

A NOVEL OF BEST LAID PLANS  
— TWO —

*To*  
KISS  
*a*  
KNIGHT



GRACE HITCHCOCK



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*To Kiss a Knight*

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*For Dakota—  
angels sang the moment we met.*

Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil,  
as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may  
devour:

Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same  
afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in  
the world.

But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his  
eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a  
while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.

To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

1 PETER 5:7–11

## Chapter One

*England, Summer 1813*

VIVIENNE POPPY HAD ALWAYS TAKEN pride in the fact that she had never fainted—not when her papa died, leaving her alone in the world, nor when her stepbrother promised her hand to the vilest so-called gentleman of her acquaintance. Of course she *would* faint during the most exciting moment in her life and miss all the potential story fodder that came along with being carted away on horseback by a masked highwayman.

But now, with her back pressed against the highwayman's solid chest and her head bent forward at an unnatural tilt and bobbing with each clop of the horse's hooves, she knew she had indeed fainted, and the moment he discovered she was awake, a battle would lay before her. She kept herself limp, despite the pain at the base of her neck, as the whispered warnings from ton mothers of what happened to unprotected maidens on the road flooded her pounding heart. She had already weighed that risk when she'd fled London before dawn, but she'd thought they were just stories. What was the risk of a supposed highwayman compared with certain imprisonment in a union of convenience that was anything but convenient for her?

*This is salvageable. I can still have my new life.* She had managed to escape her overbearing stepbrother and his waspish wife. She could outwit this brute of a man and emerge unscathed, with inspiration for her next novel. The only question was how to accomplish the feat. She

dared to lift her lashes a hairbreadth, seeking anything that could help her plight in the rapidly fading light. The horse's long, strong strides along the dirt road hinted at the highest quality of horseflesh. The earth was too far from her perch to risk a leap. She might incur a broken ankle, and she didn't have funds to spare for the doctor.

Maybe feign an onslaught of violent illness brought on by hysterics? No man would take well to a woman casting up her accounts onto his leather saddle and shirtfront and would immediately dismount . . . but she hadn't eaten anything in a day of travel, as she hadn't dared to spend any coin on bread. A lot of good that did her when her precious coins were lining the bandit's pockets.

Indignation surged through her. Who was this man to pilfer her hard-earned money from her reticule? It had taken her ages to decorate her pretty bead purse and years to save her meager pin money, which she had foolishly carried with her in case she needed it on her journey. She would have to write another novel to replace the funds, for the reticule was no doubt emptied and in a puddle on the road between London and Bath. She could only pray that the horrid letter from her stepbrother, Lucius, was tucked in the highwayman's pocket and not on the road for him or—heaven forbid—her so-called fiancé to uncover and be given an inkling of where she had vanished.

Vivienne risked another peek. The man's strapping legs were clad in well-tailored black breeches tucked into polished black Hessian boots that glinted in the setting sun. A carved ebony knife handle poked out of his left boot just below her. *Perfection.*

If she was ever to get out of this mess, she needed to act now before he joined any associates and she could be overtaken. Judging from the solid mass of man supporting her, an escape would be problematic. But she had always been gifted in performing tableaux. Surely this was no different, even if the stakes were staggering. *Violent illness it is.*

She moaned, allowing her head to wobble from side to side as she clutched her stomach, her groaning frantic as she kept her lips parted in a show of rising hysteria. She allowed a bit of spit to dribble at the

corner of her mouth to lend credence to the charade. "S-stop. I'm going to be ill!"

The man stiffened at once, drawing his horse to a halt. She barely kept her grin from appearing and betraying her. She moaned again and lurched forward, leaning over his left boot as if to cast up her accounts away from them. She wrenched the knife from his boot and whipped around, lifting the steel to his neck. "How dare you accost a lady. Who are you, and why did you take me?"

Clad entirely in black, her abductor wore a matching cloth mask over his eyes, tied above his striking golden queue that gamboled in the wind. His piercing blue eyes widened in shock behind his mask, and the corner of his mouth raised. The scamp was *grinning* at her, and dash it all if his breathing was even too.

Well, she supposed if one robbed stagecoaches for a living, daring was required. "What have you got to say for yourself? Are you to have no final words?"

"Not many can boast of tricking me," he said in a deep Scottish brogue. He rolled back his impossibly broad shoulders, which were emphasized by his layered cape, revealing a New Land Pattern pistol strapped to his chest . . . the reason for the sore spot on her back that would no doubt bruise.

From her book research, she knew it to be a firearm with a short range, but if his aim was as good as his horsemanship, she was in grave danger. He cut a handsome figure for a highwayman, with his sharp jawline and trim waist—mayhap he was not as smart as he dressed. "The Prince Regent will have your head for manhandling a lady of the court."

His brows rose. "The Prince Regent, eh? Seems I have absconded with the wrong damsel. A lady of the court even . . . one who travels by *stage*."

"Indeed you have." She lifted the blade to hide the lie that was surely reaching her eyes. She had never been good at misdirection, but proclaiming that one was a gentleman's daughter hardly held a threat, especially when she had no relation left who cared for her. She ripped the

reins from his hand and tossed them over the horse's head. "Now, you will dismount and let me ride away, or I'll see you rot in prison."

He heaved a sigh. "While that is quite the tempting proposition, I'm afraid I cannot allow you to take my horse. I am rather fond of him." Using his legs, he guided his ebony steed in a supreme show of horsemanship, as the reins still dangled over the horse's head.

"And I was rather fond of my reticule. It is hardly compensation, but it is well within my right to have your horse, as you claimed my coin." She frowned at the horse's progress. "Stop directing him! I am in earnest. I will—"

His gloved hand flashed out and seized her wrist, twisting the blade away in a single motion as he appropriated it with the other hand, tucking it in his right boot this time, away from her grasp.

"Let us put that valiant attempt behind us, shall we?" He chuckled and retrieved the reins with ease.

She lifted her chin and flipped her long blond braid over her shoulder—hoping it hit him in the face—and pushed back the hair plastered to her perspiring temple, allowing the gentle breeze to cool her cheeks. She would not cry in her frustration and let this man think her any weaker than he already did. She was used to being underestimated. It was partly how she'd managed her flight, but she had not created this elaborate plan for freedom to perish before she took hold of her life. Perhaps if she hinted at there being anticipation of her arrival in Bath, she might be saved—at the very least, she could promise a ransom for her safe passage, paid for by her friends. While she traveled alone, she had Muriel and Tess. If Vivienne did not write to them by the end of the week, her friends would come looking—she had no doubt.

"Did I hurt you, my lady?" He grunted. "I am not used to dealing with the weaker sex. Forgive me if I bruised your wrist, but I did not wish to lose my head at your lovely hand."

"I hardly think you would care even if you did cause me pain."

"I may be a highwayman, but I am no brute."

"A nice sentiment, but it has yet to be proven."



He directed the horse from the main road toward a grove of trees, sending her heart racing wildly.

“What are you about? Don’t you wish to evade the local constables and watchmen? I have no doubt they are following, after you were so bold as to rob a stagecoach bearing Sir Thomas Pomphrey and a lady.”

“An unescorted lady, which begs the question as to why a member of the peerage would take a public coach instead of her own carriage.” He slowed his mount as they slipped between the trees, the canopy of leaves shielding them from the road, the animal breathing heavily. “And my horse needs a rest. We will not be bothered here.”

The rogue halted the horse, leapt from its back, and lifted his hands to her. She ignored his offer and kicked her feet free from her skirts. She gripped the leather saddle and skidded to the ground. Her limbs tingled from the cramped travel, and it was all she could do to hold on to the saddle to keep from collapsing.

The highwayman paid her no notice as he tossed the saddlebags over his shoulder and strode a few yards away. He dumped the contents of the bags, sorting through them, setting coins and pound notes on one side and the trinkets—most likely from Sir Thomas’s and the driver’s pockets—on the other. Her reticule fell out.

*He has it!* She released her breath. Her stepbrother would not find her on that score.

The man grinned at her intake of breath. “Ah, this must be Sir Thomas’s purse. Lovely beadwork, I must say.”

She crossed her arms. “There is little of value in there.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He tugged open the reticule’s ties and unceremoniously shook out her belongings—a letter, coins, a tight roll of pound notes bound with a thin red ribbon, a pencil, and her journal. He leafed through the journal, flipping it upside down while fanning the pages before setting it aside, whistling a lively tune as he added her money to his pile.

At least he would not humiliate her by reading her thoughts, notes, and sketches of her characters. It was a combination of a diary and ideas she was working out for her new story, an entirely lethal combination if

ever lost to her, given her nom de plume was known only to her dearest friends. Others might disregard the content as musings of a love-addled girl. But in truth, if she did not make a love match, she wished to remain single all her days. She could have a good life living off her modest income as a writer and staying at her small apartment in Bath, which her father had bequeathed to her.

Even though a love match had not yet occurred and she was four and twenty and well on her way to confirmed spinsterhood, she was female and did, on occasion, develop fancies for a gentleman that were captured in her journal. No one had the right to read her innermost thoughts.

And as much as she feared what might happen to her on this adventure, she would most definitely be recording and sketching the highwayman's striking profile and features, the ones she could see at least, for future use in her stories . . . if she lived long enough to write more novels for her publisher and readers.

She patted the horse's mane, the highwayman's golden hair catching her eye once more. The color was unusually bright for a grown man, and the locks so thick they would make any woman jealous. She would sketch everything she could remember about him, guessing the placement of his cheekbones. Even with only her assumptions of how he looked beneath the mask, she would easily find him after she was safely at home in Bath by his stunning locks alone. She would see that he was brought to justice for daring to hold up her coach.

"Am I so admirable that you cannot take your eyes from me?" He grinned up at her as he rummaged through the pile. "I must warn you—many a maid is drawn in by my dangerous allure, but I am as difficult to catch as the waves upon the shore."

She rolled her eyes at his poor metaphor. "If by admiring, you mean preparing my description for when I hire a thieftaker, then yes."

"I wish you the best of luck, my lady. But as no one has caught me yet, I doubt you will be able to."

*And yet I tricked you into thinking I was ill.*

He stuffed a packet of letters into his waistcoat, and as the only stage-

coach passengers had been herself and Sir Thomas, she knew they must belong to the older nobleman. But why did the highwayman bother with them? Perhaps she could trick him once more while he was engrossed with his loot. She eyed the horse, determining what it would take to get in the saddle unaided while he was distracted by his greed. There was a nearby low-hanging branch. If she climbed atop it, she could easily crawl into the saddle. She was a decent enough rider. She grasped the branch, hefted herself up, and scooted onto the limb, stretching her leg over the saddle to ride astride. She plopped down hard in the saddle, grabbed up the reins, and kicked the horse with all her might. "Yah!"

The beast kept munching the patch of grass. She kicked him again, but he did not budge.

"He answers only to me." The highwayman's eyes sparkled with mirth as he gathered the coins and notes. His gaze seemed to inadvertently rest at her stockinged calves for half a moment before he shifted back to his bounty.

At least the arrogant highwayman had some manners. She straightened her shoulders and kicked the horse again, using the reins as a whip, as she had seen him do. Nothing.

The man had the nerve to laugh, tucking the remaining loot into his saddlebag as he rose and whistled to his mount, who perked his ears and at once trotted to his side with Vivienne bouncing in the saddle and listing to the left.

"That's a good boy." He scratched the horse's chin, as if he were a devoted dog.

She gritted back a retort and, seeing no other way around it, moved her leg back over the saddle, tucking her skirts close and sliding from the horse's back. Her skirt caught the saddle on the dismount, and she lurched, splaying out her hands to brace her fall. He closed the distance in an instant, his arms encircling her waist while her face smashed into his waistcoat, which smelled of leather and woodsmoke.

"Allow me." He held her against him with one arm, his full lips inadvertently brushing her temple as he reached behind her and freed her muddled blue muslin skirt before setting her on the ground.

*Oh my.* Her cheeks flamed as she shoved herself away from him and his kissable lips, toeing the saddlebags he had abandoned to catch her. "Why do you care for those letters anyway? You tucked them in your waistcoat instead of casting them to the side."

He rubbed his jaw. "The gentleman protested at the time, saying they were from his deceased daughter. Mayhap I was too hasty in taking them from the man."

She blinked, hope blooming. "You have a heart after all."

He shrugged. "I can return them for a price."

"Of course. Mayhap you were too hasty in taking my money as well." She crossed her arms to hide her trembling limbs at her daring. "Do you feel guilty yet? Or should I wait an hour or so and inquire about your conscience again?"

"You will recover soon enough." He gestured to her ensemble. "You are quite fashionably dressed under all that mud you acquired when you fainted out the door of the stagecoach at my feet."

"And yet, as you have pointed out numerous times, I was taking a public stagecoach unescorted. Which means either I have no one who cares for my safety enough to send a carriage for me, or my family is too poor to accommodate me." She lifted a brow. "You seem gifted enough to fly from horseback to the stagecoach top without missing a beat, and somehow you miss this fact?"

"I would argue that your pelisse and muslin gown are cut in the height of fashion."

She gaped at him. "Y-you know muslin?"

He leaned against a tree trunk and gestured to his attire. "It takes a fashionable eye to look so dashing in my work. I had my garments specially tailored to fit my needs, such as leaping from a horse to atop a stagecoach, while also being swashbuckling."

"Pray, what is the name of your tailor, so that I may send my step-brother to him?"

He laid a hand over his heart. "That I shall keep as closely guarded as my own name."

"Very well, Goldie the highwayman. You have managed to evade the

constables. Are you going to release me now? I am fairly certain a passing wagon will take pity on me and give me a ride to the nearest village between here and Bath.”

“Goldie?” He cringed. “Perhaps you should call me Bash after all.”

“Mr. Bash?”

“Just ‘Bash.’ And what will I call you, my lady?”

“Just ‘my lady.’” She looked about for a fallen limb to wield like a club. *As if that would knock him out.* She shook her head at her desperation.

“Fair enough. I could hardly allow you to wander about on the road, my lady, for anyone to find.” He slung the saddlebags over the horse’s rump, tying them into place. “You said yourself that a lady should never be unescorted.”

She quirked a single brow. “Now you choose to be noble? I believe the time for chivalry has long since passed.”

“Not all highwaymen are cads.”

She snorted and stepped over a tree root, picking her way toward the road. “I think I would rather take my chances on the open road.”

He swung up onto his horse and followed her, unaffected by her distance from him. “Dusk is nearing, and not all highwaymen are as gallant as yours. I would not leave you unattended, a helpless lady such as yourself.”

“You presume much, sir. You are neither gallant nor a proper escort.” She picked up her pace. Ten yards and she would be through the tree line. *Lord, let there be a coach passing nearby.* She broke into a run, leaping over tree roots and ignoring the branches snagging her muslin gown.

Hooves filled her vision as he raced up beside her and in a single motion lifted her into his saddle. His arm encircled her waist, pinning her to him, as if she were a butterfly in her nephews’ entomology collections, fighting for freedom until her wings were tattered.

“After my mission is complete, I shall attend you to your destination. Now, can I trust you enough to release my hold on you? If you try to leap, I’m afraid you are in danger of being trampled under my horse’s hooves.”

She sagged against him. There was no use wasting her energy in fighting a man so strong and swift. She would have to outwit him. "I hardly think you could approach my home in Bath in a mask." She turned and eyed him, a hint of curiosity burning to see if his eyes were as brilliant as they appeared beneath the cloth mask.

He slowly released her, and seeing as she did not attempt to leap from the saddle, his arms kept a respectable distance from her. "Try me. I am quite good at what I do."

"Thieving?" she tossed over her shoulder. "I wonder how you got *good* at it. Gallant indeed."

"No. Becoming invisible," he whispered into her hair, sending a chill down her neck as he returned them to the spot in the clearing she had fled. "Now, we shall wait here until the moonlight guides our path. My horse needs to rest, and so do you. We have a long journey ahead of us."

"And if I yell the moment we are in a populated village?"

"While we are traveling, I will suggest that you comply with my demands. I would not wish to tell you what would happen if you yelled, but to begin, your reputation would be shattered. If you stay silent, I can at least save your reputation . . . as long as no one on the coach knew your name, and as you were traveling alone, I am assuming you did not wish to share it."

She pressed her lips into a firm line. The comely fiend had guessed correctly and had a point. She would have no choice but to comply until she found a means of escape.

## *Chapter Two*

THE LADY'S HEAD LOLLED BACK onto his shoulder after hours of staying alert in the saddle in front of him. Sir Sebastian sorely regretted taking the lady's funds, along with the lady, but he had been under strict instructions from the Prince Regent not to be exposed in his mission—the political ramifications would be too great.

However, abduction had never been part of the plan. Riding with two to a horse slowed the journey considerably, but he couldn't rightly drop the lady on the side of the road. He was a knight and, as such, a protector . . . despite the fact *he* was the reason she needed protecting. But he had not lied. There were far more dangerous things than a ruined reputation, like leaving an unconscious lady in the same stage-coach as Sir Thomas without funds to see her safely home. And as he couldn't rightly leave her funds intact without raising suspicions of his true objective, the only way this maiden would arrive to her destination unharmed was to bring her himself . . . under the guise of abduction. Not his best idea in his nine and twenty years, but he was committed now.

He paused outside the open gate of a manor along the road to Bristol. Judging from the lack of light flickering in its windows, the staff had retired, along with the owner.

She stirred, her soft moan making him wish he could offer her words of comfort, but seeing as he was her captor, his words would have been fruitless.

Her body tensed, and she shot upright. "W-where are we?"

"Along the road to Bristol." He leaned into the thick Scottish brogue from his grandmother's clan that he used while posing as the highwayman. On the off chance he ever ran into Sir Thomas or others he had to visit on behalf of the Prince Regent, he chose to disguise his voice.

"Bristol! B-but I am to be in Bath." She groaned. "I was nearly there, and now I will be much later returning home."

"Did you not notice my horse deviating from the road to Bath? Or the change of mileposts?"

"I spent most of the journey in the stagecoach behind a book, and as you well know, was unconscious for a time, and heaven knows that I do not possess an internal compass that all you brigands seem to possess. I honestly had no idea where we were heading."

"That would explain your compliant behavior. I was wondering why you did not protest. I aim to make the remainder of our journey far more comfortable." He adjusted in the saddle, and the horse tossed its head. He petted the horse, who released a snort. "Peace, Brigand."

"Brigand? You named your horse *Brigand*?"

"He inspires me."

She snorted. "To be a man loyal only to himself and his horse?"

He glanced down at her, choosing silence over a lie. "You best remain quiet as well."

She mumbled an agreement, crossing her arms against the chill of the night.

They approached the stables, where a single lamp burned low, but no one was present. He crouched in the saddle as they ducked inside. He hopped off and quickly located a navy livery, which seemed like it would fit somewhat, and a worn-looking gig. He dug into his pockets and left enough coin to more than compensate for the items he needed.

She lifted her brows at this but said nothing as he reached up for her. His hands grasped her petite waist, and she obediently slid down. He loosened his grip too soon, and she fell against his chest. She pushed away from him, and he caught sight of a pretty blush creeping up her neck.

He grinned at the bloom in her cheeks, reached for the strap, and



removed the saddle, stowing it in the gig before hitching Brigand. He dusted off his hands and reached for the livery. "Avert your gaze, my lady."

Her lips parted, as if ready to ask why, when her eyes landed on the clothes draped over his arm. She swiveled back to the horse. "So that's how you intend to escort me into Bath—Helios?"

"Helios? I would have thought Hermes was more in line with my work."

"With hair like the sun, it fits."

"That is a far sight better than being called Goldie, but I prefer Bash."

"I will call you Bash if you return my things to me."

"Call me Bash and I may return your book." He shoved his leg into the breeches, dressing quickly for fear the owner of the livery might appear at any moment. "In this uniform, I am simply a groom escorting his employer's daughter about town."

"That is not scandalous at all. And your mask? How will you explain that away? It is hardly covert."

"You shall pretend to sleep in the gig while I ride on the horse as a postilion. No one but strangers will see my face. I must change my shirt. Keep your eyes closed," he said from his place in the shadows.

"My eyes never opened after your first warning!" She fairly pressed her face into Brigand's side.

Sebastian replaced his black linen shirt before stuffing the clothing into the saddlebags and packing them next to the saddle in the gig. "It is safe now."

She turned, and he held a hand out to her. "My lady."

"Bash." She allowed him to assist her into the gig, tucking herself into the corner, but as the seat was small, it put little distance between them—a fact he found he enjoyed.

He wasted no time getting them as far from the manor as possible. The gig flew along the road, the moonlight illuminating every divot in the road. They had four hours left in their journey and two hours of moonlight left. Brigand was strong, but they could not make the journey without one stop. He gritted his teeth against the idea of tarnishing

her reputation by keeping her out without a guardian, as ludicrous as that worry was at this point, but what other choice did he have? But if she was alone enough to take a public coach, perhaps no one would miss her if he was swift.



The jostling of the wheel awoke her. Vivienne stiffened. She had vowed *not* to actually sleep again, merely rest a moment. She cast a glance at him. In dawn's first rays, she spied his exhaustion in the redness rimming his eyes.

"Where are we?"

"I cannot rightly find us a room to rest while I wear a mask, and as I cannot reveal myself to you for obvious reasons, we shall take shelter here." He drew the gig to the side of the road and into a grove of trees.

She pressed her lips together, swallowing her protest.

The early morning light splayed through the greenery, casting a reverent glow as he directed them into the thick forest. With every turn of the wheel, her hope of escape sputtered. She was not skilled like Tess or strong like Muriel . . . but she was smart. She had to think of a way out of this situation. Despite the fact she had foolishly let her guard down by sleeping, he could not stay awake forever. She would act exhausted and see if he fell asleep, leaving her a chance to run. It wouldn't take much to act fatigued after the past few days.

"This should be far enough from the main road. It would not do for us to be discovered, for neither your reputation nor mine, so we are resting for the day. You will be home before dawn tomorrow, my lady. Now, we rest."

She crossed her arms. He would expect some argument from her over sleeping. "I rested."

"I did not." He climbed down.

"Well, you cannot expect me to actually sleep with you nearby and

no longer occupied with directing the horse.” She clambered off the side of the gig, hopping to the ground. Her shins stung at the drop.

“You do not trust me. I am aware, but we have a long wait ahead of us.”

“And you do not think I will escape?” She hoped she wasn’t taking her act too far. If she truly worried him, he might tie her up.

He shrugged, unhitching Brigand and releasing him to range free and take a drink from the creek. “I am a light sleeper, and I *know* you are not light on your feet in a forest.” He strode away from the gig, leaves crunching underfoot.

She lifted her gaze to the canopy of the lovely forest. If she squinted, she might picture a medieval hero saving his lady love from the evil highwayman. She hid her smile as she stretched her tender back. This next novel would be fairly easy to write, as she could draw from her own life. Her fingers itched for her diary and pencil. “Are you not afraid of being found out in broad daylight?”

“I know these roads better than most travelers do.” Bash knelt and gathered wood, building it into a neat pyramid and stuffing the inside with dry leaves. He removed a flint and his blade and methodically scraped it until a spark caught in the underbelly of the stack. He blew on the flame, encouraging the spark to life. He sat back on his heels, watching the fire grow. “We are far enough from the main road that we will not bring curious gazes from bored passengers. We shall appear as a husband and wife taking a reprieve from travel.”

*Husband and wife?* She had long ago determined she would never marry for any reason except for love . . . a preference no one seemed to understand or respect. She had flirted with gentlemen in the past, of course, but never in earnestness after her writing began to sell. Some ladies had the good fortune to be heiresses and therefore had many choices in a husband. She had few, and poor ones at that. After her stepbrother’s first few attempts to match her, she’d decided it was up to her to make her own fortune in life, saving her from the humility of a husband who did not love her. Her family had taken matters into their hands after her apathetic response to callers, which was when they’d

selected the horrid Sir Josiah, who was worthy due to his rank alone. *Thank the Lord I am spared from that cad.*

She gritted her teeth, forcing her countenance to remain smooth. She had to wait only until Bash fell asleep before she made her move.

He spread out a thin blanket beside the fire. "Would you like to rest on the blanket?"

"I'm fine where I am, thank you." She planted her feet beside the tree trunk. She felt much more secure with her back to the bark and the metal at her thigh that Tess had secured in a leather harness for protection. It had been impossible to get to while atop the horse. If it came to it, she would defend herself at whatever cost. But despite her fears, she knew Bash would not harm her. This handsome thief held a strange code of honor, and she felt more at ease with him than she did in that public coach . . . *Which is why I need to run as soon as the opportunity presents itself.*

He reached into the saddlebags and withdrew a loaf of bread that he cracked in half. She winced at the stale fare. He tossed her a half as he sprawled on the blanket, his hand behind his head.

Even if he was a thief, he possessed a thoughtful heart to feed her. She rapped her knuckles against it. He may as well have handed her a branch to nibble on.

He grimaced as he bit into it. "If you imagine it is toast, it isn't so bad."

She chewed at the edges. "And if you close your eyes, I have no doubt butter would appear on it as well." She laughed and surrendered the endeavor after a few bites that endangered her perfect teeth. She tossed the bread back to him and dusted off her hands. "What enticed you to a life of thieving?"

He tucked the bread back into the bag and returned to relaxing, eyes closed. "I did not start out to thief. I wished to lead a noble life, one filled with purpose as a knight of the Crown."

If she had been eating, she would have choked. "Yet here you are—a highwayman is about as far as you can get from a knight."

"Here I am. However, I do intend to remain noble." His thick lashes

flickered open. "You need not fear on my account. You are safer with me than that Sir Thomas."

"Forgive me if I do not believe you." She had pushed out the words she thought he expected. It had to be the lack of food that was making this highwayman seem more noble than the fleshy, all too inquisitive Sir Thomas.

At a sharp cough, they both started. Three children watched them from the trees. They were clean, but their clothes hung on their thin frames, as if they had not eaten in days. Their eyes widened at his mask.

He slowly rolled to sitting and lifted both his hands. "You have nothing to fear from me," he repeated to them. He reached into his pocket and tossed them each a crown, no doubt from Sir Thomas's purse. "Fetch us four loaves and a hunk of cheese at the village. If you do and remain silent about our presence here, you may keep the remaining amount along with a guinea in my thanks."

They nodded, eagerness and ravenous hunger making their eyes wild as they scampered through the forest to do his bidding.

"You are giving them the money?" Vivienne crossed her arms, her golden braid spilling over one shoulder. "Or are you so cruel as to give them hope and then rob them of it the moment they return? It does not do you well to take advantage of the desperate, even if you are only a common highwayman."

"I am neither cruel nor common. As I told you, I am a man of honor, whether you believe me or not."

"Time will tell. But if you deceive these children, you are deceiving yourself." She slunk down to the base of the tree and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep but waiting for his steady breathing to alert her.

It seemed to take forever until she was confident, judging from his heavy breathing, that he was asleep. She rose, keeping her attention on him all the while. She stepped over the tree roots and bolted into the woods, not caring where it took her, as long as she was away from him. She pumped her arms, her side burning. She stretched her legs, imagining she was at that darling country cottage outside of Bath where no rules of etiquette applied—where she had spent her June months

running through the woods or driving her pony cart across the green, as her father cared little for rules regarding what was too boyish for a girl to do while he was yet unmarried and only wanted to let a cottage and fish during the end of the busy season in Bath.

“My lady!”

She bit back a cry and ran faster, her hair pulling loose and drifting behind her in a torrential cloud of tangles. She spied a fallen log in her direct path. She could do it. She sprang and leapt over the log, her foot landing on a curled adder. It hissed, and she couldn’t keep her scream inside as it lunged at her, fangs bared, aiming for her calf as a blade flipped through the air and pinned it to the ground.

Bash balanced on the log, panting. He bent and withdrew another knife from his boot and flicked it, ending the threat.

Trembling, she turned her eyes from the blood and lurched back. She twisted to catch herself. Her knee struck a root, the sudden, sharp pain bringing a bout of nausea. She closed her eyes against the stars lining her vision and against the throbbing. She felt herself caught in strong and, oddly, comforting arms.

“It’s well. The snake is dead, my lady.”

She put pressure on her knee, gasping from the agony. *How on earth am I to escape now?* His hand gripped her elbow. Her lashes fluttered open. The concern in his eyes touched her even though he had been the reason for her running through the woods.

“You’re hurt.”

“I only need a moment to collect myself and breathe through the pain.” She shrugged him off and took a step, stumbling.

“You cannot possibly walk all the way back to camp on an injured knee.” He swept her into his arms, the action drawing her arms about his neck. Realizing protesting against her captor turned hero would do little good, she rested her head on his broad shoulder and huffed a bracing breath. *Of course he smells divine even after a race through the woods.* She groaned.

“Does it hurt that bad? You may need to wrap it. I would do it myself, but I think you would consider it a grave impertinence.”

"I would indeed, but if you have something I can use, I'll bandage it, because there's a little blood seeping through my once-favorite gown. I fear the only way to save my gown now is to burn it."

He cradled her until they reached the fire, and even then he held her as she trembled, slowly releasing her to rest on the blanket while he rummaged through his bags to retrieve a rolled length of gauze. He tossed it to her, turning his back to her. "You can either rip the bandage with your teeth, or I will cut the ends with my knife, as I cannot trust you with a weapon, given our first conversation."

"I shall see to it." She had no choice but to lift her skirts above her right knee, gritting her teeth against the gash. The root had torn through her stocking, and bits of dirt clung to the wound. She would need to have it cleaned soon, but for now she wrapped the gauze about it, using Tess's knife to slice off the edge. She returned the knife and her gown to rights.

She studied the man's strong back, attempting to put it to memory. The moment she had her journal, she would take down his likeness from all angles. He would be behind bars before spending a copper of her money. But it would be a pity for the handsome, noble thief to rot in some cell. She sighed. He should have thought of that before turning to a life of crime. "You may turn now."

He sank down at the base of a tree and crossed his arms and legs. "As you are unable to hobble away, I shall take this opportunity to sleep."

"And while you sleep, may I entertain myself with writing in my diary?" She widened her eyes, hoping to convey an innocent look. "With my knee injured, you can sleep in peace if I am entertained and, therefore, quiet."

His lips quirked in a half smile. "I shall not deprive a maiden of such an innocent pastime." He reached into his vest and lifted out her precious leather-bound notebook.

Her heart pounded as he flipped it open to the first page. "No! How dare you read my private—"

"Belonging to Evie." He grinned. "At last I may call you anything

but ‘my lady.’” He brought it over to her with her stub of a pencil. “Write favorably of me, Miss Evie.”

“No one calls me that anymore. That was what my father called me.” She frowned and snatched them away from him. “To you, I preferred being called ‘my lady.’” She flipped her book open to the first blank page and did not wait for him to return to the tree before writing furiously away. The moment he was asleep, she would sketch him. She scribbled, the story taking her away until at last she heard his deepened breathing. She flipped the page and worked on sketching what she imagined to be his fine Grecian nose, followed by a sharp jawline that she was certain he possessed, and his bright eyes. She was just adding the tiny flecks to them when rustling leaves woke him. She snapped the book shut.

The children returned, each carrying something—a loaf, a jug, a wedge of cheese, and some muffins.

He stirred, smiling as he awoke to the fare. “Well done, my friends. What wonderful treats you have brought us.” He tossed them each another coin that they caught with grimy hands, their grins spreading.

Her jaw nearly dropped that he kept his word.

“Go with God, and tell no one where you found the gold. Better yet, hide it and take out only a small sum at a time, saving the guinea for last.”

They scattered into the woods, as if frightened he would change his mind, and she did not blame them. Bash sat atop her blanket, tore the loaf, and offered her a piece. It was still warm and possessed a lovely crunch when she squeezed it. She inhaled it. She had not eaten since beginning this misadventure.

“Why is no one looking for you?” Bash asked as he cut off a piece of cheese and handed it to her, their fingers brushing.

“Why would you assume that?” She stuffed cheese into her mouth to gain enough time to formulate a question of her own.

“In our time together, you have not spoken of your family.” He popped in a bite of cheese. “Or threatened me with a relative seeking revenge on your behalf, or even an offer of a ransom.”



Seeing his kindness with the children had shifted something in her heart toward this man. He did follow a code, and he had never touched her in a way that caused her to fear. When he'd saved her from that adder, she had felt wholly safe for the first time in years. The ones who were supposed to love her, protect her, only wanted things from her—massive things, like marrying an unfaithful potato of a man.

For years, she had been her nephews' governess without pay, and now that they were finally old enough to be sent to school, she was no longer of use to the family. The first thing they did was send her a note and present her with an engagement to Sir Josiah, furthering her step-brother's objectives while crippling any hope of escape. Would it be wrong to trust this noble highwayman with the truth? She swallowed her mouthful. What did she have to lose?

"Because I am reckless and desperate."

His brows rose, obviously not expecting her honesty.

"I'm running from a marriage that would only benefit my step-brother."

He blinked, and if she wasn't looking so closely, she might have missed the chastened expression beneath his mask.

"And here I've taken your funds."

"Feeling guilty? I'll happily take my funds back." She flipped open her hand and wiggled her fingers. "With interest for the trouble I've been put through, please."

He laughed. "I can only afford to be honorable in my treatment of you—otherwise, the other highwaymen might take away my club membership to the Highwaymen's Guild."