



The Tempting of a Devilish Lord

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Description: One might not know it to look at her, but the uptight Miss Lucinda Evans was once quite the adventurer. So much so it very nearly landed her in a whole world of trouble.

Now nearing spinster age, Lucinda is determined the same fate won't befall her headstrong little sister. All she needs to do is keep a careful watch over Mary-Anne and maintain her own prim and proper appearance and behaviour. It might be a dull existence but at least it's safe. At least until she meets the Marquis of Kirbeck.

Lord Alexander Moncrieff has done his best to avoid a dull existence since inheriting the title. He might have returned home to the quiet country town at the behest of his mother, but it will not be long until he's back to his usual reckless lifestyle. But whilst he is trying to behave, at least for a little while, for some inexplicable reason, every woman in England has flocked to the dull town. Alexander finds himself surrounded by women of every variety, enough to fulfil even his rakish tastes.

So why the devil does he find himself interested in the prudish, uptight Miss Lucinda Evans? Maybe because, despite her boring appearance and determination to scold him at every turn, he cannot help but feel she's hiding some hint of scandal under those high collars...

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Chapter One

Some things never changed.

Alexander cast his gaze from left to right as he guided his mare down the road and rolled his eyes when he spotted an errant pig snuffling his way through scraps at the roadside.

Mr. Johnson's fence-making skills still hadn't improved apparently.

The town of Langmere never changed either. The gray stone buildings lined the curving dirt road down toward the lake, offering no hint of occupants. Many would be busy at the farms or down by the lake or in the few shops that were clustered at the waterside. For as long as he could recall, Langmere had been dull.

Dull gray buildings, dull people. Dull, dull, dull.

Admittedly, the mountains surrounding the lake were at least a little interesting. Despite the weather slowly warming as they moved into spring, snow dusted the tops of the hills that surrounded the generous lake. Sunlight glinted off the water and offered a clear view of the mountains that spent most of winter shielded by clouds.

He supposed if he was going to confine himself to the most boring of towns, at least he had chosen a good time of year for it. Living in Langmere during the winter was more than dull.

More like tediously boring. He shook his head. No, that didn't cover it either. Mind-

numbingly uninteresting perhaps.

Well, if anything it was perfect for him. He knew firsthand there were no attractive women in the town and escaping to the family seat would keep him well away from any temptation.

Yes, Langmere would be—

He scowled and drew the horse to a halt. The stone buildings were clustered so tightly together, he could not see the lake from this angle, but he could hear...something.

People.

No.

Women.

God bloody damn it.

Alex urged the horse on, and he held his breath until they rounded the corner. Lining the lake were little wooden boats tethered to several tired-looking jetties. He spied a large boat farther out by the private island at the center of it, its white sails stark against the green fir trees that clustered atop the spot of land.

To his left were the shops of Langmere. They hadn't changed. A butcher's, a chandlery, Mrs. Gleeson's tea shop, and The Royal Oak. Farther along, the blacksmith's bilged smoke from the chimney and Mr. Beaumont's Bazaar remained but had expanded onto the pavement by way of a stall covered with a bright blue canopy.

What had changed, however, was the throngs of women spilling in and out of the

buildings and crowding the road. He inched his way through the mob on horseback, not unaware of the various stares that met him.

Added to that were the whispers and not so quiet conversations puzzling over who he was. He nodded his head and offered a smile in greeting to two young women, one of whom had gasped.

She blushed and dropped her head. Alex fixed his gaze ahead and blew out a breath. The one place he could guarantee an escape from women and here he found himself surrounded by them. Many of whom were quite his type indeed.

He stole a look through the beveled windows of the tea room. More women. Young, old, curvaceous, slender, pretty and not so pretty. A brunette exited and offered him a charming smile. He glanced away swiftly.

What the devil was going on?

Langmere had all the appeal of London on a smoggy day when the streets were so thick with yellow, soupy fog that one could scarcely see one's hand in front of one.

So what on earth could have brought all these women flocking here?

He ground his teeth together and ignored the feminine chatter coursing about him.

Christ, he loved to hear women talk. It was a whole lot more interesting than sitting about in White's while the men about him congratulated themselves on running the world with their hefty inheritances. Alex would certainly not complain about the wealth that came with being a marquis and all the many, many benefits of rank but he wasn't foolish enough to pretend he could take sole credit for his circumstances.

Unable to resist, he glanced toward the lakeside, where three women were gathered.

Her figure snared his attention first—slender waist and just the tiniest hint of curves, all wrapped up in a simple pale-yellow gown with a high neckline. Prim by anyone's standards really. However, it was the red curls peeking out from the straw bonnet that really seized his notice.

He bit back a groan. Dear God, he always had a weakness for redheads.

He could look away. It would be easy really. Fix his attention on the road ahead and trot past with all the haste of a lord on important business. If he was to keep his promise to his mother, that was all he needed to do.

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But, no. Apparently the lure of the redhead was too great.

Anyway, there was nothing to say he could not look. What harm could come with looking? No one ever—

She looked up and his heart gave the tiniest jolt. He scowled, forgetting the roguish smile he'd intended to have in place. Her gaze clashed with his and her expression faltered, the curve on her lips dropping rapidly. She gave him a disapproving glare and then turned her attention back to her companions.

Cursing under his breath, Alex urged his horse into a gallop. This would be easy enough. One of the easiest things he'd ever done really. He'd climbed mountains and walked deserts and sailed stormy seas. Avoiding female company was nothing compared to this.

It didn't stop that redhead's glare from lingering in his mind, though.

Nor did it prevent him from wanting to turn around and offer her his most flattering words. It seemed his stay here would not be quite the escape from temptation he had wished for.

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“LUCINDA?”

Tearing her attention away from the gentleman swiftly making his way out of the town on horseback, Lucinda offered her mother a smile. “Yes, Mama?”

“I was saying that we should return to our lodgings. Rain looks imminent.”

She glanced up at the sky, speckled with a few white clouds. Though it had rained earlier in the day, leaving the air sweetly scented with the fragrance of wet grass, it did not look likely to rain again anytime soon. “I think we are safe, Mama.”

She shook her head vigorously, sending the feathers on her hat bobbing. “I feel certain in my bones it shall rain. You know my bones are never wrong.”

“What about when we went to Bath and there was that week of torrential rain and we could not go anywhere? Your bones had said it was going to be perfect weather,” Lucinda’s younger sister piped up.

Lucinda glared at her sister. Be quiet, she mouthed, but Mary-Anne ignored her, a smug smile crossing her petite mouth.

At fourteen, Mary-Anne had begun to grow into a woman, but her features remained child-like, and her petite stature belied her bold nature. Their father blamed his indulgence of Mary-Anne for her brashness whilst her mama decided it was those gothic novels combined with the scandalous nature of the gossip columns and how young girls chattered these days that had so warped Mary-Anne’s mind. Mary-Anne often reminded her of herself at that age...before everything had changed of course.

Lucinda reckoned Mary-Anne had simply been born bold. She recalled her as a baby, taking her first steps far sooner than any of their young cousins, and then as a child, her precocious and inquisitive nature had been clear. Being ten years her senior, it had often been up to Lucinda to rescue her sister from many a predicament.

And occasionally, Mary-Anne reminded her of herself at that age...

“Do you recall our trip to Bath, Mama?” Mary-Anne persisted, her smile turning sly.

“I never said such a thing.” Their mother straightened her shoulders and peered at the sky. “And my bones are never wrong. They twinge just so. There is rain in the air.”

Mary-Anne huffed. “Well, seeing as that handsome man has gone, I suppose we might as well return.”

“Mary-Anne!” Lucinda scolded.

“Do not tell me you didn’t notice because I know you did. In fact, your gaze did not leave him for one second.”

Biting back a swift denial, Lucinda narrowed her gaze at her sister. The only reason she even glanced at the man had been because she had felt his gaze upon her.

For some reason, though, she had garnered his disapproval. Perhaps her hair was too red or her dress too prim for his liking. Whatever it was, he had set her with the deepest scowl and all she could bring herself to do was glower back. After all, she was not here for his enjoyment. They had come to take the fresh air and drink the fresh spring water that came from the lakes, not garner the attention of attractive men.

Mary-Anne sighed. “He is the handsomest man we have seen since our arrival. There really is no one here of note, you know.” She pursed her lips, undid the ribbon of her bonnet with a sound of annoyance and flung one of the ribbons over her shoulder. “It is only women.” She gestured about. “Endless amounts of women.”

“You are too young to be concerned with handsome men and he was certainly too old for you,” Lucinda muttered.

“Just because you have never been interested in men and will likely wind up a spinster.”

“Mary-Anne!” Mama scolded.

“I have Bernie.”

Mary-Anne rolled her eyes. “Boring Bernie. He shall never propose, and I will be glad for it. He’s far too dull for you.”

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Lucinda held back the biting retort that burned on her tongue. Bernie was, she supposed, a little dry at times. He liked rocks, mostly. She couldn't say it was an obsession she really understood. However, they had been writing to one another for so long, he had to be about the only man to understand her, surely? Everyone anticipated that one day, they would marry. It was just a sort of fate really.

Besides, it saved her ever having to worry about being courted by another. The thought of having to try to flirt and being charming with another man made her shudder. Frankly, she didn't have it in her. Far better to stick with Bernie who never expected anything other than a simple letter occasionally.

"Mr. Sandwell is a decent man with an excellent living. He shall propose soon enough," Mama said, glancing up. "It really does look like rain."

"I hope he does not. Lucinda is far too pretty for him, and I know she does not enjoy his dull conversation."

"That's not true," Lucinda said. "I find his conversation quite interesting at times."

"Those times being never." Mary-Anne folded her arms. "You need a man like the one we just saw. Dashing, heroic."

"Grumpy," Lucinda muttered.

"Someone who will help you finally do all the things you've always wanted to do," Mary-Anne continued.

“What things?” Mama asked.

“There are no things, Mama,” Lucinda assured her, looping her arm through her mother’s. “I am quite content as I am.”

The lie almost stuck in her throat. Yes, there were things she longed to do with her life, but it would take more than a scowling man to make her do them. She had been the reserved, sensible sister for too long. How did one change oneself entirely after being set on such a path? She did not think it possible. So she would probably marry Bernie—if he ever asked—and continue to try to tame her wild little sister. No stranger on horseback was going to change her fate. Of that she was certain.

Chapter Two

Nestled by the lake, some two miles from town, Eastwick Hall, and the entailed estate of the Marquis of Kirbeck, had occupied this spot since the late fourteenth century. In various incarnations of course.

Alex had been put under pressure by various family members and even his late-wife to add his mark to the house once he’d inherited his title, but he couldn’t think of anything more dull than instructing architects and wasting a fortune on improvements to the seldom used house.

He directed his mount down the long path that led toward the front view of the house. Given its location, the house had been known to flood on occasion and he often wondered why his ancestors chose this spot. Admittedly, he and his brothers had enjoyed the proximity of the lake, often taking boats out and disappearing for hours while they explored the few small islands dotted about the lake or searched for some sign of a sea monster that Leo was convinced lived in the lake.

Or should that be lake monster?

The front of the house came into view past the trees. The newest addition, a top layer of rooms that were added in the same style as the bottom by his father, could be seen and the curtains were drawn, and the shutters thrown open. At least the housekeeper had received his message of his impending stay. The large windows surrounded by redbrick stood out against the pale stone of the rest of the building.

Alex always preferred the rear portion of the house that had been built in the seventeenth century and retained its castellations. Why anyone wished him to add something to the house, he did not know. He had no taste for fashionable houses and would rather raze all the modern stuff to the ground. Give him a rugged castle with winding staircases and hidden tunnels any day.

He narrowed his gaze toward the stables when he neared. He spied the rear of a carriage tucked into the courtyard and scowled. He kept his own carriage here and the ride from London was preferable on horseback than stuffed into a vehicle, so he had opted to go on horseback. But that was not his barouche.

And he knew damn well whose it was. But why the devil was he here?

The housekeeper and servants spilled out of the house, lining up to greet him. Alex dismounted and handed over the reins to the waiting stable hand. Mr. Quigley, the butler, and Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, greeted him.

“Welcome home, my lord.” Mrs. Jones smiled warmly as he moved inside and tore off his gloves.

The wood paneled hallway smelled a little musty so the house couldn’t have been open for long. Which meant his brother hadn’t arrived much before him. “Thank you for getting the house ready with such haste, Mrs. Jones.”

“Have you any plans of which we should be aware, my lord?” asked Mr. Quigley, the

butler. The married couple matched each other perfectly, with pale white hair, stocky builds and astute blue eyes that were hardly faded by time.

“None at all, Quigley.” Alex resisted adding sadly.

“Really, my lord?” A white, bushy brow arched.

“Really, Quigley,” Alex drawled.

If he was to avoid the temptation of women, as he had so diligently promised his mother, it would not do to be hosting any hunting parties or week-long soirees whilst he was in residence. Alex glanced about the hallway. “Now where is my brother?”

Mrs. Jones exchanged a look with her husband. “They are likely in the gardens, my lord.”

“They?” Alex repeated.

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“Yes, my lord,” the butler replied. “Lord Leo and Lord Adam are here.”

“Wonderful.”

Not that he disliked his brothers but the three of them had always been ridiculously competitive, and he was not certain he could put it past them not to try to trip him up and fling some pretty thing his way during his self-imposed confinement here.

Alex kept his coat on and marched through the house. He spotted his brothers on the large expanse of neatly mown grass that led down toward the lake. They were taking turns shooting a target with a bow and arrow and even behind closed doors, he could tell they were arguing.

He shoved open the door and marched toward them. Leo turned, bow in hand, and Alex lifted his palms. “I always knew you wanted me dead.”

Leo eased down the bow and relaxed his hold on it with a grin. “If I’d wanted you dead, I could have killed you long ago and no one would have been any the wiser.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “You have all the subtlety of a bull, Leo.”

“Says you whose only language is using his damned fists,” Leo retorted.

Adam shrugged. “You’re still bitter I beat you in our last fight.”

“Ten years ago! I could best you now with absolute certainty.”

Alex bit back a grin. “What are you two doing here?” he demanded.

Both brothers turned to face him. Many mistook Adam and Leo for twins. With scarcely a year between them, they shared the same chestnut hair, blue eye color, and square jawline. Alex’s hair was a shade darker, though it sometimes lightened during the summer, and he’d inherited his dark eyes from his mother’s side.

“I did not know we were not welcome here,” Adam said, folding his arms.

“Is that really the welcome you wish to give your brothers?” Leo added.

Alex cocked his head. “I take it mother begged you two to come here as well.”

“Why should she beg me?” Adam asked.

“Because of the rumor.” He narrowed his gaze at them both. “About Miss Kingsley.”

Leo made a dismissive noise. “Oh that trifle.”

“Hardly warrants even thinking about,” Adam agreed.

“So you decided to come here, for no reason at all?” Alex swung his gaze between his brothers. “And our mother’s tears and pleading had no impact on you at all,” he said dryly.

They were well-used to their mother’s manipulations. She was not an awful woman per se. In fact the opposite. Their mother, compared to their dull father who rarely saw them when alive, was a warm and loving woman. Too warm at times. It meant she could put on quite a show and have them do anything.

Like congregate in the country to escape this bloody scandal that was beginning to

haunt every one of them.

Adam peered at him. “Why are you here then, Alex?”

“I fancied some country air,” he said vaguely.

“Ha, you never come here. Mrs. Jones said the last time you were here was two years ago.” Leo thrust a finger toward him. “You are escaping London.”

“And women,” Adam added.

“And you two aren’t?”

“I fancied some country air,” Leo mimicked.

“Me too,” Adam confirmed.

“If you two are so convinced you can avoid temptation, why not return to London?”

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“I do not see why I should have to leave.” Leo folded his arms.

Adam shook his head. “Nor I.”

Alex drew in a long breath. All three of them were famed for being stubborn almost as much as they were famed for being rogues and rakes. It would take a tidal wave from the lake to force them back to London. He didn’t have a chance in hell of ridding himself of them.

He turned to head inside and paused. “Say, do you know why the town is swarming with women?”

“Maybe they followed me?” Adam said, offering a devilish smile. “London is likely missing me already.”

“Then perhaps you should return to London after all and they can all follow you back there,” Alex retorted.

Adam’s smile widened. “I told you he would struggle.” He nudged Leo. “Alex cannot resist the lure of the opposite sex.”

“I can resist just fine. Much more easily than you can, I would wager.”

Adam rubbed his hands together. “Oh, you know I cannot resist a wager.”

“And you?” Alex looked to Leo.

His brother glanced at the house, his expression distracted, then shook his head. “Not for me.”

Alex shared a look with Adam. Something strange was occurring with Leo. He might not have seen either of his brothers for some time, but he knew when they were up to something. But what could it be?

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LUCINDA PAUSED FOR breath and twisted to view the path they had taken up the hill. They hadn’t gained much height yet, but her breaths already grew short.

“Are you certain the ruin is up here?” she called to her sister who marched on several paces ahead.

“Oh yes. Mrs. Gleeson from the tea shop said as much.” Mary-Anne turned to face her and motioned impatiently. “Come on. We need to make haste if we wish to meet Mama for supper.”

Lucinda glanced past Mary-Anne and grimaced. “I’m not so certain I want to see this ruin.”

“Lies!” Mary-Anne snatched her skirts and closed the gap between them, taking awkward, stomping steps toward her until she could grab Lucinda’s hand. “You love castles. You love all things medieval. Why would you not wish to see this ruin? Mrs. Gleeson said it was built by a nobleman in the thirteenth century whose ancestors all survived the plague because they remained in the castle.”

“Mrs. Gleeson says many things. I would not take them all for granted.”

And Lucinda knew enough of the history behind the ruins to know that was an

exaggeration. When their mother had announced their visit to the town, Lucinda had hungrily gobbled up every ounce of information she could on the area.

That did not mean she wanted to hike a blasted mountain to see the thing.

Mary-Anne tugged on her hand. “Does it matter? It’s a castle, Lucinda. Is there anything you love more?”

“It’s quite the distance. I do not think Mama—”

Her sister made a dismissive noise. “Will you cease caring what Mama thinks for one moment?”

Shoulders straight, Lucinda stared her sister down.

Well, technically thanks to the steep slope, but she plastered on her most imposing older sister look, one that had always been guaranteed to quell her sister’s argumentative nature while Mama was resting with one of her many, many headaches.

“I am charged with looking after you, Mary-Anne,” she said. “I am not going to let you do something irresponsible.”

Mary-Anne rolled her eyes. “There is nothing irresponsible about a little walk, and I think if I have to sit at tea with Mama’s friends any longer, I might very well scream.” She released Lucinda’s hand and folded her arms. “Besides, I’m a woman. I hardly need looking after anymore.”

“You are scarcely a woman,” Lucinda muttered.

“I heard that.” Mary-Anne put hands to hips and set her with a bold look.

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Lucinda poked her tongue out briefly. “I meant for you too.”

Her sister shifted her hands, gesturing vaguely. “I do not understand you, Lucy. All I remember from when I was little was you speaking of castles and knights and how you were going to explore and document every single one. Recall all the gruesome stories you told me? Especially the one about Edward, where they shoved a poker—”

“Cease!” Lucinda begged. “I most certainly should never have told a little girl that story. It was reckless of me.”

“It was not reckless—it was fun.”

Fun? Lucinda drew in a long breath. Perhaps it had been. But she learned the hard way that one should not live for fun when one is a young lady. If she wanted better for her sister, her dreams of castles and adventuring simply had to be consigned to the past.

“Let us continue,” Lucinda pleaded.

She could not bear for her sister to poke at the past any longer. That young lady who had spoken of travelling the country was long gone, taken in one night by her own silliness, and she did not wish to dwell on it any longer. “If we are to ever find this castle, we should make haste. It looks as though it might rain.” She eyed the clouds ahead critically, spying one particular gray one that did not look welcoming at all.

Mary-Anne waved a dismissive hand. “We will be fine.”

Gathering her skirts, Lucinda took a few more steps up the slope of the hill. Mary-Anne blessedly ceased arguing and followed suit, moving at pace. They reached the top of the hill and the gray cloud vanished, so Lucinda allowed herself a little moment to relax and take in the views of the generous lake below and the hills and mountains spread out about them. She allowed herself a smile.

“I saw that,” her sister said.

“Saw what?” she straightened her lips.

“You were imagining things. I know that look.”

“You know nothing.” She was not some silly girl who dreamed of silly things like knights and castles and days of old. “I’m simply enjoying the view.”

Mary-Anne pursed her lips. “I do not see this ruin.”

Lucinda frowned and put a hand to her bonnet as a gust of wind whipped about them, ruffling their skirts. “Neither do I and it’s getting a little blustery up here. Perhaps we should return.”

“It must be here somewhere. Mrs. Gleeson was quite emphatic about it.”

“Perhaps she was mistaken.”

Mary-Anne pointed to a large rocky outcrop, jutting from near the very top of the next hill. “Why do we not walk over there? That looks like a fine vantage point.”

The great slabs of stone looked as though they had been laid by giants once, rather like dominos angled together. Lucinda could not deny that Cumbria was a beautiful place. However, they also looked a fine spot for her sister to get into some mischief

of some sort. She wasn't certain what Mary-Anne could do with some rocks, but trouble found Mary-Anne in the strangest of places.

"I think we should return to Mama."

"Nonsense. We have come all this way. It shall not take another ten minutes."

"Mary-Anne," she warned.

"Please, Lucy," her sister begged. "I cannot stand another afternoon of tea and dull chatter, and we are so close. I'm sure this castle is here somewhere."

Lucinda eased out a breath, tried to harden herself to her sister's pleading gaze, then sighed. "Very well. Just to that rock then we are returning to town."

Mary-Anne's grin turned triumphant and Lucinda regretted giving in. It would not make life any easier in future.

They made their way up to the next hill, following a tiny worn path through the grass. Sheep grazed on the hill, scampering as soon as either of them came near. Thanks to their father's work, they tended to spend most of their time in London so a visit to the country had not been unwelcome, and were it not for her sister's determination to have an adventure, Lucinda would be enjoying the sights.

She also, admittedly, would not mind finding this castle. But there was only so long two ladies could trek across the hills of Cumbria before they ran into trouble.

Mary-Anne paused at the base of the gray rocks and pivoted around. "I wonder if the ruin is very small and we simply cannot see it."

"We have a fine view." Lucinda scanned the area. "I do not see how we have missed

it.”

Grabbing her skirts, Mary-Anne stepped onto the first rock. “I’ll get a better view.”

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Lucinda snatched her sister's arm. "You will not. What if you twist an ankle and I have to cart you down the hill somehow?"

"I will not twist an ankle. My ankles are exceedingly strong."

"And you are exceedingly prone to injury."

"Very well." Mary-Anne jumped down from the rock. "You go instead."

"Or we just return home."

"Are you scared?"

Lucinda fixed her sister with a look. "Of a rock? Hardly."

"Well, then you go."

Lucinda peered up at the large slabs. They looked conquerable but young ladies did not spend time climbing giant rocks in search of castle ruins that may or may not only exist in Mrs. Gleeson's head.

"Please, Lucy. Otherwise we came all this way for nothing."

She exhaled slowly. "Oh, very well." Once she had confirmed there was nothing of interest, they could return in one piece.

She clambered her way to the top, rather wishing she had at least removed her bonnet

and handed it to Mary-Anne when a strong gust threatened to tear it from her head. Once she reached the final slab, she paused, drew in a long breath and smiled.

“Goodness.”

“Do you see anything?”

“No castles,” she called down to her sister. But what a view it was. She supposed allowing her sister to bully her into the climb had not been so terrible. Below, the lakes and hills were spread out like a feast for her senses. It was hard to believe a lake could be so large, splitting the scenery almost into two.

Another gust of wind tore around her, sending ribbons into her face and her skirts wrapping around her ankles. She put out a hand to steady herself but there was nothing to snatch at and she lost her footing a little, wavering for a moment.

“Eeek.” To save herself from toppling over, she dropped hard onto her rear, lest the wind tear her from it entirely. A hand to her chest, she felt the rapid thud of her heart and grimaced at what was likely going to be a bruised bottom.

“Is everything all right?” her sister called, her voice scarcely audible above the gale. “It’s getting frightfully windy.”

Lucinda grimaced and pressed herself up from the rock to peer down the path she had taken. “Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

She grimaced. “I’m not certain I can get down.”

Chapter Three

Alex narrowed his gaze and drew his horse to a slow stop. Wonderful. Now he was hearing women on the wind. Considering the level of noise coming from the village this afternoon, perhaps their voices had carried.

They were all still there. In the shops, the tea room, out on the lake. Swarms of them, young and old. According to Mrs. Jones, some bloody bright young chap had written of the town and the healing nature of the air. Now every woman in Christendom had descended upon it.

There was nothing healing about the place. Yes, the air was a darn sight cleaner than London but no more so than any other village in England. The man had practically sold snake oil to the women of England.

He clenched his jaw. If it were any other time, he wouldn't complain one jot. But not right now. He could not afford to be distracted. It might have been his mother's tears that persuaded him to come to Langmere but there was no doubting the rumors of Miss Kingsley's state and whoever put her in such a situation had encouraged him to agree with her. He'd already suffered lectures from a few friends and one of his regular lovers had even refused to meet him. This whole business was ruining his fun.

Before he ordered his horse on, the sound reached him again. Definitely feminine and certainly not coming from town. He wasn't hearing things.

He twisted in the saddle and scanned the hills, finally spotting a lone figure upon Salt Rock, one of the largest rock formations in the area. He closed his eyes briefly. What the devil was a woman doing all the way up there? He'd climbed it many times as a boy and even without the encumberment of skirts and corsets, it was no easy ascent.

Of course, he could turn around and head home. Pretend he had not seen anything. If some old crone wanted to climb a rock, who was he to stop her? However, from the wailing sound carrying on the wind, it did not sound as though the woman was too

happy about her predicament. He pinched the bridge of his nose and tapped Beau with his heels.

“Looks like we should go and play rescuer.”

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He covered the distance swiftly enough, having followed the paths worn into the hills hundreds of times since childhood. He dismounted not far from the rock formation and gave Beau a pat. “Won’t be long with any luck,” he assured the gelding.

From his position at the base of the rock, he saw no sign of the woman until a bonneted head peeked over.

“Mary-Anne?” she asked hopefully.

He lifted a brow and eyed the woman.

“You’re not Mary-Anne.”

“No.”

A wide, wary gaze met his. He couldn’t ascertain the color of them from here, but red curls fluttered beneath the bonnet. He cursed his luck. The redheaded woman from by the lake, the one who had drawn his attention.

Of course.

Naturally.

Who else would it be? It could not be some wizened old thing. No, it had to be a pretty woman wrapped in delicate green with hair the color of fire.

His favorite.

All he had to do was offer her aid then walk away. How difficult could that be? Given his history, pretty darned difficult but a man could change, could they not? And he had vowed he would to his mother. At least temporarily. After the death of his wife, many years ago, he had little desire to be a one-woman man.

“My sister has gone for help.” She waved a hand. “You may go.”

He let his lips slant into an amused smile as she waved him away as though she were a queen dismissing her subjects. Given she had to be lying flat on her front, the regal nature of it all rather impressed him.

“I see no sign of her.”

“Well, she walks very fast. She might well be in town by now.”

“I could have you down and safe before she returns. Would that not be better?”

“I’m quite well.” She waved a hand again. “Do go on. The views are spectacular from here.”

He nodded. “I know, though they are better enjoyed when one is not lying on their stomach.”

“I—” She paused. “It is a little windy. I risk being pushed over if I stand.”

“Shall I come up to you?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Oh no. Please do go on, sir. I am quite well.”

He glanced up at the clouds and pointed east. “It’s going to get worse. Maybe even rain. This area of the country is known for being windy.”

She craned her neck, and he swore he heard her sigh over the wind. “I shall manage, I am certain.”

This was getting silly. She had no reason to deny his aid. In fact, most women would be practically begging for it, whether they were in trouble or not. “I’m coming to you.”

“No, sir,” she protested.

He whipped off his hat and jacket, stashing it near the base of the rocks.

“Sir,” she continued, “there is really no nee—”

She shut up when he flicked open his cufflinks and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He glanced up to find her head gone. Had the woman been blown off the top of the rock entirely? He shook his head to himself and began to climb the rock.

Once he was one step from the top, he spotted her, lying on her back, her arms and legs splayed out like a starfish. The green dress he’d spotted spread out about her, a soft feminine splash against the hard, gray rock. He spied gentle curves and surmised her to be fairly tall.

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“You’re still here then.”

She pushed up on her elbows. “Yes, I’m still here.”

Her cheeks were red and her eyes blue. All she needed was some touch of purple and she would practically be a rainbow.

A tempting rainbow.

Her slightly wide jaw held lips that were currently pursed with annoyance but were generous and her eyes were huge—so big he feared he might get lost in them.

Alex stretched out a bare hand. “Twist around and I can aid you down.”

“I think I’m stuck.” The woman lay her head back down, apparently resigned.

He frowned. “Your gown is caught?”

She rolled her head back and forth against the rock. “No, I cannot move. I’m not certain why. Maybe I should just stay here.”

“Ah.”

He recognized this. He’d seen it on his climbing expeditions. One could be perfectly fine then the next moment frozen in fear. Men who were entirely capable and experienced would find themselves on one particular bit of rock and suddenly they were frozen.

He eased out a breath. He supposed he was going to have to haul her down somehow. “Stay where you are,” he ordered and then realized the stupidity of such a command. “We shall get you down, do not fear.”

???

LUCINDA HADN'T FELT fear until she had decided to sit on the rock while she got her bearings. Then it had swooped over her suddenly, pressing down on her chest as she surveyed the height of the rocks and the expanse of the land about her.

Now the situation was a hundred times worse.

No.

A thousand times worse.

Not only was she trapped upon a rock for no real reason at all, the gentleman who scowled at her down by the lake yesterday was now crawling his way toward her in an exceedingly predatory manner.

And could she bring herself to move from her silly, splayed position? Of course not. It was as though every limb had decided to glue itself to the rock. They were heavy and unwieldy and entirely disobedient.

As was this man. He should have listened to her and moved on. Mary-Anne would eventually return with aid. Though, Lucinda was not at all sure she wanted her mother to find out about this. It was about the most reckless thing she had done in five years and she did not want Mama to fear for her falling back into her old ways. Why did their mother have to insist on them staying here? Why did she think they needed the fresh air for their health? She and Mary-Anne were perfectly healthy people.

If one did not count feeling entirely hot and flustered at the proximity of this man.

The man's shirt sleeves pulled against strong arms. When he'd rolled them up, she feared she might go into a faint—and she had never fainted in her life. He revealed slightly sun-kissed arms scattered with dark hair—dark hair that matched the color atop his head. Shiny, with a slight wave and perfectly cut, it matched his elegant attire and devastating good looks.

She should not admit that to herself, really. It would not help the situation. Here she was, splayed out like some offering to the birds, entirely humiliated, with her fate in the hands of a far too good-looking stranger. She had no doubt he knew that about himself too. After all, even the most average of men thought themselves to be quite something. This man no doubt imagined himself a god amongst mortals.

Unfortunately, he would not be wrong.

She lifted her head to peer at him then dropped it down again. What a terrible, terrible, embarrassing, awful situation.

What a ridiculous one too. Nineteen-year-old Lucinda would never have found herself stuck like this. She would have climbed the rocks, climbed down, and likely rescued the gentleman instead. But nineteen-year-old Lucinda had also been a fool and she could not allow herself to revert to that, no matter how much better that seemed than her current situation.

He neared and she tried not to look at him. From the corner of her eye, she caught his smile, and her heart gave a little flutter. His eyes were a rich brown, almost nutty. She cast her gaze upward, which from her angle was more like straight ahead, across the horizon. A huge mistake really as it made her incredibly dizzy. She reluctantly set her gaze on the only steady thing—him.

“What is your name?”

“Miss Lucinda Evans.”

“May I call you Lucy?”

“Certainly not!”

His grin grew. “I am going to come and take your hand, Lucy. Can I do that?”

She longed to run away. To leap up, dash down the rocks and never set foot in Cumbria ever again. However, what she longed to do and what she could physically do were two different things.

“We have not even been properly introduced,” she muttered.

“I think it’s a bit late for that.”

She narrowed her gaze at her rescuer. Oh she had read him entirely correctly. This man knew precisely how handsome he was, and no doubt used it to his advantage. A rake, through and through.

Well, he might get away with calling her Lucy for now but once her feet were on the ground, she would be telling him in no uncertain terms that he should not even acknowledge her presence until such a time they were properly introduced. And hopefully that would be never. The last thing she needed was to relive this humiliation again.

He inched over. With scarcely enough width for them both, his body came far too close to hers. She held her breath and closed her eyes when his hand met hers. Instinctively, she curled her fingers around his, aware of the brush of bare fingers against the fabric of her gloves. She opened her eyes and found herself staring directly up at him. His eyes were a hazel brown, one cheek bore a dimple while the

other did not. Up close, devastatingly handsome did not even brush the surface.

“I’m going to take your other hand now.”

Lucinda had little idea what he had planned but apparently she had no ability to refuse him. He curled his fingers into hers and drew her slowly upright. Wind wrapped about her, making her shiver.

“Can you shuffle forward?”

Wide-eyed, she studied the vast expanse of hills and mountains about her. “I-I’m not certain.”

“Look at me, and only me,” he ordered.

She did so, feeling a strange calmness at his presence that warred with the heavy thump of her pulse in her ears and the tingle that prevailed throughout her arms at his touch.

“Now slide forward a little.” He shifted back on his knees as she inched forward on her rear. “That’s it,” he urged, keeping her fingers gripped in his. “Do not look down.”

Lucinda looked down.

“Lucy, look at me.”

She snapped her gaze back to his, away from the drop to one side of the rocks that was far steeper than she’d realized. “I think you should leave me.” She tried to take her hands from his. “I’ll stay here.” She offered a sunny smile. “I’ll be just fine.”

“I’m not leaving you.” Her rescuer held her fingers tight. “But if you wish to stay, I shall stay too.”

“Goodness, no!” She could not imagine how scandalous it would be should someone discover them together.

“Then you had better keep moving.”

“Fine,” she mumbled.

Shifting a little more, she found herself on the edge of the rock and able to swing her legs down. The man released one of her hands and stepped onto the next rock, then guided her down until they were almost at the bottom. He staggered back slightly and she reached for him, gripping his sleeve with her free hand and righting him.

He grinned. “Many thanks.”

Once he reached the ground, he offered out both hands and she eyed the large jump from the final rock to the ground. How on earth had she clambered up it in the first place?

“Trust me.”

Trust him? She did not even know his name, and he still insisted on calling her Lucy. Why should she trust him?

“Lucy.” He offered out his arms again. “Just jump.”

Closing her eyes, she took a breath and leaped.

Arms banded around her, holding her suspended in the air. She snapped open her

eyes to find herself chest to chest with the man. His breath was warm upon her face and she picked up a hint of sandalwood emanating from him. Up close, she spied amber flecks in his eyes. Up close, devastating seemed too mild a word.

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For a few moments, she stared at him, feeling her heart thud hard against his chest. Or perhaps that was his heart beating against hers, she could not be certain. Then she realized she was not the only one staring. His gaze tracked across her face, to her lips, then met hers. His pupils darkened.

Swallowing hard, she tapped his shoulder. “Um, you may put me down now.”

“Ah.” He eased her down, sliding her all the way down his body, and making her feel as though she had just been wrapped in prickly wool and her whole body had become sensitized and alert.

She took a step back and placed a hand to the rock before she tumbled to the ground and found herself roly-polying down the hill. At this point, she would not be surprised if such a thing happened. He must have noticed her unsteadiness and took her arms in his hands, his fingers warm and strong through the fabric.

There it was again. The darkness in his gaze.

Before she quite comprehended what was happening, he moved in and pressed his lips firmly to hers.

She jolted back, a hand to her mouth, her lips tingling from the short contact. “What...what did you do that for?”

“Well, we did nearly die.” He shrugged, his lips quirking.

“We most certainly did not, and you cannot...” She drew in a long breath. “You

cannot go around kissing people. It's scandalous!"

"Lucinda!"

Lucinda whipped around, took a few steps toward the edge of the hill and spotted her sister, her bright red hair streaming behind her, making her way up the hill with a large man in tow—a farmer perhaps by the looks of his garments. At least it was not their mother. But either way, she did not need her sister spotting her with this man. If he moved quickly, Mary-Anne might not spy him from her position.

She hastened back. "You should go," Lucinda urged.

"Goodness, now that's a thank you."

"Well, of course, I am most grateful but—"

He smirked. "You want me gone." He shrugged, retrieved his jacket and hat. "Good day to you, Lucy. Let me know if you wish to climb any more rocks. I should be most happy to oblige."

Well, that's not going to happen, she wanted to blurt out but by the time she'd glanced back at her sister and then to the man, he had gone. She eased out a breath. With any luck, she would never see him again. Which was precisely what she wanted.

For certain.

Most definitely.

Chapter Four

“Is there a reason there’s a large gathering of women in the garden?” Leo asked, peering out of the window of the breakfast room. “And so damned early too.”

Alex glanced up from the newspaper and folded it and then set it on the white linen besides his half-finished food. “Mrs. Jones said there had been a few requests for tours. And it is hardly early, Leo.”

“Well, Adam is not even down for breakfast,” his brother pointed out.

“Because Adam keeps his own time.”

Leo chuckled and returned to the circular table positioned directly in the middle of the room. Sunshine streamed in through the large windows on two sides of the room, offering up a promise of impending summer. A fine time for a tour of the gardens to be certain. But he would not be going in search of these female visitors. Not after yesterday and the rescue of the delectable Lucy.

He suspected that as long as he lived, he would not forget the image of her splayed out on the rock, her red curls surrounding her and her long legs on offer. He smirked to himself. The image should have been amusing but apparently he was so starved for female companionship already, it was slowly becoming his newest fantasy.

Leo took a long sip of coffee and nodded toward the newspaper. “Any talk of us?”

“How did you guess?”

“It was the disgusted look you gave when you set it down, though the gossip does not usually bother you.”

“It does when it means we’re stuck here, and some poor woman’s situation is turned into entertainment.”

“Good Lord, you have a heart, Alex.”

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He fixed his brother with a look. "I may not be interested in love affairs, but I'm not callous."

"I know, I know."

"Besides, you are a fine one to talk. I cannot recall you even keeping a lover for more than one night. Unless things have changed."

Leo shifted slightly in his seat and reached for a fresh slice of bread and then slathered it with jam. "I simply have no interest in long-term affairs."

"Since Rebecca, you mean."

His brother's face paled slightly, and Alex cursed inwardly. They never spoke of Rebecca, the girl who had vanished years ago and shattered Leo's heart, just the same as they never spoke of Alex's late wife Eliza. There were some brothers maybe who shared all their matters of the heart, but they were certainly not those sorts of people. Eliza's death had been a shock, forcing Alex to consider quite what he wanted out of life. It certainly was not to sit around and mold in his grand estate, much like he was doing now.

"Forgive me," he murmured.

Leo shook his head with a tight smile. "No matter. Rebecca was a long time ago."

"Indeed."

“So what do the papers say about us?”

“They reckon Adam is most likely the father.”

Leo’s brows lifted. “Really?”

“Do not sound so surprised.” Adam strode into the breakfast room and dropped into the chair next to Leo. He leaned back while a footman poured coffee and then reached for a piece of bread, tearing it into chunks and shoving them into his mouth.

“If Mother could see you now...” Leo shook his head.

“She would give me a kiss and a hug and tell me I’m her most handsome and favorite son?” Adam suggested.

“Hardly.” Alex picked up the newspaper and waved it at him. “Not when all of London believes you to be the father of Miss Kingsley’s child.”

Adam shrugged. “I cannot help that everyone thinks I’m the most virile of us three.”

“What makes you think that?” Leo asked. “You’re more likely to be playing cards than taking lovers.”

“That’s what you think,” Adam countered. “I can do both, you know.” He laced his hands behind his back and sighed. “I miss it. Cards in one hand, a woman on my knee...”

“Good Lord, no wonder everyone believes it’s you who is the father.”

Alex shouldn’t be surprised by his brother’s arrogance. He wasn’t wrong about being the favorite son really. Their mother was careful not to show it, but Adam had nearly

died of smallpox as a child and even now, she was protective of him. It seemed that protective attitude had ensured Adam had more arrogance than Leo and Alex combined.

“You know if this situation continues, we shall have to do something about it ourselves,” Adam said.

“Do what, though?” Leo asked.

“Find the damned man responsible and threaten him until he does the right thing?” Adam suggested.

Alex blew out a breath. “It’s certainly worth thinking about.”

“At least the scenery is pleasant.” Adam rose from his chair. “Quite pleasant indeed.” He moved to the window and peered out. “Say look. A redhead. You favor redheads, do you not, Alex?”

Keeping his posture stiff, Alex shrugged. He was not going to look. Not going to see if it was Miss Lucinda Evans. His curiosity did not need to be satisfied. He peered at his unfinished breakfast and muttered a curse before rising from the table. He ignored his brother’s smirk and went to the window to view the gathering of women strolling through the ornamental gardens. Sure enough, the redhead proved to be Lucy.

Wearing a cream dress today with the same high neckline, her simple matching bonnet made the most of those red curls. Beside her, a younger girl walked. He had not had a good look at her yesterday, but he assumed the smaller version of Lucy was her sister.

“It seems rude not to greet them.” Adam gestured outside.

“We are staying put,” Alex said tightly.

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Because, chances were, if he met with Lucy again, he'd be mightily tempted to break every promise he had made to his mother.

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"I HEARD THERE'S a huge armory in Eastwick Hall. We should go and see it."

Lucinda shook her head vigorously at Mary-Anne. "We have only been invited to see the gardens."

And Lucinda did not much blame the housekeeper for not offering them a tour of the house. Since their arrival in Langmere, more and more ladies had flocked there, filling up every inn, boarding house, and spare room in the modest town. By her count, at least twenty of them were touring the gardens today and she imagined there had been many more requests to visit the house. The housekeeper likely had much better things to do than lead a crowd of nosy, chattering women about the house.

"We should ask at least. I read it's one of the biggest collections in the country." Mary-Anne paused to run a finger along the petal of a bright pink rose. "Much more interesting than boring old gardens."

"This is a beautiful garden," Lucinda said primly.

"But not nearly as exciting as medieval armory and swords," her sister declared. "Just think how many men those swords have likely run through."

"How did you know about the collection anyway?"

“I can read, you know, and you, dear sister, have a vast collection of books on the medieval period.” She gave a smug smile. “I found one on the area in your room.”

Lucinda pursed her lips. “I would really rather you did not go into my room. Nor read those books. Some are quite gruesome and unsuitable for a young lady.”

“Then why do you own them?”

“Well, I—” Lucinda waved a hand. “I’m not that young. Besides, I would like some privacy please.” Lucinda hastened a few steps to catch up with the group of women. Their mother strolled alongside Mrs. Barker and Lady Nottingham quite a way ahead, leaving Lucinda to look after Mary-Anne.

Mary-Anne scurried to her side. “Why do you need privacy? You do not have secrets after all unless you count those boring letters from Bernie.”

Bernie. Lucinda sighed. She really ought to write him a letter. She’d owed him one for a few weeks. The trouble was, she struggled to know what to write to him. She did not do many interesting things and he never seemed to ask any questions, so she was forced to rabbit on about nothing in particular.

“Bernie is not boring,” Lucinda said.

In truth, she suspected she was the boring one. She never used to be but what else could she do? She had caused so many problems when she was younger that being boring seemed the preferable path.

“He is dull and boring and shall never propose.”

“He will someday. We are in no rush.”

“I hope he never does.”

Lucinda almost let slip an agreement. Bernie had shown interest since she turned twenty. At least, everyone assumed it was interest. He had never gone so far as to declare anything properly, but her family approved of him, he was fairly attractive and he was the sensible sort. Excellent husband material really. He would never flirt or cause scandal or break her heart.

The trouble was, she was not getting any younger and he still had yet to announce any proper intentions toward her.

The other trouble was she wasn't sure she wanted him to.

Her mind skipped to the man who had rescued her and his warm eyes, charming grin and hideously appealing arms. A man like Bernie paled in comparison to him.

She shook the thought away. A man like the stranger would hurt her, break her heart. Probably ruin her too. She'd met too many like him and she knew exactly how rakes like him behaved. No, it was far safer to continue this non-courtship with Bernie.

“You know—” She paused and peered around the gardens. “Mary-Anne?” She twisted, looking toward the trees that ran alongside the path. “Mary-Anne?”

Curses. How had she slipped away without her noticing? Blast that stranger. He had let her get all tangled up inside for no reason at all. She had only seen the man for a matter of minutes and would likely never see him again. How could he have her so preoccupied?

“Mary-Anne?” she tried again, peering into the shadows between the trees for any sign of her. The gap between her and the rest of the women widened, and Lucinda blew out a breath. She knew precisely where her sister had gone.

Why oh why could she not, for once in her life, behave?

Pivoting on her heel, Lucinda marched back the way they had come, following a path alongside a huge lake. Scattered along the path were stone benches and the occasional statue. Even a temple could be seen from here on the opposite side of the lake. The gardens were elegant, simple and most likely came at a huge cost. However, she had little time to appreciate them. Not when her sister was likely stealing into a house in which she had not been invited.

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“I am going to string you up, Mary-Anne,” she muttered, stomping up the gravel path toward the grand house.

She spied the servant’s entrance, tucked into the bottom of the building, then the rear one, up a flight of stone steps. Knowing her sister, she would take the boldest entrance and the one that was most likely to lead to the armory. Glancing around, Lucinda hastened up the steps, inched open the glass door and slipped into a generous, practically empty room.

Empty that was, apart from one person.

Her rescuer.

Chapter Five

“Oh.”

Alex allowed himself a slow smile. When not splayed out on a rock, Lucy looked a little less wild and rather more prim.

Not that the high fichu and simple cut of her gown distracted him from her attractiveness. In fact, it was rather the opposite. If her intention had been to appear plain, the dull nature of her garments ensured one’s attention strayed to her soft, petal pink lips, slightly rosy cheeks and wide eyes surrounded by that pretty halo of red curls.

She swiftly twisted around and fumbled for the door in a bid to escape.

She would not be escaping. Not if he could help it.

He took a few steps forward and put his hand to the latch of the door.

Her startled gaze met his and her brow furrowed. "I should not be here," she admitted.

"I know."

"What are you doing here anyway?"

He debated toying with her for a moment, but he found himself oddly unable to. Something about the depths of those blue eyes sucked him in, made him want to spill all his truths. Not that he had many. The life of a marquis tended to be laid bare for anyone to see. As was shown by her presence here. Privacy did not exist for a lord.

"I live here."

"Oh." Her eyes widened further. "Oh!" She glanced around a few times. "You are one of the marquis's brothers?"

He let his smile expand. "Not quite."

She narrowed her gaze. "A guest then?"

"No."

He took a little step back and glanced briefly at the portrait on the wall behind him. She scowled, following his gaze, and gasped. "You're the marquis?"

"For my sins, yes."

“Oh dear.” She dropped into a deep curtsy. “Please forgive me, and my intrusion. I will just be—” She tried to turn around again, but he blocked her exit. She kept her head bowed.

“Considering we were not formally introduced, Lucy, I hardly think I can blame you.”

Her head snapped up, her cheeks reddening. “You should not call me that,” she hissed. “Someone might hear.”

“I believe we are entirely alone.” He gestured around the empty entranceway. Their only company was a few stone pillars, the bloody awful portrait his mother had commissioned upon his ascension to marquis and some large plants in each corner of the room.

“That’s even worse!”

“In case you did not notice, you were the one to enter here alone. I am simply guilty of taking a stroll through my house.”

“I was looking for my sister,” she admitted softly.

“Mary-Anne?”

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She nodded. “She wanted to see your armory.”

Alex lifted his brows. “She is young. What interest could she have in the armory?”

“She’s fourteen,” Lucy concurred. “And she has rather a desire to see all things medieval. It’s my fault I’m afraid.”

“It’s your fault she is interested in a certain period of history? How does that happen?”

“I have—had I suppose—rather a passion for it myself. I used to study the era.”

“Had?”

“Well, one has to grow up at some point, do they not?”

He eyed her for a moment. What was it that had caused this woman to believe she had to grow out of her passions? He knew the fear—the worry that all things fun and interesting would be lost to responsibility and boredom, which was precisely why he had run for the mountains—literally—upon the death of his wife. But it seemed almost as though this woman had done it deliberately. What would cause a pretty young lady to consign herself to a life of boredom?

“Growing up is extremely overrated.”

“Well, you would say that,” she snapped back. “You are precisely the sort who will never grow up.” She paused, put a hand to her mouth and then dropped into another

curtsey. “Forgive me, my lord. That is—”

He touched her elbow, urging her to straighten. “Considering our meeting yesterday, I’d rather you call me Alex.”

“Alex?”

“My name?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She peered around and leaned in, dropping her voice to a whisper. “But we still have not been formally introduced.”

He chuckled. “That will be our secret.”

Her cheeks colored again, and he considered how he might like to have more secrets with her. He had a few already, after all. He knew what her waist felt like beneath his hands and he still recalled the scent of her when up close. Soap and a little lavender.

“I suppose we had better find your sister then.”

Though a strong part of him would rather have Miss Lucy Evans to himself.

Ridiculous really. He could have his fill of women when he returned to London and he had kept his promise to his mother. However, he could not recall any woman being quite as fascinating as Lucy.

She looked toward the gardens and then her shoulders dropped, and she gave a slight nod. “I suppose we had better.”

“Do not worry, I shall not bite.”

Lucy's lips spread into a thin line. "I did not think you would, my lord."

He offered a wry smile. Most women could not wait to get him alone. Perhaps that was part of her appeal. But he wasn't foolish enough to fall for that. He'd seen many a man chase the unattainable and make an utter buffoon of himself. The Marquis of Kirbeck did not chase.

Though, he supposed he could be persuaded to trail after her just a tiny bit.

"At least not hard," he murmured.

"Pardon?"

"Not a thing." He smiled broadly. "Shall we?" He gestured toward the righthand door. "The armory is this way."

He saw her throat work and then she gave a tiny incline of her head and marched regally to the door. Alex chuckled to himself and followed.

So much for not chasing.

???

“WELCOME TO EASTWICK Hall armory.”

Lucinda sucked in a breath, despite counselling herself to remain as placid and as proper as possible. Laid out before her were suits of armor, gleaming silver and gold thanks to the lit chandeliers above. Upon the walls were displays of swords and axes, some set in circles, others in rows. At the very end of the room, a horse’s armor was displayed upon a plinth. Even from the other end of the room one could not help but marvel at the size and grandeur of it.

She forced her gaze from the weaponry and scanned the room. “I see no sign of my sister.”

“Neither do I, unless she’s hiding somewhere.”

He strolled the long red carpet, peering behind suits of armor, his hands clasped behind him. She should have known he was titled. He behaved with all the self-assurance of a man who had never been denied anything.

Which was precisely why she needed to escape as soon as possible.

Not that she risked falling into his lure, of course. For one, she doubted a man like him had any interest in a woman like her. She’d made sure of that. Men found little appeal in her manner of dress or how she conducted herself these days. But, regardless, she had spent long enough controlling her own behaviors for her to come completely undone by the mere presence of a handsome rake.

“Mary-Anne,” she called, “do come out.”

She followed Alex to the end of the room and stopped by the horse's armor, unable to resist marveling at the size and complexity of it. "It must have taken forever to fit."

"I suspect it was more for display than practicality. Used during ceremonies mostly."

She nodded. "Yes, it would be entirely impractical to wear during battle. It looks to be from the fourteenth century?"

He glanced at her. "However did you know that?"

Her cheeks heated at the admiring glint to his eyes. "I had a passion for the medieval if you recall."

"I imagined it was a passing interest, considering you made a point of saying you were no longer interested in it. But it appears otherwise. Why do you say that?"

Lucinda shrugged, trying not to feel pleased he had recalled their exceedingly brief conversation of her interests. "A grown woman has better things to do with her time than read about history."

"Like what?"

She blinked a few times. "Well, like...like looking after my sister for one." She blew out a breath. "It seems I have done a poor job of that today."

The door to the armory opened and Mary-Anne stumbled in followed by a man of similar age to Alex. His looks were akin to the marquis's too with a strong jawline, but he was slightly taller and his hair a shade darker. "Looking for this?"

"Mary-Anne!" Lucinda gasped. "What were you thinking?"

The man grinned. "Found her in the ballroom."

"I got lost," Mary-Anne protested.

Alex strode over, an eyebrow arched, and peered down at her sister. Mary-Anne met his gaze, her chin jutted forward. "You were only invited to the gardens."

"I got separated from the ladies and did not know where to go." She affected a pout. "I was scared and needed aid."

The man's grin widened as did Alex's. "So you did not wish to see the armory then?"

"Well, I would not mind..." Mary-Anne wound her hands together in front of her. "Seeing as I am here."

"Mary-Anne, you are being horribly rude," Lucinda hissed.

Alex waved a hand. "Seeing as you are both here, why do we not give you a proper tour?"

Mary-Anne gave a triumphant grin. "See? I knew we would be welcome."

"You might have asked rather than sneaking in," Alex suggested.

Her sister made a dismissive noise. "I did not sneak."

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The man Lucinda assumed was one of his brothers shook his head. “There was certainly sneaking involved.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Lucinda muttered.

The man set his gaze upon her and bowed his head. “My brother has been careless and failed to introduce us. Lord Adam Moncrieff, at your service.”

She dipped and managed to bite back a remark about how no one in their family seemed to abide by the rules of proper introduction. “Miss Evans. And this is my sister, Miss Mary-Anne Evans.”

“We have been introduced.” He chuckled. “In a way.”

“Were these swords used in battle?” Mary-Anne asked, pointing toward a display of great swords.

“Most certainly,” Alex said. “See this one?” He gestured to the largest. “Our great-great grandfather used it at the Battle of Malplaquet. Apparently he could slice a man’s head clean from—”

“That will do!” Lucinda lifted a hand.

Mary-Anne stared at the sword, wide-eyed. “Can I hold it?”

“Certainly not!” Lucinda protested.

“Perhaps Adam will do the honors?” Alex suggested.

His brother nodded, stepped over the rope dividing the display from the floor. “Of course.”

“I really do not think—”

Adam reached to pluck the sword from the wall.

Lucinda pressed fingers to her temples. “This is going to end terribly.”

Adam handed the sword to Mary-Anne and it clanged to the floor.

Mary-Anne made a face, wrinkling her freckled nose. “Oops.”

“It’s incredibly heavy and unwieldy,” Alex said. “I suspect either our relative was a huge man or the stories of beheadings were false.”

Mary-Anne fought to lift the sword. “I think I could take a man’s head off if I tried hard enough.”

Adam shook his head and stepped back. “I like my head where it is thank you very much.” He waited for her to lower it and aided her in lifting the weapon and then swinging it a few times.

“Your brother is a patient man,” she murmured to Alex. “Not many have the time for Mary-Anne. She can be...exhausting.”

“She seems fun.”

Unlike her. That’s what everyone said. No doubt Alex had noticed that too. But fun

only put one at risk. She feared one day Mary-Anne would find out fun was not always worth it, especially when one risked utter ruin. She only hoped she could protect her from such a situation.

“Why do you purse your lips at the mention of fun?”

Blast. She met his inquisitive gaze. “Life isn’t about fun.”

“What is it about then?”

“Well...responsibility. And, and—” She paused. “You must know all about responsibility, surely?”

“I do and if I did not balance it out with fun, I would likely be addled out of my wits.”

She rolled her eyes before she could stop herself.

“What was that look for?”

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She drew in a breath. “It is easy for a man to speak of entertainments and fun. They do not suffer the consequences of it.”

His smile dropped a little. “I take it you have experienced the consequences.”

“Some,” she admitted.

Curses, why did she confess to such a thing? Her past had been buried for a long time now, tucked away underneath thick fichus and shapeless dresses and a generally dull but impeccable existence. For some reason, the way he looked at her made her want to confess all of her sins, past and present.

Not that she had many from the present and for one second, she almost wished she had some. Or at least one.

A kiss from a handsome rake perhaps?

No. She twisted away from him and took Mary-Anne’s arm. “I think we have taken up enough of the lord’s time. We had better leave. Give Lord Adam the sword back please.”

“It’s quite all right,” Adam protested but Lucinda snatched the heavy weapon and returned it.

“My mother will notice we are missing before long.” Lucinda looped her arm through Mary-Anne’s and hauled her toward the door, aware of Alex’s amused expression. “Please forgive our intrusion,” she called over her shoulder. “It will not be repeated.”

And with any luck, she'd never set eyes on that rake again.

There was something far, far too wicked in his eyes, and far, far too appealing.

Chapter Six

"We should not be here."

Adam lifted a brow at Alex. "Are you becoming dull with age, old man?"

Alex fixed his brother with a look as they paused by the lakeside. The swarms of women had yet to abate and, if anything, new ladies had arrived in the past week. Avoiding the opposite sex was harder than sneaking from a widow's bed without being noticed by the gossips.

"If we are to abide by our mother's ruling, it would be a darned sight easier without being surrounded by petticoats."

Alex gestured vaguely to the various clusters of women promenading around the lake. The excellent weather had brought them out in abundance and the usually serene aura of the town vanished under a cluster of parasols and muslin. Typically, Alex would find little to complain about but if he, the damned head of the family, could not keep his word, then how could he expect his brothers to?

Especially when a specific redhead kept playing in his mind.

The woman was somewhat of a conundrum. Pretty enough to have been snatched up long ago with a quick mind too but with some kind of secret. God help him if he did not want to find out what that was.

"He's definitely getting dull," said Leo.

“I’m merely trying not to distress our mother any further,” Alex pointed out.

“And we will not,” agreed Adam. “But that does not mean we need to remain recluses.”

“What harm could a stroll around the lake do?” Leo’s tone remained light, but he noted his brother’s gaze darting about as though looking for someone.

“Knowing you two, a lot.” Alex had the distinct feeling Leo had already found himself tangled with a woman. His brother had suffered heartbreak years ago and had plunged headfirst into every flirtation he could find after that, so it did not surprise him. However, Leo had promised Alex he would behave himself for their mother’s sake. The woman had put on a wonderful show of tears and being in delicate health that none of them could argue against her.

Adam scoffed. “You are no better, Brother. Where do you think we learned it from?”

Alex shook his head to himself and continued along the path leading around the lake. The route did not take a full lap or else one could be walking for days but simply curved a path to the shops before coming to an abrupt end by the jetties. Clustered about the small wooden piers, row boats of varying sizes awaited occupants. A few were already out on the lake so not even rowing over to the island in the middle would help them escape the ladies.

Lord, maybe he was becoming dull with age. He did not even mind the idea of not being able to stop and charm every lady here. Truth be told, unless he spotted one lady in particular, he had no interest in any of the current offerings.

“This could all be solved if you just married the Miss Kingsley,” Leo muttered.

“Or you could marry her,” Alex said. “I don’t even know her, and I have done

marriage once before. It was quite enough for me.”

“You’re the one with a duty to marry,” his brother shot back.

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“I’m a marquis with two brothers,” Alex replied with a grin. “Who will happily take on the title should anything happen to me. And then you can worry about marrying and securing the line of inheritance.”

Adam shook his head. “If I ever marry, you can be certain someone has kidnapped me and replaced me with a long-lost twin.”

“I could say the same about me,” Leo agreed. “I’ll never marry.”

“Not after Rebecca,” Adam murmured, garnering a scowl from Leo.

Alex held up both hands. The last thing they needed to do was to remind Leo of his young love. “Leo is not wrong. This would be resolved if one of us married the woman.” He rubbed his forehead with his fingers. “God knows, I have sympathy for the lady but she’s not carrying my child and I can hardly pass the title down to someone not of my blood, can I?”

“Well, what if you die and I have to make the child my heir?” Adam pointed out. “None of us are careless or heartless enough to leave a woman in such a situation but none of us is the father or even had the enjoyment of making the child.” He twisted to eye Leo. “Unless there’s something you are not telling us?”

He shook his head vigorously. “Never even met the woman.”

“There,” Adam declared. “It’s settled. None of us shall marry her and we shall remain here until it is figured out exactly who the bloody hell the father is.”

Alex grimaced. “I hope for her sake someone makes a decision. I doubt the poor woman can escape the gossip like we have.”

“Let us think of nicer things.” Leo gestured to the group of women who had paused on the path and were making furtive looks at them.

Headed by an older lady, the group consisted of two other young ladies, both fair-haired and dressed in pale colors with a flush of innocence on their cheeks. Their sideways glances toward Alex and his brothers, however, said differently.

“Have you forgotten the part where we avoid scandal at all costs?” Alex reminded his brother.

“Talking to some pretty young ladies?” Adam squeezed his shoulder. “What can be the scandal in that?”

“As I said, knowing you, it could turn into scandal in minutes.”

Adam flashed a smile. “I learned all I know from my older brother.”

Alex inhaled deeply. He wasn’t wrong. After his wife passed, Alex had certainly taken it upon himself to enjoy all that life had to offer. Why would he not when he’d seen firsthand how short and miserable it could be? However, for once in his damned life, he was going to do as his mother asked. If that meant somehow wrangling his brothers too, he would.

Oh yes and avoiding that pretty redhead Lucy.

Which was going to prove harder than keeping his brothers in check apparently.

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THERE WERE SO many things to distract in Cumbria. Beautiful, glistening lakes, impressive mountains, sweet village stores and cafes offering delicious cakes.

It should be quite easy for Lucinda to find her gaze wandering about the town and avoiding Lord Kirbeck entirely.

Oh so easy.

And yet it was not. Her darned traitorous gaze insisted on flitting over to him while half-listening to Mrs. Beaton discuss some sort of trip with their mother.

“You will be quite well, will you not, Lucinda?” Mama said. “She is such a sensible girl.”

“Hmm?” Lucinda blinked a few times. “Oh yes. Quite well.”

She glanced over again as Alex, his brother and another man she now knew to be his other brother approached the Lonsdale sisters and their mother. All three brothers were similar in appearance and according to Mrs. Barker, who had arranged the garden visit, they were close in age—the dowager marchioness having had three successive pregnancies in a row.

Lucinda had tried her best not to listen to the talk of the three brothers returning home, but it had been difficult. They were well-known in London for enjoying themselves—known as the Lords of Scandal Row, according to their mother—and apparently all three had rakish reputations. She could have surmised that herself but at least she could be confident her assumptions had been correct.

Of course, the assumption everyone had made about their sudden appearance in Langmere was that they had also heard of the book feature on the town and cleverly realized young ladies would be descending on the place with their ageing relatives.

Mrs. Barker even decided they were looking to marry.

Lucinda snorted. She doubted a man like Alex would ever marry, regardless of duty or if he did, he would continue on as normal, keeping mistresses wherever he went. Clearly he enjoyed flirtations. She saw as much as he spoke to the Lonsdale sisters.

“Did you say something, Lucinda?” her mother asked.

She snapped her attention around and forced a serene smile. “Oh no. Just, um, had a little cough.”

Her mother’s dark brows knitted. “I do hope you are not becoming unwell. Perhaps I should delay my trip.”

“Delay? Trip?” Lucinda repeated.

“Yes, with Mrs. Beaton? As we were just discussing.”

Lucinda’s cheeks heated and she expanded her smile. “Oh no, I’m sure all will be just fine.”

“You will be under the care of Mrs. Hilton. She can escort you and Mary-Anne wherever you wish to go, though I imagine you two shall be quite content enjoying the walks here seeing as you were gone so long the other day.”

“I cannot wait!” Mary-Anne said gleefully.

“A couple of days?” Lucinda stared at her mother. “You are leaving for a couple of days?”

“Well the journey to Yorkshire will take at least a day,” her mother replied.

Mrs. Beaton nodded. “We could arrange another carriage I suppose,” she murmured,

“but I have my doubts either of you should wish to come. Especially Mary-Anne.”

Lucinda waved a hand. “No, it will be fine. I know you have been wanting to visit with Grandmama Nancy for some time.”

And Lucinda was more than happy to avoid Grandmama Nancy. The woman never failed to lecture her on her past deeds, and she could do without Mary-Anne overhearing. They had protected her for this long from the truth of Lucinda’s past and she would like to keep it that way.

“Oh look.” Mary-Anne tugged on Lucinda’s arm. “There’s Alex and Adam. We should go and see how they are!”

Mama’s lips tightened. “I hear they are quite the rakes, and their current deposition does nothing to sway me from such an impression.” She leaned in. “The Lords of Scandal Row, they call them.”

She understood why they had received such a nickname, given they all owned townhouses in the same row in London according to Mrs. Baker, and it seemed scandalous behavior did not stay in Town.

Indeed, all three were laughing and smiling with the sisters while the pretty young women inched ever closer. Ivy Lonsdale was so close to Alex that all he would need to do was turn around, dip down a little and they could kiss.

The heat already lingering in her cheeks flashed to scalding levels and she forced herself to draw in a cooling breath. “Perhaps we should leave them to it. They appear quite busy.”

“Oh no, do let’s say good afternoon!” Mary-Anne pulled on Lucinda’s arm once more then scurried off toward them.

Mama pressed a hand to her chest. “They will think her rude!”

“I shall see to her, Mama.” Sighing, Lucinda scurried over. Mary-Anne barged into the conversation before Lucinda reached them and Alex offered Lucinda an amused smile.

“It seems your sister demands to come and visit with us again.”

“Well, unfortunately for Mary-Anne that will not be possible. Our mother is leaving town for a few days.” She met his gaze and tried to look away from those compelling hazel eyes.

No doubt Ivy Lonsdale had felt exactly the same as she did right now, all breathless and captive under his attention. She would do well to recall that he likely had practice with such intense looks.

“Come now, Mary-Anne,” Lucinda said. “I can see you are all busy.” She swung a look at the sisters who shot her narrowed looks at their interruption. Even Mrs. Lonsdale’s lips thinned.

“I did not actually agree to have your sister visit, you know.” Alex’s smile tilted.

“Well it would not matter if we were. We are busy too you see.” Lucinda smiled tightly.

“Oh yes, no doubt you have more rocks to climb.” Alex leaned in. “Let me know if I need to be of service again, Lucy. I shall keep my schedule entirely clear.”

“That will not be necessary,” she replied archly. “I will have no need of your aid, now or anytime soon.”

“You know, you are always welcome at Eastwick, Mary-Anne,” Adam chimed in.
“We have secret passageways and a priest hole that I suspect would be of interest to you.”

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“Oh goodness, can we go now?” Mary-Anne demanded.

“No!” Lucinda snapped. “We are returning to our lodgings right this moment.” She looped her arm forcibly through Mary-Anne’s.

“But—”

“Good day, my lords.” She swung a glance at the other ladies. “Mrs. Lonsdale, Miss Lonsdale, Miss Ivy.” She briefly met Alex’s gaze. “We shall leave you to it.” With a swift dip, Lucinda hauled her sister back toward their mother, not allowing a response from any of them.

“Well, that was rude!” Mary-Anne muttered.

“You were already rude, dashing in like that. You know we have not been introduced properly yet and if Mama has it her way, we will never be introduced.”

“I do not know what Mama has against the nobility. Anyone would think she would be thrusting you at them just like Mrs. Lonsdale did with Ivy and Beth.”

“I have Bernie. I do not need thrusting at anyone.”

Especially not someone like Alex. The man had the gall to flirt with her a mere minute or so after charming the Lonsdale sisters.

“Bernard is boring.”

“He is...sensible,” Lucinda countered. “And reliable.”

“Which means boring.” Her sister pulled her close. “You know, Alex looked intently at you. I think he likes you. And he is not boring at all.”

“A rake like him likes every woman of age,” Lucinda pointed out. She’d even seen the proof of that. So if she could not recall that whenever she thought of his dark eyes or his generous lips, she was more of a fool than she realized.

Chapter Seven

Alex paced to the window of his study and peered out across the lawns. He should be replying to letters but for some reason the sudden urge to stretch his legs struck. He shook his head to himself. Perhaps he should turn his attentions to fortune telling or communicating with the dead.

Miss Lucinda Evans scurried across the grass, a hand to her hat. He knew it was her from the curls and the manner of dress. He knew it was her instinctively. His gut clenched at the mere sight of her. Lucy disapproved of him, he’d garnered that much from their meeting two days ago, and for some wretched reason, that made him more interested in her.

Despite himself, he hastened down the stairs and reached the door before the bell sounded across the house and Quigley could answer. The butler lifted a brow, no doubt wondering what the devil had got into his master who rushed to the door like a bloody schoolboy seeing his mother after a term away.

“I’ll speak with her,” is all he muttered before opening the door and stepping outside.

Lucy blinked and took a startled step back when he emerged to find her with her nose practically pressed to the door.

“Oh.”

He grinned. “Oh?”

“I did not expect...that is...” She huffed and wound her gloved hands together.

He glanced around her. “No escort?”

She shook her head rapidly. “I have need of your help.”

“Mine?”

“Yes,” she said tightly. “Mary-Anne has gone missing.”

He dropped the smile rapidly. “When? How?”

“She slipped out this morning whilst I was asleep.” She pressed a hand to her mouth. “I should have known she might try something while Mama is gone. Our escort, Mrs. Hilton, is half-blind and always napping but our mother was relying on me to keep her safe.”

“Do you know where she would go?” He held up a finger. “One moment.” Slipping into the house, he requested his coat, hat and gloves from Quigley. Once they were handed over, he also asked for the buggy to be made ready.

“You are going to help me?” Her eyes were wide when he stepped out whilst shoving his arms into his jacket.

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“I’m assuming that is why you came here.”

Lucinda nodded, glancing at her feet. “Most of the people I know are visitors to the area and they would all tell Mama what happened. She cannot find out.”

“And I, of course, would happily keep your secret, being that sort of person,” he said with a lopsided smile.

“I—well, that is...”

“I will help, of course.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Thank you, thank you. I know you are likely busy and—”

“If I had a younger sister in the same situation, I am certain you would offer your help.”

“Of course but—”

“No matter what you think of me, Lucy, I am not a heartless cad.”

She pursed her lips and nodded slightly. “Yes, of course you are not.”

“Well then where do you think she has gone?”

“Do you recall the day we met?”

“How could I forget?”

Her cheeks reddened adorably and if they were not in rather dire circumstances, he would have taken a moment to enjoy it or even say something a little scandalous to make the color deepen. However, they had to find Mary-Anne. He doubted she would run into anyone nefarious but as Lucy had already demonstrated, the wild landscape of Cumbria could be dangerous, and it would not be impossible to imagine she might have tumbled down a hill somewhere or injured herself.

“We were looking for a castle ruin. One of the townspeople told us about it,” she explained.

“And you think she is still hunting for it?”

“That is my guess. For some reason, she is obsessed with everything medieval.”

“Like her sister then.”

“But I do not know why. She used to enjoy hearing about it when she was younger, but I thought she had grown out of it. Now, suddenly, she is determined we hunt down castles and she keeps trying to persuade me to read to her again, as though she is a child once more.”

Alex frowned. “How old is she?”

“Four-and-ten.”

“Those are confusing years. I imagine more so for a girl. She is not yet a woman but nor is she a child.”

“Sometimes she acts more like a child than any other girl her age, I’m certain of it.”

“Perhaps she is trying to reclaim her childhood. She might miss the days when you told her stories,” he suggested.

Her gaze struck his, as though surprised by the idea or perhaps by the fact he might be able to surmise as much. “I suppose I had not thought of it that way. I just thought she was trying to be rebellious.”

He shrugged. “I am certainly no expert on young women’s minds, but your sister does not seem the sort to do something simply out of a need to rebel.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, drawing it under her even teeth before releasing it. It drew his attention to the wideness of her mouth and reminded him of that stolen kiss.

Reminded him that he would not mind another but that it would have to be much, much longer so he could fully explore the taste and feel of her.

“I hope you are right.”

“We will find her,” he assured her, placing a hand upon her arm. He longed to do more, wrap her up in his arms even, when he saw the tiny, vulnerable shiver that wracked her but helping her or not, he suspected he might get a sharp slap from the formal Miss Lucinda Evans if he did such a thing.

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He grinned to himself. It might be worth it though...

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LUCINDA SHIFTED ACROSS the seat, away from Alex, for the hundredth time while he directed the buggy expertly across the hills, following a scarcely there road. She hugged the side of the vehicle, too aware of the firm thigh she repeatedly brushed against.

The uneven terrain made it difficult for her to maintain the distance between them, and when they hit a rut, she slipped across the smooth leather seat straight back to his side, moving so swiftly she had to put a hand to his arm to prevent herself from practically toppling on top of him.

She caught his smirk and tightened her lips as she pressed away once more.

“You could hold on to my arm if you like. It would make for an easier ride.”

She shook her head vigorously and clung to the side of the carriage with both hands.

“You cannot see the ruin from here which is probably why you both missed it last time but there’s a narrow path that leads to a plateau. This road skirts around it so we’ll have to go on foot once we reach the bottom of the hill,” he explained.

She nodded, tightening her grip on the glossy exterior of the buggy.

“We’ll find her,” he assured her.

She nodded again and swallowed. How foolish she had been. She should not have even slept. Or perhaps locked the door to their room. She could not even fathom how she hadn't awoken when Mary-Anne left but her sister did have rather a knack for being sneaky.

Mama would have a fainting fit if she knew what had happened.

Which was why she needed to get Mary-Anne back before Mama returned from her trip tomorrow. With any luck, sleepy Mrs. Hilton would have little idea either of them had gone anywhere.

She hoped anyway.

"What exactly is it about this castle anyway? The ruins are in rather an impressive location but there are better ruins to be seen elsewhere."

Alex glanced at her, and Lucinda almost wished he did not. The wind ruffling his hair peeking out from underneath his hat combined with the strong, determined look of his jaw, dashing seemed too simple a way to describe him. No doubt Mary-Anne would come up with some much more romantic manner of description, likely stolen from one of the gothic novels she read. Lucinda would be hard pressed not to agree with the description either.

However, it was irrelevant. Lucinda loathed rakes. All of them. Even if they were ridiculously handsome and willing to leap into action to rescue one's sister. She wasn't ungrateful for his help but that did not change who Alex was.

It did not change the fact that a rake had nearly ruined her life once. She could not let that happen again.

"We read about the castle in a book once," Lucinda explained. "Mary-Anne somehow

remembered this and has been desperate to see it ever since.”

“And she was that desperate, she did not wish to take you?”

“I had not wanted to go again.” Lucinda bit down on her bottom lip. “I should have just agreed. I should have known she would try to find it herself.”

“She’s a determined sort of young lady.”

“Something like that,” she muttered.

“So you used to read to her about castles? Interesting topic for a young girl.”

She lifted a shoulder. “We covered all sorts of medieval history. I loved it so much I just wanted to share my interest with someone—even if it was my little sister.”

She smiled slightly, recalling how Mary-Anne had crawled into her lap as a girl and begged for Lucinda to read all about battles and knights and how they lived in the past. Lucinda hadn’t been certain how she would get along with her little sister when she was born but it had been easy to love the wild, funny little girl who would rather know about a gory battle than learn her scales.

Which was precisely why she should have tried harder to protect her, to somehow prevent her from following the same path Lucinda had taken. Mary-Anne had little interest in romance, despite having read too many gothic novels for her age, but it would not be long before she paid attention to the opposite sex and with her willful disposition, she did not think it a stretch of the imagination to believe Mary-Anne might follow in her foolish sister’s footsteps. The trouble was, Mary-Anne might not be so lucky as herself. Lucinda had managed to survive it. Mary-Anne might well not.

“If you loved it so much, why did you not wish to see the castle?”

Her throat tightened. It seemed silly for it to hurt. For her to miss feeling that same passion Mary-Anne felt. Though, when her thigh brushed Alex’s yet again she could not help feel, that part of her was not as buried or hidden as she had thought. Though why a mere brush of a leg should make something so long tucked away arise, she did not know.

“Lucy?” he pressed.

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She blinked a few times. The man must think her mad, tearing up over the thought of visiting a ruin. She shifted in her seat and tweaked her fichu. “As I mentioned before, I am not so interested in history these days.”

He eyed her for so long that she had to meet his gaze. “Should you not be concentrating on driving?” She peered over the edge of the buggy where the slope of the hill dropped down and would surely mean death if he navigated them wrong.

Alex chuckled and turned his attention back to the narrow path. “I only wonder why you protest so much. Did some beau once tell you they preferred ladies to remain quiet and empty-headed?”

“I have no beau,” she snapped back and then felt guilty when she thought of Bernie. But it was hard to think of Bernie as a beau. His no-nonsense letters were hardly full of romantic prose, and though they had been writing to one another for years now and everyone assumed he would propose one day, the thought of him doing as much did not fill her with unbridled joy.

He was safe, though. And he would certainly never drive at far too fast a pace across a narrow hilltop road.

“I’ve travelled this road many a time,” he said, and she uncoiled her hand from the seat where her knuckles had turned white.

“You drive very fast,” she commented.

“We are in a hurry, are we not?”

“I suppose.”

“Besides, what is the sense in having these marvelous vehicles if one cannot drive fast in them?”

She put a hand to her bonnet as she felt the ribbons tug against her hat. Was it her imagination or was he moving even faster?

“If one does not arrive at one’s destination, it all seems rather pointless.”

“But who knows on what day one will not reach their destination. I could be doing something incredibly dull and drop dead.”

“Well, that’s rather grim.” She glanced at him and noticed the briefest flash of something cross his face—a little pain in his brow perhaps. Mrs. Barker had mentioned the marquis had been married in the past, but she died suddenly, though the conclusion from his rakish reputation was it had not bothered him much.

But perhaps Mrs. Barker was wrong.

“Life can be grim.” He cracked a smile. “Which is why I am determined to make it less so.”

“By killing us on this hilltop.”

He chuckled. “Enjoy the ride, Lucy. You never know when it will end.”

She rolled her eyes, but she could not deny there was the tiniest, tiniest part of her that agreed with him. Clearly, she had learned nothing over the years.

Chapter Eight

“Not too much farther,” Alex assured Lucinda.

“This would be much easier without...” She tugged her gown from where it had snagged on a thistle. “Skirts,” she huffed.

“Well, feel free to take it off.”

She glared at him and he let his grin expand.

“Why are you here anyway?” she demanded.

“I do believe you requested my help...”

“No. In Langmere. Mrs. Jones said you are rarely in residence.”

“Ah.” He paused for a heartbeat. He wasn’t certain he wanted to tell the story of the scandal that had chased him here. Why, however, he did not know. He had done nothing wrong.

Maybe because he still had some vague hope he would win the uptight Lucy over.

Maybe because he could not cease thinking about how perfectly pink her lips were.

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It would be better to tell her. If she thoroughly disapproved of him it would make staying away from the female of the species much easier.

“My brothers and I decided we needed a break from Town.”

There. That wasn't a lie.

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that many, many lovely women have decided to come to Langmere?”

He chuckled. That was a better excuse than he could have come up with. “Actually, I had little idea the place had become a haven for young women. It rather surprised me.”

“Is that why you looked so dour the first time I saw you?”

“I'm glad to know I am not so easily forgotten.”

“That is not what I meant!”

“Why did your mother bring you and Mary-Anne here?” he asked, enjoying the little spots of red on her cheeks, perhaps from exertion but more likely from her frustration with him. Teasing Lucy was fast becoming his favorite pastime, mostly because he had a growing suspicion the dull dresses and tightly wrapped fichus were some kind of disguise. Something else lay under the plain fabric. He just wasn't certain what yet.

“Mama likes to do anything and everything for her health and several of her friends are here.”

“But you are all well?”

“My mother worries that one day we will not be, but we are all hale, thank you.”

“You certainly appear to be.”

She blushed anew, ducking her head but not before he saw the color. She enjoyed the flattery, of that he was certain. She might even enjoy their traded words. If she let herself, anyway. A large part of him wanted to grab her, pull away the fabric around her neck, loosen the laces of her gown and unleash whatever was beneath it. The girl that liked castles and knights and gory battles. She had to be there somewhere still.

“Oh.” She paused a few steps behind him, and he turned to find her gazing ahead, her lips parted.

He twisted and followed her gaze toward the ruin. Not much more than some gray, tumbled down walls, the castle offered only a hint of what it once was. The base of a tower rose the highest, up to the level of the first arrow slit. An arch led the way through to low walls, no higher than calf height, but revealed the spread of hills and mountains behind it. He knew the ruin intimately having played in it many a time as a boy, but he never really thought much of it.

It seemed Lucy felt differently. It seemed that young girl was not so deeply buried.

“It’s quite wonderful,” she said on a breath.

Alex shrugged. “I have seen more vast ruins.”

“So have I but what a setting this is. Can you imagine what it must have taken to haul the stone all the way up here?” She twisted a few times, taking in the surroundings. “And what a marvelous defense. The natural hills and gullies would make it virtually impossible for someone to have sacked it.”

“I do believe it was never taken by siege.”

She nodded. “I read as much.”

“So you do still read history books?”

Lucy straightened her shoulders. “That was a long time ago.”

“Why did you say you have no interest in it anymore then?”

“It is hardly proper for a lady to read of such matters, is it?”

“I wouldn’t know much about what is proper for a lady.”

“Yes, I doubt you do,” she said dryly.

“Now, Miss Evans, are you judging me on gossip?”

She fixed him with a look. “The mere fact there is gossip surrounding you tells me all I need to know.”

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“I could say the same about you.”

“There is no gossip surrounding me!”

“No, but you have affected this prim young lady persona to perfection. I, however, do not judge merely on appearances.” He let his smile grow smug.

“Well, if I was to judge you on appearances, I would likely not even be on this hill with you right now. After all, you are mightily handsome and—” She clamped her mouth shut and her throat bobbed.

“Will you repeat that last part?” He took her hand and aided her over a tumbled down piece of wall allowing them access to what once would have been the inner bailey of the castle. “I’m afraid I did not catch it.”

She snatched her hand back. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Liar,” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

He smiled genially. Lucinda Evans thought him handsome. Not that he thought otherwise. He was not blind after all. But he liked that fact very much. Too much perhaps.

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LUCINDA COULD NOT help herself. Her imagination had taken flight the moment they'd come upon the castle ruin. Especially with the way Alex strode around it as though he was some Scottish laird or knight in armor. Hard-pressed not to imagine him in one of the suits of armor from Eastwick Hall, she admitted he certainly had the build and confidence of a knight.

Shaking her head, she forced her attention to the task at hand. She should not even be thinking of such things when her sister was missing. She blew out a breath. It did not appear she was at the ruin so where on earth could she be? Where else had her sister shown an interest?

Alex came to her side. "Any sign of her?"

Lucinda shook her head. "There are no secret passageways are there?"

"In this ruin? No."

She pushed a curl from her face and pressed her lips together. "I cannot think where else she would be. She's already seen your armory and apart from the castle, she did not tell me of anywhere else she wished to visit."

"She does not have her eye on a boy, does she?"

"Mary-Anne is not really interested in the opposite sex yet, and there are few boys her age here."

He lifted a shoulder. "It might be worth going back to town."

She grimaced. "What if we never find her, Alex? Mama will be distraught and I..." A lump began to gather in her throat. "Lord knows, she's a handful but she's my handful."

“Knowing Mary-Anne, she’s more than well and will be back before long.” He put a hand to her shoulder. “But we will find her before then.”

Swallowing hard, she glanced into his dark eyes, the sincerity behind his expression almost convincing her that, with him at her side, they might well find her before long.

“Very well, let us head back.” She took another look around the castle and smiled softly. “Perhaps if we find her, I shall bring her back here.” Lucinda twisted on her heel and she paused and frowned. “Alex, did it feel like—”

The ground beneath them rumbled, like when a fast-moving carriage went past. But there were no carriages here.

She scarcely had time to comprehend what was happening when the ground shifted beneath her. She instinctively reached for Alex’s arm and dragged him toward her as the ground tilted then dropped abruptly beneath her.

In a tumble of dirt and grass, she dropped before splashing into water deep enough for her to plunge entirely under. She pushed up to the surface, the cold water biting so hard she could barely draw breath. She floundered briefly and shoved her hair from her face, her bonnet long gone, before a firm arm wrapped itself around her waist.

“What...what happened?” She looked to Alex, his features shadowed by gloom. He trod water beside her, his grip on her waist tight, and peered up.

“I should have remembered.”

She followed his gaze and spied the small circle of light above them.

Far too far away.

“A well?”

“Yes.” His breaths were harsh and echoey against the stone. “I forgot it was even here. My father always warned us it had been covered over and not to walk near it.” He paused. “Of course, we always wanted to find it but never did. I assumed it was too buried to be found.”

“We certainly managed to find it.” She put her hand to the slick stone, unable to find purchase with her fingers. Her skirts were growing heavy and the cold made her legs tired already.

“Thank the Lord there was water in here or else we could have wound up with numerous broken bones.”

“Yes, though now we have to stay afloat somehow.” Her teeth chattered so she clamped her jaw together hard.

“Here, hold on to this.” He took her hand and navigated it toward a stone that jutted out. She managed to grip it with her cold fingers, giving her body a little relief from the exhaustion already seeping through her.

“It’s s-so cold.”

“I know.” Alex moved around the edge of the well, water sloshing about the tight confines of their cold, dark prison.

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing if I can climb.”

She peered up at the daylight once more and had to crush down a swell of panic. “It’s too far.”

“I’m an excellent climber.” She saw the flash of a smile.

“I-I had heard that, but I think mountains are rather different to old wells.”

As if to spite her, he gripped the wall and hauled himself out of the water.

“Don’t you dare leave me here,” she managed to quip, though the lightness she’d intended to use barely made it to her voice. The thought that this dank, bottomless pit might end up her grave would not leave her. Before long she would lose her grip and the water was deep enough to drown in. It was not the sort of end she might have imagined for herself.

“Never,” he assured her. “I have a rope in the buggy.” He cursed softly and she could not tell what he was doing, but he eased himself back down into the water beside her. “I can’t get enough of a purchase to go any further.”

“Oh.”

“Never fear, someone will notice I am gone before long and Quigley knows where I am.”

The unnaturally buoyant tone to his voice did not reassure her. He was lying. By the time someone figured out they were gone, she suspected the cold will have taken hold of them both.

“You should stay up there, out of the water.”

“And leave you? Not likely.”

“My fingers are cold, Alex. I do not know how much longer I can hold on.”

“Well, I can hold on for you.” He moved against her, his chest to her back, and shifted his arms about her so he could grip the wall.

Wrapped in the cocoon of his strong body, for a brief moment she felt safe again. But as she peered at the dark, damp wall of the well, she could not help the fear clawing its way back up her throat.

“Alex,” she whispered. “A-are we going to die here?”

Chapter Nine

The raw vulnerability in Lucy’s voice near broke Alex. He felt his heart clench as though preparing to shatter in two. Whatever it would take, he would get her out of here. He only needed to find a way to climb up. The trouble was, he felt the weakness in her body and how heavy her damned skirts were and feared if he left her clinging to the stone for long, she’d drown.

And it would take him quite a time to make his way to the top, even if he could find enough footholds.

“We will not be here long,” he promised.

“I-I thought it was going to be your driving that would be the end of us.”

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“This will not be the end of us, and my driving is excellent, thank you.”

He kept his body pressed close to hers and his jaw clamped tight, so she didn't hear his teeth chatter. Being so far down in the ground, the water was like ice, biting through his clothing. He'd already divested himself of his jacket and managed to work off his boots, losing them to the dark water beneath so they didn't weigh him down, but he could not imagine how Lucy felt, surrounded by petticoats and tight corsets.

“Now I think you might be right about being adventurous,” she said quietly. “If I had known I would end up dying in a well at six-and-twenty...”

“There will be time for adventures,” he assured her. “Did I tell you of the time I climbed Grossglockner and nearly froze to death?”

“I donotwant to think about freezing to death.”

“It had a good ending. I got caught in an awful snowstorm and ended up climbing the wrong way. It took me far longer than it should have done to make my way back to camp. It took me nearly six months for my toes to cease being numb.”

“You are lucky you did not lose your toes!” She shuddered, and he pressed himself as close as humanly possible into her.

Neither of them had much heat left to preserve, but it made him feel better having her tucked against his chest and hopefully it helped her too.

“I nearly did,” he admitted. “But the point is, I survived that, and a damned well, will not be the end of us.”

“My mother does not approve of your adventures.” She gave a weak laugh. “She thinks it irresponsible for a titled gentleman to risk his health like that.”

“Your mother does not approve, or you do not?”

“Well, it is a little reckless...” She sniffed, the sound loud in the confines of the well and he hoped to God she was just cold and not crying.

“It’s nice to know you have been talking of me at least.”

“I was not talking of you,” she protested. “But you have been the gossip of the town since your arrival and you cannot expect otherwise, surely? One of the Lords of Scandal Row in our midst? It is certainly more diverting for most than talks of the weather.”

He allowed himself a grin. “Do you find it diverting to talk of me?”

“That is not what I meant!”

“I rather like the thought of you gossiping about me, Lucy.”

He heard her struggle for an answer and felt her body sag in defeat. Which meant she had been talking of him and he most certainly liked that fact. However, he needed to keep her occupied until he could figure a way out of here or someone came along. With all the visitors to the area, surely someone would happen upon them eventually?

“Why do you do it?” she asked abruptly.

“Do what?”

“Behave as you do. A-all rakish and adventurous and whatnot. Mama said you were in the Alps for Christmas.”

“As I said, one never knows when life will end.”

“In a well,” she added miserably.

Alex eased out a breath. He hardly felt like talking about it, but he suspected it would be the best way to distract her. Women were forever begging him to share all of his woes with them. He would wager Lucy was no different.

Also, some odd part of him wished to be honest with her and spill all his secrets. There weren’t many but nevertheless he wanted to share them with her.

“My wife died abruptly and at a young age,” he said swiftly.

“I had heard. I am sorry, but I thought—”

“That I did not care. That I had no love for her.” He was well aware his plunge into numerous love affairs meant the newspapers and gossipers cast him as an unfeeling man, happy to be free from his arranged marriage.

She paused a moment. “Well, yes.”

“I scarcely knew Eliza, but she was a sweet woman and I anticipated us working well together. She was an excellent wife.”

“That does not sound like love.”

“It was not but I didn’t know better at the time.”

“That you wanted love?”

He scowled. Love had never come into it. He didn’t need love then and he still did not, even if his marriage seemed a little cold and awful when he thought back now.

“Love is not something a marquis can expect.”

“That seems a shame.”

“She had my admiration and respect.”

“Didshenot want love?”

“I...” He let his frown deepen. “I have no idea.” He cleared his throat. He’d tried not to think too hard on Eliza’s death over the years. It had brought him far too close to the reality that life could be snuffed out in an instant and he refused to let himself be dragged down by the thought.

“Are you a secret romantic?” he asked.

“Goodness, no. Never.”

He smiled at her defensive tone. There really was much more to Lucy than a determination to adhere to the strict rules of society. “You seem quite determined that

one should have love in a marriage which, you must admit, is not the most common reason for marriage amongst our peers.”

“My parents love one another. It simply seems a much better way to live.”

“Have you ever loved?”

“No,” she replied quietly, almost sadly.

A strange pang vibrated in his chest. He certainly could not let her die here without having experienced such an emotion.

A few moments of silence passed before she asked, “How did your wife die?”

“She died unexpectedly and far too young,” he explained perfunctorily. “I never really found out why. The physician suspected she had some underlying problem of the heart and she died in her sleep.”

“That must have been quite a shock.”

“Well, indeed, and it made me realize life could end in but a moment, and I was certainly not going to vegetate away doing nothing.”

“I-I suppose that makes sense.” She sighed deeply. “I am sorry you went through that, Alex, and that you had no one to aid you in understanding your grief.”

“Now you are just being ridiculous. I am perfectly fine.”

“Apart from being trapped in a well.” Lucy laughed but it sounded forced.

“What of you? Why do you pretend you do not like castles or my fast driving or

romantic notions? I know there is a deeper reason than simply losing interest.”

The silence lasted so long his gut tightened in fear that she had lost consciousness. “Lucy?” he pressed.

“I suppose it would not hurt to admit it. Especially as we are probably going to die here.”

“We are not going to die,” he said forcefully.

“Nearly ten years ago, I was—”

“Coo-ee!” A voice came from above them.

A shadow darted overhead, and Alex looked up. The silhouette of a face appeared at the top of the well and Alex’s heart gave a leap.

“Mary-Anne?” Lucy said, craning her neck.

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“Whatever are you two doing down there?” she called.

“Do not lean too far over,” Lucy warned.

“We fell and are stuck,” Alex said. “Did you see the buggy? Not far from the foot of the hill?”

“Yes,” said Mary-Anne. “I came up here because I thought it was yours.”

“Go to it and fetch the rope from it. There’s usually some stored under the seat. You’ll have to find something to tie it to then send it down. We need to get your sister out of here.”

“How on earth did this happen?” Mary-Anne asked.

“Mary-Anne,” he said tightly.

“Oh, yes, get the rope, I know. I’m going.” She vanished and then peered back over briefly. “Do not enjoy being with the marquis too much, Lucinda!”

“I might well strangle her,” Lucy bit out through chattering teeth.

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THE WORST PART of this whole ordeal was not when Lucinda had plunged into the water or realized they were trapped. No, it had to be when she was alone. After Alex bound the rope tightly about her waist, he began his climb.

She watched his progress, clinging to the rough rope with numb fingers while her breaths came in stuttering puffs. She forced her attention to remain on Alex. If she focused on the gloom surrounding her and the deep, black water, she was not certain she would be able to take her next breath.

Though the rope kept her from sinking into the endless depths, she missed his arms about her, his chest against her back, offering a safety that she had known could not last forever but reassured her regardless.

He moved swiftly, as though he had not spent what she imagined must have been nearly an hour in the frigid water. She supposed if one must fall down a well it was no bad thing for one to be stuck with someone who climbed mountains on a regular basis.

When he vanished briefly over the top the ridiculous thought that maybe he and her sister would leave her struck. However, he had vowed he would get her to safety and goodness knew, she believed him. He had taken her face in his hands and offered her endless promises before climbing, though she could not quite recall what they were now. Either way, she did not doubt he would rescue her.

He looked over the edge again, and she eased out a breath.

“I’m going to pull you up now, Lucy. Use your feet to stop yourself bumping into the side if you can.”

Unable to form any words, she nodded, even though there was no chance he saw the movement. The rope squeezed about her waist and she held on tight. The numbness in her body almost masked the pain of the rope pulling at her arms, but she could not bring herself to care if she would end up with bruises, regardless.

Focusing on Alex, she tried not to think about what would happen if she plunged to

the bottom again. Bile rose in the back of her throat at the image, so she forced her attention to Alex's determined expression. Daylight grew closer. The scent of the air changed. He moved fast and latched his hands under her arms to haul her out and away from the well.

"Goodness, Lucy, you are practically gray!" Mary-Anne exclaimed.

"We need to get her warm." Alex rubbed his hands up and down her arms.

"What of you?" she managed to murmur.

"I'm practically dry."

Alex swept a hand under her legs, making her squeak in surprise, and picked his way down the hill before she could so much as summon a response to his obvious lie. She felt the damp of his shirt under her fingertips.

He had to be cold and exhausted, but he moved swiftly, lifting her onto the buggy, and flinging a blanket about her shoulders. When Alex sat next to her and wrapped an arm about her shoulders, she swore she felt him shudder.

Mary-Anne squeezed onto the seat next to her, removed her gloves and hat and awkwardly put them on Lucinda. Her sister burrowed close and Lucinda could not help but sink into the warmth the blanket and the two bodies offered.

"Do not fall asleep, Lucy," Mary-Anne said. "You still need to scold me."

"Where did you go anyway?"

"To the stone circle. It's only a mile from here."

“Stone circle?” Lucinda repeated, aware of the breathy quality of her voice.

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“Mrs. Gleeson said if you go at sunrise you can see fairies dancing nude between the stones.”

Beside her, Alex chuckled.

“Fairies? You are a little too old to believe in them.”

“I knew you would say that,” Mary-Anne said triumphantly. “That is why I did not ask you.” She gave Lucinda’s arm a squeeze. “I am sorry, though.”

Lucinda did not have the energy to scold her. She vaguely watched the scenery pass by and then straightened when she realized where they were going. “This is the road to Eastwick Hall.”

Alex nodded. “It is closer than your lodgings. We can get you warm and Mary-Anne can fetch you a change of clothes.”

“But...but it’s not proper.”

He shook his head. “You are a woman in distress—I do not think anyone can complain about me offering my aid. In fact, Mrs. Jones would have my head if I did not.”

“I am not in distress,” she protested.

At least not anymore. And she would have been in much, much more distress had he not fallen into that well with her.

He wasted no time in having Mary-Anne driven back to their lodgings by one of the grooms and bundling her inside whilst a concerned Mrs. Jones fussed over her.

“Why do you men always seem to wind up getting wet?” muttered the housekeeper.
“First Leo, now you.”

“Leo?” Alex asked.

The housekeeper made a noise in the back of her throat but didn’t answer his question, then vanished to arrange for Lucinda’s care. She found herself swiftly installed on a sofa, wrapped in blankets, with a fire lit in the parlor room that was no doubt small for Eastwick standards. Before long, a cup of tea was pressed into her hands, and she heard Mrs. Jones say something about sending for soup before disappearing once more.

The warmth seeped back into her fingertips. She sipped the tea slowly and then scowled at Alex who watched her with a furrow on his brow.

“I am not going to die, you know.”

He chuckled and nodded. “I know.”

“You should get warm.” She nodded to his sodden breeches, only now aware he had no boots or jacket anymore.

“I’m fine.” He plucked at his shirt. “Practically dry now.”

“Have some tea.” She offered out her drink.

“Actually I think I’m in need of something stronger.” He moved over to a tall mahogany cabinet and opened the top two doors, revealing decanters and crystal

glasses. “Would you like one?”

Nosould have been her first response. Strong liquor with a marquis whilst alone in his drawing room? But she had nearly died after all.

She nodded.

He poured two glasses full and brought them over. When he sat next to her, his weight on the sofa made her slide a little toward him, and their arms brushed. She drained her cup of tea and he took it from her, swapping it for the tumbler of amber liquid.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely.

His gaze locked to hers.

She had nearly died today. No matter how much he tried to tell her otherwise, there was no denying if Mary-Anne had not discovered them, they might well have drowned in that well.

He knew it too. She could tell from the way he looked at her.

Her heart pounded fiercely, her breaths seemed loud in her ears. The world faded to dark, leaving only Alex with his damp, curling hair and the shirt that stuck to his muscular body.

Lucinda shifted forward quickly before she could change her mind and pressed a hard, swift kiss to his lips.

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Alex's brows lifted. "What did you do that for?"

"Well, I did nearly die."

A slow smile spread across his face. "I think that was far worse than nearly falling off a rock."

"So I should kiss you more then?"

He nodded, his grin widening. "Most certainly."

It was utter scandal. Completely shocking. Entirely unlike her too. However, she could not resist. All she could think on was that if she had died in that well, she would not have known what it would be like to be kissed by a man like him.

Or more to the point—by Alex.

He set aside his glass, curved a hand gently about her face and eyed her, his gaze searching hers for a few heartbeats before pressing his lips to hers. She sank into the kiss, following his lead, and slowly opening her mouth to his, a sound escaping the back of her throat at the thrill of it all.

He kissed her deeper, sweeping his tongue over hers, his hand cradling her face so perfectly. Any idea of being cold vanished, and she curled her free arm around his neck to move closer. A swirl of heat and excitement combined low in her stomach.

The clearing of a throat made them spring apart, and Lucinda stared at the glass in her

hand when Mrs. Jones entered the room, her cheeks so hot she feared she might be at the point of overheating now.

“Miss Evans’s sister has arrived with her garments, my lord,” the housekeeper said, her tone betraying nothing. “Shall I take her to one of the bedrooms to change?”

Alex’s throat bobbed and he nodded. “Yes, thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

Lucinda’s stomach sank. She could not believe it. Ten years of nearly perfect behavior and she had ruined it all. And if Mrs. Jones was a gossip, she might well have ruined herself all over again.

Chapter Ten

“We need to discuss Leo.” Adam paused in the doorway to the study and smirked. “And whatever is happening here it seems.” He gestured broadly at the desk in front of Alex.

Alex set down the quill and leaned back in his chair. Across the desk, unfinished and unread letters were spread over the surface. He usually had estate business down to a fine art, especially considering he hired only the best to aid him with it, leaving him enough time to escape the duties of a marquis at a moment’s notice. Today, however...and well, yesterday and the day before and he supposed the day before that, he had struggled to even finish a letter discussing issues as simple as cows.

He grimaced. He had struggled ever since kissing Lucy.

“What about Leo?” Alex asked.

Adam strode into the study, glanced outside the door and shut it swiftly. “He’s acting strange. You must have noticed he keeps slipping off after dinner to goodness knows

where.”

Alex pinched the bridge of his nose. “A woman?”

Adam lifted his shoulders and snatched the chair by the window, dragging it across the floor with a screech that made Alex wince. “What else could it be?”

“I wonder if Mrs. Jones has noticed.”

“Think she’s spying for Mother?” Adam dropped into the chair, made a space amongst the debris on the desk and lifted his feet onto it, leaning nonchalantly back in the chair.

“Could be.”

In which case, Alex’s promise to his mother had already been broken. She would know of the kiss Mrs. Jones had interrupted. She might also know Lucy had fled immediately after said kiss, all flustered and utterly unwilling to talk.

He ground his teeth together. Whilst Mrs. Jones might be willing to inform their mother of all their comings and goings, she was no gossip, and she would certainly never ruin a lady’s future over a simple kiss. If that was the case, she’d have had all of them married off as boys because they certainly did their share of kissing when they were younger.

But it seemed Lucy did not care to listen to him tell her that. She had been avoiding him ever since. No more visits to the house, no more impromptu hill climbs, and she darted away when he spotted her in town—twice!

“I think we need to talk to him.” Adam laced his fingers behind his head. “And you need to tell me what this is all about.”

“This is work, Adam. I know you are not familiar with it,” Alex replied dryly.

“This is a mess.” He removed his feet from the table and picked up a letter, reading from it. “Mr. Lowe, I was pleased to receive your letter about the cows at Haystack Farm. Indeed, I think we can...” He looked to Alex. “I think we can what, Alex? You cannot even finish a letter about damned cows.”

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He waved a dismissive hand. "I got distracted."

"For all your travelling, you have never been one to neglect your correspondence."

Alex narrowed his gaze. "This is not neglect."

"You are distracted," his brother pointed out.

"Well, maybe that is because my brother is in my study, talking needlessly about nothing."

"Or maybe it's because of this Miss Evans." Adam peered at his fingernails and buffed them against his jacket.

"What of Miss Lucinda Evans?"

"I saw how you looked at her in the armory. And in town." Adam shrugged, his expression far too smug for Alex's liking. "Not to mention the fact you both turned up drenched a few days ago. Mrs. Jones said you'd fallen in a well...?"

"It seems Mrs. Jones is not spying for our mother but for you."

"She only mentioned it in passing, and why would she not? What the devil were you doing falling in a well?"

"I hardly did it on purpose, did I?" Alex snapped. "Besides, I thought you were here to talk of Leo."

“That doesn’t seem quite so pertinent now.” Adam’s lips curved. “You are frightfully defensive over the lovely Miss Evans.”

Alex fisted a hand. Lovely. Merely a descriptive word. It didn’t mean anything. Yet he did not like the tone Adam used. He stood abruptly.

“Where are you off to?”

“I think I’m done here.”

Adam lifted a brow. “It doesn’t look like it.”

“I’m done,” he said firmly.

“Well, what shall we do about Leo?”

“We’ll speak with him tonight. If he is seeing a woman, we must urge him to cease or at least be more discrete.”

“Oh yes, we can only have one brother breaking our mother’s rules.”

“It was a mere kiss.”

Adam stilled and held up a finger. “Wait. You kissed Miss Evans?”

Cursing under his breath, Alex rounded the table and closed the gap between them. “You are not to say a word to anyone.”

His brother pressed a hand to his heart. “Upon my honor. But if I’m to live this dull life as a country gent, at least tell me all.”

“There is nothing to tell. She muttered something about ruination and fled.”

“She fears she’s ruined?”

Alex nodded. “And the damned woman will not see me so I cannot assure her that her reputation is still intact.” He shook his head. “I was careless, though.”

“Why would she think she’s ruined?”

“Mrs. Jones...interrupted.”

“So one woman in your employ saw? Hardly likely to turn into a huge scandal, is it?”

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“Lucy appears to think so.” He frowned. “Come to think of it, she was often worrying for her reputation in my company.”

“Well, if one mere kiss is having such an impact on your work, I suggest you do a better job of trying to speak with her, instead of writing half-finished letters about cows.”

“I already tried.”

“Write a letter to her then,” Adam suggested. “It’s got to be more interesting than writing about cows. Act like a true gentleman.”

Alex glanced at the many half-finished letters before him. Adam had a point. He didn’t know why he even wished to speak with Lucy so badly. Perhaps to reassure, perhaps because...well, damn it, because he just needed to see her again. Either way, the woman was going to listen to him whether she liked it or not.

If he was going to persuade her he had no desire to ruin her, he needed to do something he’d never done before...

Correspond with a woman. Like a gentleman.

He shoved a hand through his hair and eyed his brother. He was never going to let him forget this. “Adam, how the devil does one write a gentlemanly letter to a woman?”

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WHEN HER MOTHER entered the room, Lucinda shoved the letter behind her back, pushing it under the cushion of the sofa. It was all very odd. Why would Alex take such a formal tone? It was almost as though he had been kidnapped and replaced with another man. Admittedly, she had never read a letter written by him before, but it did not seem Alex-like at all.

She rolled her eyes at herself. Listen to her. Alex-like. She did not know the man, not really. They had barely spent time with each other and hardly in the best of circumstances.

So why did it hurt to deny herself the option of seeing him?

“What is wrong, Lucinda?” her mother demanded, sinking onto the singular chair by the window of Mrs. Barker’s parlor room.

Their host kept a cozy house not far from the lakeside and Lucinda appreciated the little touches of history in the building, like the huge fireplace large enough for one to almost stand in and the stained-glass family crests in the upper windows with dates inscribed reaching as far back as the sixteenth century.

Her mother leaned forward and narrowed her gaze at her when she did not manage to come up with a response quickly enough. “Are you ailing? Should I fetch the doctor?”

She shook her head vigorously. “I am perfectly well, Mama.”

“I have a tincture—”

“I am fine, I promise.”

Her mother settled back on the chair and retrieved the sample she had been stitching

since their arrival. “Is it because of that Lord Kirbeck? Mrs. Barker said he called for you yesterday.”

His name made her heart leap and she had to take a breath before responding so she did not sound all breathy and ridiculous. “He was simply inquiring after my health, Mama. I sent him on his way.”

“Good. You know they call him a Lord of Scandal Row?”

“I know, Mama.”

She frowned and paused mid-stitch then set down her sampler. “But why would he inquire after your health?” Her mother rose and swiftly strode over to press the back of a hand to her forehead. “You seem a little warm.”

“I am well, I promise, Mama.” Lucinda ducked back from the touch and batted her mother’s hand away.

She could explain that the heat existed because she was thinking about that kiss. A kiss that had been about the most foolish thing she had ever done. Good Lord, how wanton she must have sounded, practically begging for it. Now all she could do was sit and wait and see if the housekeeper revealed her.

A man like Alex would never marry her so she would be left completely ruined—and after such a long time of being so careful. Her parents would be so ashamed.

“I do not like that man visiting, marquis or not. I refuse to be like Mrs. Lonsdale, so desperate for a title for her daughters, regardless of the man’s character or quality.”

Lucinda bit back a response that her mother would certainly not appreciate. The man was a flirt and charming, but he was also brave and caring. Without him, she surely

would have drowned in the well, having given up long before they were rescued. She would never forget the strength of his reassurance and the way he held her, giving up any idea of comfort to ensure her safety.

“I heard he is here because he utterly ruined a woman,” her mother continued.

Sucking in a sharp, painful breath, Lucinda forced her expression to remain blank.
“Oh?”

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She leaned in, her voice low. “He has fled London because he does not wish to claim the child.”

Lucinda rose swiftly as the heat drained from her face. Gone were the memories of kisses, replaced with the darker ones of that fateful night—the one that had almost ruined her life forever.

“Lucinda?”

“I—”

Mary-Anne strode into the room and glanced between them. “What is happening?”

“I feel the need for a walk. Come, Mary-Anne, let us get some fresh air. It will do us some good.” Lucinda snatched her sister’s arm.

“My bones say it is going to rain,” Mama protested.

“We will not be long,” Lucinda assured her, practically dragging Mary-Anne from the room and only pausing long enough to snatch both their bonnets and gloves. She thrust the bonnet on top of her sister’s head and handed her the gloves.

“But I only just returned from being with Mrs. Beaton and Miss Eleanor.” Mary-Anne fumbled with putting her gloves on while Lucinda kept hold of her arm, stuffing her fingers into the wrong holes. “They made me walk practically around the whole lake.”

“I thought you liked walking.” Lucinda did not release her sister’s arm until they were some distance from their lodgings and headed down the dirt road toward the lakeside.

“I like walking when there is something to walk toward. Aimless walking is such a bore.”

“Well, we shall walk somewhere. Like...that hill there.” Lucinda pointed to a random spot at least halfway around the lake.

“That would take us at least two days!”

“Oh.”

“What of the edge of Alex’s estate? We could walk there.”

Lucinda shook her head. “Certainly not.”

“He called for you again yesterday, did he not? Mrs. Barker said as much.” Her sister looked up at her. “Why do you avoid him after he so heroically rescued you?”

“I am grateful to him, though it would not have been necessary if someone had not decided to go adventuring.”

“I would not have gone if you were not such a bore.” Mary-Anne thrust out her tongue.

“I am not a bore.”

“You are,” Mary-Anne insisted. “You used to be so much fun when I was little. What happened to you? Why will you not even visit a castle for goodness’ sakes?”

“Perhaps because I might fall into wells,” she muttered. “And I can be fun when I want to be.”

“When?” her sister demanded. “The only time I see you smile is when you are with Alex.”

“His name is Lord Kirbeck.”

“Well, Lord Kirbeck made you smile several times, and I do not think I have seen you smile like that in forever.” Mary-Anne gave a dramatic smile. “I miss my fun, happy sister.”

Lucinda didn’t respond. She could not. Her throat hurt too much because as cutting as her sister’s words were, they were not wrong, and if she was honest, she missed how she used to be too.

She just did not know what she could do about it.

Chapter Eleven

Alex had this horrible feeling he should be counselling his brother Leo. Or whatever it was brothers did. Apparently Adam had learned such skills and who knew where from. The return of Leo’s only love would surely impact their younger brother. Alex still recalled how devastated Leo had been when Rebecca had left.

The trouble was, he had his own problems. Like the fact a certain young lady was seen in the kitchen gardens and was most certainly not escorted or invited here. He strode past the rows of neatly planted vegetables toward the generous orangery at the back and spied her through the tall glass windows, currently hidden behind a towering plant.

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He shook his head to himself. He could not get Lucy to respond to him, despite what he believed to be excellently worded letters, but it seemed her sister could not stay away.

She ducked out from behind the plant when she spotted him and gave a vigorous wave. He smiled at her boldness. He saw hints of such a girl in Lucy sometimes and wondered if this was what she had been like when she was Mary-Anne's age.

Stepping into the warm building, he shut the door behind him. "What are you doing here, Mary-Anne?" He nodded toward the tree. "And why are you hiding? Quigley thought you were being a mischief-maker."

"I only wanted to see you," she protested. "But I did not think the gatekeeper would let me in alone."

"You're right."

"I had to climb the wall," she confessed, slightly breathless. "I nearly tore my skirt."

"Your sister would not be impressed if she knew what you were up to."

"My sister is precisely why I am here."

His heart gave a little jump of excitement and he tried to quash the feeling. Here he was, a well-known rake, getting excited over the prospect of perhaps a mere word or a simple letter from a woman. What the bloody hell had happened to him?

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “She has not sickened after the well incident has she?”

“No, no, she’s quite well.” Mary-Anne gestured to the stone bench tucked at the back of the building that looked out toward the gardens. “Can we sit?”

“Of course.” He waited for Mary-Anne to perch on one end of the bench before joining her.

“Lucinda does not know I am here.”

He should have known Lucy had not sent her. He shoved aside the disappointment residing in his chest. “What can I do for you, Mary-Anne?”

She flashed a grin. “I rather hope I am going to do something for you.” She fixed him with a serious expression. “But first, did you really leave that woman with child?”

“You should not even be hearing of such matters.”

“I am quite old enough to understand how relationships between men and women work.” She thrust a finger at him. “So answer my question.”

“I take it Lucy knows about this.”

She nodded. “Mrs. Barker said you escaped to Cumbria, so you did not have to claim the child.”

“Well, that explains why she is ignoring my letters,” he murmured.

“No, I do not think it does.”

He frowned.

“Did you or did you not leave that woman in the family way, Alex?”

“No I most certainly did not.”

“Good.” She eyed him for a few moments. “I do not think Lucinda believes you did either.”

“So she is giving me the cut because?”

“She was nearly ruined once.”

Alex closed his eyes briefly. “Ah.”

“She thinks I do not know—I believe she thought she was protecting me—but our grandmama told me. As a warning or some such.”

“What happened?”

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“Lucinda will likely scold me for telling you.”

“Mary-Anne,” he prompted.

“But I have never seen her smile as I have with you, and you persuaded her to go to the castle.”

“I think that was down to you, Mary-Anne.”

She grinned triumphantly. “It does not matter. The point is, my sister has been miserable for far too long and I am heartily sick of it.”

“Is this to do with all this medieval stuff?”

“I do not even care for castles that much, but Lucinda used to adore it all. She told me all sorts of tales and promised we could visit every castle in Britain when we were older.”

Alex smiled at the image of a young Lucinda sharing gory tales with her little sister.

“I was hoping if we did some interesting things during our stay here, she would be more like her old self.”

“So this ruination—that changed her?”

Mary-Anne nodded. “I do not remember it. Lucinda was sixteen and I’m ten years younger than her. But I remember what fun she was.” She smiled softly. “But then

she went out one day, and my parents kept speaking in whispers and everything changed.”

He had to prevent himself from curling a fist at wherever this story was to go next. Lucy had never married so he had to assume the man, whoever the bastard was, had not done the right thing by her. “So she was ruined then?”

“Lucinda had snuck out to visit this old abbey near us. She was always doing these sorts of things and my parents were fearful she was going to damage her reputation one day with all her adventures.”

“I knew Lucy was hiding some part of her.”

“Grandmama said she met a Mr. Yardley there who was quite a bit older than her, and they were seen kissing.” Mary-Anne wrinkled her nose. “I think the man practically forced himself upon her but Grandmama blames Lucinda.”

He bit back a curse. “So they were caught?” he managed to ask with more calm than he felt.

“The man refused to marry Lucinda.” Mary-Anne balled both her fists, her small knuckles white. “Then the person who had spied them demanded money from my parents to remain quiet. Apparently it was a huge sum and my father had to borrow money to see it paid.”

Shaking his head, Alex released a long breath. “I would not mind getting my hands on either of those two.”

“The blackmailer went to America apparently and Mr. Yardley is married to a woman who looks like a pig.” She gave a smug grin. “I hope she’s horrible to him.”

“That certainly explains why Lucy is so cautious.”

“She has tried so hard to be boring and bland for fear of causing a scandal and I know our mother is terrified she will do it again, but I loathe to see her that way.”

“I’m not certain what you wish me to do about it.”

“You make her smile, Alex, and I’ve seen how you look at her.” She gave him a smug look. “I might be young but I’m not foolish.”

“I would not dare suggest such a thing.”

“You care for my sister. A lot. And I think you could make each other happy.”

Alex could not deny it. He might not be obeying his mother’s wishes, but she could not complain if he was to properly court a woman, surely?

First, however, he had to persuade Lucy he had no desire to scandalize her.

“Your sister will not see me,” he pointed out.

“Well with my brains and your brawn, I am certain we can come up with a way of getting her to see you.”

His lips quirked. “Brawn?”

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“I am certain you have some brains in there somewhere or else my sister would not like you, but let us be honest, how many women have pursued you for your mind?”

He should be insulted but all he could do was chuckle. She was not wrong, though he rather hoped Lucy liked him for rather more than his supposed brawn.

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“WE SHOULD GO out on the lake,” Mary-Anne demanded.

Lucinda glanced up from her book. Her sister had her knuckles braced upon the windowsill and her nose pressed against the glass. For some reason, Mary-Anne had not ceased pacing today and she should not have been surprised she demanded another adventure. Mary-Anne practically vibrated with unspent energy.

“Mama won’t like it.” Lucinda lifted the book and feigned reading.

Truth be told, she could scarcely make out the words, not after another formal letter from Alex, requesting to see her. Having Mary-Anne resume her patrolling of the short length of the parlor room did not help either.

“Mama will not know.” Mary-Anne came to stand in front of her and in the periphery of her vision, Lucinda saw her put her fists to her hips. “She will be lunching with Mrs. Beaton forever. You know how they like to talk.”

Lucinda nodded and gave a grim smile. “Between them, they shall be convinced the world is going to ruin.”

“I am not looking forward to tonight.”

“She will certainly be in one of her more worrisome moods, to be sure.”

“So let us get some fresh air before she returns to tell us of all the dangers of the world,” Mary-Anne begged.

“I really do not think—”

“I’ll go myself if I have to.”

With a sigh, Lucinda set the book on the arm of the chair and rose. “Very well.”

She might have given in too easily but what harm could come from a little row on the lake? She allowed herself a wry smile. With her sister, anything could happen, but it would be a welcome distraction from the conundrum that was Alex. Why was he writing so formally? Why did he not come and see her again? And why did she wish him to visit when she was most decidedly avoiding him?

Most importantly, why oh why did it make her heart hurt to be apart from him?

Lucinda aided her sister with the buttons of her pelisse and then did her own. Mary-Anne yanked open the front door before Lucinda could finish doing up her bonnet.

Her sister’s excitable behavior was no rare thing but today she seemed extraordinarily skittish and a little odd, as though she were keeping some secret. She only hoped Mary-Anne did not persuade her to row all the way to some other mystical spot that Mrs. Gleeson had spoken of. As far as she was concerned, they would just take a little jaunt out onto the lake and come back again.

“Oh.”

She stilled on the doorstep and glanced to her sister, her fingers tangled in the ribbon of her straw bonnet. She followed her sister's gaze. "Oh."

Striding toward her in the most authoritative of manners, Bernie Sandwell had his gaze fixed upon her. He stopped a pace or so away and dipped his head. "Thank goodness I have found you."

"Whatever are you doing here, Bernie?" she blurted out.

"I have been looking for you all morning." He glanced around, irritation forming tense lines around his mouth. "No one could keep their story straight as to where you were staying."

"Is something the matter?"

He looked her over perfunctorily. "You look hale."

"I am well, thank you."

He looked well too. For Bernie anyway. He had the pale complexion of an academic which matched eyebrows that were slowly graying and matching ashy hair. He could have been considered handsome if it were not for his weak chin, she always reckoned.

Compared to Alex, he was practically hideous. A shard of guilt speared through her. What an awful thing to think.

"I'm well too," put in Mary-Anne.

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He scarcely acknowledged her sister with even so much as a look. “You have not written to me in weeks, Lucinda.”

“We’ve been rather busy...”

“Too busy to put quill to paper?” he demanded. “Lucinda, I was mightily worried about you.”

“I do not know why.” She gestured inside. “Will you come in for tea? Mrs. Barker can put some on for us.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“But we were to go rowing,” Mary-Anne protested. “We need to go now, Lucinda. Please.”

“We can row tomorrow,” she assured her.

Mary-Anne gave a pained expression. “No. We need to go now.”

“Rowing is hardly the most feminine of pursuits,” Bernie said. “You would be wise to listen to your sister, Mary-Anne.”

Her sister gave a huff. “Fine, then I shall go for a walk.”

“Mary-Anne,” Lucinda called after her, but Bernie put a hand to her arm.

“Leave her be. She must learn she cannot always get her own way.”

Lucinda bit back a sharp response, rankled by his manner toward her sister. Mary-Anne was not the easiest person to manage but Bernie did not need to treat her like a child. “You came all this way because I did not write for a while?”

“Well, I have business in Yorkshire,” he explained.

“Ah.”

That made more sense. Bernie was fulfilling his lawyerly duties rather than desperately worrying for her welfare. After so many years of writing to one another, she would have been surprised indeed if he had made a journey specially to see her.

“Though, I was worried.” He followed her into the house and divested himself of his outerwear, moving as though he owned the house. He gestured around. “It is a little small. I do wonder why your mother brought you here. I hear tell of several scandalous men in your midst. It is the talk of London.”

She ignored the pang the mention of Alex and his brothers created and led Bernie through to the parlor.

“I would not know much about that,” Lucinda said stiffly. “We have met the Marquis of Kirbeck, and his brothers, and they seem quite pleasant.”

“So you do know to whom I refer.” His lips tightened as he sat. “I do hope you have not been reckless, Lucinda.”

“Reckless? How on earth could I have been reckless?”

“Your sister is quite a bad influence.”

“My sister is ten years my junior. I hardly think she can be a bad influence on me.”
She dropped onto the sofa but kept her back rigid.

“You are a good girl, Lucinda. I should so hate to see that change.”

Yes. Good. And boring. And scarcely living her life. Seeing Bernie brought it into even more stark relief. This was how she had been spending her days, writing to a man who scarcely tolerated her sister and never had anything interesting to say.

Unlike Alex.

“Anyway, I am glad to see you looking so well. You look quite...well.”

“I am well.”

“Yes. I can see that.” He clapped his hands to his thighs. “Shall we have some tea? I have the most marvelous rock to show you.”

Inwardly, Lucinda groaned.

Chapter Twelve

Alex had certainly done some strange things in his life but hiding in the trees, readying himself to jump into a row boat and effectively kidnap Lucy had to be near the top of the list of odd moments in his life. When he'd agreed to come to Cumbria, he certainly had not envisaged this as one of the ways he would pass the time.

He only hoped Lucy came this time. He tightened his grip on the nearby tree and listened for the sound of their arrival at the jetty. The thought of this rival—some Bernard Sandwell chap, whoever the heck he was—stealing her away from him made his blood heat.

Mary-Anne seemed to think the man was no challenge, but Lucy had chosen to spend time with him rather than row a boat with her sister. Surely that meant she had some sort of feelings for him?

Well, Alex was going to find out for certain today. Did she care for that rigid-looking chap with all the personality of a wet fish or did she like him?

Or maybe even love him?

Because, damn it, he was not above a little spying, and when he had seen Lucy with this Bernard fellow, he'd wanted to stride over, kiss her firmly and claim her as his. The woman looked entirely bored and uncomfortable around him.

However, the old Alex might have been willing to do such a thing, but the new Alex would not. For Lucy, he would be as good and as sweet and as gentlemanly as

possible. He would not risk scandal. Which was why they would row out, away from prying eyes, and he would tell her of his desire to court her in person, and with any luck she would say yes.

He didn't want to think about what he would do if she did not. Likely sink into a mire of frustration as deep as the one his brother Leo seemed tangled in over his old love. For the first time ever, he could truly sympathize with his brother over having his heart broken.

He'd never felt such a thing before—this strange, twisting feeling that had him on the edge of a mountain, ready to tumble off and shatter at the bottom, if Lucy did not want him. It was oddly exhilarating but also horribly terrifying. If it were not for the fact the reward would be thoroughly worth it, he would be riding back to London and telling his mother their deal was off and she could cry as much as she liked about it.

He stilled at the crunch of footsteps. His lips curved at the sound of Mary-Anne talking far too loudly for his benefit.

"I want to go from here," she demanded, "because the views of the lakes are much better."

"I do not see why we could not use one of the boats at the lakefront." Lucy came into view through the trees and his heart gave a jolt. "I did not even know there were boats here."

"At least we can get away from boring Bernie."

"He is not boring," Lucy replied, and Alex ground his teeth together.

"He is the dullest man on Earth, and you think simply because he is somewhat respectable, he will make you a good husband."

“Like hell,” Alex muttered.

Lucy froze. “Did you hear something?”

Alex ducked down a little farther for a few moments, lifting his head up to spy Lucy and her sister climbing into the boat. He waited until Lucy was seated with the oars in hand as agreed with Mary-Anne then he sprinted over quickly, dashing down the jetty before Lucy noticed him. Mary-Anne gave a triumphant grin and leaped up, making the boat rock.

“Mary-Anne!” Lucy exclaimed.

“I forgot something,” she said and stepped swiftly out of the boat, allowing Alex to swap places with her.

Mouth ajar, Lucy stared at him. “What are you doing?”

He used her shock to his advantage and snatched the oars from her then Mary-Anne shoved the boat away from the jetty. With a few powerful movements of the oars, he had them away from the edge of the lake, giving Lucy no chance to escape.

“Alex, take me back,” she insisted.

“Not a chance.”

“This is—”

“Scandalous?” He shook his head. “I have made sure no one can see us.”

She folded her arms. “It would be less so if people could see us.”

“Very well.” He put all his effort into rowing them farther toward the town center where the majority of boats and people were.

“That is not what I meant,” she protested.

“You did not reply to my letters.”

Her gaze met his. “What could I say?”

“Yes, mostly.”

“Yes?”

“To me courting you?”

She shook her head, sending red curls bobbing about her face. The bright sunshine brought out little golden touches in her hair and lashes. Her fichu was as high and tight as ever, her posture stiff and formal. But, by God, did he want to kiss her.

“You do not want to court me.”

The response gave him hope. “But you do notnotwant me to court you?”

A crease marred her brow. “Pardon?”

“I want to court you,” he said firmly. “And you did not say you do not want me to court you.”

“Well, that is...that is not what I said.”

“No, but it is what you did not say.”

She let out an aggravated sound. “You are speaking in riddles!”

He gave a tilted grin. “You have that sort of effect on me, Lucy.”

She shook her head again. “Alex, I know all about you. About the lady you left behind in London. I do not for one minute believe you truly want to court a woman like me.” She lifted her shoulders. “In fact, I do not think you wish to court anyone.”

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LUCINDA SHOULD NOT like the slightly smug look on his face. Especially when they were in full view of everyone. She could not make individuals out at present but the closer they came to the cluster of buildings and boats, the more apprehensive she became.

She had a horrible suspicion her mother and Bernie were there and would see her in the boat with this most scandalous of rakes. Bernie had opted for a stroll with her mother and Lucinda had been grateful for a break from Bernie when Mary-Anne demanded they take their chance to finally row on the lake. Mama adored Bernie. He was respectable with no sordid history.

Unlike Alex.

“You are wrong, Lucy.”

She turned her attention to Alex and regretted it in a way. Rowing capably and powerfully, he might never have looked more handsome. Especially considering he wanted to court her. Or so he said. She could not let herself believe it.

“You know what you are, Alex, and you are not the sort of man to court a woman. Please do not toy with me.”

His expression grew serious as her voice cracked a little. “I play no games. I am deadly serious. I wish to court you.” He stopped rowing and shifted closer to her. “I did not leave that woman in the family way. I do not even know her, I swear it, and whilst you are not wrong about me, do you not think it possible that a man may wish to change?”

She shook her head. She had already risked scandal once and by some miracle Mrs. Jones had not spread word of her poor behavior. Now she had Bernie here with her and if Mary-Anne was correct, he had been speaking of proposing. She would have all the respectability she needed once she was married to him with no more fears of what her behavior might do to her family.

“I know you have been hurt previously.”

She narrowed her gaze. “What do you mean?”

“Mary-Anne told me of your near ruination.”

She sucked in a sharp gasp, feeling it stab at her lungs. “Mary-Anne was not even meant to know.”

“She’s a clever girl, of course she knows.”

“Well, she certainly should not have told you!”

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“I am not sad she did. Now I understand why you have been avoiding me.”

“I have been avoiding you because you are not serious about courting me. Because you are a flirt, a rake and far too different from me. We would not work well together.”

His smile tilted. “You are most certainly wrong there, Lucy.” He leaned closer. “You want adventure, I know you do. And this,” he gestured up and down her, “is not who you are. Not one jot.”

“You cannot presume to know me.”

“I held you when we thought we might die and confessed all my past to you. I cannot think of a scenario that could bring two people closer together.” He took one of her hands and she allowed it, unable to resist. “And you were going to do the same.” His gaze locked onto hers. “Tell me, have you told that dull Bernard of your past?”

Lucinda opened her mouth and then closed it. “That’s beside the point.”

“You are not going to choose him over me.”

“You cannot tell me what to do.” She glanced at the lakeside and spied her mother and Bernie talking to a group of older ladies. They had yet to spot her. Perhaps there was still a chance. “Turn around and take me back, Alex, please.”

“Only if you say you’ll let me court you.”

“No.” She took her hand back from his. “It’s impossible. I am not who you think I am. I am dull and unexciting, and I like nothing more than embroidery and strolls along the lakeside. I am certainly not the sort of woman you wish to court.”

“Even if I love you?”

She frowned. “Love me?” Had she misheard him?

He nodded. “It has taken a while for me to admit it to myself but damn it, Lucy, I’m fairly certain I loved you from the moment I saw you.”

“You scowled at me,” she pointed out.

“Because I was trying to be on my best behavior. My mother begged me to come to the lake to avoid all this gossip that—and I must be firm about this—is nothing to do with me.” His gaze searched hers. “I’m not lying about that, you know that, do you not?”

She closed her eyes briefly, wishing she could say otherwise. “I know that,” she admitted softly.

He was many things, but he was no liar. Which just left the matter of this love thing. Could he really be telling the truth about that too?

“So you are saying you think you loved me from first sight?” she pressed.

Why she needed to confirm that, she did not know. After all, she was going to make him return her to the shore in a moment and pretend this never happened. Perhaps she was more superficial than she thought.

“If not from then at least from our first kiss.” He grinned.

“That was—”

“Scandalous, I know.”

“I was going to say scarcely a kiss.”

“But our second one was,” he pointed out.

“And it was a mistake, one that could have cost me everything.”

“I almost wish we had been caught properly, then I could have married you.”

Lucinda had to force herself to take a breath. This was too much. First he kidnapped her, then he declared love for her, and now he wished they were married! What on earth was going on?

“Take me back to the shore,” she insisted.

“Not until you at least admit your love for me.”

“My love for you?” She blinked a few times. “No, I—”

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“You love me, Lucy, or else there is no chance you would have kissed me at Eastwick.”

“That was just...” She gave a huff and folded her arms. “That was only because we nearly died.”

“You risked scandal for a kiss from me.” His expression was so smug she longed to tear it from his face. And she would have done, had she not feared he was right. Could it be true? She loved this man? She was not certain she could handle this at present.

Aware of them drifting closer to the jetties, she stiffened. “Alex, return me to land at once.”

“Admit you love me.”

“Alex,” she said tightly. “Row us back or I shall do it myself.” She reached for the oars, but he moved them back out of her way.

“Lucy...”

“If you do not, I shall jump.”

A dark brow lifted. “Like hell you will. You wouldn’t survive the scandal of it all.”

“I will,” she insisted. “I’ll jump.”

His smile turned smug again. “You would not dare.”

Blowing out a heated breath, she rose from the boat, undid her bonnet and handed it over to him. She was tired of this. Of the confusion. Of pretending.

“Lucy?”

“I will certainly not have my future dictated to me again.” She pushed off the heels of each of her shoes with her toes, wavering in the wobbly boat. “Never again, Lord Kirbeck, do you understand?”

She jumped into the water. The frigid water bit straight through her clothes, and she heard Alex shout her name.

Ignoring him, she pushed on. At least the shore was not far away, she supposed. Her clothes weighed a ton and it seemed to take forever until her feet found the ground. She rose out of the lake, feeling rather like a sea monster. Given the reaction from the crowd of people who had gathered at the waterside after hearing her splash, she might well have been.

The crowd parted as she walked purposefully up the shingle toward the road. Bernie pushed through and blocked her path, his pallor grayer than ever.

“What are you doing, Lucinda?” he asked. He fought to pull off his jacket.

She lifted her chin. “I went for a little swim.”

“You look...awful,” he hissed. “And everyone is looking. Goodness, your mother nearly fainted when she realized it was you.”

Lucinda fixed him with a glare and waved away the offer of his jacket. She was

weary of pretending to be someone she was not for Bernie's sake.

"Take the jacket. I can see almost everything," he bit out.

"You know, some men might appreciate that fact."

His eyes widened and he stared at her for several moments. "What has happened to you, Lucinda? First you barely write to me, then you vanish off at a moment's notice and now this after being in a boat with a known rake? Of which, by the way, I do not approve."

Hands to her hips, she met his gaze head on. "You know, Bernie, I do not need your approval."

"I should have thought you do, considering you have been hoping for me to propose for many years."

Lucinda opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "I do not believe I was everhoping."

"Well, I was thinking of doing it this week, but it seems you are not the respectable lady I thought you were. Especially if you are keeping company with men like the marquis."

"You know, I may not be respectable in your eyes, Bernie, but you are quite rude indeed to believe a woman is anticipating a proposal and leaving her to wait for years on end. Before long, I shall be a spinster."

"So you should be grateful for my attention."

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Shaking her head, Lucinda twisted to view the boat, bobbing some way out on the lake. Had she really run away from Alex for this? Or was she simply too scared to risk it all again?

“Bernie, I am sorry.”

She did not want her future dictated to her, that was certain. Did not want Alex forcing her to pay attention to him. But she did want her say. She did want it to be her decision. And she suspected she had already made it the moment she leapt from the boat.

Bernie scowled. “Lucinda?”

“I am not the woman you want me to be and I never will be. You can keep your proposal.” She grabbed her skirts and turned around.

“I just said I was thinking twice about proposing. That did not mean I would not.” He stepped in front of her. “Whatever are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Causing a scandal, most likely.”

She moved around him and waded into the water. Behind her, she heard Mary-Anne give a shout of encouragement whilst the onlookers chatted excitedly. Perhaps her mother was in a faint and would not see a thing but either way, she was done paying for her one mistake.

Once the water reached waist height, she began swimming, making her way back to

the boat. Alex must have been watching her interaction with Bernie, but he stared at her for some time before he tore off his jacket and his boots and then dove into the water. With strokes far more powerful than hers, he met her where water was still only shoulder deep and latched his hands around her waist.

“You were right,” she said. “I do love you. I’m not certain how or why but I do.”

“I knew it.”

She looped her arms around his neck. “I do not care that you are a rake or that this is the most scandalous thing I have ever done in my adult life. I cannot live like that anymore. I cannot be a wife to a man like Bernie.”

“What about a wife to a man like me?” He pushed wet strands from her face with a hand. “Because, Lucy, I’m going to kiss you right here, and you will most certainly be ruined and have to marry me.”

Biting down on her lip, she nodded eagerly. It had been all too clear, standing in front of Bernie, what her life was going to be like. With Alex, she had little idea, but she did not care. That was the excitement of it.

“I tried hard to be a gentleman and court you, you know.”

“I know.” She pulled him into her and pressed a swift kiss to his lips.

“What was that for?”

“I could have drowned, you know,” she replied with a grin.

“And now you have ruined me.”

“You had better ruin me back, I suppose.”

He gave a wicked grin. “That I can do.”

He took her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers, his mouth warm and delicious against the coldness of the water. He kissed her until she could scarcely draw in a breath and the chill from the water had vanished.

Somewhere on the shoreline, she heard her sister let loose a whoop.

Epilogue

“You know she sent us here with exactly this in mind, do you not?” Adam lifted a glass of brandy to his lips and took a long, slow sip.

Leo rolled his eyes and leaned back in the armchair. “He’s been saying this for months now.”

Alex shrugged and finished the last drop of his own brandy and then masked a yawn with the back of a hand. The hour was late, the drawing room lit by lamplight that suffused the masculine smoking room with a warm glow. Despite the fact they were heading into the height of summer, rain pattered against the windowpane. “It’s probably true.”

Leo shook his head. “Yes, but he does not need to be so smug about it.”

“One married and another in two days’ time,” Adam mused. “I expected it from you, Leo, the moment Rebecca set foot in Langmere, but not you, Alex.”

Alex narrowed his gaze at his brother. “Do you have a problem with my pending marriage?”

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He grinned. “Not one jot. Lucinda is a fine woman. But do not expect me to fall so readily. I have no intention of giving up my bachelor status anytime soon.”

“Even though you are still technically banished to Langmere?” Leo asked.

Adam gave a nonchalant shrug. “Unlike you two, I am entirely capable of finding entertainment that is not of the female persuasion.”

“That’s a lie. I cannot recall that last time you were without a woman,” Leo said.

Lifting his chin, Adam’s smile grew more arrogant and he held up two fingers. “Two months and counting.”

“Well, enjoy it while it lasts.” Alex set his glass down on the tray beside him and rose. “Mother arrives for the wedding tomorrow, so I think I need a full night’s sleep before I deal with her.”

“If she’s anything like she was with Leo’s wedding, you will have your hands full.” Adam lifted his glass in salute. “I have never seen her more excited. Which means I am entirely correct, and she planned this whole thing all along.”

Alex would not deny it. It seemed likely at this point that their mother had persuaded them to come to Langmere with the express intention of throwing them into the paths of young, eligible ladies. Not that he minded. If she had not begged him to come here, he would not be marrying Lucy.

“It will not be long before you fall too,” Alex warned Adam.

He snorted. “Never. It has not happened before now, and it will not happen anytime soon. Besides, with any luck this Miss Kingsley stuff will be solved before long and I shall be returning to Town whilst the two of you pretend to be country gentlemen.”

Leo rose. “I had better return to Rebecca before it gets too late.” He looked at Alex. “I’ll be mightily glad when the house is finished, and I do not have to listen to this one’s smug diatribes.” He gestured to Adam with a grin.

“You should be used to it, you know. I’m always right,” their brother piped up.

Alex let his lips curve but ignored the taunt from his brother. “Good night, gentlemen.”

He made his way upstairs, chuckling to himself as Leo waded into an argument about who was right more often. If Alex was to put money on it, it would be Adam, though it would be a close call indeed. If their mother had intended for them to find matches, two out of three was a fine achievement indeed.

Leo had wed Rebecca not four weeks ago and Alex frankly envied him. The sooner he wed Lucy the better, but he’d done his best to take things slowly, ensure he courted her properly, despite insistence from everyone that they should rush the wedding given their most scandalous public kiss.

He grinned to himself as he opened the door to his bedroom and shut it behind him. Not long and she would finally be all his.

A bath had been prepared for him, reaching curling fingers of steam toward him. He ignored the bell pull, opting to undress himself and sank gratefully into the copper bath, running hands over his face and through his hair and then sinking back and closing his eyes.

Yes, not long until Lucy was his wife, though he had no regrets really about the courting. It had allowed him to take her to all the sights of Langmere and watch as her face glowed with excitement at every new discovery. Once she was his marchioness, life would be busy indeed, so he could not regret such time together.

Though, he did have every intention of visiting as many castles as they could on their honeymoon. He'd yet to tell her of his intention but he hoped she would like the surprise.

"Alex?"

"Bloody hell." His heart near jumped into his throat and he cupped his hands instinctively over his crotch area as he opened his eyes and straightened. "Lucy, what the devil are you doing here?"

She gave a shy smile, hands clasped in front of her. "Rebecca helped me sneak in."

He cast his gaze up to the ceiling. Of course she did. Leo's wife had a wealth of experience sneaking around his house after all.

"And why, pray tell, did she sneak you in?"

Lucy took a few steps toward the bath then paused, her cheeks flushed bright red. He saw her throat work as she cast her gaze down the length of him.

"As you know, my mother was insisting on a quick wedding, considering you kissed me in front of the entire population of Langmere."

"You kissed me," he pointed out.

"A tiny peck. You kissed me properly." She waved a hand. "Anyway, my point is,

despite my mother's insistence, you were determined to be as gentlemanly as possible and give me time." Her lips curled. "I have appreciated that time so very much." She closed the gap between her and the bath and kneeled beside it.

Alex had to clamp his teeth together to maintain some sense of control. Only two more days until she was his wife. He could survive until then, surely? But why did she have to look so blasted pretty, with her curls so red in the lamplight, and her cheeks perfectly rosy and that wide mouth infinitely kissable?

Even the gown, with its tightly pulled fichu, made every inch of him heat. He swore his body temperature would set the water to boiling before long. Somehow, he adored those high necklines now. Lucy might have been keen to set aside the rigid, cautious woman she had been, but he appreciated that she would always remind him of the woman he'd first set eyes upon.

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“I only want you to be happy,” he managed to say, aware his voice sounded strangled.

Which it was. Her proximity was making every part of his body pound and it would not be long before she glanced down and realized that.

“I am happy.” Her smile broadened. “Happier than I have ever been. However—”

He straightened in the bath a little. “However?”

“I should like to start our lives off on the right note.”

He scowled. “Lucy?”

She lifted a hand and tentatively ran it over the damp skin of his chest. He closed his eyes briefly and sucked in a sharp breath. Only Lucy could make him feel this way with a mere touch.

“I wish to be scandalous, Alex.”

???

LUCINDA COULD SCARCELY believe she had managed to utter the words. Although having Alex naked and wet before her helped a great deal. These past months of courting had been wonderful and had allowed her mother time to get over her disapproval of this man.

Her father already liked him, most likely because he knew Lucy would be taken care of, but whilst she appreciated the time given to slowly rediscover the old Lucinda—the one only brought to the surface by Alex—she was tired of the formality of their arrangement. She needed to be with him. Alone. And properly.

Or improperly, perhaps.

His eyes darkened and a few beats of silence passed, accompanied by only the slight slosh of water. “You understand what you are saying, Lucy?”

She bit down on her bottom lip and nodded.

“I have tried exceedingly hard to be a proper gentleman,” he said. “You test me right now.”

“Good.”

He shook his head, his lips slanting. “Will you ever fail to surprise me?”

“I hope not. I hope our life will always be filled with adventure.”

“Oh, I know it will.”

He twisted in the bath and lifted a hand, giving her the briefest glance of his body in all its glory before curving it around the back of her head to draw her close to kiss her.

Frankly, it was a miracle she had survived this long. His muscular body, all slick and spread out for her, had made her knees weak from the moment she set foot in the bedroom. She gasped at the contact of his mouth and closed her eyes, sinking deep into the kiss.

Rising onto her knees, she cupped his face and kissed him back urgently, pouring two months' worth of desire into it. He twisted suddenly and, with a splash, she tumbled into the warm water.

"Oh." She snapped open her eyes, finding herself on top of him with water up to her waist and lapping at her bodice. Water sloshed over the side.

Alex grinned wickedly. "If we're going to be scandalous, we may as well do it properly."

"In water?" she asked, eyes wide.

"That can be done but I do not think there's enough room."

"Then why—"

He lifted a shoulder. "You cannot blame me for wanting to get you wet for a third time." His grin expanded. "It has been rather a large part of our relationship and, I have to tell you, you look rather fetching when soaked to the skin."

She drew in a shuddery breath and smoothed her hands down his shoulders. "As do you."

"There are other things we can do here, though." He moved his hands down her waist, grabbed her hips and allowed her to feel the hard length of him against her.

“Goodness.”

Flickers of pleasure lit in her immediately and she moved against the hardness of him. He used his grip on her hips to shift her again, urging her to rock slightly back and forth.

Water spilled over the edge of the tub once more, but she could not bring herself to care. Alex’s jaw worked when she slid back and forth, his nostrils flaring slightly as though this movement was bringing him as much pleasure as it was her.

“This is...quite scandalous indeed...” she murmured.

“You should see it from my point of view.”

Lucinda imagined what he saw, her all wet, riding him with abandon, and her body pulsed. She loved that Alex revealed that side of her, that she could see herself as someone exciting and adventurous. There were times when the woman who feared scandal above all else still reared her head, but Alex never failed to aid her in seeing who she really was. It was hard to believe she had been willing to consign herself to a life of boredom with Bernie or even alone when this was at her fingertips.

“That’s it,” he urged when she picked up the pace.

Hot pleasure sizzled through her. She moved back and forth, creating great waves of water as her breaths came in pants. Gratification ran through her veins until the sensation built and she stilled, allowing it to crescendo through her. Eyes clenched tightly shut, she let the bliss lap over her, savoring each pulse until it ebbed. When

she opened her eyes, she found Alex staring up at her as though she was the most beautiful, sensual being in the world.

“Out,” he ordered abruptly.

“I—”

“Get out of the bath,” he said tightly. “I need you on that bed right this second.”

“Oh.” She struggled to stand, her soggy skirts weighing her down.

“Damn it, woman, not quick enough.” Hands to her hips, he lifted her with him, his naked body aligned with hers. She might well have collapsed at the feel of him so close and so, so naked had he not been holding her.

He lifted her, hooked one arm under her legs and marched over to the bed, dropping her unceremoniously onto it.

“I’ll get the bed wet,” she protested.

“We’re being adventurous, remember?” He moved over her, and she dropped her head back against the pillow, any fight vanishing.

He plucked at the waist of her dress. “There’s no way I am getting these wet clothes off you.” He pushed her skirts up until they were bunched around her thighs. “At least not quickly enough for my liking.”

“Well, you were the one who pulled me in.”

“And you were the one who snuck into my bedroom.”

“Then perhaps we are even.” She moved her arms around his shoulders as he shifted forward and braced himself on one elbow and eyed her. She lifted her hips in invitation.

“Let me remember the prim little woman I once met on a rock, just for a moment.”

“Alex!” she moved into him again.

“That’s enough remembering.” He rolled suddenly, taking her with him and urging her to straddle him, much like in the bath. “If you are on top you can control it better.” He smirked. “And I get a better view.”

“I have little idea what I am doing,” she warned him, her throat tightening.

She could not quite believe what she was about to do but the fire blazing through her veins would not let her do anything else. She loved this rake, this scandalous man, with every powerful beat of her heart, and she wanted nothing more than to be properly joined with him.

She rocked against him, like in the bath, and he bunched her skirts up with his teeth gritted. With no fabric between them, she gasped at the feel of his hot flesh touching her delicate center.

He guided her with her hips and lifted her a little. Swallowing hard, she sank slowly onto him, feeling him breach her just a little. She gulped down some air and sank deeper, eyes wide at the sensation. There was no chance she could have prepared herself for the stretching, full sensation, but by God, was it wonderful.

Lucinda moved a little quicker now, taking him into her inch by inch until they were fully joined. Alex’s grip on her shook, and tension clung to his jaw. She waited a few moments before slowly lifting and lowering again.

“Goodness.”

He nodded. “You can say that again.”

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The tightness inside her eased and she moved against the delicious friction, over and over, again and again. Alex lifted his hips now, meeting her movements, his grip tight on her hips. The bed creaked beneath them and she spread her palms over his still damp chest, aware of the hard muscle beneath her fingertips.

And how it was hers. All hers.

Pleasure began simmering through her. Alex gave a rough curse and rolled her over then grabbed her legs, hooking them around his thighs. He thrust hard into her, making her gasp for air. She clung to his shoulders while he kissed erratically down her neck and made his way back to her mouth.

The delicious feelings broke, shattering through her with all the power of a waterfall, hard and fast and then gently stroking through her, pattering her body with satisfaction. He groaned while kissing her deeply, his shoulders tense beneath her palms, and he muttered her name in an open-mouthed kiss before relaxing on top of her.

Lucinda stroked her hands up and down his back, her eyelids heavy. She savored the feeling of him still inside her.

“We cannot blame a near-death experience for that one, you know,” he murmured in her ear and drew in a long, deep breath before lifting up to view her.

“No, we cannot,” she agreed with a smile. “Our scandalous natures might have to take the blame for that one.”

“Let it be known you seduced me.”

“You kissed me first,” she countered.

“It’s these fichus.” He fingered the fabric around her neck. “You have no idea what they do to me.”

She laughed. “Who would have thought a Lord of Scandal Row would find such things attractive?”

“Only on you, Lucy.” He chuckled and pushed a curl from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “You know, I tried so hard not to scandalize you.”

“I know.” She rose to press a gentle kiss to his lips and smiled. “But it turns out I rather like scandal.”

THE END