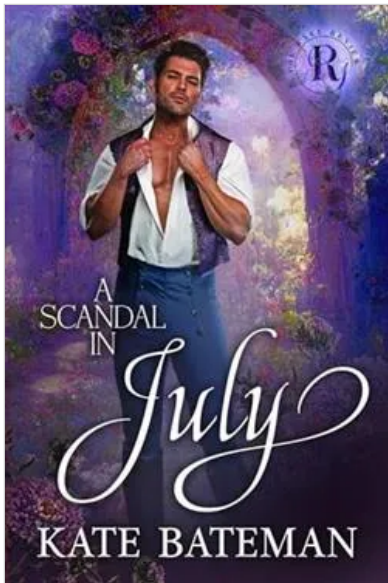




A Scandal In July

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Historical

Description: A summer to remember. . .

Charming bachelor Rhys Davies has absolutely no intention of falling for anyone with the surname Montgomery. The rivalry between their two families is legendary, after all, and despite all three of his siblings succumbing to the fatal attractions of the enemy, Rhys is convinced he's immune. Until one night, when he meets Lenore Montgomery—and promptly loses his wits.

A week he'll never forget. . .

Lenore Montgomery has wrestled a giant water snake in Brazil, chased a panther with a shoe, and survived an unfortunate shipwreck off the coast of Madagascar, but none of those things has been as difficult as seducing Rhys Davies. The stubborn man's been ignoring her all season, so when she hears they'll both be attending a week-long family party at his country estate, she enlists the help of her meddling relatives to prove there's nothing as irresistible as forbidden fruit. . . especially when it might lead to true love.

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Chapter One

London, 1820.

Lenore Montgomery had faced many challenges in her twenty-three years. She'd wrestled a giant water snake in Brazil, chased a panther with a shoe, and survived an unfortunate shipwreck off the coast of Madagascar.

None of those things had been as difficult as seducing Rhys Trevelyan Davies.

The rivalry between her family and their wild Welsh neighbors, the Davies, had been the stuff of legend for centuries, but the mutual antagonism had been tempered in recent years by a series of scandalous marriages between the two sides.

First, her cousin Maddie had married Gryff Davies, the current Earl of Powys, then Maddie's brother Tristan had fallen for the red-haired Davies hellion, Carys. Shortly after that, her other cousin, sensible mapmaker Harriet, had succumbed to the seductive pull of captain Morgan Davies.

Clearly, the combination of a Davies and a Montgomery led to all manner of exciting possibilities, and for someone with an adventurous spirit like Lenore, that was thoroughly irresistible. She'd determined to meet one of the dreadful Davies for herself as soon as she returned to London with her globe-trotting family, and her wish had been granted at Lady Carrington's summer ball.

Unfortunately, she'd taken one look at Rhys Davies, and promptly lost her heart. And her wits.

It had not been the stuff of fairytales. Their eyes hadn't met across a crowded ballroom. He hadn't begged her to dance, or even saved her from being run over by a carriage.

She'd found him, quite by accident, in the garden. The unmistakable sounds of an altercation had been coming from the shrubbery; raised male voices, the scrape of gravel, a shout, and then a splash. Being naturally curious, Lenore had peered around a hedge to find Rhys Davies coolly straightening his cravat, and another man floundering about in the fountain.

She'd known it was Rhys from the unmistakable likeness between all three Davies brothers. She'd already been introduced to Gryff and Morgan earlier in the evening, and they'd had the same dark hair, sharp jaw, and sinfully full lips as their sibling. Neither of them, however, had made her heart feel like it was trying to beat out of her chest.

"When a lady tells you no, Burton, she bloody well means no!" Davies growled at the man in the water. "And if I ever hear you've mistreated a woman again, I'll do more than just ruin your coat. I'll fucking bury you. Understand?"

The man in the fountain wiped some pond weed off his cheek and sent him a surly scowl. "Yes."

Lenore stepped back, intending to withdraw unobtrusively, but her shoe crunched on the gravel and Davies's head whipped round.

His hair was wildly disordered, his lower lip bleeding from where his opponent had obviously managed to land a punch before he'd been vanquished, and his eyes, when he caught sight of Lenore standing in the path, had been glittering with fury.

Until they'd widened in astonishment.

Lenore didn't believe in love at first sight. At least, she hadn't, until that very moment. But the combination of outrageously handsome features and a noble urge to protect the innocent had done something funny to her brain.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," she said stiffly, ignoring the way her pulse was hammering in her throat.

Davies took a step toward her, his eyes roaming over her face as if she were some sort of apparition.

"Who are you?"

His voice was deep, a gravelly growl that made her knees go weak and her stomach somersault in the most outrageous way.

Lenore tossed her head and studied him back with equal intensity. "I'm Lenore."

He stilled, and his eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "Not Lenore Montgomery?"

She sent him her widest smile, the one her father said could charm the birds from the trees. "The very same."

Davies's expression changed from guarded to horrified in an instant, and he raised his hands up in front of him as if to ward off a blow. She thought she heard him mutter *Oh, Shit*, under his breath, but she couldn't be sure.

Lenore paused. She was used to rendering men speechless. She'd been told she was beautiful ever since she was a girl, and while she found people's fascination with her appearance quite ridiculous—really, it was just luck that she'd been blessed with a combination of green eyes, straight nose, and pink lips that people generally found attractive—there was no denying that the ability to wind men around her little finger

was a useful tool to have.

To date, she'd received six marriage proposals, and countless more indecent ones, but Rhys Davies was looking at her as if she'd just told him she was carrying the bubonic plague.

A mortified blush heated her cheeks, even as a bubble of hysterical laughter threatened to escape her chest.

Oh, God, had she finally found the man of her dreams, only to discover he was the one man she'd ever encountered not to find her attractive?

The universe had a wicked sense of humor.

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Davies was still staring at her with a combination of annoyance and dismay, but the cad in the fountain had managed to extricate himself and now leaned, dripping, on the curved stone rim.

“I say, you’re a sight for sore eyes. Don’t think we’ve been introduced. I’m Gordon Burton.”

He extended his hand, as if he expected her to shake it, and Lenore sent him a scathing glance.

“I’m not interested in making the acquaintance of a man who takes advantage of women,” she said crossly. “Go away.”

Burton’s face fell, and he limped off into the bushes, leaving a trail of water in his wake.

Davies still didn’t seem in the mood to introduce himself, so Lenore twitched her skirts and straightened her elbow-length gloves. “Well, then. I suppose I’ll go back inside. Goodnight, Mister Davies. You’ve certainly lived up to expectations.”

With that parting shot, she withdrew, hurrying back inside to the safety of her family, but the image of Rhys Davies’s face had been imprinted on her brain. And her heart.

Chapter Two

Rhys Davies was excellent at evading things, especially punches and marriage.

He'd learned to dodge the punches at his twice-weekly boxing sessions, not merely because he didn't enjoy pain, but because the ladies seemed to love his face just the way it was. Not ruining it with a broken nose was reason enough to stay sharp as the blows flew his way.

He'd avoided marriage because the idea of settling down with just one woman had seemed extremely restrictive, despite the obvious happiness of his three siblings, who'd all tied the knot in the past few years.

Rhys was a rational man. He put no store in the ridiculous idea that some mystical force kept throwing Davies and Montgomerys together. The fact that both his brothers and his sister had ended up with members of the rival clan was purely incidental—an interesting anomaly, but one that could easily be explained by the inherently perverse, stubborn and competitive natures of both families.

If someone told a Davies not to do something, it—naturally—became the very thing that Davies most desired to do. Rebellion was in their blood, and had been since some distant ancestor Davies had fought by the side of Llewellyn ap Gruffud, the last Prince of Gwynned, in his unsuccessful quest to drive the invading English from Welsh soil, back in the twelve-hundreds.

Now, six hundred years later, it was clear the English weren't going anywhere, and since killing each other with swords was frowned on in a civilized society, both families had relished coming up with less violent but ever-more-sneaky ways to annoy the other.

Ergo, if a Davies knew the last thing they should do was to provoke a Montgomery, it became an irresistible quest, a source of both enjoyment and deep satisfaction.

The Montgomery family felt precisely the same way, and it was no surprise to Rhys that conquering their rivals on the field of love had surpassed beating them on the

battlefield. Sleeping with the enemy was the ultimate forbidden fruit, and it wasn't at all incredible that all the years of mutual taunting had produced several successful marriages, those of his three siblings included.

Rhys had been adamant that he wouldn't succumb to the fatal charms of some Montgomery siren, however. Even so, he'd been feeling oddly relieved at Morgan's wedding, believing all the available Montgomery girls had been taken.

He was in the clear. The Davies Curse, as he'd started to call it, couldn't touch him.

And then he'd spoken to the two meddling Montgomery great aunts, Constance and Prudence, who'd gleefully informed him that three more Montgomery chits were sailing back from Madagascar.

That news had been enough to make Rhys break out into a cold sweat, even though he'd told himself quite firmly that there could be a dozen Montgomery women in London and he wouldn't fall for any of them. It was not pre-ordained. It wasn't his destiny. Such thinking was ridiculous.

But when their ship had been wrecked off the coast of Madagascar (and once he'd heard that nobody had died), he'd actually laughed in relief, knowing their arrival would be delayed.

And when Aunt Prudence casually mentioned that they'd finally docked in London, he'd breathed another sigh of relief to learn that the eldest of the three sisters, Caro, had already married one of their fellow castaways, his old school friend Max Cavendish, the Duke of Hayworth, on board the ship.

That still left the twins, Lucy and Lenore, and Rhys knew he'd feel a lot better once the two of them were taken out of commission, too.

Not that he put any store in the idea that he was in danger from falling for a Montgomery. Of course not.

But better safe than sorry.

He'd deliberately stayed away from London for the first few months after their arrival, lurking about at Trellech Court in Wales, but he'd been bored and lonely and itching to get back to town and the many diversions of the city during the social season.

News that Lucy, one of the twins, had married Will Arden, one of the aristocratic investors of the Drury Lane Theater, had been music to Rhys's ears, and he'd decided to throw caution to the wind and return to the capital.

How hard could it be to avoid Lenore, the last remaining twin? He'd just make sure their paths didn't cross until she was safely engaged to someone else, and then he'd be home and dry.

His plan had worked splendidly for several weeks, mainly due to the fact that Lenore was, apparently, spending most of her time down at Kew Gardens, advising on setting up a new hothouse for tropical plants and butterflies, her specialty.

He'd been introduced to both Caro and Lucy, and while he'd found them remarkably attractive females, there had been no lightning strike of infatuation, no hint that he was in any danger.

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The fact that Lucy was Lenore's twin gave him great confidence, even though it was impressed upon him that they weren't identical, and that men usually found Lenore to be the most striking of the two.

Still Rhys hadn't been worried. He'd met scores of fabulously beautiful women, and had affairs with several of them, and he was no callow youth to be blinded by a pair of fine eyes and a well-turned ankle. Beauty was more than skin deep, and it usually didn't take him long to see past the outer layers of a woman to their innate character. If they were mean, or bitchy, or avaricious, then he was immediately repelled, no matter how pretty the outer packaging.

And then had come the fateful night he'd encountered Lenore Montgomery.

He'd been in Lady Carrington's rose garden, teaching a salutary lesson in manners to the boorish Gordon Burton, who'd tried to grope Carys's friend Annabelle on the terrace. He'd just pushed the ill-mannered sod into the fountain, when he'd turned and lost his mind.

At first, he'd thought she was a hallucination, the result of Burton's one lucky punch that had caught him on the jaw and split his lip, but when she didn't disappear in a dramatic puff of smoke, he'd realized that the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life really was just standing there, just a few paces away.

The moonlight had been bright enough for Rhys to see the utter perfection of her features; wide eyes fringed with long lashes, a small, straight nose, and a slightly-too-wide mouth with the most kissable lips he'd ever seen. Her brown hair had been styled half up, half down, and the single curl that trailed over her shoulder made his

fingers itch to trace it down over the snowy perfection of her breasts, which rose and fell beneath the deliciously low-cut neckline of her gown.

“Who are you?”

The question had slipped out of his mouth without conscious thought, and he’d almost been too lost in her eyes to listen to her answer.

And then he’d heard, “I’m Lenore,” and his stomach had dropped in absolute dread.

His next question was almost pointless, since his body already knew what his brain was frantically trying to deny, but he asked it anyway.

“Not Lenore Montgomery?”

“The very same.”

Oh, shit.

His heart was pummeling his ribs as if he was being punched from the inside, and a horrific feeling of inevitability was sweeping over him, a sense of soul-deep recognition, as if he’d been waiting his whole life for this woman, without even being aware of it. That thought was immediately followed by another; that nothing was ever going to be the same, ever again.

Bollocks.

Rhys had never imagined he’d be thankful for Burton’s presence, but his timely interruption had been most welcome. Rhys’s mouth seemed to have forgotten how to frame words. Even when Lenore dismissed Gordon, he still hadn’t been able to think of anything to say. He’d just gazed at her like a simpleton, his usual quick-wits gone

begging as she'd muttered something about getting back to the party.

His knuckles were still stinging from the punches he'd thrown at Gordon, but Rhys had clenched his fists against the ridiculous urge to catch her wrist and stop her leaving. To keep her there so he could . . . what?

He shook his head. He had no idea what. Gaze at her some more? Demand to know where she'd been his whole life? Kiss her, right there in the moonlight? Cave to the inevitable, get down on one knee, and just say, "Marry me?"

God, no. There was no such thing as Fate. He was concussed. That would explain it.

Except Gordon had caught his lip, not his temple.

Rhys chose to ignore that pertinent piece of logic.

No. His reaction had been a momentary aberration. He'd been taken unawares. Hadn't had time to brace himself. Now that she'd gone, he could be reasonable and admit that Lenore Montgomery was a remarkably beautiful woman. In fact, if she'd been anyone other than a Montgomery, he'd have been striding back toward the house intent on making her his next conquest. He knew how to charm, how to flirt. How to seduce.

Bloody Hell.

Why couldn't she have been one of the scores of merry widows looking for a lover, or a courtesan seeking a new protector? Why did she have to be the very thing he'd absolutely promised himself he wouldn't have?

He would not be a cliché, the reason society laughed and whispered behind their fans because another Davies had been conquered. He hadn't survived three years in the

Hussars, fighting Napoleon's finest, only to be vanquished on home turf by a pair of flashing eyes and the most splendid bosom he'd ever—

Not the point.

She might be gorgeous, but she was probably vain and shallow along with it, and no doubt desperate to marry a title now that she was back in civilization. With looks like hers, she'd have her pick of suitors. She'd be a duchess or a countess in no time.

In fact, Rhys's lack of title would exclude him from consideration. He might have a handsome face, but his fortune, thanks to his remarkable success on the stock market, was something only his family was aware of. Lenore wouldn't be interested in him. Not when she could accept a duke or a marquis.

He had nothing to worry about. All he had to do was stay away from her until she'd chosen someone else. He had too much honor to dally with someone else's wife and she'd be regretfully, but firmly, out of his reach.

It had been an excellent plan, except for the fact that Rhys hadn't been able to stay away from her.

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He'd tried. He really had. But London society was surprisingly small, and the intermingling of their two families meant that he and Lenore regularly attended the same party or fete.

Even then, Rhys had attempted to keep his distance, spending hours in the card rooms instead of watching her with hungry eyes as she swirled around the dance floor with any number of besotted partners.

But every time he tried to avoid her, there she would be, inflaming his senses with her laughing green eyes and her coppery-brown curls. Making some sly, teasing comment that showed she was not just pretty, but witty and clever as well.

She was a natural seductress, charming men without even meaning to, and by the end of her first season she'd left a trail of broken hearts in her wake.

Rhys had ignored the gnawing feeling in his gut when he'd heard that the Duke of Andover had offered for her. She'd already turned down eight other suitors, including three earls, but Andover was the most eligible bachelor on the market. He was rich, affable, and almost as handsome as Rhys himself, and Rhys had been absolutely certain that Lenore would accept his suit.

She did not.

Rhys had drunk himself into a stupor in frustration. The girl clearly wasn't right in the head. Maybe she'd spent too much time in the sun on her travels and fried her brain. Who refused a duke? Didn't every girl dream of being a duchess? Andover wasn't even old. Or ugly. Or bankrupt. What possible other criteria could she have

for choosing a husband?

The answer, when he'd grumpily posed that same question to his sister, Carys, had made his heart stop in his chest. Lenore Montgomery had determined to marry for love.

She'd stated as much in public, apparently, and instead of mocking her aspirations as foolish and unrealistic, society had wholeheartedly agreed that a woman as beautiful as Lenore Montgomery should be allowed such a radical view.

Ordinary girls should be glad of whatever offers they received, but a diamond of the first water, like Lenore, could apparently indulge in whatever romantic notions she liked.

Rhys's brain hadn't stopped burning for a week.

Lenore wasn't holding out for a title. She didn't want a duke. She wanted a man who loved her. A man she could love in return.

The solution settled in his chest with an absolute sense of rightness.

That man could be him.

The past few months had been torture, holding himself back, pretending he had no interest in her. Enough was enough. He was interested. Drawn like a moth to the flame. The idea of marriage, so unappealing before, was perfectly palatable if it was with a woman like Lenore. In fact, she was the only woman he could ever imagine committing himself to.

It was time to take action. To see if there could be more between them just scorching attraction.

Chapter Three

Great Aunt Prudence's eightieth birthday celebrations at Newstead Park—the Montgomery mansion adjacent to the monstrous Davies Welsh castle, Trellech Court—provided Lenore with the perfect opportunity to put her plan to capture Rhys Davies's heart into action.

He might have done his best to avoid her for almost an entire social season, but he would definitely be attending the week-long party. Almost all of his Davies relatives would be there, and Lenore had decided enough was enough.

Something had to be done.

She'd spent months trying to get the stupid man to notice her, but even her most unsubtle attempts had met with failure. She'd been sure that once he saw how many other men desired her—including a duke!—that the well-documented competitive nature of the Davies male would kick in, and he'd start trying to win her affections, just to prove to everyone that he could.

He hadn't even asked her to dance.

She'd dressed in the most heart-stoppingly gorgeous gowns she could find, ones made by the infamous French seamstress Madame LeFèvre on Bond Street, known for her skill in creating dresses that brought men to their knees.

All Rhys had done was glare at her from across the room, as if she was being deliberately provoking.

Which she was. So why didn't he do something about it?

He clearly desired her. His brown eyes darkened to almost black whenever they met

hers, and a thrilling jolt of excitement flashed over her skin. She'd smiled at him, but instead of shoving every man in his path aside, stomping across the room, and dragging her out into the gardens for a thoroughly welcome ravishing, he'd merely clenched his jaw and turned away as if the sight of her was more than he could bear.

Lenore was reaching the limits of her patience. Her stupid heart was fixed on Rhys, despite how little he'd done to deserve it, but she had her pride. If, after a week in her company at the party, he still showed no signs of returning her affections, then she would abandon her pursuit of him.

Every sense urged that he was the perfect man for her, but perhaps she was being blinded by a healthy dose of infatuation. He was, after all, the most physically attractive man she'd ever met, so maybe she was just suffering from a case of unrequited lust, and not love?

She almost hoped that was the case. If Rhys rejected her, she'd be heartbroken, but at least she'd know she'd have to settle for one of her many other suitors, or remain a lifelong spinster, like her great aunts Constance and Pru.

This party was her last chance to either capture his attention, or assure herself of his indifference.

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Luckily, Aunts Constance and Prudence were some of England's finest meddlers. They loved nothing more than poking their noses into other people's business, especially if that business included a Davies, and they both nodded with gleeful enthusiasm when Lenore told them of her predicament.

"Well of course we'll help you, darling," Prudence had smiled. "Although are you sure he's the one? He's outrageously handsome, I'll give you that, but the man must be blind not to have noticed how wonderful you are."

Lenore wrinkled her nose. "Oh, he's noticed me. He just does an excellent job of pretending not to whenever we're in the same room. And when he does deign to look my way, he acts as though my looks are an annoyance, not an attraction."

"That's still an excellent start." Constance grinned up from her knitting. "At least you're arousing a primitive reaction. Anger is still passion, after all. If he were indifferent, that would be far worse."

"I suppose," Lenore shrugged. "But I need to show him there's more to me than just a pretty face. I am funny and clever and resourceful."

"You just have to spend some time with him, alone," Pru said. "If he deserves you, then he'll come to appreciate your excellent qualities. And he'll show you his own."

"There will be plenty of opportunities to be alone with him this week." Constance nodded. "Especially if we make them happen."

Lenore smiled. "What are you thinking?"

“Well, you and Rhys are the only ones who aren’t married, which means the others will naturally form their own couples whenever it comes to playing games. And you know how much we all love a little friendly Davies-Montgomery rivalry.”

Pru grinned. “Connie and I had the marvelous idea of doing a treasure hunt of some sort. It’s going to take place here, in the Newstead grounds, and on Davies land, around Trellech Court. That way there can be no claims of an unfair advantage for either side.”

“We’ll put everyone in teams of two, of course,” Constance chuckled. “One Davies and one Montgomery.”

Lenore chuckled. “Genius.”

“We have at least four Davies-Montgomery couples already. Gryff and Maddie, Carys and Tristan, Morgan and Harriet, and you and Rhys.”

“What about Caro and Lucy? Neither of them succumbed to the dreaded Davies curse.”

“Their husbands will be honorary Davies. Just for this week.”

“I love it,” Lenore laughed.

Prudence gave a satisfied nod. “Knowing how ridiculously competitive you all are, I predict all manner of amusing skullduggery. I can’t wait.”

“And with you teamed up with Rhys, we’ll make sure to send you all to the most remote locations to find clues.” Constance gave a wicked wink, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Nothing like having to work together through adversity to really find out what the other person’s made of.”

Prudence nodded. “You might find him completely obnoxious and unbearable.”

“It might be a blessing,” Lenore said wryly. “At least I’d be cured of this ridiculous infatuation.”

“Or you might discover he’s been harboring exactly the same infatuation,” Constance snorted. “And he’s been too stubborn to do anything about it. I think that’s far more likely. Either way, you’ll have your answer by the end of the week. You’ll either love him, or be free of him.”

Lenore nodded. “Let the games begin.”

Chapter Four

“Montgomery.”

Lenore smiled at Rhys’s typically dry greeting as he strode across the lower lawn towards her. She tried, unsuccessfully, not to notice the divine way his pale buckskin breeches molded to his thighs, nor the careless disorder of his hair that made her fingers itch to stroke it.

“Morning, Davies. It seems we’ve been paired together for this challenge.”

Rhys’s lips gave a cynical twitch. “Indeed. I see you’ve dressed for the occasion.” He sent her pretty lavender day dress a disapproving frown.

Lenore hid a grin. The dress might not be the most practical outfit for a treasure hunt, to be sure, but it did wonders for her figure and the color was the perfect foil for her coppery-brown hair and green eyes.

“We’ll be searching the grounds, not paddling up the Amazon.” She sent him a

challenging, sideways look. “Which I’ve done, by the way.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Yes, I know. Your sister Caro told me all about your intrepid adventures when we were seated together at dinner last night.”

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Lenore bit her lip. She'd been unreasonably jealous of Caro when she'd glanced down the long table and seen her chatting so effortlessly with Rhys. He seemed to smile and charm with every other woman except her. What was wrong with her?

Both Davies and Montgomery families were amply represented this morning. Cousin Tristan, the architect, stood with his arm around his wife, red-haired Carys. They'd come over after breakfast from their house just over the hill.

Gryff, Rhys's eldest brother, was whispering something in Maddie's ear that made her blush, while cousin Harriet was arguing with her Davies husband Morgan about an alternative way to read the compass she'd pulled from her pocket.

Lenore's sisters, Lucy and Caro, were also there, each with their respective partners. It was going to be an exciting morning.

Aunt Prudence cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. "Ahem! I hope you're ready to begin." She held up a bundle of folded papers. "The aim of this treasure hunt is to find the ten colored flags, like this one Connie is waving about, that have been hidden around the place. They could be on either Davies or Montgomery property, and they could be high or low, indoors or out."

"And don't think that because neither myself nor Prudence are particularly nimble, that they'll all be hidden in easy-to-reach places." Constance said. "We employed several wonderfully athletic footmen to place the flags where we wanted them."

Lenore grinned at the sparkle in her aunts' eyes. They'd probably relished the opportunity to ogle the young men while they worked; they were bawdy old crones.

“There is one clue for each flag.” Prudence handed one folded paper to each team, winking at Lenore as she took hers. “When I say go, you may open the papers and read the clues. The team that finds the most flags, and brings them back here to us, will be declared the winner.”

“What’s the prize?” Gryff demanded, earning him a laughing glance from his wife, Maddie.

“The glory of being the victors, of course.” Aunt Prudence said. “And bragging rights over your siblings.”

“The very best kind of prize,” Morgan chuckled.

Aunt Constance pulled out a silver pocket watch and squinted at the time. “The day will be split into two sessions. You may search this morning until lunch, which can be partaken either here or at Trellech at one o’clock. The afternoon session will start at two, and you’ll have until dinner—that’s nine o’clock—to find as many flags as you can. Now . . . go!”

Rhys leaned over Lenore’s shoulder as she fumbled to open the paper, and the delicious scent of his cologne made it hard to concentrate on the handwritten lines in front of her.

“What’s the first clue?”

“I’m a handsome male, a sight to be seen. All eyes are on me when I preen.” Lenore read.

Rhys wrinkled his nose. “What on earth does that mean?”

Carys and Tristan were already hurrying away across the grass.

“It’s a peacock,” Lenore smiled. “Isn’t it the males which have the hundreds of ‘eyes’ on their tails?”

Rhys nodded. “Of course. Well done. There are scores of ‘em over at Trellech, all wandering around, screeching at people.”

“How are we supposed to know which one has the flag?” Lenore asked. “Do they have a cage where they go at night?”

“No. They just roam free. But knowing your great Aunts, and their penchant for making things difficult, I bet it’s somewhere near Geoffrey.” Rhys said darkly.

“Geoffrey’s a peacock?”

“To all outward appearances, yes. But I sincerely believe he’s the devil in avian form. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve wanted to strangle him for waking me up at dawn.”

Lenore bit back a smile at how aggrieved he sounded. “Perhaps the Trellech menagerie would be a good place to start?”

“Probably. In fact, I bet that’s where Carys and Tristan are headed right now.”

Lenore nodded and turned to start across the lawn, but Rhys’s hand shot out and he caught her wrist. She glanced down at it, surprised by the contact—and the flash of heat that skittered over her skin—and he released her as if she burned him.

“Don’t go haring off to Trellech just yet,” he said. “We need to be clever about this if we’re going to win.” He sent her a sideways glance. “You do want to win, don’t you?”

Lenore snorted. “Of course.”

“Right, then. There might be other flags, closer to here, that we can find. Let’s read the rest of the clues then make a plan for the most efficient route to get to them. No point running back and forth between here and Trellech and wearing ourselves out.”

“You can tell you were in the army,” she teased. “That’s very organized.”

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He inclined his head at the compliment. “As an officer, having my men conserve their energy was of vital importance.”

“Very well, clue two is:I’m part of a ship, a game with cards, I link two houses with a shaking of hands.”

“Ships?” Rhys grumbled. “Morgan’s bound to get this one. He’s the only one of us who joined the navy.” He bit his lip and leaned closer, apparently unaware of the fluttering his proximity created in her belly. Or perhaps he knew only too well, and he was determined to torture her until she died of unrequited lust.

“One Davies and one Montgomery have to meet and shake hands on the spring equinox every year to keep the peace.” Lenore said evenly. “Perhaps it’s a reference to that?”

“Of course. The answer’s bridge,” Rhys said suddenly. “That’s where the captain stands on a ship, and it’s a card game, like whist. The flag must be must be on the bridge over the river that marks the border between our lands.”

Lenore glanced across the lawn and saw that Gryff and Maddie were already headed in the opposite direction to Carys and Tristan, no doubt on their way to the bridge.

“That’s not too far from here,” she said. “But there still might be somewhere closer.”

Rhys nodded and read. “Clue three is:I have jackets but I’m not a wardrobe. I have thousands of leaves, but I’m not a forest.”

“A library!” Lenore chuckled. “Books have dust jackets and leaves, don’t they? But which library should we search? There’s one here, but I’m sure you have one over at Newstead, too.”

“We do,” Rhys nodded. “It’s where Tristan proposed to Carys after they’d been chasing that wretched bear all over the county.”

“I heard about that. It sounded very exciting.”

“Not nearly as exciting as the story Caro told me last night about you chasing off a panther,” he said. His brown eyes sparkled with interest.

Lenore fought a blush. “It’s wasn’t as impressive as it sounds. It was when we were in Brazil, in the rainforest. I was in my tent one evening, and I heard a strange sound, almost like a cough, then a growl. I opened the flap, and there was a black jaguar, just slinking through the camp, not five feet from me. I panicked. I picked up the closest thing to hand, which happened to be my shoe, and threw it at him with a shout. It hit him on the tail, and he ran off into the forest.”

She shook her head in recollection. “He was such a beautiful creature. His fur wasn’t completely black, but dappled, and his eyes were the most incredible yellow. I’m glad I got to see him.”

She glanced up at the man next to her. Rhys reminded her of that panther. Dark and muscled, with a sinuous, athletic grace. And yet his comment about taking care of the men under his command showed there was more to him than just his outward appearance. He was responsible, compassionate. Kind.

“So, we’ll check the library here first, and if there’s no flag, we’ll head over to Trellech. Next clue?”

“Clue four: Red or white, the ancients say there’s truth in me.” Lenore read.

“That’s easy. Wine. In vino Veritas, and all that.”

“So, a wine bottle? Wine cellar? Both houses have those, too.”

Rhys shrugged, an elegant lift of his muscular shoulders. “We’ll have to look in both, I suppose.”

“Right. Next clue. Number 5. A foolish ruin.” Lenore thought for a moment. “Oh, that’s folly. There’s one on the Montgomery side of the river, in the woods. Our great grandfather had it built when things like that were all the rage.”

“Excellent. Clue six?”

“A healthy source of water.”

They both frowned. “What could that be? A water source could be a spring, a river, a stream. But why healthy?”

“What’s another word for healthy?” Rhys asked. “Hale. Hearty?” His brow cleared. “I have it – well! As in, not sick. And somewhere you can get water.”

Lenore nodded enthusiastically. “They must mean the wishing well, near the western border. That’s about halfway between here and Trellech. So is the folly. We should go to them one after the other.”

“Agreed.”

Lenore smiled, her heart beating in satisfaction at how well they were working together. They made an excellent team.

“Clue seven is: I’m surrounded by water, but I’m not a fish. No man is this, according to John Donne.”

Rhys chuckled. “That one is for you and your sisters. You’ve spent time on several of them. The answer’s an island.”

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Lenore gave a good-natured groan. “One flag’s on an island?” She sent a mock-furious glare over at Constance and Prudence, and the two of them erupted into fits of giggles.

“Figured out clue number seven?” Pru chuckled. “We thought you’d appreciate that one, my love.”

“And you’ll need number eight to get there,” Constance added.

Lenore glanced back down. Clue eight read, I can have gravy in me or water under me. “A boat,” she said. “I thought I’d seen the last of boats when we docked in England.”

“What’s clue number nine?” Rhys asked.

“I have hands but no arms, a face but no eyes. That’s a clock,” Lenore frowned. “But there must be hundreds of clocks between this house and Trellech. There’s one in almost every room.”

Rhys glanced over at Prudence and Constance, who were watching them with undisguised interest.

“That’s true, but knowing how much your Aunts love excitement and entertainment, I doubt it’s going to be hidden behind some nondescript mantel clock. It’s going to be something big and bold.” He thought for a moment. “The most visible clock—and the most difficult one to get to—is the one in the highest tower at Trellech. I bet it’s somewhere like that.”

“You’re right,” Lenore nodded. “They did say they weren’t going to make it easy for us.”

“Very well. What’s the last clue?”

“I could be an admiral, a monarch, an emperor, or a painted lady.”

“Another naval question,” Rhys grumbled. “They’re clearly favoring Morgan again. What have an admiral, a king or queen, and a courtesan have in common?”

Lenore laughed. “They’re not people. Those are all species of butterfly. I bet my father helped them write that clue. The flag must be somewhere in the butterfly house. That’s at the far end of the gardens, behind the trees over there.”

She gestured past the edge of the formal lawns, toward the walled garden.

“Right. So, by the sounds of it, there are three or four flags here near Newstead, three in the land between the two houses, and another three over at Trellech. Let’s check the closest ones first, like the library, the wine cellar, and the butterfly house, then head further afield. Agreed?”

Lenore nodded. She’d spent ample time with men who simply told her what to do without asking for her agreement or her opinion, but Rhys had seemed pleased at her cleverness in deciphering some of the clues, and keen to work with her as an equal.

“Agreed.”

Chapter Five

While a few of the other couples disappeared into the gardens, Lenore led Rhys back into the house. The Newstead library was a handsome room, with shelves of leather-

bound volumes lining the walls and Uncle William's desk, piled high with various papers and correspondence.

They made a thorough search of the room, but no colored flag could be found, and Rhys finally turned to her with a sigh.

"Either someone's already beaten us to it, or the flag is in the library at Trellech, not here."

"Let's move on to the clue about wine instead, then. Should we check the pantry? There might be some cooking wine in there. Or the wine cellar?"

"Cellar first."

They stepped out into the hallway just as Lenore's older sister Caro emerged, giggling, from the steps up from the wine cellar. Will, her husband, was tickling her as she ascended the stairs.

"There's no flag down there," Caro laughed as she caught sight of Lenore, and batted Will's hands away so she could catch a breath. "We've already looked."

"Nothing in the library, either," Lenore said, ignoring the way Rhys elbowed her in the ribs and hissed, "Don't tell them anything. They're the enemy!"

Lenore rolled her eyes and went to follow Caro back out into the garden, but Rhys caught her waist and turned her gently in the opposite direction.

She ignored the swooping sensation in her stomach at his casual touch.

"Don't let them see where we're going!" he scolded. "They might not have cracked the clue about the butterfly house yet. We need to use a different exit. Where?"

“This way.” Lenore led him through the music room, then the drawing room, and together they slipped out of the tall French windows and onto the terrace.

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She lifted her skirts so she could move more quickly, and they hurried across the narrow patch of lawn and ducked behind a tall yew hedge.

“It’s this way, through the orchard.”

Lenore told herself she was breathless because of the pace, and not because she was suddenly alone with Rhys Davies.

A few laughs and shouts from the other couples could still be heard as they weaved between the apple trees, but they became fainter as their distance from the house increased.

“Let’s hope we’re the first to crack that particular clue,” Lenore said, silently impressed by the way Rhys matched her steps by shortening his naturally longer strides.

Sunlight glinted off the hundreds of glass panes that made up her father’s pride and joy; the glazed butterfly house he’d commissioned while they were in Brazil.

Rhys let out a whistle when he saw it. “Impressive.”

Lenore smiled. Her father, Rollo, was one of England’s foremost lepidopterists, and he’d dragged his long-suffering wife and children all around the world to study his beloved butterflies. Lenore wouldn’t have changed a thing about her slightly unorthodox upbringing, but she was glad to be back in England now, after so many years abroad. It was lovely to have creature comforts like baths, cake shops and modistes so easily accessible.

She'd also been getting restless, keen to start pursuing her own passions, instead of taking part in someone else's. And now she had her chance.

Rhys looked around in interest as they reached the glazed door. The structure was huge, with hundreds of panes of glass supported by an elegant framework of cast iron. The inner surfaces of the panes were foggy with condensation.

"Prepare yourself," Lenore warned. "It's going to be extremely hot and steamy in here thanks to all the tropical plants. In fact, you might want to remove your jacket."

Rhys raised his brows and sent her a cheeky grin. "Trying to make me undress, Montgomery? How scandalous."

Lenore fought a blush. "Not at all. I'm only thinking of your health. I'm used to the oppressive heat of the tropics, whereas you might find it overwhelming. I'm not likely to catch you if you suddenly faint on me."

"We'd both end up on the floor in a tangle of limbs," he agreed, and the twinkle in his eye proved how much he was enjoying the double-entendre. "Can't have that."

He shrugged out of his jacket and rested it on a nearby bush, and Lenore drank in the sight of him in shirt sleeves and cravat. In theton, a gentleman would never remove his jacket in the presence of a lady, and she sent up a silent thanks to her aunts for engineering this more relaxed atmosphere.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside, and the blast of hot air was still a shock, even though she was expecting it.

"I have an interest in tropical plants," she said over her shoulder. "I sent Uncle William a detailed lists of all the onesthat would be good to grow in here to help the butterflies flourish."

She started along one of the brick paths, then turned to see Rhys's reaction. Hundreds of brightly colored butterflies were flitting about, or sunning themselves on the foliage.

"Amazing!" Rhys said, his tone genuinely awed.

"Most naturalists and collectors simply pin dead specimens to a card." Lenore wrinkled her nose at the thought. "But a dead butterfly doesn't give a sense of the living beauty of the creature—the way they flutter and glide and flap. Father's made it his mission to breed as many of these exotic species as he can, and to educate people about them. He disagrees with capturing them just to put them in a collection. And I agree. They should be allowed to live a full life."

"These are all butterflies you brought back from Brazil?"

Lenore nodded. "And a few from Madagascar, too."

"How did you get them back here? On a ship?"

"We brought almost five hundred caterpillars, from around fifty different species, and hundreds more caterpillar eggs. It's quite skill to rear butterflies from eggs. Father's writing a paper on it."

Rhys tipped his head back to admire the ones flitting above their heads, and the sight of his strong throat and angled jaw made her feel even more light-headed. What would his cheek feel like under her fingers? Would the slight dark stubble she could see there be rough? Or smooth?

She cleared her throat and forced herself to concentrate on less incendiary topics.

"There are butterflies in the Amazon that camouflage themselves so well they look

just like dead leaves. And others, like the huge *Caligo* butterflies, that have markings on their wings that look like the eyes of an owl.”

She pointed. “Do you see that bright yellow one? That’s the cloudless sulphur. *Phoebis sennae*. And that red one is called a postman.”

“What do they all eat?” Rhys asked.

“Nectar from flowers mainly, or the juice from rotting fruit. Each species has their own particular favorite. The *Heliconius* feed on passion flowers, which makes them mildly poisonous to predators. The bright coloring of their wings sends out a visual warning that they will be horrid to taste.”

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She lifted her fingers toward an enormous turquoise-blue butterfly that had settled on a nearby leaf. It was almost the size of her hand, its wings tipped in black.

“This is one of my favorites. A blue morpho, *Morpho peleides*. From the family Nymphalidae. Isn't he beautiful?”

“Yes. Very.”

Rhys's voice was rough, almost raspy, and when she shot a look at him, she found him looking at her, not at the butterfly. Her skin heated even more, but the butterfly took off, breaking the moment, and they both watched it sail up toward the roof.

“See how he seems to float in the air? He hardly needs to flap its wings at all.”

Lenore started along the path again, keeping an eye out for a colored flag. But every flash of red or yellow turned out to be another butterfly. The Aunts had chosen an excellent place to hide the prize.

“How did you know that butterfly was a male?” Rhys asked suddenly. “You called it a he.”

“Only the male morphos are that lovely bright blue color. The females are well-camouflaged, a mottled brown and white. They're very dull in comparison.”

“Like peacocks, then” Rhys said. “Do you think it's nature's way of letting the men show off? Or is it a clever ploy to put themore expendable males in danger by creating a distraction, so the predators attack them instead of the females?”

“I wouldn’t say you men were expendable,” Lenore said. “But that’s effectively what you soldiers did, when you were fighting Napoleon. You put yourselves in harm’s way to protect the rest of us. The country owes men like you an enormous debt. We’d all be speaking French right now if it wasn’t for you.”

“It was our duty. I’m just glad I lived through it, to tell you the truth.”

Rhys ran a hand through his hair and looked charmingly uncomfortable with her admiration, and she turned away with a smile. His modesty was just another aspect of him that she liked.

“Morpho caterpillars defend themselves by producing a repellent smell.” She said, mainly to lighten the mood.

It worked. Rhys chuckled. “I know a few members of the ton who use the same principle. I swear Lord Ashwood doesn’t bathe more than once a year.”

She loved his humor, too.

“I helped collect most of these caterpillars.”

“You don’t have a disgust of them?”

“No. Some are rather sweet, actually. And they come in all shapes and sizes. My favorite ones are hairy, like little wooly bears. They’re very comical.” She pointed to another butterfly. “That’s a glass-wing, *Haetera piera*. Its wings are almost entirely transparent.”

Rhys snorted. “Like Lord Bollingbrook’s motivation for proposing to Violet Brand. He’s sixty-two, with a crumbling estate and debts up to his eyeballs, and she’s the beloved only child of a textile magnate. Unsurprisingly, Violet’s father doubted his

insistence that it was ‘true love’.”

Lenore chuckled at his dry, cynical tone. “That’s the tone for you. Violet might not have accepted him, but there are plenty of other society marriages that have been based on such a principle. Rich merchants ally themselves with impoverished aristocrats all the time; a fortune in exchange for a noble title.”

“Alas, I have no noble title to tempt a lady,” Rhys grinned, his eyes sparkling. “I am but a lowly second son, with no hope of acceding to the title unless something dreadful befalls Gryff. And knowing what a stubborn, perverse sod he is, he’ll live to be a hundred, just to thwart me.”

Lenore laughed. The bond between the Davies siblings was as strong as that between herself and her sisters, and she knew he’d be devastated if anything really did happen to his brother.

He glanced over at her. “But perhaps a lofty title isn’t the most important criteria for a lady? You, for example, turned down the chance to be a duchess.”

He raised his brows in question, and she glanced away, flustered by his probing. She didn’t want to discuss her reasoning with the very man who’d brought about the decision. Not yet, anyway.

A flash of red in her peripheral vision provided a welcome distraction, and she let out a little shout of triumph. “There’s a flag! Up there. Look!”

Rhys followed the direction she indicated and let out a groan. The flag had been lodged high up in the fronds of a huge palm tree.

“That’s at least twenty feet up! How are we expected to get up there?”

“There was a butterfly net by the door. We could use that.”

Rhys dutifully went to retrieve it, but even when he stood on tiptoe, the flag was still out of reach. They both looked around for something they could use as a step, but there was none to be found.

“Could you climb the tree?” Lenore suggested.

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“Not easily,” he said, hands on his hips as he surveyed the problem. “Is there a ladder somewhere? In one of the gardener’s sheds?”

“We don’t have time for that. One of the other teams could come at any moment. What if I lift you up?” She threaded her fingers together to make a step. “I can give you a leg up, as if you were mounting a horse.”

He sent her a scoffing glance. “You wouldn’t be able to take my weight. I might hurt you.”

“Well then, why don’t you liftmeup?”

“That wouldn’t be much use. We’d only gain a few inches. Unless you sit on my shoulders.”

“Let’s do that then,” Lenore said.

Rhys’s eyes widened as if she’d said the most scandalous thing in Christendom. “You’re wearing skirts, Montgomery. To sit on my shoulders, you’d have to wrap your thighs around my head.”

Lenore rolled her eyes, even though the very thought of doing something so shocking made every cell in her body tingle.

“I know that. Breeches would be better, but it can’t be helped. I’m game if you are. Don’t you want that flag, Davies?”

The challenge was the perfect goad to poke him into action, but her cheeks heated as she waited for his response. Was she being too daring? Would he be disgusted by her wanton suggestion and call her a terrible hoyden?

And then his beautiful lips parted in a wicked grin, and her spirits lifted in relief. She'd always suspected he was as ready for an adventure as herself.

He crossed to stand directly under the tree, then bent down on one knee.

"Come here then."

Lenore's heart was pounding as she put her hand on his shoulder and looked down at him. If only he'd adopt this position to propose marriage to her.

"Right, now, put one foot on my bent leg, then hook your other knee over my shoulder." His tone was one he'd doubtless used to command his troops, but all she could think about was that without his jacket, only the fine cotton of his shirt separated her palm from his skin.

His muscles twitched beneath her hand as he shifted his weight, and her mouth went dry.

"I've done this a hundred times," she said, trying to focus. "On Caro or Lucy's shoulders. How do you think we picked bananas and green coconuts when we were in the jungle?"

Rhys nodded. "Fair enough. Up you go."

Her pulse rocketed as she bent her right leg over his broad shoulder. Her skirts hitched up, gathering in lilac pleats behind his neck, and he grasped the front of her shin to hold her steady. The heat of his strong fingers bled through the silk of her

stocking.

She placed her right hand on his head and threw her other leg over his left shoulder, then let out a little shriek as she wobbled. His left hand caught her left shin, and he rose from his kneel with a fluid movement that was undeniably impressive. He was clearly much stronger than either Caro or Lucy—one of them usually had to help the other to stand with Lenore on their shoulders.

His hair was delightfully soft beneath her fingers, but her cheeks burned at the feel of his head nestled between her legs, so close to her womanly core.

The fabric of her skirts had rucked up to about knee-height, and her stockings were only visible to the knee—not even high enough for him to see her garters—but the knowledge that she was wearing nothing except her chemise and petticoats beneath her dress, that only a few layers of fabric lay between the skin of his jaw and the inside of her naked thigh, made her stomach somersault in dark delight.

A deep pulse of pleasure clenched her core.

“Reach up and grab the flag.”

His voice brought her back to the task at hand. She carefully released her grip on his hair and tightened her thighs around his ears to steady herself, as he handed her the butterfly net.

He gave a soft grunt of exertion. She reached up, pushing her heels against his chest as leverage to lift herself, and finally managed to scoop the little red pennant into the net.

“Got it!” She shouted. “First flag for us!”

She kept her balance as he slowly lowered himself back down, and climbed off his shoulders with the most elegant dismount she could manage. She stepped back and twitched her skirts back into place as he stood and turned to face her. His cheeks were slightly pink, but he wasn't sweating in the heat. Perhaps he'd become accustomed to working in such warmer temperatures when he'd been in Portugal and Spain?

"Good job!" He grinned, and Lenore had to force herself not to throw herself into his arms for a celebratory hug. She handed him the flag instead.

"You hold this. Now, let's get out of here. I'm rather hot."

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She fanned her pink cheeks, hoping he'd ascribe the humid conditions to her flustered state, and not to the thrilling excitement of his presence.

Chapter Six

Rhys took a deep, welcome breath of cool air as he stepped out of the butterfly house behind Lenore.

He felt slightly dizzy, and while it would be tempting to blame the oppressive heat inside, he knew the real reason was the outrageously provoking woman in front of him.

His blood was still pounding at the memory of having his head between her thighs. The delicious, perfumed scent of her had filled his nose as her skirts had billowed round him, and it had taken all his willpower to concentrate on lifting her up to get the flag. The temptation to run his hands up the front of her shins, over her knees and then higher, to the soft feminine skin he knew lurked just above her garters, had been almost too much to bear.

His cock had hardened to the point of pain, and as soon as she'd climbed off him, he'd turned away and pretended to admire a swallowtail butterfly while subtly rearranging himself in his breeches.

He'd let her precede him out of the glasshouse.

Lenore had surprised him with her cheeky suggestion. He'd known she had the reputation as someone who put little store in the tedious formalities of social

convention, and he was delighted to find she had a naughty, rebellious streak.

He couldn't have planned things better himself. They'd already skipped the traditional, dull first steps of courtship, like exchanging longing glances and holding hands, and progressed straight to more intimate physical contact. And Lenore hadn't seemed to mind it one bit. In fact, she'd been the one to suggest it.

Rhys's heart swelled with hope. Perhaps she might not be so averse to him as he'd thought.

Lenore handed him his jacket, from where it had been dangling from a bush, and he shrugged it back on with a smile of thanks. Her cheeks were a becoming shade of pink, and a few wisps of her coppery-brown hair had sprung free from her upswept hairstyle and curled in the heat. She looked deliciously tousled, and his stomach clenched at the thought of all the other ways he'd like to tousle her even more. He wanted her positively disheveled.

But not yet. He had to know that she was willing. And that she knew his intentions were honorable. He wasn't some cad who would ravish her and then leave her. He wouldn't touch her unless he was certain she understood that it was marriage, not merely seduction, he had planned.

Lenore pointed at the flag he still held in his hand. "Should we take this straight to the aunts, or go after the next flag?"

"Next flag, of course. The sooner we get there, the better chance we'll have of getting it. Which is the next nearest clue?"

"The wishing well. It's that way, through the woods. We can either walk, or go back to the stables and get horses."

“Saddling a horse will take a bit of time. If there’s a chance of beating the others to it on foot, then we should go.”

“I’m perfectly able to walk. I’m not some idle miss who’s never done more than amble around Hyde Park. I can trek formiles.” She gave her skirts a dismissive twitch. “I’d do much better in breeches, of course, but never mind. Let’s go.”

Rhys bit the inside of his cheek to distract himself from the mental image of Lenore’s delicious curves in a pair of breeches. God, that was something he’d give half his fortune to see.

She was already heading off through the trees, so he started after her, enjoying the seductive sway of her pert bottom as she strode along in front of him.

They walked for a good ten minutes, following a barely-visible path, and Rhys found his senses soothed by the dappled greens of the ancient woodland. Mossy oaks and lichen-covered boulders were bordered by an outrageous number of ferns and flowering plants, and he took a moment to appreciate the joy of being home.

When he’d been in Spain and Portugal, exhausted after a day of fighting or scouting, trying to sleep on some dusty, uncomfortable cot and cursing the dry heat that seemed to suck every drop of moisture from his bones, he’d closed his eyes and dreamed of this place. Of Wales, and Trellech, and this soul-calming green. Of this profound feeling of contentment and rest. Of some unknown woman who was out there, somewhere, waiting for him. A woman he’d yet to meet, but one he knew, deep in his gut, that hewouldmeet, one day.

That wishful yearning had a face now. And a name.

And eyes the same green of this forest. He wanted to drown in them.

“Here we are.”

Lenore stopped and Rhys almost bumped into her. He peered over her shoulder and saw a clearing up ahead, with a low circular stone wall in the center.

“The Virtuous Well.” Lenore said reverently.

Rhys snorted. “That’s the English name for it. We Welsh call it Ffynnon Pen Rhys—Pen Rhys’s well.”

She gave him a playful nudge in the ribs with her elbow. “Of course you’d prefer that. It’s got your name in it.”

He puffed his chest out with mock pride. “I’ll have you know that Rhys is an ancient Welsh name. One given to princes and kings. Like Rhys ap Gruffud, the ruler of southern Wales in the twelfth century.”

He leaned closer, loving the way her eyes widened slightly. “It means ardor or passion.”

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Her lips parted as she sucked in a breath, and he quashed the almost overwhelming urge to kiss her.

“Passion?” Her lips curved up at the corners and her gaze held his. “Really? How interesting.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if she wanted him to demonstrate said passion, but instead he turned his head and broke the sizzling contact between them.

Patience.

“I’ve never come at it from this direction before,” he said easily, brushing past her and into the clearing. “I’ve always ridden over here from Trellech.” He cocked his head and listened. “Doesn’t sound as if anyone else is here. We might be the first.”

The curved stone wall that protected the well was scarcely knee-high, but Rhys descended the set of shallow steps about six feet down into the earth and stepped into the tiny stone-flagged ‘courtyard’, open to the sky. The well itself was housed in a small, arched enclave at one end, surrounded by a lip of flat stones.

“Local tradition has it that if you toss a coin, or some other metal offering, into the water, your wish will come true.” Lenore said, following him down.

“Mightcome true,” Rhys corrected. “That’s what Carys told me, anyway. She said if the bubbles that form on the object rise quickly, then the wish will be granted with equal speed. If they’re slow to rise, the wish will take longer to come true. And if there are no bubbles at all, your wish won’t be granted. Nothing’s guaranteed.”

Lenore thrust her hand into a side slit in her skirts and rummaged around in the pocket beneath. She pulled out a bent hairpin. “Might as well try my luck.”

She stepped to his side and tossed it into the waters with a splash, and they both leaned forward to watch it sink to the bottom. The shaft was very deep—fed by an underground system of caves that his older brother Gryff had stumbled upon one day with Maddie, Lenore’s cousin—but it was so clear that it was easy to see the rapid stream of bubbles coming off the bent metal as it sank.

Lenore gave a pleased little hum.

“Whatever you wished for, it’s going to come true very soon,” he said.

She sent him an enigmatic smile. “Oh, I certainly hope so. It’s something I’ve been wanting for almost a year now. I’m getting rather impatient.”

Chapter Seven

Lenore was delighted to see the bubbles rising from her hairpin as it sank. She’d wished for Rhys to kiss her, and even though she put little faith in superstition, there was no denying the tingle of excitement at the possibility that it might actually happen soon.

There was no sign of a flag, however, and she climbed back up the narrow steps and back into the clearing, hotly aware of Rhys following her, his head level with her bottom.

“We should check the cave entrance, too. Just in case the flag’s been hidden in there.” She strode over to another, far newer, set of steps in a hollow of the valley just beyond the well.

Her cousin Maddie had accidentally discovered an enormous underground cave system here only a few years ago, which in turn had led to the discovery of a rich seam of gold. Since ownership of this particular section of land was shared equally between the Davies and the Montgomerys, both families had profited from the unexpected windfall.

“Maddie took us to see the mine a few days ago,” Lenore said. “It was fascinating. Our ancestors would be shocked to the core to find Davies and Montgomerys working together in a joint collaboration.”

Rhys grinned. “I like to think we’ve finally evolved. Although it’s taken a few hundred years. We both come from families who are particularly resistant to change. Wait, watch your step.”

He reached out and took her hand to help her down the stairs, and her fingers tingled at the contact.

In truth, the steps were perfectly safe. Gryff had ordered them to be built to allow easy access to the tunnel system, to replace the steep pile of rubble that had been created when Maddie had fallen through the roof of the cave. But Lenore was glad of the excuse to touch Rhys again.

The light faded as they reached the bottom, and a cool blast of air riffled the hairs at her nape. She reluctantly dropped Rhys’s hand.

He pointed to one of the lanterns that had been left by the entrance. “Want to go and explore?”

The cavern extended for some distance, some sections leading all the way to the coast, but Lenore shook her head. “No, although I don’t mind caves. We explored an enormous one in Brazil, once. The only thing I didn’t like was the bats. Or rather, the

smell of the bat droppings.” She wrinkled her nose in memory. “I can’t tell you how vile it was.”

“I can imagine,” Rhys chuckled. “Probably as bad as the smell of a regiment of sweaty, unwashed men and their equally sweaty horses, after weeks traipsing around Portugal.”

Lenore nodded, struck by the fact that they had much in common. They’d both suffered hardships and difficult situations abroad.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate being able to have a bath whenever the mood takes me,” Rhys said lightly. “It makes up for all the times I dreamed of having one when I couldn’t. I promised myself that if I made it back from the war, I’d never take something so wonderful for granted ever again.”

“I know exactly what you mean. I used to fantasize about Gunter’s ices when we were shipwrecked. I’d imagine entire six-course dinners, the most comfortable feather bed with silk sheets and velvet covers. All the things I couldn’t have.”

Including him.

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She'd dreamed of him. Well, not him specifically, but a tall, dark, handsome mystery man who would capture her heart and sweep her off her feet. He'd kept her company at night and featured in her most lurid daydreams.

Lenore bit her lip to hide her smile. Rhys had, technically, already swept her off her feet when he'd lifted her up on his shoulders. But if she was honest, he'd stolen her heart long before that, the first night she'd ever laid eyes on him.

"I don't think even Prudence and Constance would have ordered a flag hidden down here," she said. "Besides, the clue was for a well, not a cave. One of the other couples must have already been here and found it, while we were in the butterfly house."

"On to the next clue, then," Rhys sighed. "Which is closer, the folly, or the bridge?"

"The bridge." Lenore ascended the steps without his help and pointed to a tree-lined path. "That leads to the track between Newstead and Trellech. The bridge is over the river that marks the border."

"Let's go then."

The sun fell in dappled patches on the ground as they walked together beneath the trees, and a companionable silence settled between them. Lenore was constantly aware of him, but she felt entirely at ease in his company. She'd spent a great deal of time around men, porters who carried their equipment, sailors with whom she'd been shipwrecked, and a few of them had made her distinctly uncomfortable in the way their eyes had lingered on her body.

Rhys was a physically impressive specimen, but she felt safe with him. He was a man who'd provide protection, not a threat.

When they came to the road—little more than a well-used track—they turned and followed it until they reached the bridge that separated England and Wales.

Thanks to an ancient kingly decree, one member of the Davies clan and one member of the Montgomery family had to meet on this bridge on the day of the summer equinox and shake hands in a show of amity. Gryff, as the current Earl of Powys, and Maddie, Lenore's cousin, had represented the two families a few years ago, and subsequently fallen in love.

Lenore had always thought the little stone bridge very pretty, and she stuck out her hand toward Gryff as they set foot upon it.

"What's that for?" He glanced down at her palm with a frown.

"I know it's not the equinox, but we should shake hands anyway. Just in case the universe needs more convincing that we Davies and Montgomerys really have set down our weapons."

She sent him her most teasing, challenging look.

His dark eyes studied her face for a long, thrilling moment, then his large fingers wrapped around hers.

"What if shaking hands isn't enough?" he murmured. "Perhaps we should kiss, to be really convincing."

His gaze dropped to her lips and Lenore's heart began to pound, but she forced herself to pull away. However much she wanted to kiss Rhys Davies, she refused to be

an easy conquest, and showing her hand too early in the game would be foolish. If there was one thing she'd learned while stranded on that blasted island, it was that waiting for something was an excellent way to increase desire.

"After three weddings between our families in the last few years, how much more evidence do you think the universe needs?"

She turned away and made a great show of bending over the low stone wall to look for a flag. Rhys muttered something under his breath—hopefully a disappointed curse—and stalked to the opposite end of the bridge.

"We've been beaten to it," he said. "Look."

He bent and picked up something from the ferns. It was a purple silk flower.

"That's from Harriet's hat," Lenore frowned. "It's covered in flowers like that. She must have pulled it off and left it here as a sign that she and Morgan have already been here."

"And presumably claimed the flag," Rhys growled. "Ugh."

"We'd better hurry to the next clue. It must be getting close to lunch time."

Rhys checked his pocket watch. "You're right. It's already past noon. But we still have time to get to the folly before one o'clock. Come on."

Rhys clearly knew the direction of the folly, because he started to follow the riverbank south, and Lenore smiled at the suspicion that he'd trespassed on Montgomery land on more than one occasion.

She trailed after him, enjoying the way the sun glinted off the rippling water and the

swish of cornflowers and buttercups against her skirts.

After half a mile or so they branched off into the trees again, and the cool shade was a welcome relief. Lenore was no stranger to walking miles on foot, but perhaps they should have gone back for horses after all. She felt hot and sweaty, which probably wasn't the best way to attract the man of her dreams.

With his handsome face, Rhys had always been inundated with female attention, and while she knew she was reasonably pretty, she was also wild and alarmingly self-sufficient. Her skin was unfashionably tanned after months beneath a harsh tropical sun, and she had a regrettable number of freckles that no amount of powder could conceal.

Many men, she knew, preferred cool, serene beauties who looked like they needed rescuing. She was perfectly capable of rescuing herself and she refused to pretend otherwise.

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She didn't want a man who would sweep in and save her from the perils of the world. She wanted a fellow adventurer who would toss her an oar and pitch in if they were headed towards the reef. Someone who would treat her as an intellectual, if not a physical, equal.

Rhys was like that. And she wanted him by her side.

The folly's single crenellated tower and artfully crumbling walls came into view just then, peeking through the wild tangle of ivy and moss that threatened to engulf them completely.

It had never been a complete building. Lenore's great grandfather, Sir Lionel Montgomery, had commissioned it, back when no self-respecting landowner was content without a dilapidated temple somewhere on the grounds. Family legend had it that he'd employed a live-in hermit to wander about whenever he had guests.

Four classical marble statues guarded the ruin, each one representing one of the four elements; water, fire, earth and air, and Rhys paused as they neared the one depicting water.

He held his hand up for quiet and Lenore stilled at his back, then heard what he had: a distinctly feminine giggle.

"Tristan, no! Someone might come!"

Rhys's lips curved upward. "That's Carys!" he whispered. "Come on."

No-one was in sight, so he bent low and pushed through the undergrowth. Lenore followed, trying to stay quiet, and together they crept around the curved outer wall of the turret and peered through the remains of a gothic-arched window.

Rhys's sister Carys was enjoying a scandalously thorough kiss with her husband, Lenore's eldest cousin Tristan.

Rhys's eyes gleamed with amusement as Lenore's cheeks heated. He gestured upward, pointing to a fluttering green flag nestled in a giant fern sprouting from the stonework directly above Tristan's head.

There was no chance the couple hadn't seen it—they were clearly celebrating their victory prematurely.

Rhys put his fingers to his lips, then silently gestured his intent to circle around behind them, climb the wall from the opposite side, and attempt to grab the flag while they were otherwise engaged. Lenore nodded and watched him sneak away, and decided to help by creating a distraction.

She backed up a few paces, then said in her most peevish tones, "Oh, come on Davies! I've seen three-legged donkeys move faster than you. I thought you soldiers were good at marching?"

She swished her skirts and batted some ferns, making as much noise as possible, and heard Carys utter a frustrated curse just as her coppery-red hair appeared in the window embrasure.

"Oh, hello Carys!" Lenore called, waving madly. "Is Tristan there with you? Or have you split up to cover more ground?"

Tristan's face appeared next to his wife's and his expression was one of a man who'd

been interrupted in the most unwelcome manner. His hair, usually so ordered, was definitely ruffled, and his once-perfect cravat was decidedly askew.

Lenore bit back a chuckle.

“Ah, there you are Tristan. Have you found any flags yet?”

“Just the one,” Tristan growled. His eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. “Where’s Rhys?”

Lenore tried to look innocent, but the sound of scraping stone gave Rhys away. Tristan’s head whipped back round, and he rushed back toward the flag, jumping up and grabbing it moments before Rhys could seize it from his precarious position on the top of the wall.

Lenore let out a disappointed groan. “No!”

“Ha!” Carys crowed in delight and flung her arms around Tristan’s neck. “Well done, my love! And bad luck, brother. Better luck next time!”

She stuck her tongue out at a glowering Rhys, who shook his head in frustration.

“Bloody hell, I was this close,” he grumbled, holding his finger and thumb an inch apart to demonstrate.

Carys sent a cheeky glance up at her husband. “I’ve always been extremely lucky here.”

Tristan swatted her playfully on the bottom. “Enough, hoyden. It’s time to head back to Trellech for lunch.”

Rhys disappeared as he climbed back down the wall, then reappeared beside Carys. He glanced over at Lenore. “Do you want to go back to Newstead Park for lunch, or are you brave enough to risk potential poisoning with the Dastardly Davies over at Trellech?”

Lenore chuckled. Logically, it made sense for them both to go to Trellech, since that was where they needed to be for the final clues, but Rhys obviously didn’t want to say that out loud, in case Tristan and Carys hadn’t solved all the riddles.

Besides, she’d never actually seen the infamous Davies stronghold, and she’d been dying to get a look at it for months.

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“I’d love to join you at Trellech,” she said regally. “If Tristan’s brave enough, then so am I.”

Chapter Eight

Lenore’s first sight of the sprawling architectural monstrosity that was Trellech Court produced much the same reaction as her first sight of Rhys: instant infatuation.

If someone had given her ten-year-old self a paper and pencil and told her to draw a fairytale castle, a Tudor manor house, and a Palladian villa, all mixed up together, Trellech would have been the result.

The outer ramparts were fifteen feet high, complete with a drawbridge and moat, but inside that, the main structure was an astonishing cluster of styles all cobbled together as if by some mad, drunken architect.

Every generation of Davies had tacked on their own section, just to leave their mark, and the overall effect was quite extraordinary.

A crumbling Medieval clock tower butted up against a half-timbered, red brick section that didn’t have a straight line on it anywhere. Another wing, sprouting from the other side, was pure Neo-Classicism, all elegant cornices, huge windows, and pillars.

Lenore almost clapped her hands in delight. After the elegant perfection of Newstead Park, the haphazard charm of Trellech was irresistible. It was perfect in its imperfections.

“Not quite as orderly as Newstead,” Rhys muttered as they strode across the courtyard and in through a vast, metal-studded door that looked like it could have withstood a horde of Viking marauders without any difficulty whatsoever.

“It’s certainly . . . eclectic,” Lenore whispered back.

“I don’t blame Tristan for building his own place on the other side of the valley,” Rhys said. “As an architect, this place probably gives him an attack of the vapors. There’s not a straight line or a right-angle anywhere.”

He guided Lenore past an imposing suit of armor, and into a dining room with an enormous oak table that could have easily seated twenty people. A cold collation had been set out on the top, and she accepted a plate and indicated to one of the hovering servants which of the dozens of dishes she’d like to try.

She’d dreamed of such lavish spreads while she’d been shipwrecked, and she felt absolutely no guilt for accepting a little of almost everything. She needed to keep up her strength for the afternoon’s flag hunting, after all.

“I’ve told Gryff he should just burn the place to the ground and start again,” Rhys continued with a sideways look at Carys that made Lenore certain he was only saying such a thing to get a rise out of his sister. “He’s got more than enough money, after all. Why can’t we have a nice, orderly place like Newstead Park, eh?”

Carys sent him a laughing look. “Stop trying to make me quarrel with you. You love this place just as much as I do, warts and all. Anywhere else wouldn’t have dungeons and priest holes, secret tunnels and trapdoors. It wouldn’t be half as much fun.”

“True,” Rhys conceded with a smile. “And I must confess, growing up here was never dull. There was always some mischief to be made or new place to explore.”

Lenore could just imagine him as a cheeky, tousle-haired rascal. Her heart gave an odd little squeeze.

Morgan and Harriet arrived just then, and they all sat down to eat in a jovial mood. The other couples, Gryff and Maddie, Caro and Max, and Lucy and Will, must have all decided to have lunch at Trellech.

Harriet admitted to finding the flag at the bridge—and to leaving a flower from her hat as a taunt to any future visitors—although she claimed it was all Morgan’s idea.

Rhys showed the flag they’d found, but refused to say where they’d found it, presumably to make the other couples waste extra time looking for it at the butterfly house once they deciphered the riddle. Lenore silently applauded his sneakiness.

He wasn’t the only one trying to mislead the competition, either. When Tristan held up his flag and baldly declared that he and Carys had found it in the wine cellar at Newstead, Lenore bit her lip and tried not to laugh, knowing it to be a shameless falsehood.

Carys caught her eye and sent her a stern warning glare, and Lenore kicked Rhys’s ankle under the table to make sure he didn’t say anything either.

He shot her a mock-offended look at her for daring to suggest—even silently—that he was too stupid not to keep his mouth shut.

When lunch was over, they all watched the clock and the minute it struck two o’clock everyone raced for the doors. Rhys caught Lenore’s hand as she stepped out into the hallway and gave it a gentle tug to stop her heading for the exit.

“This way, come on.”

He pulled her down the hall, then, with a glance to make sure none of their siblings were still about, pushed on a section of the dark wooden paneling on the wall. It swung open and Lenore's eyes widened in excitement.

“A secret door!”

“It leads to the stables.” He stepped through, into the darkness beyond, his shoulders barely fitting through the narrow opening.

“I swear this gap was much bigger when I was a lad,” he grumbled.

Lenore hitched up her skirts and followed him, pulling the door almost completely shut behind her, enclosing them in near total darkness.

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“Wait here,” he whispered. “I’ll go and open the other door.”

He stepped away, and could hear him scrabbling around, and then a shaft of light illuminated the tunnel as he opened another small door ahead of him. He climbed out, and Lenore followed, accepting his hand as she straightened.

The scent of fresh straw and the contented whicker of horses indicated he’d been right about where the tunnel led—they were in the empty last stall in the large Trellech stables—but Lenore sent him a confused look.

“Why are we here? There weren’t any clues about horses or stables.”

Rhys grinned, his teeth flashing white. “One should always take the opportunity to harass the opposition. In the army, we used to all sorts of things to disrupt the French supply lines. We’d steal their artillery, pilfer their food, and bribe the locals to give them false directions. If we knew they were following us, we’d remove all the road signs to make it harder for them to figure out where they were on a map.”

“Brilliant! But I’m assuming your siblings already know their way around here without any kind of signage.”

“They do, but if they were planning to make their way to the lake and the boat house on horseback, we can slow them down.” He peered over the wooden stall divider to make sure no grooms were loitering about, then strode over to the wall that contained the tack, including saddles, bridles and reins.

“Quick, come and help me.”

He hefted a saddle from its hook and placed it on the floor, next to a huge mound of clean hay. “We’ll put some of the saddles under this hay, and hide all the bridles in the tunnel. They won’t know where to look.”

Lenore grinned as she scooped up an armful of hay and used it to conceal the saddles he placed on the straw-covered ground.

She loved being his partner in crime. She’d pulled equally silly tricks on Caro and Lucy in her time, and that fact that Rhys obviously had a mischievous streak of his own was delightful.

A sense of humor was an absolute necessity in a man, in her opinion, and one of the reasons she’d rejected so many suitors over the years was because most men she’d encountered were either sadly lacking in any kind of light-heartedness, or, on the other end of the scale, found humor in the most childish of things, like passing wind in public places, and pushing people into puddles.

“There.” Rhys clapped his hands, then lifted an assortment of bridles and reins from the hooks and gestured to her to re-enter the secret passageway. She did so, lifting her skirts so they wouldn’t get too dusty, and he closed the door behind him—not a moment too soon.

Morgan and Harriet entered the stables with one of the Trellech grooms, and Rhys let out a gleeful little snort as he placed the leather straps on the ground at his feet, then followed Lenore back out into the paneled hallway and shut the little door with a click.

“Mission accomplished!” he crowed. “Now, let’s get some flags. I think should forget about trying to find Geoffrey and the other peacocks. Carys always has much better luck in finding her animals, because they actually like her. Geoffrey’s given me a wide berth ever since I chased him off with a broomstick a few years ago. We could waste

hours looking for him, and the other peacocks could be anywhere on the grounds.”

“Agreed. We’d be better to concentrate on the flags we have a decent chance of finding. There was that clue about a clock. How do we get up to that clock-tower you mentioned?”

“There’s a trap door in the east wing, but first we should try the library, since we didn’t find anything in the one at Newstead.”

He led her along the hall, past a billiard room, and into a library with a huge, vaulted ceiling and a fireplace big enough to roast an ox.

“Right. Get to work.”

They both searched high and low, with Lenore even looking under the large celestial globes and Rhys climbing up the rolling ladders to peer along the top of the uppermost shelves, but there was no sign of a flag.

“Someone’s found it,” Rhys grumbled, dusting his hands. “Either that, or it was in the library back at Newstead and someone else beat us to it.”

Lenore shrugged. “Or Caro was lying when she said it wasn’t there. That’s more likely. She’s a devious thing. The clock, then?”

“This way.”

Chapter Nine

Lenore looked around with undisguised interest as Rhys led her up an impressive carved wooden staircase, with snarling lions guarding the newel posts at the bottom of each banister.

Ancient tapestries and suits of armor vied for position with gorgeous paintings and elegant gilt furniture, none of which matched, but which somehow managed to give the impression of being the perfect eclectic combination.

The place was a hodgepodge of at least six centuries, with sections built on top of one another, and little thought to aesthetic harmony. One draughty stone corridor had glazed arrow slits for windows, while another, far more comfortable, had huge panes of leaded glass giving picture-perfect views over the rolling green hills beyond the walls.

Lenore had seen all manner of interesting architectural styles in her travels and had stayed in everything from mud huts to royal palaces, but nowhere had been quite so eccentric nor as interesting as Trellech. It made her glad that Rhys's childhood here had been just as unusual as her own.

She'd love to live somewhere like this.

They passed a whole wing of bedrooms—she spied an ancient four-poster through a door that had been left ajar—and her heart leapt at the thought that one of them might be Rhys's.

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Had he ever brought a woman back to his chambers here? Would she ever get the chance to see inside?

They finally came to the entrance to a circular turret, with a winding staircase that got gradually narrower as they ascended. Rhys went up first, and she took the opportunity to appreciate the strong curves of his buttocks and the way the muscles of his thighs rippled under the soft buckskin of his breeches.

“This reminds me of that fairytale about the girl with the golden hair. Rapunzel.” Lenore panted, a little out of breath from climbing all the stairs.

She’d asked Caro to lace her stays quite tightly that morning, to accentuate her breasts, but now she was regretting it. She hated blasted stays. She’d gone months without them in the jungle, and the first time she’d had to put on a corset again, back in London, had made her long for the freedom she’d once had.

“I prefer getting to the top this way,” Rhys said. “Climbing up the outside is a lot more work.”

“That sounds as if you’ve actually attempted it,” she joked.

“Oh, I have. Several times, much to my father’s annoyance. I once got all the way up to the third floor, almost up to the gargoyles, then my boot slipped.”

She gasped. “Dear God! That’s so dangerous. You could have fallen and broken your neck!”

His chuckle echoed down the spiral stair. “I didn’t fall. Not far, anyway. I’d tied a rope around my waist, and Gryff was up here in the tower holding the other end. He looped it over the beam that holds the bell, so it would take my weight if I slipped. It worked a treat.”

Lenore shook her head, still feeling a little queasy over the idea of him being injured, or worse.

Gryff stopped on the steps ahead and reached up above his head. “Three years in the army’s cured me of such recklessness. I wouldn’t try something so idiotic now. At fifteen you think you’re invincible. By the time you reach twenty-five, you realize life’s far too precious, too easily lost, to tempt fate that way.”

He paused and Lenore nodded, even though he couldn’t see her in the darkness.

“Here’s the trapdoor, I hope you’re not afraid of heights.”

“I don’t think I am,” Lenore said truthfully. “But then again, I haven’t been up very many places like this.”

The hatch fell flat with a bang, and sunlight flooded the stairwell as she followed Rhys up and out into the bell tower. Instead of having windows, the sides were open to the elements, and two black ravens, startled by the noise, took flight through the open arches, cawing loudly.

The floor was wooden planks, and a circular wall, barely waist high, encircled the tower. Lenore’s breath caught in her chest. Her knees felt decidedly wobbly, and she had no desire to go any nearer the edge of the parapet.

A cool breeze fanned her hair back from her face as she steadied herself on a huge wooden crossbeam from which hung a large brass bell.

“That bell’s been there for hundreds of years to warn of impending Montgomery invasions,” Rhys said with a smile. “I wonder how many times it’s been rung?”

“Almost as many times as the one in the tower at Newstead Park,” Lenore countered pertly. “Designed to let everyone know when the Wild Welsh Davies were on the rampage with their torches and pitchforks.”

“Ah, the good old days,” Rhys chuckled. He gestured over the countryside which spread out before them in all directions like a verdant green patchwork quilt. “Isn’t that an excellent view?”

It was undoubtedly worth the climb. Far below, the small figures of Morgan and Harriet could be seen crossing toward the woods, and further away Lenore caught a flash of Caro’s pink skirts near the Davies menagerie.

The glint of sunlight on water in the distance made her squint.

“That’s the lake,” Rhys pointed, noting the direction of her gaze. “There’s a boat house too, by the water’s edge. We’ll need to head there in a bit for the boat and island clues.”

Lenore turned west. “Can you see Newstead Park from here?”

“Not even with a telescope,” Rhys grinned. “And believe me, we all tried spying on you Mad Montgomerys.” He pointed upward, toward the roof. “There’s a flagpole up there, where Gryff once hung Maddie’s shawl as a war trophy. That was years ago, but taunting you lot never seems to get old.”

Lenore bit back a smile, then a blur of movement below caught her eye, and a shrill avian screech filled the air.

“Oh! Morgan’s chasing that peacock!”

Rhys leaned over the parapet for a better look, apparently unafraid of the monstrous drop, and Lenore bit back the urge to grab the back of his jacket to steady him. His younger brother was indeed racing across the lawn after an aggrieved peacock.

“I wonder if it’s Geoffrey?”

“Look!” Lenore pointed. “Carys is hiding behind the hedge. Morgan’s chasing him toward her without even realizing it!”

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Rhys squinted downward. “There’s a red flag attached to one of its tail feathers.”

“Who knew peacocks could run so fast?” Lenore marveled.

Rhys cupped his hands around his mouth. “Run, Geoffrey! Run!” he bellowed.

Morgan glanced up at the shout, spied them in the tower, and sent his brother a very ungentlemanly hand signal.

“That’s not one they officially recommend in the army,” Rhys chuckled.

Lenore laughed.

Turning back to the pursuit, Morgan increased his speed. He made a valiant dive for the flag but missed as the clever bird changed direction at the very last second, zig-zagging away from him with a cry that definitely sounded gloating.

Morgan rolled down a grassy embankment and only just managed to stop himself from falling in the moat.

Rhys let out a whoop of delight.

Carys, meanwhile, stepped out from behind the hedge and gave a shrill whistle. Geoffrey slowed his pace and turned toward her, obviously recognizing the sound, and Carys crouched down and moved her hand in a shallow arc.

“Clever bugger,” Rhys growled. “She’s bribing him with seeds. Geoffrey never

misses the chance for a second lunch.”

Sure enough, the peacock strutted eagerly towards Carys, then started pecking at the grass at her feet. With a grin, Carys reached down and gently tugged the flag from where it was nestled among his tail feathers.

“If I’d done that, he’d have pecked my eyes out,” Rhys grumbled, his voice tinged with reluctant brotherly admiration.

Carys’s grin was visible even from up in the tower as she waved the flag over her head in a victory dance. Tristan emerged from behind her and gave her a congratulatory hug from behind.

“It’s a miracle anyone other than Carys managed to get close enough to Geoffrey to set the flag in the first place. I wonder if they did it while he was asleep? Or maybe they gave him fermented apples to eat. It gets them drunk, you know.” Rhys shrugged at the mystery. “Either way, that’s two flags for Carys and Tristan now. We need to improve our game.”

Lenore turned away and made a quick circle of the tower. “Where’s the clock?”

Rhys lifted his arms toward the wooden planks and beams above them and took hold of an iron ring in the ceiling that Lenore hadn’t noticed before.

“Up here.”

He pulled, and another, smaller, hinged door swung down to reveal the inner workings of a clock, its pendulum swinging with heart-beat precision back and forth.

“Yes!” Lenore cried.

There, tied to one of the cylindrical lead weights was a cheerful yellow flag. Rhys went up on his tiptoes and untied it, then tucked it safely in the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Two for us, as well. We’re still in the running.”

“Wine cellar next,” Lenore said, the excitement of the game adding a catch to her breath almost as much as the sight of Rhys’s handsome face and carelessly windblown hair. “Let’s hope Caro wasn’t lying about it not being at Newstead.”

Chapter Ten

Lenore was glad to climb down from the tower, and she and Rhys sneaked along the corridors, keeping an ear out for the other teams. When they reached the ground floor again, he led her through Trellech’s enormous medieval great hall, complete with minstrel’s gallery, and an astonishing assortment of gruesome-looking weaponry displayed on the walls.

“The four of us used to play with those all the time,” he said, noting the direction of her fascinated gaze. “We had our own tournaments. We’d dress up in the suits of armor and batter each other with swords and pikes and hatchets until one of us yielded, or until Nanny Maude called us to go wash our hands for tea. Whichever came first.”

“Didn’t Nanny Maude scold you for fighting?”

“Not at all. She thinks exercising the body is as important as exercising the mind. In fact, she even taught me a few moves. She’s a wily old bird. Much like your aunts Constance and Prudence.”

Rhys shook his head in wry recollection and Lenore smiled. It was clear he held the

old retainer in high regard.

His smile faded a little. “I sometimes wonder if those innocent childish battles gave me an edge when it came to fighting in earnest.”

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Lenore placed her hand on his arm, distressed by the sudden bleak look his eyes. “If they did, then I’m glad. Who would have given Gordon Burton a lesson in manners if you hadn’t made it back from France?”

His eyes flashed at the implication that didn’t wish his demise, and he smiled again. Her spirits soared.

She dropped her hand, and they moved into what was clearly the oldest part of the castle.

“The wine cellar wasn’t originally built for wine,” he said, glancing over his shoulder. “It used to be the dungeons.”

He pushed open a heavy oak door studded with iron spikes, and a blast of cool air from below raised goosebumps on her arms.

Rhys took one of the lanterns that were hanging on a hook on the wall, lit it with a tinderbox he produced from his jacket pocket, and held it high.

The steps led down to a dark hallway lined with a row of cells, each with a metal grille set in the door and a tiny, barred window near the ceiling to let in a little fresh air and sunlight. Lenore shivered, clearly able to imagine how miserable it would have been to be locked up somewhere so inhospitable.

“Now, instead of storing Montgomery hostages down here,” Rhys said, a laugh in his voice, “—these cool, dank conditions are perfect for storing wine.”

The cellar opened out into a vast space, far larger than the feeble circle of light cast by the lamp, and Lenore sucked in an impressed breath.

A network of arched, vaulted stone was supported by a series of thick pillars, and between the pillars were rows upon rows of wine bottles, all stacked in tall, latticed shelves, stretching out into the darkness as far as she could see.

“That is a lot of wine,” she breathed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much in one place. This is ten times bigger than the cellar at Newstead.”

“Well, we Davies have always been fond of a tippie, historically. If the family annals are to be believed, we had one ancestor who was known as Owen the Unsteady, thanks to his love of the grape. But this isn’t all to be drunk. Not yet, anyway. Most of it’s been bought as an investment.”

Lenore did some swift mental calculation. “This must be worth a fortune!”

His lips twitched at her obvious astonishment—and at her inability to disguise her unseemly curiosity.

“It is,” he said mildly.

Lenore frowned. She’d known the Davies weren’t badly off; certainly, they were richer than her Montgomery relatives, who’d only been saved from penury a few years ago by the fortuitous discovery of the gold seam that stretched across their jointly-held lands.

But while the income from the mine was steady, it certainly wasn’t enough to fund this level of extravagance. Were the Dastardly Davies living up to their name and taking more than their fair share of half the profits?

“Did your family buy all this with money from the gold mine?”

Rhys grinned, as if fully aware of her suspicions. “No. We have a few other sources of income. Even ones that don’t include pillaging with our pitchforks.”

He clearly wasn’t going to say any more on the subject, and while Lenore was desperate to interrogate him, it would be the height of rudeness to pry into his financial affairs.

Besides, this probably all belonged to his older brother Gryff, as the Earl of Powys. As far as she could tell, since he’d left the army, Rhys had no profession, except semi-professional brawler and general libertine-about-town.

If she was a sensible woman, she’d have made sure to fall in love with a man like the Duke of Andover, who possessed both money and a lofty title. Instead, she was hopelessly drawn to Rhys. A handsome second son with neither title nor fortune to his name.

Shakespeare was right when he said that ‘reason and love keep little company together.’

Unaware of her inner turmoil, Rhys stepped up to read the labels on some of the dust-covered bottles that lay stored on their side, each with the cork facing outward.

“Not a good year, that one. Here, take this.”

He thrust the lantern forward and she took it automatically, then followed in his wake as he strode off into the gloom as confidently as a cat in the dark.

The rows of racking passed by in a blur, the lantern light glinting off the glass bottles as they followed one long row to the end, then turned a corner and followed another

section deeper into the shadows.

Lenore's heart was pounding at the slightly oppressive sensation of the thousands of bottles looming around her. She felt like Theseus, sneaking through the corridors of the labyrinth, terrified of turning a corner and encountering the minotaur. She hoped Rhys wasn't getting them lost.

He finally stopped and she skidded to a stop next to him, peering around to see if they'd finally found one of the elusive flags.

Instead, he pulled two bottles from the shelves, and held them up to her.

“Let’s have a drink.”

“To celebrate finding another flag?” she asked doubtfully.

“No. Something more important. To celebrate being alive. Here. Now.”

His dark eyes glittered in the lamplight, and the angles of his cheeks and chin cast intriguing shadows on his face, making him look both wicked and playful at once.

“Being alive is the very best thing to celebrate, don’t you think?” His deep voice in curled around her. “Surviving the war made me look at things from a new perspective. Before, I took everything for granted. I put value in all the wrong things. Now, I’m just grateful to wake up every morning. I’ve learned to appreciate the small things, like the warmth of sunlight on my face, and the first sip of an excellent bottle of wine, and the company of friends.”

“Would you call us friends?” Lenore asked. Her heart seemed to pause as she waited for his response.

“Why not?” he said easily. “We’re not enemies, are we?”

She held his gaze. “No, we’re not.”

He glanced down at the labels. “Shame we had to fight the French. Hopefully now the war is over, they can go back to doing what they do best, which is making excellent wine.” He held the two bottles aloft. “Now, Chateaux Margaux, or Haut Brion? Both are fabulous Bordeaux, is you like red wine. Any preference?”

“I do like red wine, but I’ll bow to your superior knowledge over which one to choose.”

He peered at a label to read the date. “Well, Haut Brion is best to drink between twelve and twenty years of aging, so this one should be perfect.”

“How will we open a bottle? Don’t tell me you always carry a corkscrew with you.”

“Sadly not. But there are other ways. One is to push the cork in, instead of pulling it out. But you need the handle of a woodenspoon, or something like that. And it runs the risk of the cork disintegrating and ruining the wine.”

“Sacrilege!” she said, with light mockery. He was clearly a man who knew and loved his wine. “What’s another way then?”

“You can heat up the air in the neck of the bottle, just under the cork. When it expands, it pushes the cork out.”

“We can use the lamp flame, if we take the glass protector off.” Lenore said.

He nodded, and she held the flickering flame of the oil lamp steady while he kept the bottle in exactly the right spot. To her surprise, the cork began inching out of the bottle neck.

“It’s working!”

He sent her a dry, mocking look. “O ye of little faith.”

“Wait. We don’t have any glasses,” Lenore groaned.

“We’ll just have to drink from the bottle.”

She sent him a mock-horrified look. “How terribly uncouth. What would the tonsay?”

“I’ve never really cared for what the ton thinks of me,” Rhys shrugged. “And I’m fairly sure you don’t care, either. Besides, I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“Deal,” she grinned.

He pulled the cork the final way out of the bottle with a satisfying pop, the muscles on the back of his hand rippling most intriguingly as he did so. He held the bottle out to her.

“Ladies first.”

Chapter Eleven

Sensing the challenge in Rhys’s eyes, Lenore set the lantern safely on a shelf, then tilted the bottle up against her lips. She took a ladylike sip, then handed it back.

The near-darkness seemed to have heightened her senses, and her skin prickled with awareness of his proximity; the warmth of his body was a delicious contrast to the chill, damp air around them.

His swig was much deeper, and her stomach clenched at the realization that his lips were touching the same place hers had just been. It seemed oddly intimate.

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His lips were positively sinful, too; full and firm, and when he tipped the bottle higher and swallowed again, his throat moved in a way that made her want to feel the muscles rippling against her fingers.

She took the bottle back and took a longer drink, desperate to cool the heat that was rising in her cheeks, and the liquid slid down her own throat, smooth and rich. When she lowered the bottle, she found him looking at her expectantly, as if waiting for her reaction.

“So? What do you think?” His voice was a little rougher than it had been. “What does it taste like to you?”

“Wine?” She teased, certain such a bland response would infuriate him.

He shook his head in mock horror. “Is that the best you can do? Try again.” He pushed the bottle back toward her and she took another long swallow. It settled in her belly with a lovely warming sensation.

“Close your eyes,” he ordered, “and concentrate on identifying the flavors in your mouth.”

She did so, and he took another sip himself.

“This wine is beautifully complex,” he murmured. “There are hints of smoke and tar, earth and leather. Maybe a little bit of spice at the back of your throat.”

Lenore’s skin felt flushed. His voice was as delicious as the wine, sliding over her

like a velvet caress.

“I can detect a bit of smoky flavor,” she admitted. “But I’m afraid I don’t have your extensive experience.”

“Have you ever been drunk before?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious. “And don’t lie. I bet you have.”

She opened her eyes. “A few times,” she admitted wryly.

She took another drink. The wine seemed to be improving the more she tried it. “When we were shipwrecked, off Madagascar, we were able to rescue most of the stores from the ship, because it didn’t sink, it just got stuck on a reef. Some of the men rowed out in lifeboats and brought all the wine back to shore. We drank most of it while waiting for rescue.”

“That sounds like the perfect shipwreck,” he smiled.

“The first—and worst—time was when Lucy and I stole a bottle of our father’s special brandy. We were about sixteen, I think. Lucy was sick in the window box outside our room, and I decided to give myself a haircut with a pair of crimping shears. I woke up with one side of my hair three inches shorter than the other, and the worst headache I’ve ever encountered in my life.”

Rhys snorted in amusement. “I once rode a donkey backwards through White’s, because Gryff bet me ten shillings I was too drunk to stay seated.”

“Did you fall off?”

“Absolutely,” he grinned. “But only because Morgan was pelting me with fruit to make me lose my balance.”

“You make me quite glad I never had brothers,” she smiled.

“You’re welcome to one of mine.”

His dark eyes glittered in the flickering light as he leaned closer. “I must admit, I’m intrigued to find out whatkindof drunk you are. Some fellows become quarrelsome and want a fight. Others get sad and start crying. A few even get amorous and try to compose love poetry.”

“I’m think I’m a happy drunk,” she said.

He wagged his eyebrows with a comical leer. “Scared I’ll reveal my true Davies nature and steal a kiss while you’re tipsy?”

She laughed. “You wouldn’t. You might be a dastardly Davies, but you’d never take advantage of a woman like that.”

“How do you know?”

“You were defending a woman against just such an offence the night we met. Gordon had insulted her or tried to kiss her—I didn’t quite catch what— but you were the one who was administering his punishment for being so ungentlemanly.”

“Ah.” He looked a little embarrassed as he took another long pull from the bottle. “Well, Annabelle is one of Carys’s friends, and she doesn’t have any brothers of her own so I—”

“—punched him into a fountain on her behalf?” Lenore chuckled.

“Something like that.” His lips quirked.

“A knight in shining armor, then,” she teased. “Or rather, evening clothes.”

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Her gaze seemed to have become fixed on his lips. The wine was giving her a warm, fuzzy feeling. He had the most beautiful lips.

A surge of recklessness filled her. She leaned towards him, as if to impart a great secret. “Just so you know,” she whispered. “I am not drunk right now.”

Her heart was thundering with excitement, but she’d bided her time long enough. It was time to take a risk.

He leaned closer, too, trapping her against the bottles of wine stacked in the shelves. “No?”

She shook her head. The air between them was heavy, almost throbbing with anticipation.

His eyes bored into hers. “So, if I kissed you, for example, that wouldn’t be taking advantage?”

“Definitely not,” she breathed.

His face remained impassive, there was a twinkle in his eye that made her blood sing.

“Maybe I should try it, then.”

He leaned in, and his warm breath stirred the tendrils of hair by her ear. A nervous thrill of anticipation twisted low in her belly.

His lips brushed her temple, and she heard him inhale softly, as if he were drawing in her scent, her essence, into his lungs. Her knees went weak, and she breathed in the delicious masculine smell of him; musky woods and clean sheets.

His lips danced along her cheekbone, deliberately teasing out the moment, and then his fingers cupped her jaw, then slid around the back of her head to tangle in her hair.

Her whole body tingled.

The pad of his thumb brushed her lower lip, sliding across it, dragging it down, and she tilted her face up to his, desperate for him to close the distance and put her out of her misery.

When his lips finally pressed hers, she gave a little groan of relief and went up on her tiptoes to meet him. His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and when she opened her mouth at his insistent pressure, his tongue slid inside to tangle with her own.

Lenore closed her eyes in scandalized delight. She was kissing Rhys Davies! And it was glorious. Even better than her feverish imaginings.

He tasted of wine; smoky, rich, delicious. The lazy swirl of his tongue against hers was a slow, delicious seduction, fogging her brain, and making her knees weak.

He groaned, deep in his throat, a thrilling, masculine sound of torment and need, and her stomach clenched at the sound. She abandoned herself to the kiss, returning what he gave, silently urging him on. She pressed herself against him, full-length, feeling the warmth of his chest as it rested against hers, the strong columns of his legs.

Giving in to temptation, she ran her hands up his chest and over his shoulders, then up to touch the warm skin of his cheek. The slightly rough hint of stubble beneath her fingertips made her heart jolt, and she kissed him again and again, loving the swirling

vortex of darkness and pleasure he conjured.

She'd never kissed anyone like this before, never dreamed it was possible, but it also felt incredibly right. As if her body recognized this man, this feeling of being home.

She wanted to do this forever.

The sudden scrape of feet on the stairs and the muffled echo of voices only vaguely intruded on her consciousness, but Rhys dragged his lips from hers with a groan that sounded almost pained.

"Bloody Hell. Someone's coming."

Lenore opened her eyes in sudden panic as she came back to earth with an unwelcome jolt.

"What?"

Rhys stepped back, releasing her, and she reluctantly dropped her hands from his face. Her soul felt as though it was being ripped from her chest.

Her lips were tingling, her cheeks flushed, and a strange swirling sensation gnawed in her belly. She knew what it was: lust. Desire. Need.

Oh, hell.

She glanced up at Rhys and found his gaze fixed on her lips, his chest rising and falling in rapid, panting breaths, and a surge of feminine satisfaction rushed through her. At least he looked as shaken as she felt.

He blinked, then shook his head, as if coming out of a trance, and cocked his head to

listen for the unwelcome intruders.

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“It’s Lucy,” Lenore whispered, easily recognizing the tones of her twin, despite the dark and distance. “And Will.”

Rhys grabbed the lantern with his left hand and threaded the fingers of his right hand through hers. Lenore smiled at the gesture.

He bent to whisper in her ear. “You, Miss Montgomery, are the veryworstdistraction.”

She grinned up at him, her heart strangely buoyant at the feeling they’d got away with something naughty.

Lucy and Will were traversing the left side of the room, and although Lenore and Rhys tried to sneak along their row, the light from their lantern gave them away.

“Hoi!” Will shouted. “Who’s there?”

Rhys rolled his eyes in comical despair and shouted back. “It’s Rhys. And Lenore.”

“Lenore?” Lucy called over the racking. “Have you found the flag?”

Rhys shook his head just as Lenore shouted, “Not yet.”

“Race you for it!” Will called, and Lenore could hear the rapid pounding of their footsteps as they started along their row.

“Quick!” she gasped, tugging Rhys’s hand and pulling him along.

He held his lantern aloft, and they both looked frantically for the flag, moving as quickly as they could while making sure they didn't miss it. They turned into another aisle, then another, as Lucy and Will's lantern glow on the ceiling revealed the rows they were exploring.

"Found it!"

Lucy's triumphant shout echoed along the rows and Lenore let out a growl of frustration.

"Best twin wins!" Lucy taunted loudly.

"Luckiest twin wins," Lenore grumbled. In truth, she didn't mind too much. She was feeling rather lucky herself, and she'd happily give up the chance of finding the other flags if it meant Rhys would kiss her again.

He released her hand as they reached the end of their row and found Lucy and Will beaming with happiness near the bottom of the steps.

"Well done," Lenore managed, praying the darkness would conceal her flushed cheeks and well-kissed lips.

The other couple started back up the stairs and Lenore smoothed her skirts and took a steadying breath as she prepared to follow them.

Kissing someone in the shadows was one thing, a wicked secret buried deep beneath the earth, but how was she going to face Rhys in the harsh light of day?

Did he regret what they'd done? Would he dismiss it as something trivial, a lark not to be taken too seriously?

Lenore was almost afraid to find out.

Chapter Twelve

Lucy and Will were already hurrying toward the open front door by the time Lenore and Rhys emerged from the cellar.

Lenore didn't regret their kiss one bit, but she was a little shaken to imagine what would have happened if they hadn't been interrupted. Would Rhys have stopped kissing her of his own free will? Because she wouldn't have had the fortitude to do it.

And would he have taken things further? She would have allowed it, willingly, but what would he have thought of her if she'd given herself to him fully? She was still a virgin, although she'd read enough books and seen enough erotic drawings to know exactly what it meant when a man and a woman made love. Her blood heated at the thought of Rhys touching her body so intimately.

She slid a glance over at him as they headed out into the courtyard, half afraid he'd apologize and call it an impetuous mistake.

"Only two clues left to find," he said brightly, clearly determined to act as if nothing had happened. "Island, and boat. I say we try the boat shed first."

Lenore fanned her warm cheeks and nodded, just as a shout of annoyance emerged from the direction of the stables.

Rhys sent her a conspiratorial smile. "Sounds like someone's just discovered there's no tack to saddle their horses."

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Lenore couldn't help but smirk. That had been an excellent idea.

“What's the shortest way to get to the boat house from here?”

“Through the formal gardens, then a short walk through the paddock. Follow me.”

Rhys led her away from the main house and through a small wooden door set in the outer wall of the courtyard. Lenore had glimpsed these formal gardens from up in the turret, but there was no time to admire the flowers and box hedges as they hurried onward.

None of the other couples were in sight, and it wasn't long before the lake appeared through a bank of trees before them. A few swans and ducks disturbed the glassy surface, and Lenore's eyes widened at how large it was.

“The boat house is over there, behind those rhododendrons,” Rhys said.

The land sloped steeply down toward the lakeshore, and together they skidded down the embankment, taking care not to fall. Lenore was glad that beneath her impractical dress she'd had the foresight to wear a pair of far more sensible ankle boots. If she'd been wearing pretty, silk slippers they would have been ruined by now.

She thought she heard someone crashing through the undergrowth, off to their left, and increased her pace, and they reached the boathouse unchallenged.

The shed was built into the side of the hill, with the far end almost completely below ground, and the front giving onto a shingle 'beach' that acted as a launch for the

boats.

Lenore peered cautiously inside, but the scrape of wood and a splash from the far side of building made Rhys hurry forward to investigate.

He let out a hiss of annoyance as Morgan and Harriet suddenly drifted into view, floating in a rowboat that must have been tied to the small wooden dock beyond the boat shed.

“Damn it!” Rhys muttered as Harriet sent them a cheerful wave while Morgan plied the oars to take them further out into the lake.

“See you on the island!” Morgan called cheerfully.

“Quick,” Lenore hissed. “There are more boats in here. And we should look for the flag from the ‘boat’ clue, in case they haven’t found it.”

She stepped inside, quickly examining the three little rowboats that were illuminated by the light streaming in from the windows set in the roof. Two were upside down, stored on wooden stands, and she checked beneath them. There was no flag hidden there, nor behind the piles of oars, assorted garden tools, or under the stack of picnic blankets folded neatly on a chair in one corner.

Rhys had just grabbed the front of the boat closest to the door, ready to drag it out onto the shingle, when the wooden doors slammed shut with a bang, and a guffaw of masculine laughter sounded from outside.

“What the—?” Rhys exclaimed.

Another loud bang, this one clearly the scrape of something heavy being placed against the outside of the door.

“Morgan!” Rhys bellowed. “I’ll strangle you!”

“Not if you’re stuck in there, you won’t,” Morgan shouted back gleefully.

Lenore bit back a laugh as she realized how they’d been duped. Morgan had only pretended to start rowing out to the island and must have doubled back to land when he saw the chance to trap them in the shed.

“Harriet!” she called out, a pleading tone in her voice. “Cousin!”

“Oh, dear. Look at that. The wind must have blown the door closed.”

Harriet’s dry, amused voice floated through the gaps in the planks. She didn’t sound the least bit contrite. In fact, she was clearly struggling not to laugh. “And a big branch seems to have fallen right across the doors. How unfortunate. Sorry, Lenore, my love. But all’s fair in love and treasure-hunting. We’ll come and let you out if you’re still there when we get back from the island.”

“Don’t promise them that,” Morgan scolded her, with mock-severity. “They can stay in there all night, for all I care.”

Rhys slammed his palm against the inside of the door, rattling the hinges, then pushed against it with his shoulder, but whatever Morgan had placed to block the doors held fast.

“We’d love to stay and chat,” Morgan taunted, “but you know how much we Navy boys like the water. It’s our second home, and I have the most amazing urge to get back out there and feel the wind on my face.”

“You’ll feel my fist on your face if I ever get out of here,” Rhys bellowed through the door. He took a step back and rammed the wood again with his shoulder, but while

the two doors did buckle outwards a bit, it was not enough to break whatever had been braced against them.

“Stop!” Lenore urged him, half amused and half impressed at his display of brute strength. “You’ll hurt your shoulder. There must be another way out.”

“Fine,” Rhys huffed, turning from the door with a final glare, as if his fury could singe his brother on the other side. “Sneaky bastard.”

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“You’re just annoyed you didn’t think of it yourself,” she said, and was rewarded with a curl at the corner of his lips.

“True enough,” he conceded. “I would have done exactly the same to him, if our positions were reversed.”

In truth, Lenore wasn’t all that dismayed at being locked in another gloomy space with Rhys, but any hope that they could resume kissing was dispelled by the way he started to prowl around the space, looking for an alternative exit.

Her spirits deflated a little.

Was he tired of kissing her already? Had once been enough to satisfy his natural male curiosity? Had he not enjoyed it as much as she had?

He stomped to the back of the shed and stood, hands on hips, looking up at the small, semicircular window set high up on the back wall.

The slope of the hill meant that although the window was about six feet up the back wall of the shed, it was only a couple of feet above the grassy hillside outside. The bobbing heads of foxgloves and cornflowers could be seen tapping against the glass.

“You’re going to have to climb through that,” Rhys said decisively. “My shoulders are too big.”

Lenore smiled, delighted by the way he didn’t question either her ability or her willingness to do such a thing. The fact that he regarded her as a capable member of

his team, as opposed to a fragile female who would be scandalized at the thought of climbing out of a window, made her inordinately happy.

She dragged the chair from the side of the room, and stood on it, but while she could reach up and undo the window latch and push open the large pane, she wasn't high enough to climb out.

She glanced at Rhys over her shoulder and found him studying her back view, and bit back a grin. Hopefully he was enjoying the view.

"You're going to have to give me a boost."

He nodded, and she sucked in a breath as his strong hands slid around her waist. "No," he muttered pensively, "that's not going to work. You won't get high enough. I'm going to have to lift you from lower down."

"Go on, then."

He bent and wrapped his right arm around the front of her knees, pressing her legs together. The position put his cheek flush against the outside of her thigh, her bottom resting on his shoulder.

"This should do it. Up you go!" He straightened, and Lenore grabbed the window frame with both hands. She pushed her shoulders through the open casement, then her upper body, as Rhys pushed her lower half, his hands gripping her legs.

It was definitely not the most elegant position, and she struggled not to laugh as he abandoned all attempt at propriety and gave her bottom a firm push. His hands lingered much longer than necessary, too, and her stomach flipped at the feel of his broad palms cupping her hips, then sliding over the rounded curves of her arse. He gave them a gentle squeeze.

“Sorry!” He muttered from behind her. “Can’t be helped.”

Lenore kicked her heels to try to wriggle through the gap, and her left foot connected with something hard.

“Ow!” Rhys yelped. “Bloody Hell, woman, that was my nose!”

“Sorry!” She called back.

With one final push to her ankles, she managed to pull herself fully out of the window and collapsed, panting, on the grassy bank. She turned and peered back in at Rhys. He was holding his nose, and her eyes widened at the trickle of blood that seeped from beneath his cupped hand.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry!” she gasped again, filled with genuine remorse. “I couldn’t see what I was kicking. Is it broken?”

He felt along the ridge with his fingers, then wiped away the tiny smear of blood with his thumb. “It wouldn’t be the first time,” he said, “But no. Not from a little tap like that.”

She studied his nose intently, trying to see if there was a telltale kink in it, but he seemed to be telling the truth. His nose was as straight and as perfect as ever. Although he’d probably look just as handsome with a crooked nose.

Their positions, with him below, and her above, made her think of the scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, but Rhys was hardly the sort of man to linger outside a maiden’s bedroom window mooning over her beauty. He’d be more likely to scale the walls and claim a kiss, and more.

He waved his hands in an impatient gesture. “Don’t just stand there looking at my

nose. It's fine. Go around the front and see what Morgan's barred the door with."

Lenore scrambled to her feet, embarrassed at having been caught gazing at him like a lovesick puppy.

The doors had been barred with a stout log, angled to prevent their opening from within, and with a grunt she managed to roll it aside. Rhys emerged and she let out a shocked shriek as he caught her by the waist and spun her round in a celebratory little dance.

"Excellent work," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

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He released her abruptly, as if suddenly realizing the informality of what he'd done and sent a dismayed glance at the front of her dress. Lenore looked down to see what he was looking at, and found the fabric covered in streaks of black dirt, dust, cobwebs and green grass stains.

She brushed at the stains, but it was a futile effort.

"I'll buy you a new one," Rhys promised. "Since the window was my idea. That one's ruined."

Lenore rolled her eyes. "You'll do no such thing. What would people think, if word got out that you'd bought me a dress?"

"Nobody would have to know."

"Men only buy dresses for women they're intimately acquainted with."

"I just had my hands on your arse, Montgomery," Rhys said with a wicked grin. "I'd call that intimate acquaintance, wouldn't you?"

Lenore turned away to hide her blush. "I can buy my own dresses, thank you very much. I don't need your Davies charity." She pointed across the lake. "Look! Morgan and Harriet are already halfway to the island already."

"Then let's get after them. I have a bone to pick with that brother of mine."

Despite their slow start, and Morgan's undoubted familiarity with a pair of oars, Lenore and Rhys made excellent progress across the lake and managed to close the distance between the two boats quite considerably.

Since Rhys was facing backward to row, Lenore kept him updated on their progress as the muscles in his forearms rippled in time with his powerful strokes.

He'd removed his jacket and thrown it on the wooden plank that served as a seat, and Lenore couldn't help but be impressed by the smooth motion of his body as he reached forward and pulled back. The oars cut into the water, and they sped across the lake, pushing through the lily pads that clustered in the shallows.

"We're gaining on them!"

"Not quickly enough," Rhys panted.

"What's on the island, anyway? Is it just trees?"

"No. There's a little stone temple thing in the middle. You can see the columns through the trees if you look closely. I bet the flag is hidden in there."

A flash of color at the opposite end of the lake caught Lenore's eye, and she gave a disbelieving gasp as she identified who it was.

"Gryff and Carys are over there, on the far side."

"No boats over there," Rhys chuckled.

Lenore's eyes widened. "I don't think that's going to be a problem. Your brother's stripping off his clothes. I think he means to swim!"

Rhys turned around his seat to look, then let out a growl of disbelief as he, too, saw Gryff tug off his books, then discard his jacket, cravat, and shirt. Carys, his willing co-conspirator, grinned as he handed her the clothes.

Lenore raised her brows. "I say, your brother keeps himself very fit, doesn't he?" She glanced at Rhys and was delighted to see an aggrieved frown flash across his handsome face.

"You shouldn't be looking at his physique," he scolded. "Avert your eyes!"

Lenore snorted. "I've seen hundreds of shirtless men, Rhys Davies. Sailors, porters, fellow shipwreck survivors. I don't think I'm in any danger of swooning just because your brother happens to show some chest."

Rhys gave the oars a particularly hard pull.

There was an audible splash as Gryff dove into the water, and a shout from the boat up ahead as Harriet and Morgan obviously realized they had competition.

The island they were all heading for was large and tree-covered and situated far closer to Gryff's end of the lake than the boat shed. There was a definite possibility that he would reach it first.

"Row faster!" Lenore ordered Rhys with a laugh.

There was an audible crunch as Harriet and Morgan's boat reached the shore on the island. Morgan leaped out.

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Gryff had disappeared from view around the back of the island.

“Go!” Harriet shouted to Morgan, gesturing frantically into the trees toward the center of the island. “Don’t wait for me.”

Morgan started off through the undergrowth, and Harriet sent Lenore a laughing glance as their boat slid onto the same stretch of beach. “Afternoon!”

Rhys didn’t even wait for the boat to come to a complete stop. He threw down the oars and jumped out after Morgan in hot pursuit, careless of his expensive boots splashing in the water.

Harriet obviously planned to stay with their boat, but Lenore decided that two sets of eyes were better than one. She hitched her skirts up to her waist, tucked the excess fabric into her waistband, climbed out of the boat, and dragged it higher up the beach so it wouldn’t float away.

Then she set off after Rhys and Morgan.

The trees and grasses were incredibly overgrown, but she pushed ahead, uphill, batting branches out of the way and stepping over fallen logs. The sound of snapping twigs indicated that someone was up ahead, and then the peace was shattered by a cacophony of male shouting.

“Got you!”

She rounded a large pine just in time to see Rhys running towards Morgan’s

retreating back. He launched himself at his brother and tackled him with arms around his chest, and the two of them tumbled to the ground in a blur of limbs.

“Oi! Get off, you bugger!” Morgan rolled and tried to push him off, but Rhys clung to him like a barnacle, and the two of them rolled over and over through the mud and leaves, scrambling in the most undignified manner.

Morgan managed to get one arm free and grabbed Rhys’s hair, which he gave a brutal tug.

“Owww!” Rhys howled. “Not the hair!”

He retaliated by elbowing Morgan in the stomach.

Morgan grabbed the waistband of Rhys’s breeches and gave a sharp tug, and Lenore winced as he heard the rip of fabric.

Since both men were of a similar size and weight, they were evenly matched, and they’d clearly been scrapping like this since they were boys. They obviously hadn’t lost the relish for it now that they were in their twenties. Lenore almost rolled her eyes.

Rhys had just pulled his right arm back to punch Morgan in the face when Harriet’s scolding tones carried clearly through the trees.

“No punching, Davies boys!”

Both Rhys and Morgan stilled, and Lenore turned in surprise to see Harriet pushing through the greenery to her left.

Harriet sent the two men a look of withering disappointment that made Lenore

suppress a chuckle. She'd clearly witnessed such chaotic scenes from the Davies siblings before.

"Rhys Davies, don't you dare give my husband a black eye. We have to go to Lady Pilton's garden party next week and I won't have him looking like a pirate."

She turned to her husband. "And you. Have you forgotten he was boxing champion at Cambridge for three years in a row? Why on earth would you get into a scrap with him?"

"Just helping him stay on top form," Morgan grinned.

Rhys sent Morgan a gloating look for Harriet's apparent admiration of his boxing acumen, but it faded with her next comment.

"He's probably received so many blows to the head that his brain's stopped working properly."

"Hey!" Rhys objected. "My brain works perfectly well, I'll have you know."

Morgan sent his wife a laughing glance. "And if I remember correctly, there have been times when you've quite liked me looking like a pirate." He waggled his brows and sent her a comically suggestive leer.

Harriet's cheeks turned pink, and she sent him an embarrassed glare. "Oh, hush, you!"

Lenore caught Rhys's eye and gave her head an almost imperceptible tilt toward the center of the island to indicate that she was going to make a run for the temple while he detained Morgan. He understood her intent immediately.

“Lenore, go!” he shouted, just as he grabbed Morgan’s shirt collar and gave it a yank backwards.

Morgan let out a howl as there was more ripping of fabric. “I paid ten shillings for this jacket, you arse!”

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Lenore didn't wait to her Rhys's reply. She lifted her skirts and leapt over their tangled legs and raced onward.

The pale stone pillars of the temple came into view between the trees and she quickened her pace, fearful that Harriet would be right behind her.

She'd just reached the lowest of the curved steps that ringed the base of the circular temple when a dripping and shirtless Gryff Davies emerged from behind a pillar with a whoop of triumph.

"No!" she gasped, her chest heaving with exertion.

Gryff waved the little blue flag down at her. "Give Rhys my thanks for taking care of Morgan."

With a grin, he trotted down the steps and plunged back into the trees.

Rhys arrived just then, panting as he reached her side. His cheeks were flushed, and his hair was a tangled mess, but her heart gave a traitorous little flutter all the same. She liked him all mussed and disreputable.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Why have you stopped?"

"Gryff got here first." She pointed to the incriminating wet puddle in the middle of the temple.

Rhys bent over and braced his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“Bugger and arse. That was well played of him.”

The words were more stoic than angry, and when he straightened back up his eyes were glinting with good humor. He clearly didn't bear either Morgan or Gryff a grudge.

“Gryff beat both of us to it!” he called back to Morgan, who offered a muffled curse of his own through the trees.

Lenore heard a murmur of commiseration from Harriet, and then the rustle of undergrowth as the other couple started back to their boat.

Rhys, however, seemed in no particular hurry to leave. He leaned against the nearest column, and Lenore's tummy fluttered at the sight he made.

She ascended a step to they were almost eye to eye and reached out towards him. He stilled, his eyes darkening in surprise, but she merely pulled a stray leaf from his hair.

“You had a leaf,” she muttered.

She'd stepped close to him, close enough to see the flecks in his dark eyes and the way his pupils expanded at her nearness. His gaze flashed down to her lips as if he was remembering them against his own, and she leaned forward even more, hoping he'd take the hint and close the distance between them, but he cleared his throat and pushed off the pillar, breaking the spell.

Her spirits plummeted. He didn't want to kiss her again.

What had she done wrong?

“I think that was the last flag,” He glanced up at the sky, where the sun's low position

indicated the lateness of the afternoon. “We should probably head back to Newstead Park and find out who’s won.”

Lenore hid her disappointment with a wide smile. “Yes. Of course.”

They walked side by side back downhill, with Lenore’s thoughts a jumbled whirl, but Gryff’s outraged gasp snapped her from her introspection.

“They’ve stolen our oars!”

They both squinted out across the water, to where Morgan and Harriet were making a rapid escape. Harriet lifted one of the purloined oars above her head and sent them a cheeky salute.

“All’s fair in love and war!”

Rhys’s growl of irritation did funny things to Lenore’s insides.

“Bloody brilliant. We’re stranded.”

Chapter Fourteen

“I wish I could say this is a new experience,” Lenore said lightly, determined not to appear downcast at being stuck with a man who’d obviously changed his mind about her. “But I’ve been stuck on an island before. That one was quite a bit bigger than this one, of course. More tropical, too.”

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A shout from the lakeshore off to their right interrupted whatever Rhys had been about to say, and they both turned to see Carys and a now-dressed Tristan waving at them.

“Lost your oars?” Carys called, her laughing, throaty tones carrying across the water like a peal of bells. “Oh, bad luck!”

“Any chance you want to row out here and bring us some?” Rhys called.

Gryff cupped one hand behind his ear. “What’s that? Can’t hear you, old chap. Must have water in my ears.”

His amused laugh echoed across the lake.

“Carys!” Rhys cajoled, changing tack. “Favorite sister!”

Carys grinned at his pleading tone. “I’m your only sister, you dolt. Of course I’m your favorite. Which means that I’m also, by default, your least favorite, too.”

“Where’s your Davies Loyalty?” Rhys bellowed, clearly abandoning his attempt to charm her.

“I’m afraid my loyalties are now equally split between Davies and Montgomery.” Carys shrugged and glanced up at her husband. “And poor Gryff needs to get home and dry his hair. I’d hate for him to catch a cold.”

“Sweet wife,” Gryff grinned, bending to press a kiss to her lips before he turned back

toward Rhys and Lenore. “Have fun!” With a final wave he took Carys’s hand and tugged her back into the trees.

Rhys let out a long, frustrated sigh and Lenore watched with flagging spirits as Morgan and Harriet reached the boat dock and made a big show of putting both sets of oars safely back into the shed. With a wave, they too, disappeared from view.

She took a deep breath. “So. What’s the plan? Find a couple of branches and use them to row back to shore? Swim?”

Rhys sat down on the strip of thick grass that bordered the shingle beach and stared out across the water. “Are you any good at swimming? Most ladies don’t know how.”

Lenore sank down next to him. “Of course. Father made sure we knew how before we set sail on our very first expedition. We had lessons in the river, right here at Newstead.”

She sent him a sideways glance, unable to resist teasing him. “Of course, if we’re going to swim, we’ll need to take off most of our clothes.”

She heard him suck in a breath, and continued breezily, “These skirts and petticoats would just hamper my legs and drag me down when they get wet. And my stays would have to go, too. Very restricting, trying to swim in stays.”

A muscle ticked in Rhys’s jaw, and she stifled a laugh, certain she was getting to him with her mental undressing.

“In fact, I’d probably have to strip right down to my shift and my stockings.” She paused for dramatic effect. “It would be quite scandalous, actually. I bet my shift would turn completely transparent.”

Rhys stood abruptly and turned away. “You’re not swimming anywhere.”

“You mean you’re going to strip off and go?”

Oh, she was wicked. Half of her wanted him to do just that, purely so she could see him as gloriously undressed as Gryff had been, but if he did choose to swim, she’d be left here alone, and their adventure would be over. She didn’t want that. She wanted to steal as much time with him as she could,

“I don’t think you should go,” she said decisively. “The water must be very cold.”

“Gryff managed it,” Rhys growled, still with his back to her.

One of the inside seams of his breeches had split during his brawl with Morgan; she could see the most tantalizing sliver of bare, tanned skin on the inside of his left thigh, just above his knee. Her fingers itched to touch it.

“Why don’t we just wait a while and see if someone else comes along?” she suggested.

He didn’t reply, which Lenore took to be reluctant assent, so she bent and picked a daisy and started to pull off the petals one by one.

He loves me. He loves me not.

Which would it be?

“You should see the color of the sea on the islands near Madagascar,” she said, determined to avoid an awkward silence. She always chattered when she was nervous. It was one of her worst traits. Women were always thought more alluring if they stayed silent and mysterious. But she was past using such wiles with Rhys. If

he'd changed his mind about wanting her, then she might as well talk as much as she liked.

“It’s an incredible turquoise color, and the sand is almost white. The water’s so clear you can see the bottom even when it’s very deep, and the fish come in every color of the rainbow. Spotted and striped, all shapes and sizes. They make our British fish look very dull in comparison.”

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Rhys rolled his shoulders. “The coast of Portugal was like that. Not that I saw it for more than five minutes before we all marched inland.”

She cast around for something positive to say about their predicament. “At least there are no snakes here. Or insects that might kill you. The jungle’s full of snakes and spiders that are deadly. Thefer de lance, for example, can kill a person with just one bite.”

Rhys seemed to have recovered his previous good humor. He turned around and sat back down next to her. “That’s true. We only have a few adders over here in Wales. I’ve never seen one.”

She nodded. “And no water snakes either. I wrestled one once, you know. In Brazil.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Rhys’s tone was dry and slightly mocking, but she took it as a compliment, not an insult.

“I didn’tmeanto,” she protested. “But it seized one of the village dogs and I couldn’t just let it just squeeze the poor thing to death right in front of me, could I?”

“Course not,” Rhys said. “Totally reasonable reaction. Anyone else would have run screaming into the jungle, but not you. Not a Mad Montgomery. You decide to wrestle the thing. With your bare hands, no doubt. Or did you employ the same method you used with the panther, and use your shoe?”

Lenore looked out over the lake, not quite sure if he was mocking her or not. He sounded more amused than censorious.

“Well, first I hit it with a stick, and when that didn’t work, I put a rope around its throat and tugged until it let go of the dog and slithered off into the jungle.” She shrugged. “It was quite a small anaconda. A male, probably. The females can get to be enormous.”

Rhys gave a theatrical shiver. “I have never been more glad to be back on Britain’s boring, rainy shores.”

Lenore chuckled. “The only snakes you find here are the ones slithering around the ballrooms of Mayfair, trying to snare a rich wife.”

She sighed and picked another daisy. The last one had finished on he loves me not, which was . . . unacceptable.

She’d try best of three.

“I’m sure we won’t be here for long,” she said bracingly. “Someone will come and rescue us. It’s not as if they’re going to make us stay here all night.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I had to wait weeks to be rescued near Madagascar, but it wasn’t that bad. There were plenty of people to talk to, and enough food. Only Caro had the misfortune to be separated from the rest of us. She and Max were swept onto a different island, just the two of them.”

“And now he’s her husband,” Gryff growled.

Lenore shrugged. “Being stranded is obviously a good way for people to bond.”

“Or to convince them that murder isn’t such a terrible idea after all,” he said dryly.

“Oh, hush. This isn’t so bad. It’s a pleasant way to pass the evening.”

To prove her point she leaned back on the springy grass and put her hands behind her head. The late afternoon sunlight dappled her face through the fluttering leaves and sparkled off the rippled surface of the water.

Rhys gave a deep sigh of resignation. “You’re right. It could be a lot worse.”

Lenore wasn’t sure how to take that comment.

Chapter Fifteen

Rhys reached down and tugged off his wet boots and set them in a patch of sunlight to start drying, then peeled off his stockings.

Lenore turned her head and sneaked a glance at his long, tanned feet as he wriggled his toes in the grass, then went to cool them off in the water. Not to be outdone, she sat up and unlaced her ankle boots and removed her own stockings, relishing the naughty thrill of undressing, even partly, next to him.

But he only glanced her way once as she hitched up her skirts and waded into the shallows, then bent to inspect a patch of little yellow lily flowers floating nearby.

“In Brazil they have lily pads that are big enough for a person to sit on,” Lenore said, desperate to keep his interest. “Like little boats. And quite a few of the tribes have legends about them.”

“What kind of legends?”

“Of how the lily flowers are the spirits of beautiful maidens who’ve drowned in the water.”

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“That’s cheerful,” he said dryly.

“My favorite was the story about a mermaid, called the Iara. She lures men to their doom with her singing and false promises of great riches at the bottom of the river.”

“I think most cultures have legends about beautiful women luring foolish men to their doom,” he said half serious. “The ancient Greeks had their sirens and their naiads. We Welsh have Gwenhidw, a magical mermaid queen. Some say she’s the inspiration for King Arthur’s Guinevere. Men have made fools of themselves over pretty faces for thousands of years.”

He sent her a wry, sideways glance that made her pulse pound.

If only he’d make a fool of himself over her.

“It’s not always women.” She sent him an answering smile. “There’s also a male river spirit, an unnaturally handsome warrior who comes out of the river at the full moon and seduces all the prettiest girls in the village. He makes love to them at night, but in the morning, he’s gone, turned back into his true form, a pink river dolphin.”

Rhys’s expression was one of laughing disbelief. “A pink dolphin?”

“They exist. I’ve seen one, in the Amazon River.”

“And were you captivated by this scarlet seducer?” he teased.

“I was not.”

His mouth opened as if he was about to ask another question, but then he seemed to change his mind and glanced away, and Lenore bit back a wave of disappointment.

She gazed out across the lake. The sun was dropping toward the horizon, slanting its peachy rays across the land and turning the sky purple and gold. A few ducks paddled about, upending themselves in that comical way they had to search for pond weed. The water reflected the darkening sky and the fluffy white clouds above. It was an idyllic spot.

“You must have had some exciting adventures yourself, though,” she prodded softly. “You went to Portugal, Spain, and France.”

Rhys splashed back to the shore and sank down on the grass again. “I did. But I had quite a few close brushes with death, too. I was in the same regiment as Gryff, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. We saw action at Salamanca, Nivelle, and Toulouse. Gryff left just before Waterloo because our father had died and he needed to come back and take over as earl, but I stayed to get the job done. Or until I met my maker, whichever came first.”

Lenore lowered herself down next to him. “Brave men like you are the reason we’re not all speaking French right now.”

He gave a self-deprecating shrug, uncomfortable with her praise, but she’d wanted to tell him this ever since she’d met him.

“Waterloo was such a close-run thing,” he said quietly. “It could have gone against us so easily.” He selected a flat stone and sent it skimming over the surface of the water with a practiced flick of his arm. “I feel incredibly lucky to have survived, when so many of my friends didn’t get to come home.”

Sadness flashed across his features, and she reined in the impulse to put her arms

around him and give him a hug. She pressed her shoulder against his instead, in a wordless show of sympathy, and he sent her a smile to show he appreciated the gesture.

His humility was humbling. He was so much more than just his good looks. He had depths to his personality, a hundred different facets, and she wanted to discover them all. She wanted to know his likes and dislikes, what made him laugh, what made him cry.

She already knew he liked physical activity, like boxing. But did he also like to read? To ride? Was he musical? Could he play an instrument? What was his favorite book?

She couldn't pepper him with a thousand questions now, though, however much she wanted to.

She picked up her own stone and managed a very creditable four skips before it sank into the lake. He shot her an impressed look, eyebrows raised.

"I think travel has changed me," she said pensively. "Well, maybe not changed me, exactly, but certainly shaped me. It brought out aspects of my character that probably already existed but made them stronger. My resourcefulness, for instance." Her lips quirked. "And my stubbornness. And despite all the misfortunes—some frightening, some even life-threatening—I can be proud of the fact that I survived. I am stronger than I thought I could be. I can endure more than I ever imagined."

"War changed me," Rhys admitted. "It made me realize that people can do the most incredible things, both good and bad."

"Do you believe in fate?" Lenore asked, curious.

He shook his head. "Not really. I mean, I don't think I was destined to live while

other men around me died. I think there were a hundred times when my life hung in the balance, and I couldn't say whether I survived because of some action I took, or because of sheer luck."

"Well, whatever it was, I'm glad," she said with a smile. "Just think of the millions of tiny incidents that have led to the two of us being here, at exactly this point in time. It's enough to make your head spin, really."

"Best not to think about it too hard," Rhys grinned. "I've heard too much thinking can addle the brain."

She gave him a playful punch on the arm. "I'm not the one whose grey matter is scrambled from all those punches to the head."

He chuckled. "I'm beginning to think there's more to us being stuck here than just our siblings' desire to win this treasure hunt. I think the lot of them are throwing us together for their own amusement. Because we're the only two unmarried ones left."

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Lenore felt her cheeks heat with a guilty flush, as if that wasn't precisely what she'd asked her aunts to do. "Interesting theory."

"They all seem convinced the Davies-Montgomery enmity is a thing of the past. That we've been enemies for so long that the universe is righting itself now by having us all fall in love."

Lenore managed a snort. "That's ridiculous."

He raised his brows. "Is it? All three of my siblings have fallen for Montgomerys. Gryff with Maddie, Carys with Tristan, and Morgan with Harriet."

"You make it sound as though we're doomed."

He shrugged, and her heart gave a funny lurch at the fact that he wasn't outright denying the possibility that he could fall in love with her. Perhaps there was hope after all?

She skimmed another stone and kept her tone carefully neutral, praying that she wasn't about to make a complete fool of herself.

"Andover keeps asking me to marry him," she said. "He won't take no for an answer."

Rhys's shoulder lifted in a casual shrug, but there was a thread of steely tension in his voice as he spoke.

“Why don’t you marry him, then? Put the poor sod out of his misery. And the rest of the country’s unmarried men, too, for that matter. Once you accept Andover, the rest will stop thinking they have a chance of capturing your heart.”

“That’s just the problem,” Lenore said, her heart pounding in her throat. “Andover doesn’t have my heart.”

Rhys didn’t even bother to skim his stone. He just threw it as far into the lake as he could. He almost hit a duck.

“Why not? He’s got a ducal title, a huge estate in Wiltshire, and a healthy bank balance.”

“Is that what you think I’m looking for in a husband?”

“Isn’t that whatever woman’s looking for in a husband?” he countered cynically.

“Not me. I mean, it would be nice if the man I eventually marry isn’t a pauper, but I really don’t care much about material things. I’ve spent a large part of my life without what most people would call creature comforts, even necessities. There are no lovely hot baths in the middle of the rainforest, no chefs to cook up whatever delicious puddings your brain can conceive. In Brazil, I only had three dresses to last me an entire year.”

She twitched the skirts of her dress, which was now ruined beyond any hope of salvation. “And while I certainly appreciate pretty things, they’re not the most important thing in life.”

“What is?”

She tilted her head and waited for him to look directly at her. “Why, love of course.”

He rolled his eyes in typical male exasperation.

“You mock,” she said severely, “but that’s precisely what kept my parents together all these years, through thick and thin. It’s what kept us all from going mad and giving up hope for those weeks we were shipwrecked. I had a loving family to support me and comfort me. I’d trade a boatload of jewels for someone who loved me and cared for me.”

Rhys turned to look at her again. “And Andover doesn’t love you?”

She shook her head. “He does not.”

“And you don’t love him?”

“No.”

“What will you do if you don’t find someone who loves you?” he asked curiously.

“I suppose I’ll just stay a spinster, like Aunts Prudence and Constance.”

“A lot of women in your position would marry him just for financial security. Or to call themselves duchess.”

“Not me. He doesn’t make my heart flutter.”

Rhys’s dark eyes were steady on hers. “Have you ever met a man who does?”

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Lenore couldn't look away. "I have."

Rhys sucked in a breath. "Do I know him?"

Lenore threw caution to the wind. "Intimately."

She held her breath, bracing for rejection as she waited for him to realize the import of what she'd just said. His eyes widened in astonishment, then he frowned, as if questioning his own judgment.

"You might have been right about my brain and all those hits to the head," he said. "Are you saying the person who makes your heart flutter is me?"

Chapter Sixteen

Lenore nodded, not trusting her voice, but Rhys's lips curved into the most relieved, wicked smile she'd ever seen.

"Was that when I kissed you, in the wine cellar?"

"Yes," she admitted. "And every time before that, too. Ever since that very first time we met, in Lady Chessington's garden."

His jaw dropped open and she relished his look of shock as he finally understood what she was admitting.

"You love me? Right now? And you've been in love with me for almost an entire

year?” His tone was an amusing mixture of triumph and irritation. “Bloody hell, woman! Why didn’t you say something?”

She sent him a laughing, scolding glance. “When did I have the chance? You avoided me at almost every single event. You barely even deigned to talk to me.”

“Because I was in love with you,” he said, his voice rough with frustration. “And I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself. It was self-preservation. I told myself it was ridiculous to fall in love with someone I’d only just met. I was convinced a woman as beautiful and as clever as you would have nothing to do with me. That if I left you alone, you’d eventually marry some stuffy old duke and I’d just go and drink myself into an alcoholic stupor and die of a broken heart like all the best tragic heroes.”

Lenore let out a peal of laughter. Her own heart was racing so fast she could hardly breathe.

Rhys reached out and caught her face between his palms, his eyes wide.

“You really love me?”

“I’m afraid so. The Davies-Montgomery curse has struck again.”

“Lenore Montgomery, will you marry me?”

Lenore returned his incredulous smile with one of her own. “Rhys Davies, I’d be honored. And I really don’t care if you don’t have a title, or any money. We’ll manage.”

Rhys actually looked a little guilty. “Ah. About that.”

Her heart dropped. Was he about to admit to a mountain of debt? A slew of

illegitimate children? A terrible addiction to gambling or laudanum?

Whatever it was, they would deal with it. Together.

“I’m not entirely penniless. I’m actually quite rich,” he said. “You remember all that wine in the cellar? That’s mine.”

Lenore gaped at him. “But that must have cost a fortune! How—?”

His grin somehow managed to be both shy and cocky at the same time. “Turns out this poor scrambled brain of mine is quite good at investing. I’ve made some decent returns on the stock exchange, and that wine is one of my longer-term projects. Most of those bottles will increase steadily over the next five to ten years. Far less volatile than stocks and shares.”

Lenore stared at him. “I don’t know what to say. I always assumed you were a penniless second son.”

Rhys’s eyes bored into hers. “Say you’ll still marry me, even if I have a fortune. Prove you weren’t lying when you said you didn’t care about a man’s financial position as long as he loved you and you loved him.”

Lenore let out an exasperated laugh. “Oh, you are impossible! Yes, I’ll marry you, you rogue.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips.

He stilled, just for a moment, as if still afraid to trust his good fortune, then he returned the pressure with thrilling enthusiasm.

Lenore groaned as his tongue darted into her mouth, tasting her with an urgency that made her blood sing in her veins. She wound her arms around his neck and tugged him back with her onto the grass, loving the urgent sound he made deep in his chest.

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“You’re not just offering to marry me because I’ve been compromised, are you?” she murmured with a laugh, pressing feverish kisses along his jaw, his neck.

“Nobody except our families knows we’re here,” he panted between kisses. “So obviously not.”

“Pity,” Lenore sighed. “Because I’m not at all averse to being compromised, you know. In fact, I think I’d quite like it.”

He stopped kissing her and rose up on his forearms to study her. His eyes were almost black with desire. “Are you sure?”

Lenore nodded. She’d never been more certain of anything in her life. She wanted him with a desperation that was a fire in her veins. And she trusted him not to love her and leave her.

“I’ve been dreaming of you kissing me, touching me, for months,” she breathed. “Every time you looked at me from across a crowded room, I wanted to know what it would be like to have you make love with me.”

“Wicked girl,” he said softly. “But you deserve silk sheets and a feather mattress, not grass and—”

Lenore arched her neck and kissed him again. “I deserve you,” she murmured. “All of you. Right now. I don’t want to wait.”

He shook his head, but his lips quirked in that teasing way she adored. “Oh, love.

Your wish is my command.”

He lifted his body off hers and she frowned in confusion, only to smile as he caught her hand and pulled her away from the shore and into the privacy of the trees.

“Just in case they decide to come and rescue us, after all.”

As soon as they were safely hidden, he caught her in his arms and pulled her against his body for a kiss that set her heart racing all over again. The mossy grass was soft beneath her as he lowered her to the ground, his hands roving over her body as if he was searching for a flag hidden on her person.

Lenore gasped as his lips slid down her throat and over her collarbone, then lower, over the curves of her breasts. The slight stubble of his jaw raised goosebumps on her sensitive skin and her belly clenched in excitement.

His tongue swirled over her nipple a moment before he took it in his mouth, and she grasped his hair as his wicked tongue laved and circled, teasing it into a tight little bud.

“Rhys!”

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he murmured against her skin, his hand cupping her other breast, so she arched up into his touch like a cat. “I’ve wanted you from the very first moment I saw you, and I haven’t stopped for a single day since.”

His mouth nipped and teased.

She’d suspected making love would be nice, but she’d never dreamed it would feel like this. Hot and cold, like a fever, a clawing hunger in her belly and a pulsing throb between her legs.

“Please,” she panted, not entirely sure what she was asking for, but desperate for more, all the same.

His low chuckle made her shiver. “Patience, my sweet. I don’t want to hurt you. We’re not going to rush.”

He sat up and tugged off his jacket, then his cravat, and tossed them aside, and she ran her hands greedily over his shoulders, then stroked his chest, loving the twitch of his muscles beneath her palms.

“Shirt off,” she demanded, and he laughingly obliged.

His chest was even more impressive than his brother’s, all muscled curves and intriguing ridges thanks to his boxing regimen, and Lenore couldn’t resist pressing her lips to the flat plane of his pectoral. She flicked her own tongue playfully across his tawny male nipple, reasoning that whatever he’d done to her would feel equally nice to him, and was rewarded with a deep groan and another ravenous kiss.

He untied the lacing at the back of her dress with deft fingers, then undid her stays, and his reverent gaze roved over her body as she wriggled out of the fabric.

Lenore’s cheeks heated in embarrassment to be left in just her sheer shift, but the hot look in his eyes as he looked down at her made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

“One day I’m going to take you swimming in this, just so I can see you looking like a mermaid,” he breathed, his hands skimming over her ribs and down the outside of her thighs.

She arched restlessly. “And I’m going to make you work for me in the butterfly house without your shirt, just so I can ogle you in the most shameless manner.”

His brows quirked. “How scandalous.”

He moved down her body, his palms skimming her breasts, then shaping the curve of her waist. Lenore opened her legs, desperate for him to touch her there, and his deft fingers slid up under the hem of her shift against the smooth skin of her thighs.

His eyes were almost black as he looked at her in wonder. “When you were up on my shoulders, all I could think about was pressing my mouth right here.”

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He bent his head and kissed her on the inside of her leg, just above her knee, then higher.

Lenore grabbed his hair to try to drag him even closer, and felt the warm puff of his laughing exhale against her thigh.

“I wanted to taste you so badly,” he groaned, his breath fanning her most intimate place.

He kissed her again, even higher, and she squirmed at the delicious sensation. She’d seen such scandalous acts depicted in erotic engravings, but the reality was even better than the theory. Her eyes rolled back in her head as his fingers slid against her folds, teasing and circling, and when he leaned forward and added his tongue, she arched into his touch, trying to find some relief from the coiling tension inside her.

He made a hum of pleasure against her and the vibration made her shudder, and then his finger slid inside her, and she gasped at the strange sensation.

“All right?” he breathed.

She nodded. “Yes. It’s just . . . different, that’s all.”

And then his hand began to move, slowly, sliding in and out of her, and the heat and the tension increased even more.

“Oh! That’s very nice.”

He rose up and took her lips again, and his tongue delved into her mouth in the same wicked, insistent rhythm as his finger. Every inch of her body felt hot and restless, and she held her breath, tensing, moving against him, reaching for something just out of reach.

“Let go, Lenore. That’s it. Come for me,” Rhys growled against her neck, and the pleasure burst over her like a great wave. She tilted back her head and groaned in astonishment as pulses of blissful relief suffused her whole body, happiness exploding like fireworks behind her closed eyelids.

“Rhys!”

He chuckled against her temple at her astonishment, and she relaxed against the grass, entirely spent. She’d never been so relaxed, so boneless in her life.

So that was the mysterious ‘crisis’ she’d read about in books. How glorious.

A satisfied smile spread across her face, and she opened her eyes to find Rhys gazing down at her, a pleased, tender expression on his face.

“I had no idea,” she breathed. “It was like running and jumping off a waterfall, and then splashing into the most glorious pool of happiness.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you sure you’re not secretly a pink river dolphin in disguise?”

“Just a man.” Rhys pressed a kiss to her flushed cheek, then another to her lips. “Who happens to love doing that to you. Do you think you can bear any more?”

Lenore widened her eyes. She knew he hadn’t found his own pleasure yet, and to her surprise her body tingled with renewed excitement at the thought of him joining his body with hers.

“I want you, Rhys Davies. Body and soul. Make me yours.”

Her words seemed to release some pent-up spring inside him, because he groaned and pressed a passionate kiss to her lips. “God, I really want to be gentle, to make this good for you, but I’ve wanted you for so long. I don’t think I can wait.”

She stroked her fingers through his hair. “Then don’t. Show me what to do.”

“Let me see you. All of you. Please.” His voice was hoarse, and wonderfully desperate, and her heart sang at his indisputable desire.

With fumbling hands she helped him pull her shift up and over her head and she lay back, unashamed to lie before him naked. The cool breeze peaked her already-sensitive nipples and the dappled sunlight made shifting patterns across her stomach and chest.

He swallowed, then rolled to his back and discarded his breeches, and she sucked in a breath as she finally saw him naked.

He was beautiful, an animal in its prime, as sleek and as lean as a panther. His skin was tawny, and his limbs all flowed in muscled lines. His cock stood to attention against his flat belly, and when he wrapped his hand around it and gave it a squeeze, Lenore reached out, desperate to touch him herself.

She’d never seen an aroused man before, and she was intrigued by the difference between his body and her own. Men were such strange creatures.

He let her fingers close around him, and the contrast between velvet-soft skin and iron-hard muscle was fascinating.

“That’s enough of that,” he half groaned, half laughed, when she gave him a little

stroke. “Or this will be over far too soon.”

He settled himself over her, taking most of his weight on his elbows on either side of her head, and the sensation of his big body against hers, his ridged belly and strong thighs pressing her down into the earth, made her breathless with excitement.

She widened her legs to let him in, but when his cock nudged against her entrance he paused. “Still sure? We can wait until we’re wed, if you like.”

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Lenore laughed. It was clear he was desperate to continue, and the fact that he'd deny himself, even to the point of pain, just to reassure her of his honorable intentions, was all the evidence she needed that he was a good man.

Luckily for him, she was a very bad woman, and now she had him here, there was no chance she'd let him go without finishing what he'd started.

"You can't stop now," she said, wriggling her hips so they both groaned at the delicious friction. "That's like setting off on an expedition and giving up a few miles from the end. I want the whole adventure."

He let out a breathless laugh. "Whatever the lady wants."

He rocked forward, entering her slowly, then pulled back, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. She tilted her hips, instinctively seeking a better angle, and the next time he slid in a little further.

There was no pain, just a slight stretch, and soon he was seated to the hilt inside her.

"So good," he groaned, sounding as if he was barely holding on to his control. "Hold on."

Lenore wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as he started to move, slowly at first, then with ever-increasing speed. Her body clenched around him, and the friction of him inside her was even better than that of his fingers.

She stroked her hands along his sides, over the ridges of his ribs, then down to the

smooth mounds of his backside, and he groaned against her shoulder when she gave his arse a cheeky squeeze, just as he'd done to her at the boat shed.

He quickened his pace, hitting a spot inside her that made her teeter on the edge of that wonderful drop again, and then she fell, arching her back and crying out as another surge of pleasure racked her body.

Her convulsions must have finished him off, because with a deep groan he tensed within her, and his whole body pulsed with his release. He groaned her name as he came, loud enough to be heard right across the island, and she smiled up at the canopy of trees above her head, entirely satisfied.

He collapsed on top of her, squashing her for a brief moment, then seemed to come to his senses and rolled to her side, withdrawing from her body.

Lenore felt wonderful, sated and tingling and utterly replete. She'd always suspected being ravished by Rhys would be delightful, but this had exceeded her expectations.

"Well, I'm definitely compromised now," she wheezed.

Rhys let out a weary chuckle and rolled onto his back to stare at the sky. "Bloody Hell, woman. Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?"

"Since the first moment you saw me," Lenore chuckled. "You said."

"It bears repeating. I didn't even think you were real, at first. I thought maybe I'd dreamed you up. My perfect woman. But then you spoke, and told me your name, and I started being an idiot."

"It's only taken you a year to realize it," she smiled. "And I did everything I could to show you I was interested. I wore the most beautiful dresses, encouraged a score of

men fall in love with me, just to spur you into competing.”

Rhys let out a heartfelt groan. “I told you. Scrambled brain. You’re going to have to do most of the thinking.”

Her turned his head to look at her. “Where do you want to get married? Here? Or back in London? I don’t care which.”

“Here. I always thought the little church in the village was pretty, and I’ve never wanted a big public society wedding.”

“Done,” he said. “I wish we didn’t have to wait the three weeks required to have the banns read, but it can’t be helped. I think we Davies have used up our share of special licenses for a decade. The Archbishop of Canterbury must be sick of us.”

“Will we live at Trellech?” Lenore asked.

His brows rose. “Would you like that? I thought you’d want to keep traveling the world.”

“I’d like to travel a bit, but only with you. And I’d love to live at Trellech. Then, I could easily work in the butterfly house at Newstead.”

“In that case, yes. Although I do have quite a nice town house in London, just off Grosvenor Square.”

Lenore sighed in happiness. “I have a confession to make.”

His lips quirked in amusement. “Oh really? Do tell.”

“I asked the Aunts to contrive ways for us to be alone together. This entire treasure

hunt was a way for me to spend time with you to see if I could convince you to love me.”

Rhys blew a lock of his hair off his forehead and laughed. “I needed no convincing. And, well, I have a confession to make too. I asked my siblings to take every opportunity to push us together. Morgan was kind enough to lock us in the boat shed, and even kinder to leave us here without any oars. I think I owe him a drink.”

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Lenore gasped. “We’re as bad as each other,” she giggled. “I knew you were dastardly, Davies.”

Rhys rolled onto his side and pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “We’re perfect for one another,” he grinned. “Now, get dressed, in case someone decides we’ve been her long enough and decides to come and get us.”

“Please say we can do this again before the wedding.”

“Oh, we will definitely do this again before the wedding. We Davies are excellent at sneaking around. I’ll show you all the ways to get into Trellech without being seen. As nice as this was, I can’t wait to make love to you in my bed. I want you naked on my sheets, exactly as I’ve imagined.”

His eyes sparkled. “Now can I buy you dresses?”

Lenore bit her lip and pretended to consider. “Well, I suppose this does count as intimate acquaintance. I just had my hands on your arse, Davies.”

He shook his head at her cheek. “You have a wicked tongue, Lenore Montgomery. And the next time we’re together, I’m going to put it to good use.”

“I can’t wait.”

Epilogue

The treasure hunt was a four-way draw.

Four of the couples managed to find two flags each. Carys and Tristan found the ones at the folly and on Geoffrey the peacock. Maddie and Gryff claimed the ones at the wishing well and on the island. Morgan and Harriet found the bridge flag and the one hidden in the library at Trellech, and Rhys and Lenore found the ones at the butterfly house and in the clock tower.

Caro and Max found the one in the cellar at Newstead, and Will and Lucy discovered the boat house flag before anyone else.

Lenore still considered herself victorious, however, as did Rhys, especially when they said their vows in the tiny, ancient church a few miles from Trellech in front of a select handful of friend and relations.

Aunts Prudence and Constance sat in the front pew in pride of place, mopping the happy tears from their eyes and telling everyone who would listen that they always knew Lenore and Rhys were destined to be together.

Since Rhys and Lenore both secretly thought the same thing, they simply smiled, and spent the weeks after their weddingmaking love in every one of the places they'd visited in the treasure hunt.

This required Davies and Montgomery levels of sneaking about, since many of the other couples had come up with the same idea, and they all frequently encountered one another in various amusing stages of undress.

Rhys enacted a little sweet revenge on Gryff by stealing his clothes while he and Maddie were swimming naked in the river, and locked Morgan in one of the large enclosures with Geoffrey, just for the entertainment of seeing him try to scale the metal gates.

Geoffrey was not amused.

A few months after their wedding, Rhys and Lenore set sail on their next adventure, a caterpillar-gathering expedition to Martinique, on a ship captained by Morgan, and accompanied by Harriet.

Lenore discovered eight new species of butterfly, one of which, the Madagascan blue-winged Charaxes, she gave the latin name *Charaxes Daviesi*, in honor of her husband.

Rhys bought her a ridiculous number of beautiful dresses, several cases of jewelry, and named a ship after her, the *Siren Lenore*, a sister-ship to its twin, the *Destiny*.