

Seducing the Ruthless Rogue - Excerpt

May 11, 1812

Stuart McKenzie straightened the cuffs of his superfine and his cravat before he entered the lobby of the House of Commons. He received a note from Prime Minister Percevel to meet him here. Very rarely did he have direct contact with the prime minister, so he was intrigued as to why he was being asked to meet here of all places. Usually he would be summoned to the man's office.

He entered the lobby of the building to find men milling about. There would be meetings and hearings on different matters being held today. Mack moved to a shadowed corner where he could watch the proceedings. He did not like having his back to people. It was not wise for one in his position. Not after having had several assassination attempts on his life, the most recent having been last year. He had been left bloody and beaten, almost unrecognizable. His convalescence had taken much too long in his humble opinion, and he had been fighting to return to his position much sooner than anyone wanted him to.

The doors opened at the other end of the lobby as Percevel entered with his entourage of people. They crossed the lobby and people could be heard hailing greetings to him. A man dressed in common work clothes and appearing disheveled entered, looking about nervously. Mack perked up and began to cross the lobby. Something about the man seemed off. He did not look as if he belonged with all these men. All of a sudden, the atmosphere seemed charged with energy.

"Prime Minister," the man called. Percevel turned, a smile on his face from something one of the other men was telling him, perhaps a joke. A loud pop echoed in the lobby, and Mack had only seconds to react. He jumped towards the man, not even getting out a warning, and then just as quickly fell to the floor. Another pop sounded, and then a flurry of activity broke out.

Mack wheezed and tried to stand, but seemed unable to catch his breath. He lifted his head and watched Percevel's eyes glass over as blood spread across the man's chest. Men swarmed Prime Minister Percevel, dragging his inert body out of the lobby. His assassin stood

by the door, unmoving, guns still in hand. Two burly security guards moved and quickly grabbed him, keeping him from escaping. Mack's side ached fiercely. He placed a hand against it and attempted a deep breath. Instead he ended up coughing uncontrollably. He lifted his hand and saw blood smeared on it.

"Help," he tried to yell, but it came out more of a weak whisper. Mack lifted his head, but the men were blurring. He tried to push himself up, but dizziness washed over him. He squinted his eyes and thought he saw a familiar face. "Gabe!" he called twice before the man in question looked over.

"Mack?"

Mack let his head fall back on the marble floor and waited for oblivion to overcome him.

"Mack!" The voice sounded a long way off, and something pushed firmly against his side, making him wince. "I need help over here!"

"Don't let Grandmother see me like this."

"Grandmother is the least of your worries, old man."

Mack smirked followed by a grimace of pain, then the darkness blessedly rolled in on him.

Four Weeks Later

"What is it?" Stuart McKenzie barked at the sound of a tepid knock on his office door.

"Pardon the interruption, sir, but the young woman is here."

"Tell her the same thing as always."

"But sir, it has been almost a year. Can't you just..."

"No, I can't, Mr. Preston." Mack's silvery eyes met the younger man's without blinking.

"Yes, sir." The timid man backed out of the director's office. He turned to the beautiful blonde that patiently sat in a chair near his desk. She sat in the same chair, one day a week, every week, for the last year, wanting to speak to Director McKenzie. Every time she left, disgruntled because he could not be bothered to speak to her. "Miss Graham."

"Let me guess, Mr. Preston. Director McKenzie is too busy, once again, to speak to me

in regards to my missing father. I shall see you next week, and please give the Director my regards.”

Mr. Preston watched the woman as she stood, turned, and regally left the office. There were times when he felt the man he worked for was truly an arse, and this was one of those times. He was a ruthless, Scottish brute, and it came out most specifically when dealing with his job as Director of the War Office. The secretary shot a look at the closed door and then returned to his desk. He was shuffling through the mail when a courier entered the room, breathless.

“I have an urgent message for Director McKenzie sent from Lord Bathurst.”

“I’ll take it.”

“I’ve been told to put it directly in his hands, no one else’s.”

“Director, you have a missive.”

“Send him in.”

“Mr. Preston. How is his attitude today?” A strikingly handsome man, that favored the director quite a bit, entered the office.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Preston bowed low. Upon exiting the office, and hearing he was in the presence of a duke, the courier dropped a quick, respectful bow then left to complete his duties. “As surly as ever,” Mr. Preston answered his question.

“I heard that,” a voice called from the inner-office. “You all speak of me as if I can’t hear a bloody word you say, but I can.”

“Preston, can you get us some coffee?”

“Of course, Your...” At that moment a string of curses and things being slammed and thrown about could be heard coming from the director’s office.

“Go on, I’ll brave the bear.”

The Duke of Hawkescliffe made his way into Director McKenzie’s office. Papers were strewn everywhere and some were still fluttering to the floor. Several heavy objects lay on the floor, including a broken lamp.

“You better have that cleaned up before someone sets fire to this building using your office.”

“Bugger off, Gabe.”

“Now, is that any way to address a duke?”

“Pardon me. Bugger off, *Your Grace*.”

“That’s better. Now, brother dear, what has you in such a tizzy this morning?”

“Where shall I start? Let’s see, there is the fact that every Monday morning at the same exact time, Sir Graham’s daughter sits in my secretary’s office demanding to see me. She does this because she wants to know where her father is. Does she not realize we are in the midst of war? That we are trying to save the old man’s life?”

“Have you told her this?”

“I shouldna have to! She should know this,” Mack growled, his Scottish brogue becoming even more pronounced.

“Sometimes women...”

“Need to stay out of matters they’ve no understanding of! And now the bloody Americans have decided to declare war on us.”

“What?”

“Yes,” he flung the paper across the desk to his half-brother. “I am in charge of fighting not just one bloody war, but two! We have a new Prime Minister, thanks to that idiot Bellingham, who decided to assassinate Percevel. And I have a new person to answer to since Prinny put Liverpool in as Prime Minister.”

“And let’s not forget the assassination attempts on your own life.”

“There is that, but they are in the past,” Mack acknowledged and defended.

“You have been very lucky, thus far. How much longer do you think your luck will hold out? This last time was a near thing.”

“Another year or two?” Mack said jokingly. “Look, Gabe, I know you are here because your wife and our Grandmother worries about me, but there is no need.”

“No need? How many assassination attempts have you avoided in the last two years?” Silence greeted him. “That’s right. There have been too many to count.”

“The man responsible is dead.”

“Mack you can’t keep avoiding the fact that people want you dead. Instead of cutting off the head of the snake and it dying, it seems to sprout another head and then someone else wants

to harm you.”

“I’m not avoiding the fact that my life has been in danger ever since I took this position. I fully acknowledge it, but I will not go into hiding like some coward. Do you understand? And do you mean to tell me that if you’d been close enough to try and save Percevel, you wouldn’t have done the same damn thing?”

“That’s not what I am saying and you know it. Now, sit down.”

“Why?”

“Liverpool is the one that sent me here today, not Mikala nor Grandmother.”

“Liverpool?”

“Yes. He and Bathurst believe you have pushed yourself too hard to return to work after Percevel’s assassination, and you should take some additional time off.”

“I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“Yes, brother, you did. You only took a week off after being shot. That’s not enough time to heal. Is it?”

“Yes,” he growled.

“Then why is it when no one is looking, you are holding your side?”

“Habit.”

“You are the most stubborn damn Scotsman I know. Can you even concentrate on your job with the pain you’re in?”

“We are in the middle of a war, two wars now. This isn’t a bloody tea party we’re having. Everyone has to make sacrifices. I have and will continue to work through the pain. It will go away in time. Tell them it isn’t going to happen.”

“I don’t think you understand, Mack. You are not being given a choice. This is an order.”

“You agree with them, don’t you?”

“Mack, I don’t want to lose my last brother. I want my children to grow up and know their uncle. Besides, Grandmother has threatened to come and sit with you.”

“She wouldn’t dare.”

“We both know she would. Yes, you are irreplaceable, but you need to heal, *completely*,”

the Duke of Hawkescliffe emphasized.

“No one is pushing me out of my office.”

“It has already been done. For the next month, you will be restricted from setting foot on the premises. Roger Presley, Earl of Blackstock, will be stepping in for you during those weeks. He is the same one who filled in for you before. He knows what he’s doing. I suggest you take the time to rest and let your body strengthen and heal. Then, maybe you will be in a better frame of mind and not so belligerent to everyone who comes within ten feet of you.”

“Get out,” Mack growled.

“Mack, you will see it’s for the best.”

“I said, get the bloody hell out of my office!” he roared, as he stood and braced his hands on the top of his desk.

“We’ll talk once you’ve had time to calm down. Presley will be by later this afternoon to be debriefed.”

“He can go get himself...”

“Now, now,” Gabe cajoled. “Once you have had the opportunity to think further on this, you will see this is in your best interest.” Gabe shut the door just as a heavy object crashed into the wall. “Mr. Preston, I would not go in there for the a few hours. It is going to take him some time to recover from this.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Preston looked at the door to the director’s office and felt pity for the man. He was a proud man, and it was going to be difficult for him to step down even temporarily.

Cassiopeia Graham stepped out of the hired hack and paid the driver. She had followed the same protocol for the last year to no avail. She entered the small house she had lived in with her father for the last decade before his disappearance. Her father needed to live in London so that he would have easy access to the parts he needed for his inventions. So, when her mother died, there was nothing left to keep them attached to the seaside village she had grown up in.

“Any word on your papa, Missy Cassie?”

“No, Chang,” she answered, dejection and just a hint of anger coloring her voice.

“There, there, Missy Cassie,” he patted her arm affectionately, “all will be fine. I bring you tea.”

“Thank you, Chang.” She gave the old man a smile and tugged her gloves off. She laid them and her reticule on the small table in the hall and then hung up her pelisse. It was mid-June and the weather was extremely warm. The house was small and cozy. There were three bedrooms, a parlor, a study, and a kitchen. In the back was a detached building where her father worked on his inventions when he was in residence. Cassie strode to the study and sat down at the desk.

She crossed her arms on the desk and laid her head on them. Where could he be? Why wouldn't Director McKenzie at least let her know that her father was well? She had haunted his office for almost a year now. Surely he could see how worried she was about her father? No, he doesn't know how worried she is because he has refused her every single time she has been to his office.

Cassie had met Director McKenzie once at a dinner party given by Lady Greenwood. The man was a tall, dark, handsome Scot with silvery grey eyes. She had enjoyed verbally sparring with him about the war and other political matters. He had seemed surprised that evening about how much she knew about the political realm. Director McKenzie and the other men had taken her father off to a corner and began talking in earnest with him. Later, her father had refused to answer any of her questions about the oddity of the situation or what the men wanted with him.

A few days later, her father announced he had a meeting with McKenzie and had never returned home. The next morning, Cassie had arisen, dressed and taken herself off to the War Office to speak with Director McKenzie. It had not been a pleasant confrontation.

“He will not see me?” she asked Mr. Preston.

“No, Miss Graham.”

“My father is missing after leaving the house solely to speak with the man in that office, and he will not deign to speak with me?”

“I'm afraid that is correct, Miss Graham.”

“Should something happen to my father, I will make Pandora's Box look like a plaything

for children. Do you hear me Director McKenzie?" She was shocked to actually see him standing at the door.

"If you're done with your threats, you can leave now," he said. "I have no time to deal with hysterical women that refuse to stay out of government affairs."

"You haven't seen the last of me, Director." She spun on her heel and left the room. I will make a nuisance of myself to the director until he satisfactorily answers my questions, she thought.

Cassiopeia, or Cassie as she was known to her family, was raised to be independent and a free thinker. Her father was known for his inventions. Her mother had studied the sciences, most especially astronomy. Thus how Cassie's name came to be. Cassie's interest, however, lay in the written word. She supplemented the meager savings she and Chang lived off of by writing political articles under the name C.E. Jones. The name came from a combination of her name Cassiopeia Elizabeth, and her mother's maiden surname, Jones. All correspondence between herself and the owner of the paper was through mail or the local newsboy, so her identity remained anonymous.

When she was not writing political pieces, she threw herself into writing what really interested her—stories about dangerous, brooding heroes, and the women that fell in love with them. She lifted her head and pulled her manuscript close to her, reading back over the last few pages she had written.

"Here you go, Missy Cassie," the little China man said, as he laid the tray down on her desk. "What happens next in story? Is Lord Bartleby bad man?"

"No, Chang, Lord Bartleby can't be bad. He is the hero."

"But he so mean."

"He has a past he is trying to work through."

"The women, they swoon when they read this."

"Do you think, Chang?"

"Yes. Your mama be so proud."

"Thank you, Chang."

"You write for two hours, then I come get you for your lesson."

“Yes, Chang.” Cassie poured herself a cup of tea, took a sip, and began furtively working on her novel.

True to his word, Chang arrived two hours later. She begged for more time, but he remained firm. Cassie went to her room and changed into the light oriental pant suit she wore for their sparring sessions. Once she changed clothes, she met Chang in the small garden. Together they went through their stretches, then they began sparring with one another using an ancient oriental practice that had been passed down through Chang’s forefathers to him. Chang did not hold anything back because Cassie was a woman. Both of Cassie’s parents had felt it important that their daughter be taught how to protect herself. Cassie shifted her hip and swept her foot causing Chang to flip and land on his back.

“Chang, are you all right?”

“I think I taught Missy Cassie too well,” the man laughed.

Cassie laughed as well before sitting on the ground next to the older man. “Papa *is* all right, isn’t he, Chang?”

“Your papa take care of himself. These not good times. Too much fighting. Sir Graham smart man. Wanted by many people. He is fine. Too valuable alive.”

“I hope you’re right, Chang.”

“Of course, I right,” he said and patted her leg. “Help old man up,” he teased her until a smile spread across her face.

Mack entered his quiet little house late that evening. After spending hours training Roger Presley on all that he needed to know, Mack reluctantly left the office. He gathered up several stacks of papers and stuffed them in his case. Unable to let go of the nervous energy he felt, he stopped at Gentleman Jackson’s. Even that did not go as planned. Demanding to see the nature of the wound, Gentleman Jackson refused to let him spar with anyone for at least another two weeks. Mack cursed loudly when the man admitted that Gabe had been there already, to warn him that Mack might stop by.

Frustrated with everyone, he ended up at White’s, sitting quietly in a dark corner as he drank. The golden liquid helped abate his anger somewhat. Had Liverpool lost faith in his

ability to run the office? He went back to work the week after Percevel's assassination even though the doctor insisted he was a fool to do so. As he thought back on the argument, a roguish smile turned up the corners of his lips.

"I have a bloody war to fight!"

"Someone else can fight the war for you," Dr. McGregor calmly replied.

"You don't understand..."

"No, you don't understand. If you do not take some days to heal, then you are not going to get better. You are lucky that rib stopped the bullet. If it hadn't you could very well be visiting with St. Peter. As it is, you have a broken rib and a damaged lung. I don't know how else to say it, but your body needs rest."

"A week is all I can give you."

"Damn stubborn Scot."

That conversation had happened roughly a month ago. In that time, they had buried a prime minister, appointed another to take his place, and the upstart colonists thought to wage war against their mother country...again. And who could forget the assassination attempt on Prinny last year? *Had it only been a year ago?* he mused introspectively. Time rushed past at an alarming rate of speed, and he could do nothing to slow it down. Forty loomed ever closer, causing him to catch his breath at times.

Mack sat in the comfortable leather chair in his study and lifted his booted legs onto the stool. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He welcomed the silence as it soothed his soul. He was glad that when he moved to London all those years ago he had invested in this house rather than taking rooms at the Albany. He missed the Highlands of Scotland, but doubted he could ever go back there. Laird McKenzie would not welcome him, his mother was long dead, and he wasn't certain how welcome he would be by his half-siblings.

"Sir, I didn't hear you come in. Would you like something to eat?" John Bartlett, his man servant, asked. John did everything for Mack except clean the house. For that, a woman came in once a week.

"I slipped in a few minutes ago, John. It seems I will be underfoot for a while."

"And why's that?"

“I have been temporarily relieved of my position.”

“But you are the Director of the War Office.”

“Not anymore. It seems people are concerned about my health. I say I’m too ornery to die.”

“Too true, sir. Well, what do you plan to do?”

“Prove to everyone I am as healthy as an ox and get back to work as soon as possible.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“The hell if I know, John,” Mack sighed, holding his aching, bandage-wrapped side.

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