

LADY SCANDAL

by

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Romantic Times Top Pick - 4½ Stars

Romantic Times Bookclub Nominated "Best Regency" 2004

For Uncle Bert & Aunt Barb,
who taught me how to shoot a flintlock and ride side saddle.

CHAPTER ONE

She had not thought of him in ages, so why had his memory returned tonight? Alexandria frowned. Had it been Josephine's insistence on dredging up stories from when she had been young and ridiculously romantic? Or perhaps it had been watching Diana flirt with the young—and utterly ineligible—Monsieur Brenton? Marsett had been just so ineligible—and just so charming.

But she would not think of him again tonight. She had other worries to fret over.

Still, she stared out the carriage window at the endless darkness that lay beyond the shallow, yellow glow of the lantern, at the glisten of raindrops on glass. And she thought of another night such as this, in another carriage, in what almost seemed another life.

Bad weather making old injuries ache.

He was an old injury. Old and one she had thought forgotten. But tonight as the carriage rocked, she remembered too well that strong, angular face, the unruly brown hair, the smolder of dark brown eyes. And the hot betrayal that had glittered in those eyes the last time she had seen him.

She had almost given up everything for him. Almost. And the old anger flared, still rankling for his having forced her into the worst moment of her life. Why had he not been able to understand?

And why did you not come back? Why did you never keep that promise?

But why would he? He must hate her now. She knew that.

The regret trembled inside her again, not as strong as it once had, but still there, along with the anxiety. Had she made the right choice? What else could she have done? She had had Jules to consider. Bitterness tugged at her, a weight in her chest. She fought it back, willing it away, determined that it would drag no more futile tears.

But still she thought of him.

Where would he be tonight? At a gaming table? In another woman's arms. He had always

loved excitement. Did he still? Was his hair as dark and lush, or had those silky strands thinned, or acquired touches of silver as now threaded her brown curls? Would he still have that broad chest and those muscles that had rippled under her touch and that smooth skin, so warm and....

"You are very quiet, Aunt."

Blinking and pulling in a breath, Alexandria turned away from the darkness outside the carriage. The lanterns spilled a faint glow into the luxurious gloom of the coach, outlining swaying curtains, the plush upholstery, and her niece's delicate profile.

They ought to have been back in Paris by now. It was only a few hours from the duke's Chateau d'Esclimont. But a horse had thrown a shoe, and then the rain had started, turning the road into mud that dragged at the carriage wheels.

Alexandria forced a smile, but realized that Diana would not see it—all she could see of her niece was the glint of her golden curls and the white oval of her face. Years of practice at hiding her feelings, however, kept her voice utterly calm. "I am just longing for a hot cup of tea."

Such a lie. What she longed for had nothing to do with tea. She scowled at her weakness.

Diana's gloved hand, almost ethereally pale in white kid, reached out from the darkness of her traveling cloak to grip Alexandria's. "It cannot be much further. Look, you can see the lights of Paris already."

Alexandria's face relaxed. How like her niece to be the one to try and reassure. She leaned across the leather-covered seat to glance out the window. Lights did glint though the gloom—the flambeaus of the great houses, lanterns for the scandalous *Palais Royal* and the *Comédie Française*; the entertainment of Paris did not stop for weather nor for much else it seemed. Not even with war threatening again.

Alexandria squeezed her niece's hand and she leaned back, the leather squeaking under her. Their plans had been to stay another month in Paris before returning to England, but the duke's cautions had changed everything.

"You should leave France," Josephine's husband had said, his English accented heavily and his tone grim. Josephine had wrinkled her nose as she made a noise that could only sound elegant coming from a Frenchwoman. "Really, Guy—how rude to tell my friends to go."

He had frowned at her, a sober, older gentleman, his thin face and thinning hair making him look more dour than usual. "Less rude than if they should be here when the battles start again. And they will. This peace cannot last—not with England refusing to leave Malta. Not with—"

He broke off, his mouth pulling down, as if he had had to stop himself from saying something unwise, such as to criticize the ambitious First Consul Bonaparte.

Josephine waved away his words, her plump hand fluttering and her jewels flashing. "War...war...you have been too long in the military, *mon trésor*. Everyone muttered the same in March when Bonaparte accused Lord Whitworth of forcing us into breaking the peace. But nothing happened, now did it?"

"Whitworth has left France. Word came today. It cannot be good that the British Ambassador leaves so sudden."

Josephine had frowned. But a moment later she laughed and demanded that he not ruin her house party by troubling her English friends.

He already had.

Alexandria knew to give his warning added weight. The Duke of Laval had survived the bloody Revolution, saved from his country's anti-aristocratic insanity by his military titles and success. With Bonaparte now ruling France, the duke no longer needed to call himself citizen—Bonaparte had done away with that and much else from the Revolution. And gossip held that

Laval would soon be a Marshal of France. If such a highly placed man thought hostilities would come again, Alexandria knew enough to listen.

Perhaps that was why the anxiety, the troubling regrets had returned. She might have made mistakes with her own life, but she would not make them with her brother's only daughter.

Now wistful disappointment tinged Diana's voice as she asked, "Are you certain we cannot at least stay until after Madam Avill's ball? I am still due a gown from Celeste's for it, and...and...."

"And there is a certain young man you hoped to see again at Madam Avill's?" Alexandria asked, unable to resist teasing.

"Oh, that is nothing serious. You know that, only—well, isn't Monsieur Brenton just the most ravishing gentleman you have ever met? And he does dance divinely, and I did promise him one dance for Madam Avill's."

He was not the most ravishing gentleman Alexandria had met—he seemed young, absurdly so. However, she knew the sound of youthful infatuation. She also knew the importance of allowing such sparks to burn out so that they left warm memories and not bitter laments.

But she could not ignore Laval's warnings.

Frowning, she tried to make the right choice. Would a few days matter? That would allow a more organized departure—and she could write to Frederick to let him know she would be bringing Diana to London, not to his Surrey estate as they had arranged. But what if she judged wrong? So many others had already left France.

Well, she knew the lack of wisdom in making any decision by moonlight. "We can discuss it in the morning," she allowed.

Diana's hand clutched hers. "Oh, thank you, Aunt Ali."

"I said discuss—and I mean only that."

"Of course, Aunt."

Diana sounded dutiful. She also sounded confident of the outcome.

Leaning back in the coach, Alexandria shook her head. She indulged the girl. Too much, perhaps. But she had only ever had Jules—her independent, bookish son, now up at Oxford. And girls, she had learned from Diana, were ever so much more fun.

By the time they reached the cobbled streets of Paris, Alexandria's longing for tea had become genuine. So had her hunger for a hot meal and a seat that did not sway.

They entered the city through the northern gate, skirting the village of Montmartre and its steep hill. The narrow cobbled streets had hardly been changed, Alexandria thought, by revolution or the centuries. Bonaparte talked of building wide new avenues, but parts of Paris echoed back to its ancient roots, with its winding lanes, barely wide enough for a cart, let alone a carriage. A decade ago, the French queen and king had been bundled into such carts and dragged by the mob to the guillotine. Had they been carried along this very road?

Alexandria shivered. She hoped not.

But blood no longer ran in the gutters. For all his faults of ambition, Bonaparte had at least brought order to France. And he had made peace with England just over a year ago, leaving the door open for so many English to come again to Paris. It had been a delight to bring Diana, and such a relief to escape her own monotonous life.

They had taken a small house for their visit—with the jointure left to her, she could afford to indulge her whims these days. But even after two months in Paris, she recognized few landmarks. It was only when the coach stopped and the door opened and she glanced out that she knew they had arrived at 37 Rue Cambon. They were home.

The footman helped her from the carriage, and she glanced up at the house, a little surprised to see it dark and the front door standing ajar. Fenwick was not the sort to shirk his duties. So where was her butler? Why were there not lamps lit beside the steps? Why did no one hurry from the house with umbrellas and see to their luggage?

With a frown, Alexandria glanced around her.

The rain had lightened to a mist, slicking the streets and leaving the sky dark. The buildings seemed to huddle close, their stucco walls pale in the dim light and their roofs disappearing into darkness. Pulling the hood of her traveling cloak over her bonnet—a silly little velvet one she had bought just for the visit to *Chateau d'Esclimont*—Alexandria hurried up the steps. Her traveling boots slapped against the puddles left by the rain. Pushing open the heavy door to the house, she stepped inside and stopped. Shock chilled her skin.

"What in heaven's—"

She broke off the words, the air tight in her chest. Irritation sharpened in her, and chilled into fear.

Flowers lay strewn across the floor as if emptied from the vases that had once held them. She glanced around the hall looking for those vases and saw only unsettling disorder. A chair lay on its side. The wire from the picture rail told of a painting taken away.

A soft voice at her side pulled her attention from the disaster in the room. "Oh, my! What happened?"

Alexandria turned. She parted her lips to reply—only what did she say to her niece?

And then the sound of a woman's soft sobbing reached her, chilling her utterly.

#

He was lucky not to be dead. Pain, sharp and raw, burned in his side. He cursed in guttural French, and in English, the hard Anglo-Saxon sounds far more satisfying. He kept the curses to a low mutter, however, wary of giving himself away. Three hours ago he had been in a warm bed with an equally warm armful of woman. A general's wife in need of consolation for a husband who neglected his duties to her. But he had said the wrong thing.

Never call one woman by another woman's name.

He knew that law of dalliance. But he'd had another woman too much in his thoughts of late—*merde*, why had he ever listened to the gossip? Why had he stayed after hearing her name mentioned?

It was, of course, only curiosity. He had not thought her the sort to ever leave her cozy home. But she had apparently come to Paris, along with so many other English. And with a niece, in tow. A beautiful girl, according to those who had met her. Golden hair, soft blue eyes, and oh-so-English alabaster skin. He had smiled and nodded at the descriptions, but his mind had filled with brown, softly curling hair that had once twined around his fingers. He had remembered gray eyes, and slanting, light brown eyebrows that tipped up in the center when a smile lifted her wide mouth. And those slender curves and pert breasts that fit so well into his hand...rather too like Madam D'Aeth's.

Which was why he had used that once-forgotten name instead of Madam's.

Stiffening, she had glared at him.

And she had screamed. Screamed rape and bloody murder.

He'd had time to grab for his breeches and his coat. He left his cravat and fled. He had almost been over the garden wall when the ball from the musket caught him, scrapping across

skin and muscle and rib as it etched a groove in his side. He had felt nothing more than a sting at the time. But as he ran, half stumbling as he struggled into his clothes, the pain began to burn.

That's what he got for bedding the wife of a military man. Other households had servants, not guards with muskets. And now he had best move on before they backtracked to pick up his trail—thank God for the rain and the dark night.

Wincing, he eased his palm from his side. Sticky wetness clung to his shirt and his fingers. Still bleeding. Damn! He pressed his hand to his side and his back to the wall.

He had found temporary shelter in an alley off the Rue de Turenne, far too close to the D'Aeth's mansion. And uncomfortably near the Bastille with its stench of prisoners kept behind stone walls and iron bars. A sign that perhaps he ought to quit Paris—and perhaps even France. Bonaparte's generals carried far too much power, and no one would question the death—or imprisonment—of one such as him.

But where to next?

Eyes shut, Paxten leaned against the wall, soul weary, body aching. Where could he go? Back to Italy? To Venice perhaps, and the contessa with the lazy eyes and the jealous streak? That seemed unwise. To the Americas, or to India? He had not been either place yet, but that meant a long ocean voyage. An uncomfortable one, too, with his funds so low.

Boot heels on cobblestones clattered near to him. Voices rose and receded, taking their anger with them. Pushing off from the wall, he pulled in a breath and winced at the searing pain. Shallow breaths only. He needed something to bind the wound, to stop the bleeding. And a decent cognac to dull the aches.

Could he make it back to his rooms? It was not far to the Place des Vosges where he had taken rooms—on a whim to stay near the square where knights once jostled to honor Anne of Austria's marriage to a French king. But if Madam had betrayed his identity to the guards, as well as his presence in her boudoir, would it be safe?

With a grimace, Paxten pushed away from the wall and staggered into the street, his legs unsteady and his head light. God, how much had he bled?

He tried to weigh his options. He had a few coins in his coat pockets—a good thing he had won tonight at the tables. Did he have enough to reach the border? Perhaps, but not in style. And there was the matter of transportation after that—and lodging. He would also need new clothes. He hated to leave his current ones—he had only recently had most of them made—but he had done that before. His mouth twisted. What, after all, did a man such as him own that could be of value? No, he had nothing to leave behind. He never did.

That might have been different, if...

The voice, rough and using French from the streets, came out of the darkness and broke into his thoughts, "You there—halt!"

Spinning on his heel, Paxten sprinted in the opposite direction up the Rue de Turenne, his hand pressed to his side and regrets for the past cast aside in preference for surviving the immediate present.

#

Alexandria traced the sobs to the dining room. The heavy chairs and the dark mahogany table had been left in the high-ceilinged room, but the candelabras and the candles had been taken and the walls had been stripped of paintings and wall sconces. The sobbing seemed to come from under the table.

Bending down, Alexandria glimpsed a white apron over a rocking form. "What in heaven are you doing there? Come out at once—oh, for pity's sake, do stop that crying. Diana, can you say something in French to have her come out?"

Standing again, Alexandria moved to a side table to search for spare candles and flint. Diana muttered something to the maid, the words hesitant but the accent true. Alexandria pressed her lips tight—why had she never paid any heed to her governess and her French lessons?

She found the stub of one half-burnt taper, struggled with the flint pulled from a drawer, and finally struck a spark. Flame trembled to life as the wick caught fire. Lifting the candle, Alexandria bent to study the maid.

The woman crouched under the table, her knees pulled up to her chin. She had taken her apron away from her face. Fear had left her skin pale and her eyes enormous. Alexandria recognized Marie-Jeanne as one of the kitchen maids, a skinny girl of fifteen or so. A sweet girl, but rather slow.

"Well, why is she not coming out?" Alexandria demanded, glancing at Diana.

The young woman straightened, worry darkening her blue eyes. "She is afraid the guard will return."

"Guard? Why ever would they come in the first place?"

In answer to the questions a spurt of rapid French flowed from Marie-Jeanne. Alexandria bent to look under the table again. "You must come out—*tu viens ici*."

Alexandria noticed Diana wincing at such mangled French, but the maid seemed at least to recognize the voice of authority, if not the words, for she edged from under the table.

Climbing to her feet, she stared about her, clutching the white apron tied over her dark high-waisted dress and looking rather like a rabbit who intended to bolt for her hole at the first breath of trouble.

Alexandria gave the candle to her niece and said, "Now, let us have an explanation, if you please, Marie-Jeanne. Only in English. *Parle anglais, s'il vous plaît*."

A rapid flow of French answered, and Alexandria struggled to hold her impatience with the girl. She recognized only a few words—something about English, and Bonaparte's name came into it. Ruthlessly interrupting, Alexandria said, "But where is everyone? Diana, see if you can get some answers. I am going to make a quick tour of the house."

Taking the candle with her, she left Diana with the maid, who had started babbling again in French.

In the front hall, the candle flickered in a draft from the door and Alexandria glanced to where the footmen now stood—Frenchmen also, for she had left her staff in charge of the stables here. They stood one on each side of a trunk, staring about with worried frowns.

"Never mind the luggage. I want you to search the house to see if anyone else is here," she ordered. The footmen glanced at each other and Alexandria added, "*Où est*—" she broke off, struggling for the word to add with "Where is," and she added with a wave of her hand, "everyone?"

Understanding seemed to flicker in their eyes, for they put down the trunk, bowed and set off to search the downstairs rooms.

Lifting her skirts, Alexandria went up the stairs. Gradually, the sounds of the maid's babbling and the footmen's heavy steps faded and the house seemed to fill with silence. Her throat tightened. She had never been in any house so empty—at the least, there were always servants nearby.

Her kid boots echoed loudly on the floor. The faint aroma of bees wax wafted up from the

candle. Damp, icy cold hung in the hall.

She had no need to open doors—all stood ajar. Each room she glanced into told the same story—wild disorder, a violent search, insulting disregard for privacy or ownership. Clothing had been pulled from wardrobes and stolen away. Anything that could be carried, in fact, seemed to have been taken; even the linens from the beds had been stripped and looted.

Anger flared in her, growing stronger with each defilement she glimpsed. Who could have done such a thing? And why had not her servants, both those from England as well as the Parisians she had hired, not been here to prevent it?

At last she stopped at her own bedroom and glanced inside.

She had brought her jewels and her cosmetics with her to the château, but the clothes she had left behind were now gone. The large maple wardrobe stood open and empty. The room had been stripped of its velvet curtains and even of the carpet. The mattress had been slashed and feathers pulled out, as if someone had been searching for hidden items.

Glimpsing a fragment of something white on the bare wood, Alexandria moved into the room, her cloak, dress and petticoats rustling. Bending down, she picked up a fragment from a china figurine. It had been a favorite—a rearing white horse, its mane flaring out and one leg lifted as if celebrating its freedom. She had treasured that figurine. For being a symbol of something she had never had.

Her fist closed on all that remained—the lone leg.

Such senseless vandalism!

She would lodge a complaint at once with the authorities. The British Ambassador would....

Would do nothing, she realized. Lord Whitworth no longer resided in France. He could not listen to her complaints and demand results from Bonaparte's government.

A chill swept over her skin.

Turning, Alexandria left the room and ran down the stairs, the candle flickering as she hurried.

She found the maid and Diana in the main hall. Marie-Jeanne now sat on the large trunk that had been brought in by the footmen. Her eyes still seemed huge, and in the dim light her skin shone unnaturally pale, but she at least seemed to have lost that edge of hysteria for she no longer babbled.

Diana turned to Alexandria, and Alexandria's heart tightened at the hint of fear in her niece's eyes. "What is it?"

Diana wet her lips and answered, "Marie-Jeanne—she says...she says that England has declared war on France. Bonaparte has ordered the arrest of all English citizens. The soldiers who came here—they came for us."

CHAPTER TWO

"That is preposterous!" Alexandria said. But she glanced around her again and held back the rest of her protests. She had been about to say that not even Bonaparte could be so uncivilized as to order the arrest of women and children, but the man obviously allowed his troops to behave in this outrageous fashion toward civilians.

In the faint glow from the single flickering candle, she turned to stare at her niece, her thoughts as crystalline as the drops of the chandelier that hung over them in the hall. With the clarity came the sharp bite of guilt, like the clamp of teeth at her throat. She ought to have taken Diana back to England months ago, when rumors of diplomatic strain first began. Her instincts

had urged caution. But she had spent so long ignoring her feelings, pushing them away, that she had done the same as she always did. She had permitted herself to be persuaded.

Heavens, how many times she had allowed that?

Lips pressed tight, she straightened. A drop of wax slid from the candle onto her glove, warming her skin through the thin leather. She ignored it. The situation required level-headed control, not hand wringing over a past that could not be changed.

Voice clipped, she asked, "When did the guards arrive? And where is everyone now?"

Turning to the maid, Diana repeated the questions in French. Marie-Jeanne returned hesitant answers, the sobs gone from her voice, but her tone uncertain, as if she feared the reaction that her words might bring.

Diana listened, nodding, smiling at the girl in encouragement. She had put back the hood of her traveling cloak and the candlelight glistened on her golden curls. Turning to her aunt, she said, "Poor thing. She has no idea how long she hid under the table. It seems that the French guard burst in without even knocking just as the staff had begun dinner preparations for a meal for our return. She said that the man in command—a sergeant—seemed to think the butler was lying about our not being here and that no Englishman lived with us. He questioned everyone, and when he did not get answers he liked, he ordered the house ransacked and those who were English arrested. Everything fell into a panic then. Some fled, or at least she thinks they did. She hid under the table, so they would not drag her away. She had an aunt who worked for a count and was sent to the guillotine during the Revolution."

Alexandria glanced at the maid—no wonder the girl had hidden herself. Remorse stirred in her for Fenwick and the other servants she had brought with her—they had been in her care and she had failed them.

The footmen came back into the hall, lifting empty hands as if to show the lack of anyone else in the house. Diana began to untie the strings to her cloak, and that set the maid into a new round of nearly hysterical French. "*Non. Non, mademoiselle!*"

An outpouring of protests followed this, and when the maid seemed to run down, Alexandria asked, "What has upset her now?"

Diana turned from comforting Marie-Jeanne. "She seems to think the soldiers will come back—that it is not safe and we ought to leave at once."

"I doubt they will return tonight—we cannot be of that much interest, and I imagine they have their hands full with other English visitors." Alexandria frowned. Had the Fairchilds left Paris in time, or had they and their English staff been taken up? She had so liked plump and chatty Mary Fairchild. And what of the Aldersons? And the Bentleys? And a dozen others whom she had met?

She pushed aside such worries. What mattered now was to see Diana out of this. The last outbreak of hostilities had dragged on for nearly a decade. She could not risk that Diana might spend who knew how many years of her youth trapped as a prisoner of war. And she did not trust that Bonaparte would only arrest Englishmen and allow women passage home, nor that he would give his prisoners the respect due their station.

The one glimpse she had had of the man, actually, had given her the impression of a dynamic personality, but also of a man unconcerned with anyone other than himself. She certainly knew far too much about such gentleman.

Once Diana was safe, however, she could see to her responsibilities to her servants who had been arrested. For now, all that mattered was her niece.

Turning she gave a last look at the Paris house. She had brought not just her staff with her

but her china, and the good linen from home, the ones embroidered with the Sandal crest of interwoven holly and oak leaves. And she had brought some of her favorite paintings and furnishings, for she had seen no reason not to travel in comfort. Now, what had not been taken already must be left behind for other thieves. But she had her jewel case in the coach—and they had the clothing that they had taken to the château. Still, they had traveled light for it had been but a short visit.

She would hope it would also be a fast trip to the coast.

Focusing on plans helped her ignore the faint edge of fear that shivered on her skin.

Calais gave the shortest crossing of the channel, but Dieppe lay closer to Paris. Or they could choose a port between and make for Boulogne. But first priority must be to leave Paris—if they could.

Turning her back on the nearly-empty house, she ordered, "Diana, tell Marie-Jeanne to go to the coach. We leave at once. You two, take the trunk back to the carriage—oh, they are giving me that blank look again. Diana, dear, see if you can make them understand that we are leaving Paris again."

"Do we return to the Chateau d'Esclimont?" Diana asked.

Alexandria shook her head. "Laval is a military man, and if orders are now indeed that all English must be detained, we cannot put him in the position of having to arrest his guests. So we shall leave as we arrived tonight—through the north gate, past Montmartre—and then start for the coast."

And they might also be better off burning their passport papers and relying more on Diana's beauty and a good amount of bribery, she thought. She kept such plans to herself. But, of all the absurd things, her stomach rumbled, protesting the lack of a regular dinner. She pressed a hand to it. What a bother this was—why must these Frenchmen make everything into a grand production? In England, before such an action as this occurred, the word would have gone out through unofficial channels so that everyone could have a chance to leave in proper order. Bonaparte, it seemed, had to make this into a theatrical display of his power. Bother the man!

Diana finished relaying the orders in French. The footmen moved forward to take the trunk back outside to the waiting coach—they would have to travel slow to make the team last, Alexandria decided. She wanted as few stops as possible to lessen the risk that they might be exposed as English visitors and arrested. The maid hurried out behind the trunk, glancing to either side as if she expected soldiers to jump from the shadows.

After snuffing her candle, Alexandria came to her niece's side and put a comforting arm around her. "Do not worry—I shall see you safe home."

"Worry?" Diana turned bright eyes to her aunt. "Why this is the most exciting thing to ever happen! Just think—we are being swept up by history. We are in the very center of a critical juncture of fate—and we are seeing it all unfold before us. Are you certain we could not stay—perhaps there is something we could do to find Fenwick and the others and free them?"

Frowning, Alexandria took her niece's arm and steered her to the door. "What we can do is see ourselves safe—and then I shall see if I cannot at least ransom my staff through whatever channels remain open. This is all the adventure I want, thank you."

With four already fatigued horses they made slow time retracing their route from the city. As the carriage wheels rumbled along the ancient, narrow streets, Alexandria noticed the strained silence that filled the coach. Marie-Jeanne huddled in a corner, while Diana sat on the edge of her seat, peering out the window and obviously hoping for more excitement than was wise.

Alexandria battled her remorse. Would Fenwick and the others be decently housed and fed?

She could not imagine they would end in the dungeons of the Bastille. But what could she do for them from England? Would she even be able to get Diana home again—or would they end up imprisoned with their staff?

Pushing such thoughts away, she tried to focus on making lists of things to do. But the trick that had served her well in past years failed now.

At the city gates, the guards seemed suspicious to see a coach which had passed through in the other direction only an hour ago. Alexandria found her lack of mastery in the country's language frustrating, but Diana smiled, fluttered her eyelashes and—from what Alexandria could make out from the French she understood—invented a story of sudden illness in the family.

The guards seemed reluctant to accept such a story, but after staring into the coach—which left poor Marie-Jeanne pale faced and even more withdrawn—and muttering with each other in low voices, a guard lifted the gate and waved them through.

Alexandria let out a breath. But it still seemed a very long way to the Channel. She was glad now that they traveled in a black coach without the Sandal crest upon its doors. She had borrowed the carriage from her brother, for he had only just bought it and she had appreciated the modern steel springs and the touches of luxury he had bought. If their luck held, his coach and his daughter would be back with him within the week.

Not two miles later, their luck ran out.

#

Providence arrived in the form of a carriage and pair.

His side aching, Paxten ran for the slow-moving vehicle. No footman stood up behind the coach, so he caught one of the handholds and swung himself up on the back step. He clung to the swaying coach, wondering how far it might take him. The steady clop of hooves replaced that of booted feet on the cobblestone. The mist—not so heavy as to soak him, but enough to dampen his hair and chill his face and hands—left him wishing for a heavy cloak at the least.

Unfortunately, the carriage did not go far.

Just the other side of the *Fontaine des Innocents*, the ancient vehicle turned a corner and slowed. Not wanting to wait until it halted—he did not need questions about how he came to be hanging on in place of any footman—Paxten jumped off. Turning up the collar of his coat, he put his head down and started back towards the fountain.

His stride long, his side aching, he turned away from the Marais district—and General D'Aeth's mansion. He was not far from the Palais Royal, that den of sin and debauchery which housed prostitutes, gambling hells, and every other known vice. Or at least all the vices he knew. But he did not intend to stay and partake.

The diversions of the Palais Royal were just starting—the night, and the hours for sin, had barely begun. Even so, a few gentlemen already the worse for too much drink staggered from the once-royal buildings.

Paxten watched them, and settled on one portly fellow—the one who staggered the most. Following the man to the stables in the mews behind the building, Paxten waited for his chance. The smell of straw and horse filled the damp air. A thin, ragged stable boy led the portly man's horse—a sway-backed gray—to him and helped the man into the saddle with a good deal of grunting. Paxten waited in the shadows.

Sure enough, not two doors down the street, the fellow sagged as Paxten had hoped. The horse stopped and the portly man slid from the saddle and into the gutter.

With a glance behind him, Paxten slipped from the shadows and slid the reins from the drunkard's loosened fingers. He started to put his foot in the iron stirrup, but glanced back at the man who lay passed out in the street. What if a carriage passed this way, traveling at too fast a speed to see a body lying across the way?

Merde!

Turning from the horse, Paxten looped the reins over his arm, bent and grabbed the fellow by the shoulders of his coat. He dragged the fellow into a doorway, left him propped there. He could not afford to pay the fellow anything for the horse—and the sot would probably only drink it away, he told himself—but he dug out a coin and left it in the man's pocket anyway.

Foot in the stirrup, he swung up, teeth clenched against the burning in his side. Grinning, he urged the horse forward with his heels. That made two commandments he had nearly broken that night—how many more would he strain before the dawn rose?

Giving the horse its head, he allowed it to choose its own path—so long as it was away from the general and Paris he did not care. But he wondered if D'Aeth had alerted the city gates to look for a wounded man who might be seeking escape? If the general had, then one more commandment would need to be broken—to keep his freedom, he would probably have to kill someone.

#

Boots clicking on the marble floor and saber rattling at his side, Captain Giles Taliaris strode away from his meeting with the general. His lieutenant, stationed at the entrance, glanced at him as Taliaris reached the tall, wide doors to General D'Aeth's mansion. The man straightened and snapped a salute. "Orders, sir?"

Taliaris's mouth tightened. He disliked the situation. He disliked his orders. He did not think highly of the general's wife, who flirted with every man she met. However, matters had gone beyond flirtation tonight. The general's honor—and that of his wife—had been tarnished. A half-English dog had taken Madam D'Aeth's coquetry for something more and had attempted to rape her.

"She was nearly hysterical when the guards came to her rescue," the general had said, his silver, military side-whiskers bristling and his plump face reddening. He had clasped his hands behind his back and the gold braid on his elaborate uniform glistened in the candlelight. "She was naked, and—"

He broke off, almost choking on his anger. Taliaris knew better than to say anything. The general's temper had become legend to all who served under him.

The older man ground out, his tone savage, "Find this Marsett. Lisette said he has rooms near here. Find him and show him how we bring such English dogs to heel!"

Taliaris's scowl deepened. Odd that Madam D'Aeth would know where this man had rooms. However, he did not question his orders. He had grown up with a fervor to serve France. His dedication had brought him far, even though many considered him too young, at only twenty, for his rank. But was it not the age of youth? Of change? Did not France need new ideals to make her the foremost of powers?

Yes, and into a nation where women-abusing filth such as this Marsett would not be tolerated.

With a nod to himself, Taliaris gave his orders. He would bring a smile back to his general, and he would avenge the honor of a Frenchwoman who had been badly used.

Lieutenant Paulin's eyes widened as he listened, and he blurted out, "But we are not to blockade the north road as well as all the others?"

Taliaris lifted one corner of his mouth. "To snare a wolf, do you not leave open the door of the trap? We leave one road open—and then we know exactly where he must go. Have horses ready. I want a checkpoint set up a quarter league beyond the gate, and I want to be there when this Marsett shows his face."

With a nod, Paulin hurried away to carry out the orders.

Taliaris glanced back at the D'Aeth mansion, an odd tingle between his shoulder blades and frowning. Still disliking his orders, he strode out of the elegant building. France was again at war with England, which meant that shooting this half-Englishman was nothing more than a patriotic act. So why did his skin prickle?

Pushing back his shoulders, he strode into the dark night. France could not afford soft sons—not if she were to keep her liberty and her power.

For France, he would do what he must.

#

It was cold, but not as cold as the Alps had been when the army of France had crossed them. And tonight's rain had stopped. So Pierre considered himself lucky enough to have drawn this assignment. Leaning against the white plaster wall of a cottage, he wondered what name this tiny village had. The residents had seen the uniforms and wisely bolted doors and shutters. On a raw spring night, Pierre could almost wish himself inside one of these half-dozen snug buildings.

They were not far from the Porte Montmartre, the city gate, he knew, for they had marched up the road. They would probably stand here all night and then they would march back. Ah, well. What else did one do these days? Still, better a soldier than a farmer, as his father had been. The work paid well enough. Or at least, it did most months.

With a sigh, Pierre shifted his musket so he could lean on it. The good days would be soon back again. Of course the marches could be long, but he smiled as he thought of the battlefield—the terror of it, the excitement, and the pleasure after, drinking with comrades, swapping harrowing stories, or—better still—plundering a city that had resisted siege. A soldier could take what he wanted then, be it a woman, drink, or any fancy thing that caught his eye.

Yes, far better to be fighting than standing around with nothing to do but wait.

A drop of rain fell onto Pierre's sun-hardened cheek. He glanced up at the sky before he looked around him, at the empty square and the muddy road. Clouds parted and a moment of silver moonlight turned the village bleak; a half-dozen stone houses crowded together, one of them calling itself a tavern, thought it sold nothing more than bad wine. He knew because he had bought a glass to warm himself.

Twenty-six other soldiers stood in the shadows, like him, and somewhere their lieutenant and captain waited—probably in the tavern with a fire and drink.

They were looking for a man—an injured one. He did not know why, and he did not care. It was enough to have something to do after too long of parading about Paris like toys pulled out for a little boy's amusement.

Another raindrop fell on his face, and Pierre shifted his stance.

At least he had had his dinner. In the field, food could be stale bread that had to be eaten on the march. Now, if only they could catch this man that the captain hunted, perhaps he could find himself a bed and a woman to go in it.

He wondered if the captain was old enough to have even had his first woman. He grinned at the thought, and he almost called out to Henri a crude joke about the captain being too young to do more than suckle at a woman's breast. Six months serving under Taliaris made him think again.

The captain might not be inside the tavern, and might hear such a comment—and he had not looked in a mood to be amused. In fact, whoever they hunted tonight must be an unlucky bastard.

A low rumbling had him glancing up at the sky again, thinking of thunder, but he heard the jingle of harness.

Straightening, he called a soft alert to the others—to Henri and Colmar, and that lazy Anatole. He hefted his musket to the ready.

As others stepped next to him to block the road, his blood quickened, his senses sharpened. He forgot the aches left by too many other battles, by age, by too many nights spent sleeping on the ground, by long marches up and down mountains and across icy rivers. He glanced at Henri and winked. He could hardly wait to be back on a real battlefield again.

The coach slowed as soon as it came into sight of the torches carried by Colmar and Anatole. Pierre lifted his musket, but the driver pulled on the reins, bringing the tired horses to an easy halt. "Too bad," Pierre muttered to Henri.

The other man glanced at him. "What did you expect? You would try to drive through more than two dozen armed men?"

Pierre grinned. He might try. Just to see if he could. Musket lowered, he moved forward with the others to surround the coach. His interest quickened as a pretty blonde leaned out the lowered window to demand, "Why do we stop? Is something wrong?"

At once, the lieutenant stepped forward and opened the carriage door. "Step out, mademoiselle."

For a moment, the girl disappeared back into the coach. Pierre leaned closer to Henri. "Maybe she'll refuse and we'll have to drag her out, eh?"

Henri grumbled an answer about never having such luck. As he did, the carriage door opened and the girl reappeared. She hesitated and the lieutenant barked an order to let down the steps for her. He stared at Pierre as he spoke.

Now, I'm a footman, am I? Pierre kept the complaint to himself. He forgot about it as the girl stepped from the coach and into the torchlight.

A dark cloak covered most of her but parted to show glimpses of a figure still plump with youth. Golden curls flashed from under a bonnet with a curling feather and what looked to be silk ribbon. She had an oval face—a pretty one, Pierre could see in the flickering torchlight, though he could not make out the color of her eyes. But what did they matter. His blood moved even faster.

Another woman stepped out, satin rustling and bringing a faint hint of spiced perfume with her. Taller than the girl, she carried herself with the assurance of experience, and the hard angles of her face put her past any blush of youth, even though the slender figure he could glimpse under her cloak seemed young.

No meat on this one. And she thought too much of herself. She glanced around her, her straight nose up a little. She, too, wore a rich bonnet, and she made him think of the aristos years ago on the way to meet Madam Guillotine. He had been in the Revolutionary Guard back then and had been happy to see those aristos lose their proud heads. Most had had this look—this arrogant tilt to their chins, the slightly raised brows as if faintly insulted. They thought themselves better than everyone, as if they, too, did not have to piss into a chamber pot.

She looked straight at him and he became aware of the stubble on his chin, and the wrinkles in his uniform, and that he smelled of garlic from his dinner, and had not bathed in a week.

He glanced away, looking back into the carriage and seeing one more shadow. "You—out! You heard the lieutenant!" he ordered.

The figure in the coach cringed and Pierre looked at the lieutenant for permission, eager now to give these too-proud women a show of real power. The lieutenant gave a nod, and Pierre leaned into the coach, grabbing for a hold on the shadowy figure and hoping he would pull out the man they sought. Maybe they would even make him a corporal again, eh?

His hand closed over a slim arm and he heard a muffled whimper. He dragged out a small, dark-haired girl.

After the golden beauty, she seemed scrawny—nothing but big eyes and a pale face. A maid, he decided, his mouth pulling down. He let go her arm and rubbed his palm down his trouser leg as she huddled into her dark, woolen cloak. The Revolution had made all of France into citizens—but the old ways crept back; those in power needed to have their boots washed for them. Better to be a farmer even, than a servant.

The lieutenant started barking orders again. "Search the coach. I want every bag opened. You there, driver—step down! And you two at the back as well!"

Pierre did not wait for the driver to come down, but went up after him, thrusting him from his seat. He climbed up to unlash the trunks on the top. The pretty blonde protested, her words shrill, but the older woman stayed oddly silent as they pushed the trunks down to the road and spilled out frothy lace and silken dresses.

Jumping down, Pierre joined the others to paw through the delicate gowns, ignoring the young woman's cries, enjoying himself now. True enough that a man might hide in one of the larger trunks, but only a dwarf could fit in these little ones. He liked the smell of the dainty silks, though. It put him thinking about pawing other things.

A sharp voice cut through the night, snapping Pierre and the others to stiff attention. "What is this?"

Sullen now, his enjoyment gone, Pierre did not look up to meet Captain Taliaris's stare—he knew too well the sound of his captain's displeasure.

CHAPTER THREE

The girl's shrill voice carried to him in the breath of a cold north wind as good as any alarm, and Paxten pulled hard on the reins to stop the plodding gray. He straightened in the saddle, trying to focus his dizzy mind.

Standing in the stirrups, he winced as the pain throbbed in his side, but he glimpsed light flickering in the darkness. From a village? Some sort of local celebration? Only that had not sounded like a woman's cry of delight.

Had someone sprung a trap set for him?

The back of his neck had started to tingle after finding the *Porte de Clichy* and the *Porte de St. Ouen* well guarded, but the *Porte Montmatre* had only a pair of half-asleep sentries. Why should that gate be so easy and the others wrapped tight as a noose? Damn that city for its walls and confounded gates. And damn him for not paying more heed to his instincts.

The same sense that had saved his life during the few months he had tried his hand at being a soldier of fortune, and which had served him equally well during his recent life at the gaming tables, had blared an alarm. Now he glanced again at the countryside. Should he leave the road?

His father had grown up not far from here, but Paxten had spent his youth in England, so what chance did he have in the darkness? Might he run smack into a patrol on the hunt for him?

He settled into the saddle and urged the gray forward, thumping its fat sides with his legs to make it move. He guided the horse off the main road, cutting across a recently ploughed field. The gray slogged through the mud.

As he neared the village, the flickering light resolved into torchlight. Within its glow, he could make out what looked to be a few cottages. And a carriage? Yes, a carriage—he could see the horses shift uneasy in their harness. He glimpsed a flash of fire on metal and reined in the gray. His service for the King of Naples had taught him to recognize the glint of a bayonet.

Soldiers.

A number of them, he judged by the thump of boots he could now hear and the clipped tone of orders being issued. He glanced at the darkness around him. Did others wait nearby, spread out across the countryside?

Merde!

Instinct urged him to turn the gray and find out if the beast had a gallop in it, to leave the road and this village far behind. But he forced himself to take a breath and calculate the odds of this nag being able to outpace mounted cavalry.

Not a bet he wanted to take, he decided.

He might have risked it, if he weren't bleeding and already swaying in the saddle.

An idea formed and he grinned in the darkness. If he could not run, why not see if he could find a safer route? One that might take him under their noses. He had the advantage, after all, in that he knew where they were. But they had not seen him. Could he keep it so?

Swinging out of the saddle, his boots hit the mud with a soft squelch. The world spun and his knees buckled. Pressing his hand to his side, he leaned against the horse to catch his breath. Mother of mercy but he needed to get someplace where he could rest and tend his wound. He would just have to hope his instincts were right about this.

Straightening, he stepped away from the gray. It stood there a moment, staring at him, so he turned its head and slapped its rump to set it ambling back to Paris. Stepping as silently as he could with mud sucking at his boots, he moved towards the village.

#

Furious now, Diana shrieked at the soldiers to stop vandalizing their property. She grabbed her chemise from one thick-set lout and spun to snatch her aunt's jewelry box from another. A sharp voice had the soldiers dropping anything they held—gowns, shawls, bonnets—and snapping to stiff attention.

Rather than stepping forward to pick up their garments, Marie-Jeanne huddled in the background, but Diana caught a muttered word from her aunt. "*Ordure!*"

Diana almost smiled. *Trash*. The word could be applied to the clothes now strewn in the mud, or to these idiots who had ruined their garments. She suspected her aunt intended the latter.

The soldiers stepped back to allow another man to step forward, and Diana turned to him, her anger hot and leaving her French stuttering. "Who is in charge here? Why have we been stopped? This is an outrage—I assure you that my aunt's friend, the Duke of Laval, shall hear about..."

Her words faded as the man stepped fully into the circle of flickering torchlight.

The light turned sun-darkened skin into shadows of bronze. Tall, square faced and broad, he

looked the perfect military man. His dark blue uniform emphasized his wide shoulders. Tall black boots gleamed in the firelight, and the gold braid on his chest flashed. A red dolman swung from his shoulders.

She stared at him. Dark brows angled over deep set eyes. A saber rattled at his side, and he stood with one hand braced on the silver hilt as he glanced around at his men and the disorder they had created.

He glanced at her at last, his stare sharpening. Diana realized she must look ridiculous with her mouth partly open, her bonnet askew, her chemise caught up to her chest, and clutching her aunt's jewel box.

She hid her silk chemise behind her. "Are you in charge of this rabble?"

With a shallow bow, he said, his voice a pleasant tenor that made her wonder if he was younger than she had first thought, "Captain Giles Taliaris at your service, Mademoiselle...?"

His trailing words invited an answer. Ought she give him own name, or did Edgcot sound too English?

Aunt Alexandria solved the problem by stepping forward and muttering from behind a handkerchief, as if she were ill, "I feel unwell."

The handkerchief muffled her aunt's too-English accent, and Diana did the rest, clutching her aunt's swaying form as if she feared an immediate collapse. She turned her best smile on the captain and hoped he might be more stupid than he looked.

"I beg your pardon, Captain, but my aunt, she is not well. I must get her to a doctor in...in Calais."

His stare did not leave her face. "You seem uncertain of your destination."

She started to frown at him, caught herself, and lowered her lashes instead. "Yes, I am so stupid about such things. That is why our driver knows the direction. And I must get my aunt there at once." She looked up, striving for a stricken look. Only she was not much of an actress. She had barely muddled through being Juliet in her aunt's house party last year when they had done Shakespeare's tragedy. This looked to have an equally sad end.

"We fear it is consumption," she said, her voice low.

A few soldiers shuffled away, putting their hands to their mouths, left uneasy by an illness that had no cure and left one coughing up blood and slowly wasting.

The captain, however, only glanced at Diana's aunt, his face expressionless. He looked back at Diana, his stare steady. For a moment, the torchlight shifted and she caught a glimpse of his eyes. Brown eyes—a mix of warm and dark. Shrewd intelligence flashed in the depths.

He knew the truth.

The color drained from her face, leaving her skin colder than the raw spring night warranted. *How did he know they were English?* Had he guessed? Or had she given them away somehow by overplaying her role?

Heart beating fast, she met his stare, her eyes wide and the truth now in her mind, willing him to understand. *We just want to go home. We are no harm to anyone.*

It seemed forever that he stared at her, his dark eyes again shadowed, his stern features revealing nothing of his thoughts. The pulse pounded sluggish in Diana's throat. Once. Twice. Three times. She counted each beat. Would he arrest them now?

Turning sharp, he faced the man who had ordered them from the coach, a short, lean man with pox scars on his cheeks. "The man we want is not here—pack the mademoiselle's and the madam's trunks. They are to go on their way at once."

Glancing at her aunt, Diana let out a long breath. Her aunt seemed to have caught enough of

what was said to have grasped that they were to go. *Aller.*

Diana turned to the captain again. "Thank you," she said, putting all the feeling she could into the words. "*Merci beaucoup.*"

His mouth lifted in the faintest of smiles, and she realized he had an attractive face—and an even more attractive mouth, with a full lower lip.

She smiled back.

His face hardened again as he said, his voice pitched only for her and her aunt, "You may find it best for your aunt's health to take her further than Calais. I urge a sea voyage. France is not the place for two ladies who have no protection beyond their own reckless courage."

Stiffening, Diana started to deny they had ever been reckless about anything, but her aunt squeezed her arm tight, silencing her.

He turned away, all brusque military bearing as he barked orders to his men, sending some scurrying into the darkness while the rest finished a hasty repacking of the ruined clothes.

Diana glanced around, her brows pulled tight and an odd hollowness in her. An easing perhaps of the tension of a moment ago? Yes, partly that, she knew. But his remark had stung—he could have at least acknowledges her thanks!

Well, she would be glad that he had allowed them to leave, even though he seemed to suspect they were not French. But considering what he had said about their carriage not holding the man they wanted, perhaps the captain's gallantry was nothing more than a desire not to be distracted from his duty by mere women.

That rankled even more.

With her chemise, her aunt's jewel box as well as her aunt's arm, she turned slowly, as if with a care for her aunt's health. Diana led her aunt back to the coach, leaning close to whisper in English, "I think he knows—"

Her aunt interrupted, her tone sharp and her French halting. "Hush—not here."

Diana nodded, her cheeks hot. She did not seem to be very good at this pretending, and that endangered them all.

At the coach, Marie-Jeanne shifted from one foot to the next. "May I be excused, Madam. For a moment only. Nature calls."

Diana stared at the maid a moment before she realized the girl needed to visit the privy. She could not blame Marie-Jeanne. Her own insides had almost gone liquid. Her aunt nodded to the maid, and said in her poor French, "Hurry back."

After one frightened glance at the soldiers, Marie-Jeanne put her head down and lifted her skirt to pick a path around the nearest house and to whatever facilities might exist behind it.

To maintain the pretense that her aunt was ill, Diana made a show of helping her into the coach. After seeing her chemise and her aunt's jewel case repacked, she got into the coach herself. With the driver back in his seat, the luggage strapped to the roof again, and the footmen both shifting nervously beside the door, Diana called out, "Marie-Jeanne?"

The soldiers seemed to have lost interest in them, for they sauntered away, taking the torchlight with them. The night seemed darker. Moonlight crept out only to vanish again; clouds parted and thickened, pushed by the sharp wind.

Diana started to call the girl's name again, but she heard hurrying footsteps and the flap of skirts. The moon slipped out from the clouds again and Diana glimpsed the maid, the hood of her cloak pulled up and her skirts fluttering as she strode towards the coach.

The maid struggled for a moment with her skirts and the step, but she flung herself inside the coach and huddled into a dark corner. Hurrying, the footman put up the steps and shut the

door. The driver cracked his whip and the carriage lurched forward, the team having to drag the wheels loose from the mud.

"What took you so long?" Diana asked.

Marie-Jeanne gave no answer, but only pressed herself further into the corner of the coach.

Suddenly uneasy, Diana stared at the maid.

Her aunt's voice, calm as ever, drew Diana's attention from the maid. "I pray that is as close a call as we have for the rest of this trip. But since you mentioned Calais, I think we will do better now to make for Boulogne—just in case that captain changes his mind about us. The trick now will be to find a change of horses."

Between the mud and the tired horses, it took them two hours to cover the next ten miles. They found an inn willing to open and offer them food and a fresh team for hire. The candles in the lanterns set either side of the carriage doors had burnt out, and Alexandria decided not to replace them. Somehow it seemed better to draw the least notice possible.

Diana tried to coax Marie-Jeanne from the coach to eat with them, but the maid only shook her head and shrank back into the inky corner. *Poor girl—she must still be fretting over the soldiers*, Alexandria decided, and let her be.

Twenty minutes later they stepped back into the coach, having eaten quickly and with fresh horses in harness. Marie-Jeanne seemed to be asleep, but Diana leaned forward, offering a slice of lamb on bread. "Marie-Jeanne, I brought you something to eat."

The maid said nothing.

"Leave her to sleep," Alexandria urged.

"Oh, but she must be hungry." Leaning forward, Diana took hold of the maid's leg to wake her. She pulled back at once, dropping the lamb. "You're not Marie-Jeanne!"

A low purr of a masculine voice answered in flawless English, "No, I am not. But I do have a gun pointed at you, so I advise you not to do anything foolish."

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