

Praise for *The Girl from the Hidden Forest*

“From first page to last, Hannah Linder delivers a story both haunting and heart-stirring. *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* is a breathtaking journey steeped in atmospheric suspense and exquisite romance. With prose that flows with a rare poetic beauty and rich details that expertly evoke Regency England, this is a reading experience to treasure. Fans of Julie Klassen and Michelle Griep will be captivated by this standout historical tale.”

—Amanda Barratt, Christy Award-winning author of
Within These Walls of Sorrow and *The Warsaw Sisters*

“Once again, Linder has crafted a beautifully haunting tale, full of prose both elegant and evocative, capturing the essence of the Regency period while delivering a thrilling story. The chemistry between Eliza and the enigmatic Felton Northwood is palpable, and their shared quest for answers only intensifying the bond between them. As the mystery of Eliza’s true identity and the events that shattered her life comes to light, readers are treated to a tale that is as deeply moving as it is suspenseful. *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* is a must-read for fans of gothic Regency romance and historical mysteries.”

—Misty M. Beller, *USA Today* bestselling author of
the Brothers of Sapphire Ranch series

“Simultaneously tender and haunting, Hannah Linder’s *The Girl from the Hidden Forest*, draws you into a Regency world shrouded by danger, mystery, and suspense. Fans of Joanna Davidson Politano and Crystal Caudill will love this book.”

—Amanda Cox, Christy Award winning author of *The Secret Keepers of Old Depot Grocery* and *He Should Have Told the Bees*

“*The Girl from the Hidden Forest* showcases Hannah Linder’s gifts as a rising star in Regency fiction. Romance, suspense, mystery, and history intertwine and immerse you in a Gothic storyworld you won’t want to leave. Well done!”

—Laura Frantz, Christy-Award winner of *The Rose and the Thistle*

“*The Girl from the Hidden Forest* by Hannah Linder is a swashbuckling story of adventure and romance that had me turning pages to find out what happens next. With likeable characters, plenty of action, a romantic setting, and surprising plot twists, this is a story you won’t want to miss.”

—Ann H. Gabhart, bestselling author of *In the Shadow of the River*

“What a captivating novel! *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* kept me enthralled from the first page to the last. Hannah Linder’s expertly woven romantic suspense twisted and flipped all my expectations until the heartily satisfying conclusion. The conflict, motivations, and character growth displayed in this story were all believable and beautifully drawn. I can’t wait to read what this author writes next.”

—Jocelyn Green, Christy-award winning
author of *The Metropolitan Affair*

“With its lush, Regency setting, intriguing mystery, and toe-curling romance, *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* is one of my favorite reads this year. Eliza and Felton’s story left me turning pages far into the night, and Hannah Linder is now one of my favorite go-to authors. *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* is a unique and stunning tale to savor.”

—Tara Johnson, Christy and Carol finalist of *Engraved on the Heart*

“Danger, mystery, and sigh-worthy romance—Hannah Linder delivers all this and more in *The Girl from the Hidden Forrest*. Deftly crafted, it’s page-turner you won’t be able to put down. I highly recommend it.”

—Ane Mulligan, award-winning author of *By the Sweet Gum*

“Hannah Linder weaves a spellbinding tale of danger and romance from the first page of this story. With prose reminiscent of fairy tales of old, Linder’s deft hand will take readers through twists and turns to a satisfying conclusion.”

—Karen Thornell, Regency author of *Edward and Amelia*
and *To Marry an Earl*

“Raised by a kind but haunted man called Captain, Eliza has taken comfort in fairy tales, imaginings, her faithful dog, and the deep forest that isolates them. But eventually, when she is forced back into the real world—the intimidating world of the wealthy ton—Eliza’s persistent childhood nightmares take on life, and memories of something horrible begin to return. Hannah Linder sweeps us into a fairy tale for adults, where dreams and nightmares, imagination, and reality blend and hearts beat fast with unexpected but piercingly sweet first love. Poignant and lyrically beautiful, *The Girl from the Hidden Forest* will keep you mystified until the satisfying end.”

—Denise Weimer, multi-published author of *When Hope Sank*
and *The Scouts of the Georgia Frontier Series*



THE GIRL
FROM THE HIDDEN
FOREST

HANNAH LINDER



Other Books by Hannah Linder

Beneath His Silence
When Tomorrow Came
Garden of the Midnights

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Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



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DEDICATION

*To everyone still living in daydreams.
I hope you find your story.*

A decorative, ornate frame with a scalloped border and intricate scrollwork at the top and bottom. Inside the frame, the words "CHAPTER 1" are written in a bold, serif font, centered between two horizontal lines.

CHAPTER 1

Balfour Forest
Weltworth, Northumberland
May 1812

Something was wrong.

Eliza Ellis tramped down ferns and growth as she hurried for the only place in the world she wanted to be. The only place she knew.

Her short-legged beagle trotted after her, panting as if this were merely another stroll on another late eve.

But it wasn't.

Tonight was different. Captain was different. Would her father still be home when she returned? How many times had he left her already, all in the space of a fortnight, only to come back with the scent of ale on his breath?

He'd never drunk before.

When the stream came in view, flanked on each side by mossy rocks, she claimed the one she'd always dubbed the Lady's Throne. She used to sit here with a scepter made of twigs like a queen from Captain's stories.

What she wouldn't do for one of them now. To be back in her father's arms, young again, nestled where his heartbeat thrummed in her ear.

Instead, she was alone. All she could think of was the way he kept looking at her. As if something had changed—only it hadn't. How could it?

They were safe. They were always safe because they protected themselves. No one could hurt them or frighten them, not if they stayed where the trees were tall and the air was quiet and the world was the woods.

Oh, Captain. What is the matter? She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them close, lulled by the rush of the stream. If she bent near enough, she could leak her tears into the swirling motion and drop her whisper into the blue-tinted waters.

If only they could whisper back.

But they only carried away her sorrow, as they always did, to some foreign place beyond these trees. Captain said if a person followed this stream, sometime or another it would open into an ocean. What must the ocean look like? Endless water, frothy waves, blue meeting blue. Pirate ships and giant white masts and ghosts of fabricated mermaids. Why couldn't she have been a mermaid? She might have danced with the fishes and ridden upon the whales and—

A snap.

Eliza swiveled on her rock and reached for her growling dog. "Merrylad, here." The last thing she needed was her brave little beast raising his hackles against some vicious varmint. "I'll have none of your barking, hear?"

Another snap. Closer.

Merrylad ripped from her hold and woofed. He braced in front of her, as if he had no desire to sprint away and chase down some frightened hare or white-tailed deer, as was usually his pleasure.

A brush of unease fluttered her chest. She scanned the trees as evening shadows wove around them.

Nothing seemed amiss.

Nothing stirred.

Whatever had disturbed the quiet had apparently scampered up a tree trunk or burrowed into the moist needles and ground.

But the flutter increased until her heartbeat turned into hammering. "Come, Merrylad." She stood, brushed the residue of moss

and dirt from her dress—

Something white flashed to her left.

Merrylad yowled.

A face appeared, half hidden behind a pine tree, close enough that unfamiliar eyes met hers.

No, no. She lurched forward, pumped her legs so fast her muscles began to scream. No one was supposed to be here. Not ever. Captain would die if he knew, but it wasn't her fault.

Footsteps pounded behind her, closing in quickly, as fast as the evening darkness.

God, please. The prayer raced. Why was he chasing her?

Faster, faster, but the footfalls were gaining. One or two yards and she'd reach the path. Then the cottage. Then Captain—and he'd know what to do.

"Stop right there." The voice chilled the air, but she didn't listen.

A few more steps.

Almost there.

She threw herself into the old wooden door, Merrylad pushing at her legs, and swung it open. Just as quickly, she forced it shut and locked. "Captain?"

She pivoted, took in the entire room in one swift glance.

Empty.

"Captain?" Panic crawled up her throat, too big to swallow, like a boulder she couldn't breathe past. "Captain!"

The door jarred, followed by a loud kick.

Help me, God. She scooped Merrylad into her arms, flung herself into a corner, and sank to her knees like the frightened maiden in all her books. *Help me, help me, help me.*

Because in the nineteen years she could remember, there'd never been anyone in these woods. No one but her and Captain. Safe and alone. Protected.

Until now.



Felton Northwood winced as his shoulder slammed into the unmovable door. This wasn't going to work. Too sturdy to break down.

And there wasn't time.

The old man was gone for now, but what if he changed his mind? After all, there'd been a bottle in his hand when he nodded his agreement. When he'd stumbled out the cottage door, less than an hour ago, he'd been wiping tears with the back of his sleeve. "Do it quickly."

That's all he'd said.

Felton intended to, if only there was a way inside this infernal cottage. He gave the door one last shove, groaned, then hurried to the window instead.

Near darkness stared back at him. Evening was falling fast. In a few more minutes, these woods would be black—and if the gathering clouds from earlier were any indication, there would be no moon.

Maybe it was better this way. Then he wouldn't have to see her face again.

Not yet.

With his hands on either side of the window, he hiked up his leg and pressed his Hessian boot to the glass. He shoved it through, glass splintering, and waited to make certain a musket rifle wasn't about to fire down on him.

He didn't imagine the young chit he'd found at the stream could handle a gun.

But then again, he never imagined she could run like the wind either.

He kicked out the last shards of glass and climbed through. The room made his skin raise in bumps. This was insanity. He had no right here. Not when the place was still scented with an old man's cheroot and a young girl's dying flowers. . . and the faint, lingering aroma of the last meal they'd shared together.

The last meal they'd ever share.

But he had no time for that now. He'd come, and he was doing what was right. What was right for him. For his family. For their name—or at least what was left of it. But was it right for the girl hovering in the corner?

With every step he approached, her breathing grew faster. The dog growled. Their outlines became more distinct in the shadows, until he could make out her eyes for the second time today.

"I am not here to hurt you, so there is no need to be afraid."

She didn't answer.

"But I am taking you out of here. It can be as easy or hard as you wish to make it." He took one more step, reached for her—

The dog sprang forward and seized his hand with vicious teeth. Pain flared.

Deeper, deeper, until his fingers were wet with blood, even as he pried the animal off him. He combated the dog's second attack with his foot. One kick, then two until—

"Stop it!" The girl arose from her shadowed corner and snapped her fingers. "Merrylad, down."

Whimpering, the dog scuttled behind her.

Then she faced him, shorter than he'd realized in the woods, with hair that draped well beyond her elbows. She said nothing. Only waited.

More than ever, he didn't want to touch her or frighten her.

But he had no choice.

With his bleeding hand curled at his chest, he grabbed her forearm with the other. "Leave the dog here. We haven't room for him. I've a horse tethered out—"

She drove her foot into his shin. Twice. Then she twisted, her fingers groping for his face—but he never let go.

Instead, he jerked her into his arms and darted for the door. He fumbled with the latch as her nails clawed at his cheek, as the dog charged again and seized his ankle.

Fierce fighters, these two.

Something else he hadn't expected.

He threw the animal off and raced outside as the girl kicked and pounded him with her fists. He swung her onto his saddle.

Only then, when he'd climbed behind her and spurred the horse away from the cottage, did her shoulders finally cave. The dog's barking faded in the distance. One small, stifled sob escaped into the night air. A bothersome sound.

If anything less was at stake, he would take her back.

As it was, he had no choice.



No, no, no. This couldn't happen. *Captain, no.*

She was lost in another nightmare. Deep blackness, coldness, the need to run but the inability to move her legs.

She was trapped.

Again.

Only this time, it was real. Captain wasn't next to her, framing her cheeks with both of his wrinkled hands. "Hush, love. Ye're only dreaming again, see?"

How quickly the terror always dissipated under his warmth. The strange things would go away, the shadowed faces, the leering voices—half human, half beast. She would escape the suffocating devils of her dreams.

But there was no escaping this.

Because a devil had her in his arms, trapped against his chest, with his bloody hand the only thing she could fix her eyes on. She didn't dare look up. Not even when the veil of blackness lifted, when the first shafts of morning came darting between the trees.

Please, please. Soon the trotting horse would reach the edge. The boundary she'd never crossed. The line between everything she knew and everything she didn't. Why couldn't she move? Why couldn't she fight her way free?

She'd done it a hundred times. How often had she been kidnapped by villains and ruffians and desperate madmen? There was always fog,

screams, and that one quick moment when she triumphed against her oppressor and broke free.

Nausea swirled in her stomach. Captain was right. She pretended too much, and what good had it done her?

She was weak. She could no more break free than she could bring to life Captain's tales.

"You don't remember me, do you?" His words jarred the silence. How strange, hearing a voice she'd never heard before. "But then again, I cannot own to remembering much of you either."

Remember her?

She'd never seen him before in her life. How could she have? For as long as she'd known, there had only been the cottage. The trees. The stream. Sometimes she had other memories, things she didn't understand, but they were more story—or nightmare—than anything else.

"We shall talk when we reach Weltworth."

As if talk could make sense of this. As if anything the blackguard had to say might stop her terror and bring her home again. How far did he think he could take her before Captain caught up with them? Didn't he know he'd never get away with this? That she'd flee, one way or another, the second his back was—

"You'll do well not to seek escape." As if he sensed her thoughts. "We've many a village ahead of us, and unless you should like to sleep on the ground between here and Monbury Manor, I suggest you be sensible."

"Let me go."

No answer.

"Please." Bile edged up her throat. "Please, I beg of you."

Again, nothing. He urged the horse faster and flexed his wounded hand until the dry blood cracked. "You named the dog?"

What?

"Well, did you?"

"Yes."

"Fine name. Teach him to fight too, did you?"

She lifted her gaze. The trees were thinning. The wild shrubs were fewer. In the distance, open countryside appeared like foggy brushstrokes of an unfinished painting.

“The road is up ahead.”

Captain would die. Maybe she would too.

“A few minutes more and we shall be on our way to Weltworth.”

Then her beloved forest would be gone.



He should have thought this through. He should have waited for Lord Gillingham to make up his own mind, weigh the consequences, and make the decision himself. But what if the viscount had decided against sending for her? Where did that leave Felton—and his family?

Exactly where they'd been for the last fourteen years, that's where. That was no place Felton intended to stay. For anyone's sake.

The hours stretched by in silence, the only noise the clomp of his horse's hooves and the loud warbles of unseen wrens. But the girl?

Not a sound.

He'd expected tears or questions or demands for freedom, at the very least.

But she just sat there, trapped in his arms, as still as the Grecian statues outside Lord Gillingham's manor. She was her father's daughter, truly.

He just didn't know how to tell her.

The road wound onward through quiet Northumberland countryside, paralleled by stone fences, without sight or sound of another horse or carriage. A few more miles and they'd reach the village of Weltworth. Then what?

He didn't know. He needed to think. Mayhap it was foolish to take her there, to think that she wouldn't enlist the help of villagers and try for an escape. But what of his food supply? By tomorrow, they'd be out of provisions. Besides that, his hand needed a sight more than mere water and bandages. How much longer could he

handle the reins with this swelling?

Oh well.

The devil with his hand.

The risk was too great and he had no intention of losing her now, not after fourteen years of needing her to wash the blood and dirt from his family name. Had she any idea what her absence had cost him? All of them?

When Weltworth was long behind them and the widening road grew dim in the dusk, he turned his horse into a dense patch of trees. He pulled her from the saddle. "We shall camp here for the night."

No protest. Not even the slightest indication she'd heard him.

He tethered his horse to a sycamore, unfastened his saddlebag, and went to work with his tinderbox. Gads, but he was hungry. Although he'd eaten half a loaf during their ride—of which she'd refused even a bite—his stomach churned for something more substantial.

Unfortunately, it was looking like the rest of that loaf would have to suffice. At least until he could trust her in a village.

"Hungry?"

Again, she gave no reaction.

He snapped a couple more twigs, blew until the small flame enlarged, and sprinkled in a few dry leaves. "Well, I am. Sit down with you."

Without a word, she lowered herself to the ground on the other side of the fire.

For the first time, he had a chance to look at her. To *really* look at her. To see the eyes, gray and doe-like, blinking so fast he suspected tears. Her hair was much the same as it had been before—dark blond, gleaming—only without the perfect ringlets of her childhood years.

And her mouth. He saw Lord Gillingham in the grim line, but he saw her mother in the trembling corners. Beautiful, this creature. Even as she was, in the stained cotton gown and brown pinafore, as plain as the forest he'd stolen her from. Had she been hidden out there all these years? Alone with that mongrel of a man?

He cleared his throat and looked away. If he were better at words,

this wouldn't be so difficult—and explaining the truth would already be behind him.

But he wasn't.

And heaven help him, but he didn't know how to say anything or how to soften the blow or how to ruin her life in a way that wouldn't hurt so much.

He grabbed the loaf of bread from his bag. "I am taking you to Monbury Manor, a three-day ride from here." Peeling away the linen one corner at a time, he focused on his meal instead of the woman across from him. "To meet your father, Lord Gillingham."

Silence.

He took a couple of bites, chewed long, swallowed hard. Then, folding the bread back into the linen, he added, "Eat the rest of this, for I shall not have you making yourself ill—"

"My father is Captain Jasper Ellis."

"I'm afraid not. No one is quite certain who, in truth, your Captain Ellis is."

"He knew this would happen."

"What?"

"All these years. . . he knew. He warned me. He expected someone would come looking for him, but it wasn't his fault."

"What wasn't?"

"The mutiny. The shipwreck. The loss of cargo and—"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He pushed to his feet. "This has nothing to do with Ellis' success or failure on the sea—or anything else he's told you all these years."

A pallor stole the pink from her cheeks.

"It has to do with you. And you alone."



Nothing made sense. He had no right to lie to her this way, to tell her things untrue, to pretend Captain was anything but what he'd always promised he was.

Her father.

The man she needed, the man she loved, the man she cried to when the nightmares grew so devilish she couldn't bear them. How could he be anything less than her own flesh and blood?

He had her heart. She had his. They depended on each other because they had no one else and the rest of the world had forsaken them. Captain said so.

She believed him.

From across the fire, in the flickering orange glow, the young stranger unwound his makeshift bandage. Pink, swollen knuckles. Bloody teeth marks. Merrylad had never hurt anyone in his life until yesterday.

She hadn't either.

But she wanted to hurt this man. She wanted to say something, do something, that would force him to set her free. How could this happen to her? What would she do? What if Captain never came and she was dragged to this Monbury Manor and—

"I suppose you are quite proud of this." His voice was not unkind, but the smile curving his lips seemed more sardonic than anything else. He retied the knot on his bandage. "But then again, it is not as if you asked to be kidnapped, I suppose."

"Why did my father not come?"

"What?"

"If this lord you speak of is truly my father, why has he not come for me himself?"

"He could not find you."

"Then how have you?"

He pulled off his navy tailcoat, shook off the dust, and walked around the fire's edge. Then he stood above her. Held her eyes. Outstretched the coat. "The night grows cold. Put it on."

She told herself to deny the coat. Or anything else he said or offered or touched.

But in the end, she pulled the heavy tailcoat around her shoulders and wished to heaven it could scare away the chill inside her soul.

If only she were back at the Lady's Throne. Or falling back into the pages of a book. Or stirring the steaming kettle at the cottage's stone hearth, with Merrylad at her feet and the branch outside tapping the window.

She didn't want to cry. She wouldn't. Captain wouldn't want her to. But even though she crammed her eyes shut, tears pushed past her eyelids.

"Goodnight, Miss Gillingham."

Her chest ached with the hurt and confusion those words inflicted. Because it almost seemed as if she'd heard the words before.



A noise, faint and quiet. One he shouldn't have noticed—probably wouldn't have—if the pain in his hand had not kept him in and out of sleep.

Felton sat upright. He must have been out for longer than he realized, because last time he was awake, the fire was still burning and crackling. Now it was only embers.

He couldn't see a thing.

Again, a rustling sound stabbed the silence. Like footsteps or—

His horse snorted, then the animal broke into a gallop and shot past him in the darkness.

Felton scrambled to his feet. "Stop!" Blast her, the little vixen. He groped for his flintlock pistol and darted after her. "Stop!"

She was too far ahead of him. He'd never catch her, and she'd never hear him.

He aimed upward, fired.

The gunshot boomed across the quiet trees, leaving the scent of gunpowder swirling around his face and watering his eyes.

Another snort, this time louder, followed by the stampede of hooves on ground.

And a scream.

Felton sprinted into the blackness. If anything happened to her,

if she'd fallen, there would be no redeeming himself. Or his father. The whispers and speculations would only be worse until—

He spotted movement in the corner of his eye. A hobbling shadow.

With a new burst of speed, he sprang in her direction, whacked through a dead bush, and gained on her within seconds. Breathing hard, he caught her elbow and swung her against him.

She gasped at the impact. "Let me go." Pounded at him with her fists. "Let me go. Let me go. Let me go—"

"I have no intention of doing anything, Miss Gillingham, aside from bringing you to Monbury Manor."

"I won't go."

"You haven't a choice."

"I'll run away."

"I care very little what you do, so long as you stay long enough to meet my one demand." He circled her wrist and yanked her back toward the smoldering ashes of camp. "But we have no time for that now. Our main dilemma, at hand, is how we intend to get anywhere without a horse. You might have at least handled the reins instead of letting him throw you."

"Twas your gunshot that frightened the—"

"Are you hurt?"

A pause, then a quiet, "No."

"Well, you deserve to be. Now go put on my tailcoat and sit over there. If I cannot find the deuced animal in the next hour, you might as well prepare yourself for a long journey ahead. The next village is not for another four and twenty miles."

She said nothing in return, as seemed to be her way, and Felton marched back into the wooded darkness. The cool night air pushed away some of the tension in his gut. That had been too close. This whole thing was. . . ludicrous. If anyone knew what he was doing, Lord Gillingham included, they would have his neck.

Well, they would find out soon enough, and any repercussion would be no price at all.

Because Eliza Gillingham knew what no one else in the world did.

She knew what happened that night, those fourteen long, wretched years ago. She knew how to clear his father's name from the filthy stench of murder.

And she was going to do just that, whether she liked it or not. Because he'd been living in shame long enough. They all had.



Eliza kept her pace with the fast, longer strides of the stranger who had yet to impart his name. Not that she wanted to know. She didn't. She would rather think back through Captain's stories, choose the most odious character, and call him as such.

Nonsense, that.

But it was easier to think of stories—ones with familiar, happy endings—than the unknown of her true life. What was her true life anyway? Who was she?

Not that she doubted Captain.

Never.

But there was something. . . a niggling sensation every time this stranger spoke certain words. Like *Lord Gillingham*. And *Monbury Manor*.

And *Miss Gillingham*.

"I should have taken my chance with you at Weltworth." From beside her, the man swept a sheen of sweat from his forehead. "At this rate, we shan't be in Poortsmoor until dark."

The walking bore no effect on her. After all, she'd been running and ambling through Balfour Forest for as long as she could remember—and despite the slight throb in her ankle, this was no different.

But the hunger pains, which had been cramping her stomach since daylight, grew more intense with each step. Why hadn't she taken the bread when he'd offered it last night?

"You favor your left foot."

"It is nothing."

“Even so, we shall have a doctor take a look when we reach Poortsmoor. I’ll not be presenting you to your father injured.”

“He is not my father.”

“For his sake, I wish you would not say that.” He massaged his bandaged hand. “At least not to his face.”

What was she supposed to say?

“As for this captain you are so fond of, suppose you answer a few questions for me.”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

“Because I am true to him, despite the things you tell me.”

“Very noble of you, Miss Gillingham, but terribly naive. Have you ever considered he might be the one who. . .” The words trailed off.

A dull ring of alarm went off inside her chest. “Who what?”

“How much do you know of your mother?”

“Only that she died shortly after Captain returned from sea. There was no work for him after the clipper went down. Not after his own crew deserted him and the cargo of spices from Northeastern India was lost.”

“So he took you to the forest.”

“Yes.”

“To live alone.”

“Yes.”

“You were lonely?”

Lonely? Yes, she’d been lonely. She’d lain awake at night, dreaming of faces, and she’d sat by the stream wishing it could talk back to her. How many times had she devoured the books Captain brought home for her? Or pored over a new edition of *La Belle Assemblée* and imagined herself among the illustrations? Or wandered away into the forest, pretended the trees were friends, and told herself she was entering a ballroom instead of more woods?

But she’d been happy in the forest.

Restless sometimes. Maybe even a bit curious and sad some days—but always happy, because Captain was everything she needed

and they had no fear of the cruel world without.

The stranger's eyes were upon her, studying her.

Heat crept along her cheeks. She didn't look away, though. Not this time. Instead, she kept her head up and stared back into the deep green eyes.

He looked nothing like the rogues from Captain's stories. Not with his wind-tousled blond hair. His cleft chin. His strong face, strong jaw. Why did he seem almost approachable? Half boy, somehow, even though he was very much a man?

"You look at me very strangely, Miss Gillingham."

She looked away.

"Remember me now?"

No, she didn't. She'd never remember him, and she didn't want to. All she needed was to find a way to escape, to make it back to Balfour Forest and the cottage and Captain and Merrylad and—

"Someone's coming." He snatched her arm before she had a chance to react. "Say one word or make one wrong move, and I shall see you regret it."

"I cannot see that I have anything to lose."

"How about your captain's life?"

Her heartbeat sped faster as he pulled her closer to the center of the road—just seconds before a six-horse mail coach came in sight.

The dusty coachman jerked on the reins, his whip flurrying in the air, as if he weren't quite certain what to do with himself. "What the deuce, fellow!" When the horses halted, he ripped off his continental hat and cursed. "Get out of the bloomin' way 'fore I run the both of you down. I've a schedule to keep, I 'ave, and there be no time for dallying."

"We've no time for it either, good man. How about a ride?"

"Not a chance. Full of passengers already, we be. Now get a move on—"

"Up top then. And think not that we shan't pay either. There's fifty pence for you if you let us on. Besides that, is it not your Christian

duty to aid a young man and his bride who have met with mishap on their honeymoon?"

Eliza's jaw slackened as his arm fell around her shoulder.

The coachman uttered another oath. "Bloody fools. On with you then—and mind you don't be losin' the mail."

No sooner had they climbed to the top of the luggage and mail than did the coach lurch back into motion, dust rising in their wake.

"You did well, Miss Gillingham." With his hand clinging to hers, as if in fear she might fall, her kidnapper's lips spread with a grin. "And I'm certain you can forgive the small lie. Matters of romance seem to soften even the most disagreeable of sorts."

"It was terrible to say." Her whisper was almost lost in the roar of the wind and wheels. "And what you said of Captain—"

"I meant every word of it." The grin was gone. His grip now intense. "I am taking you to Monbury Manor and will do most anything to ensure that happens. Whether you want to go or not matters little to me. Your captain means even less. Is that clear?"

Tears climbed her throat.

When she didn't answer, he took his gaze elsewhere, his brows lowered, as if as much fear and burden were weighing down his own thoughts. What was he talking about? What was happening—or *had* happened?

And in the name of heaven, what did it have to do with her?



Poortsmoor was the sort of place Felton had visited once and counted as too many times. The timber-framed buildings were sooty and sagging. The air carried pungent smells of dead fish and brine. Even the villagers, as they moped about the street in approaching dusk, seemed haggard and woebegone.

But Eliza Gillingham stared as if they had just entered Grosvenor Square. Her gaze roamed from one side of the street to the other. Then up. Then down. Then back and forth again, as if she'd never seen

such a place in her life. Had she really never been out of those woods?

“To the apothecary first.” He took her elbow. “Then we shall find lodgings and something to eat.” If she didn’t take the food he offered this time, he’d force it down her throat himself. Last thing he needed was the girl fainting of her stubborn hunger.

He could be just as stubborn, though.

She’d eat.

From the middle rungs of a ladder, a scruffy lamplighter doffed his hat. “Jolly evenin’ to ye, me lady.” Slurred. “Won’t ye be so kind as to blow a poor lonesome chap a kiss?”

Her only answer was to draw closer to Felton’s side as they continued past the oil streetlamp.

“Well, a pox on you then, woman. Just because ye got a neck-or-nothing young blood of the Fancy walkin’ the street with you don’t mean ye can’t speak to those of yer own station.”

Felton backtracked until he stood beneath the lamplighter. With his eyes meeting the man’s glassy ones, he seized the ladder. “I’ve smashed in more faces than you’ve lit lamps, sir, and would have no qualms in drawing the cork of a drunk man.” To add realism to his threat, he jerked the ladder until the man wobbled and cursed. “Now if you’ve a mind to say more, climb down and do so man-to-man, eh?”

Blubbering, the fellow clambered higher up his ladder and, with shaky hands, resumed lighting the oil lamp.

Any other day, Felton would have hauled him down and forced fisticuffs. He’d done more for less, after all, in his own village. How many times had he left Lodnouth with bloody knuckles or a leaking nose?

“Disgraceful.” His mother always looked at him the same way, with sad eyes and sallow cheeks pulled in a frown. “Disgraceful, my son, that you should go to the village and deign yourself to fisticuffs with mere servants and fishermen.”

In younger years, he’d defended himself. He’d explained all the things they’d said against his family. The insults. Insinuations. The filthy rumors that clung to his name and suffocated any pride he might