

# A MUCH COMPROMISED LADY

by

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*Romantic Times Top Pick - 4½ Stars and Gold Medal*

*for Amy*

*whose patience, good cheer, and editorial fortitude  
makes this all a pleasure*

## CHAPTER ONE

His senses spun from half a bottle brandy, but St. Albans knew he had not drunk so much that spirits had conjured the half-naked lady in his bed. She sat upright with the white linens bunched in her fists and pulled to her chest, her hair tumbling loose, and firelight warm on bare, golden shoulders.

Anticipation quivered under the warmth of the brandy, and St. Albans realized with a shock that he could not recall the last time he had felt such an emotion. A disinterested part of him studied that question with a scholar's dispassion. But he was no scholar. And so he concentrated instead on the novelty of surprise—and the delight that reached past jaded boredom.

"One of us must be in the wrong room," he said, allowing a smile to twist up the corner of his mouth. "I do so hope it is not I."

She shook her head. A long curl of hair as black as the shadows that clung to the corners of the sparse room brushed across one golden shoulder. She had lovely skin. Too dark for beauty, true enough, but the dusky tones hinted of exotic lands and things foreign to English soil.

"Close the door—quickly," she said, her voice low.

St. Albans smiled. He held a woman's voice to be the most critical component of beauty, and she had a voice like wild honey, rich and deep, with an intriguing touch of refinement. This storm-soaked night had indeed improved.

From down the hall, the noise of a woman's babbling and a man's shouting carried through the inn. St. Albans was only too happy to shut the door on that racket. Crossing the room, he kept his stare locked on the lush body hinted at under the bedding that she clutched to her.

It would spoil the fun if he did the mundane, so he did not ask her name. He simply walked toward her, enjoying the brandy spinning in his head and the vision of her spinning in his sight.

Her eyes glowed luminous in the dim firelight. Large and dark and endless. A softly rounded chin lifted, and a wide mouth made for indulgence edged into a smile. She did not look as if she belonged in this dilapidated room, and irritation flashed hot across St. Albans's skin. She ought to be lit by a dozen beeswax candles and draped in fine linen. Her chamber should be hung with velvet tapestries and warmed by thick rugs. A silk gown ought to caress her skin, and slide from her at his touch.

Oh, yes, she looked lady enough to be wrapped in luxury.

Instead, the room in this provincial inn halfway between Newmarket and nowhere was a shabby thing.

It was the best to be had on a soaking, late spring night, but it was a cramped space, with the paneling scarred by age, the board floors bare and dusty, and limp, dingy curtains better suit a monk's cell. A single rough wood chair sat before the fire, while a shaving stand huddled in the corner next to the four-poster bed, opposite stood a hideous maple wardrobe with carved cherubs that had long ago had their wings chipped from their plump shoulders.

It served him well enough, he had thought earlier upon being shown to the room, and it had also served him right for traveling without his usual entourage of servants to arrange his comforts with his own linens and things about him. But now he was quite pleased not to have those encumbrances. She might not have found her way to his chamber if there had been a valet, and far too many other servants to bar her from entry.

When he stood next to the bed, she shifted up to sit on her knees. One slim, sun-browned hand let half the covers fall away.

His mouth dried as he glimpsed the curve of her breast, and his lips quirked as he noticed that, under the covers, she still wore her shift and corset.

*Not so daring as she wants me to think.*

He wondered at what game she played. Hope flared all too briefly that it might be an interesting one. He shuttered the emotion at once. Hope was a fool's hobby, and he was no fool.

Reaching out, her long fingers deftly plucked the diamond from his cravat with a touch so light he barely noticed it. She tossed the gem onto the shaving stand with as much concern as if it were a bit of lint she had removed, and began to unknot his cravat. Her other hand held the covers to her breasts. He watched those tempting curves rise and fall with fast, agitated breaths. From excitement—or something else?

Stripping off his cravat, she sent it the way of his stickpin. Her slim fingers started undoing the buttons of his waistcoat.

She frowned as she worked at his clothes, her fingers deft and all too clever. Ah, what else could those fingers do? She bit her lower lip as she struggled with the ruby buttons—an endearing gesture that made him want to do the very same thing. She had lips that invited tasting, full and wide, plump as dark cherries.

With his waistcoat undone, she looked up, her eyes pleading. She had very dark eyes, almost as dark as the cloud of hair that curled around those warm shoulders. Gold flakes glistened in her eyes and in the strands of that dusky hair, sparkling like the dust on a jeweler's work table. What in blazes did she want from him? Other than the obvious. And he knew for a certainty that she wanted something. What woman did not?

Normally, he cared little for the feelings of others, other than for the amusement it provided him to watch them act out their follies. But she had piqued his curiosity with her approach. How delicious it was not to know exactly how this encounter would progress. Seduction had long ago become such a predictable game. Enjoyable, but oh so predictable.

"Your coat now," she said, her tone more urgent and her glance straying for an instant to the door.

He smiled at her naiveté about gentlemen's fashions, and said, his tone affable, "It generally takes two footmen to ease me out of it." Her gaze came back to him and her round chin jutted forward with stubborn purpose, and so he added, "But that is not going matter to you, is it?"

She rocked back on her heels, and commanded, "Turn 'round."

Her tone pricked him, and for an instant, his eyes narrowed with a flare of anger.

No one ordered an Earl of St. Albans—not even the King, for the King was mad and the Prince Regent far too in debt to St. Albans to do more than be grateful for the discreet loans that kept the Prince in luxuries.

She shrank back a little before him, and he forced his cursed temper to cool. He had not drunk so much as to lose control of himself. He never drank so much. And he was not about to forfeit this delicious, dusky lady by frightening her with the dark edge of his own damnable self.

Besides, she was indeed giving him a full night of novelties. When was the last time anyone had dared order him to do anything? So, where he defied princes, he would obey her. For now.

Giving her one of his better smiles—the one calculated to charm any woman—he turned. “Will this do,” he said, allowing only the slightest of sarcasm to shade his tone. He waited to see what she might dare next.

Her breath, hot and sweet, teased the back of his neck as she reached around him to grasp his coat collar. Her breasts brushed his back. She pulled away to strip his coat down, so it pinned his arms. Panting and muttering curses in a tongue he did not recognize, she peeled the garment off him and tossed it aside as if it were a rag. His waistcoat went with it, and the ruby buttons winked up at him like demon eyes.

He spared a brief regret for his coat, which now lay in a wrinkled, ruined heap. He had rather liked that particular shade of midnight blue, but he could get another. Naked ladies—at least ones this comely and intriguing—were rather more hard to come by.

In his shirtsleeves and pantaloons now, he decided he had done with what she wanted.

He turned in an instant, catching her in his arms, feeling her stiffen and hearing her gasp, but he carried her down with him, falling into the depths of the feather mattress, trapping her beneath him.

The sheets, worn to threads, tore under them, and his hands tangled in her hair and her garments and the bed linens. She smelled of wild roses and some spice that stirred his pulse. Her shift dragged lower onto her shoulders, revealing sweet curves and soft skin. Against her low-riding corset, her breasts rose and fell with rapid breaths that feathered across his face. Her pulse skittered in her throat, and her hands pressed up against his chest, fingers splayed wide, as if somehow that would stay him for even a moment.

He smiled down at her. They were now firmly in his domain and he would dictate the rest of the night.

“Now, my sweet intrigue. Time to see if you strip as well as you strip me.”

Eyes enormous and flashing, she pushed against him, muttering something in that foreign tongue of hers. He did not understand the words, but a curse was a curse in any language. He smiled at her protests. They would not last for long.

He lowered his mouth to hers.

A pounding cut across his intent and he hesitated, a frown tightening his face. He started to turn towards the door and the noise, but the lady’s fingers wrapped into his lawn shirt. She dragged his mouth down to hers.

He forgot the pounding outside for the pounding inside as blood coursed through him, hot and heavy and leaving him light-headed. He had no room in his mind for anything but the beseeching demands being made.

Her teeth bit at his lower lip, and her tongue soothed what she had bitten. Twenty years of practiced seductions vanished in a hot flash of raw desire, going up like dry powder touched by a spark. He fit his mouth over hers, demanding more, clashing with her, devouring her, tasting every curve of lip and tongue, exploring every hollow and probing until he pulled a soft moan from her.

Closing his hand over her breast, he released her mouth and sought the taste of the skin on her neck, on her throat, on the valley between her breasts. She sighed, or was it a ragged pull of breath? And then the door crashed open behind them.

The lady squeaked and dove under the tousled covers, wiggling out from his loosened hold.

St. Albans growled, anger cooling his passion of a moment ago. Slowly, he rose on one elbow, his movements measured and intentionally languid—his controlled moves kept his temper at least somewhat in check. With the pulse pounding in his clenched jaw, he locked a narrowed stare on the intruders.

Three men crowded the threshold. St. Albans inspected them. An aged, balding, scrawny fellow—the landlord. A vacant-eyed young edition of him—the son. And a gentleman in a purple coat, his face pinched and lined, his silver hair worn long and tied back in the style of last century, with a too-fastidious air about him.

St. Albans recognized him at once, but he took the course of deliberately insulting the man by not acknowledging that fact. After all, facts had never mattered to any Earl of St. Albans. And he had a personal dislike for Francis Dawes, Lord Nevin. There was still a score to settle between them.

For a long moment, St. Albans simply stared at the trio, his fury for this interruption quivering inside him. He sent the unspoken words quite clearly to them: if he had to rise, they would regret it. Deeply.

The landlord, in a nightshift hastily stuffed into half-buttoned breeches, glanced about wide-eyed, taking in the scene. He stuttered an apology and began to bow himself out. Lord Nevin ignored him, pushing forward as if this was his house and he carried the authority here.

*Conceited, overbearing hypocrite*, St. Albans thought, his patience with this farce thinning.

“There’s a thief loose,” Nevin said, his narrow face pulled tight as he stared down at St. Albans with disdain. “We are searching all the rooms.”

St. Albans half expected the man to drag out a handkerchief and put it to his face, as if he smelled something offensive. Instead, Nevin gestured for the landlord and his son to move forward.

With the smallest of movements, St. Albans turned his stare to the landlord, and asked in a deadly sweet voice, “Do you mean to accuse me of harboring a fugitive?”

A chorus of denial burst from the landlord and his son, and both men shifted nervously on their feet, glancing from St. Albans to Nevin.

“Then why do you enter my room, startling my lady?” St. Albans asked, his voice softening as his anger began to fade. Interruptions were always such bores.

“A Gypsy girl broke into my rooms,” Nevin said, red-faced now, his small mouth pulled down and the lines on his face deepened with determination. “I will have her caught and up before the law.”

He came forward a step, an emerald ring flashing fire on his left forefinger as he moved.

“You certainly will not if you are dead, sir.”

The older man hesitated, uncertainty clouding his gray eyes. “Dead? Is that a threat, you...you...”

“That, sir, is plain speaking. My usual habit for dealing with intruders is to shoot them. So far I have made an exception in your case, out of consideration for the lady. However, my consideration for anyone has its limits.”

Nevin huffed as if he did not believe this, but he also did not take another step forward.

Watching the fellow, St. Albans wondered if perhaps Nevin had not heard that the Earl of St. Albans never bluffed. Their paths in Society crossed little enough that Nevin might be unaware

of anything more than the gossip—most of it true—that St. Albans had shot three men. One in a fair duel, and the other two not. Just in case, St. Albans shifted.

Moving his hand out from under the lady beside him, he slid it under his pillow. However, his fingers did not find the curve of his pocket pistol. He felt nothing. No smooth mahogany stock. No chill of silver filigree. Just bare, worn bed linen.

Annoyance flared again inside him, and quickly died as the novelty of the situation caught his fancy. So the lady in his bed had no use for diamond stickpins, but she had one for loaded pistols. He could not help the quirk that lifted the corner of his mouth. Oh, she really was a delight. He simply could not afford to let these louts ruin his evening with her.

“Get out,” he said, already starting to turn back to where she cowered under the covers with only the dark curls of her hair peeking out from the bed linen.

Nevin hissed out a curse, but the landlord was already muttering about how the thief must have slipped down the back stairs, and those Gypsies were probably already miles down the road.

Hearing the desperation in the man’s voice to leave, St. Albans glanced back at the trio. “Oh, go find your own woman elsewhere, Nevin. And leave me mine.”

Fury blazed in the older man’s eyes. His mouth pulled into a tighter sneer. “You...you disgust me.”

“Oh, for...go and be disgusted elsewhere, unless it is that you have a fonder taste of watching sin.”

Nevin glanced once at the form concealed by the covers. The emerald ring glinted again as his fingers clenched and loosened. He swung around and strode out, his back stiff as a poker.

The landlord began another set of ducking bows, pushed his gawking, sleepy son out before him, and left, pulling the door shut behind him.

St. Albans waited until he heard the click of the broken latch before he swung out of bed. Dragging the wooden chair forward, he secured the chair-back under the knob.

He turned back to the bed.

As he had expected, his Gypsy had sat up again and now she pointed his own pistol at his heart. The silver glinted in the firelight as her slim hands quivered with the faintest tremble. It was very faint, but enough to make him cautious. His pistol had a rather light trigger, and he did not care to tempt a nervous woman. It would probably be a blessing to the world if she shot him dead, but odds were that she’d only maim, and he had seen just how cursed painful a bullet could be.

No. That fate did not interest him.

Crossing his arms, he leaned against the wall. “My dear delight, pray do not spoil the evening by becoming predictable. A shot will only bring them back, and you can hardly want that beautiful neck of yours ruined with a hangman’s rope. Besides, I can entertain you far better alive than I can dead.”

Her wide mouth pulled down, and she said in that teasingly cultured, throaty voice, “I do not have to kill you—only wound you.”

St. Albans smiled. “You had best aim to kill, sweet desire. I honestly do have the devil’s temper, and unless you shoot me dead, I cannot vow to show you anything but my worst side.”

Glynis hesitated. The grim certainty in his tone sent a shiver along her skin. She did not want to see his worst side. She did not think she would care much for it. And she did not want to shoot him. She did not want to shoot anyone, in fact. Drat him for being right, anyway. A pistol report would only bring back the others. She ought to have heeded the cards. But if she had not come, Christo would have. And he had not her light touch, so it had had to be her.

At least she had seen the box. As they had heard, Francis Dawes traveled with it, keeping it close to him. She had almost touched the dragon carved upon it, but she had had no time to do more. So now she must get back to Christo and lay new plans. Better plans.

Only this green-eyed devil stood in her way.

Lowering the pistol, she eyed him cautiously. She kept her fingers wrapped tight around the cool feel of polished, deadly wood. She did not trust this *gaujo*, with his steady gaze that seemed to look into her, and his cold voice, and his too-hot touch. Her lips still tingled from that kiss he had taken. Of course, she had offered herself. She had to own that. But she had not expected what had followed.

Thinking only to befuddle him, and to hide herself, she had pulled him to her. And then a storm of fire had swept her into a spinning world of heat and sensation. He had done that to her. How? How did he know how to do such things to a woman?

She studied him, as if viewing a new kind of wild animal.

He had the conceit of his kind, this *gaujo* lord. It was bred into the clean, sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbone, and that arrogant nose. It lay coiled in the wide shoulders and strong muscles of his form now exposed by his disordered shirt and his close fitting pantaloons which outlined every lean sinew. There was much to interest a woman. But also much she despised. He stood there as if he owned this room and all in it—her included. His eyes were as cool as any green glen, and she knew how easy it was to hide danger in such places.

As she studied him, his smile twisted his mouth into a cynical slant. He had a sensuous lower lip, full and soft. Her pulse galloped faster as tension crackled in the air. She knew how that mouth had felt on her. And how his hair, now drawn into glinting gold by the firelight, had felt like the finest silk fringe under her fingers.

No, she did not trust this *gaujo*.

She kept hold of the pistol, but she put on her best pleading face, the one she used for begging shelter on someone else's land. "Please...please, let me go. I stole nothing."

One eyebrow lifted in such mockery that her fingers itched to shoot him for no better reason than to obliterate that look from his face and replace it with shocked surprise. His eyes, however, warmed as they rested on her, and the appreciation in them cooled her temper, though it did nothing to make her feel more comfortable.

"You mean, rather, you came away empty-handed. Come, my delight, be honest at least. You may not be a thief, but it is not from lack of trying."

Her temper flared and her chin shot up. "You mean I am a Gypsy, so I must be a thief! Well, I came looking only for what is rightfully mine. For what that lying *gaujo* stole from me—from my family!"

"*Gaujo*? And what is a *gaujo*?"

Struggling to temper her pride, she tried to remember the lessons her mother had taught. *Surrounded by the Gadge, the Rom's only defense is his tongue.*

She shifted on the bed, and his gaze flicker across her body. She had a far better weapon there than any mere pistol. But she would have to take care how she used it.

Softening her tone, she said. "You're *gaujo*. As was that other lord. It is someone who is not one of the traveling people."

"Well, that is true enough, but I do object to being classified with Nevin. We really do not have much in common—other than perhaps an interest in you." A measuring look came into his eyes. "And I will point out that you did steal one thing—my pistol."

She glanced down at the silver and wood pistol in her hands. It would fetch a goodly price in any market, and Bado would certainly have urged her to pocket it—and the man's gems—for the good of the family. But she hated that such need had always driven her.

Looking up at this *gaujo* again from under her eyelashes, she saw his mocking smile, and she could not bear it. She had too many times been called thief—justly and unjustly. Well, no more. She had sworn that day when *Dej* had told them of their true inheritance that there would be only one thing for which she used her skills. By God she had sworn, and on her father's memory. She would not break that vow.

Slowly, carefully, she put the pistol on the pillow beside her. Rocking back on her heels, she folded her hands in her lap.

"I have stolen nothing," she said, her expression kept empty. There, let him try to do what he wanted with her. She knew a few tricks yet to deal with such as him. Pulling in a breath, Glynis waited, her heart racing.

St. Albans's pulse kicked up a notch. Such an unwise move for her to relinquish her protection. He could now put her back where he wanted her—underneath him.

And yet he stood there, arms crossed, not moving towards her. Oh, damn his curiosity. It would indeed be the death of him one of these days.

"If you are not a thief, then why are you here? What did he take from you that you would risk your neck to get it back?"

Tilting her head, she studied him from the corner of her dark eyes. *What lie will she tell me?* he wondered.

Voice credibly even, and her gaze steady, she said, "I was his mistress. He promised me a box of jewels, and I came to claim that from him."

St. Albans's mouth quirked. Oh, she really was quite wickedly wonderful. Liar, thief, and Lucifer knew what else. Virtue had always attracted him with its fascinating illusion, but sin had always been far more entertaining.

"You were his mistress?" he repeated. He knew enough of Nevin to know that the man would never take any creature so low as a Gypsy to his bed—no matter how tempting she was. Thank heavens he himself had no such prejudice.

She frowned at him, those dark eyes flashing.

"And he promised you a box of jewels?" St. Albans said, hoping to prompt her to embroider her story.

Slowly, she nodded. St. Albans's smile widened, and Glynis's heart began to hammer a warning again.

Uncrossing his arms, he pushed off the door and came towards her. She forced herself to sit still and watch him approach. She knew better than to flinch. A hound always chased the fox that ran. Better to hold still and dodge at the last moment, if she could.

"In that case, my delight, forget Nevin. I shall give you far more than a box of jewels."

She waited until he reached the bedside before she scurried back, putting the width of the bed between them. She had no illusion of safety. She had felt the strength in his arms. But all she needed was to stay from his reach, and to find a way to unblock the door.

"Do you think me a fool to believe such a promise again? You are like him. You will say anything now, but come the morning, you will give nothing."

Green fire flashed in his eyes. Glynis's throat tightened and her pulse skittered. She knew how a dangerous it might be to taunt a lord such as him, and now she saw just how much he hated to be compared to Francis Dawes.

"You dare..." he started to say. He cut off his words. He pressed his mouth tight, and his upper lip thinned to a cruel line. She waited for him to move, to react. Instead, his mouth softened and quirked. "You are good. Very good, indeed. A lie to feint, and then a *botta segrete* to score a palpable hit."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

“Fencing, my delight. A secret attack. You compare me to Nevin, hoping I shall respond and offer you an opening. And almost I did. But the wound is not fatal, my Gypsy. I did warn you that you had best go in for a kill.”

He smiled and began to move around the bed.

Panic flooded Glynis. She thought briefly of trying to scramble across the bed for the door, but instincts tingled, warning her that he wanted her tangled in those covers again. Well, she would not play his game. She had no hope of winning.

Backing into the corner, she watched him come around the end of the bed until he stood before her, the fire lighting one side of his face and the other half of him in shadows. Heat blazed from his skin, far warmer than the embers in the fireplace. She wet her lips and swallowed, but her throat remained hollow and parched. Her heart pounded faster against her ribs, and she struggled to keep her mind clear and quick.

“You are right,” she admitted. “That was a lie. And you deserve better, for you did not give me away to the others and I see now that you could have. You are not like that man. You have honor in you.”

He stopped his advance and stared down at her, his expression startled and a little bemused. “Honor? My dear, you really did choose the wrong room for hiding if you think that.”

“No. I choose well. I heard the maids talk of you—that you like women. And so I knew that you would be a good man.” Glynis gave him a warm smile. “After all, how can any man who likes women not be good in his heart?”

St. Albans stared at her, baffled and distracted. Her logic defied rationality. It also irritated him. What in blazes was he doing arguing philosophy with her? And yet, he could not allow these delusions of her hers to persist. “My sweet mystery, a love of the fair sex is the least likely indication of virtue in this world.”

Still smiling, she shook her head, her eyes wide and staring up at him with such trust that he started to feel not only annoyed with her, but with himself. Be damned, but was this a seduction or an argument about his black soul? Oh, he had had enough of this.

Before he could move, she spoke, sealing his fate. “But do you wish to hear the whole of how I came to choose you to protect me?”

## CHAPTER TWO

*No, I don't want to hear this*, he told himself. Only the truth was that he rather did want to hear it. The very idea that anyone could view him as a savior amused him no end, for he always had been on the opposite side of such protection, from gentlemen looking after their daughters, their wives, and even their mistresses. Curiosity itched inside him, meaning that he could not simply sweep her into his arms and kiss her silent.

*She will only lie again*, he told himself.

However, he wanted to hear the next invention that would come from those delectable lips.

With a sigh of resignation, he crossed his arms again, hoping that would seem less threatening to her, but ready to pounce should she try to slip past. He leaned his shoulder against the wall. She must be playing for time. But he was a good enough angler to know that the real sport lay in the art of allowing the fish to run when it would. For now, it amused him enough to watch her play his line.

“Why do I have the feeling this is a long story?” he asked.

She gave a small shrug. “Your part in it is not, which is all that would interest you.”

His mouth quirked. “What, did the maids also fill your ears with stories of my being a vain fellow, attentive only to myself?”

“No. That I have seen for myself tonight.”

“Oh, you do have a sharp edge to your tongue. But I assure you that I can actually manage to be engaged by a number of things outside myself. But, my own ease does come first, so if this is going to be a very long—”

“Only long enough.”

“We still ought to be comfortable.” He swept his arm around the barren room. “I would offer you a chair, only it is otherwise occupied, so you shall have to make do with the bed. Oh, you may save your suspicious glances. My bite is generally regarded by ladies as considerably nicer than my bark.”

St. Albans allowed his smile to warm, calculating the exact amount of charm to exert. It always amazed him that people were so easily disarmed by a mere curving of the lips.

She, however, did not seem inclined to be easy. With a scornful glance at the bed, she threw wide her arms, her face expressive and her eyes bright with indignation. “How can I sit and tell you my *swato*—my story? Bah! That is no good. I need to show you as much as tell you!”

She was up to something, right enough. She wanted out of her corner, and this was but an excuse to get past him. He knew it as well as he knew his own name. Despite his certainty that she was plotting something, he wanted to hear this *swato* of hers. Besides, she could not get past that door without moving the chair. And he rather liked how those gestures did interesting things with those lush curves of hers.

Uncrossing his arms, he gave her a courtly bow and offered room for her to step past him. She gave him a sidelong glance, and he decided if she gave him many more of those looks from under those thick, dark lashes, he would not be able to allow her to finish her story without ravishing her. But she scooted past him, her fast step betraying her nervousness, and he thought this was far more entertaining than an ordinary seduction.

He followed her around the foot of the bed, and seated himself on the rumpled linens. After sliding his pistol back to its place under the pillow, he shifted on the bed to face her.

She had pulled up the sleeves of her shift so that the thin fabric covered her shoulders, but in her underclothes and with her hair rumpled she looked as if she had already been deliciously tumbled. The firelight warmed her face, casting a glow onto her high cheekbones and that round chin of hers.

St. Albans lay back, propping himself up on one elbow. “So what is this...this *swato* of yours?”

Glynis settled her hands on her hips, and forced her smile back in place. She had the door to her back, and everything inside her screamed to turn and run. But the chair under the doorknob would slow her too much. And her dress and cloak still lay underneath this *gaujo*'s bed, where she had stuffed them after slipping into his room. What a mistake she had made there, but no use came of regret. She needed a new plan now, and time enough to think of it.

Wetting her lips, she began talking.

As with any good *swato* there was some truth. She owed him that much for not betraying her earlier. But a *swato* needed a little fantasy, too. And she had Christo and *Dej* to protect. She could not risk betraying their presence nearby.

She told him how she came to the inn after hearing that a man who went by the title Lord Nevin was staying there. Happy to have their fortunes told, the maids had let her into the kitchen, but they told her more than she ever revealed to them. That was the usual way of it. Her *dej*—her mother—had taught her well to tell fortunes from the questions asked. But now Glynis could see why one girl had giggled nervously, and another had asked with apprehension if she would catch the eye of the wicked Earl of St. Albans.

Seeing him as he was now—sprawled elegantly across the bed, looking as boneless and lazy as a cat, his green eyes large and glittering with intriguing lights—she could believe those stories

the tavern maids had told her. She had thought they must be elaborating that he was the most depraved rake in England. A gentleman by title only, and a man to fear and avoid. They had said he took any woman he wanted, that he gambled and drank and did what he pleased. That he was a dangerous man.

For he could make any woman love him.

She had almost laughed at their words.

But now she could see how he could do just such a thing.

He had skin that glowed like rich butter. She had never seen such skin before on a man. Peeking from the 'V' made by his white shirt, the hair on his chest caught the light and tempted like strands of gold. Almost she wanted to touch it, to stroke the muscles she glimpsed there. That would be about as safe as stroking a steal trap.

Yes, he looked like a trap ready to spring. He concealed the tension coiled inside him with languid grace, but her *dej* had taught her well. *Dik and shoon*—watch and listen, Mother had always said, though her mother's own eyes were now sightless.

So Glynis watched this one as she spoke, and what she saw kept her heart pounding and her nerves stretched tight.

Stalling for more time, she told how she had slipped upstairs when the maids had left to answer a summons back to work. She did not tell him how she had gotten past a locked door—he had no need to know about her skills in such matters. However, the knowing glint in his eyes as she slipped past this point made her squirm in her own skin. He seemed to know far more than she told him. She did not like that. It made him seem more Romany than *gaujo*, and she liked better to think of him as an arrogant, hateful *gaujo* lord.

With luck, she would soon be gone from here and never see him again.

Only why did her heart twist a little at that thought? Oh, he was a devil to smile at her with his eyes. To stare at her with warmth in his gaze. To lie so very still that she began to forget her fear of him.

She needed more than luck tonight. She needed all her wits and cunning, or her escape from him might cost her dearly.

She forced a wider smile. "You were clever to sense my lie—I was never mistress to Lord Nevin. But that one, he holds papers he carries inside a box that is mine. One of the maids came to his room and found me before could take it. I slipped away, but the girl cried thief. So I ran."

One golden-brown eyebrow rose. "Into my room, where you could pose as my doxy for the night? You do like high-stake games."

She had to agree with him on that. Only he had no idea just how high the stakes were.

He went on, his voice lazy. "But what papers could Nevin possibly have that you would want? You are leaving out some rather important details here."

Glynis lifted one shoulder and her shift slipped distractingly lower. St. Albans watched her push it back up and decided that he was going to enjoy pulling it down again.

Lifting her chin, she looked him straight in the eye, her stare unblinking. "Those papers are marriage lines that would prove the truth of marriage to Lord Nevin's son."

St. Albans held utterly still. Disbelief, icy and raw, trickled into him. Married? Her? To Nevin's son? No. It was preposterous. It ought not to matter, but it did. He did not want his gypsy owned by Nevin's son. Or anyone else. His glance slid over her, and a confused anger beat hot and heavy against his chest. Pushing down the emotion, he tried to think.

It must be a lie. Did Nevin even have a son? He recalled vague talk of one. Yes, an heir. At university still, he rather thought, so that would put the son at about her age. But it could not be. Nevin was far too high in the instep to allow his own blood to marry so far beneath him. The man had the effrontery to even think his lineage surpassed all others, for its purity of Norman

blood. But the earls of St. Albans had been Saxon lords long before Nevin's kin arrived on these shores.

However, that was not the topic at hand. No, it was this ludicrous idea of a marriage between his Gypsy and...

No. He would simply not allow it to be.

He relaxed again, but his eyes narrowed as he saw the flaw in her lie. "There is but one obvious question, my sweet, which is why, if these papers are in Nevin's reach, does he not destroy them?"

Arching an eyebrow, she shot him an irritating look as if he were a simpleton. "He has the box, not the papers. And he does not know the trick to the secret bottom that is concealed there. Lord Nevin's son hid them there for safe keeping, but if they are found and destroyed..."

Her face paled and her mouth tightened, and the certainty flooded St. Albans that she meant every word she spoke. But it all seemed too dramatic with this talk of secret compartments and marriages. Dramatic, but plausible.

"I have vowed to get those papers, and I shall. On my father's memory, I will get them back."

"And what if I said I would get them back for you?" he asked.

Surprised by himself, he wondered briefly where that offer had sprung from. Of course he had no intention of making good on such a promise. It was not even yet a promise, merely a question. But he did hope that she now would try to use her charms to persuade him to assist her.

However, she did not look as if she contemplated any such persuasion. Folding her arms, she studied him, her mouth pulled down and a skeptical, assessing look in her eyes.

"You? What could you do?"

For a moment, he thought that he must not have heard her correctly. He blinked at her as her words sank in.

*What could you do?*

The scorn in her tone stung like a wasp's barb. Of all the...why, the insolent little baggage! Who the deuce did she think she was speaking to? Some...some upstart baronet?

Rolling off the bed, onto his feet, he stalked towards her.

She fell back, her hands falling loose to her sides, and sliding behind her. Her eyes widened, as if she had only just realized her mistake.

*A too sizable mistake*, he thought, his temper barely in check.

"My sweet misguided Gypsy, either you failed to gain enough information from these tavern wenches, or you have not quite grasped my identity."

Glaring up at him, she stopped backing up and stood her ground. St. Albans stopped before her, so close he could feel her anger flare in an almost tangible aura of heat.

"Oh, I know exactly who you are! I see your kind every day. A *gaujo* who thinks too much of himself, who has too much time to find himself trouble, and whose idea of help for anyone is to offer money. Well, keep your coins, *gaujo*. Some of us work for what we want!"

His fist bunched and he only just stopped himself from taking that elegant neck in his hands to throttle her. No one, but no one spoke to him in that tone of voice. And no one had the right to criticize him.

Keeping his own voice very even and low, he told her, just so that she would be quite clear and not make this mistake again, "My dear Gypsy, I am Simon Alexander Derain Winters, Earl of St. Albans, Baron Winters, Baron of Wexford and Fleet, Knight of the Garter, and there is damn little I cannot do if I so please, including get away with murder. Which I shall be happy to prove to you should you insist on continuing this most unwise discussion. And if you call thieving work, then no wonder you have such a misguided view of the world and my place in it."

Her glance dropped and thick lashes fluttered low, but then she looked up again, her dark eyes burning, the gold in them glinting hot as coals. Uncertainty also shadowed those eyes.

Under his abraded pride, regret stirred. In truth, he did have too much time for trouble, and he did solve a good many problems with coin. Had he not just been thinking how much she might cost him? However, that was not, he told himself, what he had meant when he had asked what he might do for her.

Blast her, but he would not be acting so badly if she had not started this all by asking him what could he do.

He was the Earl of St. Albans. He had been from the day he was born, since his father was wise enough to break his neck before seeing what kind of son he'd sired. He could do anything he pleased.

And he was not, he thought with gritted teeth, going to listen to the laughter of those ghosts from his past; those things he could not do were things he chose not to. And that was that.

He turned his mind from such ancient losses, but those shadows softened his mood. She did not know him. And he should not be so angry with her for being ignorant. Indeed, it was part of her charm that she did not know him well enough to be cautious enough around him.

"You may apologize now, my sweets," he said, trying hard to soften his tone. Reaching up, he brushed a dark curl from her cheek. "And then we shall move on to more pleasant things."

St. Albans's finger brushed across her skin, warm and tender. And Glynis's fear vanished like a fire doused by sand. She struggled to find the armor of her anger, but too many emotions had buffeted her tonight. Too much fear, too much of nerves strung tight, too much scorn. She just wanted it over. Fatigue filled her bones and weighed her soul, and she knew suddenly that she was done fighting her own fate.

She had thought mention of marriage might make him lose interest. He had not. She had thought if she gave him a shrewish tongue that would put him off. It had not. And she saw now that she would have to pay the price for the mistake of putting herself into his path.

"Oh, just have done with it," she told him. She shut her eyes tight and turned her face to him, prepared to endure his kiss, and whatever would follow. He would take what he wanted from her, and she would just have to hope that no child came from this. If it did, she would deal with that, too. She had dealt with so much already in life. What was one more set of burdens?

Staring at the woman before him, the image that St. Albans had tried to blot out for the past six months rose again. The vision flashed in his mind of a golden-haired beauty—the only woman he had ever allowed to escape. And that good deed had done nothing but torment him. What idiot had ever said that virtue was a reward? It had become a blasted curse.

For six months, he had done his best to obliterate the uncomfortable feelings which that one act had stirred within him. So what if that lady had seemed to find love with another. Love never lasted. And that lady and her lord were merely fools, living in a delusion that would shatter someday. Of course, they had made London a boring place to be, for at any moment the pair of them might turn up to remind him that he had given into that idiotic impulse; he had told that lady the truth instead of seducing her into staying with him.

His reward had been nothing but a restless unease that he could not shake.

Ah, those fools would be the ones who someday regretted their folly. But he was bloody well not going to allow the sight of them—happy as only the besotted can be—to ruin his pleasure.

Which was why he was not in London.

Taking his Gypsy's chin in his fingers, he tilted her face up. This one, he would not let go. Not even if she turned to wood in his arms. He had learned better of himself. He would take what she offered, and enjoy it, and he would bloody make her enjoy it as well.

He began to lower his lips towards hers, but he stopped when his mouth hovered a breath from hers.

Staring down at her closed eyes, he told her, "I mean to have you no matter what."

He felt her chin move as her throat contracted, and she said, "So have done. And then I will go."

"What if I don't want to let you go after?"

Her eyes opened then, wide and alarmed. He smiled. Ah, at last. Better to have her scratching like a wild cat than stiff with martyred submission.

However, the alarm vanished from her eyes, and she smiled. His senses sharpened with warning. What was she planning now? He waited, relief washing through him that she was no blond, blue-eyed innocent. Heaven and Hades save him from such ladies ever again. Far better to have this dark-eyed Gypsy full of too many inventive ideas, a little liar and a thief, and fair match for his own dark soul.

She wet her upper lip with her tongue and tipped her head to one side. "Perhaps then we shall talk more about your helping me—if I help you beforehand?"

St. Albans leaned forward to capture that mouth with his, but a firm hand on his chest stayed him.

"I said *perhaps*. But do you not wish me to first help from your other clothes?"

He eyed her warily. She tugged his shirt loose from his pantaloons and smoothed a hand over his stomach and up to his chest. Pinpoints of pleasure danced through him.

"Whatever did you have in mind?" he asked with a smile.

"A game. A Gypsy game. You must stand in the middle of the room with your eyes closed. And for every garment I take off, you must take off one, as well. But there is one thing—you must not open your eyes until I tell you to. It is bad luck, and I will never trust you if you promise not to look and then do so before I tell you."

She was at it again. Scheming. He glanced at the chair propped under the door knob. She could not move it without his hearing the scrape of wood on wood.

So why not indulge her?

"Where do you want me to stand?" he asked.

She led him to a spot halfway between the bed and the door and asked him to close his eyes. The smile she gave him as she asked had his pulse hammering.

"Promise not to look before I say," she told him, her mouth pulling into a pout.

"I promise."

"No, it must be a sacred vow. On your honor."

"I have little enough of that, my sweets."

"Then on your family's name."

"Oh, very well. I promise, on the name of Winters, that you have the word of the Earl of St. Albans not to look before you say."

Her hand brushed his chest again, leaving his skin tingling. He closed his eyes and was rewarded with the sound of cloth rustling. Stiff fabric was draped across his naked shoulder.

"That is my corset. Now, in turn, pull off your shirt. But keep your eyes closed."

He obeyed, and began to think that he could actually become accustomed to such commands from her. For a time, at least. Perhaps he would even keep her with him for a few days, or so. It had been long enough, after all, since he had had any such lengthy liaison.

More cloth rustled, and soft fabric lay across his shoulder. She whispered in his ear, "There is my shift. Now I have nothing on at all. Will you match me before I tell you that you can look?"

It took a few moments for him to strip off his pantaloons. Knitted from fine wool they clung to his legs, but he soon dragged them off and tossed them aside. He did not wear any drawers underneath, and the cool air swirled around his bare skin.

Straightening, he waited a moment for her next command. What would she do before she told him to open his eyes? He liked how resourceful she was. Perhaps they might even enjoy each other's company a few weeks?

The silence lengthened. Tilting his head, he stretched out his other senses. He had not heard the chair scrape, so she must still be in the room—and yet, it was too quiet. Too empty.

A cold draft wound around his legs.

Opening his eyes, he spun around.

She was gone.

He stood naked in an empty room. The chair stood on its four legs beside an open doorway. Fury pulsed so hot in his veins that he almost forgot his lack of dress and went after her. But the cold air began to cool his body and his head. He glanced down at his naked skin and a smile lifted one side of his mouth.

That little witch. So, she thought she had made good her escape. She thought this was done. Well, she had not yet learned what it was to deal with the Earl of St. Albans.

\* \* \*

Glynis ran down the backstairs of the inn, her bare feet slapping quietly on the wood and her heart quick as her feet. The door creaked as she pushed it open, but the noise of the tap room muffled the sound. From upstairs she heard nothing, but she knew she had little time.

Under her cloak, the cold swirled up and chilled her skin as she slipped outside. She winced as her feet slipped into mud. A pity she had to leave her shoes under that *gaujo*'s bed, but she knew when to cut her loses. And she knew when to strive for yet another chance, even when she was ready to give into defeat. Life had taught her that skill. And to enjoy the small favors of this world. Such as the one that the rain had stopped.

The air smelled wet and sharp with the sweetness of early roses and the earthly pong of the stables that lay behind the inn. Overhead, clouds danced, parting to reveal the silver disc of a new moon, and closing again to hide its glow.

Clutching her dress to her naked body, Glynis tightened her hold on her cloak and ran through the squishing mud. She had no regret for her shift and her corset. They were small payment to make for her escape. But her dress was of good wool, and with only three dresses to her name she had risked the few seconds it took to drag it and her cloak out from under the bed. She had left her shoes for fear of the noise they would make. And she had had to use every skill she'd ever honed in slipping into or out from places to shift that chair and turn the doorknob in silence.

Silence now filled the night—the creatures of the woods had taken to their nests and burrows during the storm. She would be wise now to copy them. Her toes dug into cold mud and she let out a breath that she had not even known she was holding. *Safe. Almost safe.*

With a care not to slip in the mud, she made for the shadows of the woods that lay near to Littlebury's village green and the Red Lion inn. Silent now, she slipped behind the blacksmith's shop and from there into the woods. Under the shelter of an oak, she stopped, her back to the wide trunk and rough bark. Her lungs hurt from the cold air, but now she could afford to let out a deep sigh of relief.

With her cloak still over her shoulders, she struggled into her dress, leaving the ties in back loose. As she straightened, a hand fell onto her shoulder.

Startled, she swung around, her fist clenched to strike. But a familiar voice whispered with dry mockery, "*Droboy tume, Romale.*"

## CHAPTER THREE

The greeting, common enough among the Romany eased open Glynis's fist. Relief warmed through her like the rush of good wine. "*Nais tuke,*" she whispered back, an edge to her thank you. She added, "For frightening ten years off my life. Why are you not waiting at the stream where we agreed to meet?"

She could not see Christo's frown, but she knew it must be there on his handsome face. His dark coat—turned up to cover his white shirt—and dark breeches and soft, dark boots changed him into a towered shadow, rather like one of the oaks around them. As always, a sense of calmness came with him. But she knew—and could feel—the restless energy that lay under that surface composure. It was only when she saw Christo with his horses that she ever felt that the quiet of his body also filled his soul.

"You were late," he said, his voice soft but his words clipped. He had been worrying too much. He always did. "What went wrong? Wasn't it there?"

She shook her head and glanced back at the inn. Yellow candlelight spilled from the public room on the ground floor. The sound of a man's guffaw and the scrape of a fiddle being tuned echoed in the night. From the upper story, Glynis glimpsed a chink of golden light as a curtain shifted. Her heart skipped a beat and a shiver chased across her bare arms.

"He had it, just as his servants said he would. But the story will have to wait. Come," she said, tugging on his coat sleeve for him to come with her into the woods.

He did not move.

With her eyes accustomed to the darkness, she stared up at him. The moon flirted again with the night, appearing from behind her veil of clouds, and gave light to the set of his clenched jaw and the impatience glinting in his eyes.

"Another time," she pleaded. "We knew this was a gamble, and we have lost. But there will be another time. A better time."

Wet leaves squelched as he shifted his weight. *Please, Christo,* she begged him silently. He had not her skills. Oh, he could charm easily enough, and could sell a blind horse to a crippled man. But too often he chose the straight path, no matter what its cost. And ever since they had learned the full truth of their inheritance, she had felt the frustration growing inside him. That lack of contentment had always been there, as it had with her. Now it had a channel inside him, and she had seen it start to change him.

He wanted—as did she—justice for what had been done to their father, to their mother, to them. But at times she feared that, in him, a dangerous need for revenge had started to grow.

Uneasy with such misgivings, she pushed them aside. They had troubles enough without allowing her inventive mind to see more than was there.

"Come," she said again, tugging on his arm, trying to pull him with her. They could not risk an open confrontation with Francis Dawes. As Lord Nevin, Dawes had power, and the law with him. To his kind they were Gypsies. Vagrants. Thieves, liars, and outcasts. They had no land, no status, no rights. Dawes could have them arrested and transported for no more cause than his word that they had done wrong. He was a gentleman. *A lord,* she thought, with bitter scorn. And he had good reason to want them gone from this land. Or better still, to want them dead.

And who would question the death of a couple of Gypsies if a lord named them thieves?

Christopher had to know all of that. But would he allow caution to rule him—for this night, at least?

Reluctant, his steps dragging, he allowed her to turn him from the inn. A few steps later, they were at the stream, swollen from the spring rain. He lifted her over, and jumped across the rushing water, his long legs easily clearing it, and his soft boots barely making a sound on the opposite bank.

Neither of them spoke as they slipped along the wooded path, back to where *Dej* and Bado waited for them.

Glynis tried to keep her thoughts on stepping over roots and ducking low branches, but her mind kept slipping back to that *gaujo*. It would be best if they traveled on tonight. She wanted miles between herself and the wicked Earl of St. Albans. But the uneasy feeling tickled along her spine like a spider dancing there that no matter where she went she would see him again.

Lord, how she hated things that were fated.

\* \* \*

By dawn, St. Albans knew with a bone deep resignation that he was going to be less than wise about this.

With a cooler head to rule him, he knew that he ought to allow the girl to slip away. Whatever mischief she was making was her own concern. She was, after all, a Gypsy, and therefore about as likely to behave herself as a feral cat. He had only his dislike of being made her dupe to drive him to hunt her.

Of course, there was also that too tempting form of hers, which had kept him restless and tossing last night. And she had shown sense as well as a clever mind—yes, a good deal of sense to run from him when she could instead of giving into his bad intentions.

However, she had set her will against his own.

And he simply could not allow her to do that.

Which meant he would have to hunt her down. And the next time she turned her face up to him, it would not be with eyes shut tight and her mouth set, as if offering herself as a sacrifice. No, it would bloody well not be so. He wanted an image of her wanton and passionate, her body burning as his now simmered.

Blast her, but she had left him in an uncomfortable state, and that would have to be remedied. There was, after all, nothing that the Earl of St. Albans could not have if he so desired it.

But a voice inside mocked his thoughts with a sly, doubting memory of the things he had once wanted which had turned to dust when he had reached for them.

*Oh, yes, you can have anything—anything that is made of vice and sin and earthly pleasure.*

Quite stupidly, some small part of him still ached for the ghostly follies of his youth—the other things for which he'd once upon a time had fancied. He could recall being very young and inventing memories of the parents he had never known. This wistful longing was very like that.

His mouth twisted at such childish desires. Someday he really would find a way to destroy that last part of himself, which still clung to this miserable nostalgic weakness. It really was a most uncommon nuisance to be plagued with that blasted emptiness. And he wondered with detachment if to obliterate that hole inside him might mean that he would have to destroy himself in the process. He rather suspected so.

Of course, his departure from this life would be no great loss to the world, but it rankled him that it would cause a good deal of celebration in some parts of London. He did so hate to give his enemies any satisfaction.

However, such gloomy thoughts did not become a spring morning, when birds sang like blissful idiots, and there was a pretty armful to find with an amusing game of fox-and-hound to play.

With that in mind, he rose and summoned the landlord in a better mood than he would have anticipated.

It took the better part of two hours to make himself presentable. He vowed a dozen times during that time never again to travel without his own servants. What had seemed in London a nuisance of an entourage following him became now a much desired necessity. He ignored his

ruined blue coat, choosing instead a brown one from the light trunk he had had packed by his valet before he had left London a week ago. It took him six lengths of linen to tie a decent cravat, and he had to clench his back teeth to keep from muttering the oaths that filled his mind. But he would not lose his temper, despite being short of rest, badly dressed by his own exacting standards, and frustrated by his gypsy's disappearance.

The only thing he could be grateful for was that the landlord's son had not cut him while shaving him.

At least, he thought as he sat down to a meal in the private parlor downstairs, the landlord set an excellent table. A pottery jug held ale—strong and dark. And upon the dark wood table sat a goodly sized beef haunch. Thick slices of ham lay upon a pewter plate, and hot bread that smelled of heaven, had been carved into thick slices and left with a plate of fresh butter and a bowl of gooseberry jam. Simple fare, but it could almost make this forsaken hostelry reputable.

He ate well and spent his time leisurely gazing out the window to the village of Littlebury, now bathed in mist, and thinking of his Gypsy.

It was all Gypsy stories that she had given him last night, he was certain of it. And yet...and yet...the curse of his own honesty thrummed in his chest like the shimmer of a bell that had been struck. He had learned the hard way how to detect a lie. And he had learned to beware of those who used the illusion of virtue as a way to justify their sins. They were far more dangerous than any honest sinner.

But which parts of her story had been the truth, and what had been invention? She was very good at blending the two. Which meant that she had had a good deal of practice at it.

That thought roused a smile from him, and a stir of anticipation. What would she say when next he saw her? More lies? More tantalizing mixtures of truth and nonsense? He had no doubt that he would see her again. It mattered not where she hid. And it mattered even less if she were wed, for vows were made to be broken. It was why he avoided them.

Well, if she honestly did want something from Nevin, perhaps he would help her get it.

He frowned again.

Had that part been lies? It was possible that the robbery was no more than a way for her to cast herself into his path. He had certainly had other females attempt to gain his notice for their own purposes. An earl's coronet was a rather tempting prize, even if it came attached with a devil as black as he.

But, no, that did not feel right. He knew a few women capable of such twisted machinations, but he would wager the hundred guineas he had won at Newmarket this past week that she had simply leapt to take advantage of opportunity.

What could she really want from Nevin? What really lay in that box, if there was such a box?

The jingle of harness and the stamping of horses in the yard roused St. Albans from the puzzle his Gypsy had posed. Curious, he rose and went to the window.

A heavy black coach stood in the stable yard, a gold crest upon the door, with seal bay horses being put into harness. Outriders in the somber dark blue of Lord Nevin's livery stood beside their mounts, talking idly with each other in the warming morning.

What ridiculous pomp. And altogether too tempting.

Putting on a pleasing smile, St. Albans sauntered outside to await Nevin's appearance.

He passed the time by critically surveying Nevin's team— too short in neck and too narrow, but flashy enough with their matched white stockings. He would not have given even one of them room in his stables.

Finally, Nevin came out of the inn, and St. Albans nodded a good morning to him.

The older man scowled, but St. Albans was far too accustomed to such black stares to take any notice.

“Did you ever find your Gypsy wench?” St. Albans asked, casually pulling out his snuff box and speaking loud enough for grooms and servants to hear. As he expected, Nevin’s face reddened at the innuendo that Nevin’s reasons for wanting to find a Gypsy girl last night were far from proper. The man’s self-righteous pride really was far too easy a target.

Nevin’s mouth pulled down, accentuating the deep lines that bracketed his lips. “If you mean the thief who ransacked my rooms, I am certain she had aid in escaping justice. But I plan to lay a complaint with the magistrate before I quit the district. I am certain the law will not be kind to those who help such criminals.”

Unmoved by this not-so-veiled threat, St. Albans selected a pinch of snuff and asked, “Ransacked? Now there’s a strong word. Tore your room apart, did she? Why, she must be a veritable Amazon. No wonder you were so anxious to find her.”

Nevin’s face darkened to the color of his burgundy coat. He really ought not to wear such a color, St. Albans thought, looking over the heavy coat with its gold brocade which would better suit the last century. Nevin was such a stick to abide by court dress that was more suited to the Queen’s drawing room.

“You are insulting,” Nevin growled, his fists clenched.

St. Albans allowed his stare to travel up and down the man’s too-formal attire. The fellow prickled like a hedgehog, but something dangerous lay under that prickling. Something savage. It roused a like sensation in St. Albans.

Fixing a cold stare on Nevin, St. Albans drawled, “Always so satisfying to achieved a goal. Do you now feel compelled to call me out? If you do, I should mention that I never duel before noon. So tiresome to have to shoot a man before breakfast, but I thought we were speaking of you and your thief. What did she come for that you turn so prickly—the family jewels?”

Nevin’s jaw worked, and St. Albans’s smile widened into something almost genuine. There really was nothing better than to make oneself an irritation to those who were too smug in their delusions of righteousness.

For a moment, he really thought the man would turn away. Nevin was one of those who disdained dueling as barbaric—such nonsense, of course.

But the fellow hesitated, his chin still jutting forward, and a stubborn look in his eyes as if he could not let go of this, as if he had to make others see the truth of the matter as he saw it. “I have no idea what she could have wanted—other than whatever money or gems she might have found. That’s the way of those Gypsies.”

He spat the word out as if it was an unpleasant taste, and St. Albans had to check a spurt of anger. He took a breath, and took a rein on his temper, and illumination clicked into place.

*Good heavens, the man actually has something to hide.* Fear had flickered at the back of Nevin’s pale gray eyes. And a touch of shame, for which he would probably die before admitting.

St. Albans recognized the emotion at once. He always committed his sins in public, for it was impossible to carry shame for something the entire world knew. But what shameful sins did Nevin hide?

Smiling, St. Albans flipped closed his snuff with his thumb and slipped the carved ivory box into his waistcoat pocket.

“I suppose those Gypsies look for whatever plump pocket is near. Yet, it is quite amazing then that she went to your rooms, and did not bother with the guineas I left in mine. Do you think that mysterious Gypsy sense told her that you traveled with something far more valuable?”

Nevin’s scowl deepened and turned away, as if the conversation was over.

“It’s Retribution,” St. Albans said.

His expression startled, Nevin swung around to glare at St. Albans, that faint shimmering fear back in those pale eyes.

*How satisfying to score a point*, St. Albans thought, now thoroughly enjoying himself. There seemed to be some truth to his Gypsy’s story, after all.

“Retribution,” he repeated. “The horse that won those coins for me at Newmarket. Quite an amazing animal. By Aston, out of Forgetful.”

Nevin’s eyes blazed and his mouth curved into something close to a snarl. St. Albans held still, waiting. How close to home had he struck?

With his expression souring to disdain, Nevin’s heavy chin lifted. “You’re a damned wastrel, and a disgrace to your name.”

“Oh, I waste nothing. I assure you of that.”

Scowling, Nevin opened his mouth as if to say more, but a shout from one of the grooms drew his attention.

“Ready, m’lord.”

With a last contemptuous glance at St. Albans, Nevin stalked away. His servants bowed before him, lowered the steps before he reached them and put them up again with a jumpiness that spoke of insecurity in their positions. With a coach horn blowing imperiously, and outriders leading the procession, the heavy coach lumbered forward.

An impossible cavalcade to miss. And any fool—or Gypsy—could track and follow that parade. Well, that certainly made clear how his Gypsy came to take note of Lord Nevin. But just what had she come here to steal from the man?

It would take some work, unpleasant as that was, to discover the truth. However, he would console himself with the fact that his Gypsy would make it up to him someday. She would—in one fashion or another.

\* \* \*

Glynis watched her mother lay the cards upon the thick, gold Turkish carpet. Even though her mother could not see, she still knew the pattern of the cards, for she had been laying out cards since she was a girl herself. And she knew the cards by the feel of them, by the edges and nicks and the painted images on the old deck.

They sat on the ground, red pillows under her mother, but Glynis preferred the hard earth. She liked the connection to land, and she liked to feel the hum of it through her bones, and she loved the reassurance it gave her. The land would always be there. The seasons came in order. The world turned as it should. Those things she trusted. All else she regarded with deep suspicion.

Even the cards.

Too often they disappointed. In fact, all her life had seemed to be heartache after trouble. But it would not be like that forever. No. This year everything was changing. This year the wheel turned, and their lives would change. For the better—or for the worse.

She wanted that change, for the hope it brought that she might at last be able to have a real home. A cottage in a village was all she had ever wanted. A place to live, where she was known and where she knew others. Christo wanted far more, but a house would be enough for her. A respectable house in a respectable village. And she wished for it with such a yearning that at times she feared it would never happen.

And at those times her mother insisted on pulling out the cards, telling Glynis, “The card will show where trouble lays. When you know the path, it is easier to walk with courage.”

*I know where trouble lays*, Glynis thought, her mouth pulling down with annoyance. But she did not mention again the *gaujo* she had met.

It had been nearly a fortnight since her encounter with that *gaujo* and Francis Dawes. She had told Christopher and her mother only a sketch of what had happened: her attempt to steal the box, how she had hidden in the Earl of St. Albans's room, and how she had given up her clothes in order to slip away. Christo's expression had darkened at that, and Glynis had thought it would be a very good thing if he and that earl never chanced to meet.

Her mother had also frowned at the story, her sightless eyes clouded. Her mother still seemed a young woman, a little thickened by age, but still strong. Still vibrant. However, that day her face turned as gray as the streak that ran through the inky blackness of her hair. For a moment, Glynis could only see the lines worn on her mother's narrow face. *Ah, she warned us not to act just yet, and it did not go well.*

But her mother had only shaken her head, as if accepting an inevitable truth. Turning away, she had ordered her faithful Bado to pack the camp.

Having her mother say nothing—not even a rebuke for ignoring the council she had given her children—was far worse than any lecture. Glynis still cringed inwardly as she thought of the disappointment on her mother's face. She was such a bad daughter. But then she was bad at most things, except for her light fingers and her dancing.

Those talents seemed so little in this world.

Since then, they had traveled a good distance, stopping tonight outside the village of Epping. It was closer to London than Glynis recalled ever going before, and she knew that her mother—and Christo—were thinking of the great house in London. Lord Nevin's House, where Francis Dawes now lived.

However, it was not the proximity to him that had had Glynis fussing with the campfire that night, making it and then remaking it three times before she had lit it. And it was not the warming, longer days, with a hint of summer in the night breeze that left her restless. It was the thought that her *gaujo* lord might be near.

Shifting uncomfortably now, Glynis glanced around the small glade where they had stopped. Anything so she did not have to look at the cards being laid down. She did not want to see what they might say. They might tell her too much truth.

Bado and Christopher had pitched the tents in the clearing of a stand of maples, and the trees were newly leafed in fresh green. Their pony—Kralisi—cropped grass nearby, her front legs hobbled, but 'Lisi never wandered far.

The two men had gone to a horse fair, and now Glynis wished she had gone with them. Only she might have been tempted into breaking her vow on how she must now use her skills to restore what they had lost. She might, instead of thinking of the future, have thought of the present and the small fare in the pot tonight and liberated a few coins from some fat farmer's pockets.

Ah, well, soon Christo would be back with broken and ill-used horses that could be fattened on summer grass and retrained, and sold for a good profit. Bado knew how to whiten a horse's teeth and file them so ten years looked like five. And Christo could teach a horse clever tricks that impressed a *gaujo* into paying more.

She wished she had such abilities, and not the curse of light fingers and a silent step. But her gift had sometimes been all that had kept them fed. She prayed now her gift might be what could change the course of their lives.

With a quiet sigh, she glanced up to the sky, just turning purple at the top with the gathering night. *Someday*, she vowed to the first star she glimpsed. *Someday I shall have a cottage with a cow and a garden, and I shall never have to steal again. And I shall belong someplace. And Christo will—*

“You don't listen, *Chei!*”

Glynis straightened with a twinge of guilt. Her mother only used the Romany for daughter when she was irritated.

Running her touch over the ace of spades with a still elegant hand, her mother said, "Preparation is needed. There is power to overcome obstacles, but only if you do not give into bitterness. There is more at stake here than the material."

Wrinkling her nose, Glynis dutifully stared at the cards. It was like this always. With the cards, her mother saw things. She only saw cards. And only heard cryptic advice. Why could the cards simply say, "*Do this!*" or "*Do not do that!*"

Her mother turned over the next card, laid it down and read it with her touch.

"The king of spades," she said, her voice still clear and as strong as a young woman's, but her tone hushed. "The highest card, and yet this one can bring failure as well as success. He is the 'law,' and yet his life is one of uncertainty in dealings with others. He is betrayed. The choice is his to touch the world for good, or to sink to evil. Be cautious with this one. For as he has been harmed, so will he give back to others—he will betray you."

Chewing on her lower lip, Glynis stared at the card. Who did the card stand for? For Francis Dawes? For that earl? For someone yet to come into her life? Someone in London?

Looking up, she stared into her mother's sightless gaze. "Who is he?"

Her *dej* began to gather the cards, and gave a small shrug. Her black shawl slid off the black of her dress. For as long as Glynis had memories, her mother had worn black. Even though she was young enough to have married again, she wore black for the dead husband she loved still.

"You will know," she told Glynis. "God gives you knowledge when you need it. Have patience for now."

With a frustrated growl, Glynis threw up her hands. "Patience. Why ever did you tell anything to Christo and I if we are only to sit on our hands and wait?"

"It was time to tell you."

"But not time to act! It never seems to be time to act."

Slowly, Glynis's mother climbed to her feet. Glynis rose as well, and reached out to help her mother.

Swatting away Glynis's help, her mother straightened. "The time will come, as the time came at last to tell you of your heritage. Bah! Christo at least listens. You! You are too like your father. You do not see that you cannot walk straight when the road is bent. And this road is very bent. Very bent. Beware the lesson your father had to learn."

Glynis swallowed the dryness in her mouth. She dropped her stare to the ground. Her father had paid for not listening to cautions with his life.

She looked up to see her mother's dark form disappear into the nearest tent, the white canvas flap closing behind her.

Scuffing a stone with her boot, Glynis turned away from the tent and the firelight. She had not meant to be so disrespectful. But, oh, she did want to hurry this. She did not trust this waiting. She wanted this to be over. She wanted to know her place in this world. She wanted a home for her mother, and for Christo to be what he always should have been.

Perhaps she simply wanted too much.

Rubbing her arms against the cooling evening, Glynis walked to where 'Lisi grazed. She leaned her arm over the sturdy pony's back, not caring if white and black hairs and horse smells attached themselves to her dark blue dress. 'Lisi's warmth soaked into her, a comforting presence.

She had wished patience for Christo, but she ought to have included herself in that, too, it seemed. It had been as much her plan as his to give into the temptation to do more than wait and

follow Lord Nevin's coach. And that had led them only to more disappointment for they had gotten nothing from that *gaujo*. Ah, she should be used to that by now.

The steady sound of 'Lisi's grazing began to ease her unhappiness, but still that need to do something mixed uncomfortably with the dread that things really would not work out as she wanted. Ah, but she did not want to spend another winter in tents and on muddy roads. Her mother never complained, but Glynis hated it most when the icy weather came and her mother moved stiff and slow, like an old woman.

'Lisi shifted, moving to a new patch of grass. Glynis followed the pony, brushing shedding hair from the pony's back, scratching at the top of 'Lisi's shoulders.

"Ah, 'Lisi. Too bad I am not like you, and happy to be anywhere that thick grass grows."

'Lisi lifted her head and nodded, as if agreeing, but Glynis knew the pony was only enjoying the attention. She smiled. And the back of her neck began to tingle.

A branch snapped under a horse's step. Straightening, Glynis turned and started towards the sound, eager to see the horses Bado and Christo had bought. But it was a giant of a black horse that stepped from the shadows of the sheltering maples.

At the sight of the rider on his back Glynis froze.

*Him!* That *gaujo!*

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