

## UNBRIDLED

by Joely Sue Burkhart

“My life is over!” Appalled by threatening tears, Elizabeth wanted to throw her head back and scream with frustration. “Intolerable. I won’t stand for it!”

Her best friend, Harriet, slipped an arm around her waist. “Your father accepted the Duke of Winterfall’s offer?”

“Of course he did.” Elizabeth shuddered. “Not even my batty old grandfather would refuse such a magnificent offer.”

Oblivious to the dancing couples, she lifted her chin determinedly, her mind racing through alternatives. Surely she could plot her way out of this. The *ton* didn’t call her family the “Mad Maddingtons” for nothing. Scandals and outrageous behavior were commonplace for her entire family. Her own father shocked everyone twenty years ago when he ran off with an actress, and her grandfather, the Earl of Branthrope, supposedly rode as a highwayman stealing kisses instead of jewels from the ladies.

*Maybe I can scare the Duke away with a little scandal of my own.*

“Now, Bess, it’s not that bad.” Harriet smiled brightly. “The Duke of

Winterfall could be ugly and as old as Lord Branthorpe himself!”

She was right, and Elizabeth greatly appreciated her efforts to help--but it didn't make this turn of events any easier to bear. Harriet was the only stable, dependable element in Elizabeth's life as she and her father came and went from England countless times over the years. For as long as she could remember, he'd been obsessed with finding the perfect stud for the Maddington stables. He dragged her from Ireland to France to Spain and even Arabia before settling on a beautiful blood-red stallion last summer.

She knew more about horses and breeding lines than most gentlemen, and she was thrilled with the prospect of finally implementing their dream to develop the finest horseflesh in all of Britain. However, the prim and proper Duchess of Winterfall would never be allowed to muck around in the lowly stables.

Elizabeth sighed. “I know. He's fairly young, he's handsome, he's rich. Everything a proper match should be. But why me?”

“You're beautiful, Bess! With that black hair against such delicate creamy skin and brilliant green eyes, you're striking. A diamond of the first water. The catch of the Season! Your family is rich and titled although a tad... eccentric. You're lucky the Duke of Winterfall made his offer so early in the Season. At least none of the other gentlemen will hound you with proposals.”

“Eccentric!” She snorted, ignoring the pointed frown from a well-meaning

matron who overheard her unladylike response. “We’re the Mad Maddingtons, Harriet! If we don’t end up in Bedlam, we kill each other in duels or die at sea or amuse ourselves by becoming highwaymen! Or run off with a scandalous actress like my father.”

“At least he married her,” Harriet muttered.

Elizabeth sighed again. She had to admit there were more than a few by-blows in her family tree, for she wasn’t the only Maddington opposed to marriage. “Shouldn’t marriage be more than titles and estates and bloodlines? I feel like a broodmare! My only purpose will be dropping the Duke’s foals before meekly heading out to pasture.”

“What do you want, Bess?”

“I want...” She closed her eyes, picturing her ideal life. “I want unbridled passion. Adventure. I want the kind of senseless love that would make me run off to France without a care for society or respectability. I guess I want what my father had with my mother.”

“But your mother... left you.”

“I didn’t say my dream was perfect.” Elizabeth smiled sadly. Her father returned to England seventeen years ago with her just a babe in his arms, and her mother hadn’t been seen since. As a child she’d believed her mother would someday come home, and a tiny part of her heart still wanted to be that child. “I

guess I want unbridled passion *and* everlasting love. Is that too much to ask?"

"Well, no, but you can't refuse him now." Harriet studied her face, worry creeping into her eyes. "I know you, Bess. You're up to something. What are you going to do?"

"I promise I won't do anything too risky, but I refuse to stand by amiably while my family thrusts me into the harness and chains of an arranged marriage! If I must, I'll find someone to compromise me just enough to scare the Duke away."

"No one will dare cross Winterfall and you know it. Besides, just think what a beautiful matched pair you'll make!" Harriet laughed, trying to distract her from such an ill-fated scheme with her favorite topic. "Two beautiful black-maned, spirited horses hitched to the carriage, necks proudly arched, green and blue eyes flashing with fire."

"You know I despise bearing reins, martingales and any kind of restraint on a horse's head that inhibits its natural inclinations and movement." Elizabeth tried to keep her voice stern, but her friend painted quite the realistic picture. Her lips curved with amusement. "Winterfall's bearing rein is so tight I'm surprised he can breathe! You should have seen his face last night when I asked him about his breeding program. He choked and stammered, totally speechless, and it was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud. I meant horses of course."

"Of course," Harriet replied dryly. "I know he's high in the instep, but he

has every right to be. And even you, my dear, will have to admit that he looks very nice with that bearing rein so tight.”

“He has very nice... pasterns.” Elizabeth answered primly, and Harriet laughed so loudly the couple waltzing by actually stumbled with surprise. “And hocks, and, well, his hindquarters in general are very attractive. Quite splendid, actually. I cannot complain about his conformation, not in the slightest. But he’s so... so... staid. Proper. Perfectly respectable! From his elegant tan cutaway coat to his carefully tied cravat to his mild-mannered white breeches. Oh, excuse me, his *inexpressibles*! Respectable and perfect and boring! God forbid the man wear green or blue or... or red! Even a colored waistcoat! Something! His neck has got to be stiff. His collar was so high last night I don’t think he could turn his head. I know--if I’m a Mad Maddington, he’s The Stiff-Necked Duke!”

“Maybe he’s hoping you’ll loosen that bearing rein for him.”

“I seriously doubt it, Harriet. No, he’s a carriage horse through and through, and I’m a hunter with the bit between my teeth, charging full speed ahead. But he’ll learn soon enough how much I struggle when Society’s trappings try to tame me. I’ll kick his carriage to splinters.”

#

“I really wish we hadn’t accepted this invitation.” Elizabeth fell against Harriet and smiled apologetically. The carriage trundled along, swaying and

bumping until she found it impossible to stay primly seated on the velvet cushion. Harriet's aunt, Lady Swanson, frowned at her young charges, her back ramrod straight and unaffected by the rough road. "Who's going to be here tonight?"

"Everybody." Harriet straightened her gown for the hundredth time. "We should be there shortly. I have it from Lady Worthington that this ball will be extremely well attended. Her parties are always a crush."

Both young ladies slid into the floor when the carriage suddenly came to a screeching halt, and even Lady Swanson nearly tumbled on top of them.

"Stand and deliver!"

"Oh dear Lord have mercy! A highwayman!" Harriet scrambled to her feet, her eyes wild. "Bess, what are we going to do? Bess!"

"First, get off my skirt so I can get up. We'll give the scoundrel our jewels and purses and he'll be more than happy to look for richer game." Besides, she had a little surprise in her reticule if the rogue was too... demanding. Her father had neglected to teach her many elements of Polite Society, but he'd been adamant that she learn how to shoot.

"Aunt Theodosia, are you alright? Auntie? Oh, Bess, I think she fainted!"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes with irritation. Fainting! A most proper and expected ladylike response to danger or excitement. A response she'd sworn a solemn oath never to succumb. "Take care of her, and I'll handle the

highwayman.”

She pushed the door open and leaned out, more curious than she cared to admit. Maybe she could become a daring highwaywoman. Would that scare the Duke away?

She was not prepared for the highwayman to steal her very breath before he ever demanded she surrender her possessions. He rode a tall, fierce black Friesian, truly a magnificent mount. The scoundrel himself looked smashing in a claret velvet coat, Hessians gleaming like polished mirrors in the moonlight, and white lace cascading at his neck and wrists. A black silk mask covered most of the man’s face, and a dashing feathered hat shadowed the rest of his features. Broad shoulders, big powerful hands and muscled thighs easily controlled the spirited stallion. This highwayman was put together very well, very well indeed.

He smiled, his white teeth flashing with an audacious grin, and her heart skipped a beat.

“Lady Elizabeth Maddington?” His voice was just as smooth and elegant as his clothing, but low and rumbling with violence. Or perhaps another dark, dangerous emotion.

Her heart pounded so loudly she thought he surely must hear it. “Yes.”

The highwayman rode closer and her eyes widened. His face remained shadowed by the cocky hat, but his eyes.... His eyes smoldered with barely

contained emotion. “Then I have a proposal for you, Bess.”

She frowned at the informality. How could this highwayman know her nickname? Maybe he’d overheard Harriet’s frantic voice earlier. “What do you want?”

“I believe the question is what do *you* want, my lady.”

His voice lowered even more, silky with blatant seduction, and she trembled in response. *If my heart beats any harder I’ll break my vow to never faint!*

“It’s my understanding that you wish to escape an arranged marriage. To.... Let me see. I believe the rumor around Town is The Stiff-Necked Duke. Is that correct?”

Scalding heat flooded her cheeks. The Duke of Winterfall would never forgive her for ruining his esteemed name and reputation. Avoiding marriage was her goal, not embarrassing him beyond repair. “Oh, no! Do you.... I mean.... Oh, dear! I never meant for anyone to find out about that name!”

“You’re a sweet-goer, Bess. This will be more entertaining than I expected.”

She wanted to be offended, but the damned scoundrel smiled with such heat and admiration that she couldn’t help but smile back at him.

“Give me a kiss, my sweet, and take a little ride with me. Then I guarantee your Stiff-Necked Duke will want nothing more to do with you.”



He rode closer and she swallowed nervously. He was so big up on that mighty horse, and obviously a stranger of questionable honor and reputation to ride the roads at night to hold up carriages. But her love of the outrageous and her reckless spirit overcame her good sense. Especially when he smiled so devilishly.

“Just a kiss, Bess. Surely a lady of your courage and spirit isn’t afraid of such a small challenge.”

Her eyes sparked and she swallowed her trepidation. How long had she dreamt of just such an adventure? She leaned out towards him, rising up on tiptoes. His gloved hand slid against her cheek as his lips brushed hers. Gentle and tender, his mouth claimed hers with an expertise that left her breathless.

“Come with me, Bess. I offer adventure and unbridled passion. Mayhap love, too, if you want it.”

How did he know her most secret wishes she’d only shared with Harriet?

“But... but....”

“What about your Duke, you ask? Do you love him?”

Wordlessly, Elizabeth shook her head.

He kissed her again as his hand slid to the nape of her neck. “Then come with me.”

“Bess!” Harriet shrieked. “What are you doing? Unhand her, you... you scoundrel! Help!”

“Come with me, my sweet.” The highwayman whispered seductively, gently pulling Elizabeth toward him until she teetered on the edge of the carriage. “I give you my most solemn word of honor that I’ll not harm you. You’ll never regret the adventure. Don’t let him turn you into his broodmare, sweet Bess. Be the wild, spirited, beautiful hunter I know you can be.”

Staring into his dark eyes inches away, she took a long, deep breath. This highwayman understood her true nature better than Winterfall ever would. More, this man seemed to admire that recklessness while the rigidly respectable Duke never would. This was her chance, perhaps her only chance, to truly live.

She jumped.

The highwayman caught her effortlessly and settled her across his thighs. Before she could change her mind or comfort her terrified friend, the fierce black horse whirled and galloped into the night.

#

They rode nearly half an hour, and in that short space of time Bess experienced at least a dozen qualms. No, a hundred. How could she have been so foolish? What would Winterfall say when he found out his fiancée had run off with some disreputable highwayman in the middle of the night? Even her crazy grandfather would take her to task for such outrageous, wanton behavior! And her father....

“Here we are.”

Smoke trailed from the chimney of a small cottage in an out-of-the-way clearing well off the main road. The black horse trotted right to the little shed beside the house, and the highwayman let her slide to the ground before swinging down.

She watched silently as he quickly stripped the tack from his horse, checked the water pail and threw some hay into the manger. At least he saw to his horse's comforts before his own. She thought that was an extremely admirable quality.

However, he apparently meant to linger here quite some time. Unease prickled the back of her neck and shivers trickled down her spine. *What in all the world was I thinking to run off with this stranger?* “I don't even know your name.”

“Reckless Rayden at your service, my lady.”

“Rayden? That's a nice name.”

“Much better than Percy, isn't it?”

Bess winced but didn't comment. Percy was Winterfall's Christian name. She'd never dared to call the Stiff-Necked Duke such a silly, prissy name.

The highwayman offered his arm gallantly. “May I escort you inside, my lady?”

Narrowing her gaze, she lightly placed her hand on his arm. She studied his

profile as much as possible, but the shadows still prevented her from fully examining his face. There was definitely something eerily familiar about him. For him to know the Duke of Winterfall's Christian name, he must have some entrance to Society. He knew entirely too much about her life, not to mention her most secret dreams and hopes.

*Who is this masked highwayman?*

Inside, banked coals cast a dim reddish glow about the small cottage. Clean and tidy, the cottage contained a table offering a basket of fresh fruit, bread and wine, a few aged but comfortable-looking chairs, and an invitingly turned down bed.

Her unease grew. She was completely, utterly alone with this man. This devastatingly handsome man. Whom she'd already kissed! Bess shied away from the sight of the bed, nervously seeking her adversary's location.

Rayden sat before the fire tugging off his boots. He'd discarded the cocky hat and dashing coat beside him on the floor. The collar of his shirt hung open to reveal the skin of his neck and upper torso.

She trembled. Her stomach fluttered with nerves. But her fingers also itched to learn the texture of that intriguing masculine skin. To roughen up that heavy dark hair until it hung in his eyes like a shaggy forelock. To pull the black silk mask away and reveal his face.

She wanted him to kiss her again, but her gaze slid back to the bed nervously. How far would she have to go in this adventure to ensure Winterfall would no longer want her hand in marriage? Wasn't just riding off with the highwayman enough to scare the Duke away?

Bess glanced back towards the fire and her head jerked up with surprise. Rayden stood before her, looming wide and dangerous, his face completely bathed in shadows. His hands settled on her shoulders and turned her around. Like a fool, she went without balking, her mind still numb with shock. When his fingers started unbuttoning her gown....

“Sir, I must protest!”

“Don't you want to scare your Duke off?”

“Well, yes. But... Oh bother! I assure you, Sir, I am not usually so scatterbrained. You're a wonderfully dashing highwayman, but I cannot.... A lady does not... er....” She nodded her head towards the bed and blushed so hotly she actually swayed with lightheadedness.

“But ladies do not usually kiss gentlemen, either, let alone strange gentlemen who are also holding up the carriage.” She heard the amusement in his voice, but the edge of raw desire still wound in and out of his words like dark velvet. “What did you think I would do when you rode off with me, Bess?”

“I thought you were rescuing me from an arranged marriage!”

His fingers continued to work on the buttons down her back until the gown drooped alarmingly. “I am. I am also offering unbridled passion, and love, sweet Bess, the greatest adventure of all.”

She clutched the bodice to her chest and whirled away from him warily. “No thank you, Sir. Now if you’ll kindly return me to Town, I will be sincerely grateful.”

“Didn’t you enjoy my kiss?”

He stalked toward her and she made a pathetic soft sound suspiciously like a whimper. She wasn’t afraid of him, not really. She was afraid of herself. That wild, thoughtless Mad Maddington side that threw caution and propriety to the wind.

His big hand tugged gently through her hair, loosening pins until the heavy black mass tumbled down her back. “So sweet but fierce and passionate. You have more courage than most men I know. I can see why your Duke chose you for his Duchess. You would make a fine, proud showing at any event, Bess. He must care for you a great deal.”

“I don’t want to be a Duchess! And he could never care for me, not like I want.”

“How do you know? Was he cruel? Tell me, dearest, and I’ll demand satisfaction at dawn. Did he neglect you after making his intentions known? Did

you fear him? Why would you flee with me?"

"He's not cruel, and he never neglected me, not at all." She hung her head, fighting back tears. "But he doesn't care for me, either. He's never professed his undying affection, he's never looked at me with his heart in his eyes, he's never done or said anything improper. He never will! He's utterly, perfectly respectable, and his Duchess must be the same way. I can't do it! I can't be calm and staid and ladylike all the time. I can't! Just thinking about it..."

Her hand fluttered up to her throat unconsciously, her breathing shallow. "He'll stifle me. He'll chain me and lock me up with respectability and titles and eventually his heirs, with no real love in his heart. I can't breathe..."

Rayden growled roughly and pulled her into his arms protectively. "No chains, dearest, I swear it. With me you can be as wild and mad as you want, and I'll murder anyone who tries to put a halter on my proud Bess."

He stroked her back, and she relaxed against him. He felt so good, solid and safe and strong. This highwayman held her, and swore to never harm her, and she believed him. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to depend on him, just a little. She nestled closer, enjoying the warm, velvet skin of his neck against her face.

"You smell very nice," Bess whispered. Her lips brushed his skin, and he tightened his hands on her back with a low, rough sound in his throat.

Emboldened, she pressed her mouth to his neck. His throat. His chest.

“Sandalwood.”

She rubbed her face back and forth against his skin and desire flared inside her. She moaned softly when his palm closed over her breast, the heat of his skin soaking through the thin material. She could feel every passion and desire in his arms and find heaven on earth. She could throw everything away for him in a heartbeat.

She could love this man.

With a regretful sigh, she stepped back and turned away from him. To distract him, she allowed the elegant gown to slip to the floor. Clothed only in her corset and chemise, she coolly retrieved her reticule from the small table where she'd dropped it. “I must ask you again to take me back to Town, Sir.”

“I thought you cared nothing for Society's trappings.”

Bess shivered at the undisguised need in his voice. She felt him take a step towards her, the air charging with his intensity. Quickly, she turned and leveled the pistol at his chest without a single quaver. “I don't, but Winterfall does. He's an honorable man, and I refuse to betray him so thoroughly. You'll take me back to Town, Reckless Rayden. Now.”

The highwayman laughed.

Her eyes narrowed with irritation. “I assure you, Sir, I know how to use this



pistol and I will shoot you if I must.”

He only laughed harder. Actually, he laughed so hard he bent over, gasping for breath. He took a few unsteady steps backwards and collapsed into the chair. She almost planted a bullet in him just to ease the stinging prick to her pride, but her heart couldn't bear to hurt him.

“I thought I planned for every contingency. I convinced my mother's dear friend to send false invitations to you and your friend. I spoke to Lady Swanson's coachman to ensure he wouldn't shoot me. I bribed the local authorities. I read all the legends about real highwaymen so I could thoroughly impress you. I even purchased this blasted red coat, all the time calling myself an utter fool. But I never thought *you* would shoot me! Instead of the legendary 'Black Bess' carrying me to safety in record time, my Bess shoots me!”

Very deliberately, she kept her voice icily calm. “Remove your mask, Reckless Rayden.”

The highwayman jerked the black silk away to reveal her fiancé's proudly arrogant features.

“You dim-witted, cork-brained fool! I almost shot you! And you *lied* to me! Did you think to treat me like a light-skirt and thoroughly shame me? To trick me into admitting my fears about you so you could laugh at them?”

“I never lied!” He protested, still chuckling.

“Oh, no? *Rayden?*”

“My full name is Percy Rayden Albert Stonewell. My mother is the only person who dares call me Percy, and only when I’ve behaved most badly. Like tonight. I must admit that I overheard you and Harriet at Lady Pemberton’s ball three nights past.”

Bess ground the heel of her hand against her mouth to choke back the wail of humiliation threatening to escape. *Exactly what did I say that night?*

“You called me The Stiff-Necked Duke, and you were right. You also commented on my.... How did you say it? Ah, my splendid conformation. My hindquarters.”

She raised the pistol again, blinded by tears, but he seized her wrists and dragged her into his lap.

“I am more pleased than I can say that you admire my pasterns.” Rayden kept his voice bland, but his mouth quirked with amusement. “Let me add that I, too, admire your pasterns, Lady Elizabeth. I admire you a great deal. Do you have any idea how difficult it’s been to maintain my thinly veiled mask of respectability around you? You’ve obviously driven me insane, or else why would I attempt such a hare-brained stunt?”

She stared at him wordlessly, tears trickling down her cheeks. Her chest was so tight she could barely breathe. He truly admired her, even knowing the truth

about her desire to scare him away?

“Shoot me if you must, but you’ve already stolen my heart. I swear I had no intention of offending you tonight. I overheard your desire to escape me by compromising yourself, and I panicked. I decided I had best be the one to compromise you, or else shoot whomever you tricked into risking my wrath. Will you loosen my bearing rein, dearest, and become my wife?”

Bess stroked trembling fingers through his hair. “No more Stiff-Necked Duke?”

“I admit I must sometimes be a carriage horse, calm and dignified and respectable. But if that bearing rein gets too tight, I know a wonderfully wild hunter who will remind me what it’s like to run the fences.”

“You will occasionally be Reckless Rayden?”

“Only for you, my Mad Maddington. We’ll cast off the carriage and harness and run wild and free.”

Snuggling closer, Bess lightly nibbled his lips. “Then I only have one more question, Rayden. How’s your breeding program?”

The End

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Joely

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