

Riding hard along the North Road for Newark, Jack slipped his hand into his coat pocket and hefted the modest string of pearls he'd taken from his bedraggled countess. They had a pleasing weight and a sensuous texture, slipping from his palm, sliding through his fingers to pool in a smoothly rounded cluster, waiting to be gathered and caressed again. They reminded him of his virginal adventuress. Natural, lacking in pretension, with an understated quality and substance that set her more flamboyant sisters in the shade.

He'd been feeling restless and empty of late, dissatisfied with everything, taking no pleasure from that which he used to enjoy. Bored, jaded, he'd been hoping for an adventure. Anything to break the monotony that made one day seem exactly like another. He'd had no real expectations when he set out to meet Perry. He'd certainly not expected Arabella.

A countess, no less. A pampered and coddled denizen of a society he had no use for except to line his pockets and temporarily ease his ennui. After that, nothing had gone as he'd expected. He was not a cruel man, nor a callous one, and his reputation for gallantry to the fair sex was fairly won. Memories lingered still of a broken woman who'd repeatedly placed herself between him and his father's fists. The stranger who had helped him years ago had come just an hour too late to help her. She was already dead, lying with a broken neck, discarded on the floor amidst broken crockery and bottles.

He had helped Arabella because he could, and because of memories from long ago. But he hadn't expected to like her quite so much. *I didn't even see her face until we were in the hall.* And then it was battered and bloodied. It was her voice that had first captured his interest—a sultry purr that almost belied her inexperience and modest dress. It suggested a marriage of primness and passion that made a man want to unlace her clothing and unlock the heat simmering within. He'd had a too brief taste of it in her innocent yet eager response to his kisses.

She had won his admiration when she kicked the bucket and let loose a string of curses that would have made a London dockworker blush. His teasing had been to distract her and take her mind off their descent, but he'd enjoyed her reactions as she had good-naturedly, if cautiously, played along. It was a courtesy and camaraderie he had not expected from one of her background.

She'd certainly come as a surprise. None of the women he knew could blush *and* climb down a sheer stone wall without panic or complaint. She spoke her mind, was artless, genuine, and intrepid, and she felt surprisingly good in his arms. He had enjoyed their escape from her prison in ways she hadn't the experience to imagine. His body had accustomed itself to the weight and feel of her as she rode in his lap and was missing her already. Worse than that, he had been reckless, letting down his guard and telling her things that could cost his freedom or his life should she decide to report them. He was damned if he knew what imp of the devil had prompted him to give her his real name.

He tightened his hand around the pearls. She was not for him, and he was not he for her. Taking the necklace had been an impulsive act. One meant to remind them both of who they were. She was a lady and an innocent. He hadn't rescued her only to finish the job her mongrel cousin had asked him to do. She was lucky it was only her necklace he stole, for she was as enticing and ready to pluck as a juicy piece of ripe fruit. He wagered she'd be married within the

year despite the nonsense she spouted about glorying in her spinsterhood. Besides, she lived in London, and whether it was as Swift Nick, Samuel Johnson, John Nevison or Gentleman Jack, London was no place for him to be.

Most of his peers carved out a territory of sorts. Many roamed Hounslow Heath. Crisscrossed by the Bath and Exeter roads it offered rich pickings from wealthy visitors headed to the West Country resorts, or courtiers heading to Windsor. Others stalked Hyde Park, Islington, and the streets and outskirts of London. The Newmarket Road, used by gamblers and members of the court on their way to the races had been the scene of a pitched battle between highwaymen and courtiers not long ago, and there were many other favored haunts.

Swift Nick had frequented them all, but Jack hunted only on the North Road. There were not many men of his height and bearing, and it wouldn't do for the two of them to be recognized in the same place and as the same person. The good-natured king who had pardoned him once, was unlikely to be amused.

Leave the lass to London then, and her spinster's ways, a pity though it be. He settled back in the saddle and the mare slowed to an easy canter they could both sustain for miles. Bess was built for endurance and speed and he'd not rushed her on the journey south, yet even she had her limits, and he promised her a rest and himself too, once this last task was done. Maybe after, he would go and see Peg, a pretty tavern wench from up the road who'd given him the eye more than once. He'd been keeping to himself too much of late. Perhaps she'd be of a mind to accompany him to the next public dance. His inexplicable attraction to a frumpish old maid, who longed to serve on grand juries and fight crime as a parish constable, only proved he'd been without female companionship far too long.

Yawning, he slowed Bess to a walk and allowed himself a short nap, trusting to the mare's surefootedness and good sense. As he nodded off, he dreamt of being arrested by a green-eyed *feme sole*, and held captive by honeyed kisses and a soft embrace.

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Jack passed through Nottingham along the broad market road with its pillared walkway about an hour before dawn. The industrious would be waking soon, and the drunks had gone to bed. The usually bustling town was still, almost as if it were holding its breath, waiting for the day to begin, and the steady clopping of Bess's hooves echoed eerily down the empty street. He loved these dreamlike moments peculiar to the night, when the world around him seemed to slow and stop and reveal itself as something new.

Leaving Notts behind, he forded the Trent and pressed on—his destination just an hour down the road. A heavy band of low-level cloud was fast approaching, and by the time he reached the farmhouse the wind was howling and he was cold and drenched. He settled Bess in a stall piled high with fresh straw, rubbing her down, checking her hooves, and leaving her oats and water. Inside the house, two guards were passed-out drunk over a heavy trestle table littered with cards and spilled drinks. Another with a bloody nose lay unconscious on the floor.

A carrotty-pated, bacon-fed fellow slumped in the room's only comfortable piece of furniture, an oversized, overstuffed armchair set before the hearth. A well placed kick started the fire back to life, and two fresh logs soon had it roaring. Jack tapped the oblivious occupant's boot with his own, and then hauled him up by the front of his shirt and dragged him to a pile of sacking in the corner. He threw back a shot of reasonably good brandy, tore off a hunk of cheese and bread, and settled in front of the fire with his long legs stretched out to enjoy the heat. A moment later, he was asleep.

He awoke to the feel of Rat-faced Perry's pistol pressed tight against his right temple.

"Morning, Jack," the little man said in a menacing tone. "What brings you here to burn my wood, eat my food and drink my liquor? I don't recall issuing an invitation."

Jack yawned, turning into the gun barrel as he shifted to look at his host. "Yours is only half-cocked," he said with a slight smile. "Feel mine. It's bigger than yours, and fully cocked and loaded." The pistol, which had been hidden within the folds of his cloak wedged tight against Perry's scrotum. "I wonder which of us would miss our respective body parts the most, should an unintended accident occur?" His voice was cool and amused.

Perry prodded Jack's head once with the barrel. "Some say you make no use of this at all." He lowered his weapon and dropped it in his pocket.

"Aye I've heard as much myself. And some say the same of you." Jack pulled the hammer back to half-cocked and raised his own pistol so it pointed to the ceiling. "You're a jumpy fellow, Perry. Though I'll not blame you for that given what sorry men you have. I might have been the devil himself and nary a one of them would have noticed. 'Tis no excuse for being so mean with your hospitality, though. Some morning ale would not go amiss."

"Aye? Been about some thirsty work, have you?"

"No more so than usual."

"You're getting careless, I'd say, Jack. You slept through the messenger that just woke me. Someone stole the girl."

"Is that so? It seems your friend has a hard time keeping track of his women."

"Why don't you join me in my office? It's private there."

Perry's office was tasteful and understated, with golden oak paneling and such refinements as a globe, books, and a pendulum clock. They seemed rather odd pretensions for a criminal overlord and whoremaster, but for some odd reason, Jack found it rather endearing. Someone had furnished ale, meat, and bread, and he reached for a loaf. He often forgot to eat and sleep when wrapped up in an adventure.

He didn't flinch when the rat-faced man drove a dagger between the splayed fingers of his left hand, but nodded and took it, using it to stab a tender piece of capon. "Thank you, Perry."

"Was it you took that girl, Jack?"

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"You're known to get odd notions from time to time."

Jack shrugged. "I was paid to deliver her, and deliver her I did. But I'd have a care, were I in your shoes, Perry."

“Eh? Is that a threat?”

“Just a friendly warning. What do you know about this fellow, really?”

“I know he’s a Sir, Jack. A fellow might expect a man such as yourself to recognize such things.”

“Pah! He’s no better than you or me, man. Like recognizes like. We’re as much gentleman as he is. A minor knight perhaps, a baronet at best—but a commoner for all that, and she a lady. There was something wrong about it, I tell you.” Jack tapped his nose and gave the other man a knowing look.

“He owns a manor house, Jack. He gave me three thousand pounds.”

“You own a manor house, Perry. But it doesn’t make you a fine lord now, does it? We both know you’re as crooked as sin. Your cove might be flush in the pocket at the moment, but some men drop that at the gaming tables in an evening, easy. Why I’ve done so a time or two myself. And when they can find naught but their fingers in their pockets, what do they do? They rob, or they cheat, or if they can pass as a gentleman, steal themselves an heiress or an inheritance, don’t they? Think about it. *Cousin*, she called him.”

“What’s all that to me?” Perry huffed.

Jack leaned his elbows on the table, beckoning him closer. “What if there *were* an inheritance, and the girl turns up dead?” His voice was low, almost a whisper. “A countess in her own right she was. Rich and titled. Did you know that? Not the sort that disappears without someone asking questions. You held her here a few days, didn’t you? He arranged for you to abduct her. Doubtless, he arranged for witnesses too. Who better to blame if some ill befalls her, than you?” Jack reached across the table and patted Perry’s cheek. “Or *me*....I would take it very personal if it were me.” The menace in his voice was unmistakable.

Perry blanched. “Jack, I swear I—”

Jack held a finger to his lips in a gesture for silence. “So now we best undo any damage that might have been done, eh? Sadly, given our respective professions, a judge might be inclined to take his word over yours or mine. Unless....” He paused, drumming the table with his fingers.

“Unless what?”

“Unless others knew him for the nasty sort he really was. I can arrange for that, my dear, in exchange for a nice wheel of your excellent cheese, the three thousand pounds he paid you, and—”

Perry, whiskers quivering, too outraged to speak, banged the table and squeaked repeatedly as he turned an alarming shade of red.

Jack held up a warning hand. When he spoke, there was a hard edge to his voice. “I have never killed an innocent, Perry. You endangered my good name. Through avarice or stupidity, I neither know nor care. No man profits from hazarding me...but me. There are other ways we might settle the matter of course, but I suggest you think of it as recompense, apology, or a gesture of goodwill. We understand each other, don’t we?”

Perry muttered something under his breath about hell-born babes as Jack poured them both brimming tankards of ale.

“Excellent! I am delighted we could come to an accord. I shall see to it that *Sir Robert*... is recognized for the villain he is, and when you hear the news, you will put it about, with the appropriate amount of shock and horror, that he has come to you many times in the past seeking to pawn his plate and jewels. Naturally, you took him as an honest country squire caught at low ebb, as happens to many a gentleman in these evil times.”

“And just what is it *you’re* going to do?” Perry asked sourly.

Jack rose and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry about that. You tend to your knitting, Perry. And I’ll tend to mine.”