



# The Taming of a Wicked Rogue

**Author:** *Samantha Holt*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** Forced to leave friends, family, and a life of privilege and fun, Rebecca Fortescue's world changed overnight nearly ten years ago. Now, with the tightening of a noose, it's changed again, but she needs to make amends for what her father did.

Which means returning, secretly, to the place where he did the most damage. And to the residence of one Lord Leonard Moncrieff—the only man she's ever loved. She's certain she won't see him again, though. Nicknamed a Lord of Scandal Row, it's clear to her, he's no longer the boy she knew, and never returns home. The last thing she needs it to be distracted by a man deemed one of the most attractive men in London. Unfortunately for Rebecca, Leo has been practically banished from London under the orders of his mother thanks to a scandal that, for once, had nothing to do with him. Now he has to spend his days playing the country gent and trying to avoid the female of the species.

It will be harder than he expected, given a sudden influx of young ladies to the area. He might be a rogue, but he has no desire to upset his delicate mother and will, albeit begrudgingly, play the dutiful son. He can avoid a few pretty faces, surely? At least, until he discovers the beautiful Rebecca hiding in the stables. She's in need of help, and he cannot resist, despite the fact she once shattered his young heart. The pull between them is as strong as ever but anything between them is impossible. Or is it?

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Delicate fingers curled around Leo's forearm. He glanced down at the digits against the mohair of his jacket and paused, his right foot set on the step of the carriage.

"You are not leaving me, are you?"

He flashed a smile at Lady Somner and returned his foot to the pavement then turned to face her fully. She unwrapped her fingers but remained a mere foot or so away. He smelled her liberally applied, expensive perfume and ran his gaze briefly over the elegant column of her luxurious silk gown.

A gown that clung carefully to each curve—curves he knew intimately albeit briefly. They'd been enjoyable curves indeed. One might even say exceptional.

Lady Somner offered everything one might want from a widowed lover—discretion, enthusiasm, humor and good looks that had yet to fade, despite being fifteen years his senior.

But while she might be keen to offer him a taste of all her exceptional qualities, even she could not persuade Leo to break his cardinal rule.

No attachments. No second chances.

"I'm off to live a solitary life in the countryside," he quipped.

"Goodness, but why? You do not even like the country." Her lips formed a tempting

pout, but he recalled his mother's stern words.

He wasn't going to tell Lady Somner his mother had demanded it amongst a careful show of tears and wracking coughs and that he, a fully grown man of six and twenty, had been completely hoodwinked and unable to deny her one demand.

"Is this about that...scandal?" she whispered the last part. "I know you would never do such a thing."

"I am in need of country air and a little shooting," he said vaguely. "Never fear, I shan't be away long."

"I do hope not." She bit down on her bottom lip and looked up at him through her lashes—a deliberately calculated move by his estimation. "I shall miss you terribly."

"And I you, Lady Somner." He dipped his head and offered a quick kiss to her gloved knuckles. "But, alas, a gentleman must do what a gentleman must do."

She frowned. "Shoot and breathe country air?"

"Something like that." He cracked another smile and the frown softened.

"Do not forget me."

"Never, my lady."

He climbed into the carriage and offered her a quick wave then tapped the roof of the carriage. He settled back against the chair, ignoring Lady Somner's blown kiss. She knew his rules. All of his lovers did. Hell, all of London society did. Lord Leonard Moncrieff did not bed the same woman more than once.

Even the beautiful Lady Somner could not force him to break that rule. He'd experienced attachment and felt the painful sting it had to offer. He had little desire to suffer that ever again.

The vehicle rolled away from the townhouse and worked slowly through the busy streets. He stared mournfully at the shadowy interior of the carriage and blew out a breath. Lady Somner was not wrong. He didn't like the country and scarcely visited the family seat.

But, alas, he and scandal had become fast friends of late—tales of his endeavors often gracing the pages of newspapers. And whilst most of them were mild narratives that could be weathered with ease, this latest one would not fade so swiftly.

What was worse, was he had nothing to do with the whole sordid mess. If he was going to be accused of planting a child in the belly of the daughter of a duke, he could have at least enjoyed the pleasure.

Lord, he might have his rules but even he was not so callous as to abandon an innocent to her fate. Unfortunately for him and his two brothers, her secret lover had been spotted a time or two and held a resemblance to the three of them.

He folded his hands across his stomach, leaned back and stretched his legs out as far as they could go. He shook his head to himself. The lady in question would not admit to who her lover was, and the man had a similar build and hair color to the three of them. Admittedly neither he nor his brothers were innocent virgins, but the furor surrounding the whole situation was beginning to grow tiresome.

Especially for their mother, who could be in delicate health and found the whole debacle wearying. So wearying that even Leo could not deny her when she requested he leave Town until the lover had either been discovered or the gossips ceased wagging their tongues.

Leo could deny a woman anything with a flash of a smile and send them on their way practically skipping, as though it had been their choice. However, he could deny his mother nothing.

So here he was, on his way to deepest, darkest Cumbria where there would be little company but sheep and alewives to live a solitary life for goodness knows how long.

At least, he supposed, it would be easy enough to avoid the fairer sex. He'd vowed to his mother he would forgo the company of all women and that would be easy enough in Langmere. The rural town by his brother's entailed estate bred hardy women who were hardly known for their charming manners or skills in the boudoir. Most of them were over the age of fifty too.

## Page 2

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There had only been one woman of interest in Langmere and she was long gone. Though she had been but a girl when he'd known her.

He shook away thoughts of Rebecca and closed his eyes. He might as well embrace a dull, sleepy existence as a country gent for the next few months. Lord knew, nothing interesting ever happened in Langmere and he doubted that had changed in the past decade.

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REBECCA DUCKED BACK, tucking herself into the shadows between the building and the market stall. The striped canopy flapped in the brisk wind that blew in off the lake. Despite the bright sunshine, the early hour meant Langmere had yet to warm and a chill swept through her, forcing her to pull her pelisse tight about her.

She peered around the splintered post of the stall and drew in a long breath. She couldn't decide if the influx of visitors to Langmere would help or hinder her cause. At least she could get lost in the swarms of women who had opted to visit for the summer to escape the thick air of London and take in the beautiful countryside of the lakes. She did not blame the visitors for wanting to come here. Growing up in such a place had been idyllic.

At least until she'd realized it had all been false.

However, more people also meant more chance of being recognized. It also meant the majority would know her sorry tale. All thanks to the blasted book on display in the stall. She hadn't even read it, but her mother had and been mightily distressed by the

publicizing of their woes.

Rebecca picked up a copy. The book appeared harmless enough—a guide to the lakes. The small town of Langmere had been highly praised for the healing nature of its air and the welcoming townspeople. She was not certain she would feel such a welcome, not after what her father had done.

She leafed through the pages until she spotted his name. Her heart gave a little jolt. His execution had been a month ago or so and no one had tired of the story of this fraudster and how he had evaded capture rowing across the lakes.

Or more precisely, temporarily evaded.

He had been caught a week later and sentenced to be hanged. It had given the town such notoriety that she suspected it was not just the healing air that brought all the visitors.

Putting the book back, she stepped out amongst a group of young women around her age, keeping the brim of her hat low over her face. How unfortunate it was that she had taken after her father with her red-tinged hair and looks. If she could but look like her mother. What misery it was to walk around with the features of a man who had lied and abandoned them. How horrible it had to be for her mother to look upon her.

Still, with any luck, she would not have to stay in Langmere long. All she had to do was find the place where her father hid his belongings before they left for Italy all those years ago. He had been in her life until she was six and ten and she knew his favorite places. Surely the diamond would be there somewhere?

And once she found it, she could put things right and maybe make up for the wreckage he had left behind him. He was dead now, and from the newspaper reports, he had few apologies to make. If he would not put things right, then she must.

Sunlight sparkled off the lake and the ladies paused to admire the mountains behind it, gushing over the majestic beauty of it all. Rebecca might have stopped to admire it too, but the blacksmith stepped out of the door of the forge and peered in her direction. Her heart gave a jolt. Mr. Cooper had been the smithy for as long as she could recall. And if she remembered him, would he remember her? It had been nearly a decade since she had returned home, and she had certainly grown since then.

He cast his gaze about, and she moved behind one of the taller ladies, but she could not help but watch him. Perhaps he would not recognize her, perhaps she could go about her business easily and be done with this place with haste.

A lump bunched in her throat when the smithy stilled. She should look away. Run even. But a cold tremor travelled through her and made her limbs stiff. His brow furrowed then his eyes widened.

She twisted away sharply, taking hasty steps back along the road, and drew in a harsh breath. Had he recognized her? What a fool she was. Her father was about the most famous man in all of England at present. Goodness, even the newspapers in Italy had written of him.

Her hunt for the diamond would not be an easy one it seemed, especially if he realized who he had seen. Her father had wrought so much damage upon the people of Langmere, she would never be welcome here again, and she would be lucky if they did not turn into a mob and exact some justice upon her. For certain, there were many who thought a hanging was not enough of a punishment for her father.

Sometimes she felt the same. He did not have to deal with the damage he had left behind. She and her mother had survived his betrayal and benefited from nearly a decade of being far from him but there were others whose hurt was recent and devastating. If she could but help them, then she must. Someone had to pay for her father's sins, and it might as well be her.



But first, she needed to find a better way of getting about the town unnoticed, and she needed to find somewhere to stay. She had an idea to be sure, but she was not certain she was brave enough to go back there. Not after all this time and certainly not after the way she had left.

She suspected, however, she had little choice.

## Chapter Two

Eastwick Hall could only be reached by way of cutting through the town of Langmere. Leo kept to the shadows of the carriage, aware the crest upon the side would draw attention. Some might even think his brother, the Marquis of Kirbeck, had arrived. If he was to keep his promise to his mother, he would need to keep to himself. Especially seeing as the once sleepy town was sprawling with people.

Or more precisely sprawling with women.

It seemed as though hundreds of them walked along the lakeside, strolling arm in arm, their pretty parasols fluttering in the breeze. He imagined he smelled their perfume drifting in the open carriage window and he certainly heard their chatter. He shook his head with a chuckle. He very much doubted this was what his mother intended when she suggested he escape to Langmere.

Well, suggestion was putting it nicely. He rather anticipated his petite mother would have dragged him there by an ear if she'd been forced to. He could deny any woman anything but not her.

Now, he wished he'd been stronger. Not only did he have to reside in the place where his heart had been shattered into pieces, he also had to avoid temptation. An easy task, he had reckoned, until he spied the first few young ladies on the road. He didn't know what had brought them all to the lakeside town, but it was safe to assume the

majority of these young women were accompanying mothers and aunts and there were few men to keep them under control.

Now, he'd have to ensure he kept himself under control. The temptation to have a dalliance with some willing widow or a bored spinster already gnawed at his gut. Anything so he did not have to stop and think about where he was.

He caught his reflection in the closed window on the opposite side of the carriage and glared at himself. No. He was better than that. Simply because women flocked to him with ease did not mean he was some lustful creature with little control over his libido. Not to mention, it would be a darned sight harder to keep to his own rules in this small town. He would keep his promise to his mother and avoid women altogether. Once the gossip had died down, he could return to London and enjoy life as he always did, with complete and utter relish.

## Page 3

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The carriage pulled up at the house after a blessedly brief ride over rutted lanes. The housekeeper and servants were already lined up outside to welcome him, and Leo climbed out of the vehicle with a brief glance up at the building. Nothing had changed since his last visit, not even the serving staff by the looks of it.

“Mrs. Jones,” he greeted the housekeeper. “Mr. Quigley.”

The housekeeper had been married to Mr. Quigley nearly twenty years, but as Mrs. Jones had worked at the house as Mrs. Jones prior to Quigley’s arrival, she had maintained her previous name. It rather amused Leo to see them grow more and more alike each time he saw them, both slowly decreasing in size with greying hair. Mr. Quigley now also owned spectacles which were similar in style to Mrs. Jones’s.

“How was your journey, my lord?” asked the housekeeper.

“Tolerable.” He thrust a finger in the direction of the town. “Tell me, why is Langmere playing host to half of the young women in England?”

Mrs. Jones's lips curved. “Do not tell me you have not read the book, my lord?”

“The book?” he repeated.

“Oh yes.” She turned and he followed her inside. She spoke to him over her shoulder. “Mr. Gerald Ferrers visited here last year and wrote all about the lakes. Langmere received particular mention for its beauty and the healing qualities of the air.” She paused and waited for him to hand over his gloves and hat to Quigley. Her lips quirked. “It also documented some of the interesting characters who reside here.”

“Interesting characters?” He frowned. “We have interesting characters?”

“Well, there’s Rosie of Buttermere of course. She’s such a famed beauty.”

“Of course,” Leo intoned but had little idea of whom the woman was speaking.

“Not to mention Fortescue who was recently hung after his daring escape.”

Leo clenched his jaw. He did not want to think about Rebecca’s father. “Indeed.”

“Even you and your brothers are mentioned.” Her smile widened.

“We are?”

“Oh yes.” She turned to her husband. “How were they described?The eligible but untamable Lords of Scandal Row?”

Leo grimaced. That name had been conjured by some gossip rag years ago because they all had townhouses on the same street in London, and despite his two brothers rarely being in residence, the nickname had amused many members of the ton and stuck.

“I believe the book mentioned how handsome they were, Mrs. Jones,” the butler said, and Leo caught the twitch of his lips.

“It sounds as though you two have been doing some reading of late.”

“Well, we needed to stay informed, my lord,” Quigley said, straightening his shoulders.

“Dinner will be at seven, my lord,” Mrs. Jones told him. “Your usual room is

prepared.”

“Excellent, thank you.” He twisted on his heel and prepared to head up the grand wooden staircase that sat to one side of the large hall, but the housekeeper cleared her throat, so he turned again to eye her. “Is there something else?”

“Your brothers have sent word that they shall be joining you here within the next few days.” She laced her hands together in front of her. “Should I be preparing for something, my lord? A house party perhaps?”

Leo shook his head. It had been several months since he’d last seen either of his brothers. Alexander had been in the Alps somewhere last he heard. He wasn’t certain about Adam, but he was most likely to be found in one of London’s many gaming hells. He shouldn’t have been surprised his mother had persuaded them to come out here too—after all he wasn’t the only one accused of impregnating poor Miss Kingsley.

“We shall be doing absolutely nothing,” he said.

“Absolutely nothing?” the housekeeper echoed, her brow creasing.

“Indeed. Absolutely nothing.”

“Absolutely nothing,” he heard the butler murmur to his wife as Leo ascended the stairs. “That does not seem right, does it?”

Leo smirked to himself. Quigley was not the only one to think that. His new, if temporary life, as a recluse bachelor had already started shakily with the introduction of all these women, but if he couldn’t have the self-control to avoid them, then he deserved his mother’s scorn.

He sighed. As dull as it was, he supposed he was going to have to be an obedient son, especially with his brothers around.

## Page 4

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WHY WAS LEO here? Rebecca had followed his pursuits in the newspapers. He never came to Langmere. Ever.

She pushed her back against the wall of the stables. A little brick dust rained down upon her. She wrinkled her nose and held her breath. The lamplight only offered her a hint of his features as he ducked into the building that was shrouded in darkness by the late hour.

He still made her heart skip. Even after all these years. It shouldn't have surprised her that it did. He always did that to her, and the years had been kind to him, hardening his jaw and filling out his shoulders.

He wore a shirt, slightly untucked and rolled up at the sleeves, revealing muscular forearms dusted with hair. He murmured something to the horse, and her stomach did a tumble. If she closed her eyes, she would be six and ten again, listening to him speak to his horses whilst perched on a milking stool and watching him with such admiration. Their love of animals had brought them together but that had swiftly turned into something else.

Sometimes, she suspected Leonard Moncrieff would be the only man she ever loved.

However, just because he was still kind to animals did not mean he was the same man. It pained her to read every column devoted to him and his dalliances, yet she could not help herself. They had not spoken in nearly ten years and she could not help but want to know every element to his life, even while it stabbed at her heart to read

of the rake he had become.

He stilled and turned, the golden light dappling over his face. She sucked in a breath. No wonder women swarmed to him. The attractive young man she had known had grown into the most handsome man she had ever seen.

She clapped a hand over her mouth when his brow furrowed. He lifted the lamp and peered at the shadows. She waited, her heart pounding against her chest so loudly that she feared he would hear it.

Then he shook his head, returned the lamp to the plinth and turned back to the horse, smoothing strong hands down the animal's flanks.

Rebecca inhaled a shaky breath through her nostrils. And regretted it. Instantly. The brick dust and hay combined made her nose tickle and her eyes water. She pressed a finger under her nose but to no avail. A sneeze burst from her, cracking through the stillness.

She jolted away from the wall with the intention of escaping but too late. Leo descended upon her and grabbed her arm. "Who are you?" he demanded.

She tried to wriggle free of his strong grip, but he grabbed her other arm. When she went to push past him, he shoved back, and she lost her footing and tumbled onto a pile of hay. He fell with her, the sudden tumble dragging him down. The breath left her lungs at the impact of his body atop hers, his strength and height utterly apparent.

"Get off me," she grunted, struggling against his hold.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

She stilled at the word. He hadn't recognized her. She supposed the shadows were too



dark. And that meant her disguise had worked. With any luck, she could make her excuses, leave, and he would be none the wiser of her presence here.

“Just seeking shelter,” she murmured, keeping her voice low.

He kept her pinned, fingers curled around both wrists. The awareness of his hard body atop hers sizzled through her despite herself. She squirmed once more and he cocked his head, releasing her arms suddenly. “You’re no boy.”

Rebecca thrust out a fist, connecting with his chest. Her knuckles stung at the contact and she yelped. Leo snatched her wrists again in response and pinned her back down, apparently scarcely noticing the hit.

“Let me go,” she said through gritted teeth. “I wasn’t doing any harm.”

“Keep wriggling like that and you will regret it.”

“I...” She swallowed hard, suddenly understanding his meaning. She relented, giving herself up to his hold and letting her head loll to one side. “What are you going to do with me?”

“Well, I can think of a few—” He paused, put a hand to her chin and urged her to face him. “Rebecca?”

Denial burned on her tongue, but it was no good. Her disguise hadn’t worked and her plan to hide out in the stable at Eastwick had been for nothing. She would have to flee and find shelter somewhere else.

“What the devil are you doing here?” He eased off her and rose to his feet and then offered a hand.

She ignored it and rose to standing. She swept the straw from her borrowed breeches. Poor Mrs. Smith was going to wonder where her son's clothes had gone in the morning. She rubbed her wrists.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you hurt me too.” He rubbed his chest with a quick grin. A grin that she recalled all too well. The signature Leo grin that always made her heart race. No doubt it made many other women's hearts race too, she thought grimly.

“I am sorry, but you were not even meant to be here,” she blurted.

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“At my house.”

“Yes! You are never here. I know that from—” She looked to her feet and kicked aside a small pile of hay. “I just know that.”

She glanced up to see his mouth slant. “You have been keeping an eye on me then?”

“No.” She shook her head vigorously.

He closed the gap between them, so she had to crane her neck to look up at him. Sweet Mary, why did he have to grow so handsome? Why was he still able to affect her after all these years?

“Where have you been, Rebecca? And why are you here? Hell, it’s been ten years—”

“Nine.”

“What happened to you? We were going to—” He shook his head. “And then you just...”

“We had to leave suddenly but please believe me that I am sorry.”

“And you could not send word?” He shook his head. “For a while, I thought you dead.”

A knot gathered in her throat when his voice cracked. Could it be he had been truly hurt? She had convinced herself that her disappearance had done nothing to him.

How could it when he had pursued a life of pleasure? But what if...

She glanced at the open door of the stables. She wasn't here for this and she could not let herself be distracted by thoughts of what could have been. They were two entirely different people now.

"I am sorry. Truly," she repeated, then darted past him, ducking past an outstretched arm and speeding into the night. She heard him call her name but refused to look back.

Their love was in the past and there it would stay.

### Chapter Three

Leo ignored the simpering smile of an attractive young woman but offered a curt dip of his head. So far, ignoring the pretty offerings of Langmere's new residents had been relatively easy.

Mostly because he was looking for her.

He grimaced to himself. He shouldn't be.

Clearly, Rebecca wanted nothing to do with him but, damn it, he at least deserved an explanation as to why she never came back or why she did not even pen a brief missive to tell him she was safe.

He drew in a long breath and strode along the path that led adjacent to the lakeside. The chances were she had fled, likely never to be seen again. After all, that was her usual technique. Tell a man she loved him then vanish, leaving said man to wonder what the bloody hell had happened.

He shook his head to himself. With Rebecca he had imagined so many things for them. Marriage, children, a long life together. What a fool he had been. Apparently their plans had meant a lot less to her than they had to him. Didn't she realize he could have protected her from whatever it was they were running from?

Yes, they were young then, but he still had power and privilege behind him. Whatever her father had done—and there were many, many things he had done it seemed—he could have helped Rebecca.

Blasted stubborn woman. He shouldn't even be thinking of her. And he most certainly shouldn't be scanning all the faces of all the boys in the town lest she make another appearance. He might not be able to touch a woman as per his promise but surely he could at least be enjoying the sight of pretty young ladies promenading along the lakeside and flitting in and out of the few shops that clung to the lake's edge?

It seemed not. His gaze snared on a young boy in a floppy hat. The dim light in the stables hadn't allowed him to pay full attention to what Rebecca had been wearing, but he'd been on top of her long enough to know she filled out the boy's garments in all the wrong ways.

There was no doubting Rebecca had grown into womanhood in all the ways he admired, and he suspected he was going to struggle to forget the feel of her soft breasts beneath him.

That did not aid her foolish disguise, however. Standing awkwardly by the side of the smithy's, her arms folded, and drawing his attention to forementioned curves, her gaze darted about. Why had she returned and why the devil had she returned dressed as a boy?

Oh yes, not to mention, why had she taken to hiding in the stables at Eastwick? He

had to assume from the rumpled state of her, she had nowhere to stay.

Most of the lodgings were booked up and even those who did not normally take in guests, had opened their doors to the visitors, sensing a fine opportunity to earn some coin. However, Rebecca had grown up here. Surely she could find someone to take her in?

He paused by Mr. Beaumont's Bazaar, feigning picking up a book from the outside stall to peruse the first few pages.

He ignored the text and eyed Rebecca out of the periphery of his vision. He could not fathom what she had in mind nor could he understand why she lingered in her spot by the blacksmith's. She took a step forward and then stepped back again, pressing herself up against the once white wall of the building. Passing carts and the nature of the smith's work had stained the walls to a grey that gradually faded toward the top story of the building, revealing its pristine white color.

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A dog approached her, and he saw her expression soften. He smiled, despite himself. Nothing changed there then. Rebecca had never been able to resist animals of any kind. Her mother had been nearly driven out of her wits with her need to take in every stray in Cumbria. He still recalled the moment she'd brought home a grass snake and her mother had screamed to the rafters at the sight of it.

She bent to fuss the dog but stilled when Mr. Cooper, the smithy, emerged from his building, looked left and right and finally motioned for the dog to return inside. The dog obediently skulked inside, and Mr. Cooper paused, hands to his hips while he eyed Rebecca.

Leo had little idea of the conversation that passed, but the smithy was no fool and Leo doubted the disguise dampened his curiosity, especially given Rebecca lurked outside his building.

Rebecca said something to him, turned hastily away and then stopped when the smithy said something else. Her eyes widened and she cast her gaze down.

Leo sighed and strode over. He owed her nothing. Not one thing. No one would blame him for leaving her up to her fate after what she did to him.

“What’s your name, boy?” asked the smithy. “I recognize you.”

Rebecca affected a low voice that made Leo wince. “Uh...my name...” She glanced around. “Uh...”

“You can’t remember your own name now?” The smithy moved closer. “What are

you up to?" He folded his arms. "If you are here to make trouble..."

Leo stepped to Rebecca's side. "Forgive me, Mr. Cooper, this is Frederick. He's a new groom at Eastwick."

The man narrowed his gaze. "I see." He eased his arms down by his sides. "You had better warn your boy not to linger, my lord. He looks suspicious." The smithy moved past him and leaned in. "And be careful. The boy seems a little addled."

Leo pressed his lips together to prevent himself from chuckling and nodded sincerely. "I shall indeed, Mr. Cooper, thank you."

Snatching Rebecca's arm, he led her away from the building. "Come with me, Frederick. Let's get you back to Eastwick."

She tugged against him, but he didn't stop until they were some distance away from the blacksmith's and toward the far end of the town, where the crowds of people thinned.

"There was no need for that."

He eyed her determined expression and laughed. "You make a terrible boy, Rebecca."

"I was fine until you came along."

"Mr. Cooper thought you were mad."

"Well...I would have been fine," she insisted.

"You do not look fine." He cast his gaze over her filthy, creased appearance. "You



look as though you are in need of rest and a wash. No wonder Mr. Cooper thought you to be a troublemaker.” He rubbed a hand across his face, not quite willing to believe what he was about to do. So many times, he’d pictured her return and how he’d behave. He’d scold her, maybe even shout at her. Or just take one glance at her and walk away.

Never, not once, did he think he’d offer her sanctuary.

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“COME WITH ME.”

She stared at him for a few moments. “No.”

It was unfeasible. Impossible. Utterly, completely unacceptable for her to go with him. But some small part of her exhausted mind wanted to reach for the outstretched hand.

Two days of searching and she’d found nothing. She’d made do with sleeping in a sheep pen of all places last night. She smelled and her stomach grumbled, not being able to set foot in the inn or the tea room in such a state.

The large, capable outstretched hand tempted and lured. How easy it would be to take it and relive those beautiful moments of romance they had shared when they were young.

How easy and how foolish.

“Come with me, Rebecca,” he said tightly.

“No.”

The temptation clawed at her like a wild animal trying to escape its cage. What harm would it be? a rebellious voice muttered.

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That same temptation pushed her to take a step back. She had no plans to stay. Even if she wanted to, she could not. This place had not been her home since her father had ruined that for her. If she gave in, it would be agonizing to leave—once again.

Leo stepped forward, shadowing her backstep. He towered over her, her head coming just to his shoulders. The broadness of him was even more apparent in the daylight.

She craned her neck to view him, squinting in the bright sunlight. It silhouetted him, masking his features slightly, but she had seen enough. The years had been more than kind to him, increasing the breadth of his jaw, adding little golden touches to the chestnut curls of his hair and widening his mouth a touch. The dimple in his chin remained, and her fingers twitched with remembrance. How she'd loved to press a finger to that dimple before he would swoop in and kiss her breathless.

His blue eyes had an intensity she did not recall, however. A sort of lingering fire behind them that made her want to search his gaze until she discovered why.

No. She took another step back.

"I'm not coming with you," she insisted.

"Rebecca, you stink."

"Well, that's charming."

He shrugged and grinned. Her stomach did that topsy-turvy tumble she recalled from the previous night, and she inhaled deeply. Leo always had a charming smile and he

used it to his advantage. No doubt, he'd flashed it at many a woman of late, and she would be foolish to fall for it.

"It's the truth."

Rebecca lifted her chin. "If I stink so badly, then I suggest you go away, my lord."

"Oh, so it's lord now."

"It's always been lord."

"Hmm, I'm not so certain. A while ago I used to be Leo." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "In fact, I believe I used to be most specifically Your Leo."

A painful twist pulled at her stomach. "That was a long time ago."

His expression shuttered. "It was."

"Yes." She folded her arms. "Well...anyway. I should be..."

He snatched her upper arm, curling his fingers firmly around it. "You are not going anywhere. Come with me and at least damn well bathe."

"I said no."

"And I said come with me."

She yanked her arm away from his hold. "I am sure you are used to ordering ladies around, getting them to do whatever you bid, but you might recall that I was never one of those." She met his gaze head-on. "That has not changed."

The grin returned. "So I see."

"So if you will excuse me." She made to step around him, but he moved in front of her.

"Come with me or I shall reveal you."

She peered around him, eyeing the many visitors milling around the lake and the locals making the most of things in a bid to earn additional coin. If they knew who she was, she would never get a chance to find the diamond. They would most likely run her out of town.

She looked to Leo, keeping her arms folded. "You would not."

"I have little idea why you feel the need for this...disguise." He waved a hand up and down her. "But if you do not come, I shall confess to the blacksmith that Frederick is in fact Miss Rebecca Fortescue, returned from goodness knows where after nearly ten years."

"No."

He nodded. "I feel certain Mr. Cooper will waste no time in telling the others. He does have a penchant for gossip after all."

Grinding her teeth together, she considered her options. The fatigue worked so deep, she swore she felt it in her bones. The smell was not much better either nor the feel of the grime upon her skin, making her itch. Mr. Cooper was indeed a gossip and it would take mere hours for the whole town to know of her return. Even if she evaded them now, they would be on the lookout for her, making her hunt all the more difficult, if not impossible.

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“You are a cad,” she muttered.

“Oh yes, a terrible cad, wanting to see you rested and bathed.”

She rolled her eyes. He had not lost his sarcastic touch either it seemed. She thrust a finger in his direction. “I shall have you know this is blackmail.”

His responding tilted grin made the butterflies dance in her stomach. She pressed her lips together in case her own mouth decided to curve in response. The man was too charming, irresistible and handsome, and he well knew it.

So she would have to keep her guard especially high because goodness, if anyone could get through her carefully crafted shield, it would be Leo.

### Chapter Four

Rebecca stilled when the tips of the chimneys of Eastwick came into sight. Her skin visibly paled and she shook her head. “I cannot be seen here. I should leave.” She twisted on a heel, but Leo stepped in front of her, arms folded.

“Why?” He gestured to her. “If it is some fear of scandal, I would suggest skulking around, dressed as a boy and sleeping—well, I can only assume amongst pigs from the smell of you—is hardly the behavior of a respectable young lady.”

“I do not care about that,” she muttered. “My father brought enough scandal upon us as it is.” Her chin jutted out. “And it was sheep actually.”

“Livestock then.” He stared her down, but her glare did not waver. “You know Rebecca, you make it hideously difficult for me to help you.”

“I did not ask for it.”

“True, but you will have it regardless, so you might as well resign yourself.”

She eyed the house over her shoulder. “I cannot be seen,” she repeated.

“Because of your father?” He shook his head. “My servants can be trusted. Lord knows, you know most of them from when we were younger.”

“That does not change what he did.” She thrust her hands into her trouser pockets and kicked a stone aside. “The damage he wrought was unforgivable.”

“He is not well-liked here, to be sure.”

“So you understand why it is imperative that I not be seen?” Her gaze lifted to his, her olive eyes wide and imploring.

“Then you shall not be seen,” he declared.

“How?”

“Do you fail to recall how we snuck around Eastwick Hall when we were young?”

A little color appeared on her cheeks. He hadn’t meant to bring up all of the memories but there had certainly been a great many kisses and fumbles conducted in shadowy alcoves in the house. Despite their young age, the feelings between them had been palpable.

He had a sneaking suspicion those feelings had not faded with time, despite himself. However, he would not be giving in to them. He offered aid because he might be a rake, but he was not a cad, as she had suggested. Rebecca needed help and he might not forgive himself if he did not offer it.

He also might not forgive himself for offering it either. Especially if he did not move his mind swiftly on from how kissable her lips were and how poorly the boy's garments hid curves that had certainly developed with age. His fingers twitched with the desire to slide a hand down her side and trace said curves, slowly and intimately.

Inhaling deeply, he gestured to the house. "I will get you in unseen, I promise."

She nodded, her jaw clenched, and they continued on along the path worn into the grass that would eventually join with the main road to the house. Leo would lead Rebecca along the line of trees, out of the sight of the house and into the ballroom entrance. No one stepped foot in there unless they were hosting a dinner party or ball, and that rarely happened given he and his brothers spent little time here.

"Will you tell me where you have been? What you have been doing all these years?"

A few beats of silence followed, marred only by the swish of grass underfoot. "Florence," she finally answered.

A knot tangled briefly in his throat and he swallowed it. "So close."

"Still another country." Her gaze met his briefly before fixing upon the house ahead.

"I was in Florence only last year."



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“My mother and I keep to ourselves. My father ensured we take no part in society anymore.”

“There would be those who would still greet you, surely?” He pointed at his chest. “Myself, for example.”

She gave a half-smile. “He borrowed and stole and left people penniless. He schemed and broke hearts. I do not blame anyone for giving us the cut.”

Leo shook his head, wishing he had been there to console her. There were plenty of scandalous characters within the town but none quite like Roger Fortescue. He had not only accrued great debt and run from it, after using whatever means necessary to amass new wealth, he had left not one but two wives in the wind before committing fraud and trying to wed a young lady from Grasmere, the village next to theirs, who had a large fortune to her name. There were other more minor crimes committed too, but it had been the fraud that had seen him hanged. Pretending to be a peer of the realm was more often than not punishable by death.

“It must have hurt you—to know the truth of him.”

She lifted a shoulder. “My mother and I managed. There are many others who suffered more at his hands.”

“But after sixteen years of him in your life...”

She put hands to her hips. “I have no desire to speak of him, Leo.”

“You cannot blame me for having questions. You did rather vanish in the middle of the night with no word.”

“Yes, well...that could not be helped.”

“Really?”

“Do you wish me to come with you or not?”

He considered his options. If he sent her on her way, he’d never forgive himself, but he’d be damned if he would not get the answers he sought eventually. Rebecca Fortescue had broken his heart and changed his life irreparably at a tender age.

“You owe me answers,” he said.

“You have not changed,” she replied simply.

Oh, he had changed. In many ways. He had hardened himself, ensured he would never be hurt again. Now would be the true test. Could he have Rebecca in his life once more without having his heart broken all over again?

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TRUE TO HIS promise, Leo snuck her into the grand house undetected. Little had changed in the time she had gone. The beautifully carved staircases and painted ceilings still stole her breath. A few different paintings adorned walls, including one of Leo and his brothers. Rebecca averted her gaze from it and realized the folly of her action. She had the real man next to her and he was far more devastating to look at than a painting.

Why had she agreed to this? She could have survived another night in a barn. Those

years in Italy, when their life had been ripped from underneath them thanks to her father's debts, had taught her to survive on her own. She had gone from pampered young lady to practically a penniless urchin with rough fingers and holes in her dresses. Their fortunes had changed over the years, mostly thanks to her mother's skills as a seamstress and Rebecca's determination to ensure they did not starve. Now they had enough money set aside so her mother could cease working while Rebecca managed the modest shop in Florence.

Leo led her up the stairs, through the corridor to the east wing and unlocked the door separating it from the central part of the house. With no lamps lit, a shiver ran through her as the cool air of the unheated section of the building touched her. A plush long rug sunk underfoot, and she grimaced when she spied her muddy footprints trailing behind her. She tapped Leo's arm.

"Uh...I think we might end up detected."

He paused and eyed where the footprints followed them. "I shall take the blame, never fear. Mrs. Jones still thinks of me as an unruly sort of boy anyway."

Unruly. Yes, that was a fine way to describe him. Though, the unruly boy she had known was far different to the man she had read about all these years. When she had known him, unruly could have been used to describe the way he rode horses bareback faster than anyone she knew or how he always snuck injured animals into his room. Now it meant he bedded every eligible woman in London. Not unusual behavior for some members of the ton she supposed, but it did not stop her heart from giving a painful pang.

She rolled her eyes to herself. Honestly, what did she expect? That he would save himself for her after she had vanished? She'd be a fool to believe that and the last thing she wanted to be was foolish. She'd been enamored with her father for years, admiring his ability to charm anyone, and truly believing him to be the best of

fathers. While other girls had fathers who ignored them or constantly dismissed their ideas, her father never once made her feel small or useless.

That was until he had dragged them all to Italy in the dead of the night, forcing them to abandon all they knew, before leaving them several weeks later with promises of wealth and comfort.

He never returned.

And she would never let herself believe such stories again.

“I believe this room should do it...” Leo twisted the doorknob and eased open the door, revealing a bedroom she had not seen before. She blinked at the sudden invasion of light. It did not surprise her that she did not know it as Eastwick boasted forty bedrooms, though she had seen enough to know the elegant cream room with its gold touches, and pale blue silk swags upon the bed, was not unusual. Leo’s mother had impeccable taste.

She slipped into the room, grateful for the wooden floors that allowed her to skirt the heavily detailed rug. Remaining close to the wall, she peered out of the window. The room overlooked the kitchen gardens where she spotted several workers. She ducked back from the window and flattened herself against the wall. “Are you certain no one shall know I’m here?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned. “You shall be my little secret.”

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A frisson of pleasure swirled through her, landing deep in her stomach. The words were scandalous and roguish. Proof of the sort of man he was, and a clear example of why she should not respond to his flirtations.

“I shall not stay long. As soon as I have—” She paused. “As soon as I have finished my business in Langmere, I shall depart for Florence.”

“Naturally.” His smile remained, but his blue eyes hardened in a way she had never seen before. “And what exactly is your business here?”

She straightened her shoulders. “It’s private.”

“You are staying in my house,” he reminded her.

“I agreed to stay here because you forced me. I made no promises of divulging my business.”

“If it is something nefarious, I should be inclined to know.”

Rebecca pressed her lips together. “It is nothing nefarious, but I understand why a man such as you should imagine it might be so.”

“A man such as me?” He moved a few steps closer, taking strides across the rug until he had joined her on the other side, leaving only a pace or so between them. “And what sort of a man is that?”

“A rake,” she said simply. “I am not an ignorant fool, Leo. I know who you are.” She

removed the hat from her head and clasped the brim in both hands for want of something to do. The rough fabric underneath her fingertips would prevent her from doing something ridiculous like reaching out to him or running her hands over his broad chest too, surely?

“Do you really?” he murmured.

His hand flexed at his side and he stretched it out, moving with enough deliberateness that she could have ducked away. However, she found herself held captive. Not physically restrained but held by the way his gaze searched hers then flicked down to her lips and over her person. Held captive by the sheer presence of him. She swallowed hard.

He flicked a thumb over her cheek, and she jolted at the touch. His lips tilted. “Mud,” he murmured.

Breaths rasped in her throat and he did not move his hand, instead letting it linger on her skin. She smelled, was filthy and likely about the most hideous she had ever looked, but when he stared at her so, she felt like the youthful, utterly enraptured sixteen-year-old she had once been.

Her stomach gave a grumble and his hand dropped back to his side. She exhaled slowly, uncertain whether to thank or be angry at her stomach for its interruption.

“You are hungry,” he stated.

Even if she had not been, she would have said yes. Anything to send him on his way so she could focus her thoughts once more. She nodded.

“I’ll get you some food.” He twisted on his heel and then paused. “I do not suppose I need to tell you to stay here.”

She shook her head, not trusting her voice, then dropped back against the wall once he left the room. “Fool,” she told herself.

She would never stay in Langmere. She could not. No one would accept her back. Most especially not Leo. The rake had not forgiven her for leaving, she suspected. In some ways, she did not blame him, even if it had been out of her hands.

Oh yes, and he was an entirely different man. She would not forget that.

## Chapter Five

Leo should not have gravitated toward the sound of female chatter coming from the long gallery. But then neither should he have installed Rebecca in the house as a secret guest.

If his mother saw him now, she’d have his head. Or at least be exceedingly disappointed in him and tell him so in that sort of manner that made him feel like a boy again.

But, damn it, he was a grown man, and a little conversation with ladies was hardly scandalous, and would serve him well. Namely, he rather hoped assisting the ladies in their tour around the house might distract him from said guest.

There had been too many moments yesterday when he’d battled the desire to stride over, tear off that boyish hat and kiss her until he forgot himself and forgot any promises to his mother. He’d be breaking vows to himself too, though. If he kissed her, there was no telling what would happen to his heart. Would it fall for her all over again?

She’d always had a hold on him, ever since she’d grown into a young woman. Now it seemed that hold had not faded, and despite stinking to high heaven like a bloody

farm and being smeared in dirt, he'd wanted nothing more than to kiss her again and recall those heady younger days of being so in love, so damned hopeful for the future.

He shook his head to himself and strode through the open gallery door. The cluster of eight women were a mix of ages, spanning from early teens to much older. He fixed the smile that had carried him through the past decade of his life and walked over to them. The housekeeper lifted a brow when she spotted him. He had a horrible suspicion his mother had written to Mrs. Jones about her request for Leo to remain a staid, boring recluse but did that also mean the woman would be reporting back to her?

Well, let her. The worse that could be said was he had charmed a few pretty ladies. His mother simply wanted him to avoid scandal. What was scandalous about greeting guests in his brother's house?

"Are you enjoying what the house has to offer, ladies?"



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The ladies turned, their gazes wide. He fixed his attention on the prettiest girl—a petite, fair-haired thing with rosy cheeks. The color in her face deepened when he widened his smile.

“Ladies, this is Lord Leonard. As I said, he is in residence and we expect Lord Preswick to join us soon,” Mrs. Jones said. “We were just finishing touring the house, my lord,” she met his gaze boldly, “and shall be out of your way presently.”

“Oh, there is no rush.” He held up a hand. “In fact—” He paused, spying movement outside. The large windows leading down the righthand side of the room offered plenty of light to view the paintings but were carefully set on the side of the house where the sunlight would not hit the paintings directly. It also gave him a fine view of Rebecca slipping along the side of the house. She paused, peered around the edge of the next window, spied him and rolled her eyes.

Blast.

“Forgive me, ladies, I just recalled a...meeting to which I was meant to attend.”

Mrs. Jones’s mouth opened and then shut. Her gaze narrowed but Leo hastened away before anything could be said by either her or the visitors.

That woman was most certainly spying for his mother, so he’d have to be cautious or sway her to his side. She’d always been fond of all three of them so with any luck, he could persuade her not to write of his deeds—or misdeeds to his mother.

Notthat he had done anything wrong of course, nor did he intend to.

After all, he was merely helping a lady in need. His mother could hardly complain about that. If one thought about it, it was practically a noble pursuit and she should be pleased indeed her son behaved so.

He caught up with Rebecca a short way from the house. She ducked behind a tree, her attention fixed on the house rather than him, and he strolled around it, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Good morning.”

She whirled in his direction and pressed a hand to her chest. “Leo!”

“I prefer this.” He gestured up and down her.

She wrinkled her nose and glanced down at the crumpled muslin gown. “As you said, I do not make a good boy,” she muttered.

“Are you admitting I was correct?”

“Maybe,” she mumbled.

He let his gaze linger on the womanly figure presented to him. Despite the state of her pale blue gown, it clung to curves that had certainly developed since he had known her. There was a softness to her arms and shoulders that hadn’t been there before, and it made him want to grind his teeth as he wondered if there was a softness to her thighs and belly too, and how her figure would feel under his palms.

“Where are you going?” he asked gruffly, forcing his gaze to her face.

It did not help matters much. The softness that had him so enraptured had found itself to her small mouth. Though delicate, the lips were full, and he still recalled how soft

they were, even after all these years. Her brown, red-tinged hair was wild, tumbling about her shoulders, no doubt a victim of her having no one to do it for her. It framed her chin and kept his focus on her mouth.

She scowled. “Do you not have guests to see to? No doubt they are missing you.”

“They are there to see the house. Not me.”

“I rather think they’d prefer to see you.”

He chuckled. “Maybe so but they will have to content themselves with Mrs. Jones.”

She tilted her head. “You are forgoing an opportunity to charm young ladies?”

“Hardly forgoing,” he drawled. “I do believe Mrs. Jones had several other requests for tours over the coming weeks.” He let his lips curve. “Plenty of opportunity to charm young ladies.”

Her gaze narrowed, and he wished to God he did not regret the words.

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WHY REBECCA FELT the need to mention the ladies, she did not know.

Liar.

Very well, she knew. But she had given up any right to feel jealousy a long time ago. If Leo wanted to charm and flirt and likely bed whatever woman he so chose, it had nothing to do with her.

“Where are you going?”

She blew out a breath. She’d been putting off this visit as it was, but she did not need Leo questioning her about it too. It was the last place she could think of that her father’s belongings might be, but she had dismissed the idea as any discoveries of riches in the house would have been declared, sold, and the profits would have been paid to her father’s many, many creditors. She had to conclude he had either hidden them well or they were not at the house at all.

“A walk,” she finally replied.

“And here I thought you were set on being rather secretive.”

“I am allowed a walk, am I not?”

“I am allowed to accompany you, am I not?”

She glanced back at the house. “Return to your guests.”

“I’d rather walk.”

“That, I do not believe.”

His lips quirked. “It seems you believe you still know me, Rebecca.”

“I know of you, Leo. Hardly a day goes by when the newspapers do not write of the Moncrieff brothers and their exploits.” Continuing along the path at a speedier pace

than before, she bit back a groan when he took a couple of big strides and caught up with her.

“I am gladdened to know you cared.”

She bit down on her bottom lip. Of course she cared. How could she not? Leaving Leo amongst a storm of scandal and dishonor hurt her more than anything in her life.

However, that was a long time ago and whether she cared for him or not was irrelevant. She had no desires to return to her old life, no matter how tempting. Leo had changed, she had changed, and more importantly the world had changed. The warm greetings she enjoyed as a child, before the truth of her father’s life had been revealed, were long gone. People wrote of her father almost as much as they wrote of Leo and the majority of it was a lot less flattering.

“You are going to the old house, are you not?” he pressed when she continued on silently.

“No.” She kept her gaze fixed ahead.

“There is little else in this direction.”

“I told you, I’m walking.”

“To the house,” he finished for her. “Though, I must warn you it is in a terrible state. No one was willing to purchase it once it was stripped of its assets.”

A lump tangled in her throat. The house had been warm and beautiful to grow up in, set amongst wildflower fields and the steep slopes of the hills. She’d read of her childhood home’s fate and known it would not be the same place she’d grown up in anymore.

But if she was ever to make up for her father's behavior, she needed to find this blasted diamond.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured.

"So you are going to the house."

"I am, but there is little need for you to accompany me."

"Well, I have nothing better to do."

She rolled her eyes. "You are still stubborn I see."

"And you are still a pain in the rear."

She sucked in a breath, stopped and faced him. The last time he'd called her that, she had been five and ten. She would never forget it. She'd jabbed him in the chest, accusing him of being ungentlemanly.

Then he'd kissed her.

She had been lost from that point on. They were never apart, and all expected them to marry once older.

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Rebecca drew up her shoulders and tried to swallow the painful web of emotions in her throat. “If I am such a pain in the rear, why did you offer me a bed at Eastwick? And why oh why are you following me?”

“Perhaps because I want answers.”

“Answers? I already told you I am visiting the house.”

“After much persuasion,” he said dryly.

“Leo, I do not have time for this.” She marched on but this time he stepped in front of her, blocking her path. She tried to step around, but he moved again. “Leo!” she said, frustration tinging her voice.

“I want answers, Rebecca, and you are going nowhere until I have them.”

She met his serious gaze and frowned. “You can hardly keep me captive.”

He shrugged. “I probably could if I wished.”

Eyeing his folded arms, she suspected he was right. He could easily scoop her up and do whatever he wished with her. A tiny swirl of anticipation coiled around her stomach, and she inhaled deeply to remove the foolish sensation.

“Very well. What do you wish to know?”

He uncrossed his arms. “What happened that night?”

“I do not know why you—” He fixed her with a look, and she sighed. “Very well, you know what happened. My father’s creditors caught up with him and we left, fleeing to Italy so they could not catch us.” She waved a dismissive hand. “But you should know this. It has been widely written about since his death.”

“I did not know it at the time. You vanished, Rebecca. Gone. Like you were never even here.”

Pain etched furrows in his brow, and it made Rebecca’s breath catch. “I am sorry, but my father gave us no chance to send word or scarcely even pack. He had us leave under the cover of darkness before either my mother or I knew what his intent was.”

“And you settled in Florence?”

She nodded. “My mother is still there. I will return to her once my business here is complete.”

“Which is?”

“Private,” she said tightly and tried to step swiftly around him.

Leo shifted and put both hands to her arms. “One more question then...why did you never write? Why not one single word?”

She glanced away. “Why should you wish to hear from me? My father left owing money to the people of this town. Even your father!”

“You did nothing wrong, Rebecca.” He released her arms and ran a hand over his face. “Hell, I was in ignorance as to your whereabouts for years. One letter would have sufficed.”



“I really did not think—”

“You thought wrong, Rebecca. Gravely wrong. Of course I would wish to hear from the girl I loved.”

The word rang in her ears and swirled around her like a violent tempest. Her eyes began to burn with unshed tears, and she swallowed hard. “I...I was wrong,” she managed to say huskily. “I’m sorry.”

“Damn right,” he muttered.

She stared at the polished tips of his boots, marred slightly by a few errant blades of grass. Of course, she’d known she caused him pain, but she did not realize any of it still lingered like it did with her. As far as she was concerned, Leo Moncrieff had moved on from her a long time ago.

“I’m trying to make things right,” she confessed, keeping her gaze to the ground. “That is why I am here. To heal some of the hurt my father caused.”

## Chapter Six

If Rebecca thought he was going to be satisfied with the minimal answers she’d given him, then she truly did not know him anymore. She called it stubbornness, he called it tenacity. Usually he used it in swaying some beautiful widow into his bed for one night only, but today he would use it to get more information from Rebecca.

Though, in doing so, he would have to be careful. He’d already stolen far too many glances at her rear or wondered how it would feel to tangle his fingers in her hair.

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Maybe it was just a symptom of his vows to his mother. Really, he should still be angry at her. Perhaps he was. But that did not prevent him recalling the heat between them, even when they had been young and innocent. It had been palpable, and he suspected it remained, only bolstered by the fact they were both fully grown adults now.

She was going to leave, though. Again.

She could not make it any clearer. She talked of returning to Florence, of finding no welcome here. He had his doubts her welcome would be as frosty as she suggested but it should not matter to him either way. Once this blasted scandal business had passed, he would return to Town and slip straight into his old life of debauchery and pleasure. He did not need to let his head get muddled with thoughts of what might have once been.

“So what exactly do you believe you can do to make up for your father’s behavior?”

Not that he believed she owed anyone anything. Her father had paid for his crimes and Rebecca had been an innocent, but even when younger, she had always taken care of others, from nursing a young stable hand better to bringing him every wounded animal she ever found.

To have caused hurt to others no doubt pained her. He glanced sideways at her and gave her a grudging smile. She might have left him with no word and shattered his heart, but she still held those qualities he had much admired.

Frustrating really. Could she not have turned into an ugly, selfish hag and allow him

to be grateful he had escaped a future with her?

She pursed her lips and lifted her skirts to step over a large rock in the middle of the path. “My father...he left behind something of value.”

“Something?”

She glanced at him.

“It’s not as though I am going to rob you, Rebecca.”

“A diamond,” she blurted.

He lifted his brows. “A diamond.”

She nodded. “When we left with such haste, he hid a box of belongings in the hopes he would be able to come back for them. I believe that is precisely why he was in Cumbria when he was captured.”

“How did you know about this?”

“A few old letters I finally read after his death—they mentioned this diamond and his desire to retrieve it.”

“And you believe it to be true.”

“My father made up a great many stories to hide the truth of his life—”

“Including pretending to be the cousin of Lord Phillips,” he added.

The one crime that had been the unravelling of him and had ensured he would face

the noose. Why the man had tried such a bold act of crime, he did not know, but it had become known since his trial that Rebecca's father was nothing if not ambitious and appeared to believe himself entirely immune to the law.

"Indeed." She grimaced. "So many that he left behind a trail of wives and children."

"I heard," Leo said solemnly.

"The woman he married after my mother had no idea his first wife still lived. She thought him a fine, upstanding gentleman, but he spent all of her dowry and left her penniless—and with child."

"Lord," he muttered. He'd avoided reading of Roger Fortescue. It reminded him too much of Rebecca.

"So when I found mention of this diamond, I knew I must find it. It will be worth a fortune and I can aid her and my half-siblings."

"And if the diamond is not real?"

She set her jaw. "It is, I'm certain of it."

"What if he already found it and moved it?"

"If he had it, it would have been mentioned when he was arrested. If he moved it, it cannot have gone far. He never left Langmere." She shrugged. "I did not understand my father when I was younger, but I understand him well enough now. Riches were his primary motivation, and greed controlled him. No doubt he thought he could marry Miss Young, take her wealth and sell the diamond after they were wed."

Leo shook his head. "If he had but left the lakes, he would likely still be alive today."

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She nodded. “He cared only for money it seems.”

“I thought he cared about you.”

One shoulder lifted and she fixed her gaze on the horizon ahead. “Maybe he did, I do not know. But at some point, he clearly tired of pretending to be a perfect father.”

He ground his teeth together. He’d been too angry she had left him with no word of her fate that he did not think how it must have felt to have her world ripped from underneath her. The Fortescues had enjoyed a privileged life and Roger Fortescue appeared an excellent father, encouraging his daughter to read and think for herself. Maybe it had been real for a while, but that loss must have been grave.

He paused by the row of trees that hid the house from view and put a hand to her arm. “Do you wish me to go to the house? If it is, uh, too painful that is.”

“Certainly not.” Her shoulders lifted and he tried not to grin. To think she called him stubborn. She really had not changed.

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REBECCA LET HERSELF sag once the house came into view, finally releasing the breath she’d held for too long. She was not certain what she had expected but the house appeared entirely normal from the outside. The grass surrounding it had become wild and the garden her mother loved was overgrown with bramble bushes, but it was not the neglected ruin she feared.

Aware of Leo watching her reaction, she strode forward and stilled, drawing in a gasp. “The bridge has gone!”

He nodded grimly. “Dismantled for the stone, I believe.”

She stepped up to the edge of the moat and peered at the remnants of the stone bridge that connected the house to the land. Built in the Tudor period, the generous-sized house had long ago given up its drawbridge and the stone one had been in place years before her family lived there.

She eyed the stone exterior. The windows were empty of curtains or any sign of residence, and the stillness struck her. When she had left the house, she had foolishly believed they would return as soon as her father had solved whatever problems they were running from. She blinked away the tears threatening to cloud her vision.

“You really think the diamond is in there?”

“It has to be. I have searched everywhere else.” She studied the few stones left of the bridge, surrounded by a tangle of weeds and murky water. If she just—

“Rebecca...”

She looked to Leo. “I have to get in.”

He shook his head. “If you fall in, you will be lucky not to drown.”

“I can step across.” She gestured to the stones. “I think.”

“You loathe weeds, remember?” He leaned over and peered at the water. “I think there’s fish in there too.”

A shiver travelled through her. She detested swimming with fish and would far rather swim in one of the clear lakes in Cumbria, where one could see what was about one. The thought of a weed or fish tangling around her leg made her stomach bunch.

Glancing again at the house, she lifted her shoulders and took the first step, landing solidly on the lump of stone. Quickly, she moved across the next two, ignoring Leo's utterance of her name. She took another step, wavered on the uneven rubble and flailed her arms until she found her balance.

"Only a few to go," she murmured to herself.

"Oh hell," Leo muttered from behind her.

She only understood why he'd cursed when she took the next step and lost her balance. She toppled sideways into the water, fully submerging with a gasp. The water felt thick and the weeds surrounded her, not offering a cushion but more of a prison, winding about her as though they intended to suck her down into the darkness. She fought to lift her head above the water, her garments so heavy they might as well have been made of lead. Bitter water caught in her throat when she tried to gulp down a breath and she choked on it, swallowing more in the process.

A strong arm banded about her waist and lifted her higher. She sucked in air. Leo dragged her forward, and she tried to help but exhaustion already leached through her entire body. He aided her toward the crumbled end of the bridge, pushing her up until she was able to drag herself out of the water. Rebecca rolled on her back and took several deep breaths while Leo hauled himself up and lay next to her. They remained there for a few moments, in silence.

"You are still as bloody mad as you always were," he finally said.

Rebecca couldn't help the laugh that escaped her. He chuckled too.

She rolled onto her side and pushed up to sitting. “Forgive me.”

He shook his head and pushed a hand through his hair. She spied his hat and jacket on the other side of the moat. She supposed her impromptu swim had been far too predictable.

Then her attention fell to his chest, where the damp fabric of his shirt clung to his body. He’d already been turning into a man when she had known him, but she doubted she could ever have imagined the astonishingly handsome specimen before her. She bunched her hands together to fight the need to lean forward and run her fingers along him to truly see what he had turned into.



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His gaze met hers and she swore he echoed similar thoughts.

Stepping up swiftly, she grimaced at the feel of her wet skirts clinging to her legs. “We had better make haste or we shall catch our death of cold.”

“At least the day is relatively warm.” He nodded toward the moat. “And we need to decide how the devil we are getting back across?”

She made a face. “Um. Swim again, I suppose. Just voluntarily this time.”

He lifted his gaze to the skies. “I should have stayed at home.”

“Yes, you should have done,” she snapped, recalling him flirting with that pretty young lady. For a moment, she had forgotten it all. Who he was, who she was. Whotheywere.

“Well, where do you suggest we start?” He indicated to the house.

“There were a few hidden rooms. I am hoping he hid his belongings in one of those and it went undiscovered.”

He grimaced. “We may not be able to search.”

Leo frowned, and she followed his gaze. An old lady hobbled along the side of the moat, gesturing angrily at them. “Intruders!”

He stepped in front of her, though why he thought she needed protection from the

stooped old lady, she did not know.

“Do you know her?” Rebecca murmured.

He shook his head. “I haven’t been here since you left.”

She peered at them through wire-framed glasses. “Get away from there. There’s nothing to be taken, you know. Thieves have already taken everything of value.” She waved her walking stick at them for good measure.

“We are not thieves,” Leo assured her. “In fact, this young lady used to live here.”

Rebecca’s heart dropped to her freezing toes. Did he not know what was at stake here? Did he not understand her need for secrecy at all?

The woman peered around Leo, and Rebecca ducked farther behind him but too late apparently.

“You are a relative of that awful Fortescue?” She spat at the grass. “He still owes my husband money. Went to his grave without paying us one jot.”

Rebecca eased out from behind Leo. “I am deeply sorry for that. If you but let me know how much it is you are owed, I will ensure the debt is paid.”

“Rebecca...” Leo warned.

“If this lady is owed money, I would see that debt settled.”

“She could be lying,” he muttered.

“I doubt it,” she said on a sigh. “My father owed money to about every business

here.”

“Your father?” the woman squawked. “He was your father?” She shook her head and wagged a finger at her. “You should stay away from this woman,” she warned. “If she has her father’s blood in her, no doubt she will take you for all you are worth.” She glanced them over. “It seems you are both already set on living most scandalously.”

“Please,” Rebecca lifted both hands, “I shall see your debts paid. Just do not tell anyone I am here. I promise I have no ill intentions.”

The woman set down her walking stick and leaned heavily on it for a few moments. She swung her gaze between them then nodded curtly. “See the debt is paid and I shall be silent.” She gestured with her stick toward a small, white cottage some way up the hillside. “My husband and I live at the farmstead.”

Rebecca nodded vigorously and watched the woman amble off toward the cottage.

“She moves fast for an old lady,” Leo commented.

“And she loathes me and my family.” She closed her eyes briefly. If she believed she had been mistaken in her assumptions for even a moment, she had been proved wrong.

## Chapter Seven

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“How are you enjoying the country, Brother?” Adam dismounted his horse and hastened up the steps to the house with his usual energy. They were close in age, having been born scarcely a year apart and so similar in looks that sometimes people mistook them for twins but, in truth, Leo had not seen Adam in over a year. Whilst Leo enjoyed balls and dinner parties, Adam could more often than not be found in the gaming hells of London.

He could usually be found winning too. His brother had turned taking money from unsuspecting men into an art form.

Leo debated telling him of Rebecca, but he had a good several reasons not to. Firstly, Rebecca had no desire for her presence to be known, and after the encounter with that old lady a few days ago, he was beginning to understand why. Secondly, if anyone knew how bruised and battered she had left his heart, it was his brother. The last thing he wanted to do was recount his heartbreak or potentially listen to some lecture on why he should send her away.

Especially, when Adam might be right.

“You know how it is. Sheep here, a few hills there,” he said. “Though a darned sight more women.”

Adam handed his hat over to the butler and ran his hands through his hair. It had grown longer since Leo had seen him last, so at least they’d be less likely to be mistaken for each other during their stay here. “I noticed that. What the devil is going on?”

“Someone wrote about the place in a book. Apparently they declared it good for one’s health or some such.” He waved a dismissive hand. “I have yet to read it.”

His brother smirked. “Mother would not be happy to know she sent us away to a place that is now more populated with women than ever. Some quite fine ones too. How will you resist temptation, Leo?”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Worry about yourself.”

Despite their more simplified social lives, both of his brothers had reputations as rakes. Which was precisely why they had been implicated in this blasted scandal. He wondered if Rebecca was going to ask why they were all here before long and he rather dreaded explaining it all, though he supposed it would ensure Rebecca maintained her distance from him and he wouldn’t find himself at risk of being heartbroken all over again.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here until I spoke to the gatekeeper,” Adam admitted, peeling off his gloves and finally his jacket. “Seems Alexander is on his way too.”

Leo nodded. “Mrs. Jones received word that he is due any day, though, I had little idea either, but I won’t complain about being stuck here if I do not have to do it alone.”

“Seems to me Mother has been scheming.”

“Or she wants all of her sons out of London and confined to one place. So we do not embarrass her anymore.”

“I am not the embarrassment, Leo. After all, I had nothing to do with Miss Kingsley’s unfortunate situation.”

“Well, I did not get her with child.” Leo scowled. “Surely you know me better than that?”

Adam lifted his shoulders. “You hardly have the reputation of an angel.”

“Good Lord, Adam, I might indulge in pleasure where I can but not with a damned innocent and I would never abandon a woman to her fate. Hell, for all I know, it was you.”

“It was not me,” he said firmly.

“Then it must have been Alexander.”

Leo made a face. “You really believe so?” He shook his head. “I cannot see him doing such a thing either though, Lord knows, it’s been that long since I’ve seen him.”

“Last I heard he had climbed Scafell, Snowdon, and Ben Nevis all in two months.”

“Rather him than me.”

“Indeed,” Adam agreed. He stretched his arms. “I need to do something active after that tiresome journey. Are the targets set up?”

Leo smirked. Of course the first thing his brother wanted to do was archery. The last time they played, Leo had beaten him. It was a sport they always played together and there never seemed to be a clear winner, but Leo would happily beat him again if he so wanted and prove his prowess once and for all.

“Are you certain you want to do that?”

Adam's brow lifted. "Beat you? Most certainly."

"Unlikely," he muttered.

They headed out of the rear doors while Quigley ensured all was set up for them and around the side of the house, toward the large stretch of land that faced the lake. When they were younger they had taken turns trying to fire arrows into the lake, never succeeding but most certainly losing enough arrows that Follet, the groundskeeper, would scold them.

He glanced at the window of Rebecca's room and spied no sign of movement. He'd seen her when he brought her food for lunch, but she had grown melancholy after not being able to find this bloody diamond and the encounter with the old lady. Despite himself, he wanted to comfort her. This older Rebecca was more serious than the one he had known and slightly...harder, he supposed. He rather regretted life had done that to her.

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Yet, before everything had gone to hell, they had been laughing together at their dip in the moat. It left him with no doubt that the old Rebecca he'd loved still existed.

He drew in a breath, notched an arrow and pulled aggressively on the bow. The arrow flew wild, missing the target by a good few feet.

Beside him, Adam chuckled. "You are rusty, Brother."

"Just warming up." And not thinking about Rebecca. Too much time had passed, and they had both changed. It made no sense to ponder what could be. Especially when he had promised his mother his utter penitence.

"You had better warm up quicker. Looks like Alexander has arrived."

Leo turned to see his brother, the marquis, striding across the grass toward him. He supposed at least with both of his brothers here, he would be thoroughly distracted from Rebecca.

With any luck, at least.

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REBECCA COULDN'T DECIDE if her heart jolted when the door opened because she feared she had been discovered.

Or because it was likely to be Leo.



He ducked in and shut the door behind him. Rebecca remained on the bed, her fingers twined together. He gave her a flash of a smile that did nothing to untangle the knot that counted for her stomach.

He filled the room with his presence much like he probably did in even the largest and grandest of ballrooms. Despite herself, her gaze flitted over his relaxed attire—the loosened cravat, the lack of a jacket and the uncuffed sleeves.

“I’m beginning to feel like the mad aunt, locked away for fear she would do something hideous,” she said. “Of course, you never read books like that so you would likely not know what I’m talking about but there was one particular title...”

A dark brow rose, and Rebecca clamped her mouth shut. Blathering on about books did nothing to calm her racing pulse nor did it make her look any more sane than this fictional mad aunt.

His lips twitched. “If you wish me to lock you away properly, that can be arranged.”

“Certainly not.”

“At least you smell better than a crazed aunt.”

“I smelled for all of one day. Will you never let me forget it?”

“Never,” he vowed.

She nodded to the tray in his hands. “This certainly does not make me feel like a normal guest. How did you steal away with the food?”

“I have my ways.”

“How mysterious.”

He chuckled. “I have not lost my ability to sneak about this house like we used to.”

She did not want to think about all the things they used to do. All the stolen kisses in the library or the orangery, all the promises of more once they were older and married.

He set the food on a mahogany drum table near the empty fireplace and then strode over to shut the curtains before lighting several lamps and candles about the room. She had not been cold, but the sudden warm light sent a shiver through her.

“I feared your brothers might spot me,” she confessed, nodding to the lone candle on the dressing table that had burned down to a mere dribble.

“It did occur to me it was a little odd to be secreting away a woman in my brother’s home, whilst he is in residence.” He moved across the room and drew the curtains more tightly. “But you can see little through these.”

“I’ve scarcely moved since they arrived,” she confessed.

“I should have warned you. Forgive me.”

“I could have left...” She gestured vaguely.

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“Why do you think I did not warn you?”

Rebecca had little idea how to respond to that, so she finally rose from the bed and drew out the delicate chair to seat herself at the table. She picked at the food, her appetite stolen most likely by Leo still being in the room.

“You do not have to stay,” she murmured between forkfuls of lukewarm but beautifully spiced duck.

“I told Alexander I was taking a stroll about the parkland.” He lingered by the window, his hands clasped behind his back, despite there being nothing for him to view from such a position.

She sighed and gestured to the chair opposite. “You had better sit then. It feels mightily odd eating with you towering over me.”

He lowered himself onto the chair, his frame seeming too big for a piece of furniture that had likely been designed for a woman.

She forced her attention to the food. Tomorrow she had intended to hunt down a woman with whom her father had been connected, and it would likely involve walking into Grasmere so she would need her strength.

“How are your brothers?” she finally asked when the silence stretched too long.

Not that it was uncomfortable, at least not in the traditional manner. It left her feeling oddly achy and desperate for the days when they had been able to talk and touch

freely.

“Well enough, though I cannot say they would confide in me were they not.”

She frowned, gesturing with her fork. “But you used to be so close, especially to Adam.”

“We are all busy these days.” He lifted both shoulders. “Alexander is forever hunting out his next adventure, probably determined to kill himself so he does not have to worry about siring an heir, and Adam still enjoys cards.”

“And you, what do you do?”

“I thought you knew all about me.” He smirked. “You have read all about me in the gossip columns after all.”

“Well, yes.” Warmth spread into her face, and she eyed the glossy table top until she could get the heat under control. “But only briefly,” she lied.

Leo leaned back and laced his hands behind his head. “Then I am sure you know it all.”

“The horses,” she blurted, motioning so fast with her fork that a few remnants of meat flung off it and splattered against the curtains. She grimaced and gently lowered the fork.

His lips curved but he said nothing of her disastrous manners.

“What I was trying to say was there are so many horses. Are they yours?”

He nodded. “We are so seldom here that Alexander does not mind me using the park

land for the horses.”

“For racing?”

“No. They are too old. I purchase those who are at the end of their racing or working careers and they live out their retirement here.”

“Of course you do.”

Rebecca should not have been surprised really, but she almost wished there was some selfish reason. It would make it all the easier to ignore this pull toward him as though he had lassoed a rope around her and was slowly hauling her in with his every word and action.

He lifted both brows. “You sound almost disappointed.”

“Well, it does rather ruin your image as the seductive rake.”

“And that disappoints you?” His gaze clashed with hers, making her chest feel tight.

“No, it is just—”

“You want to know why I bedded all those women over the years?”

“Leo—”

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“Because of you, Rebecca.” His jaw twitched. “To forget you.” He shoved a hand through his hair, leaving it in disarray. “I needed to get you out from under my skin, but I’ll be damned if I succeeded.”

She inhaled a sharp breath that seemed to sear her lungs. It all could be a lie, she supposed, but she did not think so. His confession had the loop tightening, drawing her closer still until she could fight him no longer.

Perhaps, just for now, she did not want to fight him.

“I never forgot you either,” she confessed.

The words escaped without thought and she should have regretted them, but when his gaze darkened and she knew precisely what his next move would be, she could not bring herself to.

She held herself still and waited.

### Chapter Eight

Leo froze, his throat drying. Maybe it was the confession. Or the way the candlelight caught her hair and brought out the red in it. Perhaps it was the flush in her cheeks. Or maybe it was because it had never faded. They had been young, naive and entirely unaware of how the world worked.

But it had always been real.

It still was. Pulsing between them like waves beating the shore—inescapable, powerful, unconquerable.

And for the first time in a long time, he no longer wanted to conquer it. No longer wanted to deny what he'd been trying to for all these years. There were no stranger's petticoats to bury his love for her in, no amorous words to hide behind.

He shoved back the chair and strode toward her, closing the gap. She rose at the same time or perhaps a beat after. All he knew was they met in a clash. When his hands clasped her face, she gasped, and flung her arms about his neck, her mouth already willing when he pressed his lips to hers.

"I missed you," he said, voice gravelly.

"I missed you too," she murmured between kisses.

He pressed his lips to hers, again and again, taking small tastes, reacquainting himself with her while heat surged through him. It was the same but different. Her lips seemed softer. Her body certainly was. Her breasts were pressed hard against him, her thighs molding to his body.

He kissed her more deeply and she moaned, so he moved his mouth down the soft arch of her neck. Her hands worked their way down his arms, digging tight then skimming up and over his shoulders, drawing him as close as humanly possible.

He needed more.

Breaking the kiss long enough to take a breath, he peered down at her flushed features, her eyes wide. Her pulse fluttered in the base of her neck, her breasts rose and fell. He waited a beat, just long enough to let her know he could walk away if she so wished.

It would kill him, but he would do it if she asked it of him.

“Kiss me, Leo,” she begged.

With a groan, he curved his hands around her waist and drew her hard against him. Air rushed from his lungs at the contact, but he didn't have time to draw a breath. Not when he had so long apart to make up for. Not when he had Rebecca willing and needy in his arms. She wanted his kisses, wanted his touch, and he'd be damned if he could deny her anything.

The kisses were deeper, more fervent, maybe led by his desperation but he suspected they were equally as wanting. She staggered back a few steps until her back met the wood of the door and she sucked down a breath. He used the resistance behind it to his advantage, allowing him to trail kisses down her neck, across her décolletage and up again while he moved into her, rocking against her. She laced her fingers into his hair.

“Rebecca.” He let her name linger in her ear briefly before nibbling her lobe and feeling the little shudder caress through her. Many things had changed, but she had not. A mere touch still made her shiver.

She arched her neck, tilting her head back against the wood. He nipped and kissed down, cupping her full breasts in a hand and working his fingers down, down. He gripped the fabric of her skirt and hauled it high until his fingers met the silk of her stockings then finally the small strip of flesh above them. Rebecca gripped his neck, leaving hot, open-mouthed kisses on his jawline, urging him to take her lips again with heated, urgent kisses.

His breaths felt raw in his throat. The blinding, pounding desire fairly sizzled through his veins. In truth, all of him felt raw, vulnerable, desperate. If he never saw her again, it might well break him, but if he never saw her again and did not give her



what she desired, he might regret it for the rest of his days.

Working his fingers up the soft, soft flesh of her thigh, he met her heat with a groan in the back of his throat. She gasped against his mouth and her kisses grew erratic when he touched her, circling her heat and finding her slick for him.

He had always been aware of this desire between them—so strong even when they were younger—but it had never been like this. Perhaps it was time or maybe experience, but their sweetly passionate kisses together were nothing like this moment.

Yes, taking Rebecca might kill him. It might leave him etched with agony for what he could never have again. But he could not deny her any more than he could deny the truth. He loved her. He always had and he always would.

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IT WAS AS though Rebecca had never left.

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No, that was not right. Their shared kisses had always been passion-filled but never felt like this. Each inhale was raw in her lungs, each touch like fire. She needed him more than the next aching breath. She didn't know what tomorrow held—if she would even find this diamond—but for once, it did not matter. Only his touch, his kisses mattered.

She needed more.

Digging her nails into his shoulders, she arched into his touch. He left scalding kisses on her skin and left her lips feeling swollen while he kissed her deeply. His touch made her gasp for more, drawing pleasure from her that spoke of the practice he'd partaken in.

Rebecca could not bring herself to care about his past and where he'd learned such techniques—not when he had her writhing in desperation against his hand until the sensations spiked, piercing through her with such suddenness, she nearly collapsed to the ground.

Leo banded an arm around her waist and scooped her up with such suddenness, she gasped. He set her down on the luxurious bed, the soft bedding brushing her face and the bare skin above her stockings, cushioning her.

The comfort lasted mere moments, stolen by the feeling of his hard body upon hers. She welcomed the weight of him, the almost suffocating sensation of needing him so badly. She splayed her palms over his chest in a desperate bid to feel him, but the layers of clothing prevented her from reveling in the true feel of him.

Though she resented their clothing's interference, she could not bring herself to slow and peel off his clothing to give her a chance to admire the smooth muscles beneath. If she stopped, she feared she might put an end to this.

Caution tired her. It bored her. She'd spent so long living carefully, in case someone might recognize her or think her no better than her father. She longed for the wild, heady days of her romance with Leo when all they cared for was when they would see each other next.

"Rebecca," he murmured, the word guttural.

He didn't ask permission. He did not need it. She had given it freely before he had even kissed her really. He knew her well enough to know she was his, if not in soul then in body.

Maybe in soul too but she could not bear to think on that at present.

She arched her back in invitation, lifting her hips. A growl sounded in the back of his throat and he thrust up her skirts. Cool air tickled the skin above her stockings. His expression darkened, his Adam's apple bobbed. He yanked the fabric higher, his moves uncultured and impatient. She closed her eyes while he kissed her hard and she felt something rip and his hand fumble between them.

Then the heat of him was there. His tongue tangled with hers, the heady mix of sensations making her mind whirl. The bed beneath her was soft, his body atop hers hard. His tongue demanded and she responded in kind, taking all she could from his kiss. She gripped his shirt tightly and he moved forward.

A gasp caught in the back of her throat when he entered her. He stilled and she felt his heavy breaths rising and falling in his chest, and the self-control making his arms tremble. Opening her eyes, Rebecca cupped his face and drew him down onto her.

“Good God,” he moaned and sank deeper into her.

He swallowed her responding cry. The world vanished in a tumult of sensations, the thickness of him deep inside her unlike anything she could have imagined. Joining so closely with him, feeling the sweet pressure swiftly easing the slight sting, had her entirely lost to him.

“Rebecca, I cannot—”

“Then do not,” she managed to reply.

He moved deeper into her, deeper than she thought possible, then harder and faster. She instinctively rose her hips and latched her legs around the back of his. He scattered kisses over her mouth, her neck and a bared breast, though she could not fathom when that had occurred. His hot mouth around her nipple added an additional layer of sensation that made her lids flutter closed. He thrust into her again and again.

“Oh.” She scrunched her eyes tightly shut and gripped him. The pleasure enveloped her, building higher than she thought possible until exploding through her in small, blissful caresses that had her shivering.

Leo rocked into her, drawing out the sensations, then pressed his mouth to her neck. He said her name in raspy tones and withdrew from her, groaning, leaving a hot whisper on her skin that she suspected had practically branded her. She would never forget the moment as long as she lived.

He eased slowly off her and inched her skirts down. She kept her eyes closed.

Coward.

For all her supposed courage and strength, she had none now. She felt him roll next to

her and heard his harsh breaths. Between her legs ached in a strangely delicious way and she wished she could turn back time and relive the moment all over again.

Then she would be able to ignore her fiercely pounding heart and the fact remained—she could not stay. Not even if she loved him.

Which she did.

She still did.

She opened her eyes and braved a look at the canopy above, staring sightlessly at it, too aware of Leo next to her, silent as well.

There was no sense in denying it. She had always loved Leo, and she always would. But what possible hope was there for them?

Chapter Nine

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To say there were several attractive women residing in town was an understatement. Leo wondered if fate had conspired to make their enforced solitude some sort of test but, at present, all the pretty women in England could not distract him from Rebecca.

He should never have made love to her.

Or let her make love to him.

Or whatever the hell happened.

All he knew was he had not slept one jot and he swore his lips still recalled the touch of hers, like a brand upon him. Unfortunate indeed, considering he had vowed to stay away from women, and if there was one woman he should keep his distance from, it was Rebecca. If he let himself fall any further, he'd end up reliving the pain of having her leave once more.

What a fool he was.

She had scarcely spoken a word to him since. If he was honest, he had uttered little to her either. The truth of it remained—she had left him once before and she would do it again.

Hell, breaking the vow to his mother was not even the worst of it. He'd already tumbled headlong into the utter insanity that was his desire for Rebecca, taking her in such a heathen manner for Christ's sakes.

And being her first.

He drew in a long breath. Every part of him needed to regret what he had done. If it didn't, he risked everything, all over again.

Despite it all, he could not help observe her while she made her way through the busy market set out at the lakeside. It seemed the residents of Langmere were even more determined to make coin from their new guests than he realized. Though the few shopkeepers used stalls to sell their wares, they had never had an official market day in the town, nor such a wide array of wares. He suspected some of the market sellers had come from the nearby towns.

Ribbons hung gaily from one stall, the bright colors streaming in the light breeze. On another, freshly baked bread teased one's senses and made Leo's stomach growl, even though he'd enjoyed a hearty morning meal. There were also blankets, candles, wool fleeces and writing paper and pencils on display as well as other goods he had yet to stroll past.

None of the wares tempted quite like Rebecca did, however.

The market scheme had worked, drawing in crowds of women, but Rebecca snared his attention as she slipped past the stalls, her head low. He shook his head to himself and forced his attention back to his brothers who strolled with him along the path that led across the front of the lake. A group of three ladies—the Lonsdales, who consisted of a mother and two daughters with whom they had been introduced a few days ago, stopped and dropped into curtsies.

He shouldn't. Alexander had even muttered about them sticking to their mother's rules, which was odd indeed as he could swear since his brother's wife had died, the man had lived a more debauched life than either he or Adam.

But, damn it, he needed some sort of distraction. Anything to stop him from thinking about Rebecca.

He fixed on his most charming smile and saw a blush travel along the older girl's chest. He let his gaze linger there deliberately so she saw as much and the color deepened, moving all the way up to her cheeks. "A pleasure to see you all again," he murmured, keeping his attention on Miss Lonsdale.

"A-and you, my lord," she stuttered.

Leo glanced away only briefly to spy Rebecca just outside the boarding house. She had hoped to speak with a lady who it had been revealed her father had taken as a lover. With any luck, she would know something of this diamond or at least where he had hidden some belongings and Rebecca would be on her way.

And he could put an end to this ridiculous tangle of emotion he found himself woven into. He should never have taken her in in the first place, never even acknowledged her. He could feel it pulsing hard in his gut—the need to stride over and take her home and just damn well make her his once more.

But then she would leave...

He'd worked hard enough to recover from her first departure. He was not going to let himself be that vulnerable again. Rebecca met his gaze and he saw her eyes narrow, so he turned back to Miss Lonsdale and her pretty red cheeks that worked so perfectly with her fair hair. "How are you enjoying the market?" he asked. "I saw some blue ribbons that almost match your eyes, Miss Lonsdale. A most charming color."

Beside him, Adam snorted.

Leo ignored his brother. As ridiculous as it was, the words worked and Miss Lonsdale dipped her head, glancing up at him through her lashes. "I always thought them a little pale."



Good God the woman was delving for a further compliment. Young and a miss she might be, but she was not as naïve as she had first appeared.

“Not at all. They are a most becoming color.”

Her lips curved. “You flatter me, my lord.”

“As all women should be. Delightful creatures such as yourself deserve flattery on every occasion.”

He winced inwardly as he saw her breath catch in a sharp raise of her chest. Leo usually paid attention to widows and experienced ladies for discreet affairs. Never innocent misses, no matter how keen they appeared to be on the flirtation between them.

There could be no harm in a little conversation, he told himself. He’d certainly enjoyed many a conversation with an attractive lady in the past, even if he had no intention of bedding them. The girls enjoyed the attention, usually, just as Miss Lonsdale did, and his attention would only increase her confidence in her own charms.

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Inwardly, he winced. It seemed the thought of indulging in such pastimes did not appeal as it once would have, and it was all Rebecca's fault.

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IF HER CHEEKS blazed any hotter, Rebecca swore she would burst into flames.

She clenched her fists and snapped her attention away from Leo and the young ladies around him. It didn't matter what he did or even who he did it with. They had made no promises to each other.

Even if it was the most wonderful night of her life. Given that she had never been with anyone other than Leo, she supposed one could suggest she had little with which to compare but no one could suggest lovemaking like that was anything other than amazing. Her toes still curled thinking about it.

Of course, he had likely had plenty of practice. She pressed her lips together and moved away from the wall of the boarding house. Mrs. Knight was not home, and Rebecca had yet to spot her in the crowds. She had wasted a day in Grasmere yesterday searching for her only to find out the woman had moved back to Langmere.

But if she lingered any longer, someone might recognize her or at least think her up to no good. She did not want to draw that kind of attention.

Unlike Leo, who seemed to be reveling in the female attention.

She spared him a quick look and regretted it. He flashed his smile at the pretty young

lady—that winning smile that made her stomach tumble and her heart pound. She remembered when that smile had been only for her.

Her face heated further so she spun away and marched through the stalls, her head bowed low. She had no claim over him, and one night would not change a thing. Langmere was no longer her home and Leo was the same rake he had purported to be.

The sooner she found this Mrs. Knight, the better, though Rebecca doubted her father had confided in her. He kept secrets from everyone it seemed, most especially his lovers. Still, she needed to do something. Waiting around would only lead to heartache.

To think for one silly moment, she had thought—Well, it did not matter what she had thought. There was no future for them, and Leo knew she watched him so he must have been trying to send her a message.

I'll never be yours perhaps or it did not mean a thing.

How about You were a fool to think I even care for you?

He might not have said the words, and knowing Leo he would not, but she understood his message well enough. Forget the lovemaking and forget any thoughts of a future together. Their past could not be rewritten.

“Oh.” A young lady bumped into her, forcing her to a stop. The woman, a few years younger than Rebecca, clutched a book to her chest. She glanced her up and down and her brow wrinkled.

“Forgive me,” Rebecca muttered.

“Wait, I know who you are.”

Nausea rolled in her stomach. “I do not think so.” Rebecca attempted to step past the young brunette in a pretty straw bonnet, but she moved in front of her.

“I do know you!” Her smile widened. “You are Rebecca Fortescue.” She leafed through the book and flicked it open to a page where the corner had been folded. “Look, this is you.”

Rebecca peered at the illustration that depicted a sixteen-year-old her with her father, perhaps copied from one of the portraits that had been painted prior to leaving England. The likeness to the both of them hinted at the skills of the illustrator.

She shook her head vigorously. “No, that’s not me. You are mistaken.”

“It is you, it is!” The woman waved a hand to someone. “Fi, Joanna, come and see. It’s Rebecca Fortescue!”

Several heads whipped around in her direction. She heard her name ripple through the crowd. Her chest grew tight when more people surrounded her. Someone asked her a question of her father, but she didn’t catch what it was. Then another question was flung at her, something to do with his execution.

“Oh how exciting!” the young woman declared. “I want to know all about your father. Was he handsome? Did you know anything about his misdeeds? Did he write to you before his execution?”

Rebecca spun blindly away, her breaths thick in her throat. More people surrounded her, and she pushed through only to come upon another wave of people. Someone snatched her sleeve and she tore away.

“Please, leave me alone,” she begged.

The voices around her seemed to turn into a roar as the blood rushed in her ears. She paused to draw in a breath, but her ribs did not cooperate, as though her stays were banded too tightly. Dots clouded her vision and she tumbled forward, smacking straight into a hard chest. She lifted her gaze up, able to spy the outline of a tall, dark-haired man with a wide chest. His clothes were rough under her fingertips.

“Please, step aside,” she managed to murmur breathlessly.

“Fortescue?” he said. “Your father took everything from me.”

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“I’m sorry,” she said weakly. “I’m so sorry.” She tried to twist away but he grabbed her elbows.

“Everything, do you hear?” he bellowed. “Everything.”

The haze clouding her vision increased and she pressed a hand to her ribs whilst struggling to draw air. Her skin heated and her legs grew weak. She spotted the ground coming to meet her but did not feel a thing when she hit the ground.

“Stand back!” someone shouted.

“Leo?” she whispered.

“Get back,” Leo ordered again.

An arm scooped under her neck and another under her legs. Pressed against a warm, solid chest, she let herself splay a hand upon it and burrow into the soft fabric of his jacket.

“I’ve got you,” Leo assured her.

She nodded limply and closed her eyes. If she needed more evidence that she could not stay, she had it.

## Chapter Ten

Leo stopped in the doorway of the billiard’s room. Not that he had much choice. Both

his brothers blocked his way, Adam to the left and Alexander to the right. His oldest brother had that stern look, that practiced stern look that came with being a marquis. Leo reckoned they must have secret lessons before inheriting the title on the precise expression one must use as a titled gentleman.

It didn't work on him, though. Alexander seldom played the role of the older, austere brother and was far more likely to be found doing his best to ignore the dull duties of his title. Oh, he did what was necessary, keeping the estates running and buying country houses that no one lived in, but he was a far cry from their father who had adopted that expression for most of his life and had little time for anything other than estate business.

He arched a brow. "Is something the matter?"

"You are acting strange," Adam accused.

"I am not the one standing in a doorway, looking as though one is guarding some secret of the state," Leo shot back.

"You keep vanishing." Alexander gestured upstairs. "Within the house."

"I did not know I was unwelcome here. Perhaps I should have found myself lodgings in town." He nodded toward Alexander. "Besides, you've been distracted by this Miss Evans. What would you know of my comings and goings?"

Alexander chuckled. "Distracted? Hardly."

Though tempted to argue his case, Leo opted to remain quiet on the matter of this young woman. Adam had caught her younger sister prowling the house when they had been visiting the gardens with their mother and it seemed Alexander had found Miss Evans quite fascinating. Leo wondered if Mrs. Jones was going to report back to

their mother about it all.

“I am not acting strange and there is nothing wrong,” he said firmly.

Adam gave him a look. “You always were a terrible liar. What is going on?”

Leo eased out a breath. Rebecca would loathe being discovered, but if he was honest, he did not truly believe he could keep her presence here a secret for long, and whilst he could not claim to share all aspects of his life with his brothers, he did not much enjoy lying to them about her.

“Fine.”

Adam grinned at Alexander. “I told you we could break him easily.”

Alexander shrugged. “I’m slightly disappointed in you, Leo. Now I owe Adam a small fortune.”

“You wagered on me?”

“You are mightily predictable, Brother.” Adam clapped a hand upon his shoulder. “If I was to bet upon your behavior all the time, I would be a rich man.”

“You’re already a rich man,” Alexander pointed out.

“Well, a richer one then.”

“How depressing that my behavior is so easily foreseen,” Leo said dryly. “I shall have to make more effort to do the unexpected.”



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“Well, tell us what is happening with you and we shall decide if it is expected or not.” Alexander folded his arms and rocked back slightly on his heels, the signature marquis look back in place.

“I already said I would,” he snapped.

“Well?” Adam pressed.

Leo steeled himself, ready for whatever reaction his brothers had to the news. “Rebecca is here,” he spilled out.

A few moments of silence passed, the only sound the ticking of a clock and the muffled thuds of the footsteps of a maid in the hallway. Adam and Alexander exchanged a look.

“As in...Rebecca Fortescue?” Adam finally asked.

Leo nodded.

“As in Rebecca Fortescue who you were determined to marry but vanished and never returned and left you heartbroken beyond repair?” Alexander added.

Leo scowled. “I would hardly say heartbroken beyond repair.”

Adam cocked his head. “We all know why you bed so many women.”

“Oh, really? So what is your excuse?” Leo tightened his jaw. He did not much like

his brothers thinking he was some heartbroken sap.

Adam shook his head. "We're not discussing me, and I am entirely comfortable with my behavior. I am a bachelor with few obligations. Why should I not take pleasure where I can seek it?"

"And why should I not?" Leo countered.

Alexander held up a hand. "So Rebecca is here? In this house?"

"Yes." Leo ran a hand over his mouth. "She is in the area for...well. I will have to get her to explain, but suffice to say, I did not have much choice but to offer her shelter."

"And she feared scandal, so you kept her presence here quiet? Or were you worried word of her would get back to Mother?" Adam suggested.

Leo lifted a shoulder. "I have a suspicion Rebecca has seen enough scandal to last a lifetime thanks to her father. Staying here without escort would hardly be the worst of it."

Alexander rubbed his chin. "I'd rather like to assign a lady's maid to her, though."

"She will not be happy about being known to you." Leo sighed. "She is fearful of how people will view her after her father's indiscretions." Leo curled his fists at the memory of that man bellowing at her and her fainting in the middle of the street. "She is not wrong either. That kerfuffle in town yesterday was to do with her."

"Ah. I wondered where you had disappeared to." Adam jerked his head toward Alexander. "He did not notice as Miss Evans was there."

"That had nothing to do with it," Alexander muttered.

“So what are we to do with her?” Adam asked, setting hands on his hips. “Pretend she does not exist?”

Alexander shook his head. “I’m not having some woman locked away in my house.”

“She is not some woman.”

Alexander’s lips curved at Leo’s response. “I was always fond of Rebecca. Bring her down for dinner and she can tell us herself why she is here and why she has you all tangled up in knots.”

“I am not tangled in knots,” Leo muttered, knowing full well it was a lie.

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REBECCA FOLDED HER arms and tried to ignore the thudding of her heart threatening to beat its way up her throat. She glared at Leo. “You could have lied.”

“To my brothers? I think not. Especially when you are under Alexander’s roof.”

She pressed her lips together and blew out a frustrated breath through her nostrils. She was making no progress in figuring out where her father had hidden his belongings and, in truth, she should have left Eastwick Hall long ago.

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Ideally, before they'd made love.

A tremble fluttered through her, settling in the pit of her stomach and warring with the apprehension that lingered there. A flutter that had far too much to do with desire for her liking. It did not matter that it had been a mistake, that yesterday had proven she should never have set foot in Langmere again—her body felt differently.

Very well, perhaps her mind did too. She was weakening, she suspected, pondering if there was some way to stay, some way to gain back her old life. Even after the awful incident with that man bellowing at her, after Leo had scooped her up and brought her here, she could not help but wish things were different.

Goodness, who was she kidding? She had weakened the moment he put his lips to hers. Yesterday should have been enough to counter that.

“Why do they even wish to see me?”

“In case you have forgotten, they were rather fond of you. Perhaps they want to see how you are doing after ten years.”

“Nine,” she replied automatically.

“In any case, Alexander isn't overly fond of having women hidden away in his house, especially when we are meant to be—” He paused. “Well, anyway, Alexander requests your presence at dinner.”

She glanced down at her plain muslin gown. “I have nothing to wear.”

“Believe it or not, none of us will care.”

“There will be no other guests there?”

He shook his head.

“It is strange that the three of you have not hosted a party or two yet,” she mused.  
“After all, you all have reputations.”

“I explained that,” he said tightly, his gaze darkening and connecting firmly with hers.

He did. Right before he made love to her. And she believed him. Leo was many things, but he had never been a liar.

“Very well.” She smoothed hands down her dress when he did not move.

He escorted her downstairs to the grand dining room. His brothers were already in the room and the footmen kept their attention fixed ahead, betraying no surprise at this strange woman’s arrival.

She wanted to press a hand to her stomach but forced her posture to remain formal. Adam strode quickly over to her and drew her into a warm embrace that made her laugh in surprise. He stepped back and Rebecca marveled at the similarities between him and Leo. The years had done wonderful work on them both and they still appeared so similar, though Adam had gained a scar across one eyebrow and his nose appeared as though it might have been broken at some point.

“You look as beautiful as ever,” he said, his hands to her arms.

“Thank you,” she managed to murmur.

“I agree,” said Alexander, smiling warmly. “It’s a pleasure to have you here after so many years.”

“I will admit I did not expect to see any of you here. I heard you all preferred to remain in Town.” The footman drew out a chair for her and she sat next to the head of the table and watched as all three brothers were seated.

Adam shared a glance with Alexander that made her frown. “You cannot have been keeping up with all the gossip then.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“We are here under the orders of our mother,” Alexander said.

She glanced sideways at Leo, who took a long gulp of wine, remaining oddly quiet. “Your mother?” she pressed. “Leo?”

“There is some scandal in London revolving around us,” he explained, reluctance in his tone. “Mother rather begged us to come out here and, well, stay away from the opposite sex.”

Adam snorted. “A fine job you have done of that.”

“I have seen you flirt with at least a dozen young ladies,” Leo shot back.

“What sort of scandal?” she asked, too aware of her heart beating hard in her ears.

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He wasn't a rake, not really—that was what she had convinced herself when she let him take her to bed. Or perhaps he was, perhaps the years had done more than she realized, and she was a fool to believe he hadn't changed from the boy she'd known.

Leo grimaced and blew out a breath, his hand clasped around the delicate stem of the crystal wine glass. "A young lady found herself in an unfortunate situation."

"I very much doubt she just found herself in such a situation." Rebecca pursed her lips, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone. Her father had left plenty of women in similar circumstances. "They do not usually manage to get in such conditions alone."

Adam chuckled. "She's not wrong."

"But what does it have to do with the three of you?" She glanced around the table, distinctly aware of Leo tapping his fingers against his glass.

"Whoever did it looks a little like us," Leo explained. "So it has been assumed that one of us has left her in said situation and is unwilling to admit to it or claim the child as our own."

She opened her mouth, closed it and twisted to view Leo. "But it was not you?"

"It wasn't any of us," Alexander said firmly.

"Why did you not tell me of your reason for being here, Leo?" she demanded.

"It would hardly have persuaded you to stay now would it?"

“If you have done nothing, you have no reason to keep it from me.”

“Says the woman who has been hiding in the east wing,” he muttered.

“At your invitation.” She inhaled deeply, glanced at his brothers and rose from the table, gesturing for them to stay. “Forgive me but this was a mistake. I am so sorry.”

Rebecca fled the room swiftly and moved blindly through the rooms until she found one of the drawing rooms, shutting the door behind her and sinking onto the sofa, her head in her hands.

It did not matter what Leo did, she reminded herself. Or even if he had hidden his reason for being here. She would be gone as soon as she found the diamond.

So why did it hurt?

Because some small part of her hoped their situations would somehow magically change. That the people on Langmere would accept her back and Leo would declare his love for her, and she could pretend the past nine years had never happened, and he had never bedded his way through London society.

Her love for him and Langmere had never faded.

“Rebecca?” She lifted her head to see Leo pop his head around the door and then step in. “I did not get that woman with child.”

She eyed him while he strode toward her.

“You know me better than that.”

“Do I?” She swallowed and glanced around, unable to view his earnest expression



without her heart aching. “It has been so long, Leo. Goodness knows, I am different.”

“You are certainly stronger and more independent and that is no bad thing. In fact—”

“Wait!” She lifted a finger. “How long has this been here for?” She plucked a book from the side table next to the sofa and fingered the embossed lettering. “A Guide to Langmere and the Lakes,” she murmured.

Leo shrugged. “I think Mrs. Jones has been reading it. She must have left it there.”

She flicked open the book. “It talks of my father.”

“Do not read it, Rebecca—it will not help you.”

“No, do you not see? I should have read it. It might very well help me.”

“How so?”

“I know it talks of his arrest here. Maybe there is some clue as to his movements, as to where the diamond is.” She gave a dry laugh. “I should not have been such a coward.”

“I hardly think not reading a book is cowardice.”

No. But there was no denying her every move had been dictated by fear. Perhaps the one moment she had not been, had been when she went to bed with Leo, and Lord help her, she wanted another moment like that.

### Chapter Eleven

“I am not certain I want to look.”

Leo sank onto the sofa beside Rebecca after lighting a few more lamps. “Shall I read it?”

She shook her head and turned the pages. “I should do it.”

“If anyone can figure out where your father hid the diamond, it’s you. I do not know anyone cleverer than you, Rebecca.”

She scrunched up her nose. “I’m feeling mightily stupid at present.” Her throat bobbed and she ran her finger along the page before making a sound of disgust. “It is as though my father is some folk hero instead of the awful man he was.”

“He was not all bad.”

Her gaze shot up to his. “He married and deserted several women, not to mention defrauded just about half of England. If he had not been captured, I have no doubt he would have gone on to marry more women for their money and do goodness knows

what else.”

“Yes,” Leo agreed, putting a hand to her chin and raising it slightly. “But he made you.” The temptation to kiss her dug deep into his gut. He moved back and nodded to the book. “Read on.”

He waited while she continued to read, her expression flitting from disgust to annoyance and back again. She pressed her lips together and he spied the portrait of her family, faithfully replicated in the book. He could not imagine the pain she must have suffered to know it hadn’t been real—that while she enjoyed a privileged life, her father had been living a lie. It seemed the worst of his behavior happened once he left Rebecca and her mother, but that did not discount the fact he defrauded many a person during her childhood and used funds that were not his to maintain their lifestyle.

And when it all came crashing down, he left them.

Leo curled a fist and rose from the chair, pacing past the fireplace, then back again while she read. If he could go back and punch the man, he would. Hanging almost felt too good for him. He wanted Roger Fortescue to have to face his daughter and see what he had done. Leo had to face the fact Rebecca had been just as hurt by the night she had left if not more. At least he had been able to move on with his life. Even if it had not been in the most productive of manners. Rebecca had been left with the true aftermath of it all and yet she still wished to atone for her father’s mistakes. The woman was damned selfless.

She gasped and he stilled. “Did you find something?”

“Fortescue, by all appearances, led the life of a country gentleman, spending time out of doors with his family.” She ran her finger along the page as she read. “Alas, few knew the truth, including his innocent first wife and daughter who were callously

abandoned in Florence in 1801. Those wishing to follow in Fortescue's footsteps might enjoy a walk along the West Shore, where he often took his daughter Rebecca."

"You think it's there?"

She furrowed her brows. "I'm not certain, I just have this feeling..." She shook her head. "We used to spend so much time there and it's a wild walk."

"I recall."

"We rarely encountered anyone, and I used to adore it because I could spot rabbits." She held up a finger. "And listen to this"—she flicked through a few more pages—"Fortescue was caught not far from the West Shore. Some may be surprised that the man remained in Langmere but many imagined the man so bold that he could not fathom being unable to talk his way out of his troubles."

"He was going to the West Shore."

"Yes! He must have been going to retrieve the diamond." She snapped the book shut and rose from the chair. "We should leave. Now."

"We?"

"Well, that is..." She blushed. "That is if you wish to accompany me." Her chin lifted. "I can quite happily go by myself."

"I hasten to point out it is rather dark."

"Blast." She dropped onto the chair.

“In the meantime, why do we not join my brothers for dinner once more? We did leave rather abruptly.”

She looked to the window and then to him. “I suppose I cannot go anywhere tonight.”

“You certainly cannot.”

“Will they think me rude?”

He chuckled. “Most likely.”

She rolled her eyes. “You could have saved me embarrassment by telling me the truth, you know?”

He nodded. “I know, though there hardly seemed an opportune moment.” He took her arm before she could move past him. “It is the truth, though. I did not touch that woman.”

Rebecca met his gaze. “I know.”

Maybe it should not have felt like an achievement, but it did, and at present, Leo was willing to take any victories he could because he could deny it no longer. When she had fled from him, it had hurt all over again.

He’d fallen for her once more.

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“SO WHERE PRECISELY are we going?”

Rebecca gripped her skirts and stepped over a rock, scarcely glancing at Leo. She focused only on what was ahead. She’d allowed herself too many weak moments of late. If she looked at him, she might soften again and let him kiss her.

Or worse.

She could not give him false hope. It would be a cruel game to play. The man's reaction in the village had proven her right. There was no place for her here.

"The West Shore."

"Well, yes, obviously." He came up beside her and offered a hand to climb over the next set of rocks.

She took the offered hand instinctively and regretted it. Every time he touched her, she could think only of when he had touched her so intimately. But she would be a fool to deny his aid. Her skirts were not made for clambering over the large rocks that were clustered around the edge of the lake, still damp from the spray that had been pushed toward land by the breeze rippling across the lakeside.

If she was right, this would be over soon.

"We used to spend a lot of time there when I was younger. It was my father's favorite place in the lakes." She glanced at Leo. "Mine too, I suppose."

"Roger was a good father for the most part."

She wrinkled her nose. "He was, and sometimes I think it must have all been false—that he would never conduct himself in such a manner."

"I can understand that."

"But he left us, Leo." She lifted a shoulder. "Whatever the rest of his crimes were, he left us and several other women. While I might have been lucky enough to have some good memories, most have nothing."

Leo nodded. "I suppose that is something for which to be grateful, though I cannot

deny if he were not already dead, I would have a great many things to say to him.”

“So would I,” she admitted. “But if I find this diamond, I can heal at least some of the hurt he has caused. My half-siblings will want for nothing.”

“And what of you?”

“Me?”

“Will you want for anything?”

She drew in a breath, startled by how it pricked her lungs and tightened her ribcage. “No,” she managed to murmur.

But, of course, it was a lie, and Leo likely knew as much. She wanted, well, him.

“I have my mother’s business in Florence, and we have several friends there.”

“Sounds idyllic.”

She narrowed her gaze at his dry tone, but he ignored her pointed stare and nodded toward the bare stretch of land that was the West Shore. “There’s a lot of places your father’s treasure could be.”



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“We used to play by the large oak tree.” She shook her head. “I cannot believe I did not think of it before but it’s hard to imagine he might have been sentimental.”

“I think he loved you, Rebecca. In his own way.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “But love is not enough.”

“Is it not?”

She didn’t respond and fixed her attention to the tall tree near the edge of the lake, its great roots slowly emerging from the ground where the lake had eroded away the ground over the years.

Love.

The word pounded through her with each footstep. Love, love, love. No matter how much she tried to shake it from her, it lingered there, like an uncomfortable echo wrapping itself about her.

“Let’s try here.” She strode over to the base of the tree and did a few loops around it.

“We used to climb this one, do you recall?”

She glanced over to spy Leo peering up at the tree. Her breath caught, her heart giving a little trip. Would she ever get used to seeing him like this, all grown up and utterly spectacular? She suspected not. Even when younger he’d made her pulse quicken but now it accelerated faster than a racing horse.

Of course, the fact they had made love did not help matters. Whilst he remained there, hands to his hips, emphasizing the broadness of his shoulders, she could only recall his strong fingers wrapping about her body and how it had felt for him to be atop her.

She should regret the incident, wholeheartedly, yet she could not. Some part of her, she supposed, was grateful for it. She could return to Florence, knowing she had given herself to the only man she'd ever loved.

“Rebecca?”

“Yes, I recall,” she managed to rasp out.

His gaze locked with hers and she suspected he was no longer remembering climbing trees as young children but the exceedingly adult moment they had shared.

Quickly, she looked away. She'd come here with one aim in mind—the diamond. There had been no thoughts of returning to her former life, of resurrecting a love she'd thought long lost. It would serve her no purpose to ponder on what might have been.

Or could be?

She shook her head to herself and did another loop of the tree. She pushed aside a large rock with her boots and kneeled to eye the ground. “I think this could be it.” She brushed aside some of the dirt.

Leo came to her side and bent over. “Should I have brought a shovel?”

“I didn't even think of that, but look, it's a slab of wood.” Using her fingers, she clawed away the loose soil and worked her fingers under the side of a slightly rotten

plank of wood. Leo pressed his fingers under the other side and together they lifted the wood away.

“This must be it.” She drew in a long breath to quell the nausea rising in her stomach at the sight of a wooden box, no larger than a serving tray. This was it. It had to be. And she should be excited. She glanced at Leo, whose gaze lingered on her. Once she had the diamond she had no reason to be here.

And they both knew it.

A lump knotted in her throat and Leo’s expression remained serious, tense even. For several heartbeats, she held his gaze, words of goodness knew what threatened to burst forth. Some denial that it was even the treasure perhaps. Oh no, it cannot possibly be it in the place where my father was last seen, in the place I had suspected. Not at all. So perhaps I should stay and keep hunting...

Fool.

“I suppose we should—”

A crack rang across the lakes, echoing about the mountains. Behind her, the tree cracked, sending splinters of bark in her direction. Leo snatched her arm and hauled her to the ground, crushing her straight under the weight of his body.

She scarcely managed to squeak in surprise before he covered her mouth with a hand to crush the sound. “Do not move,” he ordered.

## Chapter Twelve

Rebecca peered up at him wide-eyed and wriggled against him, freeing her mouth from his grip. “Leo, what in heaven’s name is going on?”

“Someone is shooting at us,” he said through gritted teeth.

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“That gunshot? Someone is simply hunting, surely?”

He narrowed his gaze into the distance and pressed a finger to his lips to tell her to remain silent. Movement by the boulders that were clustered at the lake’s edge snared his attention, but he could not make out whether it was a person or just some wildlife.

“Leo, you are hurting me. This isn’t funny.”

He grabbed her drawn-back fist before she could connect it with his chest. “Don’t you dare.”

“Leo!” She squirmed, trying to twist her hand from his grip. “What are you doing?”

“Keep still,” he hissed. “Damn it, Rebecca.” He eased a little of his weight from her, putting more of it onto the arm used to prop him up, and focused his attention briefly on her. “Someone shot at us.” He jerked his head toward the tree where the bullet had lodged itself into the bark, splintering it around them. “Look.”

She twisted her head to eye the bullet and he saw her throat work. “Someone is a bad shot?” she asked hopefully.

He peered up again. “I do not think so.” Slowly, he eased off her, releasing her fist and keeping low.

She grabbed his arm. “What are you doing?”

Another shot cracked through the air. Leo ducked swiftly, pressing himself back

across Rebecca's body. He could not see where it had hit this time, but it was too close. He swore he felt the ripple of the thing through the air. A rifle, he reckoned, and someone who was a good shot. An ex-soldier perhaps. It would be the only way the bullet could travel such distance without the shooter being seen.

Rebecca trembled beneath him. "Leo, what do we do?"

"You stay here," he ordered firmly. "I'm going to find the bastard."

She shook her head vigorously. "You cannot."

"Well we cannot stay here forever. If the shooter has enough ammunition, he can shoot at us all day."

"But you could get shot!"

He flashed a grin. "He'll have to be quick."

"That is not reassuring." She twisted her head, trying to see someone from her prone position upon the ground but gave up and looked at him. "You cannot," she repeated.

A boom echoed across the lakes. Rebecca gave a squeak of terror. Leo's mouth dried. Much longer and the shooter would come upon them and fire at them at close range.

"Stay here, stay on the ground," he ordered. "Do not move or I shall come and shoot you myself."

"Let me come with you." She grabbed his cravat before he could slide from her. "I can help."

"Rebecca, I know you have come to be quite the independent woman and, Lord

knows, I rather appreciate it, but two of us prowling about will only draw attention and I can much better find this person alone, unhindered by damned skirts.” He plucked at the frothy gown spread about her.

“I knew I should have stayed disguised as a boy,” she muttered.

“You made a terrible boy.” He went to move off her again, however, she gripped his cravat tighter, fairly strangling him.

“Do not get hurt, Leo, or I shall hurt you myself.”

He chuckled. “I promise.” He dropped a quick, firm kiss on her lips. Whatever happened, he would not let her come to harm. He’d rather die first.

Once he had eased from her, he crawled almost on his belly until he found cover behind the sparse trees lining the lake’s edge. From there, he moved swiftly from tree to tree and made his way to the boulders. He eyed the open position where Rebecca remained, thankfully obeying his orders. He didn’t like it, though. The shooter could cross the distance quickly enough and Rebecca had nowhere to hide apart from behind that lone tree with no way to defend herself.

He had to move quicker.

Taking less caution, he ducked behind the next tree and the next, pausing to look for movement. As he moved out into the open, he spotted the rifle, propped up on one of the rocks. Jaw tight, fists clenched, Leo barreled toward the shooter.

The man spotted him, his eyes widening. He turned the rifle in Leo’s direction and shot as he neared. Leo threw himself to the ground long enough to avoid being hit, then scrambled to standing while the man fought to reload his rifle. Leo had mere seconds. A practiced rifleman to be sure.

He flung himself forward, fist raised. Pain burst through his knuckles when it connected with the shooter's jaw. The man toppled back, and Leo used the chance to get atop him.



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“You will not hurt her,” he said between heavy breaths.

The man swung at him, but Leo dodged the blow and responded with another hit to his face. The assailant writhed in vain against Leo’s hold, stretching his fingers frantically for his rifle, and Leo lifted his fist.

“Try it and I shall beat you until senseless.” He drew in a harsh breath. “I seldom have a taste for it, but I would quite happily see your blood spilled.”

The man lifted a knee, and Leo groaned when he struck him in the crotch and the pain seared through him. The assailant used the moment of weakness and pushed Leo back to reach for the gun.

The man stilled and his eyes widened. Leo frowned, following the man’s gaze.

“I do not wish to shoot you, but I will if I have to.” Rebecca stood by the rocks, her stance wide, then lifted the rifle, tore the powder and calmly poured the powder and shot into the barrel.

Leo groaned. “I thought I told you to stay.”

She lifted a shoulder and he saw her hands tremble around the weapon, despite her confident posture. “I thought you were dead.”

???

SEEING LEO ATOP the shooter, alive and well, didn’t do much to reassure her,

even when he flashed her a grin. All she could picture was lying with her nose to the ground and hearing that gunshot, then imagining Leo bleeding to death on the ground—all for her.

To think she had nearly lost him...

“I’m most certainly alive.”

She ignored his quip and gestured to the man. “I recognize you from the town. You grabbed me.”

Though he looked smaller now, Leo had moved to hold him down again, she recalled those thick, brawny arms covered in a matt of dark hair and the pale line of a scar slicing across a weather-beaten face.

The man’s gaze skipped between them, and Rebecca saw the tension release from his body as he heaved out a sigh.

Leo eased off him and rose to standing but thrust a finger at him. “Move and I’ll let her shoot you.” He studied him for a few moments. “You’re Tom Bainbridge, are you not? From Tor Farm?”

He nodded and rubbed a hand across a bristled jaw and then pushed himself up to sitting, draping his arms dejectedly across his knees. His gaze lingered on the barrel of the rifle and his lips curled. “Let her shoot me. Her father ruined my life already.”

Rebecca narrowed her gaze. “You were shooting at me because of my father?”

“Yes.” Tom’s jaw worked and he spat on the ground to the side of him. “He took everything.”

“He took a lot of things from a lot of people,” she murmured.

“He took my wife.”

Rebecca grimaced. It did not surprise her. Her father had seduced many a woman that they knew of, and she had no doubt there were many more. How many of them had been whilst he still lived with them, she did not know, and she didn’t want to. She would do as Leo said and focus on the good moments of her childhood, unstained by the truth of her father.

“I am sorry for that but—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Leo snapped. “He nearly killed you.” He glared at the man. “And he’s lucky I didn’t beat him to death.”

“He took my wife and promised her everything.” Tom shook his head and made a disgusted noise. “She died because of that bastard.”

Rebecca eyed the man for several moments. He cast his gaze down, but grief had taken its toll on him, making him appear older than she suspected he was, with hair that had grayed before its time and a heavily lined face. She’d seen this before, in the woman he’d illegally married after her mother. The utter defeat, the desolation. She could not help but feel sorry for him.

She handed the rifle over to Leo and crouched in front of him.

“Rebecca—” Leo warned, scowling.

She held up a hand and touched Tom’s arm gently. “What did my father do?”

The man’s head shot up and he cocked his head, eyeing her with a frown. Finally, he

heaved out a sigh. “He seduced her and persuaded her to give him our life savings. It wasn’t much but we’d worked hard for that. Then when he left her, she tried to follow him.”

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“And then what?” Rebecca dreaded the answer, but she had to hear it somehow.

He twined his fingers together and stared sightlessly at them. “She returned home eventually and died of a broken heart.” He shrugged. “At least that’s what everyone reckoned.”

She glanced up at Leo, his grim expression matching the painful beat of her heart. “Mr. Bainbridge,” she said softly, waiting until he looked up at her. “I am truly sorry for what he did to you. What he did to your wife. But I am not my father.”

Tom’s gaze shot to hers and his eyes widened as though he were truly seeing her for the first time.

“He was an immoral man, to be certain, and although many feel he did not truly pay for his crimes, he is gone now.” She touched his arm again. “I would suggest you look back on the good memories as much as you can. I understand it is not easy, but I am trying to do the same. You see, I lost a father too, a man I am not sure ever really existed.”

The man glanced between her and Leo then back to her. “You really aren’t your father, are you?”

She shook her head. No, she was not. And she was no longer going to feel bad for what he did. If she could do nothing else, it was to try to live life without his shadow hanging over her. She saw now the toll it took on someone and she had no desire to be like Tom.

He put a hand to his mouth. “Good God, I nearly killed you.”

“Damn right you did,” Leo muttered.

“I should rather you did not try to hurt me again, but I do understand the hurt my father caused, if that helps.”

Tom held up both palms. “It was a moment of madness, I swear. I was just so angry—” He shook his head. “You’re just a young girl.”

Rebecca nodded, rose to her feet and offered him a hand.

Tom frowned. “I’ll hand myself in, never fear.”

“I should rather you did not. I think enough lives have been ruined thanks to my father’s actions.”

He wiped his hands down his dusty trousers and looked to Leo. “What of you, my lord? Would you not wish to punish me?”

Leo lifted a shoulder and looped an arm around Rebecca’s waist, drawing her close. “If Miss Fortescue says no then I must obey.”

The man’s lips quirked slightly. “I understand.”

Rebecca waited until the man had ambled off before turning to Leo. “Do not be angry at me.”

“I am not.” He pushed a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “Though I could wring your neck for not listening to me.”

“I thought he had shot you!” She swallowed hard, finally shifting the painful knot that had tangled in her throat since hearing the gunshot. “I thought you were dead, Leo, and I could not—” Her voice cracked, and she drew in a breath. “I could not stand it.” She pressed her forehead to his chest. “I love you, Leo. So much.”

“In truth?”

She lifted her head to peer up at him. “In truth,” she said solemnly.

“I love you too, Rebecca. Always have.” He gave a half-smile.

Rising on her tiptoes, she pressed her lips to his. There were still some things she needed to figure out, but she had not been lying when she told Tom she was no longer going to take the blame for her father’s misbehavior.

## Chapter Thirteen

“We’re playing spades, Leo. Not hearts.”

Leo eyed the card on the table and took it back. “Sorry,” he muttered to Adam.

“Perhaps you should have gone with Alexander to wherever it is he has vanished to. Some fresh air might do you good.”

“Something to do with that Miss Evans, I think.” Leo shrugged and threw a card onto the gaming table.

Adam placed his next card, winning yet another hand. “Alexander is doing no better at avoiding women than you are.”

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He lowered his cards, face down. “Do you not have a tiny suspicion that perhaps our mother sent us here with the express purpose of meeting eligible women? I hasten to point out that the majority here are sweet, innocent things, escorted by their mothers and aunts. Precisely the sort of lady our mother used to try to introduce us to.”

His brother scowled and then his eyes widened. “Lord knows, I would not put much past our mother, but did she even know about the book?”

“Mother knows everything,” Leo said dryly.

“She could not have counted on Rebecca returning.”

“No, none of us could.”

“Think she will come back again?” Adam asked.

Leo ran a hand across his face. She’d been gone for almost a month now after some vague murmur about taking the diamond they had finally dug up along with a few letters and bank notes and settling her business. Whatever that meant. He assumed she intended to give the money from the diamond sale to her half-siblings, but that would not take a blasted month, surely?

Of course, she could have decided that he was a liar in the meantime. That he had left that poor woman in the family way. He almost would not blame her. His history hardly made him out to be a paragon of virtue, but he had thought she believed him when she left.



“She went once before. I should probably assume I will not see her for another ten years. Besides, what can this town offer her?” He retrieved his cards but struggled to focus on his hand.

“Well, you, for one.”

Leo smirked. “I do not think I am enough.”

Adam shook his head. “You are more than enough for many women, Leo. There are many men who would rather enjoy being in your position. But, of course, you never fully appreciated it, not after you spent an entire decade pining after Rebecca.”

“I did not pine.”

“Whatever you call it, you’d be a fool to sit around and wait another decade.” Adam set down another winning hand and scooped up the cards. “You will never love another woman like you love Rebecca. Any fool can see that.”

Leo set down the cards once more, his jaw tight. Maybe he was a fool but what was he to do? Go crawling after her?

“We promised Mother—”

“We promised we would behave and not cause any scandal. Marrying the woman you love is hardly scandalous, and since when do you care so much about what Mother thinks?”

“She’s frail.”

“And you are full of excuses. She loved Rebecca, if you recall. Cease being such a coward, Leo.”

Leo opened his mouth and closed it. Part of him wanted to deny it, to tell his brother in no uncertain terms he was an ass for ever saying as much.

But he was not wrong. He'd been a coward before, hiding from his love for Rebecca in the skirts of far too many women, and he was being a coward now.

He rose from the table. "Do you think Mother would count Florence as the country?"

Adam grinned. "Well, it is not London."

"Damn it, if Alexander asks, I'm off to Italy."

"Leo, wait!"

He paused and pivoted on his heel.

"Do you think you had better have someone pack a trunk for you?"

"I'll find what I need on the way."

His brother chuckled. "At least have the carriage made ready. It's quite some distance to Portsmouth."

"Blast." He blew out a breath. "Fine."

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He ignored his brother's shout of 'good luck' that sounded far too tinged with amusement for his liking and ordered the carriage made ready. He supposed he could have packed some belongings in the time it took to have the horses and carriage made ready, but all he could bring himself to do was pace back and forth in front of the house. What would he do if she was not in Florence? Find her mother, he supposed. She did say she owned a dressmaker's shop there. She would know something, surely?

Hell, he'd travel the world if he had to. He had not pinned as Adam so coarsely put it, but he'd be damned if he was going to spend more time waiting around for Rebecca. She loved him, of that he was certain. Those spilled words had not been a lie. And, of course, he'd loved her from their first kiss. This time, he would not give up easily.

Once the carriage was made ready, he climbed in and slammed the door before the footman could get to it. He tapped impatiently on the roof and eased back onto the velvet chair. The journey to Portsmouth and the crossing to Italy would take some time, and he rather regretted he had not decided just to do the journey to the coast on horseback, but he would have to change horses far too often and he didn't want to arrive in too much of a state.

He smirked to himself. Of course Rebecca could not complain, not when she'd slept in a blasted sheep pen, the fool woman. Still, he wanted to make some sort of a good impression.

He scowled when the carriage moved slightly to the right of the road leading out of the estate. To avoid an animal perhaps. He leaned forward and peered out of the closed window but spotted nothing. The carriage continued on normally, so he had to

assume all was well.

Except...

He stilled and tried to hear over the rattling of the wheels and the creak of the suspension. Either he was going insane or he had heard Rebecca. But that could not be, could it?

Shoving open the window, he craned his neck to peer back at the house. He tightened his grip around the window and stared for a few moments longer, then flopped back against the seat. Surely not?

“Rebecca,” he murmured to himself.

He shook himself and rapped on the roof of the carriage. It came to a halt and he shoved open the door, practically falling from the vehicle. His feet hit the gravel with a crunch, and he twisted to face the house.

Rebecca raced toward him, her bonnet loose and hanging by its ribbons from her neck, bouncing against her as she dashed toward him.

“Leo!” she called.

He hadn’t imagined her. He was not going mad.

Ignoring a question from the driver, he sprinted along the road toward her. She flung herself at him with more strength than he anticipated, looping her arms around his neck and knocking the wind from him.

“Oof.”

She darted briefly back. “Forgive me.”

“I did not say stop.” He snatched her back, clasping her waist and drawing her close. He should have probably said something about how beautiful she looked, how much he’d missed her, but instead he kissed her deeply.

She opened her mouth to him and clung to him until they were both breathless. When he drew back, the tempting pink of her flushed lips made him almost regret he had not kissed her more.

But he needed answers first.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came back,” she said breathlessly.

“Another diamond?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Where were you going?”

“To Florence, believe it or not.”

“But why?”

“To find you, you foolish woman.”

“Well, you found me.”

He held her firm lest she get any silly ideas of escaping him again. “I had little intention of waiting another ten years.”

“It was only nine actually.” Her lips quirked.

“Nine agonizing years.” He glanced behind her to spy two travel bags and a hat box abandoned halfway up the road. “Are you intending to stay somewhere?”

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“In town actually, if I can find lodgings.”

He eyed her. “So you are not planning to hide away?”

She shook her head. “The notoriety will not be easy, but I am done hiding, Leo. I should not have to continue to pay for what my father did, and I love this town. I always have. It is my home.”

He swallowed hard, almost fearful of asking the question despite the very obvious fact she was in his arms and had allowed him to kiss her so passionately. “You intend to stay?”

“Yes.” Her smile widened.

“I was not certain you would return.”

“I needed to settle any remaining debts and see my half-siblings. Their mother will be able to look after them well now that the diamond is sold. Not to mention seeing my mother. She has decided to remain in Italy—it is still too painful for her here and she has many friends there—but there was enough money to ensure she can live even more comfortably and sell the business if she so chooses.”

“So your father did something for you all in the end then.”

“Well, not by choice but I am glad I could do something to repair some of the damage caused.”

“Do you think everything can be repaired?”

She frowned. “Like what?”

“Like ten years apart?”

“Nine,” she corrected. “And it might take some time.”

“Oh?”

“I might need some kisses. Many, in fact. If an infamous rake like you can manage that, of course.”

He gave a dry chuckle. “If I am to put an end to my rakish ways, I rather think we should be married before I spoil you with kisses.”

Rebecca narrowed her gaze. “Is that a proposal?”

“I do believe so.”

“I am fairly certain it is not entirely improper for my fiancé to kiss me.”

“Senseless?”

She nodded eagerly. “Most certainly so.”

With a grin, Leo scooped her into his arms and made good on his promise.

THE END