

***Soldier of Fortune***  
*(The King's Courtesan)*

***London, 1651***

The day Hope Mathews' life changed forever dawned crisp and clear. She awoke clutching her kitten, lying on a cot in a corner garret of a steep-gabled four-story building. Her home, a substantial structure comprised of three linked houses, all of them leaning drunkenly over the street below, was at the centre of a zigzag web of side streets and alleys, some barely wide enough for two pedestrians to pass. It was late autumn. The metallic bite of winter was in the air and frost patterned the rooftops, making the city beyond her windows shimmer like some alabaster-and-diamond fairyland. She imagined she was a princess, trapped high in a tower, waiting for a handsome rescuer to charge the battlements and take her away.

The bells started ringing well before dawn, invading the gloomy quiet generally reserved for bakers starting their day and linkboys ending theirs. The sleepy city was stirring, and there was already a bustle in the streets below. The Lord Protector and his army had been sighted. Fresh from victories in Ireland and Scotland, the young Charles Stuart driven from England's shores, they were returning home. Despite the Protector's edicts against gambling, roistering and drink, soldiers did as they had always done. As the good people of London—deprived of any spectacle since the beheading of their former king—set out early to secure a place along the route to watch the coming parade, every shopkeeper, winemaker, tavern-worker and whore were making preparations for what promised to be a lucrative day.

Drury Lane, on the eastern edge of Covent Garden, was one of the most colorful areas in London even in these drab times. Lords and ladies, hawkers and beggars, and charlatans of every nationality rubbed shoulders in this part of the city. Brightly painted signboards hung from every house and business. Unicorn horns and dragons marked the apothecary, wheat sheaves and a sugarloaf advertised the bakery, and her own home proudly displayed a golden-haired siren with wide blue eyes and crimson lips.

Her mother boasted to one and all that The Merry Strumpet was listed in *The Wandering Whore*, and as its proprietor she was noted therein as one of London's best-known bawds. It was one of many establishments counting on profits this day, and she needed to escape immediately or be trapped running errands, raking cinders and cleaning floors.

Hope slipped down the stairs and ducked through an alley joining a laughing band of urchins who greeted her as one of their own. The sun had risen, the throng was thickening, and they weaved in and out of jostling crowds, nimbly dodging carts and angry merchants as they stuffed their pockets with filched fruit and biscuits. She lost her companions as she approached the city centre, their loose-knit brotherhood disbanding as each sought a perch from which to watch the show.

The steady drumming in the distance was getting louder by the minute and she jumped up and down, trying to see over the heads in front of her. Spying a low-hung balcony, she forced her way through a river of people and pulled herself up, kicking and squirming, wrapping her arms

around a beam. Ignoring the protests of its already cramped inhabitants, she positioned herself so she had a bird's-eye view of the street below.

First came a vast army of grim-faced pikemen in their shining breastplates, pot helmets and buff leather coats. They marched in rigid formation, their weapons bristling as the air rang with the tramping of booted feet. Then came Cromwell at the head of the Ironsides, his company of horse, but there was none of the pageantry and color, the smiles and waves and dashing displays of a royalist parade.

They passed by, row upon row, a faceless army with nothing to distinguish one from another and the cheers that greeted them were dutiful rather than spontaneous. It was a clear display of might and power. A veiled threat and stark reminder more than a celebration, but any kind of public gathering was scare in the city these days, and any spectacle was preferable to none at all.

Hope was beginning to wonder if the adventure had been worth the bother when a prancing black horse caught her attention. It frothed and fretted, tossing its head and stepping sideways, breaking an otherwise perfect formation, yet its rider didn't seem inclined to curb it. Unlike his fellows, who looked straight ahead, he seemed to scan the crowd with interest. Tall and broad-shouldered, he managed the beast with ease. He wore no uniform and looked more like a cavalier than a Parliamentarian. He must be an officer, and a wellborn one at that. Her heart thudded with girlish excitement.

From a distance he appeared to be young and handsome, much like the gallant rescuer she imagined in her daydreams. It was hard to get a good look at him, though, with his wide-brimmed hat pulled low, obscuring his features.

Interest piqued, she leaned out farther, trying to get a better look, when a sudden scuffle behind her knocked her off balance and sent her tumbling to the street below. She lurched to her feet a moment before a shod hoof would have crushed her fingers, only to back into the hindquarters of a startled horse. When it shied away from her, its rider cursing, she slipped and almost fell again. Surrounded on all sides, she dodged and darted, wooden shoes slipping on the muddy cobbles, trying to remain upright as she was buffeted from beast to beast. As her panic grew, someone snarled and cuffed her and a man kicked her between the shoulders, growling for her to get out of the way. She was trying, but she couldn't see over them to find a way out and they just kept coming. People were trampled to death in London's narrow streets every day, and if she fell again—

A strong hand gripped the back of her dress and swung her up and into the air as easily as if she were a small child. Her rescuer deposited her in his lap, holding her tight with one arm, apparently heedless of his fine clothes and her muddy form.

"Apologies, my lady, for the rough handling and the loss of your shoes, but you seemed in imminent danger of being trampled."

It was him! The man she'd watched but moments before. The man from her daydreams. He was real. He had come to her rescue. She had never been at a loss for words before, but now, when she desperately wanted to say something witty, charming, and memorable, she was tongue-

tied. “I...I...”

“There now, lass. Take a deep breath and don’t worry. You’ve had a scare and need some time to gather your wits.”

She almost moaned in frustration. He thought her a witless fool!

“You’re shivering. Sit close now, and share my warmth.” She *was* cold and she had nearly died. She sank against him, her arms wrapped tight around his waist, enjoying the feeling of comfort and safety, the strength she felt in his arms and chest, and the sound of another heart beating, just inches from her own. As he tucked his cloak around she heard cheering from the crowd. She’d had no idea anyone was aware of her plight or cared if they were. Now she beamed and waved to them and they roared their approval.

Her companion chuckled. “I think we have brought some entertainment to an otherwise dull event. I’m afraid you’ll have to ride it out with me the rest of the way. There’s no place to put you down safely until we reach the palace gates. Will that suit?”

She nodded—shy for the first time in her life.

“Excellent! You’re safe now, lass. And you’ve the best seat in the house. Relax and enjoy the view.”

She felt like a princess in his arms, and as unlikely as it might seem, she decided he was her prince. Why else had he passed her way this day? Why had she noticed him right away? How was it she had fallen just as he was passing and what made him save her when no one else had even tried? It didn’t matter if she found nothing to say this moment, for fate had brought him to her and he was destined to be hers.

Even so, she still wasn’t sure what he looked like. His hat was pulled low, keeping his face in shadow. She could tell he was young. She could tell he was handsome from his strong chin, firm mouth, and bright smile, but she couldn’t see his eyes.

When they reached the courtyard outside the palace gates he used his horse as a bulwark against the crowd, making a little island in a corner by the wall. He dismounted first, and then lifted her from the saddle as if she were light as air. He grinned and wiped a speck of dirt from her nose. Her face blazed with embarrassment, but his smile was kind and amused. “You’re hard to see, lass, under all of this.” He rubbed a dab of mud from her cheek with one finger. “But if you’re half as lovely as those eyes, you must be a vision.” He took her hand and bowed, as though she were a great lady, and then slipped half a crown in her palm. “To replace your shoes, my lady.”

Her heart was pounding so loud it was a wonder he didn’t hear it. “Thank you, my lord. For saving my life.” They were the only words she could find.

“No lord I, lass. Just a humble soldier who stumbled upon a pixie on the way home. To catch one must mean luck of some kind. Stay safe, girl, and wish me well.”

She watched as he rode away. She didn’t know his eyes, she didn’t know his name, but she knew that he was hers and she would see him again. She caught one last glimpse of him as he passed through the castle gates. As if sensing her gaze upon him, he looked back at her and waved.

She started home with frozen toes, a smile she was sure would never go away, and the feeling she was walking on air. When she wasn't humming to herself, she broke into laughter or sudden bursts of song. Halfway there, she met two of her mother's ladies accompanied by a burly doorman. They hurried over, breathless. They had been searching for her all morning. Her mother needed her at once.

The brothel was always humming with energy and noise. It rang with the sound of song and laughter, though the singing was drunken and off-key and the laughter often shrill. It smelled of braised beef, brandy and ale, stale perfume and stale sex. Silks and petticoats rustled up and down the stairs and in and out of the secret exit for those guests who preferred anonymity, and well-dressed gentlemen and partly clothed ladies wandered its halls.

Several of those who lived there were her friends. Her mother's ladies told her stories as they taught her how to mix perfume from oils and flowers, and how to paint her face and fix her hair. She wasn't terribly interested in those lessons, but many of them were country girls, full of other stories. She loved their tales of princes and princesses, magical folk who granted wishes, and careless girls who got lost in the wild. *And now I have a story all my own.*

They had told her other things, too, over the years. Things about men, though her mother had been careful to keep her away from the customers. How to soothe them, how to excite them, and how to give them pleasure. How to use a beeswax cap or silk-covered sponge to prevent an unwanted baby, and a sheath to protect against a man who appeared diseased. Between their frank talk and what she'd witnessed through open doors, around corners and in supposedly quiet corridors, she'd seen enough of naked husbands and great lords, callow young men and randy soldiers to feel she didn't need or want to learn anymore. *That's not love.* Love was what *she* wanted. And she'd found her true love today.

Not that her mother would approve. From early on her mother had tried to instill in her the importance of wise commerce. It was how she herself rose from the ranks of drabs prowling London's streets to become a prosperous woman of affairs. A life of prostitution and drinking might have ruined her looks, but not her business sense, and it was that, she maintained, that would see a woman into a comfortable old age. *But I don't have to be like her. I don't and I won't.*

Hope was hurried up to her room with a great deal of fussing and clucking, only to find her mother waiting with a warm smile and a cup of hot chocolate. She eyed her warily and clutched her kitten defensively. Her mother was not one for kind gestures or maternal concern.

"Ah! Here you are, lovey. And just in time. Today will be a special day for you indeed."

She blinked, confused. "I don't understand. How do you mean?"

"You've grown up within these walls, girl. You understand. Today you take up your duties as a woman. You've had a roof over your head all these years and plenty to eat, too. That's more than many a poor lamb in London can say. But you *are* a woman now. Your courses started last month. Your greatest possession besides beauty is your maidenhead. A jewel that is. A thing of great value. Something a woman can give only once, despite what certain lying sluts might do or say. But it needs proper management. Just like arranging a good marriage. Don't

look so shocked, child.” She reached out a gnarled hand to pat her shoulder in an awkward and unconvincing display of motherly concern.

“You’re a whore, my dear. Born into it right and proper, though I was married to your father for all that. You’d best get used to the idea because you can never be aught else. You’ve no breeding, no property, and there’s no chance any decent man will have you. A girl like you won’t ever be married and who would want it? Your own father was a useless bastard. But for all that you’re a rare beauty, with his raven hair and very fine eyes indeed. And you’ve charm and a quick wit. Such gifts are wasted on a wife. She’s no need of them to catch a man, provided she has money, and she’s nay allowed to make use of them once she is married. Property she is. Broodmare and slave.”

Hope was too shocked to speak. It was the longest conversation she’d ever had with this stranger who’d once been her mother, and it was not the awkward declaration of love she’d both dreaded and longed for. She blinked back tears, feeling like the world’s biggest fool. *She didn’t keep me safe to protect me, but to add to my value.* She wanted to feel contempt and hatred but she couldn’t move past a soul killing pain. *I should have known.*

Her mother stroked her hair as she spoke, taking no notice of how it made her flinch. *Is this how she recruits new girls? Stroking and cooing like a beady-eyed pigeon? Is this all I am to her?*

“Now look here, at the pretty dress his lordship has sent you!”

The dress, with its white satin underskirt and sleeves shot through with silver braid, looked like a wedding dress but for the indecently low-cut bodice. She knew what it meant. There would be no prince for her. No choice. No happy ending.

“Which lord?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Let’s leave that as a surprise for now. It will add authenticity to the undertaking.” Taking her silence for acceptance, her mother rubbed her hands together and nodded briskly. “Good girl! The anticipation is building, child. We’re to have an auction tonight and you are the prize. There’s naught to fear. You’ve seen enough of what happens here to know that, and only my best gentlemen will take part. Remember what all the other girls have taught you and use it well. You’ll fetch a fine price, my dear. Half to you and half to the house. You’ll be off to a grand start in life. No daughter of mine will be a common whore. You’ll be a rich man’s mistress. You’re a lovely girl. Sharp and lively too. You’ll climb higher than I ever dreamed or dared.”

There must have been something—a flash in her eyes, the stubborn tilt of her chin, that hinted at rebellion—because when her mother left she stationed a doorman in the corridor, and locked the door behind her.

They bathed and perfumed her, and then tamed and combed her unruly hair so it fell like a dark silken river to her waist. They ushered her into a paneled room where her mother and two of her ‘ladies’ sat in attendance as if she were a bride. There were at least five gentlemen present, though all she could see were their boots. She kept her eyes on the floor, willing them all to disappear, imagining if she but closed her eyes and opened them again the day would start anew.

But it didn’t, and she stood red-faced and mute as they joked and murmured, waiting for

the bidding to begin. There was no doubt as to the outcome. Sir Charles Edgemont would have her. 'Twas he who'd provided the dress. Nevertheless, her mother knew an auction would raise the price he paid for her 'dowry', and had refused to spare her the humiliation when several hundred pounds might be at stake. Two of the ladies stripped her of her bodice and overskirt as the bidding heated up, leaving her tear stained and trembling, standing in her shift.

Inflamed by the sight of her and determined no other man should see naked what was meant to be his, Edgemont rose and bid two thousand pounds, raising howls of protest from the other gentlemen but effectively quelling the game. Hope looked at him then, from under her lashes. His hair was dark and close cropped, interspersed here and there with flecks of grey. His eyes were cold, his face harsh, and his jaw square.

Furious at being duped when he'd expected a private negotiation, but too proud to back out in front of his friends, Sir Charles took her wrist in a cruel grip and jerked her toward the door, stopping before he left to toss a heavy purse on the table. "This will have to do for now, madam. I had not expected the price to soar so high. My man will bring you the rest tomorrow."

"But of course, my lord. You are known throughout London as a man who pays his debts. I shall await your pleasure. In the meantime, take the girl and enjoy her."

It was clear the auction had raised far more than even she had anticipated, and the poorly concealed smirk on her face and hard-edged gleam of avarice in her eyes almost made Hope retch. Instead, she placed a delicate hand on Sir Charles' chest and leaned into him, shivering, tucking her head against his shoulder. His lips twisted in annoyance, but he released his grip on her wrist and removed his coat, wrapping it around her. She spoke for the first time since entering the room.

"You must only give her one half of it, my lord. For the rest was promised to me."

"You're as greedy and canny as your mother, girl," he growled. "If you're a virgin, then I'm the Archbishop of Canterbury. But I'll have my money's worth from you nonetheless."

"Of course, Most Reverend Sir," she said with a curtsy, as if he *were* the archbishop. Amidst her mother's furious squawking and the laughter of the other men, a grim-faced Sir Charles shook his head ruefully, bit back a reluctant chuckle, and bundled her out the door and into his waiting coach. As she watched the only home she'd ever known recede into the distance, her thoughts weren't of her mother, or fairytales, or what was to come, but of what would become of her kitten.

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The day Hope met her own true love was the day her mother sold her. It was the day she lost all hope of him. The day her childhood ended. She never saw him again. She never spoke to her mother again, and she stopped believing in happy ever after. Her mother had named her Hope. It seemed a cruel jest, but she did the only thing she could do. She took the name and made it a talisman. She did what she needed to, to keep her own hopes alive. The day she left her mother's doorstep she stopped dreaming about what couldn't be, and started planning for what might. The only thing she couldn't stop was asking herself one question. *What kind of parent puts a price on innocence and sells their child like a slave?* It still had the power to steal her

breath.

Nevertheless, Edgemont wasn't a vicious man and he had proven to be a good teacher, and what started as a cruel betrayal was the first step of a journey that transformed her from a barefoot ragamuffin into a well-spoken, fashionably dressed, well-educated young woman with a smattering of French and the attention of a monarch. *How dramatic and shortsighted we are as children.* Along the way, she had let go of her fantasies of true love and imaginary princes, and found herself a real one with all his flaws and imperfections. If from time to time her heart ached for something more, for someone else, no one knew it but her.