

Time Indefinite

Chapter 1

Arrival

Maddie Thornton was excited. She saved all her money this year, including her Christmas bonus and now her dream vacation was in full swing.

Here she stood, in the very midst of Summerset Village, along with the rest of the nerdy followers of the hit television series, *The Knights of Chivalry*. An English production that had taken the entire world by storm last season with its highly anticipated premier on the BBC network.

Since then, the show had won award after award, its authentic production values catching the eye and heart of every woman in the entire Universe.

That the series' leads were two amazingly handsome, virile men who did not cater to the modern views of what feminists insist men should be, seemed only a perk to all the female viewers.

Maddie stood now, on the side of a street, roped off that no over enthusiastic fan not trouble the film crew, set up just a few hundreds yards away. Maddie could hardly contain her growing excitement.

She wanted to squeal her delight having been one of the early arrivals, securing a good spot to see all the action that was to take place shortly, according to the latest update on the 'Knights' fan site the girl frequented faithfully.

Tension and excitement were mounting among the crowd who were surprisingly well behaved today.

Maddie could see the smiles and anticipation on all the women's faces as they too, watched and waited, phones ready to capture any and all glimpses of the aforementioned heartthrobs.

Already, Evan Murphy, the lead character had stuck his head out of the make-up trailer sitting over by the back of several parking lots where the crew had set up the necessary containers.

Causing shouts of approval and swoons of joy from his many, many female fans.

"Excuse me."

Maddie moved over obligingly, not bothering to look up for she had missed that crucial moment with Evan Murphy because she had been too occupied with the aesthetics of the small village of shops and quaint homes just across the street.

"...Excuse me, are you Madeline Thornton?"

The question was a total surprise, for the girl knew no one in England whatsoever. She turned her head, not recognizing the older, more stately gentlemen who had addressed her.

“Madeline Thornton?” the elder man tried again, to get her attention.

“Ohh, hello.” She loved the English accent, already charmed by the presence the guy exuded. “Eh...how do you know my name?” she smiled to soften the question. “Do I know you, Sir?” She knew she didn’t but the English were a polite crowd, she was already learning.

The man returned the smile, his manner subdued and quiet. “No, but it’s imperative we speak.”

“...About?” she constantly kept a running check on the production side of the matter, anxious to be about her business which was capturing each and every aspect and moment of this wonderful opportunity.

This guy didn’t seem to understand the importance of ‘The Knights of Chivalry’ television series.

A part of her wondered. What the hell could an old man have to speak to me about, a complete stranger...that is so apparently urgent...for she sensed just such an emotion oozing off the guy.

“You are the Director of Antiquities for the New York Historical Society Museum?”

“The...Assistant Director.” Maddie gave over her full attention. “Say, what is this?” her ‘Creepoid Radar’ went off. She stepped back away from the old geezer.

“Please hear me out, Ms. Thornton. I mean you no harm.”

“Yeah, well, I got mace in my purse, Mister so...move carefully here.” Maddie grasped her purse more tightly.

She checked the crowd, feeling there was safety in numbers.

“You are currently researching the life and times of Lord William Pratt, former House of Parliament member, am I correct.”

Maddie stared at the man.

“Who wed the Contessa Maria Vanessa Conti in the Year of Our Lord, 1879?”

“The Year of our Lord?” Maddie’s brow rose.

“It is imperative that marriage never take place.” the gentleman finished, his expression completely serious.

“Seems that boat has kinda sailed, Mister.” Maddie glanced around for assistance, in any shape or form.

“It is difficult to explain but if I could have some of your...”

“Look.” Maddie was from New York. She could handle this. “I really do have mace in my purse and I’m not afraid to use it. So, back off, Yosemite, get my drift?” she lifted those perfectly arched brows, as a warning and took her leave.

She moved on down the line, hating to leave her spot but...damn it all. That old man spoiled the mood and the ‘spot’.

She cut him a ‘mean’ look then settled into a small niche by a lamp post. She readied her camera, returning her interest to the film crew.

“Did I miss anything crucial?” She asked a fellow ‘fan’ who shook her head, the woman's manner bored and impatient.

“They will wait until the last minute. They always do. Damn tv stars think they are Mel Gibson or something.”

Maddie nodded that she ‘got’ that statement. “Still...it’s kinda exciting, right?”

The other woman smiled in agreement.

Maddie settled in for the duration, her good mood restored.

The other people around her suddenly whisked their cameras up for ‘filming’. She hastily followed suit, zeroing in on the opening door of one of the small but clearly new trailer’s over by the set.

Someone was coming on-scene.

A thrill shot through the woman’s entire body. She stifled a small squeak of growing excitement.

Suddenly, to her left, the scrunch of tires and crash of two cars colliding caught everyone’s attention.

Maddie inadvertently swung her phone over to the spot. She glanced around the small screen to see two vehicles, having had a very minor fender bender.

She sighed her annoyance, hastily sweeping her phone lens back to the developing scene. God, what had she missed this time??

A sudden bout of dizziness made the girl sway precariously, her vision swimming dangerously for a long beat. Nausea swept through her frame, and she hastily downed her head, hoping the weird English breakfast she had eaten, did not come back up.

Wow...what was that?

The girl took a few seconds to center herself, then...bravely worked through the moment. She shook her head, taking in a deep breath. She hastily refocused her attention on her raised phone screen.

Maddie's brain turned to mush for a second, for in her viewer, the quaint little shops across the street were all...gone.

Her mouth fell open, and the woman quickly sought the area over her phone top, seeing...nothing but a stretch of open field, grass tall and waving in the stout wind coming off the area.

Maddie blinked her awe, staring long and hard, a small gasp escaping her throat.

Where...were the fucking shops. Her senses kicked in and she hurriedly sought assistance in her fellow...

She was alone.

There were no 'Knights of Chivalry' fans.

There was no film crew.

There were no make-up trailers.

There were no quaint shops or even...modern light posts or high line wires overhead.

"...W-What...the f-fuck."

Maddie's first thought? She had some kind of medical episode.

This was not real. None of it...what she was seeing, was...real, surely.

Was she lying on the sidewalk, dead to the world? Having passed out? Was this an out-of-body experience?

Oh my god...was she dead?

The thought terrified the woman for all of one second.

Maddie's pragmatic side kicked in. Maddie Thornton was a realist.

She had just fainted. She would wake up embarrassed and horrified in a few seconds, hang on girl.

Just...hang on.

?The sound of wheels grating over cobblestone caught her attention.

Maddie glanced to her left, her world shifting once again on its axis.

Coming toward her at rather a clipped pace was an old-fashioned carriage straight out of Jack the Ripper times, or what Maddie assumed was those times.

She stared, transfixed, looking at the faces of two evil looking black horses, running full force in her direction.

The driver was frantically waving at her.

Maddie squinted, for the guy appeared to be wearing the strangest outfit. Was this another movie set?

What in God's name was going on?

A pair of hands lifted her off the ground, and suddenly...

Maddie blinked her shock, for she was now deposited over the back side of a horse. She knew she was because the ground below her eyesight was askew, her stomach was pushed hard against a saddle and she could see the distinct hooves of the horse's legs moving rapidly and fast against the grass below her.

The horse pulled to an abrupt halt. Maddie would have slid off her precarious perch but for the staying property of a pair of very strong hands preventing just such an occurrence.

She felt fingers bunched tightly into the back of her coat, holding her from an undignified exit off the horse's back.

Those same fingers lifted her effortlessly, easing her entire weight to the ground.

Maddie righted herself, her immediate attention for the carriage that lumbered by the very spot in which she had previously stood, gawking at its approach.

The driver spared her a malicious glance as he passed not bothering to slow or stop to see if she was alright even.

"Little bastard." the woman snipped her pique, dusting her clothing absently, looking after the rapidly disappearing coach. "Sunday driver!" she called out, her temper flaring. "You could have killed my ass, you fucker."

She offered a very 'New York' gesture to the rapidly disappearing 'vehicle'.

"Do you believe that asshole?" she asked the only other person available, finally taking the time

to seek out her rescuer.

The girl blinked her sudden state of shock.

Two of the greenest eyes she had ever seen stared at her. Very masculine eyes.

The guy was dressed straight out of a movie set. Complete with a cape and a rather authentic looking knife sticking out of a leather belt he wore.

“Perhaps had you not been standing in the middle of the travel path?” the very masculine tone chastised. “Even an idiot knows to get out of the way of a moving carriage.”

“Yeah, well...so’s your mother.” Maddie was from New York. She knew how to respond to an insult. “I didn’t ask you to swoop in like Robin Hood. I can take care of myself, Mister.”

“Evidence would have it differently.” the green eyes filled with a reluctant amusement. “Lady.” clearly, the word was a questionable one for the ‘gentleman’.

“What the hell is going on around here. Where am I? How did I get here?” She was more than incensed. “I don’t know this place.” she accused heatedly. “And who the hell are you to be coming on scene like one of the Avengers.” she crinkled her nose at the guy. “I can take care of myself. I’m from New York.” She was proud. “I’ve got a knife somewhere in this purse...” She started rummaging rapidly.

“So...do I.” He produced the lethal looking weapon casually, for inspection.

“You put that away, Mister. I have mace in here! I’m giving fair warning.” She faced him squarely. “I’ve taken Tae Kwon Do lessons from Master Benny’s in Queens.” She exasperated. “Okay, I didn’t finish the class, sure. I only went two times but I assure you, I know how to disable you with a couple of well-placed fingers, Mister so...stay back.” She gestured that he should.

“I could say the same, my lady.” His eyes twinkled with subdued humor.

The girl glanced to his meaning. “Is that sexual innuendo?” she narrowed her eyes at the guy. “Oh, like I haven’t heard that one before.”

The man’s brows lifted, his amusement increasing. “You are plain spoken, from where do you journey?”

“How the hell should I know.” she sought out her predicament, her expression a woe-be-gone one. “I was standing on the sidewalk, minding my own business and then...” Tears threatened as her situation came crashing in on her like waves of despair. “I was almost run down by a team of rapid horses and their maniacal coachman.”

“The driver had the animals well under control, Lady or you would not be standing here now.”

“I’ve dodged New York traffic at rush hour, so what do you know.” Maddie countered evenly.

The man’s brow furrowed thoughtfully.

“Do you speak of York?” he seemed puzzled by her speech.

“Is that what you Limey’s call it...still?” It was her turn to be puzzled.

The girl sighed more than heavily. “Just direct me to the nearest Holiday Inn. I can make my way from there.”

He glanced around their environment. “The only Inn in this vicinity would be the ‘Boor’s Crossing Inn’ in Lambeth.”

“Are you putting me on?” she was ready to be pissy, if so.

The man sighed, dismounting. “Let us start fresh, shall we.” it was suggested. He approached the girl, and she...retreated slowly.

The man pulled up, spreading his hands. “I mean you no harm.”

“Yeah, well...just stay there and say what you have to say.” Maddie motioned to the spot he occupied.

The man bowed minutely. “As you wish.” He lifted his head, beginning afresh. “The manor is there.” He pointed to the East. Maddie had not noted the massive house or grounds. “You are welcome to come rest until you get your bearings. How did a lone woman come to be out here on her own with no protection.”

Maddie shifted a wary gaze, nothing more.

“No matter. The manor belongs to His Lordship William Pratt. He would wish me to extend the invitation.”

Maddie searched out her surroundings, in truth still reeling from...whatever the hell was going on here.

“...Are you...dead?” the only logical conclusion reared its ugly head. She teared up. “Am I?”

The man did not laugh as she thought he might, his brow furrowing darkly. “Madame. I assure you, I am not one of the dead nor...are you. You clearly have had a harrowing experience but it can be put to rights, I am certain. Oft times, a warm hearth and food is all that is needed to right any wrong.” he lifted his hand to the house on the hill. “There are any number of servants and people around, that you will not be alone with a strange man. You will be perfectly safe and protected from any sort of harm.”

the day I've had." she struggled up, glancing around her surroundings.

Whose room is this?" it was a nice room as rooms went, Maddie supposed but the decor was the last thing on her mind at that exact moment in time. "Alice was it?" she sought the young woman out. "How did I...get here and where...is here?"

"This be Miss Felicity's room but she be in France for the season. She will no mind you making use of it and it is a warm, lovely room, aye?"

"...Yeah. It's peachy, honey." The woman sat up, scooting to the edge of the bed. "Lovely, really but...can you provide a few answers for me, do you think?"

"I will try, Ma'am." Alice was game.

"Is this...still England?" Start at the beginning of any story, was Maddie's moto.

"Of course it be England." the young girl laughed such a silly question aside. "Ye be just outside Lambeth on his Lordship's estate. Mr. Caleb brought you here, himself a few hours ago, he did. You were in a state, you were. But, you be better now. Your color is returning."

Maddie processed. "...Okay now, this one is going to throw you a bit but...bear with me." she smiled to lessen the effect...she hoped. "What...year is this?"

"...Oh, did you hit your head, Ma'am. Are you injured." Alice was instantly concerned. "M' brother once, fell and a knot came upon his temple, just here and he was in a fine state for a few hours. He was right as rain by the morning, though. Is that what happened to y, then?"

"...Yeah. That's it. So...can you help a girl out, Alice? What year is it honey? Humor me."

"The Year of our Lord, 1878. It be a Tuesday and it is coming up on dinner time. Do you feel up to supping with the family, Miss? They be all abuzz about the new woman who Mr. Caleb brought this very day."

"Oh...sounds like fun." Maddie forced a smile. "Can't wait. 1878, you said?"

"Aye, Ma'am."

"My name is...Maddie." she smiled sincerely. "You can call me...Maddie."

Alice smiled right back.

"And...I'm not dead and you're not dead. Did I get that one right?" Maddie tried for light and airy.

"You be silly, Ma'...Maddie." The young girl blushed. "It be no allowed though, me calling you by your name and such, you know, of course."

“I insist.” Maddie scooted off the bed, slowly getting her bearings. She surveyed the room. “This is a nice room.” She smiled softly at the girl. “And thank you for taking such good care of me, Alice. I’m sorry if I was any trouble. So…”

Maddie shrugged helplessly. “Guide me through this ordeal. What’s on the agenda? What happens next?”

“You be no trouble a ‘tall, Ma’am. If you wish, I can help you get ready to go down to the hall.”

The woman glanced at her attire. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong, Ma’am. I just thought...well, your clothes are very...nice but the Pratt’s, they dress for dinner, you see.” Alice was at her most diplomatic, Maddie sensed. “Miss Felicity has any number of dresses which she would be the first to offer over for Madame’s use.”

Maddie frowned. “Hey, these are my best clothes. I wanted to look cool for Evan Murphy today.”

The long black skirt still held its flow and the ruffled white blouse with its medieval vibe was just what Maddie was looking for to impress her favorite television actor, had she been able to actually meet the guy.

Which...she hadn’t.

God that seemed so long ago.

The girl sat heavily in a small chair by a desk, the full weight of what was happening to her crushing down suddenly.

“Are you alright, Ma’am?” Alice rushed to her aid.

“...No, kid.” Maddie knew. “Nothing is alright but...” she swallowed hard, lifting her head. “A guy has to go on, right.” She stood, drawing in a deep breath.

“Oh, Ma’am.” Alice remembered, rushing to a chest of drawers. “I dinna know how important this trinket was, so I put it here for safe keeping. It fell out of your coat pocket when I was hanging it.”

Maddie took the strange looking object, her scowl darkening. “What is this, Alice?” she turned the small shape about in her palm. It was smooth and cool and reminded Maddie of a new-fangled computer mouse Elon Musk might eventually invent.

“I dinna know, Ma’am. I thought it belonged to you.”

“...Yeah.” Maddie forced a smile. “I was just pulling your leg. It’s mine alright. Thanks for

taking care of it.”

Maddie stuck the metallic triangle in her skirt pocket. Her fingers moved over the odd feeling metal absently. She had never seen the damned thing in her life but something was telling her, it was an important piece of the puzzle she was living right now.

“So...onward and upward, huh?” She motioned the way.

“Are you certain you’ll not be wanting to...change?”

“They take me or leave me.” Maddie was a more than a little insulted but, one went with the flow, she supposed. “This is rocking where I come from.” Alice was assured.

“I will show you to the dining room, Ma’am.”

“Goody.” Maddie forced a lightness she did not feel. “More stress...just what I need.”

“Very good, Ma’am.” Alice clearly was beginning to have her doubts about the new arrival on scene. Maddie couldn’t blame her. She had doubts, and misgivings and...a lot of fear, along about now.

Maddie had to give it to these people. They showed a great measure of class. They hadn’t gawked, or stared or made any overt gestures...

“Madame. How good to see you up and about.” A man, in his early thirties arose from the head of the table, coming to greet her arrival in the large, elegant room. “I trust you are feeling better?”

“Right as rain.” Maddie tried to be gracious. She hadn’t ever had to practice such a thing, so she hoped she was pulling it off. “How cool that you invited me into your home. I appreciate the kindness.”

“...Eh, no problem whatsoever. You are welcome here. Let me introduce everyone.” He did so with a certain charm and civility that put Maddie at ease quickly enough and everyone present was classy enough to pretend her arrival was something they could easily accept.

“And this is my...intended. Contessa Maria Conti. And I am, of course.” the man waited for the two women to acknowledge each other. “William Pratt. I suppose I should have begun with that one.”

Amused chuckles met with the man’s statement. It was clear, he was well-liked by his constituents here this evening.

“You remember Caleb Finnigan? He brought you here to us.”

The man looked different dressed in much better clothing.

Although Maddie kinda liked the roughhewn look of before. The fancy dress slacks with the long waist coat did not seem quite to fit the muscular, stocky form although he wore the outfit well, he just seemed...uncomfortable in such attire.

The green eyes held Maddie's less confident ones easily. "I am pleased you seem to be feeling more yourself, Miss."

"Whoever that is." Maddie wasn't on sure footing as yet, she knew. "...I feel like Alice in Wonderland."

"Ah, Lewis Carrol." William Pratt grinned over at an obscure young lady. "Bethy...one of your favorite authors, yes? Miss...eh..."

"Madeline Thornton."

"Miss Thornton, Elizabeth Garrett. She is my son's tutor, one of them. I think he is secretly in love with our Miss Garrett." The young woman was teased.

Elizabeth flushed prettily, clearly out of her depth with so many eyes on her pretty face. "Jamie is a fine lad, Sir, but he does not enjoy the novel in question. He says it is for females to read. He is more interested in the adventures of Ivanhoe, at this stage."

"As any lad should be." His Lordship approved. "I was more interested in Rebecca, if I recall but I am certain my son's tastes run more to Brian de Bois-Guilbert, the quintessential villain, yes?"

Elizabeth lowered her eyes. "I fear so, My Lord."

Several soft chuckles ensued thereafter.

"Yeah, I loved the movie." Maddie commented unthinkingly.

A thick silence met with the remark.

"I mean...eh, the play." She corrected hastily.

"You have seen the play?" one elderly woman saved Maddie's ass, feigning interest for all was still rather shell-shocked by the remark, the girl was certain.

*Fuck...*she would have to watch her Ps and Qs here...she didn't want to be burned as fucking witch.

"Oh, yes. I was fortunate to see it." She let it go for she had no clue where the damned thing was playing or if it was or had been. She smiled tightly. "That food smells heavenly."

“Forgive me.” William offered his hand. “Please allow me to seat you.”

Maddie looked at it for it was a foreign gesture to her but her instincts kicked in and she placed her hand on his arm, just like all the chicks in the movies she had watched over the years.

Maddie was a movie buff. She was a sucker for a good, old-fashioned medieval film feast.

Many a weekend was spent binge watching old forties and fifties ‘knight’ movies.

From the time she entered the room, she felt Caleb Finnigan’s eyes.

She felt them now as she glanced about aimlessly, trying to figure out the process of this ‘dinner’ thing.

Polite conversation ensued as each guest returned to their food and drink.

Maddie sought out the place settings, picking up one of the three prong forks by her place.

She happened to catch the eye of Caleb Finnigan who discreetly showed he was, himself, using the two-prong variety of the utensil for the staff had served a small plate of something, for the moment, unrecognizable to Maddie.

She hastily corrected her mistake, pleased to see no one had noted but...the man who now smiled gently over at her, leaning, partaking of the food, showing the woman how it was done.

Maddie followed suit, her cheeks tinting a little but she hastily got the moment under control.

The food tasted passable but bland.

The dinner continued with no further incident.

At the conclusion, the women rose, all congregating out the opened doors to another section of the house.

Maddie begged off, asking if it would be alright if she adjourned to her room for the night.

His Lordship was the epitome of graciousness.

She needed time alone to think...to figure a way out of this...whatever the hell she had fallen into.

Beyond that, the young woman was lost, her mind filled with chaos and confusion.

Once inside the quiet of the room assigned her, Maddie sat...waiting.

For what, she had no clue but her mind began to function, finally.

Madeline sat, turning the object over in her hands. This was the key but to what door.

It had no buttons, no knobs, no hidden compartments that she could find. It was sleek and gray with no ridges or indentations. One end was smoothly pointed, the other rounded to fit the palm.

The old man was another key. Where did he fit? Had he somehow put this thing into her pocket and if so...why?

She had met this Contessa woman and she seemed okay to Maddie. She wasn't a bitch or anything that Maddie could see. She appeared refined and graceful and she was a lovely woman.

"Lord William Pratt, who wed the Contessa Maria Vanessa Conti in the Year of Our Lord, 1879?"

“It is imperative that marriage never take place.”

So, what did it all mean and where did she come into the equation. Maddie didn't know these people, she

The old guy was right. She was researching the project her boss, Frank Palmer, assigned just about five months back. Since then Maddie had pulled every piece of information, every google site, every slice of William Pratt's life and put it under a microscope.

The Museum was doing a retrospect on important figures of the 1800s. Pratt was just one of hundreds Maddie would catalog then present to Palmer for review.

Admittedly, the woman had found his Lordship especially interesting for the man seemed straight out of some Emily Bronte novel. Very swoon-worthy guy.

His life read like a heroic epic to which only Mel Gibson could have done justice.

Meeting the man in person had not dispelled that illusion.

“It is imperative that marriage never take place.”

Maddie pondered the words for the hundredth time.

“Why?” she snapped her annoyance. “What the hell is so important about that marriage?”

“What marriage?”

The girl startled, not having heard another’s approach. “You scared the crap out of me.” she was still trying to get her heart to settle down, throwing the man an irritated glare. “Don’t sneak up on a person. It will get you shanked in the Bronx.”

Caleb Finnigan chuckled, sitting on the opposite bench. Maddie had found a lovely niche under an arbor. The flowers were gone for it was early autumn, but the sun was warm here and the side of the manor was protected from the wind.

“Shanked.” The man repeated. “I do not know that word but it does not sound very appealing.”

“It ain’t.” the girl assured.

“Of what marriage do you speak?” The shrewd eyes were turned on the girl.

“My brother’s.” Maddie could lie with the best of them, if occasion called. “He’s thinking about marrying a succubus. Not a nice lady. I’m trying to talk him out of the debacle. Does he listen? No!”

Maddie had no brother...or sister. Or parents. Maddie Thornton was alone in this big, cruel world. Had been now since she turned seventeen.

Her mother had a sister in Albany somewhere but Maddie had never bothered to look good old Aunt Maggie up because Aunt Maggie hadn’t even bothered to show up for Maddie’s parents funeral after the car wreck that took both their lives.

Fuck Aunt Maggie, was Maddie’s slogan.

“You...interest me.” The man shifted those arresting eyes and Maddie felt sorta like an insect

under a microscope.

“You interest me too, fella.” she smiled prettily over. “A big, handsome man like you? I bet you interest a lot of women.”

Those eyes...smiled. “Where did you come from?”

“New York.” She answered automatically then, from the slight scowl which appeared on the ‘handsome’ face. “York.” she corrected. “Been there?”

He shook his head and Maddie noted the soft brown hair moved gently with the effort. His hair looked soft and shiny and...sexy. “My people are from Plymouth.”

“Lovely town.”

“Not truly.” another frown. “It is a seafaring town. I was in Her Majesty’s service for many years.”

“Explains the tats.” she had noted the markings for upon their first meeting, his sleeves were rolled up those burly arms.

“The...what?”

Maddie motioned. “I like the naked chick.”

The man’s brow was getting a workout this day. “There is no...chick.” He checked but his expression was a derisive one. “Your language is...peculiar, indeed.”

“The lady...she is minus clothing.” Maddie clarified. “Not peculiar just...different, maybe from what you know.”

Caleb glanced to his arm again. “Ah...you refer to...her.” He showed the full article.

Maddie leaned, perusing the very well-developed biceps. “She’s beautiful.”

Those green eyes swept her frame consideringly. “As are you.”

Maddie blinked. “Me?”

“Aye.” Those eyes deepened and Maddie found herself finding an excuse to look away. She cleared her throat self-consciously.

“Never been accused of it.” She was suddenly regretting the fact she had just twisted her hair up in any old fashion this morning. She touched the blonde mane, grimacing slightly.

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“Well, believe it.” Maddie rose, stiff from sitting so long. “That horse of yours leaves a lasting impression.” She arched her back this way and that, trying to pull the kinks out to no avail.

“A hot bath will soothe and heal.” The man rose as well, towering over her. He smiled down.

“Should I tell Alice to prepare one for you?”

“I will prepare my own if I decide to take one, thank you. She has enough on her plate without tending to an unexpected ‘guest’.”

“Tis her task, woman.” an attractive frown met with her words. “You are very kind to think of her, however.”

“Not kind, just common decency.” Maddie differed in her opinion.

“Tis kind.” Caleb lifted a stubborn chin. “Why do you refuse a simple compliment?”

“I didn’t refuse it.” The girl didn’t think she had, at least. “Just telling the truth of the matter.”

“Truth is subjective.”

“Shouldn’t be.” Maddie shrugged.

He...smiled and the girl’s knees went weak. “You are an opinionated, stubborn woman.”

“Am not.” Maddie snipped. “You are an opinionated, stubborn man.”

That smile grew, making the indentations on his cheeks all the more prominent, the green eyes to twinkle almost mischievously. “You are accustomed to getting your own way, I see.”

“So?”

The tip of his tongue flicked out momentarily, the emerald orbs deepening slightly. “You are challenging me...why.”

Maddie thought it through. “Why not.”

“Tis a dangerous pastime...for a wee, defenseless woman.”

“Oh yeah?” her eyes narrowed. “You know anything about mace?”

“I know how to wield one...but, what has one thing to do with another.” He clearly was intrigued. “A weapon of old. What does a slight thing like you know of a mace?”

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you.” Maddie had met the type before. “There is a lot of

things you don't know, guy...trust me."

"I do not know you therefore, I cannot lend my trust. And yes, there are things of which I know little but then..." His eyes flicked her form slowly. "There are things I will wager of which...you, know absolutely...nothing."

"You would lose that bet." she read the invitation and his challenge. "My first year college professor took care of that little matter."

"College. You attended...college? Which one?"

"In the colonies. They are more progressive. They allow women a chance to better themselves." Maddie moved carefully on that one, remembering the time and place. "Unlike you barbaric Englanders who want to repress and subjugate females."

His grin returned full force. "Barbaric? Something is telling me, Lady...you would enjoy anything primitive or uncivilized."

Maddie narrowed those blue eyes. "I wouldn't turn it down, I suppose. If done correctly with the right amount of feeling."

He laughed lowly. "We understand each other then." The laughter died a natural death. "...You are like no woman I have ever met."

"A good thing or bad?"

"...I am thinking on the matter." he confessed. "I think...you are in some sort of trouble. I can help."

"Don't offer before you know what you're getting into." Maddie looked at the guy like he had grown another head. "That's just...weird and stupid."

"Not if one knows one's abilities."

"Yeah well...this is over your head. It's over my head." she admitted. "It's over everyone's head I know, including Einstein's, probably."

"I do not know this man."

"Yeah." She nodded. "He's a really smart guy. And even he would be stumped by this 'problem'."

"You will never know until you try. Trust...my abilities, why do you not. I have been proven in the past. I stand up well under pressure and trial."

The woman looked at the man. "I bet you do but..."

“You are in need of an ally, yes?”

Maddie’s mood fell. “Look, your intentions are honorable and good, I’m sure but...I can’t...”
She trailed off. “It’s something you just would not understand.”

“A woman’s malady?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then...I can assist.”

She looked up, the man’s expression an intently confident one.