



The Traitor (Captive Hearts Book 2)

By Grace Burrowes

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New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author **Grace Burrowes** delivers a passionate, danger-filled Regency romance...

The past will overtake him...

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But this time, he will not fight alone...

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Captive Hearts series:

The Captive (Book 1)

The Traitor (Book 2)

The Laird (Book 3)

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Editorial Review

Review

"Picking up where *The Captive* ended, Burrowes continues her examination of imprisonment and the wounds of war from unexpected and intriguing angles...subtle, cozy, thoughtful, and gently paced, this is a satisfying read that easily handles a difficult character and avoids any whiff of the middle-book blahs." - *Publishers Weekly*

"Burrowes continues the *Captive Hearts* series with an unusual twist: The villain of the previous book is now the hero. It takes a skilled storyteller to turn a ruthless interrogator into a man worthy of readers' respect and adoration. She accomplishes this with compassion, talent, depth of emotion and appealing secondary characters, as well as an unconventional heroine. Burrowes steps outside the box and readers are gifted with a memorable love story." - *RT Book Reviews*

"Romances about reformed men, such as Lisa Kleypas' *Devil in Winter* (2006), are as memorable as they are enjoyable, and Burrowes' *The Traitor* is exceptional." - *Booklist*

About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Grace Burrowes' bestsellers include *The Heir*, *The Soldier*, *Lady Maggie's Secret Scandal*, *Lady Sophie's Christmas Wish* and *Lady Eve's Indiscretion*. Her Regency romances and Scotland-set Victorian romances have received extensive praise, including starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. *The Heir* was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2010, *The Soldier* was a PW Best Spring Romance of 2011, *Lady Sophie's Christmas Wish* and *Once Upon a Tartan* have both won RT Reviewers' Choice Awards, *Lady Louisa's Christmas Knight* was a *Library Journal* Best Book of 2012, *The Bridegroom Wore Plaid* was a PW Best Book of 2012. Two of her MacGregor heroes have won KISS awards. Grace is a practicing family law attorney and lives in rural Maryland.

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One

The bullet whistled past Sebastian's ear, coming within an inch of solving all of his problems, and half an inch of making a significant mess instead.

"Die, goddamn you!" Lieutenant Lord Hector Pierpont fired his second shot, but rage apparently made the man careless. A venerable oak lost a few bare twigs to the field of honor.

"I shall die, bien sûr," Sebastian said, a prayer as much as a promise. "But not today."

He took aim on Pierpont's lapel. An English officer to his very bones, Pierpont stood still, eyes closed, waiting for death to claim him. In the frosty air, his breath clouded before him in the same shallow pants that might have characterized postcoital exertion.

Such drama. Sebastian cocked his elbow and dealt another wound to the innocent oak branches. "And neither shall you die today. It was war, Pierpont. For the sake of your womenfolk, let it be over."

Sebastian fired the second bullet overhead to punctuate that sentiment, also to ensure no loaded weapons remained within Pierpont's ambit. When Pierpont opened his eyes, Sebastian gazed into loathing so intense

as to confirm his lordship would rather be dead than suffer any more of Sebastian's clemency or sermonizing.

Sebastian walked up to him and spoke quietly enough that the seconds could not hear.

"You gave away nothing. What little scraps you threw me had long since reached the ears of French intelligence. Go home, kiss your wife, and give her more babies, but leave me and mine in peace. Next time, I will not delope, mon ami."

He slapped Pierpont lightly on the cheek, a small, friendly reminder of other blows, and walked away.

"You are not fit to breathe the air of England, St. Clair."

This merited a dismissive parting wave of Sebastian's hand. Curses were mere bagatelles to a man who'd dealt in screams and nightmares for years. "Au revoir, Pierpont. My regards to your wife and daughters."

The former captain and his missus were up to two. Charming little demoiselles with Pierpont's dark eyes. Perhaps from their mother they might inherit some common sense and humor.

"Cold bastard."

That, from Captain Anderson, one of Pierpont's seconds. Anderson was a twitchy, well-fed blond fellow with a luxurious mustache. Threaten the mustache, and Monsieur Bold Condescension would chirp out the location of his mother's valuables like a nightingale in spring.

Michael Brodie snatched the pistol from Sebastian's grasp, took Sebastian by the arm, and led him toward their horses. "You've had your fun, now come along like a good baron."

"Insubordinate, you are. I thought the English were bad, but you Irish give the term realms of meaning Dr. Johnson never dreamed."

"You are English, lest we forget the reason yon righteous arse wants to perforate your heart at thirty paces. Get on the horse, Baron, and I'm only half-Irish."

A fact dear Michel had kept quiet until recently.

Sebastian pretended to test the tightness of Fable's girth, but used the moment to study Pierpont, who was in conversation with his seconds. Pierpont was in good enough weight, and he was angry-furious-but not insane with it. Nothing about his complexion or his eyes suggested habitual drunkenness, and he had two small, adorable daughters who needed their papa's love and adoration.

Maybe today's little exchange would allow them to have it.

"You fret, Michel, and one wants to strike you for it. The English are violent with their servants, non? Perhaps today I will be English after all."

"The French were violent with the entire Continent, best as I recall, and bits of Africa and the high seas into the bargain. You ought not to begrudge the English some violence with their help from time to time. Keeps us on our toes."

Michael climbed aboard his bay, and Sebastian swung up on Fable.

Burnished red eyebrows lowered into a predictable scowl. "You would have to ride a white horse," Michael

grouched. "Might as well paint a target on your back and send a boy ahead to warn all and sundry the Traitor Baron approaches."

Sebastian nudged his horse forward.

"Fable was black as the infernal pit when he was born. I cannot help what my horse decides to do with his hair. That is between him and his God. Stop looking over your shoulder, Michel. Pierpont was an officer. He will not shoot me in the back, and he will not blame you for sparing all others the burden of seconding me."

Michael took one more look over his shoulder-both the Irish half of him and the Scottish half were well endowed with contrariness.

"How many duels does that make, your lordship? Four? Five? One of these honorable former officers will put paid to your existence, and where will Lady Freddy be, then? Think on that the next time you're costing me and Fable our beauty sleep."

He took out a flask and imbibed a hefty swallow, suggesting his nerves were truly in bad repair.

"I am sorry." Such flaccid words Sebastian offered, but sincere. "You should not worry about my early outings. These men do not want to kill me any more than I wanted to kill them."

Michael knew better than to offer his flask. "You didn't kill them, that's the problem. What you did was worse, and even if they don't want to kill you-which questionable conclusion we can attribute to your woefully generous complement of Gallic arrogance-the rest of England, along with a few loyal Scots, some bored Welshmen, and six days a week, an occasional sober Irishman, would rather you died. I'm in the employ of a dead man."

"Melodrama does not become you." Sebastian cued Fable into a canter, lest Michael point out that melodrama, becoming or not, had long enjoyed respect as a socially acceptable means of exposing painful and inconvenient truths.

In Millicent Danforth's experience, the elderly, like most stripes of human being, came in two varieties: fearful and brave. Her grandmother had been fearful, asking incessantly for tisanes or tea, for cosseting and humoring. Like a small child, Grandmother had wanted distracting from the inevitability of her own demise.

By contrast, Lady Frederica, Baroness St. Clair, viewed her eventual death as a diversion. She would threaten the help with it, lament it gently with her many friends, and use it as an excuse for very blunt speech indeed.

"You are to be a companion, not a nursemaid. You will not vex me with your presence when I attend my correspondence after breakfast. You will appear at my side when I take the landau out for a turn in the park. Shall you write this down?"

Milly returned her prospective employer's beady-eyed glower calmly.

"I will not bother you after breakfast unless you ask it of me. I will join you when you take the air in the park. I believe I can recall that much, my lady. What will my other duties involve?"

She asked because Mr. Loomis at the agency had been spotty on the details, except for the need to show up at an unseemly early hour for this interview.

"A companion-you keep Lady St. Clair company!" he'd barked. "Step, fetch, soothe, entertain. Now, be off with you!"

The way he'd smoothed his wisp of suspiciously dark hair over his pate suggested more would be involved, a great deal more. Perhaps her ladyship tumbled, gambled, or neglected to pay the trades-all to be managed by a companion whom the baroness might also forget to regularly compensate.

"You will dine with me in the evening and assist me to endure the company of my rascal of a nephew if he deigns to join us. What, I ask you, is so enticing about a rare beefsteak and an undercooked potato with a side of gossip? I can provide that here, as well as a superior cellar, but no, the boy must away to his flower-lovers' club. Never mind, though. He's well-mannered enough that he won't terrorize you-or no more than I will. Are you sure you don't need to write any of this down?"

Yes, Milly was quite sure. "I gather you are a list maker, my lady?"

Blue eyes lit up as her ladyship reached for the teapot.

"Yes! I am never so happy as when I'm organizing. I should have been a general, the late baron used to say. Do you enjoy the opera? One hopes you do, because nothing is more unendurable than the opera if one hasn't a taste for it."

Her ladyship chattered on about London openings she'd attended, who had conducted them, and what she had thought of the score, the sets, the crowd in attendance, and the various solos, duets, and ensemble numbers. Her diatribe was like a conversational stiff wind, banging the windows open all at once, setting curtains flapping, papers flying, and lapdogs barking.

"You're not drinking your tea, Miss Danforth."

"I am attending your ladyship's recitation of my duties."

The baroness clinked her teacup down on its saucer. "You were estimating the value of this tea service. Jasperware is more practical, but it's so heavy. I prefer the Sèvres, and Sebastian likes it too."

Sebastian might well be a follower. Milly had stolen a moment while waiting for this audience to glance over the cards sitting in a crystal bowl on the sideboard in the front hall. Her ladyship's social life was quite lively, and by no means were her callers all female.

"The service is pretty," Milly observed, though it was more than pretty, and perfectly suited to the pastel and sunshine of her ladyship's breakfast parlor. They were using the older style of Sèvres, more easily broken, but also impressively hued. Her ladyship's service boasted brilliant pink roses, soft green foliage, and gold trim over a white glaze. "Meissen or Dresden aren't as decorative, though they are sturdier."

The baroness used silver tongs to put a flaky golden croissant on a plate. "So you are a lady fallen on hard times?"

She was a lady who'd blundered. Paid companions did not need to know that fifteen years ago, Sèvres was made without kaolin, fired at a lower temperature, and capable of taking a wider and more bold palette of hues as a result.

"My mother was a lady fallen on hard times. I am a poor relation who would make her own way rather than burden my cousins any further."

"Kicked you out, did they?" Her ladyship's tone suggested she did not approve of such cousins. "Or perhaps they realized that underneath all that red hair, you're quite pretty, though brown eyes are not quite the rage. One hopes you aren't delicate?"

She passed Milly the pastry and shifted the butter a few inches closer to Milly's side of the table.

"I enjoy excellent health, thank you, your ladyship." Excellent physical health, anyway. "And I prefer to call my hair auburn."

The baroness snorted at that gambit, then poured herself more tea. "Will these cousins come around to plague you?"

They would have to bother to find her first. "I doubt it."

"You wouldn't be married to one of them, would you?"

Milly nearly choked on soft, buttery pastry. "I am not married." For which she might someday be grateful.

"Then I will regularly scandalize your innocent ears and enjoy doing it. Eat up. When Sebastian gets back from his morning ride, he'll go through that sideboard like a plague of locusts. If you prefer coffee, you'd best get your servings before he comes down in the morning. The man cannot abide tea in any form."

"The plague of locusts has arrived."

Milly's head snapped around at the mocking baritone. She beheld...her opposite. Whereas she was female, short-petite, when the occasion was polite-red-haired, and brown-eyed, the plague before her was male, tall, green-eyed, and sable-haired. The divergence didn't stop there.

This fellow sauntered into the parlor, displaying a casual elegance about his riding attire that suggested time on the Continent. His tailoring was exquisite, but his movement was also so relaxed as to approach languid. The lace at his throat came within a whisker of being excessive, and the emerald winking from its snowy depths stayed barely on the acceptable side of ostentatious, for men seldom wore jewels during daylight hours, and certainly not for so mundane an undertaking as a hack in the park.

This biblical plague had...sartorial éclat.

Again, the opposite of Milly, who generally bustled through life, wore the plainest gowns she could get away with, and had never set foot outside London and the Home Counties.

"Aunt, you will observe the courtesies, please?"

This was the rascal of a nephew then, though as Milly endured his scrutiny, the term rascal struck her as incongruously affectionate for the specimen before her.

"Miss Millicent Danforth, may I make known to you my scamp of a nephew, Sebastian, Baron St. Clair. St. Clair, Miss Danforth-my new companion. You are not to terrorize her before she and I have negotiated terms."

"Of course not. I terrorize your staff only after you've obligated them to a contract."

If this was teasing, Milly did not regard it as humorous. Her ladyship, however, graced her nephew with a smile.

"Rotten boy. You may take your plate to the library and read your newspapers in peace."

His lordship, who was not a boy in any sense, bowed to Milly with a Continental flourish, bowed again over Lady St. Clair's hand, tucked some newspapers under his arm, and strolled from the room.

"He's been dueling again." The baroness might have reported that her nephew had been dicing in the mews, her tone truculent rather than aghast. "They leave the poor boy no peace, those gallant buffoons old Arthur is so proud of."

For all his smoothness, something about St. Clair had not sat exactly plumb, but then, what did it say about a man if he could face death at sunrise and appear completely unaffected by the time he downed his morning coffee?

"How can you tell he was dueling?" For ladies weren't supposed to know of such things, much less small elderly ladies who lived for their correspondence and tattle.

"He's sad. Dueling always makes him sad. Just when I think he's making some progress, another one of these imbeciles finds a bit of courage, and off to some sheep meadow they go. I swear, if women ruled the world, it would be a damned sight better place. Have I shocked you?"

"Several times, my lady."

"Excellent. Have another pastry."

Milly munched away on a confection filled with chocolate crème-one could learn to appreciate such fare all too easily-while Lady St. Clair waxed enthusiastic about the affairs of Wellington-for who else could "old Arthur" be?-and his officers.

And still, something about the Baron St. Clair lodged in Milly's awareness like a smudge on her spectacles. He was quite handsome-an embarrassment of handsomeness was his to command-but cold. His smile reached his eyes only when he beheld his elderly aunt.

Perhaps dueling had taxed his store of charm.

"...and the ladies très jolie, you know?" Lady St. Clair was saying. "Half the fellows in government claimed they needed to go to Paris to make peace, but the soiled doves of London went into a decline until the negotiations were complete. Making peace is lusty work, methinks."

"I'm shocked yet again, my lady." Though not by the baroness's bawdy talk.

St. Clair-a baron and peer of the English realm-had spoken with a slight aristocratic French accent.

"Excellent. We shall get on famously, Miss Danforth, provided you aren't one to quibble about terms."

"I have not the luxury of quibbling, my lady."

The baroness peered at her over a pretty teacup. "Truly odious cousins?"

"Very. And parsimonious in the extreme."

"My condolences. Have another pastry."

A properly commanded garrison relied on a variety of types of soldiers. In Sebastian's experience, the ideal fortress housed mostly men of a common stripe, neither too good nor too evil, willing to take reasonable orders, and possessed of enough courage to endure the occasional battle.

They were the set pieces, announcing to all and sundry that a war was being prosecuted, and they deserved as decent conditions as their commander could arrange for them. The decent conditions minimized the chances of rebellion or petty sabotage, and maximized the possibility of loyalty and bravery.

Equally necessary to the proper functioning of any human dwelling place were the women. They were the more interesting of the foot soldiers, usually good for morale, diversion, clean laundry, cooking, and-in a manner that comforted in the midst of war-of maintaining the peace. To Sebastian's way of thinking, they were also the intelligence officers most likely to pass along information that would allow him to sort out bad apples from good, and sheep from goats.

Though a few bad apples were utterly necessary. A few who enjoyed inflicting pain, a few who could be counted on to serve Mammon rather than France. The first group-the brutes-were useful for enforcing discipline and more useful as an example when they themselves had become undisciplined, which they invariably did.

The second small group-the born traitors-were invaluable for their ability to disseminate false information to the enemy, to start rumors among the troops, or to undermine the stability of the local populace. When Sebastian had come across such a one, he'd cultivated that resource carefully.

And now it was time to determine what manner of soldier Miss Danforth would be.

He found her not in the library, which had been the preferred haunt of Tante's previous companions, but in the music room, arranging roses.

"Good morning, my lord."

Four words, but they told him much. Her greeting was accompanied with a slight smile, not quite perfunctory, not quite warm; her tone had been halfway between dismissive and respectful.

She was accustomed to dealing with her social superiors and to dealing with men.

"Good morning, Miss Danforth. May I join you for a moment?" Because a proper interrogation was conducted with proper respect for the person questioned.

She glanced at the open door so smoothly it did not interrupt her attention to the roses. "Of course."

And then she did not chatter, which was interesting. He was permitted to join her only because the proprieties were in place, and that told him worlds. "Those roses are quite pretty, if one enjoys the color red."

Not by a frown or a pause did she show a reaction. She tucked a sprig of lavender between green foliage and surveyed the effect.

"I've never understood the allure of the rose," she said. "They are pretty, as flowers go, but most have little scent, they make a mess all too soon, they have thorns, and people are always reading arcane significance into them. May I have those shears?"

He passed her the shears and took a seat on the piano bench a few feet away. He did this because an English baron would not likely ask a companion for permission to sit, but also because something about her recitation, the frankness and intelligence of it, appealed.

"The lavender is an unusual touch."

Miss Danforth wrinkled her nose. She had classic bone structure about the brows, cheeks, and chin, the sort of looks that suggested outcrosses in her lineage. Scandinavian, Celtic, or Teutonic, based on her hair. The nose itself hinted of ancient Rome, though her coloring was too fair for that.

"The lavender isn't working," she pronounced, scrutinizing her bouquet. "Somebody left it as waste in the conservatory, though, and that is an abomination I cannot abide."

He opened the lid of the piano and considered. Something innocuous and sweet. Music by which to lay bare a soul-her soul, for he hadn't one to his name. "You cannot abide waste?"

"Not the waste of such a useful plant. The very scent of it quiets the mind. Lavender can soothe a wound, liven up a bland pudding, brighten a garden."

She had good taste in flowers. Many knaves and whores did, as did some traitors. "Do you mind if I play?"

"Of course not, my lord."

A slight misstep on his part. If he didn't ask permission to sit, he probably ought not to ask permission to use his own piano. He started off with a few scales, mostly to draw his not entirely quiet mind from the scent of lavender and the sight of graceful female hands toying with flowers and greenery.

"Might I inquire as to your last position, Miss Danforth?"

She clipped off a few inches of a thorny rose stem. "I was companion to a pair of my aunts, my lord."

Again she did not chatter. She was a woman who understood the proper tempo of an interrogation. Sebastian started up the keyboard again, this time in parallel sixths in the key of F major, the scale made a bit tricky by the nonsymmetric placement of the B flat.

"And what were your aunts' names?"

"Millicent and Hyacinth Hathaway, my lord."

"They dwelled here in London?" He kept to the small-talk tone that a wise prisoner knew signaled relentless patience rather than civility.

"Chelsea. The air is better."

A single volunteered detail, which was a significant step. She was acknowledging that he was in pursuit of her truths. He abandoned the happy key of F major-Herr Beethoven called it the pastoral key-and switched to his personal favorite, A-flat minor. Because of the intermingling of black and white keys, this key required a deeper penetration of the hand into the keyboard, and more dexterity. He particularly preferred it after sunset.

"Why did you accept a position with my aunt, Miss Danforth? She is noted to be difficult under the best circumstances, even eccentric, according to the intolerant majority. Your days here will be trying, and your evenings no less so."

Miss Danforth took a step away from her flowers. "The container is wrong."

He brought the scale to a smooth conclusion, and though he knew it would not serve his investigation into her character, flicked a glance toward her bouquet. "I beg your pardon?"

"That..." She waved a small hand toward the vase, which was a cheerful, pastel urn sort of thing from Tante's collection of Sèvres. The scene depicted was some gallant fellow bowing over a simpering damsel's hand. Courtly grace surrounded by gold trim and fleurs-de-lis.

"It's pretty enough."

Sebastian was treated to the sort of look women bestowed on men too thick to see the obvious. This look was the same across every nationality he'd encountered, and every level of society, though it hadn't been aimed at him by any save his aunt in years.

"What has pretty to do with anything?" Miss Danforth asked. "It's a vase, of course it's pretty. Also too tall, too busy, too elegant, too impressed with itself. If you would fetch me that jar?"

Some long-dormant gentlemanly habit had him rising-she was that good at balancing polite request with implied command-and crossing the room to reach above her head and fetch down a simple bisque container.

As if he were any footman, she did not move from his path, but busied herself with removing the flowers from the offending-and quite valuable-vase. When he presented her the jar, she smiled.

Too tall, too busy, too elegant, too impressed with itself.

Oh, she was quite good.

"My thanks, sir. This plain vessel will serve the flowers to much better advantage." She hefted a substantial pitcher and filled the plain vessel with water.

His estimation of her rose yet more-and this was not a good thing-because of that smile. The smile was a coup de grâce, full of benevolence, understanding, and even sympathy for a titled lord who'd done a mere companion's bidding without hesitation. His intent had been to dissect her like an orchid on the examining table.

Time to be about it. "You have not answered my question, Miss Danforth. Why choose a position with my aunt? The air in London is inferior, after all."

Her shrug was as eloquent as any Gaul's. "The wages are better in London, and your aunt is not confined to a sickroom. Her company will be lively, and her terms generous."

That those terms could be generous was no small relief. "It wants organization-your bouquet."

Why couldn't she see this? He removed all the greenery and stems she'd tucked willy-nilly into the vase and started over. Greenery mostly, a few sprigs of lavender next.

"It wants to be pretty," she countered. "It wants to have a pleasant scent."

"Balance and proportion are pretty, grace and harmony of the colors are very pretty."

He added roses next, here, here, and there. She was right about the scent, though-the lavender dominated,

mixing with the scent of greenery. The roses were invisible to the nose.

He paused, the last rose in his hand. "You're wearing lavender, Miss Danforth."

"And you are making an English bouquet, all tidy and symmetric. I would expect..."

How lovely, to see her stumble over her words, to see her gaze shift to the single rose in his hand. "You would expect?"

"A more Continental approach, more free and loose, a bit off balance but more interesting for it."

He could go on the offensive now, but he didn't. "I am in an English household, and I am an English baron. I will have an English bouquet for my pleasure."

She took the rose from him and considered his bouquet. "Here, I think."

He'd reserved the longest stem for last, and she'd used it as the centerpiece of the arrangement, English-fashion.

"Very nice, Miss Danforth. Now where will you put it?"

Her scent was very nice too, mostly sweet lavender, reminding him all too powerfully of summers in Provence. An English baron in his English household ought not to be homesick for old monasteries and French sunshine. He leaned in and sniffed the delicate purple flowers anyway, right there in front of her.

"Your aunt wanted an arrangement for your piano. She said you play a great deal, and she wanted them where you could see them. Does that suit?"

"No, it does not." The last thing he wanted was a reminder of his past when he came to the piano for solitude and solace. "Water and musical instruments are not a prudent combination."

"Then you decide, my lord." She passed him the vase, roses, lavender, and all, and began tidying up the detritus of his design.

He set the bouquet aside and took a step closer, an impulse intended to intimidate a small, plain woman who did not understand with whom she tangled. He considered how best to acquaint her with her multiple errors in judgment.

"Blast!" She did not apologize for her oath, but brought the fourth finger of her left hand to her mouth.

"A thorn?"

She nodded and drew her damp finger from her mouth, frowning at it. "Roses are overrated, I tell you. No wonder we equate them with true love."

Her comment, the scathing tone in which she'd delivered it, told him much. He wrapped his handkerchief around her finger, and thus had a means of ensuring she didn't flounce off before he'd achieved his objective.

"The bleeding will stop momentarily, Miss Danforth."

"I know that."

Her composure was jeopardized by their proximity, which should have pleased Sebastian. The simplest form of intimidation was physical, though to use his sheer size and masculinity against her was unappealing.

Unsporting, to use the English term.

And yet, he did not step back or turn loose of her hand. "Who was he?"

She glowered at their joined hands, her loathing not quite hiding the hurt in her eyes.

"My cousin's choice, one I'm far better off without." Hurt was there in her words too.

"I will tell my aunt that should any gentlemen followers come calling on you, she is not to leave you alone with them, no matter what flattery or tricks they attempt, or how strongly she is tempted to matchmake, for matchmaking is one of her besetting sins."

If Sebastian had been asked, he would have said the emotion in Miss Danforth's brown eyes most closely resembled sorrow. "Thank you."

The flattery and tricks that had gone before had been bad, then. Bad enough that she'd given up much in the way of a genteel lady's comforts to find refuge in service. Englishmen were a disgraceful lot when their base urges beset them, which was to say, most of the time.

He unwrapped his handkerchief and inspected her hand. "You will live, I think. Keep the handkerchief. It is silk and has my initials on it. When your cousins come to call, you shall wave it around under their noses, and not too subtly, yes?"

Every person in a garrison, every mongrel dog and mouser in the stables, was the responsibility of the commanding officer. Sebastian had still not ascertained quite enough to let this soldier get back to her appointed duties.

"I will flourish it about indiscriminately, my lord. My thanks."

He did not step back, but continued to study her. Her eyes were really quite pretty. "And if these cousins realize the mistake they've made? If this sorry choice of theirs comes to his senses and tries to woo you into his arms again?"

She did not step back either, and sorrow turned to dignified, ladylike rage—a fascinating transformation.

"That will not happen, my lord. In any case, I would not go. My fiancé made it plain that my shortcomings will not be overcome to his satisfaction, whereas your aunt offers me a decent wage and comfortable surrounds in exchange for my simple presence. For all her friends and callers, my lord, I think Lady St. Clair is lonely. One does not turn one's back on a woman who can, however indirectly, admit she's lonely."

Quite the speech. Quite the speech from a woman who knew what it was to be abandoned by those who'd given her promises of constancy. He spent a moment pretending to examine the bouquet while he analyzed her words.

"Then you expect to be in Tante's employ for some time?"

"She offered me employment when I badly need it, my lord, and has done so on little evidence other than my characters. I am in her debt. To toss aside her faith in me would be ungrateful, also foolish."

She marched across to the piano, closing the cover over the keys and relieving Sebastian of her lavender scent.

"One admires your pragmatism, Miss Danforth. Perhaps the flowers should be set in the window. They will appreciate the light, and passersby can appreciate your bouquet."

She liked that idea, or she liked any excuse to keep moving away from him. The sorry choice of a former fiancé sank further in Sebastian's estimation. Englishmen knew nothing of how to appreciate women. Not one thing. Most Frenchmen knew all too much about the same topic, though.

Miss Danforth nudged the flowers to the center of a windowsill behind the piano. "Will that do?"

"Lovely. And send a footman to clean this up. I cannot be responsible for further injury to my aunt's newest companion." Though he'd injure her without hesitation if his judgment of her proved overly optimistic. "I will take my leave of you, Miss Danforth."

He bowed, she curtsied, and as he left the room, she was tidying up the mess they'd created, despite his orders to the contrary.

No matter. He'd ascertained what manner of addition his aunt had brought into their household. Miss Danforth was the kind of soldier whose loyalty was earned, and once given, was not rescinded except for excellent cause. Had she been an English officer, she would have given her life to keep her troops safe.

Sebastian decided that for now, Miss Danforth would do. His next task was to head to the conservatory to see what fool had put lavender clippings in the trash.

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