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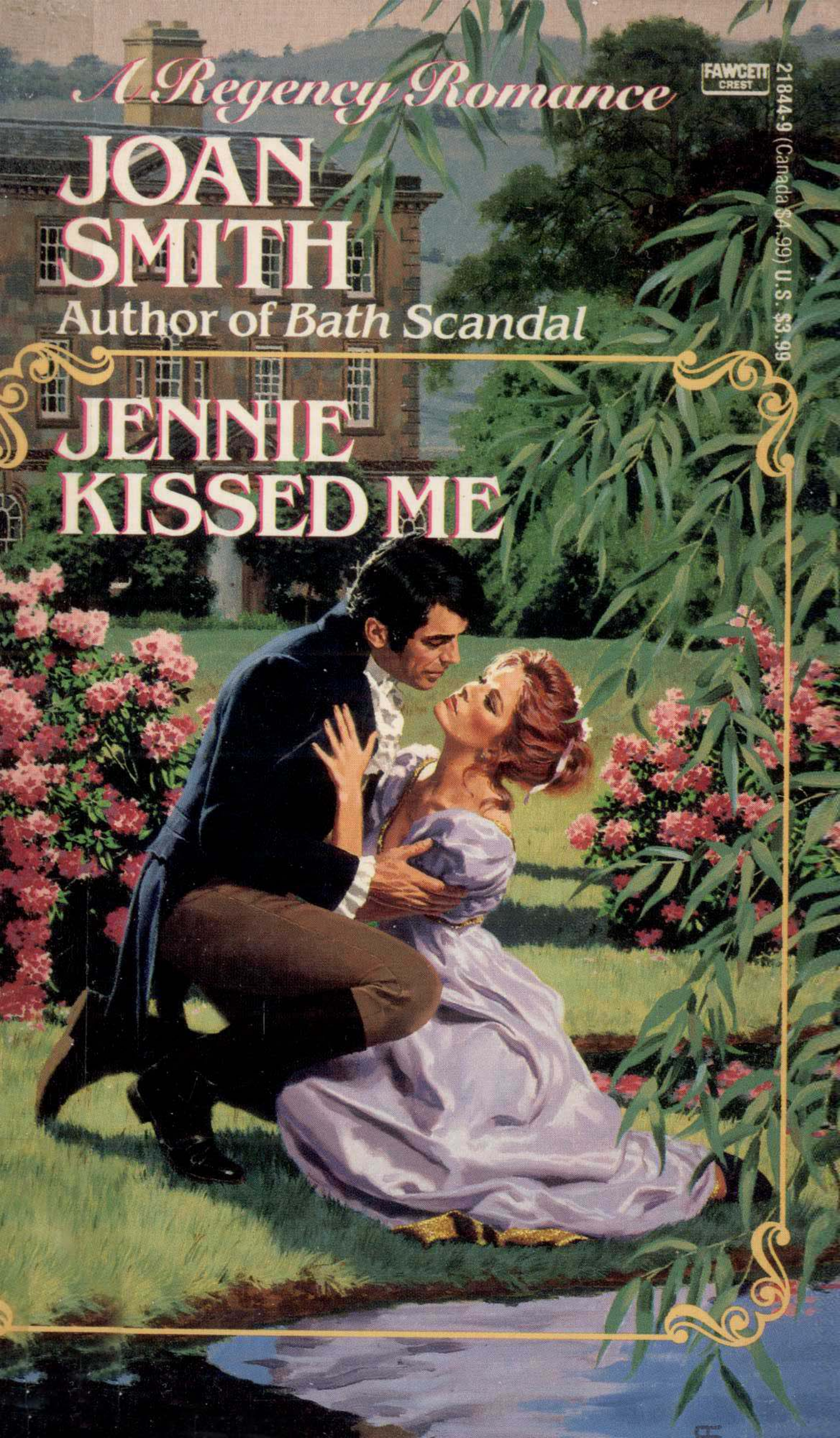
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JOAN
SMITH

Author of *Bath Scandal*

JENNIE
KISSED ME



JENNIE



Joan Smith

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“Get out, oaf!” I said, and shook the constable off. “I wouldn’t kidnap that bold chit for all the money in the mint.”

Lord Marndale looked quite stupefied, whether at my tone or the fact that I stood before him and his army in nothing but a nightgown, I do not know. I realized by his raking gaze at that point that I was undressed and grabbed my new silk dressing gown about me.

“Get this rabble out of here at once. At once, I say,” I commanded, head high, eyes flashing.

Lord Marndale became aware of the rest of the audience and turned to the constable. *“Thank you, officer. I can handle it from here.”*

“Will you be wanting manacles and a cell, milord?” the constable asked, subjecting me to a close examination.

“Don’t be an ass,” I said, shoving him out the door.

“A chair and a whip, perhaps . . .” Lord Marndale murmured, regarding me warily.

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BATH SCANDAL

Chapter One

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Mrs. Irvine declared, sliding her eyes to the couple standing at the far side of the desk. “It,” the subject under discussion, was the probable lechery of the gentleman who had just entered the inn with a young lady. He was ordering rooms for the night and said bold as brass he would like adjoining chambers. “He wouldn’t lay down his blunt for *two* chambers if they are married,” Mrs. Irvine informed me.

“She’s young enough to be his daughter,” I objected.

“That’s the way the gents like them, fresh and biddable.”

Mrs. Irvine has picked up some strangely French notions in her travels. I, like any provincial greenhorn, took the gentleman for the young lady’s husband. The reason for my displeasure was that such young ladies must nab all the eligible older gentlemen. This man looked to have a good ten years on my one score and seven. I, on the other hand, could give his bride a decade.

“I know a lightskirt to see one,” Mrs. Irvine in-

sisted. "I recognize their tricks. You see she is not wearing a wedding ring."

I must digress a moment to explain how it comes that a perfectly respectable matron like Mrs. Irvine, niece to a dean and cousin to my respectable self, comes to be an expert on sexual misconduct. She is the widow of a naval captain, you see, and toured many parts of the world with him, which I think is explanation enough. Abroad she picked up tricks that would shock a seasoned courtesan. The reason we were loitering around the desk was that we had asked for a private parlor for dinner, and some minion was preparing one for us.

The young lady we were studying gave the man a brazen stare and said, "No! I shan't go to Wycherly with you, and that is that. You can't *make* me."

The gentleman insisted; she pouted; he begged; she sulked; finally he glared; she tossed her shoulders. "Wycherly is so boring," she complained. "Take me to Brighton. You promised you would."

"It is not Brighton he has in mind, but a feather tick," Mrs. Irvine whispered in my ear.

The gentleman's protestations went unheard but not unseen. From my vantage point at the other side of the desk, I studied him. His exquisite barbering alone was enough to peg him as a member of the ton. A glistening cap of black silk hair covered his well-shaped head. His face, alas, showed some signs of dissipation. Incipient wrinkles marked his weathered brow and crinkled the corners of his dark eyes. Annoyance deepened a pair of lines at the sides of his lips, but in his well-cut evening suit he was a handsome specimen. He towered a foot over the lady, and unless his shoulders were out of all proportion to the rest of his body, he was well built.

"He should try a diamond bracelet," Mrs. Irvine murmured. "That always worked with the light-

skirts when I was young." The clerk lifted a brow and gave her a disparaging sniff.

I wished she would make clear to any chance listener that her experience was got at secondhand. She looked dowdy but perfectly respectable. In fact she looked exactly what she was: a Bath matron, complete with full figure, dark bonnet and pelisse, and sensible walking shoes. The gown beneath the pelisse defied dating. It belonged to no recognizable era or country. Ladies at sea lost touch with fashion, and now Mrs. Irvine had lost any interest in cutting a dash. Her swarthy complexion held the echoes of her life on the high seas. She is my first cousin once removed, which makes her a generation older than myself.

When I came unexpectedly into a fortune of ten thousand pounds from a nabob uncle I had never met, I threw up my job as school mistress in Mrs. Grambly's ladies' seminary in Bath, hired Mrs. Irvine as my companion, and set off for London. Mrs. Irvine, who has some tenuous connection with society, tells me ten thousand should buy me a baronet. It will be a baronet with an unencumbered estate and preferably a London house as well, or I will keep my blunt for myself.

So far as I am concerned, a husband is a desirable but dispensable accessory, like a diamond necklace or a sable-lined cape. He must be presentable-looking, amusing, and not too demanding of my time, if he wishes to get his hands on my fortune. I have no aversion to the single life so long as I don't have to spend it in front of a room full of chattering girls with a headmistress peering around the corner.

Of course, I realize that being a married lady would open more doors to amusement. In the past I have felt the burn of injustice, to receive letters from my former charges boasting of their marital conquests. No matter how ugly or stupid or ill-tempered, they all married so long as they had that essential dowry.

It was en route to the London Marriage Mart, at

the Laughing Jack Inn outside of Farnborough, that we encountered the couple under observation.

The gentleman was speaking. "I told you, Vickie, I cannot take you to Brighton at this time. My relatives would be in the boughs if I trotted in with you. You know I . . ." His voice petered into inaudibility, but the bit overheard was enough that I soon joined Mrs. Irvine in her opinion of the couple. Vickie continued pouting. Her escort gave some final, curt command and strode angrily away. Vickie was left alone at the desk, fuming.

"He picked up more than he bargained for in that one," Mrs. Irvine said. "She's better off without him. What she wants is some younger gent she can wind 'round her thumb. The older, stiffer ones don't wind so well."

"Poor thing, what will she do all alone here?" I asked. "We could offer her a lift back to London. At least I judge from that outfit that she is from London." Certainly nothing like her satin-lined pelisse had ever been seen in Bath. Her bonnet was a delightful confection with blue ribbons that just matched the lining.

"It won't do you any good to be seen entering town in company with a lightskirt, Jennie," Mrs. Irvine pointed out.

"Pooh. She looks perfectly respectable, and who will see us? We'll treat her to a bedroom tonight and drop her off wherever she wishes to go tomorrow. If this is her first patron, we might rehabilitate her."

Mrs. Irvine gave a jaundiced shake of her head. "She's not one of your respectable girls from a Bath seminary. That bit o' muslin has a mind of her own. I recommend caution."

"Oh, certainly!" I agreed, flying incautiously to the girl's side. Mrs. Irvine trailed along behind. At close range I had no reason to change my mind as to the lady's youth. She had the enviable, glossy eye of the very young, just on the verge of woman-

hood. Her skin was dewy, her teeth perfect. A rim of golden curls peeped from under the brim of the fashionable bonnet. Every instinct rebelled to think of that lecherous old man having his way with her.

I offered my hand, and after a surprised look she accepted it. "You must forgive me for interfering," I said. "I am Miss Robsjohn."

"I'm Victoria Savidge."

"The inn is busy tonight, is it not? My companion and I are waiting for a parlor. We are on our way from Bath to London. You are from London, I recollect?"

She gave a curious smile. "Why do you say that?"

"Because of your toilette. Very handsome, Miss Savidge."

"Thank you." She did not return any compliment on my new finery, but then one did not look for unexceptionable manners in a lightskirt. Her accent was good. Perhaps she was training up for the stage.

"I expect your . . . friend bought you the outfit? The gentleman who just pounced off in a huff."

She did not answer my question but said with a scowl, "He is so domineering there is no bearing it."

It was enough to encourage me to proceed. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation just now. Mrs. Irvine and I would be happy to offer you a lift back to London."

Her luminous eyes held no lack of intelligence. Indeed crafty did not seem too strong a word to describe them. "But what should I tell my . . . friend?"

"Tell him nothing. Run while you have the chance. You should not have come here alone with a gentleman," I said. "It is unconscionable of that wretched man to have stalked off and left you stranded."

"Oh, but he will be back shortly," she said. "We were to stay here the night." Her head turned to the front door. The gentleman was indeed back, even earlier than we both liked. Miss Victoria

scowled. I returned his stare as he paused a moment to glare at me then pelted swiftly forward.

"Come along, Vickie," he said sharply, and placed a commanding hand on her wrist. Vickie wrenched away. You would think Mrs. Irvine and myself were a pair of thieves, the black look he gave us. It was a thoroughly insulting, contemptuous look. I returned bold stare for stare. He grabbed Vickie's wrist again and stalked toward the staircase, dragging the girl after him. Vickie looked helplessly over her shoulder. My blood ran cold to think of that innocent young thing helpless in a room with this anonymous lecher.

"A moment, sir!" I called in a voice loud enough to command the attention of the half-dozen bodies in the lobby. "Miss Victoria has changed her mind. She is coming to London with me." I advanced to rescue her from his clutches.

His glare turned from me to Victoria. "Must you take up with every hedgebird who comes along?" he asked her, making no effort to lower his voice.

"You are mistaken, sir. No doubt you are judging Miss Victoria's eagerness to collect hedgebirds from her association with yourself. My companion and I are perfectly respectable."

His dark eyes raked us from head to toe. "That is a matter of opinion," he retaliated, and resumed his trip toward the staircase. I felt Mrs. Irvine's fingers tugging at my elbow and shook her off.

There was nothing for it but to go after them. "Unhand that girl, if you don't want me to call in the law," I threatened.

The man's face turned from pink to purple. "Go to hell, madam," he said, and started climbing the stairs. I caught hold of his coattail and hung on till he was forced to stop.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. That child is young enough to be your daughter."

"For your information, miss, she *is* my daughter," he growled, and wrenched his coat from my fingers. Shock left them perfectly useless. My eyes fled to Victoria, who gave an insouciant, smiling shrug of agreement over her shoulder as they proceeded in state up the stairs. I looked down to the lobby and saw a circle of smirking faces having a good laugh at my expense.

"A likely story!" I called up after their retreating forms.

The inn clerk came mincing forward. "Aye, 'tis true. That there is the Marquess of Marndale and his daughter, Lady Victoria. They live twenty-five mile yonder, at Wycherly Park."

"If you mean twenty-five miles, say so," I sniffed, and strode, cheeks flaming, head high, back down to the lobby. "Is our private parlor ready yet, or have you been too busy eavesdropping on conversations that don't concern you to attend to it?"

"Your parlor's free now, madam," he smirked, and led Mrs. Irvine and myself, sunk to utter humiliation, into a cozy room. The fire burned briskly. Normally its warmth would have been welcome in late April, but I felt no need for more heat on that occasion. I was blushing all over from shame. "A bottle of wine while we await dinner, please," I said to the clerk.

"I'll send you a servant, madam," he replied with a sneer. What did he think he was? The Archbishop of Canterbury?

"Well," Mrs. Irvine said, with that "I told you so" look, "You can't say I didn't warn you to use a little caution."

My temper broke. "That wretched girl! Why didn't she *tell* me he was her father? Surely she understood my meaning when I spoke of not being alone with him."

"She's a minx, and he's got Old Nick's own temper. We want to stay clear of them when we're leav-

ing. As he's hired rooms, it seems they are remaining overnight, thank God."

I sank onto a chair and dissolved in a puddle of shame. It was only a cruel stroke of chance that brought us to this inn at all. Our itinerary, which I had worked out in meticulous detail, called for us to spend the night in Farnborough, where I had arranged by post to have a bed awaiting us. We had planned to take dinner there as well, but between slow horses, ravening hunger, and general boredom, we decided to take dinner at the Laughing Jack and go on to Farnborough to sleep.

"I hope I never have to see him again as long as I live," I said wearily. "Thank God he is taking her to Wycherly and not to London."

"If he's anybody, he'll be going on to London for the Season," my Job's Comforter assured me. "Not that we're likely to meet him. My connections are not high and mighty marquesses. A knight or a baronet is the best I can hope to do for you. If you wish to disgrace yourself in front of marquesses, you'll have to arrange it yourself."

"I have admitted you urged caution and I did not heed your advice, Mrs. Irvine. Don't make a meal of my error."

When our wine came we ordered dinner, and over a mutton chop and a raised pigeon pie we discussed the incident less emotionally. "He must have married young," I mentioned. "He did not look more than thirty-six or -seven, did you think? And Victoria must be sixteen or seventeen."

"He could have married at twenty, I suppose. Odd his wife is not travelling with him."

"Perhaps he's a widower," I said idly. "What is odder is that he should have been telling his own daughter he could not take her to Brighton. Some relatives he gave as the excuse, did he not?" Mrs. Irvine nodded indifferently. "She didn't correct me

when I called her Miss Savidge. I begin to think he is shamming the waiter with that story."

Mrs. Irvine is but an indifferent conversationalist when she is eating. No matter that the meal was wretched. The chop was of bullet-proof consistency and the gravy so thick you had to cut it with a knife. She made some vague and incomprehensible sound and put another bite of pie into her mouth, which left me alone with my shame and my questions. Mrs. Irvine felt that if she had two desserts, she would not require more food at Farnborough, and to avoid another meal I went along with her. It was an hour after we entered the parlor that we finally left and went to our carriage. With the smirking eyes of the inn upon us, we carried our noses high, like a pair of camels.

Farnborough, our driver told me, was eight miles farther along, not two as originally thought. With an hour to kill, Mrs. Irvine and I curled up in the carriage, pulled a blanket over us, and prepared to pass the hour in idle conversation, mostly about our recent embarrassment.

We shared one banquette in the dark carriage. We had been travelling for two days and had managed to fill one side of the seating space with a miscellany of items to pass the time. Magazines, a box of bonbons, a spare shawl, Mrs. Irvine's netting basket, with a spare blanket thrown over it all. Neither of us gave a second glance at the dark hump in the corner. It was silent and unmoving. How should we suspect a mischievous human body was concealed beneath the blanket?

My first intimation of disaster occurred when Mrs. Irvine dozed off to sleep. From her life on the high sea, she bragged, she could sleep on an active threshing machine. She kept pulling the blanket around her, leaving me uncovered and chilly. Rather than disturb her I reached across and seized

the other blanket. And still I did not realize what I had uncovered. She had her face hidden, you see, and her dark pelisse looked like Mrs. Irvine's spare shawl. It was that sixth sense that finally alerted me. There was an eerie sensation of another presence. I felt a shiver over my scalp. I stared at the dark hump, and as we turned a corner a wan moonbeam picked out the configuration of a human hand.

I let out a shriek to wake the dead, and that is when Lady Victoria sat up straight. "Don't be frightened. It's only me," she laughed. "You said I might go to London with you."

Mrs. Irvine awoke with a start. "What? What?" Her shrieks were added to mine.

"It's Lady Victoria," I told her.

"Good gracious. So it is. I thought we were being boarded by pirates at least." She leaned forward eagerly. "Tell the truth now, missie. That man at the inn is not your papa, is he?"

"Certainly he is," she answered.

"Why can he not take you to Brighton? He mentioned some relatives . . ."

"My great-aunts think I should still be in school—at *my* age!"

"And what age is that, dear?"

"Nearly seventeen."

I was the unwitting kidnapper of a noble sixteen-year-old lady, whose papa had the devil's own temper.

"There'll be the father and mother of a row when he discovers you've slipped overboard. I'd stake my head on it," Mrs. Irvine said with satisfaction. I knew she found life dull since parting company with pirates and wild Indians and shipwrecks.

"We must get you back to him at once!" I declared weakly. Across the miles I could feel his dark eyes burn into me, and I felt a horrible presentiment of chaos to follow.

"Did you not mean your kind offer to help me?" Lady Victoria pouted.

"It was a misunderstanding. We thought you were his *chère amie*," Mrs. Irvine confided. Lady Victoria laughed delightedly. I glared futilely in the darkness of the carriage.

"Oh, here we are at Farnborough," she said a moment later. "Papa won't miss me till morning. He thinks I am asleep. I put some pillows under the blankets to fool him.

"Aboard the *Prometheus*, we used to use the ship's dog for that stunt," Mrs. Irvine informed this innocent young schoolgirl. "Then you have a hairy head on the pillow if the husband comes looking. You want to be sure to feed the dog ale first, for dogs are so jumpy. Old Walsenby had the shock of his life when his 'wife' leapt up and started licking him one night."

Glancing out I saw the myriad lighted windows of the city spread before us. With our inn so close at hand, it seemed a good idea to continue on there and decide what was best to be done. Our team was winded, and to return our unwelcome guest we would have to hire fresh horses. Within five minutes the carriage was lumbering into the coaching yard of a half-timbered inn, and we three ladies alit. Lady Victoria smiled unconcernedly and hung onto my arm as though I were her escort.

"You must be sure to tell your father this was your idea. We had no notion you were with us," I pointed out firmly.

"But it *was* your idea, Miss Robsjohn. You invited me."

She smiled blandly, and I, with great effort, suppressed the urge to box her noble ears.

Chapter Two

Mrs. Irvine got her second meal after all. We retired to a private parlor to discuss what we should do, and as we were entertaining a noble lady, I asked for wine. Mrs. Irvine requested sandwiches to accompany it, and Lady Victoria thought she could eat a few macaroons and perhaps a cream bun.

"We must get you back before your father misses you," I said firmly to Lady Victoria. After insisting on the macaroons, she didn't touch them but ploughed into the cream bun as if it were manna from heaven.

"He won't miss me till morning."

"I shall ask the inn to rent me a fresh team and take her back at once. I suppose we could not send her alone." I spoke aside to Mrs. Irvine. "I must own, I do not relish the prospect of meeting Lord Marndale again."

"We cannot send a young lady pelting about the countryside without a chaperone at night. He'd never see a hair of her head. She'd head straight for London. You'll have to go with her, Jennie."