



*To love  
and to cherish,  
in war  
and in peace—  
in scandal  
and in mystery...*

HIS  
*Spanish*  
BRIDE

**"I raced through this delicious, intriguing tale of Suzanne and Malcolm's wedding!"**

*—New York Times bestselling author,  
Deanna Raybourn*

TERESA GRANT

**Also by Teresa Grant**

*VIENNA WALTZ*  
*IMPERIAL SCANDAL*  
*THE PARIS AFFAIR* (forthcoming)

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

# **HIS *Spanish* BRIDE**

**T**ERESA **G**RANT



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*For Lauren Willig, wonderful writer and wonderful friend, who in this year will particularly appreciate this step in Malcolm's and Suzanne's lives. Wishing you and James everything Malcolm and Suzanne have and considerably less drama getting there.*

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# 1

“She’s very lovely, Malcolm. The question is, what are we going to do with her?”

Malcolm Rannoch regarded Sir Charles Stuart, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Portugal and Brazil, across the paper-strewn desk in Stuart’s study. The paintings on the walls and the silver candlesticks on the desk were Portuguese. The programme tossed on top of a pile of diplomatic correspondence was from the opera last night here in Lisbon. The sherry in the decanters on the table across the room was Spanish. But the desk was well-worn English oak. This was, after all, the British embassy. “I wasn’t aware that we needed to do anything. She’s very self-sufficient.”

“Don’t be obtuse, Malcolm. Her parents were killed by the French, her home is destroyed. She has no surviving family to speak of, and even if we could track any connections down, her father’s people would be in France under Bonaparte and her mother’s people would be in Spain under French occupation.”

“Are you planning to throw her out of the embassy after a certain number of days?”

“Of course not.” Stuart picked up the programme, which appeared to have been autographed by the fair Brunet, leading lady at the Lisbon opera, and frowned at it. “But you know damn well if she stays here too long people will talk.”

That, Malcolm knew, was all too true. Stuart, unmarried and a month shy of four-and-thirty, was known for his flirtations. “Perhaps one of the officers’ wives would take her in.”

Stuart tucked the programme underneath a sheaf of papers. “Ticklish. She’s much too pretty. They won’t like the thought of her being round their husbands in close quarters.” He moved a crystal paperweight on top of the papers. “It would be better if we could find someone to marry her.”

For some reason, tension shot through Malcolm. “Are you volunteering?”

“Lord, no.” Stuart flung himself back in his chair and loosened his cravat. “She’s a darling, but I’d make her a damnable husband. I should think I’m the last man in Lisbon you’d be wishing on her.”

Malcolm shifted against the shield back of his chair. “Except possibly for myself.”

Stuart propped his booted feet up on the edge of the desk and regarded Malcolm. A sword-sharp wit glinted beneath his affable, easygoing persona. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I’m doing no such thing. When it comes to what I do and don’t have to offer, I think my assessment is entirely realistic. Suzanne de Saint-Vallier deserves better.”

“She likes you.” Stuart’s gaze continued steady on Malcolm’s face.

“She’s grateful to me.”

Malcolm had come across Suzanne de Saint-Vallier while on a mission in the Cantabrian Mountains, the sort of mission where his work crossed the line from diplomat to intelligence agent. Suzanne—he’d long since stopped thinking of her as

Mademoiselle de Saint-Vallier—was a Franco-Spaniard whose family had moved to her mother’s Spain from her father’s France during the Reign of Terror twenty years ago. Her parents had been killed a few weeks ago in an attack by the French on their village. Guilt bit Malcolm in the throat at the thought of that attack and what had caused it. Homeless and penniless, Suzanne had escaped with her maid and literally stumbled across Malcolm and his party on a mountain path. Malcolm had brought her back to Lisbon because there was nowhere else safe to take her. On their return journey, they had combined wits to fight off a French patrol. Suzanne de Saint-Vallier was a tough and resourceful woman. But that didn’t necessarily mean she was equipped to navigate the treacherous waters of British expatriate society in Lisbon. Society wasn’t kind to a penniless woman on her own.

For a moment a vision of a future he’d never let himself contemplate swam before Malcolm’s eyes. A home that was more than just lodgings, a beautiful woman who might be a partner and friend, a small hand gripping his fingers. He shut his mind to the brush of the seductive thoughts and focused his gaze on Stuart. “Did you only ask to see me because of Miss Saint-Vallier? Or is there something more?”

Stuart grimaced and reached for a paper from one of the piles on his desk. “More, unfortunately.” He frowned at the paper, set it down, and rummaged through another stack. “The Marquesa de Flores came to see me yesterday.”

The Marques de Flores was a general in the Spanish army, fighting the occupying French forces alongside the British. Three years ago, he had married Isabella Armstrong, daughter of a British colonel. Isabella Flores and their young son were residing in Lisbon during the conflict. Malcolm had met Isabella a handful of times, as a girl in England and in Lisbon before and after her marriage, a vibrant young woman with glossy dark hair and restless dark eyes. “Is she concerned about her husband?”

“No.” Stuart swung his booted feet to the floor with a thud. “At least not in the way you mean. She’s concerned about a certain paper falling into her husband’s hands.”

“A letter?” Malcolm asked, beginning to see where this was heading.

“A letter,” Stuart confirmed. “A letter which she should never have written.”

Malcolm swallowed, the ashes of his own past bitter in his mouth. “But why come to you?” He stared at Stuart, aware of a hitherto unforeseen possibility. “Unless—”

“Oh no.” Stuart spread his hands in denial. “I know my reputation, but she’s too high strung for my taste, and in general I try to avoid entanglements that could bring about a breach in international relations. I believe she came to me because she felt she had few other choices. Her father is in England on leave—thank God—but she thought I’d appreciate the dangers. Which I do. I wish the same could be said for her lover.”

“Who—”

“Edward Linford.”

“Oh, dear God.” Edward Linford was a captain in the British army. Handsome, brave, popular with the ladies, but inclined to blunder into trouble.

“Quite.” Stuart picked up the penknife and slammed it down on the papers on his desk, sending two haphazard stacks cascading into each other. “We could have a Spanish general challenging a British officer to a duel. And their comrades lining up against each other. Right as Wellington’s planning a push into Spain in the spring campaigning season.”

“Does Isabella Flores have any idea who took the letter?”

“No.” Stuart picked up the penknife and tossed it from hand to hand. “Apparently she left it tucked into a book on a table in the library at my rout Wednesday last. Close on a hundred people could have taken it. This has disaster written all over it. Find the letter before Flores does, Malcolm. It shouldn’t be a difficult mission. You can stay right here in Lisbon.”

“Sometimes the most dangerous missions are close to home, sir.”

“I have no doubt you’re equal to the task.” Stuart dropped the penknife on top of the jumble of papers. “And while you’re about it, think about Miss Saint-Vallier. Don’t be so damned afraid to take a risk.”

Malcolm got to his feet. The sound of his parents’ raised voices, the thud of his mother hurling a vase against a silk-hung wall, echoed in his head. Marriage in his experience was not pretty. But Stuart was right, Suzanne de Saint-Vallier had to marry. Malcolm knew that even better than Stuart. For he knew more about her situation.

He knew she was carrying a child.

“We can’t stay here forever.”

“Who said anything about forever? I’m taking it one day at a time. Like always.” Suzanne Lescaut, who currently went by the name Suzanne de Saint-Vallier, looked across the embassy sitting room at Blanca Mendoza, her friend and comrade, who was currently posing as her maid.

Blanca snorted. “It’s dangerous—”

“We’ve already uncovered invaluable information.”

“The longer a masquerade lasts the more dangerous it becomes.”

Suzanne bit back a retort. As a seasoned agent she knew full well that Blanca spoke the truth. She had only been supposed to stumble across Malcolm Rannoch in the Cantabrian Mountains and intercept a valuable package he was purchasing from a band of bandits. The mission had gone awry, and the package had been lost to both of them. But Malcolm had insisted on escorting her back to Lisbon and installing her at the British embassy. Where she’d been able to discover very useful information about Wellington’s plans for the spring campaign. “It’s a risk,” she admitted. “But that’s true of every mission I’ve undertaken.”

“But on the other ones you weren’t pregnant.”

Suzanne dropped down on the sofa, harder than she intended. Her hand went instinctively to her stomach. The fact that there was a baby growing inside still seemed almost unreal.

“It changes everything,” Blanca said.

Suzanne’s fingers tightened over the ruched moss green *gros de Naples* of her gown. Was it just her imagination or was her stomach already beginning to curve beneath? “It doesn’t change what I believe in.”

And that was what had driven her for the past three years. Orphaned and alone she had clung to the Republican ideals she’d been raised on. Napoleon Bonaparte might have tarnished himself by taking an imperial crown, but his reforms were still real, and he was still the best hope of maintaining some vestiges of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Those ideals had kept her going in the face of loss and brutality. Those ideals and, she had to confess, a love of the game she’d learned to play. “I’m not going

to turn my back on my comrades and my cause just because I'm a mother."

Blanca dropped down beside her. "Mr. Rannoch knows you're going to have a baby. That changes things."

"Yes, that was a tactical error." Malcolm Rannoch had found her being sick early one morning, outside their camp. It would have been no use denying her condition. Only of course Malcolm—Mr. Rannoch—believed that her condition was owed to her story of the French soldiers who had supposedly attacked her home and killed her parents.

"He's worried about you."

Suzanne swallowed an upwelling of guilt, bitter as stewed coffee. She should be used to it by now. "Malcolm Rannoch is a very decent man. He offered to arrange for me to go away and then find a home for the child if that's what I wanted. Or to help me get rid of the child now if I couldn't bear to carry it. But I've assured him I want to keep the baby. He won't reveal that I'm with child. He knows that would spell my ruin. We have time before we need to disappear."

Blanca fixed her with an intent dark gaze. "When we do disappear he'll look for you. He's made you his responsibility."

And he would feel guilty when he failed to learn what had become of her. He was the sort who took his responsibilities seriously and his failures hard. For a moment Suzanne could feel the concern in his gaze as it rested upon her across the embassy dinner table the night before. She swallowed another pang. "He'll look, but we'll cover our tracks."

"I wouldn't count on that working," Blanca said. "He's a very good agent himself."

Surprisingly so for a duke's grandson with a gentleman's education. "He's far too decent a man for this game."

"That won't be hindrance when it comes to looking for you."

Suzanne picked up one of the sofa cushions. Something about the shiny yellow-striped chintz was so very English. "No, but it will keep him from guessing the truth. It won't occur to him that I could be capable of such a deception."

Blanca's eyes narrowed. Dark ringlets fell about her elfin face with fashionable frivolity, but her gaze was glass sharp. "You're fond of him."

Agents weren't supposed to grow fond of people, but of course it happened. "I'm fond of him." Suzanne plucked at the fringe on the cushion. "That doesn't change anything."

"What are you going to do?" Blanca demanded.

Suzanne smiled at her friend, one of the few people with whom she could be her unvarnished self. "What we always do. Make it up as we go along."

## 2

Malcolm scanned the ballroom in the British embassy. Stuart entertained a great deal. In general Malcolm did his best to escape the endless round of embassy parties, but for his present investigation having British expatriates and their Spanish and Portuguese allies crowded together was a distinct advantage. Isabella Flores was across the room, seated between two older ladies. She was listening to something one was saying, but her eyes were bright and her hands moved restlessly over the ivory and lace of her fan.

“A pretty woman, the Marquesa de Flores. I can see why Flores offered for her. But a difference in age as well as nationality can make for a complicated marriage.”

Malcolm turned to see the Marquess of Wellington standing at his side. “Stuart told me you’re helping us out with our dilemma,” Wellington said, voice pitched below the clink of crystal and strains of an English country dance. “Damned fool Linford. As if whichever marshal Bonaparte sends against us isn’t opponent enough without my own men causing problems. Thank God we have you to tidy things up.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“Which is good indeed.” Wellington’s gaze swept the gilded uniforms and pastel gowns thronging the room and settled on a tall, slender figure in peacock blue silk, walnut brown ringlets gleaming in the candlelight. “What are you going to do about Miss Saint-Vallier?”

A host of conflicting impulses tightened Malcolm’s throat. “I wasn’t aware that something needed to be done about her,” he said, perhaps unwisely.

“She’s a pretty woman as well. And clever. Wouldn’t get herself in trouble like the marquesa. Isabella Armstrong was a foolish girl when she married, and from what I see she hasn’t grown up much in the intervening three years. Miss Saint-Vallier has a woman’s maturity. And loyalty to boot, I dare swear. Don’t be blind to what’s in front of you, lad.”

Malcolm swallowed. Someone or other had been throwing eligible girls at him since he went up to Oxford. Why should this bother him more?

Because for the first time in his life he was tempted to act on the hints?

“Damn,” Wellington said. His gaze had fastened on a man in a hussar’s uniform crossing the room. “There’s Linford. And he’s making straight for the marquesa. Deal with it, Malcolm.”

Malcolm intercepted Edward Linford midway across the room.

“Rannoch.” Linford raised his brows. He had deep blue eyes, thick fair hair, and the easy assurance of one to whom life had come easily. “Just on my way—”

“Don’t you think you should stay away from the marquesa until at least we have this sorted out?”

“What—”

“Stuart’s asked me to help with your difficulty.”

“Oh.” Linford flicked a bit of lint from his coat. “No need to interfere, Rannoch. I’m more than a match for Flores with pistols or swords.”

“Neither of which would mend the breach between us and the Spanish.”

“It’s not your—”

“Trouble between us and the Spanish is all our affair. You don’t have any idea who took the letter?”

“Never received it. Tiresome, that. Don’t know why Bella had to put pen to paper—”

“For God’s sake, Linford.” Malcolm seized his arm. “Do you have any idea what you’ve exposed her to?”

“Bella knows—”

“Isabella Flores could lose her child and her friends and her reputation. And she probably considers herself in love with you. Which is more than can be said on your side.”

“Oh, very well.” Linford tugged his arm free of Malcolm’s grip and smoothed his sleeve. “Not as though there aren’t plenty of other fish in the sea.” His gaze swept the room. “Isn’t that the girl you brought back from the Cantabrian Mountains? What’s her name? St. Vincent? Tasty morsel, that.”

“If you so much as dance with Suzanne de Saint-Vallier,” Malcolm said, “it won’t be Flores you’ll be fighting.”

Linford ran a gaze over him filled with the contempt of the soldier for the diplomat. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

Linford gave a low laugh, crude as the most graphic Rowlandson print. “You fool, Rannoch. You think she’s an innocent. But for all you know she’s a Continental adventuress.”

Malcolm’s right hand curled into a fist. “One word, Linford.”

“Never thought to see a cold fish like you brought low by a woman. Go right ahead and make a fool of yourself.”

“I say, Linford, aren’t we going to play cards?” A shorter, stouter, sandy-haired man approached them. William Haddon, Linford’s boon companion. If he cut less of a swath with the ladies, it was only because he was less dashing, not for want of trying.

“Yes, all right, since Rannoch’s playing the spoilsport.”

“You don’t want to dance with your wife?” Malcolm asked Haddon. He spotted Mrs. Haddon across the room, a tall woman with honey-colored hair and a direct gaze. She was the former Charlotte Spencer. Malcolm remembered her from his childhood in England as a lively girl with a quick wit who had played with his cousins. Now the ironic curve of her mouth and the disillusion in her once bright eyes betrayed the knowledge that had come with the married state.

“Lord, Rannoch, no one dances with his own wife. What are you thinking?” Haddon demanded.

“Rannoch’s besotted,” Linford said. “Go and moon over the Saint-Vallier chit, Rannoch.”

To go straight to Suzanne de Saint-Vallier was to play into Linford’s hand. On the other hand, to avoid her was to yield even more sway to Linford. Malcolm crossed the room to Suzanne de Saint-Vallier. She greeted him with an amused smile.

“I was dreadfully afraid Captain Linford was going to come speak with me.”

“He was.”

“Did you think I couldn’t cope with him?”

“I have no doubt that you could. But I didn’t see why you should be required to do so.”

Suzanne laughed. She had a warm laugh with a touch of ironic amusement that gave her an air beyond her years. “You’re a gallant man, Mr. Rannoch.”

The laughter in her eyes couldn’t quite disguise the ghosts in their depths. Malcolm had seen how strong she could be, fighting off French soldiers at his side, nursing the wounded, riding long days and sleeping on the hard ground in enemy terrain. She’d grown up in a dangerous world, and her parents had taught her unusual skills. But he knew she was already the subject of casual speculation like Edward Linford’s. And that was nothing compared to the talk there would be when her pregnancy became obvious. She was less prepared to defend herself against those attacks than against a French ambush.

In the candlelight, the bones of her face were strong yet incredibly fragile. One wrong step—

“I was going to go out on the balcony for some air,” he said. “Care to come with me?”

“And escape the ballroom? I thought you’d never ask.”

He held open the French window. She moved past him onto the wrought-iron balcony, the silk folds of her gown brushing against his legs. Her perfume washed over him, roses and vanilla, and some other elusive, aromatic scent.

Malcolm closed the window. The rush of cold air hurt his lungs. “Have you given any more thought to my suggestion?”

“That I go away and have the baby in secret? It’s the only option.”

“You can pretend it’s an orphaned child you’ve taken in.”

“Wouldn’t there still be talk?” She drew the folds of her shawl about her.

“Of course. But no one would be able to prove anything.”

“I suppose that’s the best I can hope for.” Her fingers tightened on the velvet and lace of the shawl. “You’re kind to try, Mr. Rannoch.”

“There’s another option.” He leaned against the cold glass of the window and studied her, silhouetted against the moonlight and the dark sky. A dusky cloud of hair framing a heart-shaped face. Pale skin, winged brows, quicksilver sea green eyes. He wanted more than anything to close the distance between them and take her in his arms. And that told him how very much danger they were both in. Once the words were spoken, they could not be taken back. And the more he wanted it, the greater the risk.

He drew a breath. A thousand past hurts and future risks rushed into his lungs. “There’s another option. You could marry me.”

Her gaze fastened on his face. Wide and dark. Shock reverberating in its depths. “That’s terribly kind of you, Mr. Rannoch—”

“I should warn you I’m not much of a bargain,” he said before his impulses could betray him into danger. “My parents’ marriage was a disaster. I’ve long been determined to avoid any such entanglements for myself.”

“Mr. Rannoch, are you telling me my predicament has overcome your scruples?”

Her eyes were still dark with shock, but there was a faint tremble of laughter in her voice.

“Miss Saint-Vallier, I’m warning you of what you’d be letting yourself in for. I work long hours. I’m often required to attend events such as this one.”

“From what I’ve observed you spend a great deal of those events in the library.”

“Whenever possible. You’d be welcome to join me, but I imagine you’d find it harder to disappear. You have a way of drawing the eye.”

“I can look after myself.”

He moved to the balcony railing and leaned against it. Support was probably a good idea considering he had just cut the foundation of his life out from under him. “When I’m not attending receptions or drafting memoranda or sitting in meetings, I’m likely to disappear unexpectedly.”

“On intelligence missions. Like the one on which you met me.”

“Quite. You’d be on your own much of the time. As would”—the word stuck in his throat, an acknowledgment of just how much he’d be taking on—“the child.” The tie that would bind them for the rest of their lives, a role and a responsibility he’d never thought to assume, for which he suspected he was entirely unsuited. “Of course you might consider that an advantage.”

She moved to lean against the railing beside him, one white-gloved hand gripping the balustrade. The crystal beads at the neck of her gown sparkled in the moonlight. The wind tugged at the knots of ribbon on the shoulders. “Mr. Rannoch, you have to have considered—This child—”

“Deserves to be loved.” His hands closed on the cool metal of the railing behind him. “Love” was not a word that came easily to him.

“Mr. Rannoch—” She put out a hand, then let it fall to her side. “That means a great deal to me. But you can’t have thought this through. The child could be a boy—”

“It’s not as though I have a title to pass along.” He kept his gaze steady on her face, his head turned sideways.

“Your mother’s father is a duke. I’ve heard you talk about your family’s estates—”

His father’s legacy. He swallowed a bite of bitter laughter as rumors from his own childhood swirled in his brain. “You’ve heard me say often enough I don’t believe in inherited wealth.”

“Saying it in the abstract is different from putting it into practice in one’s own life.”

“All too often. But not in this case.” His fingers tightened on the balcony railing. The cold metal bit through his gloves. “I don’t know what sort of father I’d make. My own father didn’t set much of an example. But I swear to you I would love your child as my own.”

A multitude of thoughts he could not put a name to chased themselves through her eyes. “If you know me at all, you must realize how grateful I am. And that I could never ask you to make such a sacrifice.”

“Believe me, Miss Saint-Vallier, it would be no sacrifice.” Until he spoke the words he hadn’t realized quite how much he meant them.

She swallowed. He saw the pulse beating just above the draped peacock blue silk of her bodice. “Will you give me a few days to consider?”

“Of course.”

He should have felt relief. Instead cold terror gripped him.

The terror of incipient loss.

*Keep calm.* She had time. Time to consider, to weigh options, to calculate odds. But—Dear God in heaven. Marriage.

Suzanne made her way round the edge of the dance floor and down the passage to the place where she knew she could have a moment to collect her thoughts. The ladies' retiring room. She drew a breath, reached for the door handle, and froze at the sound of sobs. Instinct cut through her confusion. This sort of unguarded moment was the lifeblood of an agent's work. Anything she could learn from a guest at the embassy could prove invaluable.

The cloak of her work settled over her, welcome protection from the tumult of her thoughts. She turned the handle and stepped into the room to find a young woman with chestnut hair collapsed on a low stool in a cloud of cream-colored tulle and French blue ribbon, sobbing into a handkerchief.

"I'm sorry." Suzanne stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "I couldn't help overhearing. Is there anything I can do?" And she meant it, while at the same time she was keenly aware of the possibilities this encounter offered.

"Oh no." The chestnut-haired woman blew her nose. It was the Marquesa de Flores, Suzanne realized. An Englishwoman married to a Spanish general. "It's nothing."

"It's clearly not nothing." Suzanne dropped down on a chair beside the other woman. "Don't tell me one of the attachés made a nuisance of himself."

"If only it were that simple." The marquesa gave a despairing laugh. "You aren't married, Miss Saint-Vallier. You can have no notion—"

"Is it something to do with your husband?"

"My husband!" The marquesa's voice cracked like shattered crystal. "If he finds out —"

Isabella Flores broke off. Suzanne waited, afraid to stem the flow of confidences. Isabella wadded up her handkerchief in her lap. "You're the girl Malcolm Rannoch brought to Lisbon, aren't you?"

"Mr. Rannoch came to my assistance after my family were killed."

"Rescued you."

"Yes."

"You traveled with him for some days?"

"He brought my maid and me to Lisbon." Was there already gossip about the time she'd spent in Malcolm's company? Was that part of what had driven him to propose?

Isabella's gaze darted over her face. "Do you trust him? Is he a man of honor?"

Suzanne would have been the first to say honor was a smoke screen frequently employed by scoundrels, yet her voice rang sterling true to her own ears when she said, "Yes. One of the most honorable men I've ever met."

"I knew him a bit as a boy, but it's difficult to reconcile that with—Do you think he's brave and resourceful? If he says he'll do something—"

"He's the sort of man who accomplishes what he sets out to do." Suzanne studied Isabella's anxious gaze and nervous hands. "Marquesa—has he offered to assist you?"

"No, of course not." Isabella straightened up, wariness writ in her posture. "How could I possibly—"

“Because if so, I’m quite sure you can rely upon him to sort matters out for you.”

Isabella gave a desperate laugh. “If only it could be sorted out. Oh, Miss Saint-Vallier, I’ve been such a fool.”

The story tumbled out in bits and pieces, coaxed along by judicious comments, questions, and words of reassurance. Half of it Suzanne had already guessed. A bored, neglected wife. An older, absent husband. A love affair. An indiscreet letter.

Isabella Flores twisted her handkerchief in her hand. “You must despise me.”

“No, I assure you.”

Isabella shot her a look. “I betrayed my marriage vows.”

“Marriage can be complicated.”

Isabella sat back, hands locked on the handkerchief. “You’re very young to have divined that.”

“I think we’re much of an age.”

“But I’ve been married. Going on three years.” Isabella threw the crumpled handkerchief onto the dressing table. “I didn’t think it would be like this. I thought I knew precisely how my life would play out. My friends used to call me Queen Isabella because I was determined to reign over society. Ironic, is it not?”

“It’s one way a woman can achieve power.”

“Flores offered all that.” Isabella moved to the dressing table bench and picked up a comb to tidy her errant ringlets. “An English marquis would never have offered for me. I didn’t have the fortune or the family. That was my first thought when my father told me Flores had asked for my hand.” She dragged the comb through her side curls with a vicious tug. “I don’t think I’d met Flores above a half-dozen times—I’d only recently left school and come to Lisbon to stay with Papa. But I knew Flores could give me a position, a name older than my family’s, and a title beyond my dreams. I could imagine the looks of envy on school friends’ faces.” She threw the comb down on the dressing table with a clatter. “It wasn’t until after we’d been married for months that it occurred to me there’s more to marriage.”

“You were very young.” An age at which Suzanne had already been an orphaned ex-whore turned spy.

“I was seventeen. Lots of girls get married at seventeen.” Isabella wiped at her smeared lip rouge. “It’s not that my husband was unkind. In fact, he was faultlessly polite. But I scarcely saw him, and when we were together he was so remote. I was so desperately lonely. And I missed England. I missed my old life. Not all of it, of course. Not the restrictions and the chaperones hovering about. But—”

“The admiration?”

“Yes, precisely.” Isabella twined a ringlet round her finger to reshape it. “You can’t imagine what it’s like yet. One’s an unmarried girl with dozens of young men crowding about, asking for dances, bringing one flowers. Myriad possibilities. And then suddenly all those options are cut off. One’s made one’s choice and one has to live with it.”

“One’s made one’s choice of husband.”

Isabella shot a glance at her in the looking glass. “I never thought—I didn’t intend to make any other choice but that of husband. But then there was Edward being charming and attentive. Talking to me about home. Complimenting my gowns, showing me with his eyes that he appreciated me when my husband scarcely seemed

to notice. Oh, I know I'm making excuses, but you'll understand when you're married. That is—" She bit her lip.

"It's all right." Suzanne touched Isabella's hand. "I do understand how even under the best of circumstances one could feel one had lost options." A chill shot through her at hitherto unforeseen possibilities. She'd never thought marriage would be an option for her. Now suddenly she was on the brink of it.

"I thought of running away with him, you know," Isabella said in a low voice. "Mad, insane thoughts. But then I thought of my little boy. He's just a year old. He's been crying for me as he cuts his teeth, even though he has an excellent nurse. I've stayed home with him several evenings and not even minded. Two years ago I couldn't imagine being content to spend an evening pacing the nursery carpet, jollyng a baby out of fussing." She shook her head, ringlets stirring about her face. "Having children changes everything."

It took all Suzanne's willpower to keep her hand from going to her abdomen. She didn't have just herself to think of anymore. But as she had said to Blanca, the rest of her life didn't stop because she was becoming a mother. Her other loyalties didn't go away.

"If Flores discovers the letter—" Isabella drew a harsh breath. "I could lose my baby in any case."

The stark fear in the other woman's gaze resonated to a place in Suzanne she hadn't known existed. Perhaps it hadn't existed until now. She squeezed Isabella's hand. "You can rely on Malcolm Rannoch. He won't fail you."

And she knew it was true. Even though she herself might well be working against him.

"Rannoch." Edward Linford's voice was a low hiss as his hand closed on Malcolm's arm.

Malcolm turned to meet Linford's gaze. The swagger of an hour ago was gone. The blue gaze that women swooned over darted about like that of a cornered animal. "You have to help me."

"I just told you that I will endeavor to do so," Malcolm said. "You didn't seem much interested."

"That was before—Christ, let's get out of here." Linford jerked his gaze toward a gilded door that led to an anteroom.

Malcolm detached Linford's grip on his arm and inclined his head. They proceeded to the anteroom.

"Have you received a blackmail demand?" Malcolm asked, pulling the door to.

Linford spun toward him. "How the hell do you know—"

"Something happened to awake you to the dangers. Given our earlier conversation I suspect it's on your own account and not Isabella Flores's."

"Oh, go to the devil, Rannoch."

Malcolm leaned against the closed door panels. "For your own sake, not to mention our country's, perhaps it would be best if I helped you first."

Linford tugged a paper from the cuff of his coat. "Someone slipped me this."

*If you wish to recover the paper in question, meet me in the embassy garden by the statue of Diana at midnight in three days' time. I will surrender the paper in exchange for a certain book of yours. You will know the one I mean.*

*Do not fail if you value your reputation.*

Malcolm scanned the paper, then raised his gaze to Linford's white face. "Do you know the book the blackmailer means?"

"Er—yes." Linford began to pace over the Turkish rug.

"And?"

"It's a notebook."

"Your own?"

"Yes." Linford spun round in front of the fireplace. "A—a personal record."

Malcolm stared at him. Good God, the man wouldn't be fool enough to commit to paper—

"I can't surrender it, Rannoch. It could be more damaging than the letter."

He could. "Haven't you ever seen *Don Giovanni*, Linford?"

"What's that to say to anything?"

"Stay away from statues. Or not—it would make life easier for the rest of us. When you detailed your amorous conquests in writing did you put them in any sort of code?"

"I never thought the book would fall into the wrong hands."

"No, it's quite evident you never thought at all."

"If you're going to be bloody clever—"

"You're right, we need to consider options. I hope you have the book secured."

"Yes, it's in my rooms. I can't surrender it—It wouldn't just be Flores who would be after my head. Christ, the number of husbands—"

"Besides it would be uncomfortable for the ladies involved."

Linford tugged at his cravat. "Er—yes, of course."

"How long would it take you to make a dummy copy?" Malcolm asked.

"A dummy?"

"A new version in a similar notebook with made-up names, names no one can connect to any actual women."

Linford stared at him. "You think that would work?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a shot. You create the book—"

"And take it to the rendezvous?"

"No, I'll take it for you."

"Oh." Linford hesitated, as though unsure whether to be affronted or relieved. Relief appeared to win out. "Probably just as well. You're used to dealing with this sort of thing, and my temper might get the better of me. Wellington wouldn't like it."

"Indeed."

"And if it doesn't work?"

Malcolm moved to the door. "I have three days to figure that out."

### 3

Suzanne dropped down on a bench on the edge of the plaza. The sky was slate gray, heavy with the promise of rain. Few people were abroad on this December morning. After she left the embassy, she had exchanged her mulberry velvet bonnet and pelisse for a brown cloak and a black lace mantilla. Often the simplest disguises were the most effective. But even were she recognized, there was no reason Suzanne de Saint-Vallier should not be walking in this plaza or that she should not happen to engage in conversation with an acquaintance who happened by. She spread her palms in her lap. Her fingers trembled. Delayed reaction?

Malcolm Rannoch's words reverberated in her head. The first proposal of marriage she had ever received. She bit back a desperate laugh. Agents made the best of unlooked-for opportunities. Her masquerade as a victim of war and the real details of her personal life had combined to create one of those unlooked-for opportunities. An opportunity that sent a chill of dread through her. Along with a jolt of anticipation.

Boot heels clicked on the tiles. The man she had come to meet dropped down beside her in a swirl of charcoal greatcoat. "What's happened?" he asked in a sharp voice.

Suzanne turned to look directly into Raoul O'Roarke's incisive gray eyes. "Am I that transparent?"

"Not in the least, but I'm rather good at reading you." Raoul scanned her face. "Do you think you've been discovered? We can pull you out."

"Quite the reverse." She drew a breath. For some reason, she hesitated to put it into words. Perhaps because that would be the first step into an uncertain future. "Malcolm Rannoch asked me to marry him."

Shock reverberated through Raoul's gaze. "I pride myself on my skill at chess. But that's a move I didn't see coming."

"Malcolm isn't a chess piece, Raoul." Her voice cut with a sharpness she hadn't intended. "He's a decent man who wants to help a pregnant war victim."

"I know. That's why I should have seen it coming." Raoul settled back against the bench. "What do you want to do?"

"Since when does what any of us wants to do matter? We're trying to win a war." It was the thing she had clung to since Raoul had found her, an angry, bitter fifteen-year-old, scarred inside and out, in a brothel in Léon. Her world had been shattered when she saw her father and sister killed. Raoul had reminded her of the ideals she'd been raised on, restored her to a sense of purpose, given her an outlet for her anger and a direction for her life.

"It has to be part of the equation with a decision like this," he said in a quiet voice.

She spread her fingers in her lap, pressing the creases from her black merino gown. "You can't deny it's an amazing opportunity."

"So you are thinking about it." His voice could only be that neutral with an effort.

She shot a quick look at him. His eyes were even more veiled than usual. "How

could I not? I'd be the wife of a British diplomat. More than that—the wife of a British agent. I'd be part of Wellington's inner circle. The information I could gather—”

“It's not like the sort of masquerade you're used to.” His voice was quiet and steady, the voice that had kept her on an even keel for the past three and a half years. “It's one thing to play a part for a few hours or a few days. This would have no limit.”

“I know.” She tried to visualize it, sharing rooms and meals, entertaining, going about together in society. Making a life, even if it was a life built on lies. “It would be a challenge.”

“And that's part of what appeals to you.”

“No. Oh, all right, yes, that's part of it. You know I can't bear to walk away from a challenge.”

His mouth curved. “Full well. It's been known to get you into trouble.”

“And it's proved extremely useful. Damn it, Raoul, a part of me will always be an actress, and you can't deny it would be the role of a lifetime.”

His gaze flickered over her face, though it still gave nothing away. “And the child?” Again his voice was so stripped of inflection she could hear the tension that underlay it.

Her hand curved over her abdomen. “I'm not going to go off to France as you suggested and be shunted out of the fray. You can't ask me to turn my back on my cause and comrades. You of all people should know what that would mean.”

“I didn't ask it of you. I merely said it was an option. But you have to consider the child's welfare. This would at least ensure you'd both be safe.”

She swallowed, tasting fear and anticipation. “So you're saying you want me to do it?”

“No. There are risks on both sides. But the child has to be part of the equation.”

She looked into his eyes. They could dance round it, they could choose their words with the care of those walking round mines. But they couldn't deny that this child, this accident, this error of judgment, this twist of fate, was both of theirs. Spies weren't supposed to have children. Raoul, a spymaster with an estranged wife in Ireland, was even less suited to fatherhood than Malcolm Rannoch.

“We can't—” she said.

“No,” Raoul agreed. Because of course he wasn't going to turn his back on his cause and comrades, either. The single word sounded unexpectedly rough, like a knife scraped over rock. “I've known Malcolm Rannoch since he was a boy,” he continued after a moment.

Raoul had known Malcolm's parents and grandfather in Ireland. Friendships cut oddly in this world. But it was unlike Raoul to let that interfere. “Are you saying you want me to leave him alone?”

“I'm saying I know he'd be a good father.”

Malcolm Rannoch's gray eyes, at once concerned and cool, danced in her memory. “He'll be gone much of the time.”

“Make no mistake, *querida*.” Raoul's quiet voice turned hard as granite. “You won't be able to do this and remain emotionally detached.”

“Perhaps not. But I'm good at keeping my life in separate boxes. You trained me well.”

“You've crossed paths with British soldiers and diplomats you might encounter if