



Charming the Accidental Suitor (Charmed By Chance #4)

Author: *Maggie Dallen*

Category: Historical

Description: Lord Albright had no intention of falling in love again. But that was before Miss Felicity fell into his lap Literally.

Was Felicity too old to be climbing trees and spying on her uncles visitors? Perhaps. But in her defense, she was so very bored. And besides, shes well aware theres a smuggler on the loose in London, and she has her suspicions

But so does Lord Albright. And its a surprise indeed when his stakeout beneath a tree is interrupted by the very pretty, very peculiar young lady who lands on top of him. He has no desire to drag her into a dangerous investigation, but Felicity has a way of sneaking into all the places she should not be—ballrooms, abandoned warehouse, and, as hes horrified to discover—his heart.

Felicitys story is the fourth and last novella in the Charmed by Chance series, a School of Charm spinoff, which is best read in order.

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Page 1

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1

Miss Felicity McGovern was far too old for childish games.

At least, that was what her chaperone Mrs. Bishop would say if she could see Felicity now.

Felicity took a bit of her apple and wrapped her arm around the tree trunk. Shifting her weight to find her balance on the solid limb, she settled in to wait.

Wait for what? She wasn't entirely sure.

She took another bite and the crunch of the crisp apple seemed as loud as a gunshot in the otherwise quiet garden.

Her great uncle was to receive a visitor today, and this was a man she had a particular interest in. Of course, she might not be able to hear a thing, and it was more likely than not that what she did hear would be tedious.

But the chance of hearing or seeing anything of interest outside her great uncle's home was better than the certain boredom that awaited her inside.

It was only by sheer good fortune she'd managed to slip away from Mrs. Bishop undetected earlier this morning and she had no intention of returning anytime soon. But as her great uncle's estate was bordered on both sides with nearly identical townhomes and the garden was her only escape, her options during this brief window of freedom...

Well, they were limited.

But then she'd recalled the visitor meant to arrive today. And so she'd resorted to her favorite pastime—climbing trees. Or anything, really. Her mother used to say she was forever underfoot as a child. But she really meant was that Felicity was always...overhead. Hiding on the staircase to watch dinner party guests arrive or peering over the balustrade to watch the ball guests dance...

Or sitting in a tree watching visitors come and go, as the case may be.

This tree in particular had always been her preferred spot, particularly on warm spring days when her uncle would leave the windows open and sometimes—though rarely—she could overhear his conversations.

Of course, this was not always a good thing. More often than not, the visits were of a business nature and not exactly thrilling to listen to as a child. And then there was that time she'd overheard her own father practically begging Uncle Edward to take Felicity off his hands.

It had been a humbling moment, to be certain. Though not exactly shocking. As their only daughter—and an unexpected, unwanted one at that—Felicity's role within her immediate family had always been clear.

She was to marry. Preferably someone with a title. Didn't matter who, really, just so long as he helped her wealthy merchant father achieve another foothold amongst the ton .

They had connections already. Great Uncle Edward, for example. He was a baronet, and well respected in good society. And it was for that reason Felicity had been rather unceremoniously dumped upon him over the years.

This year she'd been left with him for...well, she wasn't certain how long. However long it took for her to do as she was told— for once , her mother would mutter—and make a decent match.

A breeze shook the branches around her, making the leaves dance as sunlight filtered through the canopy above. She tipped her head back and smiled. She hoped she'd heard correctly that the visitor was expected today. But even if he didn't show, she was glad she'd decided to camp out up here. It had been too long since she'd been out here when the sun was up.

And then, at last, the visitor arrived. She recognized Mr. Everson straight away. Nice fellow, she supposed, but she did not like him. Unlike her friends, Felicity had never understood the notion that one must like someone simply because that person was nice.

Certainly, all of her friends could be considered nice. But nice meant nothing. Anyone could be nice. And a pleasant demeanor often hid the most vile of hearts.

No, those she truly admired—and then, by extension, befriended—they were nice, yes. But they were also kind. They were generous and caring and good.

While Mr. Everson...

Well, she did not know him well enough to say if he was good . But like that apple she'd once bitten into that had been rotting from the inside out, she was nearly certain she smelled something foul beneath his sweet exterior.

She only caught a glimpse of his handsome features and dapper clothes before he disappeared inside, and soon enough she heard her great uncle's familiar, curt tones.

For the record, her great uncle was a pleasant enough man. If she were allowed to

continue with her fruit metaphor, she'd describe her Uncle Edward as far from rotten. He might have unpleasant dark marks on the outside, but scratch away that surface level and he was surprisingly sweet.

Mr. Everson's voice was distinctly different from Uncle Edward's. His was all smooth, ingratiating tones compared to her uncle's sharp staccato retorts. It was an interesting melody they formed, but it would have been far more interesting if she could make out any actual words.

After a while she stopped trying, and instead let her gaze drift and her mind wander.

It didn't wander terribly far. It remained firmly in the present, here in London. Because while she'd been doing her best to ignore the impending threat of marriage, it was getting ever more difficult. The topic was all any of her friends wished to discuss these days.

Not that she could blame them. Meg and Jane both had weddings to plan, and Ann wouldn't be far behind. Her sweet redheaded friend was even now considering two offers. Felicity had a suspicion who would win, but she'd been doing her utmost to keep her mouth shut so Ann could see what was right in front of her face on her own.

Felicity heaved a sigh. She was delighted for her friends. Truly. But she couldn't help feeling just a little despondent when she considered that come this time next year she'd be all alone.

This Season had only been bearable because at every social event she and her friends had found a place well out of view—as was befitting a cluster of wallflowers.

But next year...

She pursed her lips. Well, by next year she'd be married off as well, wouldn't she?

No matter what. Her father had already made it clear that if she didn't make a match on her own this Season, he'd make one for her.

Her nose scrunched and her next bite of apple was another loud snap.

She supposed it was time to take matters in hand. It was an odious task, to be certain, but she'd far rather choose her own future than let her father have the only say.

Her sigh was nearly as loud as the crunch of her apple.

She might well have spent the remainder of the afternoon wallowing over her prospects, but fortunately a distraction arrived at her uncle's doorstep in the form of...

She straightened. Lord Albright? What was he doing here?

One of Ann's two potential suitors, and by all accounts a good chap. Nice, yes—that went without saying. Albright was renowned for his easy smile and his laid back charm. So yes, nice and all that...but good too.

Which was why Felicity almost felt sorry that he'd never win Ann's hand. They'd make a good match if Ann's heart hadn't been stolen by a Marquess.

Felicity leaned forward as Albright approached the house. His easy smile was nowhere to be seen and he was eyeing the door with a fixedness that was most alarming.

He seemed to be considering his options as he hesitated.

Where he chose to pause happened to be just beneath the tree, and Felicity hesitated and considered as well. Should she announce herself?

She winced at the thought. She'd never had much concern for propriety, much to her mother's great distress. But even she understood that to be found sitting in a tree was...unconventional.

She waited too long, because then he was moving even closer to the tree. So close, he was right beneath her, and now she hesitated to announce herself because...

Well, two reasons. One, she'd give him quite a start. And two, if he looked up now he'd have quite the view.

She quietly tucked her skirt even tighter between her legs and resigned herself to wait.

Perhaps he'd just wanted a respite from the sunshine. The shade from this tree was rather lovely. But he didn't rest against the trunk or remove his handkerchief to wipe his brow.

No, he seemed to be attempting to blend into the shadows while getting ever closer to her uncle's open window.

Felicity's eyes narrowed as she stared down at this supposedly good man Albright.

What was he about?

Why was he eavesdropping on her uncle?

Not that she could judge, really, when she'd been doing the same. But still. He was her uncle, not his. And it was hardly her fault she'd been driven to tears with boredom.

Seconds passed, then minutes. Her curiosity rose with every passing heartbeat, and no

amount of staring down at Albright's full head of hair helped her to discern anything...

Other than the fact that he really did have an excellent head of hair. Her balding father would be jealous.

When it became clear that Albright was in no hurry to move, Felicity's curiosity won out over reason. Sadly for Felicity's parents, this was most often the case for her.

Without entirely thinking through the consequences, Felicity allowed impatience to drive her over the edge.

Literally.

She leapt off the limb and landed on her feet...right in front of Albright.

He jumped back with a gasp that might have been funny if it hadn't been accompanied by a fighting stance. For one terrifying moment, Felicity was certain she was about to experience her first facer.

But Albright froze with his arm drawn back, his hand still clenched in a fist. His eyes narrowed and then widened as shock and disbelief raced across his features. "Miss McGovern?!"

His outburst sent the birds in the limbs overhead flying and as one Felicity and Albright turned to the open window.

When no head popped out and the melody of gentlemen's voices continued uninterrupted, Felicity let out a breath of relief.

Only to realize that Albright had done the same.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

At the same time, he said, “Where on earth did you come from?”

She answered first with a simple gesture upward. He followed her movement and eyed the tree limb. Then he eyed her as though she were a strange object never seen by man before.

Sadly for everyone, Felicity was well used to this look. She gave him approximately three seconds to come to grips with the fact that she’d been sitting in a tree. Directly above him. Watching him.

Embarrassment had heat rushing to her cheeks but she ignored it. Curiosity was still burning bright and her embarrassment quickly faded. “What are you doing out here?” she asked again.

“I might ask you the same,” he shot back.

And there. There was that easy smile everyone knew him for. And it was a charming smile. Genuine too.

But it wasn’t the whole story. It was what he wanted people to see. This much she’d understood ever since they’d first met.

An easy smile was the surest way to distract people from looking any further. But that only made her want to look closer. Over the past few months of their brief acquaintance, that was precisely what she’d done.

And so, she was hardly fooled now.

He adopted a casual, lazy stance as if they’d just encountered one another on a stroll

through Hyde Park. “Do you often sit in trees, Miss McGovern?”

“Please don’t call me that,” she said. “It’s Felicity.”

Miss McGovern only reminded her of her parents and her duties and all the things she spent large swaths of time attempting to forget.

“Do you often sit in trees, Felicity ?”

“Yes. Do you often eavesdrop on my uncle while he’s conducting business, Lord Albright?”

He had the good grace to wince. “I was not eavesdropping.”

She didn’t bother to argue. They both knew he was. “What I’d like to know is, are you here spying on my uncle...or Mr. Everson?”

The flicker in his eyes was brief. But again, Felicity had learned to look past his smiles and so she caught it. “Ah. Mr. Everson then. I thought so.”

His brows drew down. “Pardon?”

But she did not pardon. Her mind was racing now that she’d confirmed her hunch. “Does this have something to do with that smuggling business on Jane’s property?”

He gaped at her, and satisfaction coiled in her like a snake.

She didn’t relish being underestimated, but it was awfully amusing whenever it occurred. “Oh come now, Albright. You can trust me. Jane told me all about it, so I know that you’re conducting an investig?—”

“Eeep.” The squeak occurred because Albright had surprised the life out of her by clapping a hand over her mouth.

Regret filled his eyes but he didn’t move his hand, and Felicity was absurdly aware of the fact that a man was touching her. Not harshly. If she wanted to pull away, she could. But she found herself curious to see where this would go so she held still and met his gaze.

She was keenly attuned to the rough calluses against her soft skin, and of the scent of leather and a spicy cologne that filled her nostrils.

“Pardon me.” He dropped his hand quickly. “My apologies. I...” He cleared his throat and darted a glance toward the open window. “This is not a fit conversation for a lady, and certainly not here.”

Right. By that she understood—it was not safe to speak here. And judging by the fact that those inside were likely just as capable of hearing what went on outside the window...

She supposed he had a point. But the change in him was remarkable. The affable, easygoing young baron she’d come to know had been replaced by another man she’d never met. This one was far more serious, and almost...

Well, not dangerous. She wasn’t scared of him by any means. But he definitely had an air of danger about him, and that was just plain thrilling.

No one in Felicity’s acquaintance ever had so much as a whiff of intrigue about them. Except for Jane’s run-in with those smugglers, of course, but both Jane and her fiancé the Earl of Marlin had seemed all too pleased to hand the matter over to Albright and pretend it never happened.

She'd known in a sort of theoretical way that he'd continued investigating the matter. But it wasn't until just now that she truly believed it. Her heart picked up its pace and questions filled her mind.

Oh, she had so many questions.

But she studied Albright, watching the way his jaw hardened and his dark eyes glinted with resolve...

She knew enough about stubbornness to know that as far as he was concerned, the conversation had just ended.

"I must ask that you do not mention my presence here today." His tone was so stiff it took everything in her not to laugh. She pressed her lips together but nodded as solemnly as she could.

He gave a short jerk of his chin. "I assure you, I mean your uncle no harm."

Oh, how she wanted to laugh. "I believe you."

Surprise flickered in his eyes. Possibly because she was so gamely going along with him.

But that just meant he did not know her.

If he did, he'd know that Felicity McGovern did not give up so easily, and was never deterred. Not when there was intrigue underfoot and an adventure to be had.

She smiled sweetly as he made excuses and watched his back as he slipped through the front gate.

Only then did she give in to the urge to grin, a laugh slipping out as she fetched the apple she'd dropped and headed toward the house.

Did he actually think she'd let this drop simply because he'd asked her to? Because it 'wasn't fit for a lady'? She laughed as she tossed the half eaten apple in the air and caught it. "Oh, poor Albright. He really doesn't know me at all."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

2

Alexander Albright couldn't say he was heartbroken as he watched shy, sweet Miss Ann Truesdale join his friend the Marquess of Kalvin on the dance floor. In doing so, it was clear she'd made her choice.

He felt a pang of regret, but that wasn't the same. It wasn't even close to what he'd felt after losing his wife, though he'd known her for roughly the same amount of time he'd known Ann. Still...

He'd known heartache, and this was not that.

In fact, he was happy for Ann, and delighted for Kal. Truly. Ann had chosen love over the safe, comfortable, but ultimately passionless romance he could offer. And she deserved that. They both did.

Indeed, even that pang of regret faded quickly as he watched them mooning over each other like a couple of daft fools.

Ann might have been a good choice for him. The idea of marrying again had even seemed appealing when he considered the sort of friendship they'd share.

But she and Kal were even more well suited. And he had to believe there were other women out there with whom he might share the same comfortable, easy friendship.

He rocked back on his heels, his attention already drifting away from the happy couple. He found Mr. Everson laughing at something The Duke of Carver was saying

to the group that had crowded around him and his fiancée Meg.

The last of Albright's disappointment was quickly replaced by irritation.

In the course of one fortnight he'd lost the prospect of a perfectly pleasant partner and any leads he'd had on the smuggling situation.

If he were being honest, the latter was far more irksome. Ann wasn't the only woman he might find a lasting friendship with, but he was running out time to find the one man behind the thievery—the one well-connected gentleman, at least. The crew of smugglers had grown to an unmanageable size, but it was only the one leader Albright needed to find.

One might argue it wasn't his job. Indeed, he was merely looking into the matter as a favor to his cousin who worked for the Home Office. Once they'd begun to suspect that the thieves were taking orders from a member of the ton, his cousin had drawn him in.

It wasn't the first time his aid had been requested. Not because Albright was so very clever or oh so sly. No, it was merely that he was well connected and—as his cousin repeatedly mentioned—well liked.

But mostly he had access, and friends of influence, and could ask questions without causing a stir. Truly, he had no need of a career. He had plenty of obligations and entertainments to fill his time.

It was only...

He'd been enjoying the tasks his cousin sent his way. They gave him a sense of purpose. They were a change from the day to day, and...blast it all, he felt a sense of pride when he accomplished these missions.

And for the past few years he had accomplished each task he'd been given. Some were easier than others, but he always saw it through. And he could not abide the fact that he might very well have to admit defeat in this matter.

Mr. Everson was far from clever. But the evidence Albright had to link him to the smuggling was circumstantial at best. He'd confirmed that the Earl of Marlin's late brother had been involved in the early days of the smuggling ring.

Marlin himself had helped to piece together that puzzle with financial documents.

It seemed his now-deceased older brother had helped the smugglers as a way to right the books for their struggling estate. And honestly, no one would have known or even cared if the ring of thieves hadn't grown too big and too bold these past few years.

And that was the thing. This growth, the ever more blatant disregard for any laws or even common decency...

That had occurred after the late Earl's demise.

Whoever had been heading the operation upon the late Earl's demise had grown abominably greedy. And he didn't seem to have a care for who got caught in the middle of his crew's skirmishes with the law.

As the late Earl of Marlin's closest friend, Everson had been an obvious suspect from the start. And as Albright had looked into the man, a picture became clear. Everson was well connected and well liked—but also had nary a farthing to his name. He lived like a dandy, but only off the generosity of his friends and distant relations.

He frowned as the crowd shifted and he lost sight of Mr. Everson.

Just as he had the other day.

His brows lowered further at the memory of that particularly awful incident.

It was desperation that had him following Everson himself. Since the smuggler's base had been discovered by Marlin and his fiancée Jane, the trail had grown ever colder and more elusive.

The fiends were aware that they'd been caught and had gone into hiding. And Everson too seemed to be watching his every step. But he'd been making calls of late, and those he visited were not obvious friends or even acquaintances.

Miss McGovern's uncle among them.

What had he gone there for? He might have found out if a certain beautiful little brunette hadn't dropped out of the sky.

He took a deep breath and held back another sigh.

He found himself sighing often lately, every time he thought of that encounter. Truly, he'd been doing his best not to recall that particular afternoon. It wasn't one of his finer moments.

He winced as he recalled the way he'd clapped a hand over her mouth.

In his defense, she'd been speaking too loudly, and if Everson was indeed the culprit and suspected that Felicity knew this...

Well. Even now Albright couldn't stop the rush of anger that flooded his veins at the thought of Miss McGovern in harm's way.

Felicity, she'd said to call her. And the name fit. It had a sort of melody to it, and it meant happiness. Yes, indeed. Very fitting for the young lady who always seemed to

be brimming over with effusive cheerfulness.

His brows lowered as he found his thoughts once again dwelling on the young lady. He'd been aware of her for a while now, of course. She was friends with his friends, and they'd spent ample time in the same company. And he'd felt from the start that she was...different.

Peculiar.

In truth, her peculiarities had made him keep his distance from the start. She seemed kind enough, but there was something about her that set him on edge. Like he was waiting for a sudden catastrophe.

He couldn't be the only one who felt it.

She practically hummed with a level of energy that made everyone around her seem sleepy. Her eyes were forever sparkling with a hint of mischief and amusement. And while he'd long been aware that she was pretty, with her dark curls and her delicate features, it wasn't until he'd been forced to touch her, to stand so close he could not ignore the warm, sweet scent of her...

He swallowed hard and tugged at his cravat.

Well, it was then he realized that spark was inside her. It made her skin burn his hand. It made the very air around her crackle like a summer night just before a storm.

He tugged at his cravat again, entirely too warm just thinking about that encounter.

It had been a disaster. He'd been a blundering fool. And yet, he couldn't regret that he'd kept her from being discovered. He'd do whatever he must to keep Felicity safe from the likes of Everson.

But also...he'd do best to keep clear of her himself. This much he'd understood from the start. She seemed a nice enough young lady, if her friends were anything to go by. But Miss McGovern did not inspire the comfortable, quiet, placid feelings of long term friendship.

No, indeed. She inspired a riot of sensations that would only drive a man mad.

"Good evening, Lord Albright," a voice said beside him.

And then, as if summoned by his thoughts—there she was. Miss Felicity McGovern, her curls now wrapped around her head in some sort of ornate crown. She smiled up at him with a dimpled, mischievous grin.

She might as well have leapt from a tree again, her appearance was so sudden.

"Miss McGovern!"

"Felicity, please." Her voice was lower than most, and deceptively gentle. It was completely at odds with the spark in her eyes that set him on edge.

But despite his alarm, and the warning pound of his heart, he fell back on the good manners that had gotten him through over the years. "Are you enjoying the ball?"

She ignored the question, her gaze darting over him, then glancing over to the dance floor where Ann and Kal continued to make fools of themselves. Her lips hitched to the side in a little knowing smile. "She made the right choice, you know."

He let out a little huff of surprise at her blatant acknowledgment of the awkward situation. "Yes. I know."

Her nose wrinkled a bit in sympathy. "It cannot be easy to be the odd angle in a love

triangle.”

This time he choked on a laugh. “The odd angle?”

“That’s how I picture it.” She held her hands up to form a triangle. “Two of them fit together neatly and the third is left out in the cold.”

He was torn between shock, horror, and amusement that she was speaking so plainly of something so personal. But it meant that he was able to admit the truth. “I am happy for them.”

Her smile was surprisingly sweet. “I’m glad.” She followed his gaze to the happy couple. “So am I.”

For a moment they shared a companionable silence. It was almost...pleasant.

Until she broke it suddenly. “Now then, I came over because I wish to discuss what transpired the other day.” She arched her brows. “When you were eavesdropping?”

“I was not eavesdropping.” Blast. He sounded like a stuffed-shirt ninny.

She met his gaze evenly and said nothing.

He huffed. “Oh, all right. Yes. Fine. I might have been...” He tilted his head to the side as he strained to find another term.

Felicity tilted her head as well. “Eavesdropping?”

His shoulders sagged. “Was there something that you wished to discuss, Miss—” He caught himself as she arched a brow. “Felicity?”

“Actually, I was hoping you might have something to discuss with me.” When he didn't respond, she added, “Why you were eavesdropping, for example. Shall we take a turn about the room?”

Eavesdropping. What a horrid term. He had to bite his tongue to protest that word again. It sounded so...unseemly. But he didn't relish the idea of explaining the difference between eavesdropping and investigating. Because truthfully, in that particular circumstance...there was none.

He cleared his throat and aimed for polite but firm. “As I told you, it does not concern a young lady?—”

She cut him off with a scoff that had him reconsidering the ‘young lady’ part of his speech. She was most definitely female, and she was of a young, marriageable age. But lady did not seem to fit. Especially now as a pink hue tinged her cheeks and her lips pinched. “I'd say it most concerns a young lady.”

He frowned and lowered his voice. “Miss McG—Felicity,” he altered when she pursed her lips. “Perhaps I did not make myself clear. You see...” He paused to consider how much he might tell without revealing too much. “I've been tasked with looking into a criminal matter?—”

“Yes, yes, the smuggling.” She waved a hand as if smuggling was a topic she was so familiar with, it didn't bear repeating. “I know all about that. Your cousin asked you to investigate and?—”

He hushed her as he looked around meaningfully. Her sigh made him feel a full decade younger than his years.

“We wouldn't have to worry about what passersby might hear if you'd merely done as requested and escorted me on a turn about the room.”

He opened his mouth. Then he shut it. She had a point. He held out his arm abruptly in what had to be the least chivalrous gesture of his life. But egads, this woman was irritating.

Her smile was smug as she slipped her hand onto his arm with far more decorum than he'd managed. She murmured her thanks and didn't speak again until they were walking. "I understand why you suspect Everson?—"

"You do." His disbelief was clear.

"Of course. He was friends with the late Earl at the time the Earl was involved with the smugglers, and he and Everson were thick as thieves—" She shot him a sidelong glance. "Er, forgive the turn of phrase. I did not mean it so literally."

Her dry tone had his lips twitching up at the corners and some of his normal good humor returned. "An accurate turn of phrase, I believe."

"So then you do believe he's responsible for their rapid growth and expansion into the north?"

He whipped his head to the side so quickly the room spun. She didn't look up and he found himself staring at her dark curls, which tonight had been wrangled into submission in a manner that looked...pretty.

His gaze caught on the countless pins that sparkled in the dark depths of her locks.

Pretty...and perhaps painful.

"How do you know about their expansion to the north?" he demanded.

She looked up then, wide eyed. "Was it a secret?"

He clenched his teeth. Yes, it was a blasted secret. The whole torrid affair was meant to be a secret.

“Jane and Marlin didn’t seem to think so,” she murmured.

He held back a huff. Of course. He made a note to talk to Marlin and his bride-to-be about just how much they relayed on this topic.

“Now, what I’d like to know is what proof you’ve found regarding you-know-who.” She cast a glance in Everson’s direction.

“Felicity, how many times must I tell you this does not concern?—”

“A young lady?” She stopped walking and whirled around to face him. She was so close, he could feel the brush of her skirts against his legs and her sweet, warm scent made him feel temporarily dizzy. “Lord Albright.”

The way she said his name would make any man flinch, but Albright felt a surge of amusement. She was such a small little thing, and yet her tone was more alarming than most generals he’d met, and her chin was notched high with pride.

“...er, yes?” he finally said when he realized she was waiting.

“You do realize that Mr. Everson has of late been more flirtatious than ever with the young debutantes of the ton, do you not?”

Albright frowned.

“First Jane, then Ann...” She arched a brow. “Who do you think will be next?”

“I—”

She didn't give him a chance to finish. "Honestly, I'm surprised I wasn't first on his list."

Albright blinked. And then he tensed in a way that was as overwhelming as it was unexpected. A wave of something hot and sharp struck him between the ribs.

Everson was a gregarious sort, and yes, possibly even flirtatious. But the idea of him flirting with Felicity?—

For a moment he was too overcome with fury to speak.

"Has he been making...untoward advances?" he managed.

She gave one of those scoffs again. Oddly, the unladylike noise was starting to grow on him. It made him want to laugh even though he'd been in a foul mood tonight even before this little minx had joined him.

"He has not yet, but I imagine that's because he knows I'm after a title." She made a face. "At least I hope that's the reason, otherwise I might be offended."

His brows arched at her easy admission. "You're after a title?"

She lifted a shoulder. "My parents are. And that's what matters, isn't it?"

He didn't like this tone. Not on her. It was bitter and resigned and...not at all fitting for this little spitfire.

But once again, she moved on too quickly for him to respond. "So, you see, Lord Albright?—"

"Albright," he said. "Just Albright. No one ever uses my given name, and my friends

just call me Albright.” He wasn’t even sure why he’d said it. But it felt wrong for him to call her Felicity and her to be using his title.

She nodded. “You see then, Albright, why this is very much my concern.”

He did see. Blast it all. It was beyond irritating that she had a truly valid point. But when he met her gaze, he saw the notched chin and the determination...

But he also saw the sweet cornflower blue shade of her eyes, and the pale gown that hugged her curves and accentuated her small waist, and the way that one curl refused to stay in place. He itched to tuck it behind her ear.

Despite her feisty nature, she was still a young lady.

And Everson was a threat.

He didn’t want her anywhere near the man.

“I’m sorry, Felicity,” he said gently.

And he was surprised to realize he truly meant it. It might be nice to have someone to discuss this investigation with. There was no denying she was clever. She’d likely be a help.

His regret grew when he saw her disappointment.

His gut churned with the uncomfortable feeling she wasn’t just disappointed at not being let in on the gossip, but that she was disappointed in him .

He frowned. “Felicity?—”

But he was too late. “Very well.” She was already turning away with a dramatic sigh. “Then I suppose you don’t wish to know what Mr. Everson wanted from my dear uncle.”

His mouth opened but she was walking quickly away.

He watched her go—and his one and only lead went with her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

3

It wouldn't be long before Albright sought her out.

Felicity tapped her foot as she smiled and nodded to a passing acquaintance. She knew he'd seek her out, but honestly... "What's taking him so long?"

"Hmm?" Jane murmured beside her.

"What's that?" Meg asked.

Felicity gave her friends a rueful smile, and a moment later they were all smiling broadly at a passing matron. "My apologies," she said when the older woman passed their spot in the park. "I fear I'm a bit distracted today."

"Of course you are, what with all that's happened of late," Meg said before popping a piece of cheese into her mouth.

Felicity tipped her head back to take in the sunshine and forced herself to relax and enjoy this afternoon with her friends. The only one missing was Ann, and no one could blame their sweet redheaded friend for wanting to spend this lovely summer afternoon with her new suitor. Truly, she'd been surprised that Meg and Jane weren't spending the day with their fiancés as well, but she was selfishly grateful for it.

Ann's latest coup with Lord Kalvin meant Felicity's days of sunshine and freedom with her fellow wallflower friends was truly coming to an end.

Her time had come.

Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow she'd put her mind to the task of choosing her match and then she'd make it happen.

Her confidence came not from her charms nor her beauty. It was simply that all of London knew that she was an heiress with a dowry fit for a queen. All she had to do was find a chap in need of a fortune, and with enough good standing to suit her parents.

Which was most gentlemen, her uncle had assured her. It takes funds to keep an estate running well, so don't despair, child, he'd told her only that morning.

I'm not despairing, Uncle, she'd assured him in return.

Jane leaned forward and her quiet voice was nearly lost in the breeze. "Shall I ask Jasper to speak to Albright?" Her brows were knitted in concern on Felicity's behalf.

Felicity shook her head, which sent her curls bouncing and then the wind blew a large swatch of hair into her face. She shook her head and pushed her hair back. "No, but thank you. Your husband-to-be is right to stay out of it. If Albright believes his reputation is best protected by steering clear of this mess, then you should both keep doing what you're doing."

Meg nudged Jane's arm teasingly. "And what are you two doing, anyway?"

Jane blushed as she giggled. "You'd know, Meg."

Meg laughed as well, but she seemed far from embarrassed. "I'm so glad you and Lord Marlin are getting on so well."

Jane didn't respond but she reached for a piece of fruit with a satisfied smile.

"And you and Carver?" Felicity asked Meg. "How are the wedding preparations?"

"Splendid." Meg beamed. "My mother and his aunt are so passionate about the topic, I have little to do but plan rendezvous with my intended."

Felicity laughed along with Jane.

"I am glad we're doing this today," Meg added. She reached out and squeezed both their hands. "I miss Ann, but I'm glad we're here today."

Jane nodded. "It will be so much more difficult to arrange these gatherings once we all have families of our own."

"But we will," Meg declared. "We'll always find time for one another."

Felicity smiled at her friend. Lud, she hoped that was true. Her heart gave a little squeeze as she tried to imagine the future.

She was so very happy for her friends, but in the end, she knew that they'd each found not just a love match but...a friend. A partner.

She didn't expect to find the same, and she didn't even want such a thing, necessarily. But it did make her feel lonely to know that while they'd all be marrying a dear friend...

And she'd be losing all of hers. She had no doubt they'd still remain close. But it wouldn't be the same. It would no longer be the four of them against the world. They wouldn't have their little corner table at balls or meet for tea quite so often...

She cut off a maudlin sigh and instead turned her attention to the crowded walkway nearby. No sign of Albright.

Truly. What was taking him so long? Two days had passed, and surely by now he could have figured out where to find her. It wasn't as though she'd been hiding.

She shifted on the blanket, dimly aware of Meg's chatter and the sound of her chaperone's ever-present giveaway—clicking knitting needles.

Felicity often thought she might marry the first available lord just to escape the dreaded click-click-click sound that had begun to haunt her dreams.

She was so busy looking down the path, Felicity jumped when Lord Marlin's deep voice came from behind her. "Pardon us, ladies."

Jane leapt to her feet with an enthusiasm that might have been embarrassing if Lord Marlin wasn't gazing upon his betrothed with equally embarrassing infatuation. He held his hands out to her and only had eyes for Jane as he continued. "I hope you don't mind us interrupting like this but Lord Albright was curious as to your whereabouts and, well..."

Here the once mildly terrifying Earl did the unthinkable—he smiled in a way that might be called bashful. "I found myself looking for an excuse to see you, Jane. And, well...here we are."

Jane beamed up at him. "I'm happy to see you." She craned her neck to look at Albright. "And you, my lord."

He dipped his head with that easy smile of his. But his gaze was firmly fixed on Felicity.

Felicity who could not hide her triumphant smile if she'd tried.

So she didn't try.

She'd known he'd come. I knew you'd come! Oh, how she wanted to sing it. The young baron might be charming and chivalrous, and all those many splendid things. But he was also curious, and that emotion she understood all too well.

"Miss McGovern," Albright said. He'd already exchanged perfectly pleasant greetings with Meg and Jane, but his tone altered as he met her gaze.

It wasn't irritation she heard there, it was...a challenge.

Felicity took her time getting to her feet, excitement zinging through her veins. "Lord Albright," she said when she stood.

"May I have a word?" His words were polite. His tone too.

So very proper.

Felicity had to press her lips together to suppress a grin. But she wanted to say something outrageous just to see if she could make him drop that charming smile.

But she gave an equally polite nod, and murmured an excuse to her friends. She gave her chaperone a sweet smile and made sure that she and Albright remained well within sight while out of hearing.

See? She could be proper too.

"You wished to speak to me, Lord Albright?" Her tone was as light and innocent as she could manage.

“Yes. I’d like to continue our conversation from the other night.” He said, equally light and amiable.

She blinked, feigning ignorance. “Which part?”

His smile never faltered. “The part in which you were going to tell me what Mr. Everson was doing at your uncle’s home.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “That part.”

“Indeed.”

She waited.

He waited.

She did her best to hide the smile from her lips and her eyes, but truly...this was too much fun.

He drew in a deep breath. “Well?”

She blinked a few times and smiled sweetly. “Yes?”

He moved in closer, and...there. Finally. His nonchalant facade disappeared and his voice dipped low. “This is not a game, Miss McGovern.”

“Then why do you insist on playing, Lord Albright? You have a question, so ask it.”

“Fine. What did you overhear?”

She smiled. “Nothing.”

His nostrils flared and his gaze grew even darker. “So you’re just teasing me now, is that it? Or were you lying the other day?”

“Not at all.” When he looked fit to bursting with impatience, she continued. “I overheard just as little as you. However, you may have realized by now that I live in the same home as my Uncle Edward, and we do things such as take meals together and sit by the fire in the evenings. We even have a tendency to talk to one another on these occasions.”

Now it was his turn to blink and she saw her meaning take hold. “And what is it that you talk about?”

“Oh, all sorts of things,” she started.

Felicity was distracted when Lady Olivia passed. Poor dear had only just arrived in London and was meant to marry The Marquess of Kalvin, but now that he was off the market, so to speak, she was surrounded by young lords eager to take his place.

Lady Olivia smiled and Felicity gave her a little wave.

“Miss McGovern,” Albright said. And then, in a harder tone, “Felicity!”

She drew her attention back to him. “Really, Lord Albright. You act as if it’s your right to know all that I know and yet you are so very loath to share your own knowledge.”

“That’s because it is not fit for a lady.”

“And here we must agree to disagree,” she said.

Another heavy silence fell, and this time she was the one whose patience was waning.

Her next words slipped out with more urgency and pleading than intended. “I could help you.”

He stiffened. “I do not see how.”

“Don’t you?” She didn’t try to hide her disdain. It was one thing to try and protect her, but she’d never enjoyed being patronized. “You do not see how a young heiress and the niece to his prospective business partner might be useful in some way?”

“Useful,” he repeated. A muscle in his jaw ticked and his warm brown eyes grew so much warmer. Goodness, he could burn a girl with a look that scalding. “I do not see how a gentleman could use a young lady at all and still call himself a gentleman. I do not need your help, Miss McGovern, and I thought I’d made it clear I do not want it.”

Her breath caught as his words struck their mark.

He couldn’t even pretend that she might have some use. Her chest felt empty and her lungs struggled to work. But she recovered quickly. Of course she did. His opinion of her was one she was well used to. There was no reason it should hurt her.

“I see.” She forced a smile. “Very well.”

His eyes darted between hers, and his expression clouded with...concern? Or perhaps a hint of guilt?

“I understand,” she added, smiling even brighter.

“Do you?”

Of course she did. Despite the way he’d twisted her words, he couldn’t have made himself more clear. Because she was a silly young lady, she had no use.

It was an opinion many shared. Especially her parents. It really shouldn't be so disappointing that he felt the same.

And yet, she had to swallow hard before she continued. "Mr. Everson approached my uncle in regards to a business proposal. It seems Everson is starting a trading company and is looking for investors."

Albright seemed a little stunned. Was it this news that so surprised him or the fact that she'd readily shared it? "I..." He cleared his throat. "Thank you."

She nodded, but she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. "My friends will be wondering what we're discussing if we stay here much longer." She flashed him her best, most dazzling smile. "If you'll excuse me..."

He started to respond, but she did not linger to hear it.

Her friends and Mrs. Bishop watched her rejoin the party with blatant curiosity, but Felicity returned to her seat, reached for some bread, and asked brightly, "What did I miss?"

Dear Meg and Jane rose to the occasion, filling the silence with cheerful chatter and taking the attention away from Felicity. All she had to do was sit there and smile as her heart rate returned to normal.

Once it did, she felt that familiar, reliable stubborn streak rally.

If Lord Albright didn't want her help, that was fine.

She had plans of her own to make. Her teeth clamped down on the bread with more force than necessary. She wouldn't give that dreadful Lord Albright another thought.

But those plans...?

They would absolutely involve the mysterious Mr. Everson.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

4

For a 'small soiree,' the Duke of Carver's drawing room was crammed full of far too many people, by Albright's way of thinking.

Truthfully, Albright wasn't even certain he was right in coming here tonight. Yes, Carver was one of his oldest friends, and it might have been rude to cry off this evening's gathering, but it might have been for the best, all the same.

Felicity would likely be here tonight and he wasn't sure she'd wish to see him.

Oh blast. He wasn't sure he wanted to see her .

And yet, here he was.

"Glad you could make it, Albright." Carver greeted him with a grin. Meg was tucked against his side and the two seemed happy as could be playing host to their friends.

There was no question those two were a love match, and he suspected they were both counting the days until their wedding just like Marlin and Jane.

His friend Rodrick called out to him when he drew deeper into the crowd. He waved to Rodrick and his new wife, Franny, his smile widening as he caught sight of Kal and Ann whispering to each other in a far corner, oblivious to the rest of the party.

Judging by Ann's blush and her smile, she was still more than pleased with her decision.

His gaze kept moving about the room, and he couldn't even pretend that he wasn't looking for Felicity. He owed her his thanks. A better thank you than the one he'd managed the other day.

Her information had been accurate and helpful. He and his cousin had done some digging and it seemed Everson had indeed been making the rounds, calling upon potential investors for his new business. By all accounts, it seemed to be a legitimate endeavor.

But Albright didn't trust it. It was too neat to be a coincidence. His cousin had gotten word that there was trouble brewing amongst the smugglers under Everson's management. It had indeed grown too big, and now there were some who wished to take control, and others who wanted to strike out on their own.

It was all hearsay, of course, but if it was true...

Between a potential uprising and the crown closing in, it would be safe to assume Everson was looking for a means of escape. But was he truly planning to hide behind a legitimate business...

Or was he hatching a plan to flee?

Albright stopped in the doorway to a crowded parlor. With a quick glance it was clear Felicity was not there, and so he turned right back around, frustration urging him on.

And he also owed Felicity an apology, of that much he was clear. The problem was, he wasn't entirely sure what he was apologizing for.

He shouldn't feel guilty for trying to keep her safe.

But he couldn't stop thinking about that flicker of hurt he'd seen in her eyes. Or the

way she'd almost...shut down after that.

Oh, she'd been pleasant. Too pleasant. Her bright smile had been haunting his thoughts for days now.

There'd been something false about it. And that spark he'd come to know her by had gone away. One moment he'd been talking to this vibrant, sparkling, magnetic young lady and the next...

The lights had gone out.

They'd still been standing there talking, but the warmth and the glow that was so very Felicity had left. And Albright had...

Well, he'd missed it. The absence had left him cold and uncertain, and that was not a feeling was used to.

"Looking for someone?" Carver asked.

He and Meg had approached from behind, and Albright turned with a start. He opened his mouth to say no, but the truth slipped out. "Miss McGovern," he said.

"Ah." Carver nodded. "Yes, I saw her arrive earlier."

"She arrived with Lord Marlin, Jane, and Mr. Everson," Meg said.

Meg was arching her neck trying to find Felicity so she did not see the way Albright froze, and then frowned. "She arrived with Mr. Everson?"

"Yes." Meg met his gaze, and her eyes widened in surprise at whatever she saw there.

"Well, in their party."

Carver studied him. “Is everything all right?”

He nodded, but... No. It wasn't. What was she up to?

Not for the first time he questioned his logic in not telling Marlin outright that he suspected his friend. But, in Albright's defense, he hadn't known Marlin well enough to say for certain if he could be trusted. It had seemed safer to keep his suspicions to himself.

Of late, he was beginning to think he should have trusted him. And right here and now he cursed himself for not warning all of his friends that they may very well have a snake in their midst.

“Where did they go?” he asked.

“Mmm,” Meg sort of hummed with indecision, her brows knitting with worry. “She was just here a moment ago, I'm sure of it.”

“Perhaps they stepped outside for some fresh air,” Carver offered. “It is rather crowded in here.”

Albright headed toward the veranda, ignoring everyone in his path, tension building within him with each step, until he finally burst out onto the veranda to find...

Nothing amiss.

He had to stop and take in a breath as he took in the perfectly ordinary scene before him. Several couples mingled, and among them was Felicity...and Mr. Everson.

She was gazing up at him, and her dimples flashed when she smiled.

Albright's gut twisted for a reason he could not name, and rather than be relieved that she was unharmed, he found himself irrationally angry with her.

What was she thinking coming out here by herself? And with Everson, of all people? Yes, fine, there were others around, and it wasn't exactly indecent, except...

Well, it wasn't exactly decent either, now was it? Not when she knew full well that Mr. Everson was under suspicion.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides as he moved toward her, all the while reluctantly admitting to himself that she'd made a valid point the other day. Mr. Everson would likely take an interest in her—what man wouldn't? And keeping her in the dark would not help to protect her from that.

He may have refused to tell her anything about his suspicions regarding Mr. Everson. But even so, she knew. She was no fool, and he had no doubt that whatever she was up to out here tonight, it was part of her plan.

He moved swiftly to her side, and stopped just short of touching her, resisting the urge to press a hand to her lower back. For protection, he told himself.

But even as he thought it, he felt the untruth. Protection, yes, but also...possession.

He met Mr. Everson's smiling gaze and his hand flexed at his side. He itched to make a claim on Felicity, and that was...not alright.

Even if it was just to keep her safe, it was this compulsion that startled him. The fact that such a primal feeling was winning out over reason.

"Lord Albright," Everson said. His tone was congenial as ever, but Albright couldn't match his smile.

“Everson,” he bit out.

Blast. What was wrong with him? He’d spent more than a fortnight being perfectly cordial to this man while conducting his investigations and now here, tonight...

He couldn’t so much as unclench his jaw at the sight of the man.

No, the sight of him...with Felicity.

They were standing far too close together and they were both still smiling brightly. As if Albright’s foul mood amused them.

“Lord Albright, are you well?” Felicity’s tone was filled with laughter.

And that knave Everson actually had the nerve to laugh.

“Quite,” Albright managed. Only then did he turn his gaze to Felicity.

Her eyes were dancing with amusement, and her lips were quirked up in a smile that was at once infuriating and...adorable.

He drew in a sharp inhale. No, not adorable. He could not find Miss Felicity McGovern adorable. She was not the sort of lady he ought to be admiring.

If anything, he ought to be irritated with the girl for putting herself in harm’s way.

And he was , blast it all.

A silence fell and the air seemed to grow thick and heavy as Felicity held his gaze. There was no defiance there, and no shame either. But her eyes seemed to lock with his, a whole conversation taking place between them with a simple look.

Until Everson spoke up. “I was just telling Felicity?—”

“Felicity,” Albright interrupted. He shot a dark look in Everson’s direction. “Are you so well acquainted then?”

“Well, that is...” Everson chuckled. “The young lady asked me to use her given name.”

“Indeed, I did,” Felicity said brightly. “We were just discussing Mr. Everson’s newfound friendship with my great uncle. Which of course means that we should be friends. Don’t you agree, Mr. Everson?”

Everson looked positively delighted. And Albright was almost certain he caught a hint of triumph in the younger man’s eyes as he returned her smile. “That is correct, Felicity. It would be my honor to call you friend.”

Albright nearly choked on a surge of anger. The impertinent upstart. First using his friendship with the Earl’s deceased brother to ingratiate himself with Marlin...

And now this.

Now Felicity.

Everyone knew Felicity was an heiress with an enviable dowry, and she’d said herself she’d be next on his list. His gaze darted back to Felicity, looking for...

What? A flicker of disdain at this money hungry social climber? Some hint of fear that he might have ill intentions? He looked for any sign of discontent in her expression, but Felicity seemed pleased as could be.

He took a deep breath and forced some semblance of calm into his tone as he

addressed Everson. “Might I have a word with Miss McGovern?”

Everson looked to Felicity, as if he needed her permission to be left alone with Albright. His jaw tightened. As if he were the threat here.

Felicity gave a gracious nod and a meaningful look around them at the couples gathered about. They wouldn’t be alone, and she was in no danger.

Albright wanted to shout.

Which was...alarming. He prided himself on his even temper. His friends often relied on him to be the voice of reason, the quiet in a storm of quick tempers and loud laughter.

So what was it about Miss Felicity McGovern that made him turn into the storm itself?

“Was there something you wished to discuss, my lord?” she murmured when Everson stepped away.

“Yes, I...” He came to a stop, all at once remembering why he’d meant to seek her out in the first place. “I’d meant to apologize.”

She arched a brow with some wariness at his unapologetic tone. “Oh?”

“Yes. But I’m not entirely sure I feel that urge any longer.”

She pressed her lips together, entirely too amused by his displeasure. “I’m sorry to hear that. I am certain that if the great and charming Lord Albright is capable of anything, it is the most eloquent and charming of apologies.”

“Charming,” he repeated. “You said that twice.”

“Once is not enough when it comes to the charming Lord Albright.”

His huff was meant to be one of disdain, and yet...blast it all! Why was he laughing? She was not amusing; she was a meddlesome little minx. “Would you please stop talking like that?”

“Like what?”

“In the third person, as though I am not even here.”

“Oh, but you are most assuredly here. Why, I am certain everyone is talking about your arrival...” She arched a brow again and the simple gesture said far too much. “And your manners just now.”

He glanced around them, and yes. They were being watched. His jaw worked as he understood her meaning. Carver and Marlin had been curious as to his sudden need to see Felicity the other day. And now he’d come crashing through the party, hunting her down and chasing away another man...

He muttered a curse.

“Precisely,” she said.

He narrowed his eyes. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re enjoying yourself?”

“Because I am.” Her smile held no malice, only laughter. “Come, Albright. You can smile. A little gossip will not harm you. And as for me, it can only help my prospects if word spreads that the great and mighty Lord Albright has a special interest in an odd little thing like me.”

The way she said ‘odd little thing’ had him fighting a laugh. It was the perfect imitation of the gossiping matrons who most likely did call her that.

He held back his mirth but she didn’t hold back with a loud, tinkling laugh. Then she leaned forward to tap his shoulder with her fan. “Now, did you really mean to apologize?”

He rocked back on his heels, considering. “Yes. Until I realized you were up to no good.” He arched his brows. “Again.”

“Mmm. I do tend to make a habit of that, don’t I?”

“You don’t have to sound so pleased,” he said.

“And you don’t have to sound so much like my chaperone.”

His brows drew down. “I do not.”

“You do. All that’s missing are the click clack of knitting needles.”

He frowned. “Well, that is...not good news for me, now is it?”

She sputtered a bit as she tried to swallow a laugh. “Lord Albright, do you know what I think we need to do?”

“I can hardly wait to hear.”

His dry tone earned him a dimpled smile. “I believe we ought to start over.”

He blinked.

“Pretend we’ve only just met,” she clarified.

“I see. Very well.” He gave a short bow. “Lord Albright, at your service.”

Her curtsy was surprisingly elegant and neat. “Miss Felicity McGovern.”

Her smile was so sweet and beguiling, he found himself returning it, a little stunned, really. For a moment it was...nice. Rather like they truly had just met.

He felt like he was seeing her for the first time.

Had she always had such blue eyes? And had her cheekbones always been so high, her brows so delicately arched?

Her hair certainly had never looked so soft and touchable.

It was while he was lost in these foolish thoughts that she said, “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, would you like to know where Everson’s conducting his business?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

5

Lord Albright was ever so much fun to tease.

Felicity adored the way his eyes widened, the way his nostrils flared...

But the best part was the way that muscle in his jaw ticked when he was annoyed. “Felicity, I thought I told you to steer clear of this.”

She sighed. “Just because you don’t believe I can be useful?—”

“Of course you’re useful!”

They both went silent. He wasn’t sure which of them was more shocked by his loud tone.

As if of one mind, they took a moment to smile reassuringly at the other guests surrounding them on this veranda. Then he turned back to her with a hushed tone, “That was what I meant to apologize for. Well, one of the things I—” He cut himself off with an irritated grunt and did the unthinkable—he raked a hand through his hair, mussing his perfectly styled hair.

Oh, but it was delightful watching the always calm Lord Albright come undone.

She supposed that thought made her wicked. But really, it made her itch to watch anyone so well-mannered and controlled. It made her want to act even more impulsively and throw her head back to scream and?—

“Felicity, listen to me and listen good,” Albright said suddenly.

His low gruff tone had her brows arching up.

“I’ve never doubted that you could be useful. Anyone who doubts your clever mind or your determined nature is a blasted fool.”

She felt a smile tugging her lips even as her lungs faltered. Did he know he was being kind? Absurdly so? No one ever said such nice things to her.

And yet, his tone made it sound like he was scolding her.

“But...” She shifted, trying to appear confident even though her voice quivered a bit. “You made it clear you don’t think I can help you?—”

“I don’t want you to help. That’s not the same as thinking you are incapable of helping.”

Again, he was snapping at her in a way that was so unlike Lord Albright. And that was oddly...lovely.

She didn’t know if this bubbling sensation in her chest would lead to laughter or tears so she swallowed hard. “Then will you now accept my assistance in this matter?”

His eyes flashed with a heat that made her heart falter. “You are so very stubborn .”

“Yes,” she agreed. She couldn’t say more because her heart was still racing from that show of emotion.

After a moment of silence, she said, “So? Will you accept?”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do I have a choice?”

She bit her lip and shook her head. But before he could get irritated again, she threw out a peace offering, or the closest she had to one. “I’m not trying to interfere with your investigation, you know.”

He gave her an askance look.

She bit back a smile. “Oh all right, I will admit it’s entertaining to irritate you.”

His sigh was soft and not entirely convincing.

She grew serious, something inside her aching with this desire to be understood...just once. “Lord Albright, I’m not trying to make a mess of your plans or hinder your investigation, I swear it.”

“But you will not step aside and let me handle this on my own,” he finished for her.

“I...I cannot.” She shook her head. “I cannot know that something dangerous is occurring in my midst and not try to help. Something is happening. Something is actually happening, and I could do something that matters—” Even she could hear how desperate she sounded. How pathetic. She exhaled sharply. “I must sound silly to you.”

“You don’t sound silly, but you do sound naive. This is not a game, Felicity.”

“Exactly. So do not ask me to run and hide when I can help.”

“There’s nothing cowardly about staying safe.”

“And there’s nothing foolish about protecting those I love,” she shot back.

He frowned at that.

She tilted her head so she could meet his gaze better as she lowered her voice. “If Everson is so shameless as to run a smuggling ring right under all our noses, what’s to stop him from taking investment money from unsuspecting gentlemen like my uncle and disappearing with it?”

Albright’s eyes grew dangerously hard. “I won’t let that happen.”

But Felicity spoke over him. “If he has half an inkling you suspect him, he must be making a plan to run. The fact that he hasn’t yet tells me that perhaps he has loose ends or cannot access his funds?—”

“You’re leaping to conclusions.”

But she wasn’t wrong. She knew she wasn’t. And he had to know there was at least a chance she was right. She hurried on, her voice little more than a whisper as another couple drew close. “Either way he’s only going to grow more desperate and therefore more dangerous unless we stop him.”

He was silent for too long. And then finally, “You’re far too clever for your own good. Has anyone ever told you that?”

She sighed. “My mother says it all the time.”

“First I sound like your chaperone and now your mother.” He gave a little grunt. “I cannot say I enjoy these comparisons.”

She clasped her hands before her. She was close to getting her way, she could feel it. And some part of her still felt full to bursting after his little speech about her usefulness. “Albright, my uncle could be hurt if Everson is not stopped.”

“Felicity—”

“No, don’t use that tone with me. I know you think little of me, but you must admit I’m right in this, at least.” She planted her hands on her hips before remembering where they were and all the eyes on them. She dropped her arms to her sides but lifted her chin. “And as I mentioned before, he could very well set his sights on me for courtship. Or worse, some other young lady.”

His eyes darkened. “Why is that worse?”

“Because some other young lady might not be able to save herself.”

The side of his mouth hitched up ever so slightly before he squelched it. He tipped his head to the side. “Is that the only reason you want to help? To save your uncle and any other potential victim?”

She hesitated for only a moment before admitting, “No.”

He’d never come around unless she was completely honest.

She sighed. “I also despise boredom. And Albright, I am so very bored.”

At this, his face...contorted. His cheeks sucked in and his eye twitched, and it truly looked rather painful before he finally stopped trying and let out a laugh that had them the center of attention once more.

She smiled at the guests around them. “I don’t see that it’s so amusing,” she murmured. “It’s the truth.”

“And that is why it’s so amusing,” he said. “Your candor is...”

“Shocking?”

“Refreshing,” he finished. And then he added, “On occasion.”

She smiled. He returned it.

“So then, where do we start?” she asked.

He turned to pointedly look upon the crowd. “Not here. Not now.”

“Then where? When?”

His narrowed gaze met hers. “At a place of my choosing when the time is right.”

She hitched her lips to the side as she studied him. “Are you just trying to appease me?”

“I would never.” He said it in such a flat tone, she laughed in response.

“Very well.” She turned and he did as well so they were both facing the rest of the veranda which was rapidly filling with more guests, no doubt because the indoors had become stiflingly hot with all the guests. “So. Tell me more about how useful I am.”

She’d meant it to sound teasing, but to her horror his eyes held a hint of...knowing.

She had to look away from his searching gaze.

But it didn’t work. He shifted so he was facing her once more. And even though she continued to gaze out at the crowd, he gazed upon her.

Fixedly.

Intensely.

She fought the urge to squirm.

“Who has told you that you’re...” He hesitated. “Not useful.”

She peeked up at him and her lips twisted in a wry smile. “I appreciate your attempt to avoid the word ‘useless,’ my lord. Well done.”

“Tell me who.”

Oh dear. His voice was so low and so gruff, she found herself tipping her head back so she could see his expression.

Her eyes widened and her breath caught. Oh dear. His grim expression was rather startling and she shook her head. “No one.”

His stare said he didn’t believe her. A silence stretched and stretched.

Finally she threw her hands up. “Oh all right. One does not need to be told such things, does one? Not when it has been made clear one’s whole life.”

“Mmm. Your family?”

She rolled her eyes. But really, this was too humiliating. And prying. Lord Albright, the most polite man she’d ever met...and he was prying.

“That wasn’t very polite,” she murmured.

But the answer was yes, and she suspected he knew it. After all, he already knew she spent most of her time living with her great uncle. And no doubt he’d heard the

rumors about her dowry and her parents' eagerness to marry her off as quickly as possible.

In their defense, her arrival had been a shock. They'd already had an heir, and a spare, and then another spare for good measure. An unexpected girl later in life couldn't even be called a surprise, just a burden.

Finally, when Felicity thought she couldn't bear it a moment longer, Albright tore his gaze away and shifted at her side, facing the crowd. His arm brushed her shoulder. "Perhaps your family should spend more time with your friends."

His musing tone had her glancing up, curiosity eating at her. "What do you mean?"

He looked down at her and the warmth in his dark eyes caught her by surprise and made her heart falter. "It means, if any member of your family were to spend time with Meg, Jane, or Ann, they'd hear all about how amazing you are. All they do is talk about how grateful they are for you. The way they rave about you, you'd think you're a saint."

She scoffed. "Hardly."

His crooked smile made a crease form at the edge of his mouth. And for some reason, Felicity couldn't look away from it.

"It's true." He glanced meaningfully toward the doors where Meg and Carver had just joined the crowd on the veranda. "And I'm sure they'd be all too happy to tell you themselves if they knew you needed to hear it."

She huffed and looked away. "I don't need to hear anything."

No one was convinced by her argument. Not even her.

“But...” She fidgeted with her fan. “Thank you, all the same.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment.

“Now then.” She turned to face him, her smile bright. “When exactly will the time be right? A lady cannot be expected to wait forever, you know.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

6

This was odd. Albright caught himself staring at Felicity and tore his gaze away.

Odd and...good.

This was odd because it was good.

He was actually enjoying himself with Felicity and that...was bad.

Wasn't it?

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw as Carver and Meg joined them, all smiles and laughter just like Felicity. But his own levity began to fade as he realized he'd all but made a scene earlier. And he'd certainly made it clear to Everson that he didn't like the man.

Oh yes, the more time passed, the more Albright began to look upon his own behavior this evening in horror. He'd...forgotten himself.

He'd forgotten his mission. And that was very, very bad.

"So?" Felicity's breath was warm against his cheek as she went up on her toes to speak quietly in his ear when the others were distracted.

He swallowed hard when he looked down to see her smiling up at him, her eyes alight with eagerness.

“Will you tell me now?”

She'd asked every time they'd had a moment of relative privacy.

“No.” He said it instantly and not without a smile. Her asking, his refusals...

It had turned into a sort of game between them. The whole night had started to feel this way. He kept finding himself laughing or falling into conversations that were as ridiculous as they were entertaining.

This time, Felicity gave him a good natured shrug and switched the topic. “But if I were to become a pirate,” Felicity said, picking up a former conversation where she'd left off.

“Are we still on about pirates?” he asked. But he couldn't hide his amusement.

Her choice of conversation topics was nothing short of ridiculous. But he couldn't recall the last time he'd had so much fun.

The young lady was the very worst sort of distraction. He had an investigation to pursue, not to mention a life to lead, and friends to meet. And yet he couldn't bring himself to walk away from the peculiar girl beside him.

He told himself he stayed at her side solely because he was trying to keep her out of trouble. Who knew what harm she could find if left to her own devices?

The thought was sobering and made him feel slightly more at ease as he remained at her side. It wasn't until she departed the gathering that Albright realized Everson had left too.

And he hadn't even noticed.

He thrust a hand through his hair and cursed under his breath. How in blazes had he let himself be so distracted?

“You alright there, old chap?” Rodrick called over to him.

He nodded to his friend, and then realized that his friends were very nearly the only ones left. “Would you mind a word when the other guests have departed?”

“Of course.” Rodrick frowned. “Is something the matter?”

“I’ll explain later. But could you tell the others I’d like a word?”

It seemed to take forever, but eventually the party ended and he had an opportunity to speak candidly with his friends. It was a conversation he should have had with them a while ago, but it took seeing Everson with Felicity to help him see that.

In short order he filled them in, starting with his cousin’s request and what Jane and Marlin had discovered, and ending with his suspicions regarding Everson.

Carver, Kal, and Rodrick stared at him in surprise when he was finished.

Marlin had left with his bride-to-be, and Albright couldn’t help but think it would be best if he spoke to Marlin separately. He’d taken the news of his brother’s suspected crimes in stride, but Everson had been a friend to him since his brother’s death, and finding out he was behind this sort of betrayal wouldn’t be easy. But for now...

“I knew I didn’t like that man,” Kal said.

He and Albright shared a small smile. Kal hadn’t liked him because Everson had set his sights on Ann, but his instincts had proven correct.

“And now he’s after Miss McGovern?” Rodrick said, his brow furrowed.

Albright tipped his head to the side as he considered this. “Yes. Although, I think it’s safe to say Felicity hasn’t exactly been discouraging him either.”

Carver chuckled. “So little Felicity has taken it upon herself to catch the thief herself, eh?”

Albright was torn between an answering laugh and a huff of annoyance. She wasn’t little. Well, she was as in stature. But personality? One could never call her little. And while he’d accepted that she’d thrust herself into this investigation, he still couldn’t find it amusing.

“That’s why I’m telling you all this,” he said. “I’d like to think I can handle it on my own. But now that Felicity is involved, I wanted to make you all aware of the danger.”

“We’ll look out for her,” Carver said.

Kal’s expression was somber. “Of course we will.”

Rodrick was nodding. “We’ll make sure Felicity is safe...and whatever else you ask of us.”

Something loosened a bit in Albright’s chest. He still didn’t enjoy the thought of Felicity at risk, but he was somewhat reassured knowing his friends would be looking after her as well.

“You know, much as I dislike the notion of involving a young lady,” Kal started. “And particularly Ann’s dear friend...”

Carver was already nodding. “If she insists on being involved, she really could be an asst, you know.”

Albright’s chest grew tight all over again. He knew this. But he could not allow it.

“We’d all be keeping an eye on her, of course,” Rodrick was quick to add. “But if she could gain his confidence...”

Kal winced. “If he really is desperate for money then Felicity does make a good decoy.”

Albright had been fighting a headache all night, and now his temples began to throb.

He understood their reasoning. And hers, for that matter. If he truly wished to bring this investigation to an end, he’d take her up on her offer. He’d use her and her fortune to lure him in.

But the very idea was so off putting it made him feel ill.

All he could picture was Felicity in danger. And just as vile, Felicity flirting with Everson, letting him see her smiles and hear her laughter.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “There must be another way. But for now she has agreed to help me in her own way.” He told them of Everson’s business proposal to her uncle, and how she’d managed to find out where he was conducting his business. Apparently he’d purchased a warehouse down by the docks. He’d offered to give her great uncle a tour.

Though whether this was part of his scheme to look legitimate remained to be seen.

Carver whistled low. “Don’t let the Home Office find out about Felicity; she may just

be their latest recruit.”

Albright smiled at the jest, but his heart slammed in his chest.

He needed to find her alone to speak to her, and while he was at it, perhaps he could finally make her see reason.

His mind filled with the image of her gleaming eyes and bright smile when she spoke of running away to become a pirate. She was only teasing, of course.

He hoped.

His lips twitched. And the sound that escaped could have been a laugh or a grunt of exasperation...

Or perhaps it was a little of both.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

7

Felicity typically welcomed surprises, but in this case, a little warning might have helped her composure.

“I don’t...” Her mouth flapped open and shut. “I don’t understand.”

Her mother was already setting down her teacup and motioning to her maid to gather her things.

She’d been in Felicity’s great uncle’s home for all of ten minutes, but she’d said what she’d come to say and apparently had no time to dally over an actual conversation.

Panic gripped Felicity by the throat. “But, I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

Her mother paused, her brows arching in surprise. “I thought I’d made myself clear. Your father has found a husband for you.”

“I—what?! But who?”

“Lord Bargedale.” Her mother huffed with impatience. “Really, Felicity, you must learn to listen better.”

Felicity’s mouth flapped again and she felt like a fish with her bulging eyes and gaping lips.

She had listened. She just hadn’t believed what she’d heard.

“But Lord Bargedale...”

Is ancient. And mean.

And old enough to be my grandfather.

And also...just plain mean!

Her mother didn't pause to wait for Felicity to speak. And Felicity didn't bother finishing. Her mother likely knew all these things, as did her father.

Pointing out his flaws would only make her mother annoyed and impatient. So Felicity drew in a deep breath and tried to think.

Be reasonable, that was what her mother always said.

Reasonable. She could do that. “Mother, we'd agreed that I'd have this Season to make a match?—”

“And how has that been going, hmm?” Her mother's pinched lips held the answer.

Not good. Not good at all.

Her mother sighed, bustling about to leave as she spoke. “Do you think your father and I haven't been paying attention? I have friends everywhere, dear, and what we've heard is most discouraging.”

“But—”

“All of your friends have found a match. Why, the eligible men of the ton are being snatched up quicker than a blink.” She tsked, not even looking at Felicity as she

donned her wrap. “And what have you done? Sit in a corner? Surround yourself with wallflowers and outcasts as usual?”

Her mother headed to the door. “Your father thought it might help your stubborn willfulness if we gave you a say. I told him it was a silly plan from the start. Now look at you. All of your friends have done as they were told, and you are the last woman standing.”

“The Season is still well underway,” Felicity started.

She went unheard. “And now Lady Olivia has come to town. Do you really believe you can stand a chance when there’s competition like that around?”

“We’re not competition,” Felicity said. But she barely heard herself, her voice was so small.

This was a point on which they’d never agree. Her mother saw all the women of their acquaintance as either a tactical ally or the enemy. Felicity wasn’t sure her mother actually understood what a ‘friend’ truly was.

“No, you are not competition for her,” her mother clarified. “You should be grateful your father found someone willing to take you on.”

“I—” Felicity couldn’t continue. How could she argue that? Was she really so difficult?

She frowned. Possibly.

“But Mother?—”

“No arguing. If you’d just done as you were told for once, you might have more say

in the matter. But as usual, you were headstrong and willful?—”

“I wasn’t. I fully planned on...”

But her words trailed off as she watched her mother walk out the door without so much as a goodbye.

Later that evening, she was still quiet as she fussed with her dinner. She pushed the food around but could not bring herself to eat it.

“Is something the matter?” Uncle Edward’s tone was as short as ever.

A diplomat he would never be.

The thought made her smile despite her heavy heart. “Nothing important, Uncle.”

“Mmph.”

She went back to pushing her food around on the plate, biding her time until dinner was over and she could escape.

Fresh air, that was what she needed.

Fresh air and moonlight. And perhaps an adventure. Just a small one. She wouldn’t stray far from home.

Her brows knit. How far was Everson’s home?

The thought of Albright’s annoyance if he even knew she was even thinking about spying on Everson had another smile tugging at her lips.

He truly was the most amusing to annoy. He was easy to rile and yet he seemed amused as well. And all the more irritated because he was amused.

She finally took a bite of her food and chewed slowly. Yes, Albright was surprisingly fun to tease. Surprisingly fun...period.

She'd overlooked him at the start of the Season. She'd seen his easy smile and his calm demeanor and had mistaken him for...

Well, boring, she supposed. But while he was indeed calm, she couldn't see him now without thinking of that Latin phrase her old tutor had made her memorize: *altissima quaeque flumina minimo sono labi*.

Or, the much easier to remember English translation— still waters run deep .

She was lost in thought as she chewed her next bite. And indeed, these thoughts were a most welcome distraction from the impending engagement that had kept her mind churning these last few hours.

A little later, however, her Uncle Edward broke the silence at the dinner table again. "Do you know what I've always liked about you, Felicity?"

Her head shot up in surprise. "What's that, Uncle?"

"How self sufficient you are," he said.

She blinked. On one hand, this much was clear. She suspected the only reason he'd allowed her parents to keep foisting her on him and his household every year to "better prepare her for society" was aided by the fact that she'd required little by way of paternal affection from the man.

He'd hired servants to look after her and had endured relentless questions over dinner now and again, but for the most part, he'd been able to give her some freedom and maintained his in turn.

It had worked out well for both of them.

She cleared her throat, trying to shake off this feeling of hurt at his words. It wasn't as though she misunderstood their relationship, but she'd thought he'd started to think of her as...

Well, maybe a young friend if not a dear niece? After all, he said himself she was the only one of his acquaintance who could best him at chess. And just yesterday she'd made him laugh over breakfast. Didn't that count for something?

She forced a smile. "I try my best to inconvenience you as little as possible, Uncle. I'm glad you approve."

He stopped eating and gaped at her. Then he let out a guffaw and slapped his knee.

Felicity stared. Her stern uncle actually slapped his knee from amusement.

"Did I...Did I say something amusing?"

He swiped at his eyes. "Inconvenience me," he murmured through laughter. "My dear, you are as inconvenient as it gets." He arched his brows. "Do you know how many chaperones and governesses I've had to hire over the years? Not one of them could keep up with your mischief."

Her cheeks burned. Ah. So...perhaps she hadn't been succeeding as well as she'd thought. She wet her lips, trying to form an apology, but he continued on.

“No, no. What I meant was, I’ve always admired your independent spirit.” He paused with his knife in the air as if to make his point. “Even if it did have its downsides.”

She relaxed a little. “Thank you for putting up with all my mischief, Uncle. I likely don’t say that often enough.”

He used his knife to wave away her thanks. “It’s for the best. As I always tell your parents, you keep me young.”

Her eyes widened. Did he say that? Truly? No one had ever told her this.

“Besides...” He dug into his food again. “Your parents wouldn’t know what to do with you.” His gaze met hers and it sparkled with mirth. “It’s difficult when the child is more clever than the parents, you know. It’s a recipe for trouble.”

Her lips parted. He hadn’t just said...

Had he?!

His wink was so quick she nearly missed it. “Now. My point is, you’ve never been one to sit and sulk when you don’t get your way. You’re a doer. An action taker. You’re decisive and stubborn.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing.” Her mind had drifted back to Albright. To the heat in his eyes when he’d called her stubborn. The butterflies in her belly still fluttered whenever she thought of that moment. The sight of his cool, calm demeanor giving way to such...such...

Passion, she supposed. It seemed so unfamiliar coming from him. So out of place. And yet it had stirred something inside of her that was still unsettled, even now.

She looked down at her plate with a sigh.

Albright certainly didn't seem to think her stubbornness was a good thing.

Her uncle, meanwhile, seemed to be mulling over her words.

"Good is a relative term," he finally said.

Felicity blinked. "Pardon?"

He set down his utensil and when her uncle looked at her, she realized he was actually seeing her, unlike her mother who'd avoided looking at her or had stared straight through her.

"Your being here in my home, for example." He lifted his wine glass. "That is good for me."

Felicity pressed her lips together. She was not one to cry like a ninny even when she hurt herself. She certainly wouldn't succumb now. But her chest ached at the kind sentiment.

Her uncle leaned back in his chair. "Your mother's visit today?" He made a face as if he'd smelled something foul. Felicity smothered a giggle. "That was...not good for me. She interrupted my day and made my housekeeper cry."

Felicity's urge to laugh died, her eyes widened. "No."

Not old, terrifying Mrs. Marks.

He nodded solemnly. "Yes."

“I’m sorry?—”

“Do not apologize for others,” he snapped.

Felicity shut her mouth. She was used to his harsh tone, though, so the bark washed right over her.

“My point is that what I value is different than what your mother values.” He picked up his knife and stabbed his meat. “It is your task to figure out what it is that you value.”

Her lips parted, but she found herself speechless. It did not take a genius to realize he knew about her mother’s news.

But what did he expect her to do about it?

Be stubborn , a little voice whispered. Be brave.

But how?

She nibbled on her lower lip, food forgotten again as she turned over her uncle’s words. She didn’t know what she’d do.

But she’d do something. She’d do anything. Because she might not be certain what it was she valued, as her uncle put it. Nor even what she thought was good.

But she did know one thing. She desperately wanted the freedom to figure it out.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

8

Albright had no idea what he was doing.

He slipped onto Felicity's property like a blasted burglar in the night, all the while cursing under his breath.

He was being ridiculous.

He wasn't even certain why he was here. Creeping along the shadows, he shook his head at his own foolishness.

And yet...here he was.

He picked his way over to Felicity's climbing tree, the slip of parchment in hand. He could have just sent a messenger, for heaven's sake. And during broad daylight.

But no. He frowned. He'd decided to come himself. To act like a spy and leave a hidden message where Felicity might find it, and he couldn't even say why he was doing such a ridiculous thing.

"You're back."

Felicity. The voice came from overhead, and his body reacted instantly. His heart slammed and his blood seemed to heat in his veins. But most of all, it was this strange, light sensation that stole over him that made him curse.

This was why he'd come. The truth of it was as overwhelming as it was unwelcome.

He paused a moment more to collect himself before tipping his head back. And...there. Perched on the lowest limb, Felicity smiled down at him. Her smile was brighter than the stars, and her eyes seemed to glimmer with moonlight.

His heart gave another sharp kick to his ribs. He had to swallow hard before he could speak. "Do you make a habit of spending time up there?"

"Yes." Her tone was light, like she was about to laugh at any moment. "You don't seem surprised to see me."

She was keeping her voice low and soft so they wouldn't be caught out here, and the dulcet tones wrapped around him like a blanket. Something inside him eased and thawed as if he'd just come in after a long winter's journey and was finally basking before a fire.

He looked away. Stuff and nonsense. Felicity was a young lady, not a fire. And he was a gentleman. With a job to do, no less. He cleared his throat, readying himself to speak, but before he could— whoosh!

Felicity dropped to the ground right in front of him.

Again.

But this time he was prepared for it, and he found himself reaching out to help her, his hands gripping her arms to steady her. She stumbled forward a bit, and soon he was clutching her to his chest...

Which was how he found himself holding Miss Felicity McGovern.

In his arms.

In the moonlight.

His lungs stopped working entirely as she laughed up at him. Her hands were pressed to his chest and surely she could feel what her nearness did to him.

But she simply took a step back and performed a funny little curtsy. “Thank you, my lord.”

He tried to say an equally unfazed ‘you’re welcome’ but it came out as an incoherent grunt.

After a moment of silence, her lips quirked up in a mischievous little grin that made her dimples flash. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t invite you inside for tea...”

Oh. Right. He gave his head a little shake as he held up the parchment. “I came to give you this.”

She took it, read it, and cocked her head to the side. “A meeting time and place. How mysterious.”

“Yes, well, I never did get a chance to speak with you about what we know about Everson, nor how much you have learned.”

Ugh. For a man renowned for his charming manners, he sounded like a right prig.

“You sound like my old tutor,” she said.

He huffed. “I do, don’t I?”

His admission delighted her and her grin dazzled him.

He cleared his throat. "Apologies, I'm not accustomed to this sort of rendezvous. I'm not entirely sure what etiquette dictates."

She feigned shock. "You mean you do not make a habit out of stealing into young ladies' gardens at midnight?"

"Surprisingly no."

They shared a smile this time, and the air felt significantly warmer than when he'd first arrived. He gestured to the limb above. "What were you doing up there?"

She hesitated, and for a moment her smile waned. But she recovered quickly. "Enjoying the moonlight and summer breeze. Why were you not shocked to find me here?"

"Because it is an evening filled with moonlight and a summer breeze," he shot back.

His heart seemed to swell at her delighted laughter.

"Well played," she murmured.

She leaned against the tree trunk. "Now then." She held up the parchment. "Shall we exchange information like proper allies?"

No. Everson was the last thing he wished to discuss. But it was why he was here, wasn't it?

For a little while they passed the time with business. They shared their information, and by the end he was well and truly impressed by how much she'd managed to

discover.

“It pays to be notoriously curious,” she said when he said as much. “When you ask pointed questions about topics that are not your concern, no one suspects a thing.”

Her smile was too unapologetic and charming not to share. “Very useful,” he agreed.

But soon enough the conversation shifted. It drifted. Seamlessly and without effort, he found himself following her on a winding conversational path.

Or maybe she followed him. He had no idea how much time passed or how the words kept flowing, but he could have happily kept it going all night long.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, he had no sense of right and wrong any longer—the sound of one of the townhome’s side doors opening and closing brought a swift end to their conversation.

Felicity moved first. She grabbed his shirt and tugged him with her as she dove behind the tree trunk. Holding him as she was, he found himself pressed against her.

Or rather, he had her pressed against the tree.

And he couldn’t move. His heart thudded painfully and his senses became so acutely attuned to her, he nearly forgot they could be caught.

But her eyes were wide with fear so he moved in even closer, and she gripped his shirt even tighter. They fell silent but their eyes locked, and Albright could have sworn they held entire conversations as they waited for...something. Anything.

Finally they heard a low voice and then a high giggle. Some whispering followed before they heard the male voice call out a farewell to his lover.

The door clicked shut once more, and Albright...didn't move.

Felicity's breaths were coming in short bursts and this close he could feel the warmth of her skin.

"I..." He started and stopped.

Her lips quirked up. "I think the danger has passed."

"Yes."

She'd said what he'd meant to say. It's all clear. We're out of danger.

And he could move. But he...really did not want to move. And she seemed in no hurry to push him away.

"It's a good thing we weren't caught," she whispered.

"Yes." Wonderful. He was only capable of saying one word, it seemed.

"Well, it was good for you," she added.

He had to blink a few times and then he finally backed up a step. "Pardon?"

Her smile returned, but there was something off about it. An edge he did not care for.

"If we'd been caught," she said. "I'd have been ruined."

"No," he said quickly. His brows came down as he took another step back. Did she really think that little of him? "I would have done right by you."

Her smile faltered a bit, and when it flickered back to life, he got the sense that she

was trying not to cry.

“Felicity?” He reached a hand out and touched her cheek.

She pulled away. “I’m all right. Do not mind me. I’m being silly, that’s all.” She looked around as if only now realizing that she was still alone, outside, in the dark... “It’d be best if I go inside.”

He wasn’t entirely certain what had caused this shift in her, but he suspected it had to do with the thought of being caught. Did she really think he’d leave her to face the consequences on her own?

“I would have done right by you, Felicity,” he said again. “Your reputation is no trivial matter. I’d?—”

“Yes, I know.” She stared up at him for a long moment. “You would have married Ann.”

He frowned. What did Ann have to do with anything?

An uneasiness filled his stomach at the mention of her friend. Not that he missed her or felt regret or guilt, no...

It was just that Ann was the type of woman he’d thought he’d marry if he were to marry again. Someone soft spoken and compatible. Someone who would be a friend...

And only ever a friend.

Felicity’s eyes searched his. “So you’re not opposed to marriage, then. One might think you were.”

A pang of alarm shot through him as he watched Felicity's eyes grow feverish.

Whatever had transpired between them tonight, it had not been friendship.

Not for him, at least. This was not the easy camaraderie he was looking for. This was not the placid, even-keeled partnership he wanted.

But Felicity was moving closer, her hands once more on his shirt and a smile on her lips that made him uncertain.

She made him uncertain.

"Some thought you'd never marry again, because you were so in love..."

Her words came in a rush so quickly he couldn't keep up.

"But you're not looking for love now, are you? That's what Ann said..."

He took a deep breath and tried to focus. But the word 'love' coming from Felicity's lips...

It did something to him. Whatever it was...it wasn't good. Something inside him that had been held tightly together began to unravel. The neat stitching that had kept him upright and calm was fraying at the edges the more she spoke.

"So it had me thinking...." Her tone was light and her gaze bright. "Perhaps you should marry me then."

His lungs faltered and his gut turned. The whole world went topsy turvey. His heart went wild at the thought of it, but the rest of him...

It froze.

Hardened.

The ease and warmth he'd been reveling in disappeared so quickly, it nearly gutted him.

He barely recognized his own voice as he gritted out. "I beg your pardon?"

Mistake! A voice in the back of Felicity's head was shouting the word over and over as she watched Albright transform right in front of her eyes.

Mistake, mistake, mistake!

What had she been thinking?

She hadn't. She hadn't used her brain at all. She'd gotten swept away by the moment. A bolt of blasted hope had hit her square between the eyes, sure as lightning.

But now, seeing this dark hardness in his eyes—so unfamiliar, so cold—she made her smile even brighter and forced a laugh. “Well, you mustn't look as though I've just asked you to commit a crime.”

Her heart was aching, but she laughed again. She was terribly good at laughing in the face of pain, and right now that skill was a godsend. “Really, Albright. So serious.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, and Felicity felt as though she were talking to a stranger. “Marriage is a serious matter.”

It started to make sense then, and that hope she'd felt disappeared, snuffed out like a candle in the wind. It wasn't disappointment that made her stomach fall to her feet. It was something that made no sense.

It was something so much worse.

It was no longer about what she wanted, but about Albright. About what he wanted. Who he wanted...and why. She swallowed hard, and some distant part of her marveled at the way her smile stayed true.

His jaw worked and she would have taken his heated anger any day over the coldness in his eyes as he said, "Marriage is nothing to make light of, Miss McGovern."

She felt so very small. "No, of course you're right. Forgive me."

He seemed to be looking right through her. Maybe he was seeing Ann, the woman he'd actually wished to marry. Or no...his wife. The woman he'd sworn his heart to.

The woman who'd have his heart forevermore.

She swallowed a thick lump. What would it be like to be loved like that? To know that even after you passed, you lived on in someone's heart?

No, not just someone's heart, this man's heart. A man who was so kind and good and loyal and true.

And he believed she'd just made a mockery of that devotion.

The urge to cry came on so quickly, it shocked her. She did not cry.

She shifted away from the tree, itching to run away. But she also did not run. Ever.

And yet here she was, on the verge of tears, and looking for a chance to flee.

She swallowed hard and shifted away once more. "I do apologize for making light of such a serious topic." Her voice sounded stilted to her own ears, but she forced herself to continue. "Please, accept my apologies. And..." She held up the parchment

that had been all but forgotten this past hour during their conversation. “And thank you for including me in your investigation.”

“Felicity,” he started, his voice a low rumble.

But she didn’t want to hear any lectures on the topic of marriage, and she couldn’t bear to hear him expound upon all the reasons he would not wish to marry her, in particular.

He did not love her, and he couldn’t imagine ever loving her. That much was clear.

She had to clear her throat to continue. “If you’ll excuse me, I should go. We came close to disaster just now and I should not wish to tempt fate by staying out here any longer.”

He made a move in her direction, but she turned and fled before he could stop her to say...what?

She didn’t know. She didn’t care. Anything he said now would only make her feel worse.

She slipped into the house and padded toward her room, navigating the dark hallways with ease.

It seemed to her in this moment that she was forever creeping about in the dark. Always spying on others or learning to go undetected so she might have her freedom.

Perhaps she’d missed her calling. A wry smile curved her lips as she headed up the stairs. She swiped away a tear as she hitched up her skirts and deftly avoided the creaking stairs that would give her away.

She'd always suspected she'd been born to the wrong family and the wrong life. A gently bred young lady? Ha! She'd never fit that role. And the wife of a handsome young gentleman was not for her either. Just look at Albright's horrified reaction.

But wife to a surly old brute like Bargedale?

She stilled on the steps as her stomach dipped and weaved with dread.

No. She lifted her chin and continued her climb. That was not for her either.

She would find a way to avoid that fate. By the time she reached her chambers and slipped inside, resolve had filled that empty space in her chest, and determination washed away the last of her tears.

She lay awake for hours as her thoughts spun and her mind readjusted to this new fact.

She would not marry Bargedale. No matter what she must do. No matter the consequences. She'd find another future, a different way forward, even if it meant she was disowned and an outcast.

But even as sleep finally claimed her, she had not settled on a plan.

How could she avoid such a fate?

And, most importantly, how could she find her freedom instead?

Days later she was no closer to a plan, though she had the overwhelming sense that it was coming together. Like a jigsaw puzzle scattered on the floor, all of the pieces were there just waiting to be fitted together.

Everson. His devious plans. Her great uncle who needed her protection from Everson—even if he did not know it.

Albright.

No, she gave her head a shake. Albright had no part in her plans. She refused to think of him any longer. He did not care for her, and while she might care for him, it was her future at stake. She couldn't waste time worrying about him. He did not want her, let alone need her.

“Felicity?” Meg’s voice called her out of her wandering thoughts.

Felicity blinked and realized belatedly that Meg, Jane, and Ann were all staring at her.

She smiled. “My apologies. You’ve caught me daydreaming. Did you ask me something?”

The others shared a look that held more concern than she could bear. So she forced her smile even wider. “Come now, I may be distracted, but there’s no need to fret.” She flounced down on her great uncle’s settee beside Jane and patted her knee reassuringly. “Now, what did I miss?”

“Felicity,” Ann started slowly. “Is there anything...amiss?”

Felicity didn’t let her smile falter. “Why would there be anything amiss?”

Meg frowned. “Have you been unwell? Carver said that Albright tried to visit and was turned away because you were not feeling well.”

“Ah.” Felicity laughed. “Forgive me for making you worry. I simply was not up for

company. Particularly not Albright.” She shook her head. “He is kind enough, undoubtedly, but I cannot bear too much time in his company, I’m afraid.”

The words rang true—because they were true—and Felicity took some pride in the fact that she’d thus far managed to avoid lying to her friends. She truly disliked lying, and particularly to those she loved.

Jane’s brows furrowed. “I thought you and Albright were working together to catch Everson. Was that not what you wished for?”

“Indeed. However, I believe Albright and I have different ideas on how such a task ought to be accomplished.”

There. She clasped her hands in her lap with a smug smile. She’d done it again. Yes, they shared a desire to see justice served, but she could not imagine their tactics would be the same.

Albright was so careful. So patient. That was not her at all. Felicity sniffed and gave a sharp nod. No, indeed. It was likely for the best he’d been so horrified at the thought of marriage. Why, they wouldn’t get on at all.

He was likely even now watching Everson, waiting patiently for him to fleece the ton and take off for parts unknown so he’d have the evidence necessary to arrest him.

If it were up to her...

Her smile faltered. If it were up to her, what would she do?

A nagging sensation was tugging at her as it had been for the last two days since her awful encounter with Albright. And it was back now in full force, that feeling like it all connected. As though this puzzle could be completed if she just rearranged the

pieces. Perhaps looked at it all from a different angle...

She tilted her head to the side, her gaze distant as if she might actually see the moving pieces if she stared long enough.

Meg cleared her throat. "Felicity? Did Albright...offend you in some way?"

"Kal seems to think he wishes to apologize," Ann added.

Felicity knew they were speaking to her, and she ought to respond. But she was so close to making this connection. And then sweet, quiet Jane spoke up. "Marlin's worried they've put you in too much danger with the Everson matter. I believe he'd like to apologize as well."

Lord Marlin.

Everson.

Felicity getting too close...

Her initial conversations with Albright came back to her all at once, as if a dam was lifted. The reasons she'd argued to be a part of the investigation in the first place. Her own words came back to her.

You do realize that Mr. Everson has of late been more flirtatious than ever with the young debutantes of the ton , do you not? Honestly, I'm surprised I wasn't first on his list.

And then, What's to stop him from taking investment money from unsuspecting gentlemen like my uncle and disappearing with it?

And then her uncle's voice was in her head. You've never been one to sit and sulk when you don't get your way. You're a doer. An action taker.

She shot up off the settee so suddenly, Jane gave a start.

"Felicity?" Ann sounded wary.

"She has that look in her eyes," Meg said. She was talking about Felicity.

"Am I the only one afraid of that look?" Jane asked.

"Definitely not," Ann said.

They were in jest. Mostly. Or...maybe they weren't. Didn't matter. Felicity began to pace the room, aware of her friends' watchful stares all the while.

It was such an odd mix of emotions that filled her as the puzzle pieces fit into place.

Determination. Fear. Excitement. The occasional flicker of dread as she considered all the possible endings.

And yes, perhaps some of that dread had to do with Albright's reaction when he found out.

She stopped pacing to stare out the window at the gray cloudy sky.

She could not worry about Albright's disappointment in her. She owed him nothing.

All that mattered now was saving her uncle and the other unsuspecting marks from Everson's plans—and potentially saving herself in the process.

And this plan she was concocting...it could do both, if she played her cards right. At the very best, it might save her uncle.

The trick was to time it so no one could stop her.

She bit her lip. And by no one, she meant Albright.

“Please talk to us, Felicity,” Meg said.

Felicity turned, her attention fixed on Jane. “Would you relay a message for me, Jane? I need to get word to Lord Marlin...”

Albright was flummoxed. There was no other word for it. But he reached for his cloak even as he tried to sort out why he was being summoned to run out into this wicked storm.

He eyed the uncharacteristically unkempt Lord Marlin in his doorway with a puzzled frown. "I beg your pardon?"

Lord Marlin thrust a hand through his hair, pushing the wet locks out of his way. Again, very uncharacteristic.

Albright couldn't claim to know the Earl well as he'd only just started to spend time with him now that he and his fiancé Jane had become...

Well, infatuated was the only word he could think to describe their mooning state.

But in this short time he'd known the Earl, he'd never seen him look anything but put together nor act anything less than stiff.

And yet, he'd just shown up on Albright's doorstep soaked from the rain, out of breath, and telling him he had to come with him now if he wanted to catch Everson in the act.

"In the act how?" Albright asked for the second time, and for the second time Everson said, "I...don't know exactly. I'll tell you all I do know on the way."

“On the way where?”

He named a warehouse Albright was already familiar with. Albright paused only long enough to call for a footman and give orders to send a message. After that he darted out and followed Marlin, who led the way back to his coach.

Marlin was talking as he walked, but through the wind and the harsh rain, Albright only made out one word, and that word sent fear spiking through his veins and set his body into motion.

Felicity.

He overtook the Earl. “What about Felicity?”

They climbed into the coach and it set off promptly. Marlin, it turned out, truly did not know much. Only that Jane had relayed a message from Felicity and it was frustratingly brief.

If you wish to catch Everson, be at the warehouse. The time and date was today, in...

Albright consulted his pocket watch. In mere minutes.

“What is she planning?” He wasn’t actually asking Marlin. It was clear the Earl was just as in the dark as he was. He was talking to himself and trying his best not to panic. But all he could remember was that look in her eyes as she’d backed away from him the other night.

That look held fear and panic and...

And desperation.

And he'd done nothing to stop her, nothing to calm her. He'd done nothing but stare, lost behind a fiery wall of emotions he'd been unable to conquer.

Not until it was too late, at least.

He'd come back the very next day. And every day after. He'd done his best to talk to her. Because while her proposal had seemed to be in jest, there was more to it than that.

And she deserved to know why he'd acted the way he had. Why he'd been so callous and curt.

But right now all that mattered was getting to Felicity before she got herself hurt. He turned to Marlin as the coach seemed to crawl through the crowded streets of London. "Did Jane know anything more?"

Marlin shook his head with a frown. "She only relayed the message. But she did say Felicity was...out of sorts."

Albright's heart pounded. He hated the idea of Felicity upset, and hated it even more that his boorish demeanor might have something to do with it. "How was she out of sorts? Was she upset? Was she..." His heart twisted. "Was she crying?"

Marlin shook his head. "No, nothing like that. According to Jane, she was...quiet." He said the word slowly, as if trying to make sense of it.

Albright's heart fumbled. "Quiet."

Marlin nodded, his lips thinned. "I personally do not see someone being quiet as cause for alarm?—"

“But it is,” Albright interjected. “It is most definitely cause for alarm when that someone is Felicity.”

“Yes,” Marlin murmured. “That is precisely what Jane said.”

“Did Jane say anything else?” Albright asked.

Marlin hesitated. “Only that she and her friends are worried. Apparently there was a...” Here Marlin paused to wave a hand in front of his face. “A look.”

“A look,” Albright repeated.

If Marlin were a man to fidget, Albright suspected this would be the time for it. Instead he grew even more serious as he repeated. “A look. In her eyes.”

When Albright continued to stare at him, Marlin gave a helpless shrug. “I apologize, that’s all she said. It’s not terribly useful, is it?”

But it was. Albright swallowed hard and nodded. “It is useful. Please give my thanks to Jane when you next see her.”

Unfortunately, he was nearly certain he knew exactly what Jane meant. It was likely a similar look to the one he’d seen in her eyes just before she’d left him by the tree.

And if that was her state when she’d hatched this plan...

His heart felt like it might explode with an all-consuming fear that was horribly familiar. He’d felt it only once before when his wife was on her deathbed and he’d been unable to do anything to help her.

It was a useless feeling. It made him powerless and left his whole body drowning in

dread. And...blast.

He'd told himself he'd never experience it again. That he'd never let himself feel this way.

Finally, the carriage stopped. And while Albright wanted nothing more than to knock down the door and charge in to Felicity's rescue, some logical part of his mind was pointing out that he could make matters worse if he did not handle this carefully.

And so he and Marlin scouted out the building, looking for the best way in...

Assuming Felicity was in there. With Everson.

Albright's every muscle tensed at the thought. What could she have been thinking coming here? And why hadn't she come to him first?

That second thought hurt more than it should.

She hadn't come to him because he'd behaved like a brute. He'd rejected her out of hand and scared her off with his temper, and...

No. Now was not the time. He could apologize later after he was done here.

He and Marlin found a back door propped open in the alley and slipped inside.

Besides, it was possible Felicity wasn't here at all. Perhaps she'd just been too preoccupied to relay the message herself.

He didn't actually believe this, but it was his best attempt at calming this sickening fear.

Fear that Felicity was in danger—and that he was too late to help.

He clung to the hope that Felicity hadn't actually decided to meet with Everson...

Until he heard her voice. Clear and light, and filled with that passion that was so particular to Felicity. "...I do so appreciate you taking the time to?—"

"Enough with the niceties, Miss McGovern." Everson's voice was clipped and low. Far from the pleasant, amused tone Albright was used to from the cad. "What is it you want?"

Albright cut a sidelong look at Marlin, who was pressed against the hallway wall beside him. Marlin nodded, and they worked their way closer to the open doorway before Albright held up a hand to pause when Felicity spoke again.

"I thought we agreed that you ought to call me Felicity." She sounded perfectly at ease. As though they were taking tea and not sharing a clandestine meeting in the worst neighborhood in London.

Still, the lack of fear in her voice helped to ease the worst of his dread, though his temples still pounded as his pulse raced. But she'd told them to come here...

For a reason, undoubtedly. And while his instincts told him to say hang it all to whatever plan she'd concocted, he found himself pausing and waiting.

Felicity was many things, but she was not simpleminded. If she'd asked them here to listen it was for a reason.

"Well then, Felicity," Everson bit out. "Do you want to tell me how you knew to find me here? Or why I got a letter threatening to expose all my secrets?"

“Threatening?” Felicity repeated as if shocked. “I would never! Come, let us be civil, at the very least, Mr. Everson. I mean you no harm, I swear it.”

“What did I say about pleasantries?” he snapped. “The way you’ve been carrying on, one would think you’re waiting for something.” His voice grew louder and Albright heard footsteps. “What are you waiting for?”

Albright exchanged a look with Marlin. She was killing time waiting for them.

Blast. Now he knew he had to see this through.

“What is it that you want?” Everson continued.

She’d murder him with her bare hands if he ruined whatever scheme she’d dreamed up. Slowly, carefully, he craned his neck so he could see around the corner.

His hands clenched tight at the sight of Felicity so close to him.

Everson loomed over her, but she smiled brightly up at him. “It isn’t about what I want, Mr. Everson.”

Everson blinked, a flicker of confusion in his eyes. “What?”

“You asked what I want, but it’s not about what I want—at least, not entirely.” Her smile widened and Everson seemed momentarily stunned.

Albright knew that feeling well. Between her warm, charming smile and her brazen confidence....

Albright spent half his time in her company trying to figure out up from down. It seemed her particular charm had a similar effect on Everson. Felicity put him out of

his misery. “I was not trying to threaten you with that note, Everson, merely hasten along the conversation.”

Everson scoffed. “What are you on about?”

“I know you’re behind the smuggling ring.” She let that sink in for one moment, and Albright held his breath, ready to lunge for the knave if he took one step toward her.

But then she added, “And so does Albright.”

Marlin looked to Albright with wide eyes as if to say, is this part of the plan ?

Everson started to sputter in indignation. Clearly whatever he thought Felicity knew—it was not this. But Felicity merely waved a hand to dismiss his protests. “There’s likely a great deal more who suspect that you helped the former Earl of Marlin start the smuggling operation?—”

“I had nothing to do with it. It was all him. He was a greedy lord with wasteful habits and?—”

“I do believe that’s enough,” Felicity said softly.

Albright stole a look at Marlin.

Marlin’s expression wasn’t merely stern. He looked...furious.

For a moment Albright’s heart went out to the other man. He’d told Marlin of his suspicions about Everson not long after informing his friends. The Earl had taken it as well as could be expected, but he couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be to learn that the man you considered to be a friend had been using your land to commit crimes right under your nose.

“As I said, I did not come here to threaten you.” Felicity’s laughter was so light and sweet, it took everything in Albright not to rush to her side and hold her close.

Or, better yet, scoop her up into his arms so he could carry her somewhere safe.

“What do you want?” Everson’s voice was a feral growl.

It set Albright on edge but even from where they hid, Albright could hear Felicity’s exasperated sigh. “I told you?—”

“Speak plainly, woman.”

It wasn’t the words or his tone that alerted Albright to a new danger. It was Felicity’s soft gasp. But her voice was still light with laughter when she said, “Really, Everson, a dagger is hardly useful for the civil conversation I came for.”

Marlin was giving Albright a hard stare. He was waiting for Albright to give the signal.

Albright’s heart pounded. He was furious with Felicity for putting him in this position. For making him wait and listen while she was in harm’s way.

But to make a move now would ruin whatever plan she’d concocted—and could get her hurt in the process. His hands clenched and unclenched.

His patience was wearing thin.

And Everson’s was as well, it seemed. “What conversation?”

“Well, a proposition, really,” she mused. “I thought you might prefer it if we were open and honest for this topic. I wanted to ensure we both had all our cards on the

table before I laid out my proposal.”

She was delaying again. Stalling.

She didn’t know he and Marlin were there, and he had no way to tell her she was safe. That whatever ludicrous, reckless plan she’d enacted, he would move heaven and earth to keep her safe.

That he’d always keep her safe.

“What proposal?” Everson snapped.

Albright found himself straining as well, impatient for Felicity to get to the point so he could figure out what sort of trap she had planned.

“Why...” Felicity feigned surprise that he hadn’t guessed. “A proposal of marriage of course.”

This...was a gamble. Felicity's smile was fixed in place, despite Everson's gaping.

Felicity had known this would be a gamble, of course. But it was funny how the risks involved in a gamble seemed so much more frightening in the moment then they did when they were a mere idea.

There was nothing theoretical about the knife he still held in her direction. And the words she'd just uttered had been very, very real.

There was no going back now. And despite all the lectures she'd given herself beforehand, all the ways she'd thought this through...

Her heart still clattered about wildly as thoughts such as what are you doing?! echoed against her skull.

But it was too late now. Ridiculous or not— ridiculous! that same voice shouted, Definitely ridiculous! —she was here now, and it was done.

Everson finally recovered enough to cock his head to the side, fix her with a look of disbelief, and say, "Pardon?"

Fine, it was almost done. She supposed now was the time to explain her reasoning.

But first, she told herself... First she had to get control of this situation once more. Because honestly, there was every chance Marlin didn't take Jane's message

seriously. Or perhaps he forgot...

And even if he had taken the message to Albright, as requested, what if Albright thought it was a joke? Or worse, what if he just didn't care?

And even if they were both frighteningly eager to get here, there were any number of ways they could have been delayed, especially in this weather.

Everson was starting to regain his senses, and he scowled down at her. "I beg your pardon?"

She folded her hands together in front of her and gave the dagger a pointed look.

With a look that was almost embarrassed, Everson hurriedly dropped the dagger to his side. "My apologies, Felicity. I'd thought you'd come here as an adversary."

Some of his debonair manners seemed to have returned. He even gave her a crooked smile that might have made her swoon if she hadn't taken such a dislike to him from the start.

And that was before she'd discovered he was a thief out to bamboozle her great uncle.

"On the contrary," she said, her voice filled with the sort of happy enthusiasm typically reserved for a wedding toast. "I came here because I saw an opportunity for us both to get what we want."

Everson tugged at his ear, considering her.

Meanwhile, Felicity did her best to listen. She waited to hear any scratch or rustle...

Anything that might alert her to Albright's presence. When she didn't hear anything, she felt the most unusual mix of relief and disappointment.

As with any good plan she'd had a plan and a backup plan. Neither was ideal, and each had its cons, but...

Well, now was not the time to fret over how this might end. She was here now, and she meant to see this through.

"You see, Mr. Everson," she started. "I find I'm in a bit of a pickle. My family is eager for me to marry, and quickly."

He made a noise of understanding. "And how does this affect me?"

"I understand that you require funds at this point in time, is that correct?"

Everson looked suspicious so she smiled brighter. "I'm sure you've heard of my dowry, have you not?"

His suspicion transformed to burgeoning excitement almost instantly as he pieced together what she was after. And a second later his face fell. "Your parents want a title, everyone knows that."

"Indeed they do. But I do not. And my parents will have to accept the man of my choosing...if they mean to avoid scandal."

His brows arched and his eyes widened as he caught her meaning.

Really. For a man who dealt so frequently with criminals, he was awfully easy to shock.

“You mean...”

“Yes,” she said simply. “It would be easy enough to arrange a...situation in which we are caught.”

His eyes narrowed, but not so much with suspicion as renewed interest. “What’s in it for you then?”

Her smile felt far more genuine now that he was finally catching on and they were getting to the point. She stayed quiet for just a moment. But no...

Still no sign of Albright.

For the best, really. Perhaps this plan to marry Everson would work just as well. With that thought, she straightened, and spelled out how it would work. “You would have all the money. And you’d drop this investment scheme—” She arched a brow in warning when he tried to protest.

He fell silent and waved for her to continue.

“There will be no need to fleece good men like my Uncle Edward if you have my dowry.”

He gave a little nod of assent to the unposed question.

“I assume you want that money because you are keen to escape the country...” It was a guess but it made sense to her so she wasn’t surprised when he nodded again.

A hint of panic filled his eyes as he fidgeted with the dagger but when she remained silent, he admitted, “I’ve made some...enemies here in London.”

His expression took on a hunted quality that made her wary. A desperate man could be a godsend or a danger. She had to choose her words wisely.

“Your enemies and your former business interests are none of my concern,” she said, in a tone as reassuring as she could manage. “What is my concern is my uncle and my freedom. My proposition is this—marry me, take the dowry, and leave the country?—”

“But you?—”

“I will be in disgrace, yes, but a disgrace who is free to live on her own terms. I have enough money from an inheritance on my mother’s side that I will be able to have my independence.”

“You...” Everson said. “You are serious.”

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. “Indeed.”

Everson stared at her in disbelief for a moment longer before scrubbing a hand over his eyes, confusion and hope mingling with a paranoia that made her doubt his sanity. He scratched his chin. “To be clear, you know that I have been running a smuggling ring...”

She nodded when he paused.

“And that I’d planned to fleece your uncle and his friends...”

She nodded again, and his face caved with confusion.

“Then, for the love of...” He shook his head as his voice trailed off. “Why?”

She didn't have a chance to explain because at that moment a ruckus broke out in the warehouse. Men seemed to surge out of every doorway, and her heart surged into her throat as she caught sight of Albright at the front, rage marring his features.

Marlin was right behind him, and from the far side came The Duke of Carver, Lord Calvin, and several men she did not know.

Everson was obviously more than outmatched. Indeed, it was overkill. She nearly felt sorry for the man as he toppled, the crowd descending too fast and too suddenly for him to lift his dagger.

She missed what was said, only that one of the men she didn't recognize seemed to be in charge, barking orders.

What she didn't miss was the look of rage that twisted Everson's face. He was sprawled on the ground, with several men holding him still, but his eyes were fixed on her, and the emotion was...

Well, she didn't wish to sound melodramatic, but the word murderous came to mind.

She found she couldn't look away until one of the men blocked him from view.

"Felicity." Albright was next to her, and Felicity looked up at him.

She instantly wished she hadn't. The sight of him hurt. Which was ridiculous.

Ridiculous, but true.

The sight of his warm brown eyes, filled with concern, the furrowed brow and the lines at the edges of his eyes...

When had his face become so familiar and so...so dear ?

It made no sense and it was not fair. Had she not been through enough today? Did he really have to look at her like this right now?

“If you’ll excuse me...” She began to edge around him. “I fear the events of today have made me....”

She didn’t finish.

She couldn’t.

Tears were stinging the back of her eyes and making her throat swell shut. So she did the only thing she could...

Felicity ran.

She didn’t make it far, obviously. Albright caught up to her and blocked her path, his hands on her arms.

She waited for his ire, braced herself for the angry lecture to come.

And then she waited some more.

When she finally looked up she found he was studying her, his eyes taking in every feature as if he were reading a book. “Please,” she said. “I’d just like to go home.”

He hesitated but then nodded. “I’ll take you.”

She wanted to argue. The last thing she wanted was to be alone with Albright.

He might not have shouted at her, but he was angry, and no doubt disappointed in her.

The thought stung, but what made it worse was that she cared.

She'd always prided herself on not minding what others thought, but here she was fretting about his good opinion, absurd thoughts creeping in as he led her toward the door. Thoughts like, Ann never would have done something so reckless.

His wife would never have been so brazen.

What did it matter if she did not live up to sweet, charming Ann or his angelic wife?

She'd never wanted to. So it was fine. Just fine.

They were nearly out the door when noises broke out behind them. Everson was struggling as the men informed him of all they'd overheard. In short—his confession.

“We heard it all,” one of the men said.

All? Felicity doubted it. But they'd likely heard enough to put him away for a very long time.

Everson would no longer be a threat to her uncle.

So there.

That was something.

Wasn't it?

12

A lbright had no idea what to say.

No idea what to do .

He had the most urgent sense that he had to do something. Say something. But all he could manage was a gruff, “After you,” when Marlin’s driver brought the carriage around. He helped her in, and while he supposed he ought to wait for Marlin, it seemed far more urgent that he take Felicity as far away from this wretched alley as possible, and quickly.

He felt certain Marlin would agree, and once he’d returned Felicity to her home, he’d send the carriage back for Marlin and the others.

“You can say it, you know.” Felicity sat across from him with her hands folded in her lap. Her expression was difficult to make out in the dark shadows of this carriage, but her chin was notched up in that way he’d become so familiar with, and her eyes held a glint of challenge.

“Say what?” He was honestly curious. And some part of him might have even welcomed a cue on what he was meant to say. He was filled to bursting with emotions, but for the life of him he couldn’t pick one to convey. It was maddening.

“You’re angry,” she said.

He nodded. Yes. He was angry she’d put herself in danger, and irrationally hurt that

she hadn't come to him directly with this scheme, but most of all...

"I am relieved," he said.

She regarded him in silence.

"I am relieved that you are unharmed." His voice was mild, his features placid, but inside he was a blasted mess.

Relieved? That did not begin to cover it. Watching Everson hold a weapon to her had made his whole world come to a halt. His very life had rested on what happened next.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. It had been that same powerless feeling he'd felt with his wife, but worse. So much worse. Because then there'd been nothing he could do. But today he'd been in a position to do something and hadn't been able to. Not for too long, at least.

And worst of all, he could have stopped this from the start if he'd just listened to her the other night. He dropped his hand. "Marry me."

Her brows arched, and her lips parted. But she said nothing.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he repeated himself. "Marry me."

Not the most eloquent of proposals but the moment the words were out there, that urgent desperate sensation settled. For the first time in years he felt...at peace. Content.

No, more than content. He felt the flickering flames of happiness he hadn't felt in years—a happiness he hadn't expected to feel again.

“No.”

He blinked, straightening in his seat at the abrupt rejection. He blinked again, trying to see her more clearly, but her face was half covered in shadows. The jostling of the carriage and the click clack of horse hooves filled the silence.

“I...pardon?” he said.

She let out a huff of amusement, but the sound held a hint of bitterness that made his stomach sour. “No,” she said again. With a slight bend of her neck, she added, “Though I thank you for the charitable offer.”

Charitable. He opened his mouth and...nothing came out.

Charitable?

He was proposing marriage, not offering her a donation.

“I appreciate the offer,” she continued, apparently sensing his distress. “But I’m afraid that is out of the question.”

“But...” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Felicity...”

“Albright.” She mimicked his serious tone and he frowned.

“Less than twenty minutes ago you proposed marriage to Everson.”

“I did, yes.”

He shifted. Her own calm tone was making it difficult for him to maintain his. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. “You could not have been certain we would

arrive in time.”

“No,” she said simply. “I knew he’d be at the warehouse—I heard him say as much to my uncle,” she added before he could ask. “He’d said he had business to attend to, and it’s become clear that the warehouse is what he considers his place of work.”

“We had little notice,” he said. Lud, his patience was wearing thin. “You could have been trapped in a marriage with?—”

“Not trapped,” she said. At his blank stare, she lifted a shoulder. “I’d hardly say I was trapped when I was the one to make the offer.”

“So you actually intended to go through with it then.”

“Of course. I would not have hatched such a scheme if I was not willing to see it through.”

“Of course,” he echoed. His tone was dry but she didn’t seem to notice. His mind was reeling as he tried to make sense of it. She’d been willing to marry a no-good thief but she’d just rejected his proposal without so much as a second thought?

“I...I...” He found himself recalling Everson’s question to her. The last thing he said before being taken into custody, and Albright found himself repeating it now. “But...why?”

“Why not?” Her tone was flippant but it did not ring true. “I need a husband, and...” She trailed off with a shrug, as if the rest was obvious.

I need a husband. The word husband from Felicity’s lips was enough to be his undoing. A wave of hot anger rushed through him?—

No. Not anger. It was jealousy. Possessiveness. Not just the thought of Everson as her husband but of any man who was not him.

But before he could so much as utter a word, she was hurrying on. “Anyhow, it’s all for the best that you received the message when you did.” She gave him a smile. “Truth be told, he was not the ideal candidate for husband.”

“Not the ideal—” He stared in horror.

“But I could hardly focus on my own problems while my uncle’s fortune and reputation were still at stake. And while I might have merely told my uncle to avoid Everson’s investment, that would have led to questions, wouldn’t it? Questions that might have hindered your investigation?—”

“Hang my investigation, you?—”

“That wouldn’t do. And even if my uncle believed me—and really, why would he listen to his silly niece—there would still be other gentlemen in the same predicament as my uncle. So, you see, I had to be sure that part of this sordid business was handled. To my way of thinking, my scheme accomplished this neatly.”

Albright could only stare. She was babbling, hardly pausing to breathe let alone let him speak.

“While I am relieved you arrived when you did—well done, by the way,” she said with a bright smile. “I must confess, my mission would have been accomplished either way.”

“Your mission,” he started.

But once again she overrode his interjection with more long winded babbling, all

about how a suspected criminal on the run was hardly her first choice for a husband, but it all worked out in the end, and?—

Albright could hardly keep up with her reasoning, and there was no room for questions with all her talking.

Then...the carriage stopped.

And so did Felicity's incessant chatter. She let out a loud exhale and this smile she aimed his way seemed far more genuine. Which was how he realized...

She hadn't been babbling. Or, she had , but she'd been doing so to stall just like she'd done with Everson back at the warehouse.

The moment the carriage stopped, she threw the door open and leapt out before he or the driver could lend her a hand.

Once on the ground, she turned back to him with a smile. "I do appreciate your haste in responding to my message this evening, but as I would not wish for my uncle to become aware that I am not in my bed..."

She didn't finish. She merely shut the carriage door.

And with that little snick of a door closing, Felicity disappeared from his life. Two days passed without a word from her and he was...unmoored.

There was so much left to say.

So much he really should have said before he'd proposed. Before he'd left her that night under the tree, for that matter. And now...

He paced Carver's parlor like a caged animal.

Now he feared it was too late. And with Kal's latest news, he was certain of it. He stopped his pacing to fix the unflappable Marquess with a glare—though on some level he knew it was not polite to shoot the messenger. “What do you mean she is to marry?”

Kal looked to Carver as if to say, would you care to step in?

Carver was known to be better with people who were in a temper, and it was alarming to realize that Albright was now that man in a temper.

He never lost his temper. Never lost his wits.

Until lately.

Until Felicity.

Albright scrubbed a hand over his face, his heart pounding out the words too late . Felicity was to marry another, and he was too late. He took a deep breath and gave Carver an expectant look. “Well?”

Carver exchanged looks with Kal, Rodrick, and Marlin.

All four of them had been tasked with ferreting out information from their fiancées—Felicity's friends. And what they'd returned with was nothing short of unbearable.

Carver winced. “Perhaps you should speak to her directly?—”

“I've tried!” Lud, now he was shouting. He aimed for calm as he explained. “I've

been to see her so many times her great uncle threatened to have me removed physically if I showed up on her doorstep again.”

This earned four shocked expressions.

“Oh dear,” Rodrick murmured.

“Indeed.” Albright straightened his spine. His pride did not relish this admission, and he could only imagine how much more shocked they’d be if he told them how he’d also visited her home unannounced after dark when everyone in the house would be asleep.

He’d been so certain he’d find her in that tree. He’d even taken a midnight tour of the garden. It would have been romantic indeed...if Felicity had been out there.

He resumed pacing as he worked through what little his friends had told him. “Who is she to marry? And when?”

“Well, this is the unpleasant part, you see...” Carver said.

Albright turned to face them with wide eyes. They hadn’t even gotten to the unpleasant part yet?

“It seems her parents are...forcing a match. At least, that’s how Meg put it.” Carver turned to the others and all three of them nodded in unison.

“Forcing a match,” he echoed. But as he spoke his mind was elsewhere. It was back under that tree. He was seeing that awful panic that she’d tried to hide with her smiles and her laughter.

His heart felt like it was breaking in two. She’d seemed desperate because she was

desperate. “Who?” he snapped.

“Lord Bargedale.” Kal’s tone was grim. Well, it was always grim, but now it was grimmer than usual and a heavy silence fell.

Albright felt sick. “He’s old enough to be her grandfather.”

“And a mean old gent, if rumors are to be believed,” Carver added.

Albright started to pace and then stopped. His mind was spinning and his heart was racing, but that would not do. If he was to win Felicity’s hand he needed the use of his wits. And so he gripped the mantel until his knuckles turned white and his pulse slowed.

He found himself picturing Felicity in the carriage, replaying her words.

She’d had her reasons for confronting Everson, and saving her uncle from theft was only one part of it. He took a deep breath, certainty filling him and giving him an odd sort of reassurance.

If he knew anything, it was that Felicity would not marry Bargedale without a battle. She’d fight for her freedom, and that meant she had a plan.

And, most likely, at least three contingency plans.

He turned to the others with as much calm as he could muster. He would not shout or glare. He was cool and unwavering. “What is she up to? She must have a plan for another suitor.”

His friends exchanged looks again, but it was Kal who spoke up. “It seems she has a...” He cleared his throat. “A list.”

“A list ?”

The others flinched. His voice was admittedly still too loud. But really. A list? As in multiple contenders for the role of her husband?

Rodrick spoke up with a hesitant question. “Franny said you’d...rejected her?”

“Yes, Ann is rather put out with you for that,” Kal added most helpfully.

Carver’s brows were furrowed with confusion. “Meg said as much as well, but I didn’t believe it.”

When he didn’t respond, Marlin asked outright. “Is it true that she proposed and you rejected her?”

“Well...yes.” Blast, he hated to admit that aloud. Hated even more the rightful looks of disappointment aimed his way. There was no time to explain the jumble of emotions he’d been drowning in at that moment. But his friends continued to stare and he found himself blurting out, “But then I proposed to her.”

However, they all already knew this part and they were clearly not impressed by his belated and inept attempt to right his wrong.

“It seems Felicity believes that refusing your proposal is a kindness,” Marlin said. “According to Jane, Felicity would rather ‘buy a biddable husband than subject you to a life sentence at her side’...” Marlin flinched. “Those were her words, obviously.”

“A life sentence,” Albright echoed. He glanced at the others and they all nodded.

“But that’s not...” He swallowed hard. “That’s not the case at all.”

And there he went, understating the facts again. “I didn’t propose because I had to, I proposed because...”

Because I love her.

He let the words go unspoken. She deserved to hear them first. But he suspected his friends understood all too well by the pitying looks they were giving him.

“But she does not know that,” Carver said.

“No. Clearly not,” Kal said.

And then all four of them started talking at once, scheming and fretting and bandying about ever more ridiculous ideas of how he might propose again.

Albright appreciated their assistance, but they hadn’t made any headway at all when a ruckus at the front door interrupted them. Kal arched a brow and turned to Carver. “Are you expecting more company?”

“At this hour?” Rodrick added.

“No, of course not.” Carver headed toward the door but was cut short by the butler. He handed over a missive to the Duke.

Albright looked on warily as his friend unsealed the message. But even before Carver spoke, Albright’s stomach sank with dread.

Carver looked to Albright. “It’s from your cousin...”

He knew...he just knew...

“Everson has escaped.”

Felicity was in trouble.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:23 pm

Felicity shifted to find a more comfortable sitting position as she once again laid out her options. “Mr. Franz is the best contender at this point, don’t you think?”

She heard a sigh, but ignored it.

“Of course, Lord Wentley has the title, which will make him more appealing to my parents, but I’m the one who’d be stuck with my choice, not them.”

She set her chin in her hand and rested her elbow on her knee as she deliberated.

It truly was a difficult decision, made all the more so by the ticking clock that was her engagement announcement. Her uncle had informed her only this morning that her parents had settled on making the announcement at the Loggerfields’ ball, which was only ten days away.

She had to act and she had to act quickly.

You know how you can act quickly , Meg had said.

Accept Albright’s proposal , Ann had finished.

But neither of them understood that she could not do such a thing. She hadn’t wished to explain in detail, mainly because she didn’t even wish to dwell on the topic.

Truly, the sooner she could marry another man and never hear Albright’s name mentioned again, the better. The thought of him only made her mood fouler—which was difficult to do considering the day she’d had—so she endeavored to focus once

more.

After all... “Pining over a man who does not return one’s feelings has never done anyone any good.” She frowned. “Who said that? I feel as though I’ve heard it before.”

No response.

Lud, she knew she was miserable company of late, but really.

“Perhaps I made it up.” She gave a hmph . “Perhaps once I am free of my family and my husband I shall set out to be a writer.”

This earned her a groan which she did not dignify with a response.

A silence fell and, like always of late, her silly brain tried to fill it instantly with thoughts of Albright.

The way he’d looked when he’d come charging in to her rescue. His grudging laugh when they’d first become acquainted, and his easier, more affectionate laugh once they’d formed a....

A what? A friendship?

No.

An alliance?

She shook her head. Didn’t matter. Mooning over Albright was a waste of precious time.

This was why she had to keep her thoughts focused. She opened her mouth to

continue her list of potential husbands and all their pros and cons, but before she could, a voice split the night air.

“Felicity!”

She winced at Albright’s shout. Though, she had to admit the desperation she heard there was rather gratifying, but still...

“Not so loud, if you please,” she said quietly as he rounded the corner of her great uncle’s home. “I’d rather not wake Uncle Edward.”

He stopped short at the sight of her sitting under her beloved tree. “Felicity, are you all right?”

“Quite well, thank you.” She was proud of how strong her voice came out. No hint of a weepy wobble.

A grunting noise ruined what might have been an otherwise lovely moment.

Albright seemed to be frozen in place and the men who’d come with him faltered to a stop beside him. Most of the men she knew and so she waved.

This earned her a smothered laugh from Carver, and a wicked grin from Lord Kalvin.

She’d always liked these men, even before her friends decided they loved them.

Marlin took several steps forward. “It seems she has the situation well in hand.”

“Indeed I do,” she agreed. “But as this is not the most comfortable position...”

She held a hand out and every man present rushed forward to help her to her feet. Albright reached her first and she tried not to notice how warm his hand was as it

wrapped around hers, nor how close he stood as the others retrieved the scoundrel from where he still lay prostrate on the ground.

She resisted the urge to rub her aching bottom.

Perching on that rascal Everson's back had not been comfortable, but it had been the most assured way to keep him down until help arrived.

And she'd known they would arrive, eventually. It did not require a great leap to understand that the angry and unstable Mr. Everson would want revenge first and foremost...

And perhaps that dowry he'd been promised.

So yes, all of the men had arrived, and swiftly.

To her dismay everyone was making a fuss over her as Everson was led away—shamed, it seemed, since he'd been beaten by a woman.

“Are you sure you're all right?” Rodrick asked.

She smiled and nodded, and gave the slightest tug of her hand. But Albright refused to let it go.

If the other gentlemen noticed the way he was clasping her hand in his, no one let on as they applauded her bravery and asked her about the circumstances that had led to her sitting atop their runaway fiend.

“It was not bravery or strength,” she finally admitted as she tried and failed to reclaim her hand once again. “I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

“The tree,” Albright murmured at her side.

The sound of his voice, all low and serious...it sent a shiver down her spine, and her hand?—

She tugged so hard she nearly stumbled into him when he held on tight.

“Yes, the tree,” she agreed. For the benefit of the others, she explained how the tree had long been her favorite place to come sit and think, particularly at night. “I saw him coming, of course.”

“And you didn’t shout for help?” Marlin asked.

She lifted a shoulder. “Help from whom? My elderly great uncle? He’d only be in harm’s way. And while we do have some footmen on the premises, they are little more than boys and no match for Everson in strength.”

A silence fell and Felicity felt their gazes fixed on her. She didn’t feel condemnation or disdain coming from them, however. If anything, she thought she saw a glimmer of admiration in their expressions.

Except for Albright. She couldn’t see his expression at all because she refused to look up at him.

“And you thought you are a match for Everson in strength?” Albright’s voice was as low and calm as ever, but she heard the undercurrent there.

He was angry again, no doubt. And perhaps a little relieved.

A niggle of warmth seeped into her chest at the thought of him worrying about her.

She shut the thought down instantly. She’d made the man fret far more than he ought of late, and only a fool would mistake kindhearted worry for something more.

While she answered Albright's question, she kept her attention on the other men facing her. "I did not believe I could match him in strength, but I knew I had the element of surprise in my favor..." She glanced up pointedly at the tree limb. "Not to mention a height advantage."

Carver sputtered a bit. Kal and Rodrick chuckled.

Marlin's lips twitched. "And so you...jumped on him?"

Felicity started to laugh. When he put it like that, it sounded rather ridiculous. "I'd say it was more..." She paused and lifted Albright's arm with hers in a sort of reenactment of her leap. "It was more like I fell on him."

They were all laughing now, aside from Albright. He was squeezing her hand so tightly she was starting to wonder if she'd lose feeling in her fingers. But soon enough the others were taking their leave, and no one seemed to find it strange in the slightest that Albright made no move to join them.

And soon they were alone.

In the dark.

Under the tree.

And he was still holding her hand.

It wasn't panic that flooded her veins, but it was something close. She wasn't afraid of him, but...oh drat. She was afraid of this. Of the way he made her feel.

It was everything she didn't want to feel, not when she had decisions to make. He was too tempting by far with his chivalrous offer of marriage. If he asked her again, she wasn't sure she'd have the strength to say no.

She gave her hand another useless tug.

But it would be selfish and greedy...and all she had to do was think of the look of disappointment she'd see in his eyes eventually to know it would destroy her in the end.

"Let me go," she finally snapped.

He dropped her hand so suddenly she wondered if he even realized he'd been holding it. Clutching it to her chest, she turned away. "I appreciate your rescue—again." She rolled her eyes, though no one could see it. "But I find I'm rather tired, so if you please—"

"No." He moved so he was standing in front of her, and his eyes were darker than the night sky as he gazed down at her. "I need you to listen to me."

She started to protest.

"Not for long, and if you never wish to see me again after you hear me out, I will respect that. But please..." It was the please that got her. So gruff and filled with emotion. "Please let me speak."

She couldn't deny him now. With a jerky nod she waved for him to continue as she shifted closer to the tree, as if she could somehow hide in its shadows.

"I want to talk about what happened under this tree the other night," he started.

She stiffened instantly and her gaze darted away. "I do not think that is?—"

"I want to marry you, Felicity."

Her eyes returned to his, startled by his intensity. "I know you think you ought to?—"

“The way I feel has nothing to do with what is right or good or dutiful.” He reached for her hand again and this time he pressed it to his chest. “The way I feel is...alive.”

His voice was so raw on that last word, it made her throat thicken with emotion. “W-what do you mean?”

“After my wife died...” He paused. “After she passed away I was heartbroken, and I never wanted to feel that way again. So I...I didn’t.” He wet his lips, but his gaze never left hers. “You know, there was a time when even my closest friends wouldn’t say her name. They walked around me like I was breakable. No one wants to dwell on loss, and so I...”

She squeezed his hand when he faltered, her heart racing and her thoughts whirling.

“And so I pushed those feelings down, and I moved on?—”

“But you didn’t move on,” she said, jumping in rudely because her patience was well and truly spent. “You still love her. I understand.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. I do still love her?—”

“And no one will ever replace her, and certainly not someone like me?—”

“Felicity.”

She clamped her lips shut.

“Please,” he said again.

She nodded.

“I’ll always have a place in my heart for my wife, yes.” His brows furrowed. “I am

not still heartbroken, nor am I pining away over her memory, if that's what you think. I met Catherine when I was young, and we married quickly. Truthfully, I sometimes wonder how we would have gotten on if we'd had the time most couples have. As it was, I will always remember her with fondness, but..." His throat worked as he swallowed. "But I didn't know her well enough to miss her in the way my grandmother misses my grandfather. He was part of her life for decades and they truly shared a life. With Catherine, I think sometimes that what I miss most is..." He looked upward, his eyes searching the stars. "I miss the life we thought we'd have. I miss the man I was when I met and married her. But I am not that man anymore. Grief and loneliness and forging a new path in life...all this has led me to be someone else altogether. I often think that if by some miracle Catherine were to come back to me today she would not recognize me. And she would likely not fall in love with me. And I'm...I'm not certain I'd fall in love with her either."

Felicity took a step back, her brows furrowed. "Don't say that. Of course she'd love you."

His smile was so soft and tender, it took her breath away. "Do you think so?"

"Of course!"

He let out a huff of laughter and then reached for her again. This time he tried to pull her close, but she resisted.

"I appreciate the explanation..." She swallowed. "But it is unnecessary."

"It is, though, because you clearly do not understand." The exasperation in his voice made her want to smile and cry at the same time.

She'd grown oddly fond of his irritated gruff tone since she only ever heard it aimed at her, and usually when she was teasing him.

“For a long time I thought I would not marry again,” he started.

“You wanted to marry Ann,” she interrupted.

He arched a brow.

“It’s true, you wanted Ann,” she argued.

“I wanted what Ann and I could have together.”

She didn’t think her heart could hurt any more than it had the night he’d rejected her. But here she was, with her heart feeling as though it was cracking in two. “I see.”

“You don’t see. Not at all,” he snapped. “I thought I wanted Ann because...because she could never make me feel like this .” He snagged her waist and pulled her so close she could feel his body heat, so warm compared to the night breeze.

“I spent years trying to avoid getting hurt again. I avoided loving and losing. I didn’t want to feel too much about anything or anyone because I thought...” He shook his head. “I’d played the game and lost, and I had no intention of playing again.”

She frowned up at him. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I felt that way right up until a ridiculous, funny, irritating young lady fell into my life.” He glanced up meaningfully at the tree limb as her lips parted on a gasp.

It wasn’t his words so much as the passion in his voice that left her trembling.

“Ever since that day I’ve been feeling things I never wanted to feel. I’ve laughed and lost my temper. I’ve...” He shook his head, his dark eyes blazing with emotion. “I’ve lived . I’ve lived more these past weeks with you than I have in years.”

Her heart was thundering in her ears and her hands fluttered over his chest as she tried to sort out if she wanted to pull him closer or push him away. He was confusing her. She'd been so sure she was making the right choice, doing what was right for him, and now here he was...

She shut her eyes tight. It was too much. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying I've fallen in love with you, Felicity."

She opened her eyes and her gaze met his. And it was there. That love he spoke of was right there in his eyes, shining back at her and making her heart swell and her eyes tear up.

He swiped a tear from her cheek. "I love you. That's what I came here to say."

"But...but that night..." She clutched his shirt now, and pulled him close. "That night..."

"That night I was a blasted fool," he said with a shake of his head. "Your proposal caught me off guard, and I..." He sighed. "I didn't know what to make of all these feelings. It was like a bottle of champagne had been popped open and all came spilling out."

She nodded.

"And I thought..." He huffed. "I thought you were making light of marriage...making light of me. And I'd only just realized that I'm in love with you and?—"

She cut him off with a kiss.

After a second of shocked stillness, he growled and deepened the kiss. His arms

wrapped around her waist and he held her so tightly she thought he might never let go.

Good.

She smiled against his lips, and soon he was smiling too, his lips still pressed to hers. “Shall we try this again, my love?” he murmured.

A shiver raced through her. “They say third time’s the charm.”

He chuckled as he pulled back to look down at her. “Marry me?”

Her heart leapt into her throat. “Yes.”

His joy was instantly visible in his eyes, in his smile. He let out a loud whoop as he tightened his grip on her waist and lifted her off her feet.

She laughed as he spun her around, her heart bursting with joy. “Shh,” she said through her giggles. “You’ll wake my uncle and we’ll be caught.”

“Good,” he said. But he set her on her feet so he could kiss her once more. “The sooner everyone knows, the sooner we can be wed.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight. “You’re that eager to marry me, hmm?”

His eyes grew so warm, she felt an answering fire spark low in her belly. He leaned down so his lips were next to her ear. “You brought me back to life, Miss Felicity McGovern,” he whispered. “And now I want to make sure I live every last waking minute...with you by my side.”

Thank you for reading!