

DRAFT

The End of The Order by Shannon Bailey

Emily stirred and stretched, smiling at the achiness of her limbs and body. She turned over and hugged a pillow close, breathing in the scent of sandalwood. How she loved that smell. It was David's smell.

David!

Eyes popping open, she saw the fancy patterned wallpaper. Springing to a sitting position, she looked around the room. Moonlight poured through the windows and a fire still burned in the fireplace. She was in David's room. In David's bed. But David was gone! He had promised to be there. No! Not again! Her mind screamed. This can't be happening! Things were different this time. They hadn't made love in the shower. Develyn hadn't been lying in wait for her return to David's bedroom. They hadn't killed David. Or had they? She wasn't sure what was real and what was a vision.

Heart pounding, she threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. Grabbing the robe he had been wearing, she tied the belt about her waist and flew to the door. When she flung it open, she heard the sound of shattering glass. Please, God, no! She prayed. Please don't let this be happening! Not again!

As she ran, Emily saw Robert pass at the end of the hall heading toward the stairs. His long hair was loose and mussed from sleep and he was wearing his old blue robe over his blue pajamas.

Her heart leapt at the sight of him and she desperately wanted to run up to him and hug him, but she wasn't sure if any of it was real or just another horrible vision. Hesitantly, she called out.

Robert stopped short and waited until she neared before he anxiously whispered, "Miss Emily! Are you all right? Did you hear it too?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Do you have your pistol?"

Robert looked confused, but he nodded. "Aye, but how did you know?"

"I can't explain it right now, but can I have it, please," she asked, turning her head toward the noise coming from below.

With eyebrows meeting over his nose, he withdrew it from his pocket and handed it over.

Not exactly sure why she wanted it or what she planned on doing with it, Emily hurried down the stairs on trembling legs. The sound of a man's growl turning her blood cold.

As she stepped onto the icy marble floor, she squeezed the toy pistol in her sweating hand, the plastic creaking dangerously, as her mind raced.

Please don't let David be dead! I can't lose him again!

I can't go through it again! But what if he is? What if I walk in and find only Develyn alive? Sitting there like last time. What will I do!? Squirt him with Holy water so that he's paralyzed and Robert can do what he's wanted to do for the last 35 years? Even after knowing all I do. That Develyn had only wanted to end his brother's suffering, do I help kill him for it? God, what do I do? I didn't even get a chance to take a picture of David this time! She thought frantically.

Oh, God, this is all so crazy! How did any of this even happen . . .

Wilhelm, Prussia

October 1792

Count Konrad Von Wahran sat atop his gray Old Don stallion as he peered down onto the wide valley below. Tall brown grass swayed in the cool breeze. Orange leaves of the trees rimming the creek that meandered along the valley floor shimmered brightly in the afternoon sunshine.

Konrad's full dark eyebrows were drawn over his sharp green eyes as he contemplated his predicament. He had traveled more than 200 miles to meet a woman he was expected to court and subsequently, quickly, marry.

How ironic! He thought with a derisive snort. The very thing that had brought him and his mother to this embarrassing point was the very same thing she had expected him to do save them from it.

Enter into a loveless marriage for financial security.

Being the byproduct of two people who had been thrust into such a union, Konrad had witnessed, first hand, how destructive such cold and calculated arrangement could be.

After twelve years of cold indifference and civility, both of his parents abruptly ceased all pretense and sought refuge from their miserable coexistence in their own way. His mother shut herself away from the man who was her husband and buried herself in books about true and everlasting love, while his father traveled the world, flinging himself, and the family fortune, at as many women as he was physically able; the last one in Paris, being the very death of him.

With the slightest shake of his head, Konrad decided ultimately that despite him and his mother's current dire circumstances, if, by the end of visit with Count Stanovich, he was not certain he could love the woman, Ivannia Stanovich, he would not seek her father's permission to court her much less ask for her hand. Konrad knew the only woman he would ever stand before God and utter those vows with would be the one he truly loved and the one who would truly love him.

The jangle of a horse's harnesses from behind him, reminded Konrad he was not alone. Joseph Kurtz, who had he regarded as more of a friend than a servant, waited patiently with two pack horses that carried trunks and satchels that contained a fine new and costly wardrobe meant to impress the Count and his daughter.

Without turning or speaking, Konrad heeled his horse into motion. It had taken only a few steps when the faint sound of a high-pitched squeal reached their ears. Both he and Joseph tensed instantly, each reaching for their sword sheathed beneath their heavy, gray woolen capes.

From the trees below emerged a horse and rider, who, judging by the rich emerald hooded cloak, was a woman. With another squeal and peel of laughter, the rider glanced over her shoulder and when she looked forward again, the wind caught the hood of her cape and blew backward, revealing vibrant red hair.

A moment later the subject of the woman's laughter, a young man in a brown cloak, emerged from the trees, vigorously heeling his mount in a desperate attempt to catch up to her.

Entranced, Konrad watched as the woman and horse galloped daringly across the valley floor and boldly charged up the steep incline. As she and her chestnut

mare raced up to him, he couldn't believe his eyes.

The woman was a beauty the likes he had never seen before. Lightly freckled pale skin, sharp classical features, large, striking green eyes the same color as his own and a wealth of red hair that hung loose, wildly, about her shoulders and down her back.

As the woman battled her to keep her feisty horse still beneath her, she dipped her chin regally and boldly met his eyes. "Good day, sir," she addressed him with a breathy voice. "I am Princess Valaree Stanovich, daughter of Count Holce Stanovich. I bid you welcome to his land on this fine day. Shall I see you and your man to the castle?"

Reacting to the excited filly, Konrad's stallion began to snort and neigh and dance anxiously as it tossed its massive head and pawed at the ground.

Struggling to keep the powerful animal under control, Konrad nodded and with a wide white smile, replied, "Good day, Princess Valaree. I am Count Konrad Von Wahran. I am honored by your presence and humbled by offer. However, Princess, your filly must be in season and perhaps it would be best if I continue onto the castle without you— lest we are both unseated due to these beasts' passion for one another."

Surprise flashed across her pretty features and her cheeks reddened, but her eyes never left his, "Yes, I believe your are right. Good day then, Count Konrad."

"Until we meet again, Princess Valaree," he was quick to say with a dip of his chin.

"Yes, until then," she replied, as a smile curved her pink lips.

As he and Joseph trotted away, Konrad chuckled aloud at the incredible turn his life had just taken. He had

found her! The woman he could envision himself taking those sacred vows with, but as fate would have it, she was not the woman he had come to meet. "Well, Joseph, I believe *that* was the woman I shall take as my wife."

Joseph had caught the heated looks and had felt the tension that passed between his Master and the woman, it was a visceral as the two animal's attraction to each other, so he wasn't surprised by Konrad's revelation, but he felt it was his duty to remind him of the purpose behind their visit to Stanovich Castle. Scratching at the three day growth of blonde hair along his chin, Joseph said, "But what of the other sister? It is expected—"

Konrad knew Count Holce Stanovich could very well refuse him if he were to ask for his youngest daughter's hand, but he did not care. He would wait. Even if it meant certain destitution for him and his mother, he would wait until the day Princess Valaree could wed.

With a shake of his dark head, Konrad chuckled again and said, "Expectations and consequences be damned! I shall marry no other than Princess Valaree Stanovich!"