

To Love & Protect - Excerpt

“John Coachman, please take me to Hyde Park. I would like to go for a stroll before retiring for the evening.”

“My lady, is that wise? It is getting rather late, and there is frost in the air.”

“Please,” she pleaded to the old man who had been more friend than employee many times.

“All right, miss,” he agreed reluctantly slipping into a more familiar address. He shut the door and the carriage swayed as he took his spot on top. They drove through the city before arriving at the nearly deserted Hyde Park. The coach came to a stop and the old man opened the door. “Are you sure, miss?”

“Absolutely. Who could miss walking on an afternoon like this? The sky is positively clear and how often does that feat occur in London, especially on a winter’s day?”

“I’ll be following behind you,” he said.

“No, you stay with the horses and carriage. I’ll be fine. I just want to take a stroll.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“Everything will be fine. Wait here.” Clarissa took off at a brisk pace toward the flower gardens. The groundskeepers for the park made certain that there were several types of flowers that bloomed every season. The trees had only just lost their leaves due to a rather warm autumn and there were still a few flowers brave enough to peek their colorful petals out for all to see.

She found a bench and sat down to think and be by herself. She used to be able to do this in her gardens at home, but now she feared Franklin too much and what he might try. Since Papa had been gone, she often took her meal in her rooms, never leaving her door unlocked for any reason. Sometimes she would spend the evening with Aunt Gertie, but she did not dare do it too often for fear of worrying the dear woman.

How she wished for the peace of the country once more. She also wished her father had never met that woman. Woman! Hah! She acted and dressed more like a harlot than a lady of the *ton*. The thought of that woman pretending mother her and act so much wiser than her was laughable. So lost in her thoughts, Clarissa failed to hear the footsteps that fell behind her. A gloved hand covered her mouth and an arm pinned both of hers to her side. She struggled to break free, but could barely move at all.

“Hold still and it will go much easier for you,” the coarse voice teased at her ear. “You really are lovely, my dear,” dry lips caressed her ear, “he said you were.” She stiffened and shivered, attempting to pull away from the man. Her mind raced. *Who was it? What did they want? Where was John Coachman? Could he even see her from the carriage? Why had she refused his company?*

“Now, we are going to leave here quietly. Do you understand?” She nodded her head slowly. She knew she had to get away now, otherwise who knew what would happen to her? Clarissa held out her reticule as if a peace offering to the beast behind her. “Nice touch, lovey, but I have other plans for you before I deliver you. Yes, indeed. Something sweeter than whatever is in that fine reticule of yours.”

Clarissa’s eyes widened in fear at the meaning behind his words. Innocent she may be, but she heard the change in his voice, felt the change in a certain part of his anatomy behind her. No, she cried silently. He stood her up and dragged her to the side of the bench. Not knowing what else to do she slammed her foot down on his and kicked his knee. He loosened his hand enough that she screamed for help.

“You little bitch!” He roared.

Clarissa turned and ran up the path towards the carriage. Too much land lay between her and safety. She saw John approaching them and recognized the worry on his face.

“Duck!” She heard him yell and she instinctively dove into a hedge before she heard the pop of a gun. She felt the prickly branches scratch her face, chest and arms. Another crash followed by an oath sounded only a few feet behind her. She scrambled out of the bushes, gaining her footing and began running towards the coach. Her dress caught in some of the underbrush ripping loudly and slowing her escape. The gloved hand felt like a manacle as it closed around her ankle.

He pulled her down, but she fought and clawed, trying to pull herself away from the thug. Her fingers left trenches in the damp London soil. “Help me!” she cried at the top of her lungs.

“Shut up,” he whispered as he tried to pull her towards him.

“Help! Please!” The sound of pounding footsteps came closer and closer. Clarissa felt her energy running out fighting the large man. “Help!” Even her voice sounded weaker, fainter.

“Hell, this ain’t worth it. I don’t care what the bloke said.” All of a sudden her foot came free, she attempted to scramble free, but huge, strong hands were lifting her. “But you are

my way out of here.” The man dragged her towards the far entrance to the park. She heard people chasing after them. They were close enough to the entrance that the man could get away easily. “Another time, m’lady,” the man turned her head and roughly kissed her mouth bringing blood. “That’s a lil’ somethin’ to remember me’s by,” then he flung her towards a copse of trees. Disoriented and unable to catch her balance, she slammed into a huge old tree headfirst. She felt the bark scrape down her cheek, tearing her flesh. Clarissa saw beautiful stars light the blue sky before all went dark.

###