

CONNIE MASON

A man with dark hair, wearing a white button-down shirt that is open at the chest, stands in a rocky, mountainous landscape. He is holding a sword with both hands, pointing it towards the upper left. The background shows a steep, rocky cliff under a cloudy sky.

New York Times
Bestselling Author

The Rogue and the Hellion

York

The
Rogue
and the
Hellion

CONNIE MASON



LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

A LEISURE BOOK®

June 2002

Published by

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.
276 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Copyright © 2002 by Connie Mason

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

ISBN 0-8439-5020-X

The name "Leisure Books" and the stylized "L" with design are trademarks of Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

Visit us on the web at www.dorchesterpub.com.

**ROMANTIC TIMES RAVES
ABOUT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR CONNIE MASON!**

THE DRAGON LORD

“This is a real keeper, filled with historical fact, sizzling love scenes and wonderful characters.”

THE BLACK KNIGHT

“Ms. Mason has written a rich medieval romance filled with tournaments, chivalry, lust and love.”

THE OUTLAWS: SAM

“Ms. Mason always provides the reader with a hot romance, filled with plot twists and wonderful characters. She’s a marvelous storyteller.”

THE OUTLAWS: JESS

“*Jess* . . . is a delight. Typical of Ms. Mason’s style, *Jess* is filled with adventure and passion. Ms. Mason delivers.”

THE OUTLAWS: RAFE

“Ms. Mason begins this new trilogy with wonderful characters . . . steamy romance . . . excellent dialogue . . . [and an] exciting plot!”

GUNSLINGER

“Ms. Mason has created memorable characters and a plot that made this reader rush to turn the pages. . . . *Gunslinger* is an enduring story.”

MORE ROMANTIC TIMES PRAISE FOR CONNIE MASON!

PIRATE

“Ms. Mason has written interesting characters into a twisting plot filled with humor and pathos.”

BEYOND THE HORIZON

“Connie Mason at her best! She draws readers into this fast-paced, tender and emotional historical romance that proves that love really does conquer all!”

BRAVE LAND, BRAVE LOVE

“*Brave Land, Brave Love* is an utter delight from first page to last—funny, tender, adventurous, and highly romantic!”

WILD LAND, WILD LOVE

“Connie Mason has done it again!”

BOLD LAND, BOLD LOVE

“A lovely romance and fine historical!”

VIKING!

“This captive/captor romance proves a delicious read.”

TEMPT THE DEVIL

“A grand and glorious adventure-romp! Ms. Mason tempts readers with . . . thrilling action and sizzling sensuality!”

THE EYES HAVE IT

"Return me to the ballroom immediately."

She tried to duck around him, but he trapped her against the railing with his arms braced on either side of her. "I'll let go if you answer one simple question, Lady Olivia."

Olivia had no choice but to accede. She could only hope his question had nothing to do with the robbery. It didn't.

"Are you as innocent as you claim?"

"How dare you!" she cried as she swung her hand back and delivered a well-aimed blow to his face. He reeled backward but did not release her.

"What have I done to deserve this kind of cavalier treatment from you?" Olivia demanded. "Why would you ask such an insulting question?"

"I want to be your lover," Gabriel returned, "and I avoid virgins like the plague. I saw you talking to Palmerson. His unsavory reputation surpasses even mine." He shrugged. "I just assumed . . ."

"You assume too much," Olivia protested.

Gabriel stared into Olivia's angry green eyes and felt a strange sense of familiarity. Something tugged at his memory but the sensation was too vague to retrieve. He had gazed into those same emerald-hued eyes before, he was sure of it. Where? When?

Other books by Connie Mason:

TAKEN BY YOU

THE DRAGON LORD

THE OUTLAWS: SAM

THE OUTLAWS: JESS

THE OUTLAWS: RAFE

THE BLACK KNIGHT

GUNSLINGER

BEYOND THE HORIZON

PIRATE

BRAVE LAND, BRAVE LOVE

WILD LAND, WILD LOVE

BOLD LAND, BOLD LOVE

VIKING!

SURRENDER TO THE FURY

FOR HONOR'S SAKE

LORD OF THE NIGHT

TEMPT THE DEVIL

PROMISE ME FOREVER

SHEIK

ICE & RAPTURE

LOVE ME WITH FURY

SHADOW WALKER

FLAME

TENDER FURY

DESERT ECSTASY

A PROMISE OF THUNDER

PURE TEMPTATION

WIND RIDER

TEARS LIKE RAIN

THE LION'S BRIDE

SIERRA

TREASURES OF THE HEART

CARESS AND CONQUER

PROMISED SPLENDOR

WILD IS MY HEART

MY LADY VIXEN

The
Rogue
and the
Hellion

Chapter One

London, 1817

The elegant black coach rattled through the moonless night along the turnpike to London, its coal oil lanterns casting an eerie glow through the thick fog blanketing the countryside. Inside, the Marquis of Bathurst's dark head lolled against the rich velvet squabs, his legs sprawled in exhausted abandon.

Pleasantly tired and sexually sated, Gabriel closed his heavy eyelids as he recalled the pleasurable hours he had spent in the Countess of Barrow's bed. When the countess had invited him to her country manor, Gabriel had accepted with alacrity. It hadn't been the first time he'd been invited to share Leslie's bed while her husband, the Earl of Barrow, was at his hunting box in Scotland, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

Since the earl was returning tomorrow, however, Gabriel had thought it prudent to take his leave, though it

Connie Mason

had been difficult to extract himself from the warmth of Leslie's clinging arms. Leslie had coaxed him back to bed for a final goodbye and one thing led to another, which resulted in his late departure.

A slow smile stretched Gabriel's sensuous lips as his erotic thoughts lulled him to sleep. His last vision before slumber claimed him was of soft white breasts, clinging arms, and open thighs. Too bad Lord Barrow wasn't away from home more often.

Two horsemen waited along the deserted dark road, shrouded by damp mist that rose up from the ground in thick, suffocating tendrils. Covered from neck to heels in long cloaks, caps pulled low over their foreheads, they were barely discernable in the darkness.

" 'Tis late, Ollie. Time to go home. No one seems to be abroad tonight."

Ollie sighed regretfully. "So it seems, Pete. We'll try another—"

Pete cut his partner off in mid-sentence. "Hark, Ollie, perhaps luck is with us after all. I hear a coach coming down the turnpike. Remember now, caution is the word. There'll be hell to pay if I let anything happen to you. You're to ride away at the first sign of trouble."

"What can go wrong? We've done this before and probably will again."

"No doubt you're right, but I don't have to like it," Pete grumbled.

"You're far too protective," Ollie complained. "Don't worry, nothing is going to happen."

Ollie peered into the darkness, waiting for the coach to round the curve, every nerve ending tingling. When the vehicle finally came into view, Ollie hissed, "From

The Rogue and the Hellion

the looks of the coach, the pickings will be good to-night."

"Remember what I said, Ollie," Pete warned as he reined his horse into the center of the road and withdrew his pistol. Ollie followed, taking a stance beside Pete, a pistol clutched in fingers gone numb with tension.

Gabriel was dreaming when his coach jolted to an abrupt stop, hurling him to the floor. He shook his head to clear it of the last remnants of sleep, returned to the seat and pulled up the shade. Seeing nothing beyond the glare of the coach lights, he reached for the door handle.

"Stand and deliver!"

Gabriel's hand froze. Highwaymen! Wide awake and alert now, he scrambled for his pistol.

"I wouldn't if I were you," the highwayman ordered in a low growl.

The pistol aimed at him through the window was long, large and lethal.

"Toss your weapon out the window."

Cursing beneath his breath, Gabriel removed the small pistol from his pocket and threw it out the window.

"Now get out. Don't try anything—there are two of us, and my partner has your coachman covered."

Gabriel descended cautiously from the coach. He wanted to do nothing to endanger the life of his coachman. His relief was palpable when he saw Jenkins standing beside the horses, alive but closely guarded by the second highwayman.

His attention snapped back to the highwayman waving a pistol in front of his face. Though the situation

Connie Mason

wasn't humorous, he wanted to laugh. He could discern nothing threatening about the bandit.

"Empty your pockets," the highwayman ordered in a gruff voice that sounded forced.

"You'll get no more than a few pounds," Gabriel drawled as he pulled several banknotes from his pocket and offered them to the highwayman. "You've held up the wrong coach this time. No jewels, no cash box, nothing but a man on his way home from an assignation."

Gabriel's midnight-blue eyes narrowed as he peered through the darkness at the highwayman's face. The bandits had picked their night well, he thought. Obscured by clouds and mist, the moonless skies provided scant light, and the highwaymen's faces were all but hidden by their cloaks and caps, making identification impossible. But the impression of a slim build and youth was strong. And once, when the highwayman lifted his face, Gabriel saw a flash of green and a hint of red beneath the brim of his cap. A green-eyed, redheaded bandit; the clues were mounting.

For the space of a heartbeat their gazes met and held, and some indefinable emotion passed between them. Gabriel barely had time to think about what it meant when the highwayman said, "Is that a ring on your finger?"

Gabriel's fingers curled spontaneously into his palm. The ring had belonged to his dead brother, the one who would have been his father's heir if he had lived.

"Give it over," the highwayman hissed.

"You can't have it."

The pistol lowered perilously close to his privates. "Give it over, I say. Which would you rather part with, your ring or your . . . family jewels? Make no mistake.

The Rogue and the Hellion

I will stop at nothing to get what I want."

Gabriel hesitated but a moment before working the ring off his finger and placing it in the highwayman's outstretched palm. The man sounded more desperate than dangerous. His voice had risen several octaves and he appeared nervous. He also spoke rather well for an ordinary highwayman. Gabriel stored all this within the chambers of his memory. He wouldn't rest until he saw the highwaymen swinging from the gallows on Tower Hill. No one robbed the Marquis of Bathurst and got away with it!

"Are those diamond studs in your shirt?"

"Will you leave me nothing?" Gabriel drawled in a deceptively calm voice.

"If you are rich enough to wear diamonds for buttons, the loss will cause you scant grief. Hurry."

"What's the problem, Ollie? Is he giving you trouble?"

"Everything's fine, Pete. I'm just waiting for his shirt studs."

"Shall I bind the coachman and help you?"

"I can manage," Ollie called back.

Gabriel removed the studs and placed them in the highwayman's eager hand with a contemptuous flourish, wishing he had thought to strap on his sword tonight, but he'd had no need of it in Leslie's bed.

"Anything else?" Ollie asked.

"That's it," Gabriel replied. He shot the highwayman a curious glance. "Your voice is changing, Ollie. Aren't you a bit young for this kind of work? And your speech; 'tis rather refined for a highwayman."

"Get back in the coach," Ollie ordered.

Gabriel wanted to protest but thought better of it. His wasn't the only life in danger. Though he sensed no

Connie Mason

danger from the lad, his partner was another matter. He watched through narrowed lids as Ollie backed away. A moment later the highwaymen mounted their horses and quickly disappeared into the swirling fog.

"Are you all right, Jenkins?" Gabriel called as he leaped from the coach and searched the ground for his pistol.

"That I am, my lord. And 'tis sorry I am for allowing this to happen. Bloody highwaymen. They came out of nowhere. I had a devil of a time getting the horses under control."

"It's not your fault, Jenkins. Help me find my pistol. It's too late to stop the bandits, but I'd hate to lose the piece. It belonged to my brother." And so did the ring, Gabriel thought with a surge of anger.

The pistol was found in short order, and Gabriel returned to the coach. Jenkins picked up the reins and the coach rattled off down the road. Drumming his fingers on the seat, Gabriel sat back and reviewed the clues the bandits had let slip, few though they were. Their names were Pete and Ollie. Ollie was young, possibly with green eyes and red hair. Gabriel hadn't seen the other one close enough to note any identifying aspects of his appearance.

Gabriel closed his eyes and tried to picture the younger highwayman again. Something uncomfortable stirred in him when he recalled Ollie's green eyes; the feeling that Ollie was something other than what he pretended clawed at him.

The following evening, Gabriel stalked into Brooks's Club on St. James's Street, still miffed over the previous night's robbery.

"Bathurst, over here!"

The Rogue and the Hellion

Gabriel saw his good friend and fellow rogue, Ramsey Dunsford, Earl of Braxton, motioning to him from the doorway of the game room and swerved in his direction.

"Westmore and I missed you last night," Ram said in greeting. "We looked for you at White's, then headed to Crocker's gambling hell. We both lost a fortune," Braxton grumbled.

"I need a drink," Gabriel said, summoning a dignified, black-clad footman with a wave of his hand.

"Something's happened," Ram guessed. "Don't tell me until Westmore joins us. I want him to hear this too."

"Are you looking for me?"

Lucas, Viscount Westmore, strolled over to join his two friends, his eyebrows raised in question.

"You're just in time, Luc," Ramsey said. "Bathurst is about to regale us with his misadventures last night."

"Misadventures?" Luc drawled.

"Nothing short of calamity would bring so ferocious a scowl to Bathurst's face," Ram vowed. "I haven't eaten yet; shall we repair to the dining room? Bathurst can relate his tale of woe while we eat."

Anger simmered inside Gabriel as he followed his friends into the dining room and ordered a meal of roast pheasant, trout and potatoes. He had been so busy trying to track down his midnight bandits that he had forgotten to eat today. He had even hired a Bow Street Runner to find the bloody bastards.

Gabriel regarded his friends moodily. Both were the best friends any man could hope to have. Blue-eyed Luc had deep auburn hair and classically handsome features. Luc had fought beside him at Waterloo. Dark-

Connie Mason

haired, silver-eyed Ramsey had been his friend since Eton.

"Well, out with it, man," Ramsey goaded. "What woman is bedeviling you? Where were you last night?"

"In Lady Barrow's bed. And she's not the one bedeviling me."

"Her husband caught you tuppings her!" Luc said gleefully. "It's not like you to be so careless, Gabriel."

"Barrow most certainly did *not* catch me," Gabriel retorted. "And you don't have to act so bloody smug about it. For your information, I left the lady's bed shortly after midnight."

"Something happened, that much is clear," Ramsey said.

"Indeed," Gabriel allowed. He took a healthy swig of the brandy the footman had set down in front of him and slammed the glass on the table.

Ramsey's upper lip curled in amusement. "You seduced a virgin and her papa called you out. When will you learn that virgins are off limits?"

"Bloody hell!" Gabriel groused. "Will you leave off? You know I prefer experienced women. I want nothing to do with cringing virgins. A pair of highwaymen stopped my coach on the turnpike last night. They took my brother's ring and the diamond studs from my shirt."

Ram suppressed a chuckle. "They probably didn't know you were a war hero. It's not like you to be caught off guard."

"I fell asleep," Gabriel muttered.

A brief silence ensued as a footman placed their food before them. "Lady Barrow is a legendary man-eater," Luc claimed as he picked up his fork. "Hell, even I would be exhausted after a few hours in her bed."

The Rogue and the Hellion

Gabriel slanted him a sardonic look. "You're tireless, Westmore. Not even I can keep up with you."

"Now there's a lie if I ever heard one," Ram laughed. "There isn't a willing lady whose charms we haven't sampled, a bordello we haven't visited or a gaming hell we haven't frequented. We're called the Rogues of London with good reason."

"And proud of it," Luc added. "Tell us about the robbery, Bathurst. A pair of unlikely highwaymen accosted Lord Trowbridge and his wife a few weeks ago. They're probably the same ones who robbed you."

"Highway robberies have been occurring with some frequency of late," Ram mused.

"I heard about the robberies," Gabriel admitted, "but never thought I would become a victim. I've set the Bow Street Runners on them. I know their names and aim to see them brought to justice."

"You know their names?" Ram asked, all agog. "Rather careless of them, wasn't it?"

"They call themselves Ollie and Pete. Careless or not, it's a damn good clue."

Their meal arrived and they ate in silence, but Gabriel's mind churned as he chewed and swallowed without really tasting his food. Something about one of the highwaymen bothered him. The younger bandit's mannerisms and voice were distinctive. If he saw the fellow again, he most certainly would recognize him.

"Forget the rascals, Bathurst," Ram said as he sat back and lit a cigar. "The law will deal with them. Sooner or later they'll make a mistake and end up on the gallows."

"Who's for Crocker's?" Luc asked. "I aim to win some of my money back tonight."

"I think another type of entertainment is what Ga-