

The Determined Bride

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Belgium, 1745

"Madam, we must stop!"

Wet wind almost snatched away the shouted words of the clergyman clinging to one side of the rocking, racing cart.

"*I won't* give up now!" Kate Dunstable screamed back, though she was clinging just as desperately to the other side of the hay-lined cart, and was equally cold and exhausted.

Somewhere nearby in this bleak, cloud-squashed countryside was the father of her child. Nothing would stop her reaching him and compelling him to marry her properly before the child was born.

Before it was born a bastard.

She pushed her face closer to the jowly one of her companion. "They said the Buffs were up ahead. We must go on!"

To the soldier driving the cart, she yelled, "Faster! Or we're likely to be benighted in the open!"

There had been some kind of fighting here today for they'd passed a cart loaded with wounded. So the driver eagerly whipped the two horses to greater effort, almost tossing Kate into the parson's lap. She braced herself, trying to cushion any impact with her legs, praying that her obsession wouldn't injure the child she so wanted to protect from shame.

The polite world was unkind to bastards unless they were the offspring of the nobility or royalty. Lieutenant Dennis Fallowfield-damn his black heart-was hardly royalty. He was gentry, though, unless that was just another of his lies. His child deserved a place in that world.

Connections. Perhaps a good school. An honest name. All the things that mattered.

"Madam, it is growing dark," the clergyman protested. "And clearly matters here are in some disorder. We should turn back."

"No, Mr. Rightwell. No, I say!"

Kate turned to look ahead through gathering dark made more impenetrable by the wind and drizzle, desperately seeking the ramshackle farmhouse apparently made temporary billet by Dennis's company. She shared all the clergyman's concerns, but her need was urgent.

She was already in labor.

"You are *mad*, madam," he muttered. "Mad, I say."

Kate suspected he was right, though if she'd known her time would come upon her so soon, she probably wouldn't have been crazy enough to set out on this wild journey.

The cart lurched violently, and fearing they would overturn, Kate flung herself in the other direction. She landed on top of Mr. Rightwell who whooshed as the breath was knocked out of him, then shoved her away, spluttering.

The middle-aged man had been rather chilly and urbane at the start of this enterprise, even though she'd virtually kidnapped him with her insistent demands that he officiate at her wedding. Now he was red-faced and furious.

"It will do precious little good, woman, to find your prospective bridegroom and expire on the spot from exposure. I insist we turn back. Now!"

"Some shelter must appear soon." Kate struggled to sound rational or else he would take command and retreat. Surely they must come up with her quarry soon.

Was that... ?

"Yes! A light. Look. A light! That must be them."

It was only a flicker in the gloom, and too late she realized that it could be anyone, even the enemy French. But it was something and her strength was finally giving out.

They would have to stop here, whether Dennis was here or not.

* * *

Captain Charles Tennant was in his shirtsleeves, sitting on a beaten-earth floor staring into a leaping fire. The room had been the kitchen of a sturdy Flemish farmhouse, but the inhabitants had fired the place rather than leave it for the approaching armies.

Disobliging bastards, he thought.

One end had burned pretty well, but this end had largely been spared, meaning that the kitchen was weatherproof now they'd shuttered the windows and patched one hole in the ceiling. Though he'd twenty men crammed into the space, it was a better situation than many they'd been caught in.

For one thing, the men around him were alive, and their wounds were minor. They'd sent the more seriously wounded back down the line and buried the dead.

His mind sought back over the day's unexpected and disastrous skirmish. Could he have done something differently...?

He shook his head. He'd learned ten years or more ago that such thinking did no good and sapped a man's ability to fight, to lead others into the thick of it. He was Charles the Bold, wasn't he? His company was the best, the bravest.

Those that were left.

Damn this mismanaged, meaningless campaign that had already cost too many lives and would soon cost more.

Perhaps his own. He didn't fear death, but he hated graves. He wished he'd lived in ancient times when dead heroes were burned on funeral pyres. Better for the dead and for those left behind.

He shook himself and threw another piece of charred beam on the glowing fire. He loved fire. It was alive, hot, and dangerous-like the best moments in life.

Like the best women.

Hell, they had fire, fresh water from the well, and a few scraps of bedding to add to their own. This was surely soldier's heaven-

The door crashed open, bringing him to his feet in one bound. His sentry gasped, "Cart coming, Captain!"

"Cart?" Charles hastily dragged on his dirty white waistcoat and muddy, bloody, braided red coat. "Shut the damn door, Milwood. No point in freezing us all again."

The corporal hastily obeyed, leaning back against it, but then he hurtled forward when the door burst open and a wild creature surged in, swathed in a heavy cloak and blanket. "Is this the Buffs?"

Hands shoved the blanket back, and to his astonishment he saw the unforgettable-if ravaged- beauty of Kate Fallowfield. Tension gripped his gut in a way it hadn't in the worst of the fighting.

Damnation.

Deep, dingy shadows pressed under her eyes, made heavier by the dim light from the fire, but those eyes were still the most remarkable he'd ever seen. They were scanning the room, however, and now they fixed on him. "Where is he?"

Charles took refuge in anger. "What the devil are you doing out here? And in this weather. And in your

condition.

Are you mad? Shut the damned door, Milwood!"

As the corporal rushed to obey, another person spoke. "Indeed she is mad, Captain."

So at least Kate had not come alone. Then he saw who it was. A clergyman?

"I amnot mad," snapped Kate. "Where is he?" She spotted the door leading into the other room- the room that was charred and roofless-and headed for it.

Charles caught her arm to halt her. "He's not there. Sit, Kate."

Though he made it a command, he was surprised when she obeyed, collapsing on the only seating in the room, a rough wooden bench. Since it was by the fire, he eased off her sodden cloak. It was good army issue and had kept her mostly dry, though hanks of her heavy blonde hair were dark with water.

"We have hot water and a bit of tea. Would you like some?" He signaled to his gaping men that someone get busy and make it.

"Thank you." She seemed a great deal calmer, though her hands were clasped tight together. "It will be very welcome. But I must know where Dennis is."

His men had been sitting like stuffed dummies anyway, but to Charles it felt as if the sudden intensity of silence must be answer enough. She was clearly so weary and focused on her need, however, that she was numb to it.

It was tempting to keep talking about tea and trivialities, but he went down on his haunches before her and took her chilled hands. "He's dead, Kate. We buried him a few hours ago."

He'd wondered sometimes how deep her feelings ran for Dennis Fallowfield. Now he knew. Her eyes went black with a kind of horror, and she swayed so that he swung up onto the bench to hold her. Then her mouth opened to let loose a banshee wail of loss the likes of which he'd never heard before.

"Kate, Kate, don't! You'll make yourself ill. The baby..."

She didn't even seem to hear him, but fell into a heartbroken weeping he could hardly bear. All he could do was to hold her swollen body tighter and tighter and beg her to stop.

Then, abruptly, she did stop, though her breathing turned strange.

"Kate? Kate!"

Slumped against him, she turned her ravaged face up to his. "I'm afraid I'm having the baby, Captain

Tennant."

Charles found he was staring down at the immense bulge of her abdomen beneath a heavy brown wool gown as if it were a barrel of gunpowder licked by flames. "Good God."

"Having the *baby*?" cried the clergyman, straightening from where he had hunched over the fire. "You can't possibly ..."

Kate didn't seem to hear the protests. She just stared up at Charles with the kind of hopelessness he'd seen sometimes in a dying man. "I did so want it not to be born a bastard."

She melted then into a weary weeping perhaps more heartbreaking than her previous agony.

Charles, however, was hard pressed not to point out that she could have thought of the problem a little sooner.

He gestured to Private Peabody to bring over the mug of tea, praying for anything to help handle this. But even as he took the mug in his hand, Kate stopped crying and sat up, hands to abdomen, a frightened look on her face.

Charles ran a number of violently obscene comments through his mind. He was stuck in a storm in the middle of a running battle, with a birthing woman and no midwife closer than the baggage carts.

"Kate, you can't have the baby here."

Her face relaxed, and she was transformed by her smile—the quirky smile that crinkled her eyes and turned up the right side of her generous mouth. "And what, pray, do you suggest I do to prevent it?"

Charles looked around the crowded room as if one of his men might have an answer, and then started when she touched his hand, making him spill some of the tea.

"If that's for me, may I have it?"

He gave it to her. "How did you get here?"

"In a cart. It was going up ahead to collect more wounded."

So there was no immediate way of sending her back.

He realized Milwood was still in the room, gawking like the rest. "Get back on sentry duty!" he snapped. "And if that cart comes back, stop it."

"Yes, sir!" The corporal dashed out into the cold, wet night.

"You're a damn crazy woman," Charles told her, but he couldn't snarl when she was smiling so ruefully at him.

"I thought you'd decided to go back to England."

Her smile faded. "I changed my mind."

"Dennis sent you away, didn't he?"

She didn't answer, but just stared into the fire.

"He wouldn't have changed his mind, Kate."

She looked at him then, and he'd never have thought that laughing, singing, sensible Kate could ever look so hard.

"Oh yes he would."

He was about to vent all his feelings on her, when she caught her breath and he knew she was having another pain.

She wasn't silent this time, though. "It's distracting," she gasped, "to have one's body take over ... like this." Then she relaxed again.

"How much does it hurt?"

"Not much. Just a sort of pulling. It's more of a shock." She drained the tea and gave him back the mug.

"How long is it likely to be?" Perhaps they could carry her to a safer place, somewhere with women. But it was full dark by now and he couldn't know about enemy movements. Truth was she was safer here in shelter and guarded by a resolute bunch of redcoats.

"I have no idea," she replied with that wry smile. "I've never done this before."

"Come on, Kate. Women know these things. How long?"

"A day, perhaps, though it can go longer, or be very fast. But I don't know when it started, you see. It was only a little while ago that I was sure."

Charles had never felt so helpless in his life. He glared around at his men. "Can anyone think of a way to get a woman here to help?"

It was a damn stupid question and got the silence it deserved.

"I suppose we'd better make you a bed," he muttered.

The people who'd lived here had taken most of their belongings, but they'd left a rag-stuffed mattress and some moth-eaten blankets. As he was supervising the clearing of a corner and arranging the mattress there, he heard her say, "Here we go again."

He turned to see her arch slightly, which thrust her enormously distended belly further forward. She'd never been a lightly built woman, though every one of her generous curves had been perfect, but now highlighted against the fire,

she was like some primitive earth goddess.

And just as terrifying.

One reason she terrified him was that he desired her, now, caught up in this primal force. She seemed almost one with the fire, burning with life, heat, and danger.

When she blew out a breath and relaxed, he took a deep breath himself. "Worse, eh?"

She turned, brushing a lock of hair off her face. It had presumably been pinned up when she'd started the journey, but now was a disordered tangle down her back. "Not worse so much as stronger. It's meant to be, so it can't be bad."

"Very philosophical, I'm sure. But pain is pain."

"So we cope as best we can. Is there more tea?"

He gestured for Peabody to get it. "Kate, you're in the middle of a military disaster here. With daylight and clearer weather, we'll be fighting again. Are you sure you can't hold out until we can get you out of here?"

"Captain, it's like being in the hands of the ocean and I am not about to play King Canute and try to cry halt. However, if your duty calls, you must leave me. I'm sure Mr. Rightwell will help as best he can."

Charles looked skeptically at the Reverend Rightwell, who was hunched in a corner clutching a mug of tea as if trying to dissociate himself from all proceedings.

Then he looked back at Kate. She'd spoken firmly, but he could see fear in her eyes. He didn't think he could be any help at all, but he squeezed her hand. "No one's going anywhere until morning."

Come morning, though, he would have to leave. His duty was to reunite with his regiment and be ready for action.

He'd heard that births could go on for days. Could he bring himself to leave her here in labor?

He sent up an earnest prayer that this birth be fast. But how soon afterward could a woman travel on foot? And what about the baby? Peasant women seemed to travel with young babies. But, though Kate Fallowfield was clearly good country stock, he wouldn't describe her as a peasant.

She'd always been secretive about her origins, though Dennis claimed to have found her in a bookseller's shop in a small country town. She'd gone by the name Mrs. Fallowfield, but that was a common enough practice among the army camp followers. She spoke and behaved like a lady, but true ladies generally prided themselves on a kind of delicacy, whereas Kate Fallowfield had never seemed delicate at all.

She'd always impressed him with her decency, however, and he'd often puzzled about how she'd become Fallowfield's lightskirt. His lieutenant had been blessed with startling looks and an overabundance of easy charm, but he'd also had

the morals of an alley cat. Charles would have thought Kate clever enough to realize that. Yet she'd stayed with him for well over a year now, and only left for England when he'd thrown her out.

Suddenly Charles realized her purpose. She'd battled fate and storm to get here with a clergyman in order to force Fallowfield to marry her. At pistol point, perhaps? Dammit, but he wished his lieutenant were alive. He'd hold a pistol to his head himself!

Fast on that thought, however, he knew he'd not wish such a husband on the most hard-mouthed jade in the army camp.

He watched another couple of pains come and go and then felt compelled to sit beside her. He'd held her when she was weeping, but it seemed awkward to touch her now. He'd never touched her before except in the most formal way.

"Would it help if I held you?" he asked.

She looked startled, and even might have blushed, but she nodded. He moved the bench a little so that they could both lean against the wall, then wrapped an arm around her. After a moment, she rested her head heavily on his shoulder.

"I was mad to come here, wasn't I? It just seemed so unfair ..."

"It doubtless is unfair. If Fallowfield were still alive, I'd make him take his vows."

"I'm miserable because I can't seem to care that he's dead. He didn't deserve to die."

He rubbed her arm. "Perhaps no one does. Despite everything, he was a good soldier and died well." He wasn't sure if that was any consolation, but she was swallowed up in another ocean wave of labor and made no response.

Was there anything they could do for her? Back home as a lad he'd watched animals being born—horses, cats, dogs. He couldn't recall anything from that experience that might help here.

Trying to whisper, he asked, "Any of you men know anything about this?"

It was damned stupid to whisper when her ear was only inches from his lips.

The men shook their heads, and he saw genuine regret on many faces. They all knew Kate, and they knew her as cheerful and kind. It didn't hurt that she was so bloody beautiful, with clear skin, big blue eyes, and that mass of heavy golden hair, but the beauty went far deeper than that.

They'd missed her these past weeks since Fallowfield had sent her back to England. They'd missed her smiles, her joyousness, and her singing as she worked.

Even if the only flaw she possessed was to sing off-key.

"Then I suppose I must help."

Charles stared at Mr. Rightwell, still hunched in his corner. "You know about childbirth?"

The clergyman shrugged, and he did now look a little less morose and peevish. "I must make it clear that I have no professional qualification. I know nothing, really. But I have been at a few births in the course of my duties. Some devout women like to pray ..."

Charles had hoped for more, but this was better than nothing. "What do we do, then?"

"As far as I can tell, very little. It is mainly a matter of waiting. The midwife generally comforts and encourages the woman, who is frightened and distressed ..." He cast a dubious look at Kate, who was in the throes of labor again.

She was a dead weight against Charles, looking more stunned than distressed.

Her hearing must have been working, however, for when it was over she said, "Some comfort and encouragement would be nice, you know."

Charles burst out laughing.

When he got a grip on himself, he took refuge in organization. He passed the duties of comfort and encouragement to Rightwell and went back to setting up a bed using the rag mattress. The best they could do for a pillow was to stuff a flour sack with odd bits of clothing, but soon they had a cozy corner shielded off from the rest of the room by blankets hung from a rope.

Charles then invited Kate to take up residence.

She moved to obey, but Rightwell held her back. "If you wish to take to your bed, madam, you must do so. But in my experience, the midwives encouraged the woman to stay sitting, or even walking, as long as possible."

"Walking!" Charles exclaimed. "Well then, why don't we march her back to the baggage carts! Damnation, Rightwell!"

"Language, sir!" snapped the clergyman. "You say you know nothing. I merely tell what I have observed. In fact, I questioned one midwife about these practices. She said that as babies have to come down, it generally helped for down to, so to speak, be down."

One of the men cleared his throat. "When me mam were birthin' young 'uns, Captain, she always seemed to be stamping around the place until near her time. Then she took to the bed."

The only pictures Charles had ever seen of women in childbirth had shown them in bed. But now he came to think of it, they seemed to also show the babe already born. Though his instinct was to make Kate lie down, perhaps with someone to gently wipe her brow, he said, "Right, then!" and seized her hands. "Up you come."

When she was on her feet, he put his arm around her and steered her up and down the small room.

She walked willingly enough, but said, "I never knew you were such a bully, Captain."

"When called for, Kate. I've no mind to be shot for desertion or dereliction of duty. I've even less mind to leave you here in distress. So let's get this child safely into the world."

The men were hastily scooting into corners, trying to give as much walking space as possible, but it was still only about ten paces each way to the turn. They halted when labor hit her, then settled back to walking again. Though she clutched at him and her breathing spoke of pain, she denied any great distress.

She seemed to enjoy talking as they walked, and so he dredged his mind for light chatter. This was hard since he doubted she'd want to talk about Fal-lowfield and army life, or the time before she'd been seduced away from home and family.

At some point Private Chase pulled out his whistle and began to play a lively march. Charles wondered if a drummer might come in useful, too.

He looked over at Mr. Rightwell, who merely said, "As far as I can tell, Captain, it is going as it should."

He wanted to ask the man if any of these births he'd attended had resulted in death. Women did die in childbirth. He couldn't even say the words. Surely someone as strong and vital as Kate Fallowfield couldn't be dead before morning?

Soon they were stopping more than walking, and at last she groaned, "Ah, now it hurts."

He held her tighter, not minding the way she bruised him with her grip. He'd shed his jacket and waistcoat a while back, and now only his shirt protected his arms from her viselike fingers.

When she relaxed her grip and looked up at him, he saw fear, and this he understood. She was like a new recruit facing enemy fire. He said what he would say to such a terrified lad. "There's no turning back, Kate. The only way out is through it."

She blew out a breath, pushing hair away from her eyes. "That's easy enough for you to say!"

Charles laughed and found a string to tie back her straggling hair. "You've convinced me I never want to be a general. I'd rather be in the thick of it than out here watching."

"Whereas I've always been delighted not to be in the fighting."

"We soldiers value the women who are there to tend to us. Now, it seems, the situation is reversed. Is there anything practical we can do?"

She shook her head, swaying unselfconsciously against his shoulder. "I'm just glad I'm not alone-" But another pain took her, clearly sharper and stronger than before. When it finished, she was almost

slumped against him. "I think I need to lie down. .."

He swept her up and carried her to the bed. The next attack was on her before he put her down and she cried out with it.

By the time he had her settled, Rightwell had come to the other side of the bed. She was arching up, grimacing.

"Dammit, Rightwell. There must be something we can do!"

"I fear not, Captain. But I think that at last we are near."

"Pray God you're right. She can't go on like this. What time is it?" Even as he asked, Charles realized he had his own watch and pulled it out. Eleven. He'd thought it later. That left plenty of time before dawn and surely this writhing, sweating intensity couldn't last for long.

"I think ..." said Rightwell.

"What?"

"In some cases, perhaps one of the women rubbed the mother's back."

"Then why the devil didn't you say so!" Charles immediately rolled Kate onto her side and started massaging her rigid shoulders.

"Er .. lower, Captain."

"Lower? Where lower?" Charles moved his hands down to the center of her back.

"Er . . . just above ..."

Charles looked for a moment at Kate's wonderfully rounded bottom, then put his hands just above it, pushing with his thumbs.

"Oh, God!" she gasped, so he snatched his hands away. But then she cried. "Yes! Harder! Harder!"

She sounded embarrassingly like a demanding woman in a spicy bed, but Charles pressed harder and harder and she rewarded him-like a woman in a spicy bed-with a groan that seemed almost of pleasure.

Since she wanted pressure, he started to use the heel of his hand, praying he wasn't doing any damage. At least she'd stopped that tormented arching.

As time went on, however, he began to dread that he was in fact ministering to a death. The baby was surely stuck inside.

Then, suddenly, it all changed.

Kate had almost seemed to be in a trance, but now her eyes opened and she grunted in surprise.

"Kate? What?" Charles looked at Rightwell, who actually smiled.

"This is just as it should be. I believe we are almost there, Captain. She is going to push the baby out."

Kate looked for all the world like a gunner pushing a cannon up hill, but then she relaxed and actually smiled at him, though she looked more drunk than maternal. "It doesn't. . . hurt much any more. Thank you for . . . for rubbing my back."

"I'm glad it helped." He had the strangest urge to stroke her face and kiss her simply because she was being so brave.

Rightwell cleared his throat. "Madam, are you wearing underwear?"

She turned dazed eyes to the man. "A shift, Mr. Rightwell. No corset. None fit." But then she was grunting and pushing again so that Charles looked down at her voluminous skirts expecting a baby to appear under them at any moment.

"Drawers," mouthed Rightwell. "Some ladies do wear them in the coldest weather. Er. . . at some point you are going to have to push back her skirts and . . . er . . . look."

"Me?"

"You, sir. You at least seem to know the lady. I am a complete stranger."

"Perhaps a stranger would be better!"

"You, sir."

"You, Charles," said Kate quite strongly, and he looked up to see that she was even smiling that tip-tilted smile.

"This is all damned irregular," Charles muttered, but he gingerly put his hands under her skirts- wool on top, then flannel, then cotton-and pushed them up to expose her open thighs. He was sure he was blushing and could only be grateful that the shielding blankets made this corner quite dim.

Then he realized they made it so dim he could hardly see anything. There certainly was no baby there.

He called for one of their precious candles to be lit and brought to him, then set it in the ground near her feet. When she grunted and arched with the next push, he saw the skin bulge between her legs. But there was no sign of the baby actually coming out.

It was surely stuck.

"Rightwell, come here and look."

"Certainly not, Captain. There would be no point anyway. You don't think I would actually have looked

at a woman's private parts if there was no need to do so, do you?"

"It would have been useful if you had," Charles muttered. "How long should this take?"

"I think it can be quite a while."

Since there seemed nothing to be done, Charles lowered the skirts and moved to sit by her head and stroke her hair. "Poor Kate. It won't be long now."

She seemed half conscious, but she said, "Not poor ... as long as the baby's safe ..." But then tears swelled in her eyes and leaked onto her cheeks. "Poor innocent..."

He brushed them away. "Don't cry. I swear your baby will be safe." He wished he believed it.

"God, are you, Captain?"

He wiped more tears. "No, but a bloody good officer. I keep my men alive." Then he remembered the three burials that day. "I wish I'd kept Fallowfield alive for you."

"So do I. My child doesn't deserve to be a bastard." And more tears flowed even as she labored under the next push.

Charles knew that belief, faith, was key to many victories. Was Kate's misery over bringing a fatherless child into the world stopping the birth?

He stared at the clergyman, who shook his head. "A little while yet, I think."

"Not that. The question is, can I marry her?"

Rightwell's features set hard. "Are you saying *you* are the wretched father of this child?"

"No, dammit. But I could be, couldn't I? If we marry before it's born, it will legally be my child, and legitimate, won't it?"

"Legally, yes ... Though there should be certain church formalities."

"But it would be legal, especially with a clergyman officiating."

"That is why I am here, Captain."

"Then let's do it."

"I don't know-"

"What possible reason can you have to refuse?"

"The lady's wishes, sir!"

Charles looked at Kate to see her watching him, dazed but comprehending. "Do you understand, Kate? Would you like my name for the child? I'm not saying I can be much of a husband. I'm not a family man. But if it would ease you..."

She disappeared into another of the appalling spasms but emerged to say, "Yes, please. If you don't terribly mind."

"Do it," Charles snapped to Rightwell.

It looked as if the clergyman might object again, but he swallowed it-perhaps because of the silent threat of violence Charles was sending him. He began to gabble from memory the rite of marriage, frequently interrupted by Kate's red-faced struggles and Charles' peeps under her skirts to check progress.

"Hair! I see hair!" he shouted. "Hurry up, dammit. Yes, I do. Of course I do. Yes, she does. Say it, Kate!"

She blinked up at him. "I do, I do, I do."

"Then I now pronounce you man and wife."

Impelled by the moment, Charles laughed and kissed Kate smackingly on her slack lips. She startled him by laughing herself, though it twisted into a groan and another writhing push.

Charles watched under her skirts and would have sworn the baby was going to push out, but then Kate relaxed and the hair disappeared again. It didn't seem right to him.

He pulled Rightwell to one side, hopefully out of Kate's hearing. "I thought you said babies should come down. She's pushing uphill!"

"Midwives often have birthing chairs, Captain, but we have no such thing here."

"So they do it sitting up?"

"Mostly . . . yes. In one case, the husband formed the chair."

"What do you mean, formed?"

"He sat on the chair, and she sat on his lap."

Kate had heard. "I should be sitting up?" She struggled up, and Charles went to help her. Though badly shaken by this whole event, he was a battle-hardened officer and it took only a moment to decide. He pulled her to her feet then turned to Rightwell. "Do you want to be husband or midwife?"

"You, sir, are undoubtedly the husband."

"Dammit, so I am." He swung her into his arms, thanking God he was a big, strong man. He took some pleasure from the thought that Fallowfield had been shorter and slighter and would doubtless have buckled. "Come on,

Kate. Over
to the bench."

"The bench?" It was just as if she were drunk.

"That's right. We'll have the baby out in no time." He sat with his back braced against the wall and arranged her in his lap, her legs spread wide over his. Then he realized they were facing most of his fascinated men.

"About face!" he commanded, and they hastily obeyed.

Soon only Rightwell was facing them. Clearly wishing he were somewhere else, the clergyman sat on the ground and tentatively peeped up Kate's skirts. She grunted again, but at least this time she didn't writhe or arch, but seemed to curl down upon herself. Caught in the moment, Charles began to urge her on as if she were a raw recruit in her first charge. "That's my girl! On and at 'em. Push, push, and never say die!"

She collapsed back on him, gasping, "Bully. I knew it."

"Officer. You can do it."

"Do I have a choice?" Then she was grunting and pushing again. Suddenly she gave a kind of squeal.

"What's happened?" Charles demanded.

"The head," Rightwell gasped. "It's out. Good God!"

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing. Nothing. But it's *ahead!*"

"What the devil did you expect, man?" Then Charles realized that Kate, slumped against him like a sack of grain, was laughing. He turned her sweaty face to him. "I suppose you find us funny," he said.

"I find you wonderful. This is a most peculiar state to be in, though. I wish I could see ..."

He pulled her skirts up and she looked down. "Oh God! It's my baby!"

"Now, what did *you* expect?"

But she wasn't listening. She was reaching down. He twisted to look too. It was astonishing. The baby was looking up, eyes open and seemingly as startled as everyone else.

"I wonder what *you* expected, infant," Charles whispered. "Not a bunch of rough, dirty soldiers . . ." But then had to gather his wits as another push hit Kate. Her skirts had settled over her thighs again, so he couldn't see, but he heard Rightwell gasp. "It's slippery! I almost dropped it. He. It's a boy!"

And the baby cried.

Kate grabbed her skirts up high to look. "Oh!" Then she reached out. "Here. Give him here! My baby!"

All dreaminess seemed to have fled as she snatched the baby to bring it close, wrapping it in the layers of her skirt for warmth.

"Careful, madam," Rightwell said. "It's ... er ... still attached."

Kate was oblivious and the cord seemed long enough.

"Hello," she whispered quietly and Charles thought his heart would stop.

By some miracle all her ravaged weariness evaporated for the moment so that she was at her most beautiful, and she and the wizened baby were staring at one another like reunited lovers.

"Was that as hard for you as it was for me, beautiful one?" she murmured, stroking the baby's cheek. "Exciting, too, though, wasn't it? And tiring. Do you want to sleep now?"

A lilting lullaby drifted through the air. Chase and his whistle. Charles realized he was stroking Kate's tangled hair and had just planted a kiss on her cheek. It seemed wrong, but completely right.

After all, they were married. He was beginning to think that might have been a rash act bringing all manner of complications in the future, but remembering the peace it had brought her, he couldn't regret it. And she was right.

This little innocent didn't deserve to have the stain of bastardy on him all his life.

With a swallowed laugh, he realized that it was as well that his uncle, Lord Jerrold, had a healthy son and heir. Society was inclined to look closely at the bloodlines and legitimacy of heirs to the peerage. Nor would it be right to bring a cuckoo into that nest.

Long life and health to Cousin Tom!

Charles pulled his wits together. No wonder they didn't let men into these matters. It was far too powerful a business. And, he now realized, the baby was still attached inside. His eyes met Rightwell's. "Does it just come out?" he mouthed.

"I believe so." But the man seemed as shaken and unsure of himself as Charles.

Charles looked up and caught some of his rough, tough killers trying to peep at the baby, faces as soft as the most doting grandmother. He glared and they hastily looked away again.

Then he looked dotingly at the perfect Madonna and child.

Reality intruded in time. Kate was no lightweight, and now the excitement was over, his legs began to complain. He wasn't sure he could move her, though, until the afterbirth separated.

Rightwell cleared his throat. "I do believe Mrs. Tennant should put the child to the breast about now. Since there is no question of a wet-nurse . . ."

"Mrs. Tennant," both Kate and Charles said together. Then they laughed self-consciously.

"Oh dear," said Kate.

"Oh, my dear," Charles replied with a grin. "Do as the doctor says."

"I think I'd like to, but how do I manage the gown?"

Charles muttered under his breath, thinking horses and dogs were a' damn sight easier.

"Perhaps, Captain, you could carry the lady back to the bed."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"I believe so..."

"Hold on to the baby, then, Kate." He gathered her into his arms and praying his stiffened legs didn't give way, rose to stagger over to the shielded corner and the bed. He settled her on her back, but she immediately sat up, seemingly not at all tired. "Believe it or not, I feel splendid! Could you unbutton my gown, please."

Charles felt inclined to give her a lecture on proper womanly behavior, but when it came down to it, he had no idea what such behavior was in this situation. Certainly he could not imagine some of the fine, delicate mothers of his acquaintance-including his own-going through this enterprise, but he had to assume they had.

He saw now that she'd let out a gown with many panels of extra cloth so that it flowed loosely from the shoulders. But it was still fastened by buttons down the back. He undid them and eased the gown off, trying not to see more than he should. As she'd said, she wore no corset, so only her cotton shift covered her breasts. Blushing fiercely, she loosened the drawstring to expose a breast, and brought the baby close. "They said it would come naturally at the time."

The baby, young though it was, did seem to show the same instinct as any baby animal. It opened its mouth like a bird, trying desperately to find the source of food. Kate tried to guide her nipple into the mouth, but he judged it more luck than skill when proper attachment was made. Kate winced, but then seemed to settle to it, too, stroking the baby's damp hair and cooing to him.

Charles realized he'd been staring at her breast, *and though there was nothing lascivious in his thoughts*, he called for someone to bring one of his spare shirts. Unfortunately he had nothing clean, but some covering was better than none. He slashed it down the front and draped it around Kate's shoulders, covering baby and breast.

"Sir." Rightwell's rather tight voice intruded into Charles' contemplation. "Do you have any idea what I should do with this?"

Charles looked down and suppressed a laugh. The reverend gentleman was clutching what looked like a large lump of liver in his bloody hands.

Kate looked, too, and started blushing again. "Oh, Mr. Rightwell, I am so sorry. I never meant for you to be *so intimately* involved in this."

"I am pleased to have been of service, Mrs. Tennant." It was polite but unconvincing.

"Someone has to tie off and cut the cord," she said. "Then, I think, the afterbirth can just be thrown away. Also, I am not completely featherwitted. I came with a bag, and it does include some necessities for the baby and ... and personal cloths for me."

Hoping it was not more complicated than it looked, Charles tied the rubbery cord with a strip of rag then sliced it with his knife. He half expected the baby to scream with pain, but it sucked on obliviously.

Rightwell went off to dispose of the afterbirth and Peabody hurried forward with Kate's bag. "Lovely baby, ma'am," he said with a bobbing bow, "and you're a gallant trooper!"

"Thank you, Private," said Kate, but Charles hurried the man back to the other side of the blanket even though there was nothing untoward to be seen.

He was beginning to feel quite shaken by all this. He'd wanted the baby born, but a mother and baby seemed a much more vulnerable package than a heavily pregnant woman.

This, legally, was his wife and child yet he had no idea how to take care of them.

"Could you take him, please."

Charles looked to see that Kate was holding out the baby, now bundled in cloth.

"Me?"

"I need to ... to do something."

He saw the pad of cloth in her hand and understood. Reluctantly, very reluctantly, he took the tiny bundle in his hands. The baby was asleep now, peaceful but still looking more like an old man than a baby should. Ah well, not all babies could be beautiful, he supposed. It was still a precious mite.

And when he thought of it, a new colt could hardly be described as a thing of beauty, but they generally soon became so.

He looked up to find Kate relaxed back against the wall, watching him. The shadows under her eyes seemed darker, and her hair was a mess. She'd pulled a ratty blanket over her legs and clutched his dirty shirt around her shoulders.

She was still one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

"I suppose you want him back," he said, surprised at how reluctant he was to relinquish his burden.

"Eventually." Again, that bewitching smile twitched her lips. "Thank you, Captain."

"I don't feel I did anything much to the purpose."

"You were there. I needed someone I could trust."

He wouldn't be at all surprised if he were blushing. He thanked God for the shadows and his sun-darkened skin.

"Did I dream it?" she asked. "Or are we married?"

Tension coiled in him. It had seemed so right, yet she could hardly be said to have been in full possession of her faculties. "Yes, we are married, Kate. This little one is the legal son of Captain Charles Tennant unless his mother decides to contest the dubious honor."

"There is nothing dubious about it. I fear it is a terrible imposition on you, though. Such undisciplined weeping and wailing..."

"Hush." He leaned forward to place the baby in her arms. "I have no particular use for my unmarried status and am glad to surrender it in the cause. I fear it's more likely to inconvenience you than me. But war often takes care of such problems."

* * *

Kate held her precious child close, looking up at Captain Tennant-her husband, for heaven's sake- not at all sure what to say. She knew this campaign was not going well, and Dennis's death was proof of it. In a little while she was going to be very concerned over the safety of herself and her son, but for the moment she was more concerned about this man.

Charles the Bold, they called him because he seemed without fear. Even just walking through the camp he gave off a kind of energy, a readiness, an extra dose of pure life. He led the charge others quailed from. He captured positions others thought invincible.

In many ways Dennis had hated him-a kind of envy really-but he'd loved to serve under him because Dennis was above all a soldier. He wanted to be in the thick of things and victorious.

Part of the captain's boldness came from strength, she supposed. He was an impressively big man, lean and hard with muscle, dusted dark with virile hair. In the intimacy of army life she hadn't been able to avoid seeing men in various stages of undress and she'd sometimes feasted her eyes on the captain's fine form.

And felt guilty afterward.

His was a boldness of the spirit, though. She'd often seen his dark eyes light with the joy of a terrifying challenge. He didn't laugh much, but his smile, wide and carefree, had terrified her once or twice. It had generally been a prelude to him leading his men into appalling danger.

His smile now was just an ordinary one, yet he seemed to be expecting to die. She'd heard him say that since he didn't fear death, it could not dismay him. Now, he still didn't seem to fear death, but was he walking toward it?

She'd seen it happen a time or two. It wasn't suicide, and it certainly wasn't fear. Sometimes men just grew war-weary. They cheated death again and again until one day the game palled and death, like a teasing harlot, became not the enemy but the seducer.

Kate didn't have the energy to fight death at the moment, but she'd hate to think that their strange midnight wedding might have pushed him closer to the brink. "I would much rather you didn't die," she said simply.

"Then I assure you I will endeavor not to. I think this greedy lot may have left a little stew. Would you like some?"

"Yes please."

When he left her corner, she put the baby down on the bed and pulled back the blankets a little to peep into the room. Now the excitement was over, the men had rolled in their cloaks and blankets to sleep. Mr. Rightwell was sitting quietly by the fire. He looked up and smiled at her quite kindly, so she smiled back.

She'd almost kidnapped the poor man and dragged him along on this adventure.

The captain had squatted down by the hearth to scrape the last of the stew into the bowl, and the dying fire outlined him like a halo. She grinned at that. Sainly, he certainly was not.

Good, though. Yes, he was a good man. She'd lived with his company now for over a year and seen the way he cared for his men. A rough caring at times, and he could be harsh when called for, but caring all the same.

She dragged her eyes away from the sight of him and turned back to her baby. She'd wrapped him in cloths and a blanket for warmth, but she would have to put a baby clout on him before he soiled everything. She carefully unwrapped his tiny limbs and put the folded cloth between his legs, securing it with an outer cloth, tied at either side. She'd practiced this on other babies, but her own newborn was so tiny and delicate that she was afraid. She'd dearly like to have one of the women from the camp here to advise her.

Meg Fully, perhaps, who'd had a baby recently. Or Red Jess who'd had ten of her own and generally acted as midwife. These women had become her friends, though back home in Aylesbury she'd have crossed the street to avoid them.

Meg and Jess would scold her mightily for this mad venture, though it did seem that thus far she'd avoided disaster. Both she and her baby were alive.

The captain was coming over with the bowl and a spoon. Perhaps their marriage was the disaster she deserved. She couldn't think so. She did regret entangling him, but her child had a name now, and a respectable one.

She put the baby down again to take the bowl, murmuring her thanks.

He sat cross-legged on the ground by her bed, as graceful as a big cat. "There was only a crust of bread, so I broke it up into the broth. There's not much meat left, I'm afraid."

She took a spoonful. "It's good."

"It's not much nourishment after all that work. No wonder they call it labor."

"I admit I am hungry." She consumed the stew with indecent speed and could have eaten more if there'd been any. She knew enough to be grateful for what she'd had. One of the inefficiencies of this campaign was in the food supply. If there'd been meat in the stew it had probably been a rabbit one of the men had managed to snare or shoot.

She saw Mr. Rightwell find himself a corner and lie down to sleep. "You must be tired," she said to the captain.

"So must you."

They both spoke softly to avoid disturbing the exhausted men.

"A little. But there's a kind of excitement. I don't think I can settle yet."

He nodded. "Like after a battle. But why not try? Lie down, and if you don't mind, I'll lie here by you in case you need anything in the night."

Because he clearly wouldn't rest until she did, Kate lay back on her lumpy bed and closed her eyes. She heard him moving and peeped to see he'd wrapped himself in his army cloak just a foot away and appeared to have gone to sleep.

She rolled, too, so that she could study her sleeping baby. Such a soft little face, yet so old-looking. Round cheeks, tiny nose, and closed eyes offered no hint of a resemblance. What would he look like as he grew?

By God, but I wish the captain was your father.

Taking the baby with her, she rolled so she could look at the captain again, placing the baby between them. The women at the camp had assured her that she wouldn't smother a baby in her sleep unless she was drunk. She prayed that was true for she had no cradle or other safe warm spot to put him in.

The captain looked less formidable lying down and with his eyes closed. She'd always been struck by his eyes, but now she realized they were framed by remarkably long dark lashes. His hair was dark, too, and fell in disorder around him, having escaped its ribbon. One lock straggled down over his eyes. She remembered him stroking her hair off her face many times during labor. She wished she were bold enough to do the same to him. She was not Kate the Bold, though. She was Kate Dunstable, very proper daughter of Augustus Dunstable Esquire of Aylesbury, Purveyor of Books, Pamphlets, and Writing Materials. Tears threatened. Childlike, she wanted her home and her mother at this moment...

She pushed such weak thoughts away, studying instead the man who'd saved her. She'd never have thought him the kind of man to involve himself in a birth. But then, what choice had he had other than to toss her into the dubious care of his men?

Suddenly, Kate lay back on the bed, painfully embarrassed. Giving birth had been the strangest,

strongest, most exhilarating experience of her life. But now she thought of what she must have looked like-what she must have sounded like-and turned hot from head to toe.

No wonder they kept men out of these affairs!

The next thing she knew, a strange noise was dragging her out of sleep. An animal? A baby . . .

Her baby!

She jerked up and grabbed him. "Shhhhhh."

"What is it?" the captain asked sleepily.

"I think he's hungry."

" 'Struth."

Kate swallowed a chuckle as she exposed a breast and tried again the tricky business of attachment. The baby seemed willing to take a good firm grip of just about anything near its mouth but it took a few tries to get him on the nipple.

Then there were the strange sensations of suckling and a kind of tingling in response. Kate relaxed back against her lumpy pillow, relieved that the babe was silent and sucking away with remarkable strength and confidence.

Kate heard a faint snore and looked to see that the captain was fast asleep again on his back. The wonders of birth and babies had palled a bit, she assumed.

The baby didn't feed long and soon they both drifted back to sleep.

The next time her son woke her, the captain sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Horses are definitely easier." He spoke softly, for the men were still sleeping, and the only light was the embers of the fire.

"I beg your pardon?" said Kate, the babe already suckling.

"Foals find their mother without having to demand attention." She could hear teasing humor in his voice as he added, "And they don't make such a stink."

Kate was only too aware that the baby had wet his cloth, but she retorted, "I have smelled a stable, Captain."

Clearly the infant had only wanted a light snack, for he soon slid off the nipple, fast asleep. Kate put him down and began to struggle to her feet.

Immediately, Captain Tennant pushed her down. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

"I need water to wash him."

"Stay there. I'll get it. I put a jug by the fire last night so it will be a little warm."

He brought the bowl of water and a candle he'd lit in the embers. She thanked him, but added, "I don't think I need to lie abed, you know."

"Then why do they call it 'lying in'?"

"Are you always so logical?" She set about cleaning and changing the child, being especially careful in the dim light. "Perhaps women do usually keep to their bed for a few days. But that requires a bevy of female assistants to fetch and carry and a deal more security than we have here."

He rubbed his big hands over his face. "Gads, you're right. We have to get you out of here, though I'm damned if I know how. If no transport comes by, you'll have to walk."

"I know."

"But can you?"

She looked up, hoping she looked and sounded calm and confident. "What choice do I have? Quite apart from warfare, I'm soon going to run out of clean cloths for him."

He touched her hair. "As soon as there's a trace of light, I'll send a couple of men to try to find some form of transport. I'd escort you, but. . ."

"But your duty lies elsewhere." She picked up her clean little tyrant and held him close. "I understand, Captain."

"You're a remarkable woman, Kate."

"Am I? I feel like a remarkably foolish one, all in all."

He stretched, hands brushing the rafters, then coiled down again to sit beside her, leaning on one raised knee. "What happened between you and Fallowfield, Kate? If you were willing to go to such lengths to force a marriage, why not sooner?"

Kate delayed by looking down and stroking her baby's tiny head. She could feel a light fuzz beneath her fingers, but now it had dried, the poor thing looked almost bald.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

She looked up then into those remarkable eyes, eyes that mocked cowards and fools. "It's just such a sorry tale. The truth is that until a short while ago, I thought *wewere* properly married."

"What?"

She grimaced. "I'd heard tales of false clergymen and lying witnesses used by libertines to cozen virtuous

young ladies, but of course such things could never happen to me. And certainly Lieutenant Dennis Fallowfield-handsome, charming, adoring- would never resort to such deceit."

"He staged an elopement?"

"Certainly not!" Then the absurdity of her outrage struck her and she smothered a laugh. She laid the baby back down on the mattress and lay back on her pillow. "I think you deserve to hear the whole tale, Captain."

He lay back too; so that their heads were only a foot or so apart. Pillow talk, didn't they call it? she thought wryly.

"Could you bring yourself to call me Charles?" he asked.

She would do almost anything for him, but that was beyond her. "I really don't think so."

He just shrugged and lay there on his side, head propped up on hand, attentive.

"Dennis was on furlough and visiting friends near my home. Of course you know he had looks and charm to turn any female head. It seems brash to say so, but I too am similarly cursed."

"I don't think Dennis saw his attractions as a curse."

"Perhaps not. I have always found beauty a cross to bear."

"You certainly made a remarkable couple. Two blond gods among mere mortals."

Kate couldn't be sure if his tone was ironic or not. "Perhaps that was part of my appeal to him. Mainly, however, I was a challenge. Many men of all stations had wooed me and yet I remained unmarried. The truth was that none of my suitors caught my fancy and I was content enough with my life not to leap into marriage. In time, however, the male species began to see my unmarried state as a kind of insult. I gather-though of course I only discovered this recently-that the subject of my chastity came up over a punch bowl and Dennis boasted that no woman had ever resisted him. Perhaps it was cheating of him to decide to win my chastity through marriage, but he courted me most assiduously and I proved as foolish as the rest of my sex. I accepted him even though he was charmingly frank about his lack of fortune."

"You mean he offered for you in form? Spoke to your father?"

"Yes, but we are quite simple folk." She couldn't bring herself to remind him that she was a shopkeeper's daughter.

True, her father was an educated man and the shop was a bookseller's, but it was still a shop. Captain Tennant, she had heard, was connected to the nobility.

"I was of age, and my parents were not about to forbid me to follow my heart."

The captain's eyebrows rose. "So he managed a false ceremony in your own hometown. I didn't think Fallowfield a magician."

She grimaced at him. "No, of course not. But he was clever. He came up with a reason why we should marry elsewhere. A great-aunt with property to leave who would be pleased to see us marry in her private chapel. The journey took less than a day, and our middle-aged maid accompanied me to guard my virtue."

"Why didn't your parents travel with you?"

"My father is an invalid and my mother doesn't like to leave him. It didn't seem important since the next day we were to return home to celebrate the event with them."

"And?"

"And we spoke our vows in this musty old chapel which formed a kind of attachment to a decrepit house. Our witnesses were the ancient aunt and her equally ancient maid. The minister was the local parson who seemed a habitual drunkard. It wasn't the wedding I would have chosen but I thought it legal. I was even given a signed document to keep."

"So when you went home, everything seemed to be in order."

"I never went home. We stayed the night in a nearby inn and the next morning were awoken by a message demanding Dennis's instant return to his regiment. He was flatteringly upset and insisted I return to the comfort of my parents' home. I insisted on accompanying him. To this day I don't know which he truly wanted. He'd won his wager and taken my maidenhead."

"Wager?" His body seemed relaxed and yet she sensed the anger in him.

"Three hundred guineas. Dennis was often in debt, you know. His army pay was definitely inadequate for his tastes."

All he said was, "He's lucky he's dead. So, was there an aunt at all?"

"Apparently not. He hired three actors and used a deserted house."

"You know, in law there doesn't have to be a clergyman for marriage vows to be binding. The church courts don't like it, but the civil courts will uphold a union when there are witnesses to the vows being taken."

She smiled. "I've learned about such things. But what chance do I have, do you think, to find those actors and have them testify to my vows? The written record just disappeared."

"The cur. And you never forced him to acknowledge you as his wife. You called yourself Mrs. Fallowfield, but most of the army camp followers take their current protector's name. Why not, Kate? Why let him tell the world you were his doxy?"

She studied him. "I think you doubt my tale, Captain. I don't blame you. I did protest the situation, but

he told me that

he was not allowed to marry without his colonel's permission. I think that is true."

"Indeed it is. But the worst he'd have suffered would have been a blistering reprimand."

"He convinced me he'd lose his commission. And of course, it was only for a little while until the right moment to ask. He also reminded me that I had my marriage lines if I ever truly needed to prove my virtue. He was a most persuasive man."

The expression in the captain's shadowed eyes was disturbing, though Kate couldn't tell if it was anger, disbelief, or even disgust at her stupidity. She looked up at the dark beams in the ceiling. "They weren't bad times, you know. Dennis was always charming until pressed to be otherwise, and army life was an adventure for me."

"You were starved for adventure?"

She rolled her head to meet his eyes. "I wouldn't have thought so, but I think perhaps I was. Otherwise, I would have returned home after the wedding, wouldn't I, and not be in this ridiculous pickle."

"So, when did the bubble burst?"

She looked back at the ceiling. "When I realized I was with child. I was a few months into it before it really dawned on me. I wasn't sick as some women are. I just began to find my gowns too tight at the waist. Of course, I immediately told Dennis and pointed out that he must gain Colonel Purdue's approval of the marriage and make it public." She sighed. "The next few months were . . . difficult."

She started when he touched her cheek, then moved into his hand, looking at him. His expression was still enigmatic, but at least it was sympathetic.

He doubtless thought her a complete fool, but not a lying tart.

"I noticed Fallowfield grow more and more out of humor."

"Probably because I would not let the matter drop. He was alternately charming and terrifying so that I had no idea what to do, particularly when I was beginning to suspect that he was being unfaithful to me. When he was charming I truly believed that soon all would be put right. When he was angry, I was afraid of him. But then, since Dennis seemed so nervous of speaking to the colonel, and yet the man was quite kind to me, I said I would approach him."

He winced. "And that's when it all blew up."

"Exactly. He threw me out with just enough money to get me home. But first he explained that we weren't married at all, or certainly not in any way that I could prove. Of course I raced to find my precious piece of paper, but it was already gone. I doubt it would have served. It could have been written by anyone, anywhere. It's witnesses that matter."

He rolled onto his back. "He died instantly, you know. At the moment I could relish the memory of him perishing slowly and in pain."

She reached over and took his hand. "Don't. That serves no purpose. He was as he was. It was my fault

for being so stupid."

He carried her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss softly over her knuckles. "None of it was your fault, Kate, none of it. I saw you leave, though. How did you come to be here?"

He still held her hand, and it was pleasant to leave it there. Dennis's hands had been strong but slender and he'd gone to some trouble to keep them soft.

Captain Tennant's hand engulfed hers in warm rough skin. It made her feel very safe.

"I headed back to England with a convoy of wounded soldiers. It was as if I were sleepwalking. I was numb. I didn't know what to do since I dreaded returning to my home in this state. But then one day I awoke. I realized he hadn't just branded me a whore, but he'd branded his child a bastard. It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter in God's eyes. But it just wasn't right, and I was not about to let him get away with it."

The anger returned, the fierce flame that had carried her back across the continent, and had swept up poor Mr. Rightwell in the final stages. "I set off back to the army. I begged rides on carts when I could, and walked when I couldn't. I wouldn't stop or be stopped. Dennis was going to marry me properly before true witnesses, or I would tell Colonel Purdue everything and *ask* him to throw Dennis out of the regiment."

"And I always thought you such a sensible woman."

"Did you?" She realized she was gripping his hand tight enough to hurt, and let go. "I thought so, too. I suppose I did become a little wild, but what would you have done?"

He laughed softly. "For a host of reasons, it's hard for me to put myself in your position. But did it not occur to you to worry about a lifetime married to such a man, especially when you'd brought him to his knees?"

She sat up, hugging her knees. "No. It is rather daunting. But what else could I have done?"

"I don't know." He sat up. Slowly, he reached out to touch her cheek. She glanced at him, sensing something in the air, then feeling his hand coil around her neck. She stiffened under the tantalizing, intimate touch, but did not pull away. It did not feel wrong ...

"And you've landed in the suds again, haven't you?" he said softly. "Married to me."

"I don't think so."

Those eyes studied her, studied her lips so she could almost feel them there as a touch. "I've been wanting to kiss you, Kate, from the first moment I saw you. This may not be the ideal moment, but it could be the only one we have. Will you permit it?"

From the first moment? What was he saying? "You've already kissed me a few times, Captain, and without asking permission at all."

"I wasn't sure you noticed. But I want to kiss you properly, Kate. Deeply, thoroughly."

Kate felt that perhaps she should object, though she couldn't think why. They were married, after all, absurd though it might be. And her lips were already hungering for a kiss. "I... I don't object, Captain."

"Charles," he said as he shifted closer so he could draw her against his shoulder. "Please try to think of me as Charles, at least for a moment or two."

His shoulder was very wide and hard. And yet comfortable. She was sure she'd rested against it many times during her labor, but this was the first time she'd been able to think about it. It fit her head better than Dennis's had. His arm around her seemed more cradling, more secure.

His lips were soft, though his bristles certainly weren't. It was the first time she'd ever been kissed by a man with stubble around his mouth, for Dennis's blond beard had been quite soft and he'd been fastidious about shaving.

She'd used to think Dennis's care over such things very attractive, but now she didn't mind the feel of bristles at all. Nor did she mind the insistent pressure of strange lips, or the first contact of a strange tongue with hers.

She let him take her weight and take her mouth and drifted on novel and highly pleasant sensations. His smell was different. His smell was actually quite pungent since it must be days since he'd had any chance to wash. That didn't seem to bother her, either. If anything it excited her, that mingled smell of sweat and blood. She didn't suppose she was any too delicate herself.

She even began to think that it would have been pleasant if there'd been a chance of taking it further. They were married, after all.. .

He drew back from the kiss, lids relaxed over smiling eyes turned almost dreamy. "I hate to stop, but if I don't I'll soon be in a state quite unsuited to our situation."

Kate pushed back flustered, not so much by his words but by the fact that they echoed her own. Intimacy with Dennis had been pleasant, but there'd been none of the fire she'd sensed in that mere kiss. Perhaps this, too, was an effect of birth.

If so, it was a very illogical one!

"I do like it when you smile like that," he said.

"Like what?"

His thumb brushed one corner of her mouth. "Your lips turn up just here."

"Do they? That sounds most peculiar."

"It's charming. I noticed it the first time we met."

When I was Dennis Fallowfield's doxy, she thought bitterly. She remembered Captain Tennant saying that he had wanted to kiss her then. She doubted his intentions had ever been honorable.

She began to regret their recent kiss and the message it might have sent him. Her body provided distraction. "I'm afraid I need to relieve myself, Captain."

It wiped away his lazy smile. "We've no chamber pot."

"I never supposed you had. I'm used to using the latrine."

"It's outside."

"So I would think."

He laughed. "Not even the most gallant knight errant could solve this problem for you, could he?" He stood and held out his hand. "Can you walk?"

"I think so." She put her hand in his strong one and was pulled to her feet. For a moment, she swayed, but then with the help of his arm she regained her balance. He wrapped her heavy cloak around her, then helped her over to the door that led into the ruined half of the building.

He turned away while she used the crude latrine, and only turned back when she touched him.

"All right?"

"Yes."

He wrapped an arm around her and she discovered that his shoulder was perfectly positioned for her head when standing up, too. His strong hand rubbed at her back, making her almost want to purr.

He spoke softly, almost to himself. "These things come upon us at the most damnable moments."

Before she could ask what he meant, he led her back into the warm room and settled her on the bed. Of course he'd meant that she'd summoned his desire at a time when he couldn't assuage it.

Without asking permission, he lay close beside her and gathered her into his arms. He was so big and warm that her instinct to resist melted in a moment and she drifted back into sleep.

She awoke alone on her bed to noises, misty morning light, and a deep weariness. Then she remembered her baby and turned to him.

He was gone.

So was the captain!

She ripped back the curtain and met the startled eyes of the soldiers all involved in packing their

possessions. Clutching her blanket closer around herself, she desperately searched for her child.

She almost screamed. He was in the hands of a haggard dirty creature who was baring huge yellow teeth at him. But then she came to her senses. It was amiable Peabody, who couldn't help having teeth the size and color of a horse's.

The door swept open and Kate huddled further in her blanket as cool air blasted her. The door slammed shut. The captain had returned. In his red braided jacket and tall black boots he once more seemed the charismatic man she'd always found fascinating. And rather daunting.

Had they really kissed in the night? Had he confessed to having always wanted to kiss her?

She never would have guessed, particularly from the cool, assessing glance he flicked over her now. Whatever they had been to each other in the night, she was now a problem to be dealt with.

Belatedly, she realized that the weather outside, though chilly, had been clear and sunny. Traveling weather if she was up to it. She had to be up to it. Assessing herself, she felt stiffness and some tenderness between her legs, but no particular aches and pains. She'd probably tire easily, but she could try to walk back to camp.

Perhaps she looked afraid, for the captain's expression changed. He grinned for her in the devil-may-care way that the whole regiment recognized as a sign that Charles the Bold was about to take on death again. And win.

She hoped.

She'd married the man.

She must have been mad. She could never cope with such energy, such risk-taking, and he could never have really intended to tie himself to a woman such as she.

In their last devastating encounter, Dennis had clearly told her that she should never have expected that even a son of the gentry would marry into trade, and he'd been right. Though she'd loved him for himself, she'd been extremely flattered by his attentions. Captain Charles Tennant was undoubtedly far, far above her touch.

He rescued the baby from the doting Peabody and came over, the child a tiny bundle in his big right arm. "We just wanted to let you rest as long as possible. But it's time to move."

No "Are you able?" she noticed.

Pushing weariness aside, she said, "It certainly is," and took the hand he extended. She was sure his pull contributed as much as her rather shaky legs, but she hoped he didn't notice. If he believed she could not cope, he'd be on the horns of a terrible dilemma.

How far could she walk today, though? Perhaps out of sight would be far enough.

"Are you in pain?" he asked curtly, shattering her hopes of looking indomitable.

"No. A little fragile, perhaps. Heavy inside. I'll be all right."

"Then what are you thinking?"

She smiled for him. "Nothing bad. Just that none of this seems real."

"Oh, it's real enough." He snapped a few commands to his men and they finished gathering their stuff in double time and rushed out the door followed by Peabody carrying a big pot of porridge. "They'll eat outside while we get you decent."

Kate bit her lips to control a smile. Charles the Bold was definitely back in form.

The baby, however, didn't recognize his authority and begin to wail. The captain scowled down at him then put the infant into her arms. "I suppose you'd better feed him. Don't take long."

Self-conscious in the daylight, Kate tried to slide the baby under his shirt, but the business was still sufficiently tricky that she gave up. A glance showed that he'd courteously turned away. "I suppose I had better name him," she said.

His back gave no indication of mood, but she thought there was a touch of humor when he said, "We certainly can't call him baby forever."

She liked that "we" but didn't place much dependence on it, and forever was not a concept that had any meaning for her at the moment. She looked down at the baby, who almost seemed to be frowning in concentration as he suckled. A fierce little thing. What name would suit him? Certainly not Dennis. And not Charles, either, tempting though it was. Her father was called Augustus, which she did not favor.

"Do you have any suggestions?" she asked.

"A good friend of mine died not long ago. His name was Stephen..."

Kate remembered Major Stephen Courtenay-a rather serious man, who liked to consider all the angles of anything. Dennis had found him infuriating, but no one had denied that he was honest, brave, and sensibly caring of all the men in his command. He'd been sincerely mourned.

She hadn't been aware of a close bond between the major and the captain, but the major would have been foil to Charles the Bold's occasional fiery impulses.

"Stephen, then," she said, but without a last name, for it seemed absurd to call the child Stephen Tennant. As absurd as to call herself Mrs. Tennant.

She left such conundrums for later.

The captain went to the door and called Mr. Right-well. In moments the baby was christened, with

Private Peabody

and Corporal Milwood standing proxy for godparents back in England-Kate's sister Anne and the captain's cousin, Thomas.

When the others had retreated outside again, he went with them, saying, "I'll get you some porridge."

In moments he was back, and he started to spoon

feed her as she fed the baby.

"In a hurry, are we?" she asked between glutinous mouthfuls. She was sure the stuff was nutritious, but she'd never before tried to eat it without sugar and cream.

"Yes." He pushed another spoonful into her. "I've to find my regiment and you must be out of here before the fighting starts."

As if summoned by his words, a distant boom stilled both of them. A cannon. Silence followed and so they both relaxed a little.

The baby-Stephen-had finished and so she quickly changed him, bundled him up, and placed him on the ground. Then she took off the captain's ruined shirt and began to struggle back into the bodice of her dress.

"Hold on." He came over, pulling out his sharp knife. "You've got to be able to feed him on the road." Pulling the bodice away from her, he slashed through over both breasts then helped her into it.

"I can hardly walk around like this!" she protested while trying to bundle her heavy hair up with the few pins still caught in it.

"With your cloak on top, you'll be all right." He brushed her hands away and began to drag a comb through her hair.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry. Hell, it's a mess." The next thing she knew, he'd just pulled it back and tied it with something, probably a piece of twine. "Once you get back to the baggage carts and the women you can get yourself in order again. There. You'll do."

"I see I will have to!" she retorted, but she was laughing. "You are a tyrant, sir."

A touch of humor lightened his grim face. "When I have to be. Can you use a pistol?"

"Yes."

He gave her one which she instantly recognized as Dennis's.

"I've had all his possessions put in the cart."

"Cart?"

"The one that brought you. It's on the way back and had room."

"You might have said! I've been steeling myself to walk."

He ignored that. "The pistol's loaded, so be careful." He suddenly stilled to look at her. "I've never been married before."

"Neither have I." She instantly regretting the sharp edge to it.

He brushed his knuckles down her cheek. "Don't be bitter, Kate. It never helps." His knuckles brushed over her lips. "Be bold instead."

"Very well." She stretched up to kiss him quickly but firmly on the lips. "Thank you, Charles the Bold. For everything."

He looked at her in some confusion for a moment before the officer snapped back into place. "Come. You must be off."

He gathered up her bundle and blankets while she picked up the sleeping baby. At the door she turned. Strange though it might seem, she was going to miss this place.

Then another distant boom shook the air, dragging her back to the practical moment, and she hurried out to the familiar cart, now holding four wounded soldiers, one of them in a very bad way. Mr. Rightwell was standing beside the cart, clearly intending to walk.

The men were already in line ready to march in the opposite direction. Toward danger.

The captain picked her up and placed her in the cart, her belongings beside her. "Doesn't sound as if there's fighting between you and the main camp. If you need anything, ever. Thomas Tennant. March-mont Hall. Strode Kingsley. Got that?"

"Yes."

"God go with you!"

As if that were a command, the driver cracked his whip, and the cart jerked off along the rough track.

"God go with you, too," Kate said softly to all the soldiers marching briskly away from her.

* * *

On the slow journey back to the main camp, exhaustion felled Kate. The baby, too, seemed worn out by his adventures and scarcely bothered her, but the excited cries and welcoming arms of the women stirred a smile.

Kate felt home and safe.

She slept. She woke when someone brought the baby to feed, but never had to fetch him, or clean him. He had learned the business as quickly as any healthy animal and only needed her breast close to suck lustily until he gave up, replete, milk trickling from the corner of his soft sleepy mouth.

"Little glutton," she murmured to him as she wiped away the dribble.

"That's men for you."

"All of them?" Kate smiled up at Red Jess who was sitting ready to take Stephen away. Jess was a strapping woman in her fifties who'd borne many a child to many a man. Her red hair was fading into gray but nothing had faded her vitality.

"All of them," said Jess with a grin. "They're all greedy for something. Just find out what it is, and you've got them round your finger."

"Aren't we greedy for things, too?" Kate realized she was awake and alert again. A little part of her wished she weren't, for there were problems to be faced, but all in all it was good to be clear-headed and with energy.

"Of course we are. Affection and someone to care for, mostly. Why else do we put up with babies?" Jess grinned, showing strong teeth marred by only one gap. Kate had heard the tooth had been knocked out in a fight and she could believe it.

She liked Jess. She admired her. But she didn't want to be like her. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life with the army.

Clearly, during her semiconscious recovery, her brain had been working over the problems, and that was one of the answers. She was married to an army officer, though.

And that was another of the problems.

"What's the matter, luv?" Jess asked. "You're not in pain, are you?"

"No. Not at all. In fact, I think it's time to get up and get on with things."

"That's my girl." Jess scooped up the sleeping baby in one arm and extended the other to Kate. It was nearly as big and muscular as the captain's and brought back poignant memories of that strange night. Kate accepted the help to scramble up off the low cot bed, let the world steady, and then nodded. "Definitely better."

"You'll enjoy some fresh air, too. I'll just take the nipper off and freshen him up. You get yourself dressed. Shall I send someone to help you?"

"No, I'll be fine."

Kate hastily dressed, finding that she could squeeze into her less tight-fitting garments. Feeling almost normal, she stepped out of the tent into fresh air.

And into unnatural calm.

Mary Milwood sat by a fire stirring a pot.

"Where is everyone?" Kate asked her.

"Battle, ducks. Feeling perkier?"

Kate saw then the dark worry in the young woman's eyes. Mary called herself Gillet and appeared to be the true mate of Corporal Milwood. As with Kate, however, no one ever asked for proof.

So, there was a full battle going on, and the only troops here were the lightly wounded left to guard the baggage and the baggages, as it was put.

Oh God.

"Sorry about the lieutenant, ducks."

Mary's voice pulled Kate out of worry over Captain Tennant. She almost said, "Dennis?" but stopped herself in time. She couldn't pretend deep grief, however.

"It's all right," said Mary with a wry smile. "It's been clear awhile that it weren't all roses with you two. And he had sent you home. But still, he's dead. His son's fatherless."

It dawned on Kate then that no one seemed to know about the captain and their strange marriage. "What happened to Mr. Rightwell?"

"Who? Oh, that parson. Once he were sure you were in good hands, he went on his way. Important business in Brussels, he said."

Fortunately Jess reappeared at that moment with the well-bundled baby, and laid him on a blanket in a safe corner near a couple of older babies. Children ran around the camp like wild animals. They were happy and generally healthy, but it was not as Kate wanted her son to grow.

Dennis's son, legally the captain's.

What a tangle.

Other women appeared, all with some kind of work in hand, and sat to talk about men and babies. They didn't speak of the battle, even though cannon fire could be heard. None of these women were whores-available to any man. The whores kept to themselves in another part of the camp. All of these woman had a man involved in the fighting, and some of those men wouldn't come back.

Kate had been through this twice before in her time with the army. It didn't get any easier.

They wanted to hear the story of the birth, and it was as good a distraction as any. Her account of the men's panic, and Captain Tennant's command of the event had them all laughing. No one asked why she'd gone into a battle zone in such a condition, and she didn't mention her last-minute marriage.

Perhaps they guessed, but people never asked too many questions here.

Kate wished she could speak of it and ask advice, but it was impossible. Her desperation to have a legal father for her child might be seen as an insult by these women, who stuck by one man at a time but rarely bothered with legal ceremonies. She also didn't want to claim to be married to the captain until he was here to support the story. True, this time she had her marriage lines, but with Mr. Right-well gone, her witnesses were the captain's own men. If they denied the whole thing, then where would she be?

And did she even want to be the acknowledged wife of Captain Tennant? Did he want to be husband to her?

What moon-madness had seized them?

The battle proved to be as bad as everyone had feared, but the captain wasn't among the dead. He wasn't among those returning to the camp, either, and by the time the army moved to safer ground, Kate still didn't know exactly where he was.

She could have asked, of course, but she hesitated to draw any particular attention to their situation. Everyone was accepting her as Dennis Fallowfield's unofficial widow, her child as his son.

For three weeks she waited for word from the captain. Silence in itself was telling. Their marriage had been mere impulse, and he must be regretting it.

Then one day the company paymaster gave her the sum of fifty guineas. "Widow's allowance," he said, but accompanied it with a wink.

"Lieutenant Fallowfield arranged for this?"

"Let's just say it's fair and aboveboard." And though she pressed him, he would say no more.

Dennis had always been short of funds, and when he'd given her ten guineas for her journey home, he'd acted as if he was squeezing out blood. Any official money would only go to a legal wife.

Walking back to her tent-Dennis's tent-Kate was sure the money had been arranged by the captain. He'd managed to arrange money for her, but sent no message? It was as good as a message. It said, "Go away."

She remembered then that his last words to her had been about a cousin in Strobe something. At the very least that translated into, "Go back to England."

He must be waiting for her to leave before returning to his regiment! Though she couldn't blame him, tears ached around her eyes.

She hid the hurt and arranged to return to England with a slow train of wounded heading for the coast and a naval ship. She'd work her passage by nursing the men.

She'd be glad to be home again, she assured herself, home with her friends, her family, and the peace of her father's shop. If Captain Charles Tennant wanted to speak to her about their situation, he could always find her there.

* * *

Six weeks later, Kate stepped onto English soil, tears of joy in her eyes. It had grown on her over the weeks, this need to be home. The feeling had only confirmed, however, that she was done with army life. That certainly complicated her marriage.

She put that aside for the moment and concentrated on getting back to Aylesbury. She had a baby to cope with, but she also had help. Red Jess was with her.

Jess had spent nearly all her life with the army, and if she'd ever kept track of her men, she'd stopped years ago. She'd married quite a few of them, too, and laid their bodies out. Kate had been surprised when the woman appointed herself her companion.

"I'm getting old, Kate," Jess had said. "I have a fancy to go home again. If I tire of it, I can doubtless come back."

Kate hadn't really believed the speech. Jess radiated vitality, and her ability to draw men hadn't waned at all. She hadn't argued, though. She'd discovered that a baby was a lot of work. An extra pair of hands would be very welcome.

Perhaps she would have been better without extra hands, though, and her mind occupied by work. Instead, the journey had given too much time to think.

Everyone in the army had thought her Dennis's doxy, but been happy to treat her as a widow, and Stephen as a normal child. But the army was used to irregular unions and illegitimate children. In Aylesbury, they cared about marriage lines and such. She believed that she would be treated as Dennis's legal widow, since she had left home to marry him. Could this belief hold, however, for the rest of her life? For the rest of her son's life?

She'd like to think so, but she doubted it. Partway through the journey, she'd thought of Dennis's family. Apart from his bogus great-aunt, she'd never met his relatives, but he must have some. At some point she would be expected to contact them and inform them about Dennis's son.

Even if she didn't they might hear about her. They'd doubtless drag her into court as an impostor!

Kate was by nature impeccably honest, and though in her heart she had truly been married to the man, she would feel as if she were living a lie.

The honest act would be to tell the truth. But that involved telling her parents and all who knew her that she'd been a fool and had no proof that she'd ever been legally married to the father of her child. Even if they believed her, her reputation would be tarnished, and her son would be viewed as a bastard.

Unless, of course, she made her marriage to Captain Tennant public.

How could she do that to him, though? He must be feeling like a man waking up after a wild drunk wondering what follies he'd committed under the influence.

All in all, she thought wearily, as she hauled the baby and a couple of bundles from the wharf to a nearby inn, it might have been simpler to stay with the army, where no one looked at these matters too closely.

At the inn, Kate took care of the baby while Jess booked places for them on the coach to London, from whence they would go to Aylesbury. Her mind continued to run round and round the problems like a chicken with its head cut off. And just as uselessly.

Straightening from bending over Stephen on the bed, she sighed. Perhaps her problem was just lack of sleep. The baby was waking her three or four times a night these days, and though Jess sometimes tended him, Kate always had to feed him. A good stretch of sleep was a long-forgotten fantasy.

When she was home it would be better.

As soon as they were settled into the crowded coach she dozed off, only to be awakened by a demanding cry. At least she'd grown adept at putting Stephen to the breast discreetly, and Jess had shown her how to alter her dresses to make it easier.

She still had the big shapeless one in her baggage, though, the one with the roughly cut slashes over each breast.

It was alarming the way the captain still dominated her thoughts.

She worried about his safety. He'd not been seriously wounded in the battle. That was all she knew. Irregular fighting had continued however, with some deaths.

Surely Charles the Bold wouldn't surrender to the dark. He was so vital, so strong, in mind as well as body. This was illogical, she knew. Dennis had loved life, but death had seized him.

She stroked Stephen's head beneath the big shawl that covered both baby and breast. He had hair now, but so fine and blond as to still be scarcely visible. She'd begun to detect a resemblance to Dennis in his soft features, too. How could she put Captain Tennant in the position of having to claim as his oldest son a child so clearly not his own?

But how could she live a lie?

Her head was aching with all this by the time they reached London and settled into a room at the Black Anchor Inn.

"I think I'll nip out and see if there's any news of the Buffs," said Jess, and was gone before Kate could object.

She shrugged. Probably Jess had ex-army friends in London that she wanted to meet. Men. Though Kate was fond of the woman, she had no illusions about Jess, who enjoyed the company of men a lot.

Kate wasn't sure she did. Once the bloom had worn off, Dennis had just been a problem to be handled—a problem rather like an unreliable pistol, likely to fire at unpredictable moments. Looked back on, the last months of their relationship had been exhausting.

As for other men, in the army she'd stayed with the women and not spent much time with the other soldiers. She'd only noticed the captain because he was so unignorable—big, graceful, powerful. A force,

really, creating waves wherever
he went.

Waves could leave people battered, as she was.

Not all men were so disruptive, though.

She sent her mind back before Dennis, to her years working in her father's bookshop, chatting to the customers, mostly male. She'd enjoyed that, especially talking to the older gentlemen. The young ones tended to embarrass her with attentions, not always honorable. She'd particularly disliked flattery from married men. It had made her feel soiled.

And now here she was, to all intents and purposes a soiled dove.

Tears of weakness threatened and she blew her nose.

Damn all men!

But perhaps not Captain Tennant.

Jess came back late and a little drunk, but Kate pretended to be fast asleep. Stephen, for a blessing, only woke her once in the middle of the night so that she felt a little more like herself the next morning. A maid brought breakfast to their room and as they sat to it, Jess pulled a much-folded news-sheet from her pocket.

"One of my friends had finished with this, luv, so I thought you'd like it. Thought you might read it aloud like, since I don't read much."

A touch of color in the woman's weather-worn cheeks confirmed that she didn't read at all. Kate hadn't seen a recent newspaper in over a year and so she picked it up willingly enough. Holding it one-handed she read out bits of political and court news. Seeing Jess enjoyed the sensational news of trials and hangings, she read those in detail.

Then she stopped.

"What's the matter, luv?"

Kate scanned the brief item again. "There's an account here of the trial of Jem Suffolk for highway robbery and murder. The victim was apparently a certain Thomas Tennant of Essex, heir to Viscount Jerrold."

"Did you know this Jem Suffolk?" Jess asked, her mouth full of excellent ham.

"No, of course not. It just struck me that Tennant is the same name as Captain Tennant." And Thomas was the name of his cousin.

"Oh, aye. And the captain's connected to some lord or other. He's what they call a black sheep, though I've never seen the point in calling 'em that. Black wool's valuable for weaving."

"Do you know what his relationship is to Lord Jerrold?" Kate asked, a nasty sinking feeling threatening to disgorge the ham and eggs she had just eaten.

Jess shook her head. "But in line to become a lord 'cept for a few others. Or that's what they say."

Kate clung to that "few others," but when she climbed into the Aylesbury coach she knew she certainly wouldn't tell anyone about her strange marriage just yet. If Captain Tennant were now closer to inheriting a title, the question of his legal heir would become a touchy one indeed.

* * *

Aylesbury hadn't changed.

After a moment, Kate wasn't sure why she'd thought it would have, but she'd changed so much, gone through so much, that it caught her by surprise. The White Hart's sign was still so faded as to be hardly readable, and she immediately saw a number of people she knew.

And who knew her.

In moments a crowd had gathered.

"Why, it's Miss Dunstable!"

"Kate!"

Then they saw the baby and remembered. "You married, didn't you? Home to see the family? What a nice surprise!"

Kate took a breath and said the words. "My husband died."

Silence fell, then she was enveloped in a new babble, a caring, loving fuss that carried her along the High Street toward her home.

"Oh, you poor dear."

"A soldier, wasn't he ... ?"

"Still, you have a child."

The crowd turned into a lane to stop before the double bow-front of her father's shop.

Augustus Dunstable Esquire, Purveyor of Books, Pamphlets, and Writing Materials.

It, too, hadn't changed.

Tears started to escape and Kate bit her bottom lip.

The commotion had been heard and the door swung open, bell jingling, to reveal Kate's mother, short, plump, abundant gray hair tucked into a cap.

"What's amiss . . . ?*Kate!* Husband, it's Kate. And with a baby!"

Kate hardly knew what happened next until she was ensconced in the small parlor with a teacup in her hand. Her mother was crying by now, with happiness to see her and ecstasy at the tiny grandchild in her arms. Her father in his wheelchair was smiling and nodding, though as usual saying little. This certainly was not the time to embark upon her sorry tale even if she'd intended to.

"Oh dear," said her mother for perhaps the tenth time, "it is so sad about poor Lieutenant Fallowfield. Such a charming young man. I did have doubts, dear, about you marrying a soldier. But so brave, I'm sure. And this little one his image. His very image! I'm sure it will be a consolation to his family."

Kate's mother didn't put stress on the words and Kate let them flow by. It was as she'd thought, however. Life was not to be simple.

She'd thought of Dennis's family as a problem to be avoided. Her mother was right, however. They were doubtless grieving and could be comforted by knowledge of his child.

He'd casually mentioned that his family lived in the Midlands, but nothing more than that. As far as she knew he'd never received letters from them, or sent any. He'd certainly received no funding, for he'd often lamented having to live on his army pay.

Perhaps he didn't have close family. She clung to that. In fact, she was driven to say, "Dennis had no family."

"No family?" asked her mother, looking up from the baby. "Oh, the poor man! But what about that great-aunt?"

"Oh, yes. Well, he had*her*." Kate was about to say that the old lady was dead when she realized that would raise questions about the supposed inheritance. "But she's a recluse and very unpleasant. I'd not want to take a baby there."

To her, the words sounded wooden and she was sure she was coloring with guilt. She hated to lie.

"Perhaps when he's older, dear," said her mother. "There was an inheritance wasn't there? It would be foolish to deny little Stephen the chance of it."

"I suppose so."

Perhaps everything could be put off until Stephen was older. In time, surely some solution to this tangle would occur to her.

Jess, it appeared, had a mind to stay with Kate for a while, and since her parents had few servants, it was convenient to have her play nursemaid and general help. "But good behavior, Jess," Kate warned. "My parents are well-respected here and I'd not want any scandal."

"I can be proper as a church cat when I've need to, Mrs. Fallowfield," said Jess, addressing her as a proper servant should and even bobbing a curtsy.

It occurred to Kate for the first time that Jess must believe that she'd never been married to Dennis. That she was lying to everyone. It was tempting to raise the thorny issue, but even more tempting to ignore it.

Kate did such a good job of ignoring everything that it was three days before she made herself go into the shop and pick from the shelves a guide to the nobility of Great Britain.

As well as running the bookshop, her father was a collector of books and the store operated as a sort of library open to the public. He kept reference books of all kinds, and genially assisted people to find the information they needed.

Kate was equally adept at searching the books for facts.

She flicked through the guide to the page devoted to Viscount Jerrold. Montague Arthur Tennant, born 1683. Married 1709 Mary FitzMarshall. Issue: Mary 1710, Catherine 1713, Thomas 1715, Eliza 1720, Elizabeth 1727.

Only the one son? But Thomas had been thirty at his death. Surely he would have married and produced sons of his own?

Her eyes scanned down over details of the estates owned by Lord Jerrold to find the section on the heir.

Thomas Arthur Tennant. Married 1742 Sophie Earlingham. Issue: Mary, 1743.

Kate flipped back to the title page. This was last year's issue! He could well have a son by now. Please let there be a son.

Then she calmed herself. Even if there was not, Captain Tennant might not be next in line. Nothing in this book could tell her, though. What she needed was a directory of notable families.

She soon found one, but it was ten years out of date. It might suffice. This book was arranged by district, and she turned to the page on Strode Kingsley, Essex.

The principal house of the area was Marchmont Hall, home of Montague Arthur Tennant, Viscount Jerrold, and his family as given above. At Oak House lived the Dowager Lady Tennant and Miss Eliza Tennant, doubtless one of the dowager's daughters acting as companion. The dowager would be Lord Jerrold's mother.

At Grailings lived Mr. Charles Tennant, his wife, two sons and two daughters. The sons, in order of age, were Charles and Arthur. She noted that the captain was just thirty-one years of age.

Kate slowly closed the book. Unless Thomas had sired a son shortly before his tragic death, Captain Charles Tennant was now heir, after his father, to a title.

"What are you digging around in there for?" asked her father amiably. "There's no need to work, my dear, now you have a babe to tend to."

Kate emerged, hoping her smile looked convincing. "But I like to, Papa. And with Jess and Mama both dotting on Stephen, I'm hardly needed except at feeding time."

He chuckled. "Yes, your mother is in heaven, isn't she? Thank you for coming home, Kate." "Thank you for letting me." He raised his gray eyebrows. "Would we turn you away? But you have a duty to your husband's family, too. Is that who you were searching for?"

Of course, he would know exactly what books she'd been consulting. "Yes," she lied, feeling like the worst sinner. "I didn't find anything, though." "Ah well, some people are sadly without near kin. There is that great-aunt, however. In due course you must contact her and ask about family."

It was a command, and the matter would not be forgotten. How had she ever thought to manage this deception?

A customer came in and she went to serve him, happy of the distraction. Of course she was offered sympathy and lured into conversation about her time with the army. At least she could talk of such matters without outright lies.

The days soon fell into a pattern that would have been pleasant except for nagging guilt and the fear that at any moment her illusion would crack open to reveal her a liar. And to plunge her and the captain into disaster.

She'd checked other books and found that, as she feared, inheriting a title was not simple. When a new peer applied to take his seat in the House of Lords, a committee investigated his claim. Normally this was just *pro forma*, but sometimes they dug deep. In one case, a man had been cut out of the title because his parents hadn't been married at his birth, even though they'd tried to forge documents later. In Stephen's case, they might insist that he was the rightful lord even if neither she nor the captain wished it.

She clung to the hope that Thomas Tennant had had a son, but still hadn't found a way to find out more about the Tennant family without raising suspicion.

Nor did she know whether the captain was still alive.

She was avoiding the papers that lay out on a table in the shop for all to read. Thank heavens Jess couldn't read, or she'd be poring over the army news. She often begged Kate to read such items to her but Kate always found an excuse.

Horribly, she couldn't help thinking that it would be so convenient if the captain was dead. At that thought, however, she experienced a real physical pain in her chest. She hardly knew the man, so why did he seem such an important part of her world?

He is your *husband* after all, a little voice reminded her.

A fact I'm sure he'd much rather forget.

Perhaps not. No one forced him. Perhaps he'll want to be married in truth.

And acknowledge a son not of his blood? And a wife from a shop?

Then perhaps he'll contact you and tell you what he wants you to do.

Perhaps he will, thought Kate, pushing the matter yet again to the back of her mind.

When Charles Edward Stuart landed in Scotland, however, attempting to raise that nation in support of a Stuart claim to the throne, she found she couldn't resist the papers any longer. The rebellion was all anyone wanted to talk about, and she was as interested as they.

The recall of troops from the continent to face this new threat was an essential part of the story, but she didn't see anything about the Buffs. When she came across important news, however, it was quite incidental.

The name Tennant leaped out at her. It was among a list of officers giving up their commissions, and the editor of the paper had added a special note.

Major Charles Tennant-so he'd been promoted- had resigned his commission in order to support and assist his elderly uncle, Lord Jerrold, grieving over the cruel murder of his son and heir Thomas Tennant by the highwayman Jem Suffolk, hanged for the crime at the Colchester Assizes. Major Tennant was now heir to the viscounty.

Well, there it was, and it must even mean his father was dead. He was next in line.

And he was now in England.

That fact created an absurd little fizz inside her until she realized that he hadn't contacted her.

His silence, added to the fact that he was now heir to a title, should have simplified matters. She must keep silent for his sake.

It plagued her conscience, however, so that strife in Scotland faded to insignificance alongside the warring loyalties in her mind. Kate's mother must have noticed, for one day she pushed her down into a chair in the parlor and said, "Kate, tell me what is the matter."

Kate tried to find the strength to lie yet again, and failed. She told her mother the whole sorry story, most it through tears.

"Well!" said her mother, fairly quivering with outrage. "If Dennis Fallowfield were still alive, he'd wish he wasn't!"

Kate laughed and blew her nose. "That's what Captain Tennant said."

"He sounds like a man with some sense of right and wrong. So, Kate, what are you going to do?"

Her mother was an amiable, soft-seeming woman, but Kate knew her sense of right and wrong was

firm. Sitting on the moral fence would be unacceptable. "What do you think I should do?"

"It's for you to decide, dear, but you cannot hide from it. Your captain-or major as he is now-is caught in this dilemma, too. He is married and thus cannot marry again. Yet he may wish to. He may feel it his duty to provide an heir for this title."

"He has a brother . . ."

Her mother fixed her with a look. "You would condemn him to chastity or a life of sin?"

Kate hadn't quite looked at it that way, since she knew perfectly well that the captain had not led a life of chastity.

It was true, however, that he might want a family of his own.

She gnawed on a fingernail, a habit she thought she'd broken in childhood. "But if we make our marriage known, Stephen will be his legal heir."

"There must be a way of getting around that."

"Perhaps, but only by making a horribly public scandal of the whole thing. It would brand me a whore and Stephen a bastard to the world. Must I really do that?"

Her mother turned pale. "The poor innocent. If only we could find those actors who played aunt, companion, and clergyman. They'd still serve as witnesses."

"And what, do you think, is the chance of that?"

"As likely as a rain of fish. Oh Kate, poor Kate."

"But what am I to do, Mama?"

"I think you must go to see Major Tennant and discuss the matter. Perhaps he can see a way out of the situation. Even if not, you owe him the chance to have a say."

"He could have found me if he'd wished to speak of it!"

"Perhaps *she* feels *you* don't want the matter raised. Come, come," she said briskly, "no good will ever be done by shilly-shallying and talk might clear the air."

"Talk might dig me deeper in the hole," Kate muttered, burningly aware of one possibility. That she might be Major Tennant's true and only wife and therefore have to save him from a life of chastity or sin. The thought was terrifying, but it carried a certain *wanton appeal*.

In the weeks after the birth she'd thought herself drained of all desire. Time had healed, however, and now at moments her body longed for a man. She would have expected her desire to be for Dennis, who had been a satisfying lover on his good days. Instead, memories of lying in Captain Tennant's arms, of that long and stirring kiss, spun off into more erotic fantasies.

It was really all most embarrassing.

"Perhaps I should wait," she said, rising to fuss with the copper molds on the shelf. "Stephen's too young to be an easy traveler ..."

"Stephen's six months old and able to do without you, now that you're no longer breast-feeding him. He's taking pap and goat's milk well."

"I can hardly travel cross-country alone."

"Take Jess."

"I hate to leave you ..."

"We coped before, and can again."

Kate pushed back a lock of escaping hair. "You're determined on this, aren't you, Mama?"

"It's right, my dear."

Kate sighed. "Yes, it's right. And as with a trip to the toothpuller, it will be horrid, but I'll feel better when it's done."

Her mother stood. "Good. I pray it will put an end to this moping around. But don't tell your father why you're traveling. It will only fret him. We'll just say you're going to visit an army friend."

"Lies, Mama?" Kate teased.

"Not exactly." But her mother's color was high. "You know how he frets."

"Just as much as you do." Kate hugged her mother, who was a head shorter than she. "Is that what love is, all this protection?"

Shrewd blue eyes looked up. "Love? Is that why you're trying to protect this Charles Tennant?"

Kate could feel her color flare. "Love? I hardly know the man!"

"I met your father at the Michaelmas fair." Kate's mother's eyes became unfocused as she looked into the past. "Of course, we had seen one another about. But that was the first time we really noticed, if you know what I mean. We spent most of the day together, and we both knew. Sometimes it's like that, Kate."

Kate shivered with a kind of recognition.

"But what if it's impossible?"

Her mother patted her cheek. "Few things really are, dear. You go to this Strode Kingsley and talk to your young man."

Aylesbury to Strode Kingsley was not a great distance as the crows fly, but by stagecoach it would require another journey into and out of London. So Kate used some of the remaining fifty guineas to hire

a post chaise for herself and Jess to travel cross country.

Jess was mightily impressed. "Very nice," she said, settling into one of the two red-upholstered seats. "I've never traveled post before."

"Nor have I." As the coach pulled out of the inn yard into the road, Kate added, "You've always known about Major Tennant and me, haven't you?" Jess shrugged. "Rumors reached the camp before we left. Didn't surprise me. I'd seen the way he looked at you now and then." She clutched onto the strap. "Lordy, we're going fast."

"The advantage of traveling in style. How do you mean, looked at me?"

Jess turned to her. "All the men looked at you, and that's no lie, but the captain, he had that look in his eye. Not just admiration. Not just lust. More than that. Can't describe it if you don't know it. It's when you know a man's yours for the wink."

"You must be mistaken! We scarcely ever spoke."

"What's that got to do with it? He was hardly going to make a play for a fellow officer's woman now, was he? Especially when relations weren't too cordial between them at the best of times."

Kate tried to make Jess's comments fit her memories. "They didn't like each other, did they?"

"Never did, and less so when the lieutenant came back with you. But he was a good soldier, the lieutenant, and in a strange way the two of them worked well together in the fighting. The captain would never risk messing that up over a woman." Kate smiled ruefully. "That puts me in my place." Jess shook her head. "You gentry folk. Everything has its place. Do we worry about the men's feelings when there's a baby to be born?" "I certainly didn't."

"So I should hope. And look at marriage. I gather you were upset because the lieutenant didn't marry you, but what good is marriage and those so-called sacred vows? Does the parson come around and tell a man he's to worship his wife and hand over all his worldly goods? Not bloody likely. But he'll preach about how a woman should obey her husband. Can't see the sense in marriage, myself."

"It gives a woman legal protection, and it makes her children legitimate."

"And who makes life difficult for poor little bastards?" Jess was warming to her subject, and Kate couldn't help feeling that she'd be a fine orator. "The church and the men who make the laws, that's who! And as for protection, a few words don't make a man respectful or faithful. It's how they treat you that counts. And if they treat you bad, you land 'em one, or just go find a man who appreciates what he's got. If you're not married, there's nothing to stop you."

Kate burst out laughing. "Oh, Jess! How true. It doesn't work that way in Aylesbury, though."

Jess grinned. "So I gather. When I've got you settled, I think I'll get back to the Buffs. Things are a deal simpler in the army."

Kate had already ascertained that Strode Kingsley had a small inn, the Jerrold Arms, and had written to request accommodation for a few days for herself and her maid. The innkeeper greeted her courteously and his curiosity about her purpose was subtle enough to be ignored.

She was astonished that he didn't seem to see that she was pulled tight as a harp string.

From first rolling into the tiny village she had expected to see Major Tennant at any moment. She'd studied the few people on the evening street in search of him. What foolishness. There was no reason he should be there when light was fading.

She was worried that she wouldn't recognize him, yet certain that was impossible. True, she'd be hard pressed to draw an accurate picture of his face even though she had some talent, and her memories of that wild night in the farmhouse were almost dreamlike. But for all her time with the Buffs she'd been aware of his presence-his height, his broad shoulders, his walk. Yes, his walk. For a big man, he moved gracefully, seeming more comfortable in open spaces than when confined. And he walked confidently, as if sure of his place on the earth.

She would recognize that walk.

Surely she would recognize his features, too, unless he had relatives who very closely resembled him. She could never forget that combination of dark hair and dark eyes along with a very determined chin.

Jittery, Kate decided that evening, was the only way to describe her state. If it wouldn't be outrageous, she'd storm up to the Grailings immediately and demand to see him. It was bad enough, however, to turn up unexpectedly in the middle of the day. She couldn't possibly do it in the evening.

She picked at an excellent dinner glad that at least Jess was doing justice to it. After prowling their room for a while she announced she was going out.

Jess heaved to her feet somewhat reluctantly, so Kate waved her back. "I'm just going to walk up and down the street a little before the sun goes down. In such a small place I won't even be out of sight of the inn."

She swung on her cloak and went down the stairs, which emerged into the one open tap room. She was aware again of the curious looks from the innkeeper and his patrons. Any new face would be remarkable a small village like this, and she knew her face was remarkable in any location.

Trying to look uncaring, she strolled to the door and almost collided with someone coming in.

She looked up into dark, well-remembered eyes. Startled eyes.

"Kate?"

"*Oh. Oh no!*" She turned away, hand to face, and heard herself babble another embarrassing, "Oh no!"

He seized her arm and turned her back. "If you try to persuade me that this encounter is entirely by accident, you will stretch my credulity, you know."

At least a smile lurked in those eyes, allowing her to rally. "I'm sure, sir, that any number of people stop in this charming inn for no particular reason at all."

"They must all be ghosts, then, for we never see them. How are you, Kate?" His hand remained on her arm, and those eyes were fixed on hers.

Despite hot cheeks, Kate tried to be cool. "Very well, Captain. My maid is upstairs." It seemed important that he knew she had one. Then she realized who the maid was, and turned even hotter. Then she realized she'd called him "Captain."

This was not how she'd planned this important encounter.

His lips twitched slightly. "I have the feeling that I should go out and come in again when you've had time to compose yourself."

Kate took a deep, steadying breath. "I did come to speak with you. I intended to call upon you tomorrow."

"That would, of course, be delightful. But for the moment, why don't we stroll outside, since I assume that to be your purpose." He held out his arm, and she placed hers upon it. A flickering glance at the locals showed them to be deep in their ale pots but looking smugly satisfied that they'd solved the problem of the mysterious visitor.

"How are you, Kate?" he asked again as they began their walk down the simple lane that was the nearest thing Strode Kingsley owned to a road. The repeat of the question comforted her. Perhaps he was as flustered as she.

"Very well. And you?"

"In prime twig. The baby?"

She smiled up at him. "Is beautiful and healthy. He's sitting now."

"I presume that's on schedule or ahead of it, since you look pleased."

"He is a little ahead."

"You make an excellent proud mama, Kate. And you're looking well. I assume you have a suitable place to live."

"I'm living at home, of course." She felt her color rising. "Everyone thinks ... I let everyone think that my marriage-to Dennis, I mean-was acknowledged. That I'm just a war widow."

"I'm sure that was simplest."

Was that reserve in his voice? "Yes. But it was mainly you I was thinking of." They'd come to the end of the village, and a curve in the road brought them out between fields gilded by the setting sun.

He paused. "Me? Why?"

She studied him as she explained. "As soon as we arrived in England I heard about your cousin. I

wondered about the implications. I wasn't sure it would be wise ..."

"To advertise the fact that we were married? Why ever not?"

Yes, it was reserve. Or even leashed anger. Why? "You can't want Dennis's son to be heir to your uncle's title."

He separated from her and leaned back against a rough fence. The flaming sun glowed along the edge of his strong cheek, and down the length of his body, reminding her disturbingly of him by firelight. "Perhaps you regretted your involvement with me."

"No, of course not! I was, am, very grateful."

"Grateful. You are very welcome, I'm sure."

"Well, really! If you *wanted* to see me again, Captain-Major-you had only to visit."

"I would have been pleased to do so if I'd had any idea of your hometown or your maiden name. Have you any idea how many booksellers there are in England?"

Kate put a hand to her unsteady chest. "You've been looking for me?"

"A good officer does not mislay his wife."

"I'm not really your wife ..."

"A fact I am very aware of."

His meaning caught her breath. "You can't want to-"

He pushed sharply off the fence. "I see the notion is distasteful. We'll say no more-"

"Stop!" She physically blocked his way, terrified he would storm away. "I didn't mean that."

He didn't push past her, but he was rigid. Guarded.

Gathering her courage, she placed a hand on his chest. "I'm not accustomed to even thinking of... of fully being your wife, Captain. Major, drat it!"

Perhaps he relaxed a little. "If you called me Charles, it would solve one of your problems."

She licked her dry lips. "Charles, then."

"Thank you. Now, about fully being my wife?" Perhaps it was just the setting sun that made his eyes look hot. Kate didn't think so. She felt rather hot herself, and the evening sun gave little heat. But what did she want in this regard?

"It is not. . . not entirely out of the question," she whispered.

He covered her hand, and through two gloves she clearly remembered his touch-big, strong, callused

from his trade
of war. "I, at least, have thought about it. God, have I thought about it. I want you, Kate."

"As your wife?"

One eyebrow quirked. "*You are* my wife."

"But it's so complicated!"

"Is it? It seems quite simple to me." He tilted her chin and kissed her. It was a slow advance, allowing room for retreat, but when she put up no resistance, he pushed forward and captured her entirely.

They'd kissed in the night, two strangers brought too close, too soon, but needing contact in the dark hours.

This time, it was as if it were a first kiss, and she tasted him with interest and with wonder. How different he was to Dennis, who had kissed greedily, or else with planned seductiveness.

Charles kissed as if exploring, and relishing what he found. Or perhaps it was just that she felt that way about him. His arms came around her tight and strong and it was as well she had no mind to escape, for it would have been impossible, especially with her hands clutching his shoulders.

He turned her, pressing her back against the fence. His raised leg captured her on one side as he molded her body to his in a sensuous possession the like of which she had never encountered. Clothes hardly muted the intensity of such an embrace.

When he released her swollen, tingling lips, she felt dazed, and he looked it.

He trailed kisses from temple to jaw. "I don't want to trap you, Kate. But we are married." He was breathing as if he'd just run a race.

"You really want me as your wife."

He laughed and pushed against her, so that even through her petticoats she could feel his erection.

"As your *wife*," she repeated, studying his face. "In sickness and in health. Till death us do part. I'm a shopkeeper's daughter, Charles."

"And I'm the black sheep. I'm sure my family expect me to marry badly, and you aren't bad at all."

"Except that I bring the complication of a son who isn't yours and yet is, legally, your heir."

"What's your solution then?" Perhaps unconsciously he pushed against her, almost hurting her against the rough, fence. "Do we hide our marriage and both set off blithely into bigamy?"

She pressed away from him, but there was nowhere to go. "I don't know. That's why I came."

The pressure increased suddenly. Then he stepped back. "I see. You are seeking a way out."

It was as if a chill wind blew.

"For you."

"But I don't want a way out. I want you. In sickness and in health, Kate. Till death us do part. I wanted you nearly the whole time you were with Dennis. I watched you move. I listened to you singing. I was aware of you every bloody minute. I saw how you treated all the men with kindness. I thought of getting wounded just to have you nurse me. I saw you cry when one of them died. I love you, Kate."

She turned away. "Oh, don't!"

"Are you saying you cannot feel that way for me?"

At the hurt in his voice, she had to turn back. "No! I'm saying I don't want you to hurt as much as I do. It can't work, Charles. Stephen's looking more like Dennis every day. He's going to be the exact image of him when he's a man. We can never pretend he's yours."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Kate, I've faced the enemy from thirty feet and not flinched. I won't let this ruin our lives. Be with me. Be my wife. And we will win."

"Some battles cannot be won. . ." But this was Charles the Bold before her, the man who could inspire raw recruits to valor, and turn a forlorn hope into a brilliant success. Could she resist?

He kissed her again, quickly, passionately. "That's for tomorrow, Kate. Tonight we seal our marriage with our bodies. Tonight I know you in the depth and heat I need, I've longed for, and you learn me so that nothing can ever part us short of death. Say it will be so. Say it."

"It's madness ..." But the power of his will battered hers. She didn't know if she were ally or enemy here, but he would prevail.

And she didn't want to resist. She'd been sleepwalking through the past six months, only half alive because this man was not by her side. She didn't see how she could live the rest of her life without him.

"How?" she said, and it was surrender. "Where?"

She looked around but he shook his head. "In a field? In a barn? Kate, we are married! I've already told my family, and had the devil of a job coming up with reasons for your long absence. You have a very frail and sick father, by the way."

He was tugging her back toward the street but she resisted. "You told them?"

"Of course. They were suitably dismayed." Victorious, he was grinning.

Kate broke free to put hands on hips. "What did you tell them?"

He sobered a little. "Just that you were the widow of a fellow officer. That wasn't what dismayed them. And that you are the daughter of a bookseller. That didn't upset them, either."

"Then what did? Our scrambling marriage?"

"I didn't tell them about that. They are just sure you'll be impossible because I married you. My mother and sisters do not think much of me. Because of some youthful indiscretions, they always think the worst."

Kate melted, wanting only to hold and comfort him. "Why do I think that I am not going to enjoy meeting them?"

"It need only be briefly, thank God, and another day. I'm living with my uncle at Marchmont Hall. We rub along well enough." He put an arm around her and began to propel her toward the inn. "Let's collect your bags and your maid and move you there."

"The maid is Jess," she said. "Red Jess."

"I know."

"How?"

"When I got back to camp I was told. It's been my one ray of hope. I always knew that Jess couldn't stay away from the army, and when she returned she'd be able to tell me where you were."

"If you'd come back quicker, I'd have still been there."

"I had duties." But he wasn't looking at her.

"I can read and you can write."

He looked at her then. "Believe me, I've regretted the delay. I was thinking about it all, Kate. I wasn't sure you'd want to be tied down by that scrambling ceremony. I wanted to find out how binding it was."

"And?"

"Very, unless we swear all my men and Mr. Rightwell to secrecy."

"Oh dear."

"Not at all." He swept her into the inn, smiling.

"Gentlemen," he said to the locals, "I'm pleased to present to you my wife."

Eyes widened, and startled glances bounced around the smoky room. This, clearly, they had not expected. But then they all grinned. "Congratulations to you both, Major!" declared the innkeeper. And chancing a wink, he added, "Congratulations well deserved indeed."

"Thank you. Mrs. Tennant wasn't sure I was at home. Now she wishes to remove to the Hall. Please have her bags and maid brought down and lend me your gig to transport them."

"Right you are, Major!"

"And a round of ale for all here."

As the small room echoed with cheers, Kate trembled. Thus are the bridges burned, she thought. How like Charles the Bold to make retreat impossible for the nervous raw recruit.

In moments Jess came clattering down the stairs. "Captain! Major, I should say. I'm right glad to see you." She did
mute this familiar greeting with a demure curtsy that made him laugh.

He pulled her to him and kissed her heartily. "It's good to see you, too, Jess. And thank you for taking
such good care
of my wife."

At the word wife, she winked. "It's been an experience. A bit tame, though, if you see what I mean."

"I'm sure I do. Come on. There's the gig."

They squashed together on the seat, Kate in the middle, and headed off briskly down the lane. The sun
was a deep fiery red now and the shadows of houses and trees lay long and dark across the road.

He pointed to a solid square house near the road. "The Grailings. My family home."

* * *

Soon they turned in between gates to wind up a driveway toward a larger, less organized house.

Marchmont Hall. The center was probably Jacobean, but two wings had been added more recently.
Not a particularly elegant house, but with charm.

Kate couldn't imagine it as her home, however.

"I know nothing of managing such a large establishment," she told him.

"That's the least of our worries, love."

And there, she supposed, he was right.

Back by the fence he'd swept her into his madness, but now all the problems were crowding back to
harry her. There was no retreat, though. Like a ruthless officer, he'd made sure of that.

Did raw recruits facing the flash and fire of enemy muskets feel this spurt of anger at their charismatic
leader?

He drew the gig up before the gleaming mahogany doors and a groom ran from the side of the house to
assist him. Jess climbed out by herself, but Charles insisted on helping Kate down. He kept hold of her
unsteady hands. "The only way out of this is through, Kate. Up and at 'em."

"Have you ever lost a battle?"

"Yes."

"You could lose this one."

"We can't lose, Kate, as long as we have each other."

"That's simply not true. And what about Stephen?"

"He'll win, too. I promise."

"How?"

"Trust me, Kate?"

Damn him, he'd found a new weapon—a genuine appeal in his eyes. What could she say but, "Yes, I trust you."

She allowed him to lead her into the house.

It was not, she knew, a spectacularly grand house, but it was finer than any she'd been in. The door opened into a spacious tiled hall whose walls were darkly paneled and hung with assorted weaponry arranged in decorative wheels and lines.

When Jess had been introduced to the housekeeper and sent off to the servants' quarters, Kate looked around at the swords and pistols. "Expecting an armed assault, are you?"

He smiled at her. "At least we're ready for the Jacobites."

That gave them something rational to talk about as he led her up wide stairs to the second floor. "I must introduce you to my uncle."

"And what does *she* think of me?"

He stopped by one of a line of panelled doors. "He's still grieving for Tom. I don't think he cares much about anything."

Kate's resistance melted. What an appalling homecoming this must have been for him. His mother and sisters expected the worst, and his uncle must see him as a poor substitute for a beloved son.

Then she wondered if summoning her sympathy was an officer's trick, too.

He pushed open the door and gestured her into a small sitting room furnished in heavy, dark brown brocade. An old man sat hunched near the fire looking older than sixty. He turned, showing a lined, weary face and straggly silver hair. "What is it?" At the sight of a stranger he made the effort to stand.

Charles immediately hurried forward to settle him again. "Don't disturb yourself, uncle. I just wanted to

introduce you to my wife. I didn't expect her so soon, but she surprised me."

Lord Jerrold's eyes were dark, too, she noticed, and when they fixed on her she thought they might once have had his nephew's intensity. She went forward and curtsied. "Good evening, my lord."

"Got a beauty at least, didn't you, lad? And she *looks* a lady."

"She is a lady."

Kate stiffened her spine. "In the sense of good manners, I am, yes. But I am also the daughter of a bookseller in Aylesbury, Lord Jerrold. And not the least ashamed of it."

A crack of laughter escaped the viscount. "I suppose a man like you needs a filly with spirit. Is she fertile?"

Kate gaped, but Charles merely said, "Kate has a son. We'll have to see if we can repeat the miracle." Charles gave Kate a sideways glance that made her toes curl.

"That's the main thing. Sons. And don't forget to name your first son Tom. You promised."

"I won't forget," Charles said, gently. "I want to show Kate to her room now, uncle."

"Aye, you do that. And see she has everything she needs." He then sank back on himself, once more staring into the flames.

Charles led her out of the room and further along the corridor. "If you wish, you can choose from five spare rooms, but I suggest this one." He led her into a pleasant chamber with cream damask curtains and hangings. "It conveniently adjoins mine. However, the sheets are doubtless not aired, so ..."

Kate found herself in his bedroom with the door firmly shut behind them.

The hangings here were blue, and only a riding crop on a table and a book by the bed showed any sign of occupancy.

"I don't have a fire lit in this mild weather. I will if you wish, but I can think of better ways to keep warm."

Kate clutched her cloak around her as if she were, in truth, cold. "You are brash, sir."

"I am bold. I want you, and I intend to have you, Kate."

"Whether I am willing or no?"

He flinched as if she'd hit him. "Of course not! Are you unwilling?"

She turned away, for he could so easily weaken her. "I don't know. I came here *totalk* to you."

"What good will talk do? Is there some aspect of our problems that I haven't considered? I doubt it. The only thing of importance is whether you love me and want me."

"That's childish talk."

He turned her to face him, to face those intense, compelling eyes and the leashed vitality that could overwhelm armies. "Kate, this isn't just any love. As soon as I saw you, I knew. You walked into the camp on Dennis's arm, smiling up at him. It was a cool, sunny day and you were wearing something pale. Bone-colored with braid. Everyone stopped to look because new people always stirred interest. Everyone kept looking because you were so damn beautiful. I looked and I felt sick. I knew at that moment, and I knew I couldn't have you. I knew I was going to have to watch you with another man. See you kiss him. See you going into his tent together at night." His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Tents don't cut off sound, you know."

She did know. She'd always tried to be quiet, but Dennis liked noise. She'd come to realize that he liked to show off and it had always embarrassed her. She remembered a number of occasions when she'd caught Captain Tennant looking at them as they headed for the tent, or in better days, toward a room in a billet. She'd felt even more uncomfortable then.

She covered her hot cheeks, but he pulled her hands down.

"We have our chance, Kate. The only thing that will make me lay down my arms and retreat is if you tell me you want to be free."

Reason told Kate to keep resisting, but everything else surrendered to the power of his hunger for her, and her need of him.

"I watched you, too. I can't say I noticed you that first day, but once I did, I was always aware of you. It bothered me.

I thought it was just that you're the sort of man people notice. After all, I was married. *I couldn't* be so aware of another man."

He pulled her against him. "Ah, Kate. But now *we're* married. You're supposed to be aware of me." He looked down into her eyes, cradling her face. "We have the moon and the stars, beloved one, but I need to make it full and complete. Somewhat desperately," he added, making her burst out laughing.

Doubts lingered, but Kate pushed them back. She wanted him as desperately as he wanted her, and they *were* married.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back out of his arms, unhooked her cloak, and let it slide to the floor. When he reached for her, she held up a hand to stop him. Then she unfastened the two buttons at the waist of her overgown and slipped it off her arms. That joined the cloak, leaving her just in two petticoats and her corset over her simple cotton shift.

Watching her fixedly, he leaned back against the bulbous post of his bed. "I've been running mad this past half year, Kate, thinking you'd managed to disappear off the earth."

"I'm sorry. It never occurred to me that you didn't know my name and my hometown." She untied her petticoat laces and the top quilted one slid away. "I didn't talk of them because I knew my parents would be devastated to hear of my living as a soldier's kept woman. But I think I expected you to know all about me by miracle." The second petticoat of red flannel fell, leaving her just in corset, knee-length shift, and stockings.

He stayed still, though she could see his chest rise and fall and his cheeks were flushed.

He swallowed before he spoke, but his voice was still husky. "I've hired people to search for you. I've been waiting for Jess to return to the Buffs. I didn't expect her to stick it out so damn long ..."

Since Kate and her mother didn't employ a personal maid, she wore corsets she could get into and out of herself. Her hands trembled, though, as she unfastened the hooks, for the power of his need was beating against her like the fierce heat of an oven and this did seem the last bastion of decency.

The fact that he'd seen her without a corset before didn't help at all.

When she opened the corset and shrugged out of it, he groaned. A giggle escaped her and she clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry."

He was grinning, even if his eyes seemed to burn. "Don't be. I'm in a state of the most delicious agony."

She expected him to seize her then, but instead he wrenched brass buttons out of holes and dragged off his jacket. As he tore off his waistcoat, one button actually popped and rolled away. By instinct Kate scrambled to trap it before it was lost. When she stood he was laughing.

"Oh, Kate! I adore you."

Then she was in his arms, and his shirt-covered torso was wonderfully familiar. "I like you in your shirt, Captain..."

"Back in memories, are we, love?" He tugged on her hair so she had to look up at him. "Am I not allowed to take it off then?"

"Are you saying you are mine to command?"

"Always."

"I'll remind you of that at inconvenient moments, sir.

"Ah, Kate." Rough-light, he traced the right corner of her mouth. "That smile. I've longed for that smile. Command me. Command me to kiss you and love you and make heaven with you : .."

Despite tears in her eyes, Kate said, "You are so commanded, Major Charles Tennant."

Kate had never been kissed like this before-to the edge of pain, to the edge of breaking, to the edge of ecstasy just from a kiss. As they landed on the bed she heard cloth rip and had no idea if it was hers or his.

His mouth and hands roamed her, not gently but with tight-held control so she feared he'd break. So she met him in fierceness, using nails and teeth until he did break and was in her, deep in her, shuddering, hot, heavy, hard.

Wonderful.

She choked on a cry and moved before he did. He laughed, though it turned into a groan as he met her

hips. Then they pounded together as if eternally practiced in the rhythm, losing it together as orgasm gripped them. Collapsing together in a shuddering, sweaty tangle of perfectly matched limbs.

Kate sprawled on her back, one arm over her eyes, mind scoured clear of all but one thought. "It's never been like that before. Never. That fierce ..."

His hand moved to rest with simple possession over her left breast. "It's never been like that for me, either, Kate. I'm a big man. I'm usually very careful. I assure you, I can be gentle in season."

She moved her arm to smile at him. "I'm sure you can. So can I. But I'm a strong woman. I can take it. You..."

"We're made for each other."

"Yes, I really think we are." But thought was returning. "That doesn't mean we don't have problems."

He moved his hand to cover her lips. "For tonight, it does. Let's try gentle ..."

And he proved to her that he could be gentle in season, stroking and teasing until she was a puddle of sweet need, which he amply fulfilled. In turn, much later, she loved him in turn, delighting in reducing the mighty officer to a man conquered by desire.

It was mid-morning when they acknowledged the new day.

Kate sat up in bed and knew her hair was a tangled mess, and that her pins could be anywhere. She gazed around at a scene from a wild debauch. Clothes draped the room as if a whirlwind had passed through, and her shift was completely ripped down the front. One of her stockings draped from the top bar of the four-poster bed!

The bed-coverings must have worked loose in their activities and been pulled around them again, for they were all hanging at odds, and mostly trailing on the floor.

She leapt out of bed and began to straighten things.

"What are you doing?"

She turned, his waistcoat in her hand, to see him sitting up in bed, smiling at her.

Naked, his shoulders seemed to span half the bed, rounded and contoured with muscle. Dark hair feathered his strong chest, disappearing into the disordered bedclothes that covered his hips and most of his legs. His long hair straggled onto his shoulders, as unkempt as hers, and a dark shadow marked his cheeks.

Never had a man looked so beautiful to a woman.

"You can eat me if you want," he said with a very tempting smile. "It would be more to the purpose than what you're doing."

"You must be worn out! Or should be."

"Should I take that as a challenge?"

"No!" She realized she was stark naked and his waistcoat didn't conceal much. She was tempted to grab her cloak, but knew he'd be hurt. She'd undressed for him last night, hadn't she?

His smile turned tender. "All right, I'll admit it. I need to recoup my strength. I suppose you're in the same state. That was a truly remarkable night." He slid out of bed and began to straighten it. She went to the other side to help. Their eyes met across the sheet they were pulling tight.

"This feels very comfortable," he said softly. "Very right."

"Yes, it does, though you don't make good corners, you know."

They both laughed, and the smiles lingered as they completed the bed. But then he folded it back and came around to her.

"What-"

Kate was picked up and tucked into the bed. "Stay there."

"Bully." But Kate stayed and watched as he found his robe and slipped it on. It was a rather dull gray. She pondered what color would suit him better, planning to make another for him.

He disappeared into the next room, returning with her valise. He dug out her nightgown and tossed it to her. "Put that on, and I'll command some breakfast for us."

Kate clutched the night dress but looked around at the wild room. "Here?"

"I'll soon have it tidied."

"I should-"

"It can be your turn tomorrow."

Kate slumped back, silenced by his confidence. Tomorrow. Another night like last night, and then tomorrow.

They still had to face today.

While he was out giving orders, she pulled on the night dress, then climbed out of the bed. He returned as she was finding her comb and hairbrush in the valise. Sitting at the dressing table working on tangles, she fired the first shot of reality. "If I came to live here, Stephen would have to come too."

In the mirror, she saw him turn to her. "Of course he would."

She swiveled to face him. "You wouldn't mind?"

"I'd mind any other arrangement. I mind the fact that you haven't brought him with you. He must be a different child to the one I saw born."

"Yes, he is. But you can't acknowledge him as your son."

"Later, Kate." He turned away to gather up his coat and her flannel petticoat. "We'll talk about it later."

Kate sighed and turned back. Time wouldn't change anything, but perhaps that was reason enough to put off the reckoning.

He had the room in pretty good order by the time two maids arrived with trays of food. Though well-trained, they couldn't hide their interest and excitement at Kate's arrival. They arranged covered platters, coffee and chocolate pots, and pots of jams, then curtsied and left.

"I suppose I'll be a nine-days wonder."

"Begging for compliments?" He led her to the table. "I'm sure your wonder will last more than nine days."

"You know that's not what I mean!" She raised a cover and found eggs and bacon. "I'm astonishingly hungry."

"Nothing astonishing about it." He helped himself to a huge amount of food and ate with relish.

Kate ate a bigger breakfast than she ever had in her life.

And all the while they talked-about army friends, his decision to come home, and her family in Aylesbury. They avoided talk of their marriage.

When they'd finished, he said, "I've ordered you a bath next door, and Jess should have your clothes unpacked.

When you're ready, come to the drawing room. It's to the left at the end of the corridor. We'll talk there."

Kate went without complaint. The idyll was over.

A long bath was welcome, and delayed the fateful hour. Kate had to climb out eventually, though, for even with a fire in her room, the water grew cold. She dressed carefully in the light brown merino she had intended for her formal meeting with Charles Tennant. Jess helped her tidy her hair into a simple knot, and then settled a demure lace cap on top of it. The cap was trimmed with lace and ruffles, but couldn't be called frivolous, she assured herself.

Taking a deep breath, she went into the corridor and followed it to the left to a half-open door. When she pushed through it, she found herself in the drawing room with Charles awaiting her, standing by a lit fire.

Midday sun shafted through four long windows hung with cream brocade, and glowed on light-oak paneling and a white-painted ceiling. It was a charming, comfortable room, part of a house that until recently had presumably been a happy one.

"What happened to your cousin's wife and daughters?" she asked.

"They are living with Sophie's family at the moment. I'm sure they will at least visit here."

He was dressed much as he had been yesterday, in green coat, long white waistcoat and breeches, and brown tan-top boots. He'd shaved, and his hair was tamed back into a neat ribbon. All the energy was there, though, threatening to shatter her good sense.

She sat in a chair quite close to him. "So, what are we to do?"

"I think our best course is to tell the world that our marriage occurred after your baby's birth."

Kate gripped her hands together and made herself consider it. "It makes him a bastard."

"Everyone seems willing to accept that you were married to Fallowfield."

"That's only because no one has questioned it."

"Who's likely to?"

"His family? For all I know, there's an inheritance at stake."

Now she'd surprised him. "You don't know?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He never spoke much of his family and since coming home, I've ... I've been too frightened to look."

"Kate, there's no inheritance. His father was a corn factor, I believe, who married a lady. Doubtless the father had the same charm as the son. They were both carried off by a fever when he was quite young and he was sent to a school paid for by his maternal uncle. All the uncle did for him in the end was to buy him a commission. So I doubt anyone is going to take an interest in his son."

For a moment, Kate surrendered to the pleasant prospect, but then she sat up straight. "But the only birth documents I have are those provided by Mr. Rightwell, and *they* state that he is your son!"

"We'll find Rightwell and have the matter corrected. If you were married to Dennis when the child was conceived, that overrides who you were married to later."

"But *he'll* want proof that I was married to Dennis!"

"Plague take it, are you always this difficult!"

Kate snapped to her feet. "And are you always so self-deceiving? There *is* no easy way around this. Either my son is a bastard, or he is your son and heir." She took a deep breath and made her decision, bitter though it was. "He can be a bastard. He certainly is a child of his mother's folly. I expect the support and patronage of a peer of the realm will mitigate any stain upon him."

"Which only leaves your reputation sullied ..."

"Perhaps I deserve that."

"Never." His hand formed a fist against the mantelpiece. "Kate, what if we can find proof of your marriage to Dennis?"

"Proof?"

"Those actors."

"There are probably more actors in the nation than booksellers! How do you intend to find those three?"

"We could advertise. Post bills."

"Charles! It's a forlorn hope."

He smiled in a way she remembered from the army. "I'm the master of the forlorn hope," said Charles the Bold. "First, we'll go to the place you were married ... Where was it?"

"Worleigh, but-"

"That's not far from here. We'll ask questions. Perhaps the actors were local."

"But-"

"If we find witnesses to vows, no matter who they are, the marriage would be legal."

"And Stephen would be Dennis's son." Kate was almost caught up in his spell, but only almost. "I go odds we find a decrepit house, and no one who even remembers a mock wedding over two years ago." "So you'd rather give up without trying?" At that, Kate raised her chin. "Never. By all means let us try." "That's my girl." He pulled her in for a kiss.

"Don't forget, I'm a genius at the forlorn hope."

* * *

Kate's memories of Worleigh were faint, but she remembered the name of the place in which she'd said her vows-Thornford House. She and Charles had come alone in his curricle, traveling almost entirely in silence. Kate could not bear to talk of hope or the future, but was not interested in anything else.

She suspected he felt the same.

She tried to hold onto hope until they turned in between crumbling stone pillars and gates rusted open. It was a wild-goose chase. The house was still deserted. The drive was rutted, and overgrown by unkempt trees and straggly shrubbery.

"Other vehicles have passed this way," Charles pointed out as he steered around a particularly large hole. Kate looked and saw that he was right. Since the last rain, wheels had rolled down this drive. It gave her a tiny bit of hope.

At first glance, the rambling old house killed it, but then she realized that behind dense ivy, no windows were broken.

A wisp of smoke curled up from one of the half-dozen chimneys.

"Someone's here!" she announced.

"Probably just a servant," he cautioned as he halted the vehicle and jumped down. "We won't find our actors here, but there may be a clue."

Kate scrambled down by herself. "It's more than I ever hoped for. It's something." As he tied the reins to a tree, she marched up to the door and rapped the iron knocker, causing a shower of rust.

Paint was peeling from the door, but even though most of the leaves had fallen and were piled in drifts around the house, the steps were clear of them.

She plied the knocker again, loudly.

"Perhaps we'd better go around the back," said Charles, coming up behind her. "If it's a servant, they doubtless just live in the kitchen."

Kate scowled at the knocker, but took his hand to pick her way along a rough path round the house to the back. There they saw the promising sight of a well-tended kitchen garden, and when they knocked on a back door, it was opened by a surly old man.

"What d'yer want?"

He held the door half-closed so they couldn't see into the kitchen, but warm air and a smell of soup or stew wafted out.

"We'd like to speak to the mistress of the house," said Charles.

"Why?"

Kate's heart gave a little skip. He hadn't denied such a mistress.

"Private business." Charles became the officer. "Open up, man! You can't keep a lady standing here."

The man instinctively stepped back, and they were in before he could collect himself.

It was a large old kitchen, with smoke-blackened walls and simple wood furniture, but it was fairly clean and well-tended. In front of an open hearth, two old women sat on a settle hunched in shawls.

One of them straightened. "What business have you here?" It was not a servant's voice. Then she peered at Kate.

"Don't I know you?"

Heart beating fast, Kate went closer. "I'm Kate Dunstable, Miss Heston. I was here two years ago to marry your great-nephew, Dennis Fallowfield."

"Hah! Now I remember. Yours is not a face anyone would forget, gel. What do you want?"

"I'm afraid Dennis is dead, ma'am."

"So I hear. Do you want money? You'll not have it from me."

"No, I don't want money." Kate was gripping her hands tight together. The aunt was real. Was it possible the marriage was too? Had Dennis *lied* to her?

God, why had that never occurred to her?

"What do you want, then? Speak up."

"I... I have lost the documents of my marriage, Miss Heston. I am looking for the witnesses."

"Well, here we are. Myself and Aggie here." She gestured to the other woman, who nodded vaguely. "Her wits are going. Fine companion she's turned out to be. Does nothing but eat."

Rather dizzy with relief, Kate asked, "And the clergyman?"

"Reverend Trowlip. You'll find him down at his parsonage, I suppose, nursing a brandy bottle. Such a fuss as he made about coming here to wed you two in my own chapel. Seems to think I should go to his church. What's wrong with a lady praying to God for herself in her own chapel? All he wants anyway is money for 'glass.' Money for windows and things, you might suppose, but it all goes for bottles." She stared up at Kate. "I did tell you I have no money, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry for it. Can we help you in any way?"

The old woman jerked back in surprise. "We?" She peered behind Kate. "Who are you, sir?"

"Major Charles Tennant, ma'am. A fellow officer of your great-nephew, and husband to his widow."

"Indeed! I like your jaw, young man, but you'll still get no money of me!"

"I assure you, we wouldn't take it if you offered. You so clearly need every penny. But Dennis and Kate did have a son."

"Ah-ha!" Miss Heston emphasized the explosion with a thump on the arm of the settle. "Now I see it. You want my money for the boy. How old is he?"

"Just six months."

"Bring him here when he's ten. No younger. I can't abide young children. And don't bother bringing him if he don't have manners. Can't abide brats. If he can make a bow and say please and thank you, I'll consider leaving him my pittance."

The old lady's sour words didn't bother Kate at all, for hope and relief were spreading through her like the warmth of the fire. In fact, she went forward and took a clawlike hand. "That's very kind of you, Miss Heston. I'll be sure to bring him here to see you. He should know his father's family."

The old woman scowled up at her, but didn't remove her hand.

"And," added Kate, "I now regard you as my family. If you have need of anything, you must send word." As if by magic, Charles passed Kate his card with Marchmont Hall, Strode Kingsley on it, and she placed it in

Miss Heston's unresisting hand.

They found their own way out into the sunshine.

"I was really and completely married to him," Kate said in wonder. Then she added sharply, "The loathsome toad!"

"Indeed. A nasty trick to steal the documents and deny it. I suppose he just found marriage too restricting. I apologize on his behalf."

"But *why*? Why court me and marry me, then ... ? Oh God, it was all just the wager."

He took her hand. "He never could resist a challenge, and your unassailable virtue must have seemed an exciting one. I'm sorry, Kate."

"I'm just sorry that I proved such a disappointment to him."

He drew her into his arms. "Don't. It wasn't your fault. None of it was. He wasn't a man for domesticity. I was considerably surprised when he turned up with a regular woman. I'd probably have keeled over with shock if he'd announced that he'd married. But I'm sure he intended to play honestly with you at first. He was a gentleman." He rubbed her back comfortingly. "Perhaps it was us all along."

She looked up then. "What do you mean?"

"A few times he accused me of wanting to steal you. Even of having an affair with you-"

"The wretch!"

"He read my wishes correctly. Especially when he started going to other women."

"I suspected it. Especially as I grew big with child." Kate wondered why-with all the other betrayals-this one hurt so much.

"Perhaps he sensed that what you had together wasn't perfect. Put it behind you, Kate. I want domesticity, I want marriage, and I adore you. And I will be completely faithful to you, till death us do part."

"You'd better be," Kate said, pulling out of his arms and deliberately using her smile. "Let's go and talk to Reverend Trowlip."

The plump, red-faced, elderly clergyman confirmed the marriage without hesitation, though he railed at Miss Heston's practice of only using her decrepit private chapel. In return for a couple of guineas, he copied out his record of the marriage and signed it for them.

"For glass," he muttered as he pocketed the coins. Kate suspected that Miss Heston was right, and the glass was in bottles rather than windows.

She didn't care. She didn't have a care in the world!

As they walked back toward the curricule Charles said, "All we have to do now is to amend the birth record."

"Will that present any difficulty?"

"None at all. A man can't be declared father to a child if he couldn't have been legally married to the mother at conception."

Kate leaned against the side of the curricule, almost weak with relief. "It's over? It's settled?"

"It's over. It's settled." He took her hand. "But do you know what? I want to marry you again, with all pomp and ceremony, and with the whole of Aylesbury as witness. So you can never get away."

Kate looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "Jess warned me about that. She thinks marriage just ties a woman down."

"I want you tied down. I want to be tied down with you. Gads, this is beginning to sound decidedly odd!" He raised her hand to his lips, watching her with those remarkable eyes. "Marry me, Kate. Marry me with pomp and ceremony and forever."

Kate went into his arms. "Oh yes. Yes, please. Till death us do part."

Jo Beverley

In writing *The Determined Bride*, JO BEVERLEY finally managed to use the knowledge and experience gained teaching woman-centered childbirth classes, and in giving birth to her own two children. These days, however, she's a full-time writer with sixteen romance novels to her credit-four of them RITA Award winners-and a member of the Romance Hall of Fame. Her most recent novel is *The Shattered Rose*, a medieval romance.