



***Nowhere Near Respectable* by Mary Jo Putney**

Excerpt

Prologue

London, Early November 1812

The death notice in the London newspapers was small, but it attracted considerable attention. Three of Mad Mac Mackenzie's gambling friends met at the club and raised their glasses to him. "At least he cheated the hangman," one said respectfully. They raised their glasses again to that.

Several society ladies sighed with regret, perhaps wiping away a tear or two of genuine sorrow. What a waste of virile, albeit annoying, manhood.

A man who had claimed to be Mackenzie's friend swore and crushed the newspaper with one agonized fist.

His legitimate half brother, Will Masterson, learned the news in Portugal some

days later. He grieved without tears—and wondered if his maddening brother was really dead.

Mackenzie's old schoolmistress and surrogate mother, Lady Agnes Westerfield, closed her eyes and wept. Trust Mad Mac to get it wrong. The young should not be allowed to die before their elders. It was damnably unfair.

Mac frowned as he read his obituary, and hoped his brother Will didn't see it. As he set the newspaper aside, he also hoped he didn't have to stay dead for long.

Dying was bad for business.

Lady Kiri Lawford, half-Hindu sister of the Duke of Ashton, has fled the country house party of potential husband after hearing racist slurs about her mixed blood. While riding to Dover, she runs in a smugglers' pack train and is kidnapped. The smugglers are debating what to do of her—none of it good—when a stranger arrives at their cave.

Chapter 3

Kiri watched uneasily. Most of the smugglers would be family men and not prone to murder. But drink could make even sensible men violent, and Howard and perhaps others might kill in cold blood. Grimly she returned to working on the manacle. She had to do something, or she'd go mad.

Time passed, the runners got drunker—and then the devil from hell swept into the cave.

Shocked jolted down Kiri's spine before she realized the newcomer was only a large man with a torch-bearing smuggler behind him. The sweeping folds of a dark greatcoat and the wildly flaring flames were what made him look like the devil arriving to claim Faust.

He stepped into the light, doffing a hat to reveal a handsome face that looked as if it was seldom troubled by deep thought. "Greetings," he said in an easy voice that filled the cavern. "How are my favorite free traders?"

Staccato exclamations greeted his appearance. "It's Mackenzie!"

"Aye, Mac the Knife himself!"

"I bet you say that to all the smugglers, you silver tongued devil!"

"Where ye been, ye rogue?"

“Pull up a rock and join us, Mac!”

“Sorry I’m late,” Mackenzie said cheerfully. “I spotted a troop of excisemen and didn’t think you’d want me to lead them here.” He shook hands with the captain. “Could you bring in all I ordered?”

“We were a cask short of the hock, but everything else is on its way.” Hawk poured wine into a glass. “Taste this claret. ‘Tis a new vintage, but mighty fine.”

Mackenzie accepted a glass and swallowed thoughtfully, judging the wine. “Excellent. I’ll want some of this next time around.” He held out his glass for a refill.

“Here’s your special French tobacco.” Hawk handed over a packet. “Smells nice, but no tobacco is worth what you pay me for smuggling this in.”

Mackenzie sniffed the packet appreciatively before tucking it inside his greatcoat. “Worth every penny. A moment please...” He reached into a different pocket and pulled out two canvas pouches, one large, one small. They clanked when he handed them over. “This for the tobacco. This for the wine and spirits wending their way to London.”

“‘Tis a pleasure doing business with you,” the captain said with a rare smile. Kiri noticed he didn’t count the money. Mackenzie must be a regular and trusted customer.

Though the newcomer was large, good-looking, and well dressed, that wasn’t why everyone in the cave watched him. The word *charisma* flitted through Kiri’s mind. She’d had a brief flirtation with a Cambridge student who claimed Kiri was charismatic because her beauty compelled all attention whenever she entered a room. Charisma was a personal magnetism that drew others close, he’d explained. It gave leaders the power to inspire their followers.

Then he’d presented her with a poem written in Greek, which was sweet of him,

and concealed the fact that he was probably a bad poet. Calling Kiri charismatic was mere flattery, but Mackenzie was the real thing. All the runners, even the angry Howard, brightened when the newcomer acknowledged them with a glance or a smile.

Mackenzie was savoring his claret when his gaze reached Kiri. “Who’s the wench?” he asked as he moved in her direction.

Hawk, Howard, and Jed moved with him. “Trouble,” the captain said dryly. “She rode into us when we were moving the goods. Had to take her captive. I’m not sure what to do with her. Maybe see how much her family will pay to get her back.”

“They’d be fools to pay a shilling,” Howard growled. “She needs taming, and I’m going to be first in line.”

Jed laughed. “A good thing her kick was a little off or you’d not be able.”

Coarse banter ensued among the smugglers, but Mackenzie ignored them and went down on one knee to study Kiri more closely. She stared back with narrowed eyes.

The man looked a little familiar, though she was sure she’d never met him. Despite his air of genial frivolity, he moved with the feral alertness of a soldier. One who knew how to kill. But she didn’t sense mad dog violence.

“If looks could kill, we’d all be dead,” he said with amusement. “She might be handsome under that gag. Is it necessary?”

“Had to gag her because her filthy tongue was embarrassin’ us,” Hawk said morosely. “Swears like a drunken sailor.”

The smugglers found that hilarious, and a roar of laughter filled the cavern. Kiri was chilled by the recognition that they were getting to the drunken state where they didn’t care about consequences for their actions.

“What are you going to do with her?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not sure. She’s probably worth something to someone, but I don’t know who.”

The captain scowled. “She ain’t the cooperative sort.”

“Bites like a wildcat and kicks like a bloody mule,” Howard muttered.

“She has spirit,” Hawk agreed. “The sort to march off to the excisemen and persuade them out to hunt us down. She must have a pretty fair idea where this hideout is, too. Damned if I know what to do with her.”

“Tie rocks to her and drop her in the channel,” Howard said.

Kiri glared at the man with murderous rage. She had meant these men no harm. Though she didn’t approve of smuggling, she knew that it was accepted and almost respectable in this area. She’d not have interfered.

But she no longer felt neutral. Given the way they’d treated her, she wanted to do just what the captain feared: bring the law down on these filthy kidnappers. Though she would pass on that in return for the opportunity to kill Howard with her bare hands.

“Says she stole her fancy horse, but I’m thinkin’ she comes from money,” Hawk continued. “Her clothes are strange but not cheap.”

“Sellin’ her back to her family would cause trouble,” Howard argued. “Better to use her and lose her.”

“That would be a waste of a tasty morsel.” Mackenzie’s gaze was still on Kiri, but coolly unreadable. “What’s her name? Maybe I can tell you how valuable she is.”

“Says she’s Carrie Ford, but she could be lyin’,” the captain said with a frown. “Know any rich Ford families?”

“No, but maybe if you take off the gag she’ll say more now that she’s had time to

evaluate the situation.”

“Careful she don’t bite you,” Jed said.

“Or kick you in the bollocks,” Howard added. “She’s trouble for sure.”

“Trouble is my middle name.” Mackenzie caught Kiri’s gaze. “If I take off the gag, will you promise not to damage me or injure the delicate sensibilities of our companions with your language?”

She wanted to kick the lurking smile off his handsome face. But even more, she wanted to be free of the filthy, choking gag, so she nodded.

Mackenzie leaned forward and reached around her head to untie the gag. She gulped a deep breath, grateful for the air.

“That was really cutting into your face.” For a moment he cupped her face in his hands, and his warm touch almost unraveled her. Kiri wanted to turn her face into his palm and weep at the nearest thing to kindness she’d experienced since her capture.

But she could not afford to weaken. Burying her emotions, she said, “Thank you.” Her eyes narrowed. “In gratitude for untying me, you have until the count of three to move out of biting and kicking range. One...two...”

“You really are quite a handsome wench,” he said admiringly as he moved a safe distance away. “Your name is Carrie Ford?” He handed her his half empty wine glass.

She took a swallow of wine, grateful for the moisture and for the taste that washed away the grime of the gag. “Call me what you will.”

“Very well, wench.” His gaze still on Kiri, Mackenzie said, “I’ll buy her off you, Hawk, and offer my personal assurance that she’ll keep silent about this little episode.”

Hawk looked startled, then interested. “How much?”

Mac considered. "I have fifty gold guineas on me. I should think that would do."

It was a small fortune, and an unexpected bonus for the night's work. The captain's eyes narrowed speculatively. "She might be worth more to her family."

"Perhaps," Mackenzie agreed. "But finding her people could be difficult and perhaps dangerous." He pulled another bag from an inside pocket and tossed it in one hand. It jingled alluringly. "Cash in hand, and no trouble for you."

Hawk scratched his stubbled jaw thoughtfully. "That sounds like a good bargain to me." He glanced at his men, who were listening raptly. "What say you?"

The nods and "ayes" of agreement were interrupted when Howard said belligerently, "*I* don't agree! I want the bitch, and I'll challenge this London sharper for the right to have her."

"Then we won't get our guineas!" someone complained.

"I'll pay fifty guineas for her myself!" Howard retorted.

"You have that kind of money?" someone asked with surprise.

Howard stared at Kiri with hot, angry eyes. "I can come up with... thirty guineas now, and I'll pay the rest out of my share of future profits."

Kiri tried to hide her fear. Maybe she should be flattered Howard was willing to spend his savings and pawn his future for her—but not when she knew she wouldn't survive his ownership.

Some of the runners looked troubled, but others found the business highly entertaining. "Sure, we'll wait for part of her price," one said drunkenly. "But when you're through with her, you have to share."

"She won't look so pretty then," Howard said. "What will it be, Mackenzie—"

guns or knives? Or will you withdraw your offer since I saw her first?”

“I’ll take your challenge, but really, nothing so deadly as guns or knives. I greatly dislike the sight of blood. Particularly my own.” Mackenzie pondered. “You gave the challenge, so I pick the weapons. I choose cards.”