

## XIV

*One year later . . .*

“Oh, I do hate the countryside,” the lady inside the stagecoach moaned. “It is quite dull.”

“I have told you before, wife, too many people are getting sick in London. The countryside will be safe for us until the reason for it has been discovered,” her husband, the knight, explained while reading *The Weekly News*.

“My God, The Five Mile Act has actually passed. No clergyman can come within five miles of any parish from this day forth.”

“Let’s not talk politics,” the lady groaned. “This dull journey is bad enough without such bleak conversation.”

The man tossed the pamphlet on the seat across the way from them. “If boredom has overshadowed your heart, my lady, may I be so bold as to suggest some *vigorous* activity?”

He moved his hand up her dress while kissing her neck.

She wrenched away and pushed him.

“Not now, husband. The motion of this dreadful carriage has made me ill.”

Disappointed, the knight went back to reading. She turned her sights to the window, secretly admiring the lush green forest surrounding them. The air was fresh, warm, and clean with the sound of wildlife all around. The sight of such natural beauty nearly sent her into another world, distracting her from her motion sickness. But her tranquility ended the moment the horsemen rode swiftly past her window.

“Stand and deliver!” ordered a loud, strong voice.

The stagecoach abruptly halted and the footmen given more orders.

“Drop your bloody weapons or we’ll shoot! Drop them, I say!”

“Henry,” the lady said fearfully. “What is going on?”

“It appears we are being robbed,” he answered irritably. “Stay calm, my love.”

She peered through her husband’s window and spotted the few highwaymen outside.

“Sir Henry!” one of them shouted. He was dressed very well and held himself straight upon his steed. He wore a black masquerade mask. The lady believed him to be the leader. “We have received information that you carry the sum of four hundred pounds upon you.”

“How does he know your name?” she whispered. “And where on Earth did he get this intelligence from?”

The knight shrugged and whispered, “I know not.”

To the horseman, he said, “Hmm, good sir, I am afraid your information is quite false. You see, I have nothing more than twenty quid upon my person.”

“You’re lying,” the highwayman challenged him.

The highwayman then turned his focus away, and when he did, someone flung the door open. A man wearing an ugly sack mask pulled Henry out.

“You’d do best to cooperate, boy-o,” the masked man warned. “Things will go much easier on all of us if you do.”

“I recognize that ill-bred voice,” the knight said to the robber. “You, sir, played me in a game of cards last night back at the tavern. You were there when I won said four hundred pounds from the others who played us.” The knight looked around at the rest of the highwaymen. “Is this man the source of your intelligence?”

Claude gave no answer. “Just hand us the money, *monsieur*.”

The lady shivered uncontrollably—not out of fear for her safety, but for her husband’s. She needed to show these creatures that they were not afraid of the likes of them.

“You shall not have my money,” the knight responded in as firm a tone as he could muster. “It is nearly everything we have until we reach our summer home.”

“Don’t give us your sob story,” seethed the highwayman with the ugly sack mask. “This is your last warning. Give us the loot or . . .”

“Quiet,” the leader ordered.

Everyone fell silent. The lady knew she had their undivided attention. Both her husband and the highwayman peered into the coach while she played her flageolet. The song was low and her nervousness forced her quivering lips to jag the tune. Naturally, everyone seemed bewildered by her action.

The leader dismounted and approached.

She watched the tall man come close while he pulled off his gloves. She kept playing even after he brought out his own flageolet from his satchel and joined in on the low melody. His mask covered only the top portion of his face, which made it perfect for him to play without removing it. The rogue stunned her to no end. For him to not only own such an elegant instrument but to also play it well, was the last thing she expected. His steady lips carried the song with the passion it was meant to be played with. She rose to the challenge by calming herself and strengthening her own tune to match his.

No one moved as the lady and highwayman played in perfect sync.

“What are you doing?” one of the highwaymen demanded.

The leader paid him no mind and peered inside the stagecoach. Together, they finished the song.

For a moment, silence divided them. Finally, the leader said, “You play excellently, my lady.”

“Thank you, good sir.”

“A lady who plays so elegantly must possess feet to match. Will you honor me with a dance?”

“Good fellow,” the knight contested. “I must say this is intolerable, I . . .”

“Yes,” the lady interrupted. “You seem to be a gentleman, and your request is very reasonable.”

The highwayman held out his hand to her and she accepted it without delay. She was utterly nervous about where this dance could lead. To a ditch where her dress would be thrown over and she would be raped in front of her husband’s very eyes?

“This is rather unexpected,” one of the other masked men said, aiming his pistol at the coachman while two others held guns on the footmen.

The rogue helped her out and led her to a more spacious area with the eyes of the knight following them. Her body trembled, especially when the rogue pulled her close to him. She gasped a little.

“Do not fear me,” he whispered gently, obviously reading her distress.

He led her in a slow dance, stepping gracefully despite his heavy boots. Regardless of her fear, she looked up into his eyes. They were nearly as black as his mask. The section of his face where the mask didn’t conceal was very appealing. His skin was clear and his thin mustache and beard neatly trimmed. Nothing like she imagined a scoundrel should look like. He smiled generously at her and right then, she no longer felt afraid as if that smile had the power to eliminate her fear.

She decided this was the most exciting moment of her life, one she could not wait to share with her lady friends. He began speaking to her in French, a language she did not understand, but she quivered with pleasure nonetheless. He held her closer to him while they danced in a theatrical and provocative fashion. She was too swept away by the moment to know what kind of a dance they were performing.

As he spoke his soft foreign words, he slid his hand down her face to her slender neck and carelessly brushed her exposed flesh as lightly as a feather. Eventually, his hand rested on her waist. The excitement raised her body temperature, causing her to forget that she was in the middle of a holdup. The elegant highwayman slowly dipped her backwards, where his breath touched her chest. Her breasts nearly reached his lips and she cared not.

He lifted his chin to the knight and said with a grin, “You are a privileged man, *monsieur*.”

Her husband’s disapproving expression brought the world back into focus.

The highwayman pulled her up and bowed deeply to her. She rewarded him with a curtsy. He offered his hand and escorted her back to the coach. Along the way, she tried to hide her amusement from her husband. The highwayman helped her inside and kissed her tenderly on the hand.

“*Au revoir, madame*.”

She blushed and turned away to shield her rosy cheeks.

“Well, then,” the knight huffed. “Gentlemen, thank you for this, er, unique delay. Good day.”

He turned to enter the coach when the highwayman placed a hand on his shoulder.

“*Monsieur*, I do believe you have forgotten something. I have danced with your lady and should be compensated for my time.”

The knight faced him and puffed out his chest. “Sir, I will not pay. . .”

“Pay him,” the lady cut in. “His services were well worth it. Pay him, husband.”

The knight decided not to argue, reached under the seat cushion, and brought out a hidden purse. He slapped it into the highwayman’s hand. “Does this satisfy you, sir?”

He opened the purse and the highwayman beside him bellowed, “This be no more than a hundred pounds! Where’s the rest, you fucking—?”

The leader raised his hand for silence.

“*Monsieur*, you are liberal and shall have no cause to repent your being so. This liberality of yours shall excuse you the other three hundred pounds.”

With that, he walked away from the coach and mounted his horse.

“Let us be away.”

The leader rode off down the road with the rest following him. When their hooves fell away to nothing, the knight sat in the coach and ordered the driver to carry on.

“What insolence!” he shouted angrily. “How dare that cur make sport of me like some common fool!”

Before he could utter another word, his wife kissed him, then mounted his lap while loosening the threads of her gown.

“I want you, husband,” she said with heavy breath. “Make me the mother of your child right now!”

The knight argued no further.

Claude and his gang rode steadily to London and reached Russell Square as the sun went down.

“You’re lingering too long with the heists, Duval,” said Clive Quentin, Claude’s most skillful member. “It took me less time to play the bloke in cards than it did to rob ’im.”

Claude stepped into his room with the gang following behind.

“You worry too much,” Claude scoffed. He turned to find everyone standing in his room. “Is this the moment for a lecture?”

“Doing a bit in broad daylight wasn’t wise, neither,” Clive added.

“He and his wife did not leave this hotel until morning,” Claude explained. “We needed to follow farther behind so we could strike before they reached their summer home. Night would not have arrived in time.”

A short man named Neville Cox stepped in front of Clive.

“But you let the bastard go with three hundred pounds. We could’ve been three times richer, if not for your generous little act.”

Although Neville was his least favorite of the group, he was right. Claude had acted generously toward the knight and his lady by allowing them to keep most of their money. However, he was the leader and it was *his* decision.

“If you do not appreciate the way in which I execute my affairs, Neville, then by all means leave,” Claude told him. “But I doubt you have ever earned more before joining me, *non?*”

Neville clenched his teeth as if fighting for words.

Claude took off his coat to show the many pistols he had strapped on him.

Since Christian’s hanging last year, Claude had decided to carry an arsenal of weapons upon him. However, no mere gun suited his taste. Claude needed the biggest, fanciest, and the most up-to-date pistols available.

The threat worked on Neville for he spoke not one word more.

Claude threw his coat on the bed. The moment it landed on the mattress, another member, Nigel Lacy, rushed over, picked it up, and went to hang it. Claude had found Nigel in a pub on the night the man had escaped from Bedlam, the London insane asylum. To Claude, the only peculiar thing about him was his impulse to keep everything clean.

“If money is the issue, then take this.” Claude tossed Neville the purse with the hundred pounds. “You can have my share. Divide the rest among everyone else. Now leave.”

Satisfied by the loot, Neville scurried out of the room.

“I want me cut, Cox,” Clive hollered while following him out. “Or I will break your legs.”

“These maids know nothing about how to dust a surface,” Nigel complained, wiping down a table with a rag. “How can you sleep in this dusty room, Duval?”

As he vigorously polished the furniture, Claude poured himself a glass of wine.

Claude sighed and took a seat.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, placing the glass on the now dust-free table.

Jude—who’d been standing in the corner—opened his mouth to speak when Nigel blurted out, “A broom! Duval, your boots have made a mess of the floor. I need a broom to sweep this dirt.”

“Go away,” Claude ordered calmly. “Now.”

The twitchy man looked at him for a long moment as if ready to argue. He said nothing and left the room.

“Why did you take him in?” Jude asked as the door closed behind Nigel.

“He is skillful with a pistol,” he answered, pulling off his boot. “And he entertains me. Now, tell me, *mon ami*, what ails you?”

“Why have we come back to London? For four months we have stayed clear of this wicked place.”

“There is a lot to gain here.”

Claude withdrew one shiny pistol after another and placed them on the table next to his wine glass. His prized weapon, the one he used most often in robberies, was a

German flintlock made from silver and hardwood with a pewter-finished warrior's head on the base of the stock.

"I think coming back was a terrible idea. Only trouble lurks in the shadows for the likes of us."

"I am well prepared for any trouble," he said, pulling out his dagger.

"What if that bloody knight identifies you?" Jude's words trembled with worry. "I don't want to see you swing like Christian. What are you trying to prove, Duval?"

Jude's reminder of his friend's demise sent an icy shiver up Claude's spine.

"Prove? Nothing. You, on the other hand, have plans for your future. You wish to save, start a business, and add a family, to boot. It is all well for you to do so, but you see, I have no such plans. I've chosen not to look past next week, let alone the rest of my life. I relish living in the moment. That is why I prefer to take measures to the extreme by taking the chances most men with their thoughts beyond the horizon consider madness."

He slipped off his silk shirt. He no longer dressed in the ratty clothing Christian had advised he wear when on a job. Instead, he owned two sets of high-class duds, which he wore just for thieving. Though it went against the advice of his late friend, Claude still had the common sense not to wear the outfits he wore on robberies when mingling with the public.

"Some of our fate strings are shorter than others, *mon ami*." Claude drained his glass, stood, and went over to lie on the bed. "I will meet you at the tavern tonight. Do not forget to get your slice of the hundred pounds."