

A sound caught Ethan's attention, halting his thoughts. His gaze darted to a large oak several feet away, and a flicker of red in the breeze.

A hair tie.

The red satin streamer hung loosely down a woman's black mantle, her waist-length locks swirling around it. She knelt under a large tree, head lowered, showing no sign of having heard his approach. Her hair reminded him of thick, long curls of chocolate-colored ribbon. Recognizing those glossy curls, he felt his gut tighten with annoyance. What the hell was the girl from Skerrit's farm doing here, once more precisely where he did not want her? He strolled up behind her, standing there a full minute before he realized what she was doing.

Praying?

"I ask for your help—again, I know—and in return, I promise"—at her pause, her whispered words hovered in the clearing like morning mist—"I promise not to fall prey to temptation."

Temptation? That was certainly an area to which he could relate.

Grinning at the idea that occurred to him, he leaned down and brushed his cheek against the wisps of her hair. "Are you tempted, sweetheart?"

She jolted, head whipping around and loose curls and ribbon flying about her shoulders like streaks of crimson lightning.

Ethan didn't step back, and she arched her neck, squinting up at him.

"It's you!"

"My thoughts exactly."

She scrambled up, and he grasped her elbow to help.

"What are you doing here?"

"The words right out of my mouth."

She was still struggling to rise, the tree roots behind her forcing her to step forward to avoid losing her balance. Mere inches separated them, and he smelled her scent—remembered it from the day before. He hadn't tried to place it then, but he did so now. Like the color of her hair, she smelled of chocolate and cinnamon.

With a small sound, she backed away, a wary look in her eyes.

He raised an eyebrow. “Afraid I’ll lead you into temptation?”

“No!” She sounded defensive.

Good. He had a mission. And the first order of the day was to dispense with this girl so he could investigate the clearing for signs of the smugglers.

“I think you’d better run home, Miss Dashing.” He released her arm and gave her a little push toward the path through the trees. “Too much temptation out here.”

She stared at him, eyes widening. They were the shade of cocoa swirled with rich cream. From the shock in her gaze, he could tell she hadn’t missed the innuendo. “I assure you, I am quite well, Lord Winterbourne.” But she took another step back. “I walk here frequently.”

Trees, a stream—what could interest her here? “Why?” he asked. “Can’t you pray somewhere else? A church perhaps?”

Her mouth curved down at the corners. “I like it here. Where I can be alone.”

“You’re not alone now.”

“No. I’m not.” She swept the ribbon, which had blown across her cheek, aside. Perhaps she wished she could sweep him aside as easily.

“I have no intention of leaving, Miss Dashing, so if your prayers are done, you should go.”

“I should go?” The ribbon blew forward, obscuring the glare in her eyes.

Ethan grinned in spite of himself. She wouldn’t make this easy, but then he liked a challenge, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d smiled so much.

“A little girl like you can’t have that many sins to repent.” He gave her a roguish look. “Yet.”

She gaped at him, rosy mouth forming an O. “Lord Winterbourne—”

Ethan turned his head at the sound of approaching voices and tried silencing her with a wave.

“No, I will not be quiet! You have no right—Mmmpfh!”

In one fluid motion, he closed his hand over her lips and dragged her into the thick shrubs nearby, pushing her onto her stomach and coming down next to her.

She bucked against him wildly. She was small but strong, and he struggled to keep his arm around her. She bit his hand, and he swore soundlessly. Little hellion!

“Lie still!” He clamped his hand tighter to muffle her protests. “Stop fighting. There’s someone coming.”

She shook her head, elbowing him in the stomach.

“The devil take it!” He pulled her hard against him, where she’d be less able to inflict damage. “Listen,” he whispered against her ear.