



Boxing With My Duke (A Sweet and Lighthearted Regency #16)

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Category: Historical

Description: The last thing Carlton Coleman, the Duke of Richmond, needs is Lady Catherine Campbell picking fights with his bouncers and rampaging through the halls of his peaceful gentleman's club looking for her brother Edward. When Carlton finds out the young earl has eloped with Serafina, his na?ve young ward, he offers to escort the stubborn spinster to Gretna Green to stop the wedding before it's too late.

Heaven help her from arrogant dukes...Catherine is so worried about Edward that she is willing to do anything to bring him home, even accompanying the cavalier duke. Her heart clenches with concern for her impulsive brother, knowing the possible consequences of his rash actions.

Will they be able to stop the wedding in time? Thrown together by misunderstandings, mishaps, and a mysterious puppy named Riggs—Carlton and Catherine set off on a wild ride through the craggy countryside, facing possible danger and unpredictable weather as they navigate through both the treacherous terrain of the countryside and the tumultuous landscape of their own hearts.

-----Book #16 in the Wayward Dukes' Alliance series

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December 1816 ~ Bath, England

Carlton Coleman, the fifth Duke of Richmond, stared down at the ledger in front of him. He needed to prove to himself his changes had been worthwhile. When he inherited his father's dukedom and, subsequently, his uncle's gentlemen's club, he made changes, primarily in how the third floor operated.

In his uncle's time, the club had partnered with Madame Shanty, who supplied women to entertain the members. While Carlton realized this type of entertainment had been part of gentlemen's clubs for years, he didn't support the partnership and disliked the financial arrangement his uncle had made. Even so, ledger numbers had driven his decision. The madame had substantially increased her costs, and her sales had dropped.

His father used to say, "You can't expect loyalty from those people who would do anything for money." With the numbers backing him, it wasn't hard to eliminate her presence. However, having the numbers on his ledger to support his decision was even better. A few members disagreed with his decision and had been very vocal.

Carlton refurbished the rooms and rented them to members, demanding a level of decorum and requiring any female visitors to be escorted in through the backdoor by the member. The members well-received the change and had driven a marked improvement in profits. His move had not been to remove the access to women of pleasure; it had been to remove Madame Shanty.

Pleased, he leaned back and puffed his cigar. This modification had not been easy, but with a finite amount of space, it was important to maximize profits. The door to

his office opened and his best friend, Damon Devereaux , the Duke of Danforth , strode into the room.

“ Damon ! This is a delightful surprise. I thought you’d be leaving for Scotland this week,” Carlton said, closing the ledger and securing it in the safe behind his desk.

“ My duchess changed things for this year. We’re staying here and having the family visit us,” Damon said, helping himself to a brandy before taking a seat in front of his friend’s desk.

“ I see you were reviewing your books—tedious work. I just concluded reviewing the books with Mr . Garmin , my man of business. I was hoping we could get some time in the ring and work off some of the torment of meeting with him,” Damon said. “ He’s good at his job but has a bothersome habit of chewing his fingernails to bleeding nubs. Rather disgusting. I’ve asked him to stop, but I don’t think he even notices he’s doing it.”

“ I’d be happy to introduce you to mine if you’d like. There’s no bloodletting in our meetings,” Carlton said, laughing.

“ I may take you up on that,” Damon said with a smirk.

“ How are the children doing with your governess-turned-duchess?” Carlton asked, reaching for the decanter. “ And how is married life? Still mooning over your lovely Lydia , I take it?” he teased. Damon’s children had run off six governesses in under two years. When he returned with his family from their Christmas vacation in Scotland , Damon found his housekeeper and butler had hired Lydia as the newest governess. Lydia had a way with the children and turned the children’s destructive behavior around. And despite his best efforts to remain unmarried, Damon fell in love. Carlton was genuinely happy for his friend, even though he did not believe in true love.

“ Lydia insists on staying involved with their lessons. She finally hired another governess but still visits the nursery—although, with her increased responsibilities, that’s lessening. She hired a widow who lost her husband fighting Napoleon . Mrs . Allen . Lydia posted an advertisement in her father’s mercantile.”

“ Bold move— I like it . Her family probably knows the woman. Wise duchess you have there,” Carlton drawled. “ When does she start?”

“ Soon , I hope. I had to insist she find one. She agreed to interview the finalists. My housekeeper took charge of filling the position—which was a much better arrangement than my involvement. I believe she said it would be the day after the twelfth night. January six,” said Damon . “ It’s the same date I gave Lydia .”

“ Your luck changed when you met Miss Hammond .”

“ Yes , it was also a reprieve for the frogs and lizards. The children stopped their pranks—and the frogs stayed in the pond,” Damon said wryly.

“ Will your mother’s family join you from Scotland ?” Carlton asked.

“ I believe so. Lydia insists on handling the arrangements. Now that I’m married, I’m hoping Mother’s focus shifts to the children.”

“ I get it. My mother does much the same with me,” Carlton agreed. “ Frankly , I’m a large man. No offense intended—but I’m not ready for marriage, and if I were, the woman must be taller than most of what I see among the ton .”

“ I get that. I’m six feet, and you tower over me” laughed Damon .

“ Mother is tall, herself—and should understand my dilemma, but that isn’t the case. She’s always suggesting I escort her to some function when I know she’s planned an

ambush of debutantes and their marriage-minded mamas.”

“ Thank goodness my mother chose to live in Scotland for much of the year. I couldn’t imagine her living here. She could very possibly have joined the Golden Duchesses , as they’ve all known each other for years. Four well-meaning women who miss nothing. Interfering in one’s life is integral to their group’s mission,” Damon said with a shudder. “ I enjoy their company but prefer it in small increments. Lydia was entertaining them this afternoon, so I welcomed them on my way out, hoping you are up for time in the ring.”

Carlton scoffed. “ They are a force to reckon with. Last year, the duchesses suddenly needed to honor a commitment from their youth and move in together—one year after The Duchess of Featherly had hired Lydia —and just as you had an opening for a governess.” Carlton drained his glass.

“ Yes . But perhaps I’m looking at them all wrong. Their meddling gave me a treasured wife and a loving mother to my children. As a foursome, the Dowager Duchesses are a societal force in the Bath community.”

“ Please don’t let my mother ever hear you say that. She already thinks her meddling in my business is justified.” Carlton pushed back from his desk. “ What do you say about going a few rounds in the ring?”

A frantic knocking sounded at the door.

“ Come in,” Carlton said.

His club footman opened the door. Beads of sweat lined his forehead.

“ What is it, Adams ?”

“ Your Grace , I apologize for the intrusion. But a lady has breached the entrance and is running through the place opening rooms, demanding to see her brother.”

Carlton rolled his eyes and looked at the ceiling. “ A lady? Who is her brother?”

“ The Earl of Landon . She believes he is being entertained by one of our staff—upstairs. ” The footman emphasized the word and looked beseechingly at his boss. “ Your Grace , she claims the young lord is possessed by a she-devil who has bewitched him into marriage and is concerned about her mother’s wellbeing, should she find out.”

“ A she-devil? Where is Roberts , the manager?”

“ He stepped away to the bank, Your Grace ,” Adams replied.

Carlton turned to Damon . “ I’m sorry. We’ll have to continue this later. I have a fire to douse.”

“ Ah ! No problem, my friend. The lovely Lady Catherine Campbell has breached your club’s defenses, and you have a possible bewitching. Your hands are full,” Damon said, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “ I should get home before my children come up with ideas on how to entertain themselves. For the moment, I think the frogs are safe. But once they hear a new governess is coming, anything is possible.

“ Give Mandy and Michael my love and tell them Uncle Carlton will see them soon.”

Carlton grabbed his jacket and left the room with his footman, and made his way to the front entrance.

“ Why would she think her brother is on the third floor? Does he have an apartment?” he asked Adams as they searched the main floor.

“ I’m unsure if he has one of the apartments. Lady Campbell ranted about the third floor and the illicit activities she’s heard take place in clubs such as ours.”

Lord Landon was a newly minted earl. Carlton recalled hearing Lady Landon was having a rough time with the loss of her husband, having lost her eldest son and heir only a year and a half prior. At least it gave him some understanding of the emotions involved with Landon’s sister.

“ I don’t recall having met his sister. Their father died not quite a year ago. I’m beginning to get the picture,” Carlton murmured.

“ I’ll cover the second and third floors. You cover this floor, and make sure you cover the kitchen.” Carlton started to leave and turned back to Adams . “ Did Lady Campbell name the employee she thinks is the she-devil?”

“ Serafina .”

“ My Serafina ? ” he asked, stopping in his tracks. “ That’s absurd.” Carlton had treated Serafina Davies much like a younger sister and saw her as his ward. As the daughter of a vicar, she had grown up with an education, but her parents perished in a fire at the vicarage when she was twelve. Serafina was shuffled among relatives until she finally ran away at the age of fourteen from the home of her father’s distant cousin, who treated her like a servant. The last straw was when he tried to grab and kiss her. Serafina had met Carlton’s uncle in town once, and he had been very kind to her.

Remembering his uncle’s kindness, Serafina found her way to his doorstep three years ago, looking for a job. His housekeeper, who had no children of her own, took an immediate liking to her and encouraged Carlton’s uncle to help her. Following his uncle’s wishes, she became his ward. Carlton never told a soul when he found Serafina’s cousin and beat him to a pulp for what he tried to do to her.

Presently , she lived under his roof, as his ward, and under his protection, but also under the guidance of his housekeeper, who looked at the young woman like a daughter. Serafina asked to work, and after much discussion, he compromised and gave her access to his club books. She helped with accounting and bookkeeping—a position designed to keep her presence unseen and unknown. He had just received word she would start the Judith Allen School for Young Ladies in January . His mother had pulled some strings to get her accepted and seemed excited about the prospect. So ...how did Serafina meet Landon ?

The woman is mad. “ Serafina would never flee with a member.” Would she? His mind screamed no , but there were questions. Niggling doubt wedged itself in his thoughts as he struggled to remember something—something he had asked Serafina to do for Lord Landon .

With cold certainty, he recalled having asked her to sit with the young lord and transfer his father’s account assets into his name. It was something he normally did, but for reasons he couldn’t recall, he asked Serafina to handle it. But how did Lady Catherine Campbell know her?

“ Adams , find out where Serafina is. Leave no stone unturned. I want her in my office in ten minutes. If you don’t find her, report back to me.”

“ Yes , Your Grace . I’ll find her.”

Taking the stairs two by two, Carlton reached the second floor and frantically looked everywhere. The floor housed common areas for the members, but they were all quiet. Exasperated , he climbed to the third floor, where members’ private rooms and suites were located. Normally , the doors were locked. But on the off chance one had escaped the cleaning crew’s notice and was left open, he’d check. Going room by room, he tested the knobs. As he approached the last one, the door burst open, and a woman bumped into him. He caught her to keep her from toppling the two of them.

“ Who are you, sir?” she demanded.

“ I believe the question is, who are you, and why are you going into my club members’ private rooms?” Carlton asked.

“ You never answered my question,” she snapped. “ I am Lady Campbell , and my brother is the Earl of Landon .” She paused for emphasis. “ He should be here, but I cannot find him.”

“ I am the Duke of Richmond , and you, dear lady, are running through my club. And this,” he waved his hands, “is a private floor.” Carlton returned, not bothering to mask his irritation.

“ A lightskirts’ dream, no doubt,” she snorted, placing her hands on her hips. “ Where are you hiding him? I demand you take me to him.”

Carlton caught his breath. The woman was beautiful—and to his liking , she was taller than the average woman, with chocolate brown hair, blue eyes, and curves in all the right places. Not only could he see, but he felt every delicious curve when he bumped into her. Carlton had refused to court a too-small woman who he would crush in bed. A smile rose to his lips. “ Your brother doesn’t maintain a room here. If you cannot find him, perhaps he is not on the premises.”

“ Then you must help me find him! I fear we don’t have much time!”

“ Lady Campbell , suppose we go to my office and sort this out,” Carlton suggested. He had no intention of sorting this out in front of an audience—especially given her unflattering remarks about Serafina .

“ Fine ! But we must hurry. The longer we take, the further away they could be, and the worse things will be should Mother find out what Edward has done,” she

blustered.

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Lady Catherine Campbell swished past him and took a seat across from his desk. “Let’s get this over with,” she said in a huff. “I’m desperately worried about my brother.”

Carlton bit the inside of his cheek, conflicted with feelings, but the two vying for the top spot were irritation and lust. He’d rather focus on her curves, imagining how she would feel in his arms, but in the few minutes he’d known her, he found her snappish attitude exhausting. “Tell me why you are here,” he sighed. “I know it’s about your brother, but why do you think he would be here?”

“My brother Edward.” She gave her head a slight shake and exhaled. “Our father passed away eleven months ago, and my brother—who always thought of himself as the spare—is now the Earl of Landon. Something he’d never even considered until the death of our older brother, William, a year and a half ago.” She cleared her throat as she glanced down at the gloves on her lap.

Carlton could not help but feel sorry for Lady Catherine and her family. He vaguely knew the older brother, who had been rumored to frequent the opium dens, unbeknownst to his family. William was robbed and stabbed one night as he was leaving one of the most notorious dens and tragically died from his wounds in the back alley. Even worse, when the authorities finally discovered him, he’d been stripped of everything—clothes, shoes, even his underclothing. Picked apart by the buzzards in the East End.

The old earl had most likely died of a broken heart—William having been his heir and favorite. Edward couldn’t have predicted the one-two punch of losing both his brother and father within months of each other. The poor bloke had been studying

music at Oxford and suddenly had to take on the mantle of the Earl of Landon . It was no wonder their mother hadn't recovered from her mourning.

“ Since coming into his title, Edward has been making foolish mistakes, but this latest one could be irreparable. He met a young woman here and has convinced himself he is in love and must marry her.” She leaned forward, and Carlton found himself once more captivated by her beauty. He couldn't help but picture that dark hair spread out across his pillow, those striking blue eyes gazing up at him, those pouty pink lips beckoning him for a kiss...

“ I need you,” she whispered. “ I need you desperately...”

“ Huh ? Wha —?” He cleared his throat, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him.

“ I said that I need your help, Your Grace . I'm in a desperate situation here. Aren't you listening?” She crossed her arms over her chest, making her already curvaceous bosom even more rounded and delectable. Double damn! He poured himself a shot of brandy and gulped it down. “ Shall I ring for tea?” He avoided looking at her as he poured himself another drink.

“ No , I don't want any tea. For goodness' sake! You're the only one who can help me find my brother before he makes the worst mistake of his life by marrying that woman.”

“ Who ?” Carlton asked, his irritation rising. Good . Stay that way. Stay irritated.

“ Who ?” she repeated.

“ May I inquire the name of the young woman?” Carlton asked, hoping she would name someone else—anyone else.

“ I believe her name is Serafina . I also believe Edward is most enamored of her. It’s as though she’s bewitched him.”

Carlton snorted. Bewitched my arse! Serafina is a beautiful girl, both intelligent and warm-hearted. Of course, Edward was taken with her. But he had to admit that Lady Catherine was right. They were too young and inexperienced to pursue such a whimsical dream. “ I assure you, my bookkeeper is not a witch. She’s a young woman under my protection,” he drawled, watching her reaction. “ A nice young woman.”

Lady Catherine started at his revelation. “ Then , you have been duped by her as well, Your Grace . If my brother’s valet is to be believed, Edward has seen her every day for the past two weeks.”

Duped ? Now he was beyond irate. “ Do you think they’re planning to marry?” Carlton probed.

“ Of course I do! My brother packed a small valise and told his valet he was going on a brief trip to London to speak with our solicitor on estate matters and would not require his services. Carruthers has been my brother’s valet since he was a boy. He knows when my brother is lying. And besides, we only just met with our solicitor last month.” She tapped her index finger on the desk. “ I am positive they’ve run off together.”

“ I’m shocked the valet shared your brother’s plans with you,” Carlton mused out loud. “ I would sack him, were he mine.”

“ Carruthers was only acting in Edward’s best interests,” she said in a haughty tone. “ But what of your ward? Do you know where Serafina is?”

She’s a clever one, Lady Catherine . “ I’m looking into that as we speak.”

Thankfully , he was saved by a knock on his office door. “ Enter .”

Adams stepped inside and shook his head but said nothing.

Carlton nodded. Double damn!

“ If they are together, where do you think they went?” Lady Catherine asked.

Carlton regarded her. “ Gretna Green . Order my carriage be brought around to the front,” he ordered.

“ Yes , Your Grace ,” Adams said, making a swift exit.

He had no choice. He had to go after them. He liked young Landon , but his priority was protecting Serafina —even from herself. “ My coach is being readied.”

“ I will follow you in my carriage.”

“ Absolutely not! I will go on my own and bring them back.”

“ I will not sit idly by at home, twiddling my thumbs, Your Grace . I am coming with you.”

Stubborn woman! Carlton poured himself another draught of brandy and downed it in one gulp. There was no use arguing with her. “ Very well, but you can send your carriage home. We’ll take mine. It’s large, well-sprung, and comfortable. The journey will be difficult enough without adding to our discomfort,” Carlton said.

Catherine sputtered. “ What do you mean?”

“ I mean that my carriage is built to accommodate my height.”

“ Oh !” She glanced away, her cheeks flushing red.

She was even prettier when she blushed. Double damn it all to hell and back. This would be one heck of a trip.

“ Wait —my maid...” Catherine protested. “ She isn’t with me.”

He arched a brow. “ Interesting . You charged into a men’s club unchaperoned? Yet , you represent yourself as a troubadour for social mores.”

“ I ...thought I’d find him here,” she sputtered. “ I acted on impulse without giving enough thought.”

Her contrition made him feel sorry for her. But only just. “ How old is your brother?”

“ He’s twenty,” Lady Campbell replied. “ We are twins.”

Carlton caught himself staring at her.

She held his gaze. “ I’m older by two minutes.”

“ It’s my turn to be surprised,” Carlton said. “ Come along then, Lady Campbell . Let us go rescue your twin brother—younger by two minutes—and my ward.”

Carlton had no doubt the trip to Gretna Green would be a miserable one. Lady Campbell was a stubborn, snappish woman. Nevertheless , they were united by a mutual cause. To stop a wedding.

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Catherine had no doubt their journey to Gretna Green would be a miserable one. The duke was a pompous, arrogant man. But she had no choice. She needed his help to stop a wedding.

She leaned back against the plush burgundy leather in the carriage and adjusted the thick, velvety blanket on her lap. The duke did have a point. She had brazenly burst into a men's club, ranting and raving. With no chaperone. What was I thinking? Her foolishness had potentially landed her in a mess. But in her defense, she'd been so worried about Edward that she hadn't stopped to think. After losing William and her father, it would be unbearable to lose Edward too.

And she was worried about her mother's health. Her poor dear mother would take to her bed if she learned of Edward's disappearance. Catherine had penned a brief note and had asked one of the duke's footmen to deliver it to her maid, Bertha, who was wise beyond her years. Bertha would make sure no one in the household found out where Catherine was heading, and with whom. Nor would they know Edward whisked a woman he met in a gentleman's club to Gretna Green.

She turned to gaze out the window at the passing scenery. She felt awkward sitting across from him. A virtual stranger. Lord, he's big. The duke had been right about his carriage. It was huge and accommodating for his size. But he still dominated the space. She couldn't decide whether it was his height or the dynamic energy he exuded. She snuck a peek at him from the corner of her eye. He was handsome. Very handsome. So handsome she could barely keep from blushing every time he looked at her with those dark brown eyes framed perfectly with wavy, brown hair. His tall, muscular body was impeccably contained in well-tailored clothing. It was all she could do to maintain a stiff upper lip to get through this ordeal.

“ I ... I realize our traveling together could be compromising for me,” she said, breaking the silence. Her voice had sounded too soft and feminine. Fiddlesticks !

“ For me as well,” the duke said in a wry tone, arching a dark brow. “ And if you are compromised, we may have to marry. Oh , that’s right...your brother is on the road, possibly compromising my young ward.”

“ That’s not what I meant...” she started.

“ Look , we don’t know what’s going on. But I’m hoping we can catch up with them before it’s too late. They’ll have to stop along the way to eat and attend to personal matters.”

“ Yes , of course,” she agreed, feeling another blush heat her face. Personal matters! She hadn’t thought of that. They would have to stop at some point as well. Oh Lord , she’d have to hold her bladder if that were the case.

“ Adams asked my cook to pack several days’ worth of provisions. Cheese , meats, bread, fruit, and drink should help with any hunger issues,” Carlton said.

“ There are more blankets in the drawer under the seat. Be careful, the foot warmers should be hot.”

“ Thank you, that is most kind of you. You are right about the comfort of your coach,” Catherine said.

“ Barring unforeseen difficulties, we should reach Scotland in about four days,” Carlton said.

“ Four days?” she squeaked out.

“ Yes . What did you imagine? That we’d be back before teatime?”

Her gaze dropped to her gloves, embarrassed by her naivete. “ Forgive me, I wasn’t thinking. Of course, I understand it will take several days to cross into Scotland .”

The duke cleared his throat. “ I don’t know your reading preferences, but I brought a few books from my library. And I brought a book that you might enjoy. It was to be a gift for Serafina .”

She glanced up, meeting his dark brown gaze. “ That was very thoughtful of you.”

He inclined his head.

“ Edward is usually so sensible,” she murmured. “ I can’t understand why he’d behave so rashly.”

“ I understand love is an emotion that can cause logic and sensibility to fly out the window,” Carlton said, lifting his carriage seat and pulling out a book. He handed it to Catherine . “ Serafina specifically asked for this one. Have you read it?”

“ Pride and Prejudice ! No , I’ve not read it yet. But I’ve been wanting to. Where did you purchase it?”

“ There’s a fine bookshop next to my club. They always seem to have what I’m looking for. If not, they’re most accommodating when placing orders.”

“ Perhaps it’s because of its nearness to a gentlemen’s club—it allows for the quick gift for guilty consciences,” Catherine quipped, then immediately regretted her comment. As a child, her parents had often scolded her for blurting out her thoughts. She’d learned to curb that habit over the years, but given her anxiety under the circumstances, she’d reverted to that pesky old habit. “ Forgive my comment. I too

enjoy reading and I thank you again for the loan of the book.” She smoothed her hand over the leather-bound cover. “ Er , what do you enjoy reading, Your Grace ?”

“ My name is Carlton . Given our close confines over the next few days, I think it would be more agreeable if we forgo formal forms of address when in private, don’t you?” He arched that brow again. This time, he seemed to be challenging her.

“ Please call me Catherine .” She inclined her head. “ I agree, Carlton , it would be agreeable to me as well, when in private .”

“ Very good, Catherine .” He nodded. “ I’m glad we cleared that up.” He leaned forward and pulled the shade down on one window and then the other, blocking the bright rays of the setting sun. “ I enjoy reading a wide variety of subjects,” he said, leaning back against the seat. “ At the moment, I’m reading a new edition of Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift . My ward prefers romantic tales of love.”

“ You don’t believe in love, Your — Carlton ?” There I go again. Edward had teasingly called her Miss Blabber Mouth . She did not know why she’d asked Carlton such an outrageous question. But she could not help herself. She was most curious to hear his answer.

“ I’ve never had a reason to,” he replied. “ Men have done foolish things in the name of love. I’ve known several of them.”

“ Do you think my brother is one of them?”

“ I think your brother and my ward are both too young to know better.”

She nodded. He was right. Of course, he was right. Wasn’t he?

“ You don’t think highly of my business, do you?” Carlton tapped the ceiling with his

cane and the carriage surged forward.

“ I don’t. It’s how my brother William got into trouble.” She blinked back tears. “ I know it wasn’t at your club, but it could have been another gentlemen’s establishment. He became dependent on the vices that places such as yours allow. My father would still be here if William had not been killed. Edward would still be at Oxford . And our family would still be together.” Catherine couldn’t continue to blame others for what had happened to William . She knew it but couldn’t help herself.

“ You know very little about my club,” he retorted. “ We don’t have an entertainment floor...at least not as you seem to think. There are gaming rooms and apartments that members may rent. And we offer pugilistic training. That was started by my grandfather years ago...and my uncle made it a part of his club. When I inherited it, I expanded it and built a larger building—just behind the main one. It’s an enjoyable and healthy pastime for our members.”

“ Forgive me. I’m afraid I’m blaming you and Serafina for my family’s shortcomings. William’s death had nothing to do with you. And while I am worried about my brother, I apologize for my rude and unfounded accusations about your ward. I will do my best to remind myself of that.”

“ You know, life is not a constant battle between you and the rest of the world, Catherine .”

Her gaze flew to his. “ I know that! I don’t consider myself doing battle with anyone. And I just apologized to you. The least you could do is acknowledge it.”

They passed out of Bath as the sun was setting, and Carlton pulled the shades down to cut out the extreme light. “ I’ve been boxing my entire life, and I know when someone has a chip on their shoulder. You stormed into my club with guns blazing,

so to speak. And you were looking for a fight.”

How dare he! She opened her mouth to retort, but the carriage careened to a sudden stop. “ What happened? Why aren’t we moving?”

Carlton placed a finger to his lips in warning.

“ Stand and deliver,” a man’s raspy voice called out. “ Now .”

Highwaymen ! Catherine felt her legs trembling as she watched Carlton mouth a silent curse. Thank goodness the blinds had been drawn. At least the thieves couldn’t see inside the coach.

“ We’re armed, in case yer thinking of doing anything stupid,” another nasally-sounding voice said. “ One of my pistols is pointing right at your driver. And another at your carriage door. So , you’d better step out right now, or your driver won’t be livin’ much longer.”

Catherine thought he must have been pointing to another man. She breathed slowly, still trying to calm her fear.

“ We’re no threat to you,” she heard his driver reply.

Catherine had seen an armed outrider for the duke’s coach when they’d set out. Where is he? Had he been injured or worse?

“ Here , take this,” Carlton said, unsheathing a lethal-looking knife from his boot. “ Keep it hidden. This shouldn’t take long to dispatch. But if something happens, aim for the gut.” He leaned across her, barely touching her hair with his chest, and slid open a small panel that opened under the driver’s seat. “ How many, Morris ?”

“ Three of them, Your Grace . One’s hiding at the tree line. Two are on either side of the carriage. They look rough.”

Catherine wished she could keep her knees from knocking together. It didn’t help that Carlton was practically on top of her. Every breath she took was heady with his masculine scent of citrus and sandalwood. His nearness sparked a frisson of sensation that reverberated from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. Never had she felt anything like it.

“ Be ready—on my order,” Carlton whispered, sliding the panel closed. Moving away from her, he motioned for her to stand and lifted the bench seat, revealing a compartment.

“ It’s completely hidden and large enough for you to hide,” he whispered. “ I don’t want them to see you. I want you to get in and keep quiet. Hold on to that knife, but be careful. It’s sharp.”

“ B -but I c-can help. I h-have the knife.” Her heart hammered in her ears and her head began to spin. She didn’t want to admit that the thought of climbing into that dark space terrified her.

“ Look , I don’t have time to watch over you and fight off three armed highwaymen. For once, don’t argue with me. And just do as I say.”

His eyes were deadly serious as he spoke. Catherine was too anxious to even counter his insult that she was argumentative with her stomach in her throat. She nodded and obeyed his order.

“ If you should need it, there are coins under my seat—in a small bag.”

Catherine felt faint as she scooted to the back of the secret compartment.

“ Keep quiet. And don’t worry. I’ll be back for you,” he whispered, closing the lid and securing the seat.

She heard the carriage door open and Carlton stepping out.

He’s right. Get ahold of yourself, Catherine . This man is risking his life to save you and you’ve been nothing but peevish.

Why , oh, why did she insist on chasing after her brother? She’d behaved foolishly and rashly, and now she’d put them all in danger. Catherine clutched the knife, praying she would not have to use it.

“ I’ll have yer purse, milord,” the raspy voice demanded.

“ You’ve got competition. The men on the other side of Bath already cleaned me out.”

Catherine was amazed at how calm and confident the duke sounded.

The thief barked out a laugh. “ That’s too convenient, milord. Look inside.” Catherine heard the raspy order. The carriage door opened, and she held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut—not that it could shut out any light. It was pitch black in the box. The air smelled like pine, she reflected, trying to keep the dark thoughts away.

“ There’s not’n inside. Empty , like he says,” the nasal voice called out.

“ Now !” she heard the duke command. Three shots rang out, and Catherine froze.

She was terrified. Terrified that Carlton or one of his men was hurt. Terrified that she would be discovered.

A few minutes passed, but it felt like hours.

She heard the carriage door open, and someone stepped inside.

Oh God ! She prayed it was Carlton . Finally , the seat was lifted, and a hand reached down.

“ It’s all right. You’re safe.”

A sob escaped her as she gripped the big, muscular hand. Carlton helped her out of the black box.

Throwing her arms around his neck, she held on for dear life. “ T -thank y-you!” She could barely speak between sobs. All she could do was hold onto Carlton .

His arms went around her, and he pulled her to his chest. “ Hush , it’s all right. Everything is all right now.”

The feel of his powerful arms around her and the warmth of his broad chest made her feel safe. Protected .

She didn’t know how long he held her that way. Maybe it was a few moments, maybe an eternity. She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “ You s-saved my life. Th -thank you.”

He stared into her eyes, holding her gaze captive. He angled his head as his gaze traveled down to her mouth and then back up to her eyes, then back down to her mouth.

Was he going to kiss her? Did she want him to kiss her? She realized she did. And that quite shocked her to the core. She closed her eyes and waited. But he didn’t

lower his lips. And there was no kiss.

“ Come , I’ll help you down,” he said in a hoarse voice.

Foolish . Foolish woman! She’d practically puckered her lips! Catherine opened her eyes but avoided his gaze. She’d been silly and naïve. As foolish as Edward and Serafina . Why would Carlton want to kiss her? He most likely had a bevy of sophisticated mistresses.

Stepping outside the carriage, she spotted the three highwaymen, bleeding, slumped over, and firmly tied around the base of a large tree. “ Are they dead?”

“ No need,” he said smugly. “ The magistrate will take care of the hanging. I’ll send my outrider, Yates , to fetch him.”

“ But that will mean we’ll have to stay here and wait.”

“ Yes , it will take a few hours.”

“ But we don’t have a few hours,” she snapped. “ We don’t have time to wait. We need to leave now.” She didn’t mean to sound so abrupt and harsh, but the sting of his rejection was still with her.

Carlton raked his hands through his hair. “ Look , I don’t take orders from you. And may I remind you that I just saved your life?”

“ Yes , I know, and I thanked you for saving my life. But now that the danger is over. We cannot afford to dally here.”

“ Then what do you suggest we do?”

She looked back at the men tied around the tree. It was a very big tree. An idea flashed through her mind. She turned to Carlton . “ Do you have a sheet of paper and a pencil?”

He blew out a breath and stepped back into the carriage. A moment later, he returned with a piece of paper he had torn from the back of his book and a short, fat pencil.

“ Excellent ,” she said and proceeded to write on a blank sheet of paper. “ Now , if you’ll please assist me.” She walked over to the tree and handed Carlton the note. He glanced down at what she’d written, and his lips twitched.

They walked to the tree, and she studied the robbers’ boot tops until she spotted a knife. Pulling it from its sheath, she handed it to Carlton .

Carlton tacked the note well above the heads of the thieves. “ Does this meet with your approval?” he asked, crossing his hands over his chest.

“ Indeed , it does. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Carlton shook his head and helped her into the carriage.

Catherine looked out the window and smiled at the note hanging above the three unconscious thieves. “ There ! We can leave now.”

To Whoever Finds these highwaymen ? —

These three thieves accosted our carriage and would have killed us were it not for the courage of the Duke of Richmond and his men. Unfortunately , we could not wait for the Magistrate as we were in a terrible hurry. Therefore , we leave the fate of these three miscreants to you.

(P.S . This was not their first hold-up.)

She heard a snort and turned her notice to the duke, who was trying to hold back his laughter. Her lips twitched, and she began to giggle. At that, Carlton threw back his head and howled with laughter. From the window, she heard Brandon , his footman, and Morris , the driver, laughing as well.

“ If those miscreants don’t die of thirst, someone will bring a magistrate,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes. Tapping the ceiling of the carriage, they lurched forward once again.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:25 pm

A day later ~ Somewhere between England and Scotland

“Carlton, how far are we from our stop?” Catherine asked. Her personal needs were calling, and she couldn’t sit still much longer.

“We’ve thwarted a highway robbery and traveled for over twenty-four hours—with three more days to go. If it’s all right with you, I wonder if we could take a short break and stretch our legs.”

“That makes sense,” he replied. “But there’s a small inn a few miles ahead. It’s clean, and the food is good. We’ll be stopping there for the night.”

This wasn’t going the way she needed it to go. Unfortunately, she needed to be more specific, or she would embarrass herself. Catherine cleared her throat. “I need to stop for the necessary. I can’t wait much longer.” She felt her face blush and thought her face must be as red as a ripe apple in October.

Carlton regarded her over the top of his book. “I’ll have the driver stop.” He lifted the shade and looked around. “Nothing but woods here. Is that suitable?”

She nodded. “I have no choice. Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Carlton put down his book and tapped the ceiling with his cane, signaling a stop.

“We will be back shortly,” he told Morris as he helped her from the carriage. Taking a lantern from the front of the carriage, he handed it to her. “Use this to light the way and pay attention to where you walk.”

“ I will, but you’re going with me all the way, are you?”

He regarded her with an arch of his brow. “ I’m not planning to watch if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Fiddlesticks ! The duke had every trap door and convenience imaginable. How could they forget something as important as a chamber pot? Stop it, Catherine , she scolded herself. She would not make a fuss. She was determined to get along with Carlton for the rest of the journey. Remembering her temperament of yesterday, she bit her lower lip and decided not to point it out. Besides , she needed him to stand guard.

They reached the edge of the road, and Carlton peered into the woods. “ Looks to be as good a place as any.”

“ Promise to wait for me?” she asked, nervously holding the lantern.

“ Of course,” he assured her. “ Just don’t drop your lantern.”

She gulped and slowly walked into the woods. “ Carlton , talk to me. I need to gauge how far you are.”

“ I’m where you left me at the edge of the road,” he replied.

“ Then back up to the other side,” she replied. “ Don’t let anyone else walk back here.” She found a small clearing behind a copse of trees with a small stream. Elated , she set the lantern down. Glancing around, she pulled up her dress and squatted. A sudden whimper made her jump back up. “ Did you hear that?” she yelled.

“ I heard nothing,” Carlton yelled back.

“ It sounded like a dog whimpering,” she said, pleased he sounded far away but not

too far away. She almost lost her balance when she realized Brandon and Morris could most likely hear them. Briefly , she wondered if Yates , the outrider, had joined them.

“ A dog?” he pressed.

“ You heard the whimper?”

“ No , I didn’t hear a whimper. You did.”

His voice sounded suspiciously closer that time. Maybe too close. “ Um , Carlton , could you please move back a few feet?”

“ For the love of?—”

In the evening’s stillness, she heard the crunching of his feet moving farther away and relaxed. Her stomach had been cramping since the noon meal. This would not be a quick trip, she despaired.

“ I had to move closer when you started asking me questions,” he said in a voice that sounded far enough away.

Pleased , she relaxed and finished. Reaching behind her, she tugged a few leaves and cleaned herself.

“ Don’t forget to use nonpoisonous leaves,” he yelled.

She froze and held the lantern up to examine the leaves. She had already used some of them and did not know if they were poisonous or nonpoisonous. “ There are poisonous ones out here?”

“ Unless we’ve found the only woods in the area without them.”

She couldn’t linger much longer, or she feared the odor would cling to her. She tore a bit of her shift, rinsed it in the stream, and hastily washed herself and her hands. Thank God for the water.

Grabbing a clean leaf from the pile, she decided to show it to Carlton . She read books about love, not leaves. How was she supposed to know what was what? “ I’ll bring one leaf back with me and show you,” she yelled.

“ Just make sure it’s one you haven’t used,” he replied, his voice threaded with humor.

Oh ! Isn’t that just like a man to tease at a time like this?

She held her lantern up and trudged back to the road. Holding the leaf up to examine it. Panic suddenly gripped her. Had she used leaves from a nightshade plant? It was the one plant her mother had always warned about. Suddenly she felt a burning sensation on her bottom, and she broke into a run, carrying the lantern and trying to shake the folds of her skirt back into place.

She heard the whimper again and glanced over her shoulder, trying to see into the dense darkness. She stumbled and would have fallen if Carlton hadn’t stepped in front of her and caught her just in time.

“ You’re all right,” he said, his deep voice reassuring. “ Show me the leaf.”

Catherine didn’t miss his twitching lips as she handed the leaf to him.

“ It’s lamb’s ear. You’re safe. Did you never think to use the lantern?”

Her bottom stopped burning and her face heated. “ My stomach was upset.”

“ I see,” he said, looking away. “ Fortunately , you’ll be fine.” He tossed the leaf, turned, and strode away.

“ You're laughing at me.” She struggled to keep up; his legs were so very long.

He kept walking.

“ Wait . Don’t you need the lantern?”

“ No . I handled my business while waiting for you. All done,” he said, stopping to let her catch up.

His face stretched into a wide grin—making her breath catch and, at the same time, frustrating her with his smugness. Instead , she shrugged. “ I’m certain a man must have invented the dress. Honestly , sometimes I think it would be far simpler to wear breeches.”

“ You would look incredible in breeches.” He waggled his brows. “ Yet , I think...” He cleared his throat. “ Without the male appendage, the process would be the same—just less fabric.”

Catherine burst into laughter. She couldn’t help herself. She’d never known a man like Carlton .

He didn’t know what was more appealing, Lady Catherine Campbell’s throaty laugh or the thought of her wearing breeches. Either way, a jolt of heat coursed through him. Her soft curves displayed in a pair of snug breeches would have forced him to sit outside with the driver. As it was, he needed time to regain his self-control before they returned to the carriage. The lantern would provide some cover, at least.

“ The inn isn’t far, and I’m certain you would prefer a hot meal to cold cheese.”

“ Oh but, we can’t leave now. An animal is wounded out there somewhere. I’m almost certain it’s a dog.”

“ Are you sure it wasn’t a female fox giving a mating call?”

At the shocked look on her face, he shook his head. “ You’ve led a sheltered life, young lady.”

She reached for his hand and took a step closer. The warmth of her touch and her luminous blue eyes nearly took his breath away.

“ Please , Carlton ,” she said, her voice breaking. “ We can’t leave it to suffer. We must do something.”

At that moment, if she’d asked him to wrestle a bear, he would have.

“ Fine . Let’s look for this dog. Carlton felt in his waistcoat for his small pistol—just in case.

“ Thank you, Carlton .” She beamed at him and continued to hold his hand as they made their way back into the woods.

He didn’t mind holding her hand. In fact, he quite enjoyed her company—something he never imagined when they first met. Catherine differed from the other women he’d encountered at Society functions. She was forthright, funny, vibrant, and warm-hearted. Their conversations had been lively, to say the least. One would never be bored married to Lady Catherine Campbell .

He nearly froze in his tracks. Holy Hell ! Where did that thought come from?

Marriage ? He wasn't ready for marriage. He'd avoided it like the plague since his first Society ball. So why was he thinking about marriage? And not just any marriage. No , he had to contemplate marriage to Lady Catherine Campbell . His convoluted thoughts were interrupted as Catherine tugged on his hand.

“ It's just up ahead.” She glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled.

He blew out a breath and tried to shake off his strange notions as they walked into the woods. Catherine pushed through the trees at a quick pace—as if on a mission. The whimper sounded again, and she let go of his hand and took off at a run. Just beyond a decayed tree and some brush, they came upon an orange and white puppy with a leg caught in a trap.

“ Oh , you poor thing.” Catherine crouched down. “ My goodness! It's a Brittany Spaniel . My father always loved these dogs—ever since he first saw them in France .”

She knelt beside the canine and cooed, reaching out to stroke the fur around his face. “ He's just a pup. I cannot believe someone abandoned him to this horrible fate. Sweet fella, we are going to take you with us and make you all better.”

“ Hunters don't take the time to ensure their dogs are with them,” he pointed out. “ I see blood, but no bones showing. That's a good sign. His leg may recover, but he'll probably be no good to a hunter.”

“ How will we get him out?”

He crouched down to get a better look at the trap's mechanism. “ Damn contraptions! People who set traps should be required to spring them with their own feet inside.”

“ It's just plain cruelty,” she agreed, petting the whimpering dog's head.

“ I’m going to pull the trap’s iron jaws open,” Carlton said. “ When I do, I want you to lift the pup. But be careful.”

Catherine nodded.

“ Ready ?”

“ Ready .”

Carlton gripped both edges of the metal jaws and pulled them apart as Catherine carefully lifted the animal from the trap.

“ You intend to make him a pet?”

“ Of course.” She cuddled the moaning animal against her chest, planting soft kisses on its nose. “ Mother is used to my bringing home injured birds and abandoned kittens. Father never minded either. I think I shall call him Riggs . Riggs was my father’s valet—he retired last year. A finer man I have never known.”

“ Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr . Riggs ,” Carlton said as he opened the pup’s mouth and looked at his gums. “ He’s barely a year old and didn’t have enough training in the field before someone cut him loose with the pack. We’ll have a farrier check him over when we arrive at the inn.”

“ Good idea,” Catherine said, glancing up at him with that bright beaming smile of hers.

He cleared his throat. “ You know, I had a dog as a young lad—a wolfhound. A fine dog she was, too. Her name was Gretchen .”

“ Gretchen ?” She giggled. “ Did the name mean something to you?”

He chuckled. “ Actually , yes. Mother would read to me sometimes and act out the story—different voices, you know. Anyway , there was a story about a young boy and his dog. The dog was named Gretchen . The name must have stuck in my head, and when I got a pup for Christmas that year, I named her Gretchen .”

“ How sweet. I can just imagine you as a precocious little boy getting into mischief and Gretchen always by your side.”

“ You can?”

“ Yes , I can. You must have been quite a handful for your mother.”

He chuckled again. “ And my mother never lets me forget it.”

“ I wish I had known you back then.”

“ Trust me, you would have hated me. I most likely would have put a snake down the back of your dress.”

“ I disagree. Something tells me you would have watched out for me.” Tears crested her eyes. “ Thank you for saving Riggs . I’ll sleep in the barn with him at the inn and not let him be any trouble.” She swiped at a stray tear.

“ You’ll do no such thing,” he said, restraining himself from taking her in his arms and kissing her tears away. Holy Hell ! What was happening to him? Get ahold of yourself, man! He was acting like a lovesick fool. “ The inn will allow him to sleep in your room,” he croaked out. “ I’ll see to that.”

They arrived back at the carriage to the oohs and ahs of Morris , Brandon , and Yates .

“ I seen a Brittany once,” Morris said. “ Softest fur I’ve ever felt on a dog, milady. Someone will be sorry they left this ’un behind.”

“ I simply couldn’t ignore his cries.” She looked up at Carlton and gave a wry smile. “ I’m so glad he wasn’t a fox. Thanks to the duke, we were able to save this little one,” she said, giving Carlton another soft smile.

“ Yes , well, let’s try to get to the inn before dawn, shall we?”

“ I’ve never had a dog,” Catherine murmured a few minutes later when they were back on the road. “ But I’ve always wanted one. I found one once, but after I nursed it back to health, a woman came to our home and claimed it. It was a small spaniel that had jumped from her carriage and disappeared. The animal was full of bites and burrs when I found it. But when he heard his mistress’ voice, he went tearing to the door. There was nothing to be done but return him.”

“ Yes , but you took care of it and had you not, it may have perished. Owls , eagles, and hawks are gruesome predators of small dogs and cats. I’ve seen them swoop down and carry them off in a matter of seconds.” He leaned over and rubbed Riggs ’ nose. “ Something tells me you won’t lose this one.”

Catherine leaned down and kissed the dog on the nose. “ I hope not.” She smiled and met his gaze across the carriage. “ I’m already falling in love with him.”

His chest constricted at her words and the tender look on her face. What would it be like to hear her say those words to him?

“ Is something wrong?” she asked.

“ Er — No . I was just thinking about a hot meal and a warm bed.”

“ Well , I’m thinking what a good man you are.”

“ Thank you, but let’s not let the world know. I have a reputation to uphold.”

They both laughed. Hers was a rich laugh. For the moment, Carlton forgot why they were on the road, stuck in a carriage that had begun to feel cramped. Instead , he focused on the rich, throaty sound of her laughter and wished he knew something to say to keep her laughing.

“ Your secret’s safe with me, Your Grace ,” she smiled as she cuddled the sleeping puppy close to her chest.

Carlton’s chest did that funny thing again. Double damn! He needed to keep his mind focused on the matter at hand, finding Edward and Serafina and preventing them from making the biggest mistake of their lives. And most importantly, he needed to stop thinking about Catherine’s sweet smile and throaty laugh.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:25 pm

Late evening ~ Three days later

Catherine stared out the coach window at the passing scenery. A strange melancholy had come over her as they neared their destination.

Each day with the duke had been a new adventure. Carlton was the most fascinating man she'd ever met. A man who didn't care what Society thought and lived by his own code. One might think such a man to be selfish and self-serving, but Carlton had surprised her at every turn. He was patient, kind, and thoughtful, and he made her laugh at her own foibles.

Carlton was knowledgeable and multi-faceted—at ease conversing on any topic, from managing a gentleman's club to maintaining an estate to the purpose of pugilism to literature and philosophy to humorous stories about his many escapades in his youth. Not once did they discuss any mundane Society topics, such as the weather.

Catherine enjoyed his company, and he seemed to enjoy hers as well, asking about her childhood, teasing her into a smile when she fretted about Edward and Serafina, engaging in lively debates about social mores. He'd even read to her from Gulliver's Travels, his deep, rich voice making the story come alive. Nor did he ever shy away from controversy; instead, he handled every challenge with calm, honesty, and directness.

Riggs clearly adored him, and Catherine had always believed dogs to be good barometers of a person's personality. The pup enjoyed playing with Carlton before snuggling in the cozy bed the duke had fashioned for him at her feet. On one particularly dark and dreary morning as they traveled through heavy rain, she'd fallen

asleep with Riggs in her lap and awoke cuddled against Carlton's chest as he soothed the whimpering pup. Tears had welled in her eyes at his thoughtfulness. When the farrier pronounced Riggs' bones free of breaks, she felt a wave of relief. But the torn muscles and lacerated skin would take a while to heal. Catherine had been determined in her care of the pup. She'd cleansed, medicated, and re-wrapped his wound twice a day, and Carlton had assisted her each time. Thanks to Carlton's help, Rigg's eyes were brighter, and he had begun testing his weight on his injured leg.

Catherine had never spent so much time with a man other than her father and brothers. And she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to spend every day of the rest of her life with Carlton. She was positive it would never be dull. She was also positive it would be exciting, invigorating, and full of passion. That was the man Carlton was.

Stop it, you silly goose! Carlton was a sophisticated man who no doubt entertained many a mistress on that notorious third floor of his club. She doubted he was interested in marriage in the foreseeable future, and certainly not with someone like her.

"We should arrive in Gretna Green tomorrow," Carlton said, pulling her from her thoughts. "The horses are exhausted and damn if I'm not as well. We'll be stopping at a comfortable inn for the night. The innkeeper and his wife are charming hosts, and the food is excellent. I'm certain you'll have a most enjoyable stay." Carlton grinned.

Catherine could not help but smile back. She liked the way he handled things. He informed her about every part of their travel, making her feel special. "That sounds wonderful," Catherine said with a sigh. "Although, I am concerned that we've yet to encounter Serafina and Edward. They couldn't have been that much farther ahead of us."

"Don't give up hope. We will find them." He regarded her for a moment. "I may not

have another opportunity to say this, but..." He paused and cleared his throat. "I've appreciated getting to know you, Catherine. Considering our initial meeting, I'd never have predicted such an enjoyable journey."

"Thank you," she said, glancing down at the sleeping Riggs as the telltale heat suffused her cheeks. Carlton's compliment filled her with a pleasurable warmth. "I, too, have enjoyed your company, something I never would have predicted either," she added. "And thank you for helping me care for Riggs and the many stops along the way."

"I'll admit, Riggs easily wormed his way into my heart. He's a valiant fellow, trying with all his might to walk and never complains when he must go out for his business."

The carriage slowed and pulled onto a bumpy drive. "We're here," he said, tapping the ceiling. "I'll organize our rooms and order our dinner. Do you have any preferences in case there are choices?"

"I'm generally not partial to mutton or boar but will eat it if it's the only choice. Do you mind if I come along? I'm sorely in need of stretching my legs," Catherine said, flexing her toes to return the feeling to them. Despite the lap blankets, she had been sitting so long they felt numb with cold.

He stepped out of the carriage and helped her down.

"This won't be like the last time you stretched your legs, will it?" he said with a smirk.

She swatted him playfully. "No. Goodness! It looks busy."

"I thought that myself," he murmured.

The innkeeper and his wife greeted them warmly. “ Welcome , Yer Grace . It’s been a long while since yer last visit,” said the short, ginger-haired man.

“ Thank you, Mr . Bramble , Mrs . Bramble . It’s good to see you both looking so well,” Carlton said with a smile. “ We’ll require accommodation for one night’s stay.”

“ We’re pleased to have ye,” Mr . Bramble said, “ But unfortunately, we have only one room available.”

Catherine’s heart began to thunder in her chest.

Only one room? But that meant that she and Carlton would be together. All night long.

“ That is perfectly fine, isn’t it, my dear ?” Carlton gave her a charming smile as he slipped his arm around her waist. “ My wife and I will take it.”

“ Ye’ve married? Congratulations ! Did ye hear that, Martha ? The duke has married! And a lovely lass, she is, Yer Grace ,” Mr . Bramble said with a wink. “ As it ’appens, the room we have left is our finest. It ’as a larger bed and a fireplace. Will that suit?” he asked.

“ And I’ll be sure to bring up a nice hot bath for ye, Yer Grace ,” Mrs . Bramble said with a curtsy directed at Catherine before bustling off to ready the room.

Carlton turned to Catherine , that dark brow arched in a challenge. Catherine pasted a smile on her face and leaned into his side. “ That sounds wonderful, darling .” Two could play at this game.

Carlton turned back to the innkeeper. “ Thank you, my good man. We shall take the

room. Ah ...but there is one more thing. Our dog was injured the day before we departed, and we simply could not leave him behind. He means a lot to my wife. May he stay with us?" Carlton placed a stack of coins on the counter.

The man gave them a broad smile as he scooped up the coins. " Usually , Mrs . Bramble does nae approve of animals in the rooms, but ye being newlyweds and all, I'm certain she'll make an exception."

" Excellent ," Carlton said, hugging Catherine close. " Most excellent."

Catherine did not know how she would get through the night. Dozing off in the carriage across from the duke was one thing, but spending the night in the same room with him was going to be more nerve-wracking than dealing with cutthroat highwaymen!

" Welcome to Scotland , Richmond . I hear congratulations are in order."

Carlton felt a hearty wallop on his back and turned to see Blake " The Bull " Baldwin , the Duke of Douglas , grinning at him from ear to ear.

Carlton had just escorted Catherine to their room and left to give her some privacy. He suddenly wished he'd stayed behind. Double damn! Running into Douglas made an already complicated situation ten times worse. " Douglas , it's good to see you." Carlton shook hands with his friend. At six-foot-five, Douglas was the same height as him but two stone heavier. No one, except him, dared to face The Bull in the ring unless they were completely foxed.

" Bramble just informed me that ye've recently married—and to a verra bonnie lass. I invite you to share a scotch and a cigar with me." He thudded Carlton on the back again and handed him a cigar. " Aye ! Mrs . Bramble mentioned you had just arrived with yer wife and took the room I just vacated. I just canna believe the Duke of

Richmond is married. I thought if anyone would escape the wedding noose, it was you.” Waving to the innkeeper, Douglas ordered two Scotch whiskies. “ And what is yer lovely duchess’s name?”

The two men each downed their whisky and Carlton glanced heavenward, mentally asking for forgiveness for what he was about to say. Then he turned to Douglas . “ Catherine , formerly Lady Campbell , daughter of the late earl of Landon . It was rather a whirlwind courtship, so I would appreciate you not saying anything just yet. We plan on informing our families and having a reception in the near future.”

“ Of course, of course. You have my word.” Douglas grinned. “ Enjoy the honeymoon first, eh, Richmond ? Tis verra wise of ye. From what I understand, she’s a beauty she is—tall for a woman with curves made for a man, if ye ken my meaning.” Douglas laughed as he puffed on his cigar.

Carlton felt a jolt of jealousy shoot through him. He’d never been jealous a day in his life. But for some reason, hearing Douglas talk about Catherine’s figure made him see red. Suppressing his anger, Carlton ordered them a second whisky out of courtesy, reminding himself that Douglas was just being Douglas . They’d been friends for years. Blunt and gregarious, the man had a good heart and would fight to the death for friends and family.

“ I appreciate your discretion. Her Grace’s mother is in a bad way—still mourning the earl’s death and that of her eldest son. As I said, we plan on having a public ceremony and celebration when the countess is feeling better.” Carlton had always known Douglas to be a man of honesty and integrity. If he promised something, it would be much like the promises he carried out in the ring. You could count on it.

“ Yer secret’s safe with me,” Douglas said, clapping Carlton on the shoulder. “ I’ll swap you favors,” he added. “ I’ll keep yer secret if ye name yer ring after me. I like yer club and fancy myself being a loyal attendant whenever I’m in Bath . I’d even

consider renting one of those apartments of yours. To have the ring named after me would keep up my image, and a ring named after me might provide enough press to keep people talking.”

“ The ring in my club? You want it called... The Bull Ring ?” It would certainly create a buzz among the ton, as well as the newspapers and scandal sheets. Carlton hadn’t named it anything as of yet. He certainly had no plans to name it after himself. It was just a sparring ring.

Douglas nodded vigorously. “ I like that. Aye . Do we have a deal?”

Carlton scrubbed his hands through his hair as he ran through a mental list of what he’d had to go through over the past four days since meeting Lady Catherine Campbell : he’d had to chase after her brother who’d absconded with his ward, he’d battled highwaymen and then had been forced to leave them with a note tacked to a tree for the Magistrate . A note! He hadn’t minded rescuing the pup. But worst of all, he’d spent the past four days in the confines of a carriage, seated across from the most vexing woman he’d ever met, trying to suppress every urge that thundered through his body with every smile of her pouty lips, every glance from those sapphire blue eyes, and every touch of those luscious curves. And now, he’d have to name his sparring ring after Blake “ The Bull ” Baldwin , Duke of Douglas . Double damn!

Carlton blew out a breath. “ You drive a hard bargain, but you have a deal,” he said, reaching out and shaking hands. Before he could say anything else, Catherine appeared by his side, looking lovely and fresh-faced in a pretty red gown that made her eyes look almost purple under the glow of the gas lamps. She must have borrowed the dress from Mrs . Bramble . “ I thought you were going to rest, darling ?”

“ I - I wanted to bid you good night, Your Grace ,” she said in a soft voice. Her cheeks pinkened as she glanced at Douglas and then back at him.

“ My dear, allow me to introduce you to the Duke of Douglas , an old friend and a member of the Carlton Club .”

“ Ah ! This is the bonnie lass I’ve heard so much about!” Douglas reached for Catherine’s hand and placed a soft kiss on it. “ Congratulations , Yer Grace .”

Catherine’s eyes widened for a moment, and she shot a confused look at Carlton , but she recovered herself and gave an elegant curtsy. “ A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace .”

Carlton felt another flare of jealousy as he watched his friend flirt outrageously with Catherine . And Catherine didn’t seem to mind at all. She was all sweet smiles and giggles. She’d never had that reaction to him, he thought morosely.

“ Well , my friend, I must be leaving, but I’ll stop by yer office next week and we can go over the details of our arrangement.” Douglas slapped him on the back once more and gallantly kissed Catherine’s hand again, then strolled out of the inn like a cat that just ate the canary.

Catherine spun to face him, her eyes showing fear. “ The Brambles are telling people we are married. Can’t you do something about it?”

“ Er —yes. But let us not discuss this in public,” he muttered. “ I’ll meet you back in the room.”

Her shoulders sagged. She looked defeated but nodded and gracefully made her way to the stairs, looking as regal and elegant as a queen.

Double damn! He’d had every intention of bribing Bramble to keep his mouth shut, which would not have been difficult given the innkeeper and his wife did not know who Catherine was, but how was he going to deal with Douglas ? Yes , the man had

integrity, but what would happen when time passed and there was no celebration of the supposed nuptials?

Eventually , word might get out, and Catherine's reputation would be ruined. She'd already risked a great deal by traveling with him without a chaperone. Carlton didn't think he could keep a lid on things indefinitely.

Holy Hell ! What am I going to do now?

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Carlton made his way back to the room—after requesting the innkeeper and his wife to keep the wedding a secret. He was under no illusion they would stay silent, but he was certain they'd keep quiet until he and Catherine checked out. They wouldn't risk angering a duke. That should protect her reputation. If it didn't, he'd marry her. For some strange reason, the notion of being married to Catherine wasn't as ludicrous as it would have been four days ago.

Entering the room, he realized she was fast asleep in the bed. Those long chestnut locks were spread out on the pillow. Those pouty pink lips were slightly open and curved in a slight smile as she slept. Holy Hell ! She is beautiful! So breathtakingly lovely she made him yearn to take her in his arms and kiss her awake. He shook his head at such thoughts. She's an innocent, for God's sake. Her reputation had already been put at risk. He would not drag it through the mud.

Turning away, he made a pallet on the floor next to the sleeping pup. Damn , it was as hot as Hades in the room. He always slept naked with a window open, but he couldn't open the window, or Catherine would likely catch a chill. Carlton didn't expect to get any sleep, in any case, and would most likely be up before her. He removed his clothing down to his smalls and lay on his back, willing his mind to stop churning.

Encountering Douglas had made everything more complicated. Imagine Douglas asking him to name the boxing ring after him. Yes , he was the best boxer in the club, but it was just the kind of thing Douglas would request. The utter arrogance of the man. But Carlton would concede to keep Catherine's reputation safe and he unwed.

Welcome to Scotland , indeed...

Welcome to Scotland ?

Carlton sat up with a jolt.

Douglas had said those exact words to him as they shook hands. But that couldn't be... The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Double damn! It was true. This . Is . Scotland . Triple damn! This is a disaster. And it's all my fault. Thanks to ancient Scottish common law, he and Catherine were married. I've got to tell her, but how? Dazed by the revelation, he stood and walked to the bed, unsure of what to do. She's sleeping so peacefully. No . I won't wake her and tell her now. It will ruin her sleep. I'll tell her in the morning.

He lay back down and stared up at the ceiling. Unable to concentrate, he stood and began pacing. He needed to come up with a solution to this fiasco. A soft moan reached his ears. Poor pup . “ It's all right, boy,” he whispered, squatting on his haunches to check on Riggs . That's odd. The dog was sound asleep. The moan sounded again—this time it was more of a cry—and he realized it was coming from Catherine , not the dog. Thrashing followed a third moan, and he leaped up and ran to the bed. Too late, he realized he was only wearing his smalls. Tears were streaming down Catherine's cheeks.

“ Don't leave me in here, please,” she cried over and over.

Is she talking about the carriage hiding place? “ Catherine , wake up. Wake up, honey. It's me, Carlton ,” he said, sitting next to her on the bed. He shook her gently to wake her. When that failed, he pulled her into his arms and traced her cheekbones and her chin with his fingertip. “ Wake up, sweetness.”

Catherine uttered another faint moan as her hands moved to the back of his head and she tugged his face down to hers. His lips to hers.

Carlton knew it was wrong. Knew she was still in the throes of her dream. But he couldn't stop himself. Not at this moment. Not when every part of him was flooded with desire.

Closing his eyes, he kissed her. Her lips trembled and his passion soared as she responded to his kiss. She opened her mouth, and he swept his tongue in and caressed hers, then ran it gently along the curve of her full lips. A breathy moan escaped her, and she pressed herself against him.

The feel of her luscious breasts pressing into his chest intensified his need to an almost fevered pitch, and he dived in for another deep kiss.

Her lips were made for kissing and her body was made for loving, but he forced himself to stop. What am I doing? She's having a nightmare and I'm taking advantage of her .

He wanted her, but not like this. He had to put an end to this... now . Pulling away, he placed his hands on her shoulders and gently patted her face. “ Catherine , wake up, love.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “ Wha -what's happening?”

“ You were having a nightmare...”

“ Oh , no! What was I saying?” she asked, her eyes wide in her stricken face.

“ Something about a box. You begged me not to leave you in there. Were you upset about the hiding place in the carriage?” Double Damn ! “ I didn't think of that at the time. I'm so sorry for being so thoughtless.” He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling like a first-class heel. Not only for making her hide in the box in his carriage when the highwayman had shown up, but for kissing her when she was in the throes of a

bad dream.

“ No . Yes . No . I get panicked when I’m in closed spaces. But I was fine. You did nothing wrong, Carlton .” She glanced down and plucked at the coverlet. “ My brother and I played hide-and-seek when we were small. It was our favorite thing to play. I’m afraid my hiding place was too good. He couldn’t find me and forgot to tell anyone. We were five. I was trapped in the window’s box seat in the library for hours. Sometimes , I have nightmares about it. And sometimes I become most anxious when I feel trapped in enclosed or dark spaces,” she said in a soft voice. “ I know it’s childish, but there you have it.”

“ It’s not childish,” he said, lifting her chin and looking into her eyes. “ That was a genuinely frightening experience you had as a child. Sometimes those stay with us for many years.”

“ Thank you for understanding,” she whispered. “ Um ... Carlton ?”

“ Yes , Catherine ?”

“ Did we just kiss?”

“ Well , technically, you kissed me first. Not that I minded, but I’m afraid we got a little carried away.”

“ Oh !” She averted her gaze. “ I - I , did you think it was brazen of me?”

“ No . I thought it was wonderful of you.”

“ Really ?”

“ Really .”

“ Um ... Carlton ?”

“ Yes , Catherine ?”

“ Just so you know, it was my first kiss,” she whispered. “ And I - I’m glad it was w-with you.”

“ You are?” Her first kiss? How has this beautiful woman never been kissed before? Carlton felt conflicted in his reaction. Anger that she’d never experienced a kiss before and pleased as punch that he’d been her first.

Her cheeks blushed a pretty pink. “ Well , I have never spent so much time with a man outside of my family. Between the death of my older brother and then my father, I’ve never been officially out in Society ...” She shrugged her delicate shoulders.

“ I see. Well , that explains why I never encountered you at any Society functions. Not that I go to many, mind you. Only when I can no longer stand my dear mother’s nagging. But if I had met you at a ball, I would have damn well asked you to dance and, most assuredly, stolen a kiss or three behind a potted palm.”

She giggled and gave him a teasing punch on his shoulder. “ I am very sorry for being so brazen in my sleep. I can’t imagine what came over me.”

“ Don’t be sorry! I found it most pleasurable.”

She looked up...and her eyes brightened. “ You did? I wish I’d been awake, so I could remember it.”

His eyes held hers. “ I suppose you could persuade me to go for a second round.” He held up a hand. “ Purely for the memory, of course.”

“ You would do that?” Her eyes misted.

“ I would.” He wanted an excuse to kiss her again. As he leaned in, he jerked himself back. “ Good grief!” Even though the only light in the room came from the fireplace, he realized he was down to his smalls. And she was awake. “ Avert your eyes for a moment.” How was he screwing up everything?

She complied, and he rushed to the fireplace, snatched up his pants, and put them on.

“ This is the best I can do,” he said sheepishly. “ I jumped up so quickly to check on you, I forgot I didn’t have my breeches on.”

She chuckled. “ I suppose I can forgive you since your intentions are so noble.”

He grinned. “ Let’s have another go at making a memory,” he said, taking her into his arms. Leaning down, he teased her lips open. He took full advantage of this opportunity and kissed her lightly at first and then deepening the kiss until he felt her quivering in his arms. Pulling away, he nuzzled the side of her neck. “ You smell wonderful,” he murmured, kissing her neck, her ears, and then her lips.

“ Lemon and Lilac ,” she murmured. “ I think I’ll remember this kiss.”

He claimed her lips once more and could have kissed her forever, but his body was thrumming with desire, and he couldn’t compromise her innocence. Gently , he pulled away, breaking their kiss. Carlton held her face in his hands and stared into her luminous blue eyes. “ We should stop now while I’m still able.”

“ Thank you for my second kiss and my first memory.”

“ You’re welcome.” He kissed the top of her nose. And leaned back to look into her eyes. He felt torn inside. He should tell her the truth about their situation, but he

couldn't. The smile on her face was so tender, so sweet. It had been her first and second kiss, for goodness' sake. He wouldn't ruin it. "We should get some sleep. I'm fine by the fireplace."

He awoke with the first rays of the sun and lay there for a few minutes, thinking about Catherine. And kiss numbers one and two. And how he should tell her the truth? And how would she react once he told her? Riggs stirred next to him, and he pushed his swirling thoughts away. "I should take you out, buddy." Swiftly, he donned his clothes and carried the pup downstairs.

When they returned to the room, Catherine was up and dressed and tying up her hair.

Her eyes met his, and she gave him a shy smile. "Good morning, Carlton."

"Good morning, Catherine."

"Thank you for taking Riggs out. How is he doing this morning?"

"Much better," he replied, offering the dozing pup up for her morning kiss and then placing him on his little bed. "He's healing quickly, and I predict he'll be a holy terror in no time at all."

Catherine giggled as she finished pinning up her hair.

"Before we go down to break our fast, I must tell you something," Carlton began.

"Of course. But first...um, I know this is awkward, but could you please help me lace up my dress?"

"I'm happy to assist, my lady," he said with his best wolfish grin.

Her cheeks turned a rosy pink again, and she hastily turned around. How he loved seeing her blush.

Is this what it would feel like to be married to Catherine ? Small intimate moments like this? Happily , lacing up her dress before escorting her down to breakfast and then happily unlacing it before bed? He'd put off marriage for so long that his mother had practically given up on him. And yet, after spending more than four days in close confines with Catherine and getting to know her, he realized it was something he could easily do. With her. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and kissed her nape.

She uttered a small gasp and spun around to face him. Her eyes were wide, but a smile played about her lips. “ You kissed the back of my neck.”

“ I did, didn't I ? Did you mind it?”

She shook her head. “ I - I liked it. I liked last night's kisses too.”

He breathed out a deep sigh. How he yearned to take her in his arms and kiss her again. But he needed to tell her the truth. And then she would probably hate him. And that would be awful. Carlton knew he was being selfish, but he'd been wanting to kiss her again since he woke up. Leaning down, he lifted her chin and kissed her lips, tender at first and then hungrily.

Catherine uttered a soft moan, slipping her arms around his neck and pressing herself against him. Now it was his turn to moan as he reluctantly broke their kiss.

He stepped back and raked his hands through his hair. “ Catherine , there is something you should know.”

“ What is it?” She reached out and laid her hand on his cheek. “ You look so pained. What's wrong? Is it Edward or Serafina ? Did you find out something? Are they

hurt?”

A panicked look came into her eyes, and he sought to reassure her. “ No , this is not about Edward or Serafina . This is about us.”

“ Us ?” Confusion replaced the panic expression.

“ There’s no getting around this. We are married,” he said.

Her face went from confusion to stunned. “ What ? How can that be? We’ve said no vows in a church, in front of a minister, with our family and guests in the pews.”

“ This is Scotland . I’ve been here several times and I know the old ways and ancient traditions. But the problem is, I thought we were still in England . I forgot we’d crossed the border.”

“ So ? I still don’t understand.”

“ Scotland has irregular marriage laws. Couples don’t need to say their vows in a church. Handfasting over the blacksmith’s anvil is but one of them. It was the furthest thing from my mind, I assure you. And we only took the room together because it was the only one available. But ...”

“ Go on,” she said in a calm voice.

He was worried that she sounded so calm, but he forged ahead. “ In Scotland , when a couple declares themselves married to others publicly—whether or not they shared a bed—they are considered married. By law. No church or vicar is needed.”

“ Oh , I see...” She nodded. “ Last night in front of the Brambles and then in front of the Duke of Douglas . We declared ourselves, didn’t we?”

“ Yes , we did. When you think about it, what we did was similar to handfasting over the anvil. We declared ourselves in front of witnesses—therefore, the marriage is binding.” He wanted to shrivel up and disappear. “ I am so sorry. I should not have allowed this to happen. All I can do is plead stupidity.”

“ I see,” was all she said. She turned around and walked to the window. She stood there silently, looking out for several moments.

“ It’s not the end of the world, is it?” she whispered, her back still to him. “ Surely , if you wish it, you can have the marriage annulled.”

He swallowed hard. Carlton was suddenly unsure of himself.

“ Perhaps we should discuss this further after we have breakfast and get our trip underway. We must deal with Edward and Serafina first. And then, I promise, we’ll talk about this again.”

She finally turned around and the tears in her eyes nearly undid him. “ Yes , you’re right,” she said in a husky voice. “ We must find Edward and Serafina first. And then we can speak of this again.”

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Catherine felt chilled, despite the hearty fire in the hearth next to their table in the dining room.

We're married.

His startling revelation had shocked her to the core, but then her heart had soared with the knowledge that she and Carlton were married.

I love him.

She was certain of it. How could she not have fallen in love with Carlton ? He was kind, honest, courageous, handsome as the devil, and he made her laugh. He made her frustrated too when they debated a topic and their discussion turned heated. But most of all, he made her heart do somersaults when he kissed her.

But does he love me?

His kisses had made her tingle right down to her toes. But had he kissed her because he felt sorry for her or because he truly wanted to kiss her?

She was certain Carlton would want out of this marriage, having made his feelings about marriage very clear. He avoided it like the plague. And yet, she also knew that he would leave the decision up to her. He was chivalrous to the core.

But she could never force a man to marry her. No matter the risk to her reputation. She would never want to be married to a man who did not love her.

No matter how much she loved him, and she loved him so very much, she would not force Carlton to stay married.

“ Do my eyes deceive me?” Carlton asked, pulling her from her thoughts. “ Is that your brother and Serafina getting up from the table on the other side of the room?”

Catherine followed the direction of his gaze and gasped. “ It is!”

Carlton nearly knocked his chair over as he stood. Grabbing Catherine’s hand, he almost lifted her into the air and pulled her with him as he nearly ran across the room.

“ Edward , thank goodness we found you!” Catherine said, catching her breath. She hugged her brother tightly, relief washing over her.

“ Miss Serafina Davies ,” Carlton’s voice resonated, causing everyone to look their way.

The couple paled at the sight of them.

“ It’s not as it looks,” Edward blurted. “ I can explain everything?—”

“ Quiet ,” Carlton said in a voice that brooked no argument. “ We’ve already attracted the attention of every single person in this dining room. We’ll conduct this conversation in the privacy of my carriage.” He grabbed Catherine’s hand and strode out of the inn.

Catherine glanced over her shoulder and saw her brother and Serafina exchange a worried glance as they hurried after them.

When they arrived at the carriage, Riggs was already waiting for them, along with Morris , Brandon , and Yates .

“ We have a few matters to discuss,” Carlton said, taking Riggs from Morris and handing him to Catherine . He yanked open the carriage door and assisted Catherine and Serafina up the steps, and climbed in after Edward , before closing the door with a firm click.

“ Please , Your Grace , let us explain,” Serafina pleaded. “ I know this looks bad, but it isn’t as it seems. Even though Edward and I have only known each other a few weeks, we’ve fallen in love.” She looked at Edward and her smile reflected all the promises of young love.

“ But the journey to Scotland gave us time to consider everything,” Edward added. “ Including our families. In my haste to marry Serafina , I never considered what it might do to Mother , or you, Cathy . And for that, I am truly sorry.”

Catherine nodded as she stroked the sleeping pup on her lap.

“ And even though I’m sixteen and Edward and I come from different backgrounds—we don’t care.” Serafina gave a firm nod as she reached for Edward’s hand.

“ But I do care about Serafina’s reputation,” Edward added in a rush. “ And I would never compromise her, Your Grace .”

“ We never shared a room, Your Grace ,” Serafina added, glancing down. “ And we never...”

“ I get the picture,” Carlton said in a wry tone.

“ But we decided it would not be prudent for us to marry at this time. And so, when you saw us in the inn, we had already made our decision to return to Bath .” Edward looked at Catherine and then at Carlton . “ And when we return, I would like your

permission to court Serafina , Your Grace .”

“ Well , that is quite the explanation,” Carlton said. “ I’m sure you realize what you put your sister and me through.”

“ We do, Your Grace , and we apologize,” Edward added in a rush.

“ We hope you can forgive us, Your Grace and Lady Campbell ,” Serafina said, clinging to Edward’s hand.

Carlton turned to Catherine , his brow arched. “ What say you, Lady Campbell ? Should we forgive them?”

“ Yes , Your Grace . I think that would be a fine thing to do.”

“ Well then, Lady Campbell has decreed that we forgive you. But we will speak about your courtship when we return to Bath .”

“ Thank you, Your Grace ,” Edward and Serafina said in unison.

“ Thank you, Cathy ,” Edward said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek.

Serafina shyly thanked Catherine , as well.

Impulsively , Catherine placed the sleeping Riggs in his bed and leaned over and hugged the girl.

“ I see you got a dog, sister,” Edward said, scratching the pup behind the ears.

“ Yes , his name is Riggs . We saved him from a trap on our way to Scotland ,” she said.

“ It was love at first sight,” Carlton interjected. “ Between your sister and Riggs , that is.”

Catherine glanced at Carlton , confused at his comment. His voice had sounded odd, strained.

“ I need a breath of fresh air, Carlton said abruptly. I’ll instruct Brandon to retrieve your bags from the inn.” Carlton pushed open the door to the carriage and climbed out, not bothering to close it behind him. “ I need to take a minute and think,” he said, causing the others to stare in confusion.

Catherine heard him pacing back and forth and muttering to himself. She could only hear bits and pieces of what he was saying, including something about his best friend Damon and how happy he was with his new wife, Lydia —and how he had seen it coming when they bumped heads together.

Why is he upset over his friend and his wife?

A few minutes later, Carlton stuck his head in. “ Catherine , I need to speak with you for a moment. Can you join me outside?”

Confused , she nodded numbly and allowed him to help her from the carriage.

He began to pace again. “ This thing that happened to us. Maybe it happened for a reason,” he rasped before clearing his throat. “ People do strange things sometimes and there must be a reason for it.”

She glanced around them and noticed a few people were stopping to listen, but Carlton seemed oblivious to them.

“ Four days ago, you rampaged into my life, making all sorts of unfounded

accusations about my ward, my business, my reputation. Despite that, I agreed to go on this wild ride with you.” He raked his hands through his hair as he paced. “ But along the way, something happened. I compromised a lot more than I ever have in my life. I put up with a stubborn, argumentative woman who insisted that a note tacked to a tree would be sufficient evidence for a magistrate to arrest a trio of highwaymen, cold-blooded criminals who would have killed us, given the chance. A woman who demanded that I stand guard while she attended to her private needs, but not too close for fear that I would hear something. A woman who worries after the fact that she may have used poisonous leaves and then asks me to examine one of them to make sure. A woman who insisted there was no time to wait for a magistrate to arrest those three highwaymen and then suddenly decides it’s perfectly fine to waste time trudging through the woods to search for a whimpering dog. What man in his right man allows this,” he signaled with a wild motion of his hand, “to happen?”

Catherine opened her mouth to protest, but he held his hand up.

“ Fine , you were right about the dog. But you weren’t right about me.”

“ What do you mean?” She had no idea where he was heading with this, especially after what he just said.

He stopped pacing. “ You never asked me how I truly felt about love when we spoke of such things early on. I want you to ask me now,” he whispered.

“ How do you feel about love?”

“ I never believed in it. I thought it was rubbish. I believed love was for fools.”

“ And do you still believe that?” She blinked back tears.

He shook his head. “ I was wrong. Love can hit you like a thunderbolt. And when it

does, there's no turning back. When you had that nightmare and you kissed me while you were still half asleep, that was the most incredible kiss in my life. And then the second one was even better." He pulled her close. "Double damn, woman. Don't you see? I'm madly in love with you. And I don't want this irregular Scottish marriage of ours to be annulled."

"I ... I love you, too," she whispered. "Remember when you said it was love at first sight between me and Riggs?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath. "I think it was love at first sight when I collided with you at your club four days ago. It took me a while to realize it. I love you so much, Carlton, and I don't want our marriage annulled either."

Carlton dropped to his knee. "Lady Catherine Campbell, you are the most incredible, amazing woman I have ever met. Will you make me the happiest of men and marry me...in a regular way?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so." She placed a finger on his lips as he was about to protest. "However, I will if you take me to Gretna Green and marry me over the blacksmith's anvil."

Catherine dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "You stole my heart when you agreed to come on this wild ride with me and you put up with everything I threw at you. There is nothing regular about you, my love."

Carlton gave a loud whoop as he picked her up and twirled her about in his arms. "Here comes kiss number three." He grinned as his lips claimed hers.

Applause erupted, and they pulled apart to see Edward and Serafina, Morris,

Brandon , and Yates cheering them on, along with a sizeable crowd that had gathered around them.

“ Are you ready for another adventure, my love?” Carlton smiled. The love shining in his eyes made her heart soar.

“ I’m ready, my love.” She smiled through her tears and pulled him down for kiss number four, knowing it would be the best one yet.

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Two months later ~ Bath, England

“ Did you ever think you’d be back in the carriage with me so soon, my lovely duchess?” Carlton Coleman , the Duke of Richmond , asked as he tugged his beloved wife onto his lap.

“ Honestly ...no!” Catherine Coleman , the Duchess of Richmond , said with a laugh.
“ But I’m happy to go anywhere with you.”

“ That’s good to hear,” he said, pleased as punch. Although he was curious that she hadn’t asked about a honeymoon.

“ Thank you for my special day, Carlton .” She sighed, placing a light kiss on his lips.
“ It was like a dream.”

“ I aim to please.” He grinned.

“ It was well done of you to include the Duke of Douglas as a second-best man alongside Damon . With Damon married and now you, it gave the unmarried ladies an unmarried duke to idolize at the reception, re-enforcing that my handsome husband is firmly off the marriage mart.

“ Is that a hint of jealousy I hear?” he asked, waggling his brows.

“ Yes . I suppose it is. It’s still so new, I can’t help it,” she conceded, giving him one of her soft smiles.

“ I feel the same about you, my darling wife,” he admitted. “ And I’m happy you loved the ceremony.”

“ I did love it. Although our hand-fasting ceremony in Scotland was also lovely and romantic.”

“ You cried the entire way through.”

“ Tears of joy, if you recall.”

“ Hmm ,” was all he said, being too busy nuzzling her neck.

Catherine uttered a soft moan as she leaned her head back. “ Few people can claim to be thrice married.”

“ Well , I can have you to thank, my duchess, for changing my mind. I am a reformed man,” he said with a chuckle, leaning back to gaze at his beautiful wife. She was still dressed in the cream silk gauze and satin gown she had worn for their third wedding in front of all their friends and family. When she entered the church, he’d been utterly mesmerized. Her gown shimmered from hundreds of crystals and pearls sewn into the silky fabric, but Catherine’s inner glow would have outshone any dress. He would have sworn.

“ Have I told you that you’ve made me impossibly happy by marrying me— all three times ?”

“ Yes , but I never tire of hearing it.”

“ Good , because I’ll never tire of saying it.” He was damn lucky. Catherine was intelligent, beautiful, and had the most generous heart in the world. She’d taken Serafina under her wing and treated her as a loving older sister.

“ And have I told you that you’ve made me the happiest of women for marrying me three times?”

“ Yes , but tell me again.”

Catherine giggled as she tucked her head into his shoulder and snuggled against his chest. “ I would also add that you are the most valiant, handsome, charming, witty, kind, and thoughtful husband in the world. Sometimes , I feel like pinching myself. I went from never having a Season to spending four days in a carriage with the most dashing duke I’d ever met and becoming his bride, not once, but three times. It’s as though we stepped into a wild, baffling, beautiful dream.”

“ Then , I never wish to wake from it, my darling duchess!” He tugged her head down and claimed her lips in a heated kiss. “ I think that was kiss number 10,433 if I’m not mistaken.”

“ And they keep getting better and better,” she breathed.

“ Good , because I plan on rounding 11,000 by tomorrow morning.”

“ Ruff !” Riggs barked.

“ See ? Riggs agrees!” Carlton teased.

“ Riggs , darling. You were marvelous at the ceremony!” Catherine picked up the pup and set him on Carlton’s lap.

“ He does have a certain panache about him,” Carlton quipped. “ I swear, the guests were more excited about that puppy than they were about us.”

Catherine’s mother and his mother, along with the other Golden Duchesses , came up with the outrageous idea of having Riggs wear a cravat and a tiny top hat and

accompany Catherine down the aisle.

“ I’m sure Riggs will be the talk of the ton for weeks,” Carlton added.

“ I think he prefers to be called His Grace , Duke Riggs .” Catherine chuckled.

Carlton could never get enough of her rich, throaty laugh. “ And had we not capitulated to the ceremony, we’d have been forever apologizing to my mother for not giving her the grand event Society expected. Society has some silly mores, although I didn’t mind playing along with this one.” He hugged her closer. “ Besides , the smile on your mother’s face when we told her about the public ceremony made it all worthwhile.”

“ Oh , Carlton , what a lovely thing to say,” she whispered.

His breath hitched at the tears shimmering in her sapphire blue eyes. “ Aren’t you curious about our honeymoon destination?” he asked, wiping a stray tear from her cheek.

She sighed. “ I tried to find out, but no one would tell me a thing. But ...yes. I am very curious.”

“ Ruff , ruff!” Riggs barked and smiled up at them.

“ Well , it seems Riggs is as well, although I’m sure he suspects,” he said with a wry grin. “ I swore everyone to secrecy. My darling duchess, we’re on our way to Scotland .”

“ Double damn!” Catherine said.

He threw his head and laughed.

~ Not the End ~