

Vivienne stumbled into the clearing and fell to her knees. The wet grass soaked through her skirts, but she barely noticed. Darkness still shrouded what she imagined in the sunlight were rolling green hills and manicured lawns.

Daylight was long, terror-filled hours away.

And she was so very, very tired.

She'd been running all night, running and hiding. She couldn't afford rest. The assassins were right behind her, hunting her. But for that hollow under the tree in the woods, they would have her now. She could not pause, not even for a moment.

She needed water. Her throat felt coated with sand, and it took effort to swallow. Since Masson had been murdered, she'd been constantly hungry and thirsty. She'd come this way because she thought she smelled water, and now looking out over the lawn that sloped down from the woods, she spotted a small pond with a charming bridge crossing it. The pond was not big enough to warrant a bridge, but it was probably an idea one of the British nobles had liked and commissioned. These nobles had more money than they knew what to do with.

Once, she had been the same.

Looking left and right before moving farther into the clearing, Vivienne made her way toward the pond. She had to restrain the urge to rush to the water and gulp great handfuls as soon as she reached the bank. Instead, she circled the pond until she faced the woods and her back was to the bridge. The shadows cast by the bridge in the weak light from the crescent moon would hide her, shield her, give her a moment to recover her strength.

With a last look at the woods, she removed her quiver and bow, set them against the bridge. She knelt and cupped the cool water, sniffing it and then drinking. She cupped more water, drinking and drinking until her previously empty belly roiled. Splashing water on her face, her arms,

she rinsed some of the mud from her skin. Vivienne had hidden in a pigpen most of the day, and though the sow and her piglets had not seemed to mind her company, she was eager to leave reminders of the pigs behind.

She leaned against the bridge, bracing her weary body against the smooth, round stones. She'd been safe hidden under the pig muck. It wasn't until she'd tried to sneak away from the farm that the assassins had spotted her and come after her. Vivienne harbored no illusions that if the three men had caught her they'd leave her alive. They'd slit her throat just as they'd slit Masson's.

Poor Masson, she thought, closing her eyes against the sting of tears. He'd given everything he had to save her. She would not diminish his sacrifice by failing now. She had to reach London and the king. How far was Nottinghamshire from London? Hours? Days?

At the moment, London seemed as far away as the moon.

She leaned her head back, eyes still closed. She would rise in a moment. She would keep moving south, south toward London. She would not rest until she reached the capital. She...

Vivienne slept.

Nathan Cauley, the Duke of Wyndover, swirled the port in his glass. "I already have more money than I need. What I don't have is an heir. How I envy Hardcastle that nephew of his. Why can't I find a nephew and heir? Instead, I've a cousin in the bloody Americas. My mother is on the verge of faking her collapse in order to hurry me along."

His host for the house party, the Duke of Sedgemere smiled. "There are worse things than matrimony, Nat."

"Says the man already leg-shackled. Besides, Elias, your duchess is one in ten thousand. Where am I to find a lady like her?"

"Do you know what your problem is?"

Wyndover drained the last of his port. "I'm sure you will tell me."

“You’ve had it too easy. You’re a duke, and not just a duke, a young duke. Add that pretty face to the package, and the ladies faint at your feet. All you need do is crook your finger.”

“I object.”

“On what grounds?”

“I have never crooked a finger at a lady.”

Elias inclined his head, conceding the point. “My argument still stands. You have never had to woo a woman, never had to work to make one take notice of you.”

“And *you* have? You’re a bloody duke too, you know.”

“If you think Anne merely fell into my arms, you don’t know her very well. She led me on a merry chase, and I’m a better man for it.”

“I’m too busy for chasing. Love and all that rot is fine for the likes of you, Elias, but I have estates to manage, solicitors at my door, stewards with rapidly multiplying rabbits.”

“Rabbits?”

Wyndover waved a hand. “I need an heir, not romance.”

“Then you haven’t found the right woman yet. When you do, you’ll welcome both the romance and the chase. You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Nathan shook his head, but Elias did not stay to hear his protest. He stood. “I see Greenover is retiring for the night. There was an incident with a maid earlier. I think I’ll make sure he finds his room without incident. I shall see you bright and early for the scavenger hunt, Nat.”

Nathan gave his old friend a pained expression. “Scavenger hunt? Will your bride be very offended if I pass?”

“Try it and I’ll call you out,” Sedgemere said in a tone Nathan thought only half joking. “This is her hostessing debut. You will cheerfully attend every single event and activity, be it archery, embroidery, ices in the garden, or a scavenger hunt.”

“Embroidery?”

“Be there with needle and thread.”

Nathan gave a mock salute and watched his old school chum follow the lecherous Greenover out of the Billiards Room. If he'd been an intelligent man, he too would have sought his bed. Instead, Nathan poured another glass of port and settled back to watch Viscount Ormandsley lose yet another game of billiards.

The next morning came too early, and despite his tacit agreement with Sedgemere to act the dutiful guest, he was late for the start of the scavenger hunt. By the time he made it to the breakfast room, the other guests had already departed, all but a Miss MacHugh. He relaxed when he saw her. She had not fainted at his feet upon meeting him the day before. The same could not be said of two other ladies at the party—a Miss Frobisher and a Miss Pendleton. Miss MacHugh, however, had not seemed particularly impressed by him, but then he'd seen her gaze slide to the Duke of Hardcastle one too many times.

Best he left Miss MacHugh to find her own amusements this morning.

He exchanged pleasantries with her, then made his way to the drawing room to ask after the rest of the party. The butler informed him they'd already embarked on the scavenger hunt and handed him a sheet of foolscap on which had been listed a number of items he was to acquire.

“They have not been gone long, Your Grace,” the butler said. “I am certain you will have no trouble catching up to one party or another and joining their ranks.”

But that was the trick, Nathan decided. If he accidentally encountered the Frobisher-Pendleton party, he'd be stuck catching fainting ladies all morning and afternoon. He scanned the first items listed on the paper. A horseshoe, a feather, a pink rose, a smooth round stone for skipping.

The list went on and on.

He could find these items on his own, find them and complete the scavenger hunt without assistance or fainting ladies. He'd start with the skipping stone. It was in the middle of the list, and he imagined the teams would either begin with the first or last item and work from there.

He remembered crossing a small stone bridge upon arriving the day before. Several ducks had been swimming in a pretty little lake. He'd start there in his search for the stone. While everyone else swarmed the stables or gardens, he'd have a nice walk by the water.

Nathan started in the direction of the pond, encountering the Duke of Linton and Sedgemere's great-aunt, Lady Lavinia, returning to the house.

"Wyndover, join us," Lady Lavinia said, after the initial pleasantries. "I remember quite fondly a scavenger hunt with your late father. This was before he met your mother, and I rather think we spent more time flirting than hunting."

"Yes, do join us, Wyndover," Linton said hopefully, his voice raised so the deaf older lady could hear him.

"I wouldn't want to intrude," Nathan shouted. "I have my own plan of action."

Linton scowled, and Nathan made his escape, Lady Lavinia's voice carrying over the lawns. "Who is the object of his attraction?"

Nathan chuckled, crossing the lush green lawn quickly. Sedgemere's estate was well tended. As a man of property himself, Nathan noticed the details—the manicured flowerbeds, the way the land sloped away from the house to aid in drainage, the gravel paths that were free of weeds. He would have liked to see some of the surrounding land and meet a handful of Sedgemere's tenants, but that would have to wait until he'd played dutiful guest a few more days.

Sedgemere had mentioned archery as an activity, Nathan remembered as he neared the lake. God in Heaven, anything but archery.

At the edge of the water, he scanned the stones on the sandy bank. Several were quite smooth, but they were too round to skip well. He needed a flat and oval stone. He followed the edge of the water, head down, eyes narrowed for any sign of the perfect skipping stone. A duck quacked, and he looked out at the water, glinting in the morning sun. A drake, his mate, and a line of ducklings swam in the middle of the water, looking quite aimless. Doubtless the ducks were hunting insects for breakfast. He watched them for a moment, but when he might have gone back to his search for skipping stones, his attention caught and held on a flutter of something brown near the base of the gray stone bridge.

It looked like a clump of brown cloth. A coat a groundskeeper had set aside and forgotten? He almost returned to his quest for the skipping stone, but something made him stare just a little longer. The coat was not empty. Someone was inside it.

Wyndover stuffed the sheet of foolscap into his coat pocket and walked rapidly toward the bridge. His long-legged gait ate up the distance quickly, and the indistinct shape became clearer. It was a body lying on its side under the shade of the bridge. As he neared the form, he made out the mud caked on the coat and the matted hair falling over the person's face. Probably a vagrant who'd fallen asleep there the night before.

At least Wyndover hoped the man was only sleeping. The last thing the Duchess of Sedgemere needed was a dead body to put a damper on her house party.

"Excuse me," he said as he walked the last few steps. "Are you hurt?"

The body didn't move. The wind ruffled the brown material again, but now Wyndover all but stumbled. It wasn't a coat whipping in the breeze. Those were skirts.

A girl?

Where he might have nudged the body with his foot had it been a man, now he hunched down and examined the form. She did wear a coat—a man’s coat—which was far too large for her small form. Beneath the hem of the coat, skirts covered with dry mud lay heavy against her legs, which were pulled protectively toward her belly. Her long dark hair covered her face, the muddy strands making it impossible for him to see her features.

Still, this was no lady nor a guest of the house party. She stank of shit and farm animals. Wyndover looked back toward the house. Should he fetch one of Sedgemere’s servants? He winced at the thought. He could already hear the taunts from the other guests.

Leave it to Wyndover to find a girl on a scavenger hunt.

That desperate for a bride, Wyndover?

He might not need to involve the servants, but he couldn’t leave her here. “Miss.” He shook her shoulder gently. It was surprisingly pliable under the stiff outer clothing. He’d expected to feel little more than bird-like bones. So perhaps she was not as malnourished as he’d thought.

“Miss,” he said a little louder. He shook her again.

She moaned softly and then came instantly awake. He stood just in time to avoid her swing as she struck out. She scrambled up and back against the bridge, her arms raised protectively, as though she expected him to attack. The matted hair fell to the side of her mud-streaked face, but her large green eyes stared at him with undisguised terror.

Wyndover raised his own hands in a gesture of peace. “I won’t hurt you.”

Her eyes narrowed. Such large eyes and so very green. They were the color of myrtle, a plant he knew well as he’d had to approve a hundred pounds for the purchase of myrtle at Wyndover Park. He’d stopped at his nearby estate before continuing to Sedgemere House, and

the head gardener had insisted on showing him the myrtle, which had been in bloom with white flowers.

“Do you understand?” he asked when she didn’t answer and continued to look at him in confusion. “Do you speak English?”

“Yes.” She rose, using the bridge for support. “I understand.”

Her voice held a faint exotic quality, a lilt that was both familiar and foreign.

She was no child; he could see that now. Although the coat hid her figure, he could see by the way she held herself that she was a woman and one of some standing. She held her chin high in a haughty manner, and her gaze swept down him with an imperiousness he recognized from more than one *ton* ballroom.

She obviously decided he was no threat, because her gaze quickly moved past him to scan the area around her. She reminded him of a hunted animal, a fox cornered by hounds. He wanted to reach out, lay a hand on her and reassure her, but he didn’t dare touch her. The look in her eyes was too feral, too full of fear.

“Where am I?” she demanded, her eyes darting all around her, searching, searching. What was she looking for? What was she scared of?

“Sedgemere House,” he answered. “The residence of the Duke of Sedgemere.”

“Are you he?”

If she didn’t know Sedgemere, she wasn’t local. But if she didn’t live in the area, then how had she come to be on Sedgemere’s estate? He saw no evidence of a horse or conveyance. She must have walked. Another glance at the state of her clothing confirmed she must have been traveling for some time. Or perhaps not traveling but running. But from what or whom?

“No. Miss, you look as though you need some assistance. May I escort you back to the house?” Damn the taunts and teasing. The woman needed help.

She shook her head so violently that flecks of mud scattered in the breeze. "I must be going."

She turned in a full circle, obviously trying to decide which way to travel. Her muddy hair trailed down her back, almost reaching the hem of the thigh-length coat. Sections of it were still braided, indicating at one time it had been styled in some fashion or other.

"Which way to London?" she asked.

He almost answered. Her tone was such that he felt compelled to snap to attention, as though he were the butler and she the master. Something else was familiar about her. The way she spoke, that accent. She wasn't English. Not French or Italian. He'd traveled the Continent years ago, when he'd been about two and twenty. He knew that accent, just couldn't place it at the moment.

"Why don't we discuss it inside over a cup of tea?" he said. "If you'll follow me—"

"I don't have time for tea. I have to run. Hide. They're looking for me. If they find me..." She shuddered, and that one gesture said more than any word she'd spoken.

"Let me help you."

Her gaze landed on him again, ran quickly over him, and dismissed him just as quickly.

"If you want to help, tell me which way to London." She shook her head. "*Ne rien!* I'll find it on my own."

She swept past him, obviously intending to go on without his assistance. She might have climbed the embankment beside the bridge, but Wyndover suspected the exertion would have been too much for her. She would probably take the easier path around the pond and then double back and head south.

Ne rien. He'd heard that before, and quite suddenly he knew exactly where she was from. *Ne rien* was a Glennish phrase meaning

never mind or forget it. Glennish was the mix of Gaelic and French spoken in the Kingdom of Glynaven.

He'd read reports of recent unrest in Glynaven. Another revolution ousting the royal family.

"Oh, bloody hell," he muttered as another thought occurred to him. He turned just in time to see her stumble. In two strides he was beside her, his arms out to catch her as she fell.

He lifted her unconscious body, cradling her in his arms. She'd barely made it three feet before she'd collapsed from what he'd hoped was only exhaustion and not something more serious. She might smell of manure and rotting vegetables, but with her head thrown back, he could see her face more clearly now. The high forehead and sculpted cheekbones, the full lips. She had all the features of the royal family of Glynaven.

But the unusual color of her green eyes gave her away—Her Royal Highness, Princess Vivienne Aubine Calanthe de Glynaven.

"Welcome to England," he said as he started back toward the house. She was light as a spring lamb, but he knew under the bulky clothing she had the full, supple body of a woman.

A beautiful woman.

She hadn't even recognized him. Other women might swoon at the sight of him, but her gaze had passed right over him, just as it had when they'd first met.

"You're in danger," he remarked to himself as he left the pond behind and started across the lawn. Not toward the house. He didn't dare take her to the house. One of the outbuildings. His gaze landed on a small shed, most probably a boathouse. He'd tuck her there and then fetch Sedgemere or his duchess.

"Princess Vivienne." He gave a rueful laugh. "Bet you never thought I'd be the one to save you."