

For Jenny Crusie – because she hates epilogues.

## EPILOGUE

It was the first decent day of spring, Elinor, the Viscountess Rohan decided, pushing open the windows in her dressing room and looking out over the rolling lawn that led up to their house in Kent. The air was soft and warm, still damp what seemed like an eternity of rain, and a faint breeze ruffled her hair. She stared out into the quiet morning, trying to ignore the small, ridiculous ache inside her. Francis had been gone for almost five days, and she never failed to be nervous when he left her. Too many bad things had happened for her to be entirely at ease, though in fact there had been no disasters whatsoever in the last six years. The king had seen fit to forgive Francis's time in service to Bonnie Prince Charlie, and Francis had seen fit to forgive the king for being a Hanoverian and accept reinstatement of the title and lands that had once been forfeit. This monstrosity of a house had been in wretched shape, having been abandoned for almost thirty years, and it had taken a great deal of time and money to get it back in good stead, but now everything in the house was finished, the gardens were well on their way to being the showplace they had once been, and the stable was more than respectable.

Even her sister and her husband had settled down within riding distance, and given the fact that Lydia was increasing yet again, it was just as well.

Why had Francis been gone so long? He'd been called to court, and the very thought made her nervous. What if King William changed his mind and decided to renew the execution orders for anyone who participated in the bloodbath that was Culloden? It was said that the monarch's mind wasn't the most steady – what if he'd decided to make an example of Francis?

She wasn't going to let that happen. She would ride to London herself, throw herself on his mercy. She'd heard the queen had a kind heart – surely she could intervene?

Elinor took a deep breath. She was worrying about nothing. It was a beautiful spring day, and Francis couldn't stay away much longer. Everything would be fine.

It was simply difficult to believe it when there had been so many bad times and disasters lurking around the corner.

“Why are you standing there in the window, lass?” Mrs. Clarke's voice came from behind her, the comfortable Highland burr still there even after decades in France. “Watching for him won't make him come any sooner.”

She turned, managing a smile. “I'd tell you that wasn't what I was doing but you know me too well. Where are the children?”

“With Nanny Owens, of course. And no, you can't steal them away again. Nanny's beginning to think you don't trust her.”

“Of course I trust her!” Elinor protested. “She's like my dear Nanny Maude. I just ...”

“You need some tea and toast, your ladyship. He’ll be back, before you even have time to miss him,” Mrs. Clarke said comfortably.

“Too late.” Her voice was glum.

But she managed to steal the children away after all, with Mrs. Clarke’s eventual help. Adrian was just nine months old and crawling everywhere. He was absolutely fearless, with powerful lungs and the most enchanting baby smile, and she sat on the grass and watched him. Charles Edward lay stretched out on his stomach in the sunshine, his nose in a book.

“Your brother’s going to be a hellion,” she said, watching as Adrian tried to pull himself up on the picnic basket.

Charles Edward turned to grin at her. “He already is,” he observed, tolerating it as Adrian began to climb onto his back and grab fistfuls of hair.

Poor babies, she thought miserably. What if they had to grow up without a father? What if she had to live without Francis? Her wicked, lovely king of hell who managed to give her her first real taste of heaven.

She was being ridiculous. She shook her head, shaking away the sudden sting of tears in her eyes. He would be fine, they would all be fine. As Mrs. Clarke often told her, after so many travails there could simply be nothing but good times ahead.

She watched Adrian shriek cheerfully as he pulled at his brother’s hair. And then he rolled off with a delightful giggle, taking off at a fast crawl as he went heading for God knew what.

“Biscuit, darling?” she said, waving one in front of him in an effort to distract him from his goal. He paused, momentarily distracted. And then the most amazing thing happened. He caught his brother’s shoulder and hauled himself up on two uncertain legs. And then let go as he took his first unassisted step toward his astonished mother.

And then another. And another.

“Charles Edward!” Elinor said in an awed hush. “Your brother’s walking.”

Her elder son looked up from his book, unimpressed. “God help us all,” he said.

Elinor held her breath, expecting Adrian to collapse at any moment, but his face was creased with the familiar stubbornness, and the biscuit was in sight. He was almost there, and it took all of Elinor’s self-control not to scoop him up with a cry of triumph.

And then he stopped, looked past her shoulder and let out a shriek of delight, landing on his bottom and raising his arms upward.

There was only one person who elicited that kind of response. She rolled over, blinking into the bright sky, looking up at the sun-gilded frame of her missing husband.

He leaned over and scooped his younger son up with a cry of triumph. “You little terror!” he said. “I trust you saved that demonstration for my return.”

Even Charles Edward put down his book, rising and launching himself at Francis’s long legs. Francis scooped him up as well, then collapsed beside Elinor in an ungainly tangle of husband and sons, the children giggling as they crawled over both of them.

Elinor lay back, blinking away her tears of relief. Eventually their elder son returned to his book, while Adrian of the powerful appetites stuffed two cookies in his mouth at once, and Francis took her in his arms.

“You’ve been very foolish, poppet,” he whispered. “It would take more than a Hanoverian to get the better of me.”

“I know,” she said, taking a shaky breath. She let herself revel in the feel of his body against hers, until her eyes widened in shock. “Francis! There are children present!”

“Where do you think they came from?” he said with a wicked smile. “I’ve been too long without you.”

“Five days.”

“Long enough for you to work yourself into a state of foolishness. Long enough for me to almost miss my son’s first steps. Five hours is too long.” He rocked against her, just a small, suggestive bump, and Elinor could feel her stomach clench in sudden desire.

“I’ll just take the children then, shall I?” Mrs. Clarke appeared, ignoring their entwined bodies. Clearly she’d seen it too often to even notice.

A moment later they were heading back to the house, leaving Francis and Elinor alone on the blanket. He began unfastening the laces of her dress, and she slapped at his hands weakly. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she protested. “Someone might come.”

“I trust we both will.”

“Francis!” she said on a note of laughter.

“Indulge me, love,” he said, loosening her dress. “I’ve always had a distinct desire to seduce a marchioness in a country field.”

“You’ve seduced me in a country field any number of times,” she said with asperity. “And you’d best keep your hands off any marchioness you happen to run across.”

“Afraid I can’t do that, my love. I’m married to one.”

She was about to hit him, when his words suddenly sank in. “You’re married to me.”

“Indeed.” He kissed the tops of breasts, pushing her bodice out of the way.

She caught his long hair in her hands and yanked his face up to meet hers. He let out a yelp of pain, and then he was laughing down at her, as he slowly slid her skirts up her long legs. “The king decided he had a great need for my lands in Mowbray. And since I had no particular desire to get rid of them, a little bribery was required. We are now the marquess and marchioness of Haverstoke. Reward me.”

She could feel his long fingers on the bare skin of her thighs, and she stopped worrying about any servants happening upon them. Servants, friends and family knew not to wander unannounced on the Rohan estate when the lord and lady were at home, else risk great embarrassment.

She rolled onto her back, and he followed, leaning down over her, her skirts halfway up to her waist. “And if I don’t wish to be a marchioness? It’s a clumsy word.”

“Get used to it,” he advised. And pushed her skirts the rest of the way up.

Mrs. Clarke could hear their laughter from a distance as she brought the two children into the vast front hall, and a smile creased her face. She had faith – there would be nothing but good times ahead.