor had not arrived yet, so surely not much time had passed. Derek shushed Hawkescliffe when the woman winced. “Did you just ‘shush’ me?” he asked incredulously.

“As my friend, shut the hell up,” Derek whispered. “Follow me,” he led Gabe to the fireplace.

“Well, what is it? What is so important that I had to leave my conference with the Prime Minister?”

“This woman is not a traitor,” Derek spoke with conviction.

“What makes you so certain? Tell me you have not let an attractive woman turn your head. You are a better man than that. This woman was found with incriminating evidence on her person. Of course she is a traitor.”

“I swear to you she’s not.”

“Have you questioned her? Did she give you reason to believe that she isn’t?”

“No, I have not had the opportunity to question her.”

“Then give me one good reason why she is not, and,” he cut him off before he spoke, “I assure you it had better be one bloody good reason.”

“Because she’s my wife, dammit!”