

Katy Carter Wants a Hero

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Extract

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KATY CARTER WANTS A HERO

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Chapter One

As the carriage came abruptly to a halt, Millandra's heart began to pound. She placed her small hand above the gentle swell of her breast and held her breath. Could it be that their carriage was being held up by the infamous highwayman Jake Delaware? Jake Delaware, famous for always claiming a kiss . . .

I write the name Jake, underline it and doodle a question mark in the margin. I'm not sure if they had the name Jake in the eighteenth century, but it's such a masculine name, isn't it? It's kind of edgy and a little bit dangerous with just the right amount of rough thrown in for good measure. A Jake is tall, with strong, muscular forearms, thick, dark hair and fine chiselled features. Somebody called Jake would wear tight white breeches and a billowing crimson shirt and look totally manly, whereas some one called Nigel wouldn't.

I chew my biro.

Jake it is.

'Stand and deliver!' The voice contained a potent masculinity that made the small golden hairs on Millandra's slim arms ripple deliciously.

Millandra sounds just right for a romantic heroine; it's kind of fluffy and girlie and blonde. I'm going to make my heroine willowy and graceful with flowing golden tresses.

And totally unlike my good self, who is somewhat short and ginger.

Millandra wouldn't be seen dead in DM boots and a tatty old hoodie. Nor does she get plastered after a crappy day at work, because Millandra doesn't have to work. She just wafts around all day in flowery frocks looking beautiful and fighting off her suitors.

I bet if *she* had a flat tyre Jake wouldn't expect her to change it and get covered in dirt. He'd leap off his horse, kiss her hand and then get to work straight away. No man on earth would tell the Lady Millandra to fetch the jack and do it herself because a modern woman really should know how. No, Millandra never has to struggle with a jack and wheel nuts that were fastened by Geoff Capes while her fiancé shouts encouragement down the mobile.

Lucky cow.

Wish I'd lived in the eighteenth century.

Germaine Greer has a lot to answer for.

Anyway, do carriages have tyres?

I make a mental note to find out. Not that we have many carriages about in west London, but they've got to operate on the same principles as cars, surely?

The carriage door swung open.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, I apologise for the inconvenience but I must relieve you of a small road tax before you continue on your way.'

Millandra found herself trembling like a willow tree in the breeze. Would he shoot her? Or would he pull her into his arms and ravish her?

Isn't ravish a great word? I've never been ravished in my life but it sounds like great fun. James, my fiancé, isn't the ravishing type. He'd be too worried that his boss might find out and his chances of promotion would be

scuppered, which is fair enough I suppose; one of us has to be sensible. But wouldn't it be fantastic to be so irresistible that your man can't control himself?

Oh well. Don't suppose that happens in the real world. Not in the world of Katy Carter anyhow. Back to Millandra . . .

'My lady,' said the highwayman, taking her small gloved hand in his. Millandra felt the heat of his flesh through the fabric and her heart beat even faster. 'Allow me to help you from the carriage.'

Abruptly his hands were around her slender waist and she was clasped against his strong chest.

The last time James lifted me was when I was too pissed to climb the stairs. He put his back out for a week. Luckily for my hero, Millandra's a size zero. It would ruin this novel if Jake pulled a muscle. I have serious plans for Jake's muscle in the next few pages.

As he held her tightly, Millandra found herself drawn to the jade eyes that gazed most powerfully down at her. Although the lower part of the highwayman's face was obscured by the dark triangle of his mask, she could feel that his sensual mouth was curved into a smile. Beneath the tight lacings of her corset, Millandra's heart was fluttering like a trapped bird. As his hand moved higher she felt—

'Katy? Will you second the proposal?'

Proposal? What proposal?

I look up from my writing and it's a shock to find myself back in the middle of an English Department meeting. Jake vanishes and nine pairs of eyes are trained expectantly on me.

I shove the novel under my teacher's planner while Cyril Franklin, the head of English, looks at me with the usual mixture of impatience and frustration. He taps a

pencil against his mossy teeth. 'Well, Katy? Do you agree?'

Agree with what? That Marmite's fantastic? That Brad is sexier than George? I'm in danger of looking like a total plonker, which isn't unusual, but I promised James I'm going to turn over a new leaf and focus on developing my career. No more drifting around with my nose in a book. No more wearing gypsy skirts and platform boots. And – James is especially adamant on this one – no more dreaming about being a bestselling romantic novelist. And I'm trying really hard! But it's like giving up cigarettes (thank God James doesn't know that I still have a sneaky one in the boiler room; he absolutely *hates* me smoking). I just *have* to write. Hence the fact that *Heart of the Highwayman* is being secretly scrawled in Wayne Lobb's English book.

All the other teachers are waiting for an answer, which wouldn't be a problem if I only knew what the question was.

'Um,' I begin, 'obviously it's a very important issue.' Everybody nods, so I must be on the right track. If I just agree with Cyril, he'll leave me alone and hopefully we can all go home early, right? I take a deep breath, fix him with my best *I'm totally fascinated by all matters educational* expression and add, 'But in my opinion it's an excellent idea.'

'Really?' Cyril looks amazed. 'You agree with me?'

'Absolutely!' I enthuse. 'Totally!'

My colleagues are deadily quiet and I feel a prickle of unease. What can be such a big deal? Changing the GCSE course? Inviting Jamie Oliver in to overhaul our pitiful canteen?

On second thoughts, that really isn't such a good idea.

The kids at the Sir Bob Geldof Community School would eat poor Jamie alive. They'd ram his wraps up his bum quicker than you could say 'turkey twizzler'. Gordon Ramsay would fit in much better.

'It's official then!' Cyril taps something into his laptop. 'Seconded by Katy and unanimously agreed to by everybody else in the department, I presume?'

There's deafening silence. Ollie, my colleague and friend, looks daggers at me and then draws his finger across his throat, while the elderly Miss Lewis pops a Murray Mint into her mouth and crunches loudly.

'Agreed?' hisses Cyril, as menacingly as somebody who dresses in polyester possibly can. The others see crappy timetables swiftly coming their way and shoot their hands up in the air. I can practically hear the bleating.

'Wonderful,' smiles Cyril. 'The Sir Bob's summer school is officially up and running. It will start on the first day of the holidays.'

'Summer school?' I mouth at Ollie.

He nods. 'Traitor!'

Summer school? No way! I *need* those six weeks. I'm looking forward to them already and it's only April. James will be delighted. He's always going on about what easy lives teachers have with all their endless holidays. A comment from somebody who has never attempted to teach bottom-set Year 11 last thing on a Friday afternoon or tried to scale a mountain of coursework that makes K2 look like a small grassy knoll.

'Katy can't possibly do summer school,' says Miss Lewis sharply, spraying Ollie with shards of Murray Mint. 'After all,' she continues, reaching across the table to pat my ink-stained hand, 'she's getting married in August. Planning a summer school will be far too much for her.'

‘Oh dear,’ I say, trying really hard to look devastated at missing out on this career-enhancing opportunity. ‘What a shame. I was so excited I wasn’t thinking straight. I’d never be able to do the summer school justice with all the wedding preparations.’

Saved!

And meanwhile, back in my bodice-ripper . . .

‘Unhand me, sir!’ gasped Millandra. ‘I insist you release me this instant!’

Jake threw back his head and laughed. Millandra couldn’t help but be thrilled by the deep rippling sound.

‘To pass through this forest,’ he told her, ‘you must pay a toll.’

‘I have no money upon my person,’ she said.

‘Then,’ Jake told her firmly, ‘I shall have to find another way for you to pay.’

His hand rose to cup her breast. Millandra felt her nipple—

‘Go on!’ Ollie hisses. ‘Don’t stop now!’

I glare at him. Ollie knows I can’t bear people reading what I write. Bit of a drawback if I want to be the next Jackie Collins, but I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.

He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively and fans his face.

I bet Jane Austen never had to put up with such disrespect.

Just wait until I’m number one on the *Sunday Times* Bestseller List. If he’s not careful, I’ll write him in as Millandra’s ugly fiancé. Then he’ll wish he’d never laughed. And when Spielberg buys the film rights, he’ll be *really* sorry. I’ll go on TV and tell the nation that the inspiration for my pustule-ridden, hunchbacked arch-villain is actually Oliver Burrows, an English teacher from Ealing. He’ll never be able to hold his head up in school again.

Yes, that'll show him!

I've known Ol for years. We go back so far that dinosaurs were roaming Ealing when we first met. OK, so that's a *slight* exaggeration. I met him during my teacher-training year and we bonded in that way that only prisoners of war or those traumatised by teenage thugs can bond. No one can understand the terror of trying to entertain a class of chewing teens with PhDs in boredom unless they've been there. Ollie and I have shared tales of woe and countless boozy evenings for nearly eight years and he's one of my closest friends, probably because I've never muddied the waters of our friendship by fancying him. Not that he isn't attractive; in fact, if you like clever-looking guys who spend all their spare time climbing and canoeing and doing lots of other exciting things that require beanie hats and Quiksilver, then he'd be right up your street. It's just that I have a picture in my mind of the perfect romantic hero, and he doesn't wear combats or wire-rimmed glasses and he certainly doesn't drink milk straight from the carton! Nor does he spend hours hunched over an Xbox making poor Lara Croft contort herself in all kinds of mind-boggling ways. No, lovely as he is, Ol simply isn't my type, unlike my fiancé James, with his floppy fringe, smart suits and promising career with merchant bank Millward Saville. James, who reads the *Financial Times* for fun, rather than *Viz* like Ollie does. James, who wants promotion and pensions and . . .

Oh bugger.

And a dinner party tomorrow night for his managing director to show just how suitable James is to be made a partner. Our flat will need to be perfect, as will the meal, which will be home-cooked to show off my wifely skills. Millwards is practically medieval in attitude, and although

I'm supposed to be a career woman, I'm also meant to be a fantastic cook and hostess, the type of woman who will support my husband as he rises to the top, hold down a high-flying career of my own and make a soufflé.

It doesn't help that Ed Grenville, James's arch-rival, has a wife who's such a genius in the kitchen that in contrast Nigella appears amateurish. Sophie, with her perfect blonde bob and immaculate house and immaculate children, would make a Stepford Wife appear sloppy. I've got my work cut out if I'm going to compete with her.

I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

I'm starting to wonder if I'm suited for this corporate wife stuff. I bet Jake doesn't expect Millandra to cook supper for his fellow highwaymen. He's far more likely to gallop off into the forest with her to a shady dell where there's wine cooling in a babbling brook and a picnic laid out on a blanket. He'll feed her strawberries and then lie her back on the blanket and start to kiss her throat. She won't have to spend her Saturday trying to disguise Marks and Spencer food. Oh for the good old days when women faked orgasms rather than our cooking!

Not that Millandra will fake her orgasms.

If I ever get the time to write one for her, that is.

Catching my eye, Ollie mouths, 'Pub?'

I nod. Now I've remembered the dinner party, I could do with a drink or six.

Forget making Ollie the villain of my novel. I'll buy him a pint and soften him up for the brilliant idea that has just occurred to me.

Pub here I come.