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*Always
a Princess*

CLYVE ROSE

A LOVE THAT CANNOT BE DENIED

When Captain Warwick “Wil” Clifton offers to assist the Romany family he has injured, he's unprepared for the warmth of Romany camaraderie, and he is no where near ready for the force of nature that is Princess Syeria Brishen. Keeping a lid on his desire for the Romany beauty takes all his self-control. A notable rake, he is well out of practice at showing restraint and finds himself asking: What is he willing to risk for love?

As the eldest daughter of the Romany king, Syeira's pride in her heritage is matched by her finely-honed distrust of Englishmen. Captain Clifton surprises her with his affection, passion, and...love. She trusts her heart, but is caught between family duty and an unrelenting desire to be with the man she loves.

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For Beautiful Bella, who always belongs to herself.

And for Jenn, Julie, Sara, & Stuart:

The ones who catch you before you hit the ground never lose their wings.

Thank You. xxx

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ALWAYS A PRINCESS

Romany Rhyme (*trans. c. 1625*)

*Ride a cock-horse
To Banbury Cross;
Where the Romany lady
Rides a fine horse.*

*With rings on her fingers
And bells on her toes
She shall have my love
Withe'er she goes*

Prologue

February 1814
Mayfair

White's whist room was hazy with too much tobacco smoke and tension. Wil frowned, shuffled the deck, and replaced it. The stakes were higher tonight than the other three gentlemen knew.

"Time to declare the stakes," murmured Lord Maynooth, glancing at the men on either side of him. "We stake our pot." He glanced briefly at Wil.

Wil nodded, adding his gold pocket watch to the small store of cravat pins, signet rings, and other objects of value. That was it. All he had apart from his horse, and Nero was as necessary to his new commission as having the money to purchase it. He had to win this hand or it was all over. He watched the Earl of Horsham place the papers down for another mount.

The players lifted their cards in silence. Horsham slopped his drink down his front. All three earls were a little foxed this night, but Wil would not drop his guard with so much on the line. Steadying his nerve, he lifted his cards, turning them—

A discreet knock sounded at the door.

"Come," called Maynooth, not without irritation.

The hall butler sidled into the room, signalling to Wil particularly. Wil's face warmed as he rose, aware of his partner's glare as he laid his cards on the table face down and strode over to the servant. "I beg your pardon, Lord Maynooth."

"Is it life or death, man?" Wil asked the butler, trying to hide his vexation. He was so close to his win he could feel it. No delay was welcome. The butler bowed, offering up a silver salver, on which lay a single letter, addressed to Captain Warwick Clifton, Esq., care of White's on St James's Square. Not bothering to scowl at the use of his hated Christian name, Wil nodded his thanks and took it, recognising the additional direction scrawled on the flap. The note came from his brother Roger, who'd agreed to up their stakes. His pulse quickened.

Stuffing the rest of the letter in his empty watch pocket, Wil returned to his rubber. He glanced at his companions. "Lord Clifton stakes his Lune River mill."

This sudden increase in the size of the pot mollified all three peers at once. They'd been playing all evening, and Wil knew each earl to a man by now. Without lifting his head, he eyed them in turn. Each man's appearance of stoicism was a failure and Wil recognised which trick to take first.

"One, no trump," he muttered, watching Maynooth's nod.

His partner placed his card. Their opponents laid down theirs. This was the final hand. Gathering in his tricks, he closed the game quickly. All three hands were won, with Maynooth no less delighted than Roger would be with their joint result. Roger had his hunters, and Wil would make a cavalry major now. He tasted his port and rose to bow.

"Good night, gentlemen. It has been an excellent rubber."

“Well played, Captain,” Lord Maynooth replied. Halving the monies, his partner handed the notes across. “Yours, I believe, Captain. May it assist you in being made.”

Wil inclined his head. “It’s Wil when we win the pot, my lord.”

“Very well, Wil,” Maynooth replied. “You ought to call me Charles. Come, stay for a drink.”

Wil shook his head at the proffered glass. “Another time, my lord. I leave town tomorrow and have much to arrange.”

He changed his mind when he remembered his letter. Standing by the fireplace, Wil pulled out the rest of the pages and read it through.

“Damn his eyes.” Wil’s shout made all three earls jump as he smashed his glass into the fire.

“What the—,” Lord Maynooth paused. “News from Lord Clifton, I take it. Is your brother quite well?”

Wil blinked and unclenched his jaw. Ripping his letter into tiny pieces, he swore again, throwing every scrap into the fire. Grabbing the poker, he stabbed viciously at the flames before looking up.

“Lord Clifton is quite well. A pressing matter of business has gone awry.” He banged a fist against his open palm. *Damn the duke and his meddling.*

With a last glare into the fire, Wil turned and stalked to the door.

Maynooth was still staring at the smashed whisky glass by the grate. “Where the deuce are you going?”

“To the devil.”

Chapter One

Few sensible folk were abroad this night. Syeira envied the carefree slumber of small woodland creatures tonight. All seemed tucked away in their warm dens and burrows. The moorland wind whipped cruelly about her face and hands, and she thought longingly of the great central cooking fire at her Romany camp and the warmth she'd find there. Warmth that was nowhere in evidence in her journey across the Lancashire moors where snow remained in small pockets on the heights. Blowing warm breath onto her cramped hands, Syeira flexed her fingers before re-threading them through Grygry's mane.

"Have you found it yet?" she said in Romany, her whisper ringing loudly in the pre-dawn silence. She glanced around. Nothing stirred.

"If I had, do not you think I might say so?" Her eldest brother, Valkin, uttered several Romany curse words as his speech died to an undertone. Syeira cleared her throat to remind him that she, the princess, did not like his language. Valkin gave no indication of hearing her, nor did he beg pardon, but the curses ceased.

"I know the fence is poor along this path. There is most certainly a way in," he said.

"If you say it is here, Valkin, it is here."

Syeira strained her eyes in the dark, watching the country all around as her brothers walked slowly along the northern boundary fence of the greatest estate in Lancashire. It was essential they find an access point that would admit their horse. She rode the animal up and down the fence line at a trot, keeping an eye on the horizon as she did so.

Though it was night, she had as assured a sense of direction as the horse. No one suggested leaving their mount on the open moor. Grygry was as much a part of the royal Romany House of Brishen as any of them, and valuable breeding stock besides.

"Something we two have in common," Syeira spoke under her breath, leaning forward to stroke the proud soft ears in front of her. The animal snorted, stamping a hoof in the freezing air. Syeira encouraged him to walk on, keeping him moving and his powerful equine frame warm. There was no telling when this Romany family would need to move quickly, especially so near the estate of a notable English peer. A rapid gallop might be needed at any moment and the animal must be kept ready.

Her younger brother, Janfri, moved silently beside Valkin, testing each paling with his boots. The boundary fence held true so far, but the Romany House of Brishen knew this estate, given they stopped in this part of Lancashire each winter. It was well known that sections of the fence were in sad need of repair.

With no roads on this side of the estate, it was the safest way to enter the grounds unobserved. Though the wind dropped off, Syeira felt colder than ever. She tugged her shawl more tightly about her. It was the warmest one she'd yet made, but she sometimes wished for the heavily furred cloaks fine English ladies wore.

"Is it so important that we enter under cover of dark, Valkin? We have an appointment at the estate, after all."

"We cannot risk being seen."

"We cannot risk *you*, my *prala*, my brother," she replied, so quietly he might not hear it.

His sigh spoke otherwise. "You worry too much my sister, my *pen*."

"Perhaps you do not worry enough." Even as Syeira said the words, she knew they were unfair.

"We have no choice, Syeira."

Valkin was right. No Romany risked their family lightly. All of them, even Janfri, risked this midnight journey for the good of House Brishen. If there had been another way out of trouble for her Romany House, her brother would have found it. She took a breath, trying not to think about the people she'd already lost. For her brother's sake, for the sake of the Royal Romany House of Brishen, she must not give in to her fear.

Syeira glanced up at the stars glimmering overhead. Inhaling deeply, she drew in the scent of furze and pine needles. Distant wood smoke tingled in the back of her throat. The call of a night bird reached her ears. A splash sounded somewhere close by. Perhaps a flying fish or a moorland owl chasing a meal. There must be a lake near the estate. No doubt crafted for the pleasure of the Englishmen who resided here, rather than one naturally formed from the earth. Anger curled through her. That anyone should border an open woodland to declare "these are my lands and no other shall walk in them," then tamper with it in such an unnatural fashion. It was not the Romany way, and the cause of much trouble between her people and the English.

A deeper black space in the fencing opened before her. Her anger falling away, Syeira pulled Grygry to a halt and leapt down. Using a fistful of mane to keep a firm but gentle hold on her mount, she inspected the hole and the jagged edges of wood that bound it. It was large enough to lead Grygry through. Exactly as Valkin had described it.

"Valkin," she called as loudly as she dared.

"Ah." The prince hurried towards her, Janfri at his heels. "Well done, my sister, my *pen*. I shall go first, in case—"

Syeira didn't stop to wait for him, leading Grygry through the boundary fence, one hand beneath the horse's chin.

"Syeira," the prince called in alarm. "I said I'd go through first. You do not know what dangers await."

Syeira clicked her tongue in irritation. "I can take care of any dangers as well as you, Valkin. Besides, we're the only ones mad enough to be out at this time of night." Nonetheless, she stopped as soon as she'd cleared the fence and turned to wait for her brothers.

"Good boy, Grygry." She stroked the sleek nose of the horse, huddling against his flank for warmth. "Well, we have arrived in safety it seems. Shall we wait out here in the open?"

"Hmmm, I think not." Her brother took her arm, moving forwards. Janfri led their horse close behind them. "We may seek shelter in that copse. The field is not far from here and the trees offer some protection from this wind. It will be warmer among the trunks in any case."

Already Syeira felt the welcome of the woodland. There was little foliage to afford them any cover, but the trees had trunks and early green growth. It was at least somewhere to stay better hidden. It would not do to be charged for trespass under the English law. A stupid law to be sure, as most English laws were. There was no such equivalent charge among her Romany. All Romany agreements allowed room for re-negotiation and compensation. *Not quite all*, she amended, anger and grief flashing through her at the thought of the promise that bound her.

They reached the trees after a brief walk, their horse glad of fresher grass and new leafing buds. Her brother was right. It was a little warmer here than out in the open, at least until the sun rose. She thought longingly of the sun's warm rays. Better to think warm thoughts than focus on her numb hands. She made a mental note to trade some herbal remedies for gloves as soon as she could.

Gazing upward, Syeira wondered if any Romany had studied the stars. She took another deep breath and released it slowly, feeling the night air move into her body and out again. Somewhere, stubborn stalks of lavender still scented the air. A smudge of grey tinged the eastern sky. It wanted a few hours to the dawn.

"And now, Valkin?" she asked, doing her best to find his face in the shadows.

Her brother took her cold hand in his, placing his other arm around Janfri's thin shoulders. Drawing them all in closer to Grygry's warmth, Valkin spoke in a low voice, full of wariness and tension.

"Now, we wait."

Chapter Two

Wil kept his eyes shut tight against the needle-sharp pain at his temple. Someone was moving about his room. The susurrations of pouring water, the rustle of cloth-on-cloth, and an occasional rattling pierced right through the fiendish agony behind his eyelids. The perpetrator of these multiple assaults on his delicate sensibilities deserved a whipping at the very least. Peering ever-so-slightly out of one eye, he surveyed his blurry surrounds.

This wasn't his room.

Far too much peach and gold brocade glimmered on the bedclothes in this chamber, and a good deal too many ruffled ribbons masqueraded as drapery. The fussiness was positively dizzying. A false floral scent cloyed his nostrils. He held his breath, feeling distinctly ill. Lying quite motionless, he closed his eyes against what little light there was, attempting to recall what he could of the previous evening.

A lamp was lit. Bright light speared directly through his eyelids, eliciting a grunt. Clearly this person was determined to disturb him. A discreet cough told him that the person who deserved a thrashing was Hudson, his valet. He suppressed a groan. If Hudson was already present, then arrangements were well underway.

His man cleared his throat, loudly this time.

Grimacing, Wil tried to sit up. A mistake. His head throbbed like a volley of musket-fire shot loose inside his skull.

"Good morning, Hudson," Wil croaked, feeling every agonising word.

Hudson inclined his head towards the lovely form sprawled over on the other side of the expansive bed. Wil glanced over his shoulder. Lady Gresham was deeply and irretrievably asleep. Bits and pieces of memory from the Valentine's Day rout at Gresham House came back to him. It must have been a blinder, judging by the state of himself and his hostess this morning.

It would have been terribly poor form to disappoint Lady Gresham last night. She'd been remarkably persistent. He was not sorry he'd allowed himself to be persuaded to attend her party or her bed. He'd enjoyed pleasing her. Besides which, this liaison would end with the dawn. He was, after all, merely the second son of the Duke of Carston. With the duke hampering his advancement at every turn, Wil could not reckon on an increase in income any time soon.

How dare the duke prevent him purchasing a new commission? The anger in his gut had not lessened any since he'd read Roger's letter. Wil wondered how long the rumours about his wild behaviour would take to reach His Grace. He hoped the duke might choke on the scandal. No doubt His Grace sought to keep his spare son docile and dependent by bribing him into the kind of marriage Wil especially despised. From what he'd seen, marriage within the ton appeared a sort of misery shared. He shuddered. Glancing out the window, he saw the sun was not yet up.

"Hudson," he began again, keeping his voice low. "Why—?"

"There is a dawn appointment, captain." His valet handed him a cup of cool water, gesturing toward the fresh linen already laid out in the dressing room. "At the hall."

A dawn appointment at Clifton Hall? But that was several hours' hard riding. And on Pancake Day? Wil gulped his water, rising gingerly to his feet. He sat down again immediately, head swimming. It would not do to black out, even in front of his valet.

"What idiot arranged this?"

Hudson's expression did not alter. "You did, captain."

Wil groaned, aloud this time. "I was afraid of that. I am meeting whom?"

"The Earl of Haversham," Hudson replied. "Your offense against Lady Haversham last week in town, captain." The slightest shade of disapproval coloured his tone.

Wil did nothing more than lift his brows, his man having long earned his trust.

Wil had never backed away from a physical challenge in his life. He sighed. Haversham was a fool. Calling him out was incontrovertible proof of this. The earl had insisted they duel, despite the bodily risk. He'd also insisted the duel take place at Clifton Hall—private land owned by the duke.

"You are aware that duels are illegal, even on private land?" Hudson seemed to read his thoughts. "If the law is alerted, it will be Clifton Hall's responsibility."

"I am aware of that, Hudson. I thank you."

The fact hadn't been lost on Wil when the earl issued his challenge. It marked his opponent as a coward. "A man so afraid of scandal that he gives up a home ground advantage is no threat." Besides, Wil was an excellent pistol man, and the earl could not hit a farmhouse wall with a blunderbuss. This morning's appointment was a pointless exercise. Haversham was certain to be hurt.

"Is this the best way to return home?" His valet continued, ever determined to make his point. "It's some time since you were furloughed, captain. His Grace expects you to pay your respects at the hall. He will be livid this is the way you choose to do it."

Wil waved his hand, used to being the target of his father's ire. "His Grace likely will. As for demanding I pay my respects, I understand the duke to be en route to London. Haversham may be satisfied at no inconvenience to His Grace." He forbore to add that he would not bestow attention on his father that was so little deserved. "As for the duel itself, we are safer on private land than on his common. You can't save a fool from his folly, Hudson."

Wil swallowed slowly past the nausea washing through him. Dear God, what *had* they been drinking? He shrugged off his tension, accepting the valet's hand to haul him to his feet. He took a moment to steady himself, blinking in time with the thudding in his brain.

"Is there hot water at this hour?"

Hudson gestured toward the dressing chamber. "I thought it best to prepare in the other room, captain, and—ahem—to avoid disturbing Her Ladyship."

Once again, his valet's face conveyed no expression, but Hudson had occupied the room directly beneath theirs last night and he'd been Wil's valet for some years now. He conjectured that his man had heard most of last night's activities. Her Ladyship was nothing if not enthusiastic. His ears might still be ringing. His headache was so severe he couldn't be sure. "Remind me, Hudson, what vintage was I drinking last night?"

"I believe it was the house brandy, captain."

"That explains it," Wil muttered. "Remind me not to drink at Gresham House again."

"Noted, Sir." The valet handed Wil his wound pocket watch. "We must be leaving if we're to make Clifton Hall by dawn."

"Thank you, Hudson. I shall be down directly. Have you breakfasted?"

Hudson, who had most likely been up for several hours already, nodded.

“Excellent.” Wil pulled on his boots. “There will be no occasion for disturbing the family.” He glanced meaningfully at the woman in the bed behind him.

Hudson took the hint, averting his attention entirely from Her Ladyship. “Something to eat may be a good idea for yourself, captain.”

Wil shook his head, wincing at the sensation of being clubbed. A Gresham House soiree would not tempt him again. “Lord, no. Not after that god-awful brandy and never before a duel, Hudson. I aim best on an empty stomach.”

“And a clear head,” his man responded as he left to see to their horses.

Wil dismissed this parting shot with a wave of his hand. That was true too, of course, but the earl was no formidable opponent, and one out of two would have to do today.

Wil damped a monogrammed cloth in the bowl, and wiped the hot water over his face and shoulders. Splashing some into his eyes for good measure, he shook his head again.

The ride home would take several hours and the winter road was hard. The snow had ceased but the Lune remained frozen and the way icy. They would be riding into a rising sun as well, and visibility would be poor. Hudson was right to get their journey underway, no matter how vile his master’s head might be. Wil must arrive at Clifton Hall well in time to secure his honour. After all, this was nearly the only thing of value he had left.

A murmur from the bedclothes sent Wil straight out the door. He groaned quietly, putting his hand to his head as he awaited Hudson in the dark relief of the downstairs hall.

The valet still deserved a thrashing.

Chapter Three

Syeira shivered in the shadow of the trees, holding Janfri's hand tightly in both her own.

"Janfri should not be here," she spoke up. "He is too young to see this."

"He is thirteen," the prince countered. "A Romany man. With Papa's health so poor, I require Janfri present in case I can no longer lead House Brishen." He placed his hand on her shoulder.

Again, Syeira tasted her fear, glancing down at her younger brother. Janfri was next in line for *sher-engro*, Head of the House of Brishen.

"The fewer witnesses to an illegal duel the better," she reminded Valkin.

"I cannot disagree with you there," her brother sighed. "You do not have to remain, my sister, my *pen*."

"I can take care of myself," she replied, bristling as her brother shook his head at her. "You do not trust me to do this?" Syeira's voice rose in warning.

"Of course I trust you." He shrugged impatiently, cutting off further debate. "It is the Englishmen I do not trust. Their behaviour, even with English girls, is not always honourable. I will not leave you unchaperoned with Captain Clifton. You are the pride of Brishen after all." He smiled as he said this, calling on Janfri to agree. This the young boy did, nodding firmly at his sister.

"Your honour is a matter of importance for all of Brishen," Valkin added quietly. "Janfri is here for us both. He is a man of Brishen now."

Syeira shook her head at Valkin's stubborn adherence to such an outdated tradition. It was true that Romany children grow up quickly and most married young. Janfri would probably find himself betrothed before his sixteenth birthday. Janfri was the second son of the centuries-old royal Romany House of Brishen, and she had no doubt *his* marriage bed would prove satisfactory. *Unlike my own*. She tossed her head in regret. There was no point dwelling on what cannot be changed.

Syeira studied Valkin closely. "You are truly uncomfortable," she observed, catching his dark, worried gaze with her own.

A knot settled heavily in her stomach and stayed there. Until this moment, it had not occurred to her that Valkin might be afraid. That he might be at risk of losing this silly contest. Her brother succeeded in everything he did. He was rarely bested by the English in any trade. Indeed, success in his parlay with the English was one of his greatest strengths.

Now he was as tense as she'd ever known him. Syeira swallowed her sour-tasting acrimony. The prince was the one facing the pistol this morning, after all. He likely did not need her to voice what they both knew to be true in their hearts. None of this felt right. None of it was fair, and still, Brishen must see it done. With their mother dead and their father ill, care of the royal Romany House rested with its prince and princess.

"Do you know much about this Englishman you are to face?"

The prince lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. "Captain Warwick Clifton is the second son of the Duke of Carston. I am acquainted only with his brother. Lord Roger Clifton is heir to this entire estate."

Syeira gazed around her. All these woods and lands belonged only to one man? One man who had but two sons? She shook her head.

The estate was truly an abundant bounty, even in winter. Rich mosses hung from giant trees and she breathed the cold-weather herbs on the air. There were some midwinter blooms still about. Snowdrops and pale heather graced the little copse in which her family stood hidden among ancient elms and towering oaks.

Oh, what she could do with these woodland plants. Syeira expelled an impatient breath, eyeing a lichen-draped bough dripping with growths.

"The English always have more than they need," she said softly.

"You are right, my sister."

Looking up at Valkin, her chest swelled with pride. He was handsome and strong and would make a fine *sher-engro* when their father passed on. He was nineteen, a year older than her, and he took his duty to Brishen seriously.

Syeira frowned as her brother's quick smile faded and he looked back across the field, jaw stiff with tension. Duels like this one were against the law. There was always the chance that the earl had tricked their Romany family into the crime of trespass. Haversham wouldn't be the first Englishman attempting to stir up trouble between the law and Brishen. Clearly, Valkin had similar concerns.

"Stand back. Stay under the trees. Our house has history here at Clifton Hall but it would be as well not to trust these English too far." Valkin did not make requests. He was a Romany prince and knew what it was to give orders and be obeyed.

"If the constabulary arrive, take Janfri and ride back swiftly. Say nothing to anyone about this. I will not have you in trouble with the law."

Syeira made an irritated noise again. "I still do not see why you have to stand up as the earl's second. You never so much as touched his sister."

"This is true." Valkin made a terribly un-prince-like face and shuddered.

His sister raised a brow, trying not to grin.

"But Papa gave Haversham his word. This way the earl forgives our poaching debt, which is considerable. You know the year we've had, Syeira. We cannot pay this any other way." He didn't say, "Father is ill and may not last much longer," but Syeira heard it in his careful tone.

As the most skilled healer of House Brishen since her mother's passing, Syeira ministered to their father daily. She knew his time was not far. If Papa died while they were here playing proxy for a foolish earl... Syeira's temper flared as she cursed the Englishman for forcing them all away from their father at such a time.

"It is not our way to pay at all. He could have had fortunes told, or handwoven silks in exchange, or curing herbs. Even one of your new-bred horses. Do you truly think a few game hens are worth your life, brother?"

Her response drew a smile. "It's more than a few hens, Syeira. We're talking over two dozen deer, countless grouse, braces of partridge by the dozen and geese too. And some hundreds of rabbits." His voice lightened.

Syeira guessed he was thinking back to the outrage Brishen had caused by camping at the far end of an estate no one appeared to examine thoroughly. They'd managed rather well from

Michaelmas to Christmas, until the sort of a gamekeeper eventually sobered up. Now, their house was being threatened with prosecution if they did not make good the debt.

"Don't forget the salmon," Janfri chimed in.

Valkin chuckled.

"Or the trout," Janfri said again. "We took his gamefish too."

This time Syeira laughed with them, her slender shoulders shaking as she allowed herself a brief respite from the tension. The moment was all too fleeting. Surveying her surroundings like a wary fox, she sobered again, feeling the joy fade from her face.

The change did not escape her brother. "I swear, when I am head of our house, I will find a way to help you to happiness." Valkin reached for her shoulder, holding her steady.

Syeira took a breath, trying to smile again. "I thank you, my *prala*, my brother." She heard Valkin make that vow out loud at least once a day but was no closer to seeing it fulfilled. Her father, and only her father, could make her situation right, and he was in no fit state to do so.

This was not something Brishen discussed. It would not serve their people to have it known that the Romany king, and *sher-engro* of the oldest Romany house in England, was fast losing his reason. The prince, especially, had warned his siblings never to speak of Papa's illness to the English, and Valkin had more knowledge of them than any other Romany.

Janfri tried one more time to lighten the mood as the chill winter sun began its glow over the horizon. "Then there was also—" his voice was drowned out by hoofbeats as two riders galloped into view.

"Hush, they're here." Syeira shivered again in the icy air. "He is a coward not to stand up for himself then," she whispered to Valkin.

Her brother looked as if he didn't disagree, but he'd never say so. It was not his way. The Romany king's oath was given to the peevish Earl of Haversham who believed her brother's life of less worth his own, even though Valkin was a man ten times better than the earl. The earl's behaviour was little different to that of other Englishmen. Many peers of the realm treated Romany men poorly, and their women worse. It did not help the peace the English king fought so many wars to keep.

Shaking out her hair, the princess Brishen stationed herself against the trunk of a great oak, erect and ready for whatever might befall her family this morning. These English and their pride: Miss Haversham ought to have stopped the duel if she could. What sort of sister would risk her brother so? Syeira would never permit such a foolhardy display on her own behalf. She'd borne too much loss already.

Syeira sighed and reined in her temper. It would only get her into trouble. Besides—she looked down at Janfri—she ought to set an example. Drawing back beneath the shelter of the trees, Syeira wrapped her woollen shawl more closely about her. As Valkin advanced to meet the man who'd apparently insulted the honourable Miss Haversham, Syeira examined his opponent as best she could at such a distance.

If Clifton had said something ungentlemanly about the earl's sister, Syeira was willing to bet it was no slander. It was common knowledge among the Romany that fine ladies of the English aristocracy were not as unstained as everyone pretended. Her handsome, virile brother knew this at least as well as some of the *gadje* English ladies knew *him*.

Now that the mist was lifting, Syeira saw Clifton clearly. He approached with his valet as his second. His man bore a flamboyantly crested case of duelling pistols. She was surprised at the captain's height, which was over six feet, she guessed. He had the subtle strength of a military man and moved with an easy grace. She allowed her gaze to follow long, strong rider's legs up to

a hard-looking chest and broad shoulders, leading to a muscled neck and handsome face with a clear-cut, angular jaw. The rays of the rising sun picked out the golden strands of his hair.

Captain Warwick Clifton was a fine-looking man. She shivered again, and this time it was not from winter's chill. Syeira knew a fair amount about *camello*, or lovemaking. Romany girls received their instruction from the women of their house when they came of age at thirteen. It wasn't her Mama's fault that Syeira would never come to practise these lessons.

Feeling his gaze move over the woodland, she shrank back with a gasp. She had the oddest feeling he guessed they were there. A warm tingle passed through her belly. She pressed further into the shadow of the trees. Had he seen her? Had she wanted him to?

The captain wore nothing but his linen, breeches, and boots. His red coat was slung casually over his arm with the rest of his attire. Clifton appeared to be arguing heatedly with her brother as his voice carried in the crisp air. Deep and powerful, the sound was currently overlaid with harsh, angry tones.

"...damned coward, where the *hell* is he? Granted that sister of his isn't worth the trouble, but why in thunder the cad had to drag you into it, I can't say. I've no wish to injure you, Prince Brishen, but the *Code Duello* is absolute. If I had to leave a warm, favoured bed to duel on time, then that blasted Haversham can bloody well—" and there followed further vigorous expletives.

Syeira placed her hands over Janfri's ears, who repeatedly and determinedly tried to push them away. She smiled. A passionate man, then. Immoderate too. She liked his fire. She shook her head. What was she thinking of? None of this mattered when he was about to duel her brother.

Clifton was shouting something, signalling with his hands for Valkin to remain stationary while he set up a shot. Her brother shook his head. The prince's pride would have none of a dumb shooting as he turned his back to the captain, taking his place on the duelling field.

Janfri's hand squeezed hers. Syeira held her breath, heart in her throat, praying she would not need the herbal poultices she had prepared. She tensed as the duellists stood back to back. The two men paced out, her brother standing proud. Clifton moved as though his head hurt. The terrible thought came to her that Valkin might kill the captain, and immediately, she pushed it away.

She could not bear it and couldn't think why.

Clifton's second dropped the white kerchief. Syeira froze, not daring to breathe. Both men turned and fired.