

CHAPTER ONE

Saint Mary's of Bethlehem Hospital ("Bedlam"), London, England, 1703

"I am sane."

The sound of her own voice anchored her. It kept her from going mad. "I am eight and ten. I am called Rachael Penrose. I have been here nine days. My brother was called James—" She stifled a sob. "My brother *is* called James." Even the tinctures they fed her did not dull the pain of not knowing the fate of her baby brother.

She froze when she heard the scratch of claws on stone. A rat, attracted by crumbs of moldy bread, began a stealthy approach. She shared her meager rations with the rats because they displayed less interest in her when their bellies were full.

There had been no hearing and no formal declaration of insanity. An exchange of gold from one greedy hand to another had sealed her in this place. With no blanket, she shivered in the bitter cold. Beneath the thin shift she wore, faint and fresh bruises mottled her skin. Her stomach rumbled, the sound loud in the quiet of the small chamber.

She tensed as metal creaked. The door to her cell swung open. Freezing air rushed in, and she trembled as the strong scent of citrus cologne, a harbinger of her uncle, mingled with the foul, musty odor of the cell.

Victor Brightmore handed a gold coin to the guard accompanying him. "Her doctor and I require privacy." Victor lifted the hem of his cloak to prevent it from sweeping the floor of the filthy cell as he entered.

The attendant checked the chain securing her right leg to the straw-filled pallet upon which she lay. He tested the iron ring riveted around her neck and the circular iron waist bar holding her arms pinioned to her sides. She suppressed a shudder when his hands lingered over her breasts and followed the double link to its point of origin at the wall. Powerless against the intimacy, she gritted her teeth and stared at the gray stone ceiling above her. Apparently satisfied with the security of her restraints, the attendant withdrew, leaving Victor and the doctor alone with her.

Rachael remained silent while Victor angled the shaft of the candle he held until the flickering yellow light illuminated her face then leaned toward her, his blue-gray eyes glittering with malice. She looked into the face of pure evil. Tall, with burnished gold hair and even features, his pleasing exterior concealed his twisted nature. As he watched her, shadows played over the upward cast of his lips.

“You cling to life with such tenacity, Rachael.”

He moved the flame along the length of her jaw inch by agonizing inch, stopping near her eye. The light from the candle was painfully bright, and her breath quickened as she struggled to hide her terror.

Oh, God, is he going to blind me? Gasping, she shrank from him, but the linkage of chain held fast. She was at the mercy of a man who had none. How she despised him!

“Victor!” The candle wobbled on its perch as his companion jerked it away from her face. “How would I account for burns on her body?”

“Her eyes mock me, Elliot.” He peered down at her, scowling.

“She is feverish,” Elliot said. “She is in the grip of the drug. We can speak freely.”

“It appears I have need of your help once again, good doctor. Keeping my niece isolated

is not the permanent solution I seek.”

It did not bode well that he spoke so openly in front of her. With both her parents dead, once Victor succeeded in his plan to dispose of her, there would be no one left to protect James. Victor was desperate to inherit, but he was also crafty and cautious. He would not risk the hangman.

Elliot peered down at her. “Perhaps her food might be—”

“The attendant told me she tests her food on the rats. Besides, we dare not risk poison now.”

“I can keep her indefinitely,” Elliot said. “Her whereabouts are unknown. No one here will believe anything she says.”

“Tarry Morgan knows the truth.” Victor searched within the folds of his cloak. His hand shook as he withdrew a letter. The edges of the parchment gaped where the wax seal had been broken.

Her heart sank at the sight, and she felt light-headed with despair.

“This letter details her discovery of my plan to poison James. She sent it to Morgan, one of the few allies she has left. She must have dashed it off before we brought her here.” Victor glowered in Rachael’s direction. “The fact that James must die before I will inherit is clear motive to anyone who would investigate.”

“So, is Morgan dead?”

Rachael stopped breathing while she waited for Victor’s response.

“No. His servants were rousing; I barely escaped with the letter. I was only able to wound him.”

“Can you buy his silence?”

“Morgan cannot be bought.” Victor crumpled the letter in his hand and began to pace the floor. “He is her loyal little lapdog. He remains silent because I have taken the proof and threatened Rachael’s life. He has delusions he will rescue her, but he won’t remain silent for long. We must dispose of them both.”

The weight of her terror squeezed the air from Rachael’s lungs. She would never forgive herself if she brought harm to her childhood friend.

“And what about her brother?”

“My nephew is sickly,” Victor said. “His nanny has often commented on his frailty. With your help, I’ll be rich. When I am rich, I will be generous.”

“Monster!” Rachael sobbed. She screamed in outrage and struggled against the restraints. The tortured souls in the adjacent cells heard her and added their voices to hers. Hearing them, she fell silent. *Screams of torment are routine in this place. I’m just another Bess O’ Bedlam. No help will come.*

Victor spun to face Elliot. “‘Senseless,’ you promised. ‘Incoherent.’ ‘Her mind will be incapable of coping with her surroundings.’”

“Having her wits about her in this place is an added torment, not an advantage,” Elliot said. “We will dose her with laudanum to keep her quiet, and she will be released into your custody.”

“Released? You seem a likely candidate for a strait-waistcoat yourself.”

“Victor,” Elliot said patiently, “we must remove Rachael from Bedlam. Morgan is searching for her, and he has the resources to find her. I will have her transferred to Bethnal Green.”

“She will be no less dangerous to me in a private asylum.”

“She will never *reach* Bethnal Green,” Elliot said. “You, of course, must appear distraught over your loss.”

Rachael locked gazes with Victor, who nodded vigorously. His smile told her time was running out.

“Doctor, I believe you have arrangements to make on my behalf.” He leaned down to Rachael and added, “While I joyously prepare to grieve.”

###

Rachael lay still. The doctor had left the cell, but she sensed Victor’s malevolent presence and steeled herself at the sound of his approach. Her nerve endings drew taut with anxiety.

Without warning, he seized her jaw in a brutal grip with one hand while, with the thumb and forefinger of the other, he pinched her nose, blocking the flow of air through her nostrils. When she opened her mouth to gasp for air, cold fluid slid over her tongue and down her throat. Choking on the bitter stuff, she swallowed convulsively.

“Good girl,” Victor intoned, patting her head. “I didn’t dilute the drug with water; you’ll soon be *dead* to the world.” His fingers gathered in the locks of her hair, smoothing them, and she jerked at his touch. Rachael opened her mouth and spit out what little of the fluid she had not managed to swallow, and the irons tinkled faintly.

“What a selfish chit you are, Rachael. I had no wish to harm Tarry, but your letter has left me with no choice. James’s death must appear a common cot death. I cannot leave anyone alive who will claim otherwise.”

Rachael looked up at him, willing him to see hatred on her face instead of fear. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing she was afraid.

“Oh, still hoping for rescue?” he taunted. “Pining for the fresh air and blue skies of Cornwall, are we?” His eyes held no warmth, but his mouth formed a languid smile. “It will be easier if you accept your fate. A far worse one awaits you outside these walls. I’ve spread the rumor among your neighbors that you are the Customs informer who exposed their smuggling operations. You cannot go home.”

Rachael’s breathing slowed, and she blinked, fighting the effects of the drug. Her ears rang, and a foul taste coated her tongue. Had he deliberately given her enough of the drug to kill her? The thought brought suffocating terror as she struggled to focus on his words. If she died, she would fail James. Victor would win.

He inspected the ornate signet ring he wore. “The informer also caused the ship and goods of Sebastián Falconer, a French smuggler, to be seized by Customs. Meeting up with him in his present mood would result in a worse fate than even I could arrange for you.”

“—James?” Her own voice sounded far away. Her mouth felt as if it had been filled with wool.

“Have no fear; your brother will join you in heaven soon enough.”

She mumbled, and when he leaned down to hear her words, she spat on him, the stream of saliva hitting him squarely in the face. Victor stepped back with an oath, shaking with rage.

“I will allow you that,” Victor ground out as he mopped his face with a silk handkerchief. “I have the intense satisfaction of knowing you will soon be dead.” He yelled and pounded on the cell door, and the face of an attendant immediately appeared. “Where is the usual turnkey?” Victor demanded.

“He’s well into his cups by now,” the young man replied in a bored tone. “I can turn a key same as any man.”

When the attendant stepped back, Victor brushed past him. The staccato rap of boots filled her ears, then faded. The attendant had not moved to follow Victor out of the cell. *Why?* Rachael tensed, her heart pounding.

Groaning, she felt the urge to retch as her stomach suddenly rebelled against the strong drug. The need to purge the contents was bad enough; now she had the added worry of why the attendant had remained.

“Rachael Penrose?”

He stepped forward with a rusty ring of keys in his hand. Placing a lantern on the stone floor, he hastily unlocked the fetters holding her.

“I’m a friend of Tarry’s,” he said as he eased her into a sitting position. “My name is John Wyatt. We’ve not long before the rightful owner of these keys comes looking for them. I have a carriage waiting at Bedlam Gate.”

The shackles fell away. Rachael winced, rubbing where the irons had chafed and bruised her flesh.

“Come, we must get you out of this place,” John urged.

A wave of dizziness swept over Rachael, and she swayed. She could not lift her head without feeling as if she were under water. Shadows in the room shifted like specters; the floor seemed to be moving as well.

“You’re strong, Miss Penrose, or you would not have survived this hellish place.”

Rachael felt his arm around her waist, felt him lift her to her feet.

The door to her narrow cell seemed miles away and Bedlam Gate even farther. But for the first time in days hope had eclipsed endless terror.

Warn Tarry. Save James.

###

The welcome lights of a coaching inn limned the black horizon. John urged the horses forward, desperate to elude the men following. He'd been a fool to believe he'd whisk Rachael through the gates of Bedlam without being observed by one of Brightmore's minions. The evidence of his folly took the form of the two riders who trailed them on the deserted road. Inside the carriage, Rachael huddled in a corner, unresponsive.

John was the stable master's son on the Morgan estate. He had witnessed Victor's attack on Tarry and the theft of the letter. Morgan had asked him to follow his assailant, hoping the man might lead him to Rachael. The thought of his own young wife or sister in Rachael's predicament was enough to spur him into action.

The inn was all that stood between them and an encounter with assassins. Located on the main road to London, the busy inn saw the bulk of travelers going to and from the city. At least a dozen carriages were being attended, even at such a late hour.

He guided the horses into the midst of a throng of conveyances, jumped to the ground, and opened the carriage door.

Rachael jolted awake with an inarticulate cry, wide, glassy eyes holding no hint of recognition. She shrank against the wall of the coach and looked around in confusion.

"What have I gotten myself into, Tarry?" John muttered.

At the mention of Tarry's name, Rachael stirred. "Tarry?"

Pity washed over John. Tarry had described Rachael as a striking beauty, but he might not recognize her now. Starvation and maltreatment had etched the delicate bones of her face in sharp relief, her blue eyes were haunted, and her porcelain complexion had a bluish translucency. Dirt and clinging bits of straw matted her long, sun-gold tresses. Her petite form, slender to the

point of thinness, gave her an ethereal appearance.

With a sinking heart, he realized he could not hide Rachael inside a public inn. Not in her condition. He doubted she could manage to walk even a short distance.

“Do you remember me?” he asked. “Tarry sent me.”

She shivered and closed her eyes. “I had a bad dream.”

“That’s two of us,” John mumbled as he doffed his cloak and spread it over her, gently tucking it under her chin.

When he leaned out the carriage window to view the roadway, he saw one of their pursuers dismount and enter the inn. The other man had already begun searching for the carriage among the vehicles assembled outside. John snatched the carriage curtains closed.

“They don’t dare attack us while there are witnesses about,” he said with a bravado he did not feel. The men had only to wait until he became desperate enough to risk the open highway, or until no witnesses remained in the yard.

John leaned across Rachael and swept the curtain on the opposite window aside to view the surrounding carriages, now fewer in number. One fine, lacquered specimen sat parallel to theirs, separated by a few yards.

He threw open the compartment door and hopped down. As he approached the handsome vehicle, he had a brief glimpse of the man and woman inside before the driver slammed the door shut. The woman adjusted the velvet draperies to afford them more privacy.

John removed his tricorne and rapped sharply on the polished surface of the door panel. He waited, and when there was no response, freed the latch and yanked open the door.

With stunning speed, he found himself spun around and pinned with his back against the coach door. He stood face-to-face with a tall, dark-haired stranger whose wide-set, deep green

eyes seemed to miss nothing.

John twisted to look at the woman peering at him from inside the carriage. Her complexion was unnaturally white, with smears of carmine at her cheeks. She eyed him with amusement as he stared in fascination at her heavily drawn eyes and bold red mouth.

“Relax, luv, he’s barely more than a lad,” she said.

His assailant suddenly released him, and John stumbled. The man muttered something in French as he entered the carriage again, and the woman laughed. John thrust his hat against the door latch to prevent it from closing.

“Wait!”

The door exploded outward, and he backed away as the man sprang from the coach, wearing an expression as menacing as the stiletto he held. He thrust the blade outward, forcing John to retreat.

John held up his hands to show he was unarmed and was dismayed to see that they shook. “I meant no offense. I am in need of assistance.”

The man spoke to his companion, and she extended a gloved hand toward John. He smiled wanly and shook his head at the gold coin she offered. The man raised one black brow in inquiry, a look of annoyance crossing his face.

“My sister and I were attacked by highwaymen,” John said. “Our coach was stolen. She is frail, and the experience has taxed her to her limit. We must get to Newbury. We have a friend there, Tarry Morgan.”

“Hire a coach,” the Frenchman snapped. His eyes narrowed when John appeared surprised he spoke English.

“I thought you might allow us to share yours.”

“*Non.*” The response was quick and definite. “I’m on my way north.”

“All the vehicles have been reserved. A coachman allowed my sister to rest in his empty carriage but only temporarily. She is in no condition to sit a horse.” He cleared his throat to squelch the note of desperation in his voice. “I can pay you.”

“How do you know I won’t take your money and slit your throat?”

“You look trustworthy enough.”

A loud cough covered the woman’s amused laugh. The Frenchman pursed his lips as his eyes made a slow arc across the starlit sky.

“The lady offered me charity a moment ago, at your behest, I believe. That is not the action of a killer,” John pointed out. “After our recent experience, I would feel safer if we were not forced to travel alone.”

He could not think of a more suitable guardian for Rachael than the man standing before him. The foreigner had demonstrated wit, quick reflexes, and a charitable nature, no matter that the last quality had been grudgingly revealed.

The Frenchman whispered to his companion, his gaze still on John’s face.

“I say ’tis a guileless face he has,” the woman replied. “They’ll not be sending one Englishman to do what the Court of the Exchequer could not.”

“Anna!” The Frenchman spoke to her again, this time in a language John did not recognize. He slashed his finger across his throat in a brutal pantomime demanding silence.

“Right you are, luv,” she said. “We haven’t seen proof the girl exists yet.” She chuckled when her refusal to speak in any tongue other than English brought a glare from the Frenchman.

“Let me see this sister of yours,” the man demanded.

“Of course. Follow me.”

CHAPTER TWO

John opened the door and lifted Rachael out of the vehicle, taking care to conceal her filthy, ragged clothing and bruised limbs with his cloak. She stirred and moaned.

The Frenchman sheathed his dagger in a single fluid movement, his face inscrutable as he beheld the slender form in John's arms. A slight elevation of his brows and faint pursing of his lips were his only outward reactions.

John was anxious to conceal Rachael within the Frenchman's carriage and stepped forward impulsively to press Rachael into the man's arms. The Frenchman accepted the burden in a move that was nothing more than reflex. The muscle in his angular, shadowed jaw tightened.

"My sister, sir."

The Frenchman drew breath noisily between clenched white teeth. His eyes blazed, and for a moment, John feared the man would fling Rachael to the ground.

Instead, he crossed the distance to his own carriage, booted the gaping door open the rest of the way, and deposited her onto the seat opposite his companion, muttering to himself the entire time.

The Frenchman slammed the door panel shut and rejoined John. "I will take you only as far as Newbury," he said. "Make no mistake, if you cause me any trouble, I *will* leave you both along the roadside."

John nodded. "I must express my thanks to the coachman who allowed my sister to rest in his carriage." *If I put my own coach up for hire, they might follow the decoy.*

"Two minutes." The Frenchman braced a well-shod foot against the carriage board, folded his arms across his chest, and scanned the surrounding area while he waited.

John rounded the corner in search of the coach master and almost collided with one of Victor's men. The man shouted to his accomplice, quashing John's hope he had not been recognized, and he sprinted away from them, reckless with terror. He would have to act as the decoy. There was no other choice.

John climbed onto the coach box and urged the horses forward with a yell, attracting the Frenchman's attention. The man's relaxed posture became ramrod-stiff with suspicion as John gave every indication of preparing to flee.

"*Où allez-vous?*" the Frenchman shouted. "Where are you going?"

John pulled the coach alongside the Frenchman. "Take her to Newbury, and ask for Tarry Morgan. Tell him John Wyatt sent you. You will be paid." He shook the reins free of the Frenchman's attempt to snatch them and urged the team forward.

###

Sebastián Falconer entered the carriage, meeting Anna's bewildered look with a scowl. Drawing aside the velvet curtain, he glimpsed a rider falling out of the shadows in furious pursuit of the coach driven by Wyatt.

He dropped the curtain back into place before turning his attention to the girl asleep on the seat opposite him and sat brooding for a moment before calling the destination of Newbury to his driver.

"Something is wrong," he said. "I'd leave her with the innkeeper, but this is not the

opportune time or place to call attention to myself. We will be paid to take her to Newbury.”

Anna uttered an unladylike grunt. “That’s a comfort, right, luv? With you bein’ so *needy*.” She leaned in his direction and slid her hand over the taut muscles of his forearm, but he shifted on the seat and brushed her hand away.

The coach lurched forward, and Sebastián scrambled to catch the girl before she slid to the carriage floor. He moved to the opposite seat, braced himself against the sidewall of the coach, and with an inaudible oath drew the slumbering girl into his lap, enfolding her in his arms in an effort to hold her steady on the seat.

His nose wrinkled in distaste. She was filthy, and if he’d had a bottle of cologne in his possession, he would have doused her with it. He scowled and squirmed beneath the dead weight of the sleeping girl while his companion fanned the air and laughed at the pained expression on his face.

She shifted without awakening and nestled her head against his shoulder, half-burying her face in the soft fabric of his coat. Sebastián lifted his head and turned his face away.

“I should have left her with the innkeeper.”

“Afraid you’ll ruin your reputation?” Anna chided softly. “Pirate turned nursemaid?”

“Privateer,” he amended curtly. “Pirates are criminals. A pirate would not be chivalrous, nor would he find himself in such a ridiculous situation.”

He stared down at the blond head pressed into the crook of his shoulder. What had happened to the young man and his sister on the roadway? Why were they being followed? By whom? The girl was not merely traumatized and covered with road grime; she was either ill or drugged, or both. She bore no odor of alcohol.

Annoyed that he had been moved to pity, Sebastián reminded himself that a young

female informant like the girl he now coddled in his lap had already cost him a great deal and might yet cost him his life. Rumor had it Rachael Penrose was somewhere in London, and he intended to flush the fox out of her hiding place. It was the reason he was on the coaching road to London in the middle of the night instead of crossing the channel to safety in France.

“How far is Newbury?” he asked.

“Why? Have you more urgent business than putting Land’s End behind you?”

“*Oui*,” he replied stiffly. “My ship and cargo are forfeit; my men are dead or jailed. I shall not leave England until I have had my revenge upon Rachael Penrose, the English bitch responsible.”

“If her ladyship is wise, she’ll have gone into hiding, Sebastián.”

“No matter. She cannot hide from me.” To remain in England was the same as thumbing his nose at the hangman, but finding the woman responsible for the misfortune of so many had become an obsession.

The girl moaned and huddled closer against him, one hand clutching his collar in a death grip. Distracted from his thoughts, he smoothed the hair back from her brow, and frowned when his fingers touched moist, heated skin. If his luck held true, she probably carried the plague.

He lowered his arm and leaned his head against the upholstery. “I should have left her with the innkeeper,” he said again.

“Aye, you should be safely in France by now, instead of tending some English girl.”

His hand closed over the girl’s small, fragile hand and tugged, but he could not dislodge her grip from his collar.

“Ah, the English,” Sebastián muttered under his breath. “Damn them all.”

###

Tarry Morgan responded to the pounding on his front door by grabbing a lamp from the desktop in his study and dashing down the stairs. Startled servants scurried out of his path.

“John!” he exclaimed as he threw open the front door. “I’ve been expecting—”

He froze. It was not John Wyatt at his door, but a tall, scowling, dark-haired stranger. The stranger’s gaze lingered on the blood-soaked bandage wound around Tarry’s forearm, who silently noted the expensive cut of his visitor’s clothing and the handsome coach resting in the oval driveway.

“*Monsieur Morgan?*” the man inquired. His fingers rested on the hilt of the dagger strapped to his thigh.

“So, Victor found a French assassin to do his killing for him.”

The man’s eyes narrowed to slits. “If I had made the journey to kill you, you would be dead.” He indicated Tarry’s bloodied arm with a slight inclination of his head. “If you wish to see more of your blood spilled, I can oblige.”

Tarry winced as he shifted his injured arm and cradled it against his chest. “If bloodshed is not your intention . . . what, then?”

“To discharge my duty and be on my way.”

“Your duty?”

“*Oui,*” the Frenchman said. “A delivery.” He turned and moved in the direction of the coach.

Curious and cautious, Tarry trailed the tall foreigner, hanging back when the man opened the door and leaned into the carriage. Tarry shouted in surprise when he glimpsed the occupant then ran forward and roughly elbowed the Frenchman aside.

Entering the coach, Tarry used his good arm to gently ease Rachael upright against the

upholstered seat. Her head lolled, giving her the look of a broken doll. He pressed her cheek to his own, rocking her and smoothing his hand over her hair, struggling not to weep in the presence of the impassive stranger.

“So you do know her.” The Frenchman nodded, his expression guarded. “*Bon.*”

Tarry lifted his head and peered beyond Rachael into the dim interior of the coach, where he spied a woman whose face glowed eerily white with paint. The luminous effect of the cosmetic transformed her skin into a shining beacon that glowed with reflected light. When she bobbed her head to acknowledge him, the sight was unsettling.

“Where is John?” Tarry asked Rachael. “What became of John?”

Rachael closed her eyes and moaned, as if in pain. “Victor has James.” Her teeth chattered.

“There is little we can do about that at the moment, sweetheart,” he said. “What of Wyatt? Did John escape?”

His words propelled the Frenchman in his direction, and Tarry stole an uneasy glance at the man when the Frenchman’s hand drifted toward his weapon.

“Did the girl’s husband not precede us here?” the Frenchman asked.

Tarry avoided his gaze. What story had John told in his desperation to see Rachael to safety?

“Answer me!” the Frenchman demanded.

“Perhaps he was delayed,” Tarry suggested.

His answer did not have the calming effect he had expected. The Frenchman drew himself to his considerable height, stance rigid, eyes gleaming with anger.

“The man claimed to be her *brother*, not her *husband*,” he informed Tarry. “But you are

agreeable to any tale, *n'est ce pas?*”

He drew his weapon in a flash of steel and motioned Tarry out of the vehicle then crooked his head at the carriage behind him.

“Shall I guess, *monsieur*? I would say the young *mademoiselle* has implicated me in her escape from Newgate.”

“Newgate?” Tarry said, his own anger rising. “Your suggestion is offensive, sir.”

“I have spent several hours closeted in my carriage with her. Do you think I am blind to her condition? She has the appearance of one who has been incarcerated.”

“She is no criminal,” Tarry insisted. “Her rescue has been brought about for a just cause. That is all I can tell you.”

“Escape is a just cause to anyone awaiting the gallows.”

“That is not the case.” He would not trust this arrogant Frenchman any more than he would Victor Brightmore. “I regret you were involved, of course—”

“*Bien sûr!*” The Frenchman spat the words back at him. “You have only begun to regret it.”

Sebastián hesitated, glaring at Tarry before he opened the carriage door and vaulted inside. Tarry had one more glimpse of Rachael before the compartment door swung shut with finality. She had appeared to be either blissfully asleep or unconscious.

Tarry ran to the carriage and tried to pry open the door, but the Frenchman’s knife at his throat stilled his hand. “What do you mean to do?” he cried in alarm, voice breaking.

“You have involved me in some sort of mischief. I already have difficulties of my own with the English authorities. I require some form of insurance. I will not share her punishment if you have made me party to a crime. I shall return her to you when you have told me the truth.”

He thought for a moment. “And have compensated me for my inconvenience.”

“You mean to ransom her?” Tarry was shocked and indignant.

“*Non*,” he said mildly. “If she is a criminal, I will hand her over to the authorities in exchange for leniency in my own case. If you can prove she is not, I require only the cost of her upkeep from now until the day I release her to you.”

“The day you . . . Free her now, and I shall tell you everything!”

The Frenchman’s face was resolute; there was undeniable ruthlessness in the man’s expression. “*Non, enfant*, you had your chance. I do not abide lies, and I would not believe you now. You will gather proof of your story, present it to me, and I shall return her to you unmolested.”

Was it his imagination, or had the man placed deliberate emphasis on the word *unmolested*?

“*Proof*? How will I obtain proof?”

“You would know that better than I.”

The Frenchman withdrew inside the coach and thumped against the side wall. The carriage slowly pulled out and Tarry stumbled after it.

“How am I to contact you?” he shouted. “I don’t even know who you are.” He added a curse, but it was lost when he ran to keep pace with the carriage.

“Make inquiries and you’ll find someone who can lead you to me,” the voice drifted back to him. “Ask for Sebastián Falconer.”

The name hit Tarry like a brick in the chest. His legs suddenly buckled under him and he pitched forward onto his knees. He looked on in horror as the carriage disappeared from sight.