



Every Wallflower Has Her Thorns (Revenge of the Wallflowers)

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Category: Historical

Description: From the bestselling author Bronwen Evans, comes a best friend's brother, friends to lovers romance.

For Lady Alice Montague, love is a prickly business, especially when she's in love with her brother's best friend, Calum, and he doesn't even know she exists. It's the age-old problem of being a wallflower. No one ever notices a wallflower. That is, until she mistakenly creates the biggest scandal of the season, and ends up betrothed to the one man she thought she could never have.

For Calum Arden, the Marquess of Skye, and heir to the Galloway Dukedom, love is a word he refuses to use. He has a world to travel and conquer before he is yoked to his future title and duty. So, imagine his horror when he's trapped in a marriage to his best friend's little sister. With his plans in ruin, Calum must learn how to make this marriage of convenience work without his heart being torn apart by his wallflowers thorns

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Page 1

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Chapter One

L ondon, April 1818

“If you could arrange an introduction with your brother, I’m sure I’d be forever in your debt.”

Had she been asked that a hundred times this season? Lady Alice Montague reluctantly shifted her gaze across the crowded ballroom to where her brother, George Montague, Earl of Hampton, held court with a group of the season’s eligible bachelors. But as always, her eyes focused on only one man.

The handsome, sought after Calum Arden, Marquess of Skye, the heir to the Galloway Dukedom, was the intent of as many of the bevy of beauties as her brother was. All eager to attract their notice.

He was the epitome of aristocracy. His fair hair gleamed amber under the light of the chandelier, his commanding, elegant form garbed in a blue jacket that showcased wide shoulders, a pair of breeches that outlined the muscles in his thighs, and stockings that exposed the fine tone of his calves.

He glanced her way, with his features so striking, her breath caught. Even from a distance, her memory remembered the dark blue of his eyes, surrounded by dark thick lashes, and his cheeks prominent, his nose just right, his bearing refined and commanding. Proud. But it was his full, harsh lips that had her knees trembling. .

His glance didn’t notice her, but stopped when it fell upon Lady Patricia, a stunningly

beautiful and relatively young, rich widow. Rumor was, she was his current mistress. The smile he sent the widow, sensual enough to make a lady's undergarments fall, confirmed the gossip..

Alice swallowed her reaction to him and returned her focus to Lady Penelope Gower. The only reason the popular debutantes gave Alice the time of day was obvious. The bluestocking cripple was worth having around if she furnished the ladies with access to her brother, and through him, Calum, and their friends.

"I'd wait until supper. My brother will come to escort me. If I know my brother, he, along with the other men, will head to the card room shortly." Besides, I wouldn't introduce you to my brother if you were the last lady on earth. Given that she'd unlikely ever marry, Alice would probably live her life in her brother's household, and there was no way she would live with Lady Penelope as her sister-in-law. The vicious cow made Alice's entry into society a living hell. What would she be like if she were the lady of the house? She pitied any man who took Penelope to wife.

Penelope tapped her fan against Alice's arm. "I don't think they are. I was told the hostess, Lady Gilberte, has refused to open the card room tonight, insisting her son and his friends remain in the ballroom for the duration."

Alice's gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "My brother won't be happy with that situation." Her brother took his duty to squire her to the endless balls, or marriage mart, as he called it, seriously. He refused to contemplate that she was unmarriageable. Her limp wasn't because of any birth defect. It had been a broken leg not set properly, from a fall off a pony while trying to jump the same fence he and Calum had jumped. She'd been twelve years old and George blamed himself for her injury. They were men of ten and eight and should have stopped her from following them. That's why he tried so hard.

That had been ten years ago and still her brother carried the guilt.

Unfortunately, he thought men would overlook such an impediment. She couldn't ride or dance, and even walking or standing for too long was painful. No man wanted a cripple for a wife, no matter how intelligent or pretty she was. Some had tried, because of her large dowry, but she'd made it clear to George, there would be no marriage of convenience for her, and he was happy to indulge her.

"Shall we make our way closer, and you'll perform an introduction?" Before she could refute Penelope's command, the horrid woman linked her arm through hers and, with her entourage of giggling, vacuous ladies in tow, pulled her across the room.

Penelope moved with long strides, eager to get to the men before the other ladies present this evening realized the men were not escaping to play cards. Alice could barely keep up, and by the time they reached the men, her leg ached.

As they drew beside the young bucks, Alice felt a push from behind, causing her to clench her jaw, from anger or pain she wasn't sure which. They stood for a moment before Penelope elbowed her in the ribs and cleared her throat.

"Brother dear, I'm wishing to confirm you'll be escorting me into supper." Another dig to her ribs. "And my—friend—Lady Penelope notice you in the park yesterday and was admiring your bays. She is after a pair and wondered if you could advise her. I'm sure you must have already met?"

Her brother stepped forward with a practiced smile. Many young ladies sought him out. "Of course, Lady Penelope," he answered and bowed over her hand. "I had dinner with your father last week. Is he not here with you tonight?"

Fluttering eyelashes accompanied her reply and almost made Alice's stomach recoil. "My father is indisposed, but my mother is here."

Just then, Lady Gilberte arrived. “Now gentlemen, I don’t want to see my dance floor empty, and I’m certain these lovely young ladies would be thrilled to take the floor,” Lady Gilberte continued, “So, come now...”

Being forever proper, her brother requested Penelope to accompany him and soon partnered up all the ladies, except of course Alice. Penelope said over her shoulder, a triumphant gleam in her eye, “Alice, since you won’t be partaking of a dance, perhaps you could organize drinks for us once we’re finished. I’m sure Lord Hampton’s exploits on the dance floor will have me parched.”

Her face heated as all eyes turned her way, including Calum, who leaned against the wall in the shadows, obviously not wanting to be dragged into the dancing. George was just about to say something when Calum was at her side, bowing over her hand. “I believe Lady Alice has kindly agreed to keep me company as I twisted my knee this morning and cannot dance.” His voice dared anyone to refute his statement, and George gave him a grateful smile.

Alice hung her head while the group took to the floor. Without thinking, she rubbed her aching thigh through her gown.

“Shall we find a seat by the garden doors? The room is quite stuffy this evening,” Calum said, offering her his arm as they strolled slowly around the room.

“You don’t have to stay with me. I know you probably want to speak with Lady Patricia.”

His refined eyebrow lifted. “Indeed. Why do you think that?”

Horror gripped her. “Well, that is, isn’t she...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it. She’d known Calum since she was a very young girl, and he and George were the best of friends. They’d always had an informal relationship since Calum had virtually

lived at their house when the boys were at Eton. His home was in the Scottish highlands and such a long way to travel from school. But she couldn't be that familiar, could she?

“Why am I not surprised that you, of all the debutants, are aware of mistresses? You caught George and I in the barn with the milking maids, if I recall. That's how I got this scar.” He pointed to the small scar on his chin. He'd tripped over the rake, trying to pull his clothes on and split his chin open. Her face heated at the memory of what she'd seen that afternoon, but his words held admiration rather than reproach. “Besides, you are incorrect.”

“Oh, I was so sure...”

He winked as he drew her towards the chairs by the French doors. “Not yet, anyway. She has declined my advances.”

“Is she mad?” Goodness, did she just say that out loud?

Calum laughed. As they sat, he whispered, “But you're biased because you love me.” She went as still as stone. How could he know? How could she live with him knowing? Floor, please open and swallow me. “You're like family. You're like the sister I never had.”

She let out a thankful sigh. He thought she loved him like a brother, like she loved George. Calum did only have brothers—three. Of course, he would think of her as a sister. He'd certainly never given her any idea that he might find her attractive, no matter how often she'd tried to show him she was no longer the little girl that used to follow him around. He'd never treated her with anything but respect.

“Since you think of me as a sister, may I ask you a favor?”

“Of course. My services are at your disposal.”

“Can you please ensure my brother never seriously considers Lady Penelope to be his wife? I couldn’t bear it.”

His head moved close to her in a conspiracy. “Absolutely. I pity any man who offers for such a shrew.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “Since I’ll probably end up living with my brother, I’d like a nice, kind sister-in-law.”

“Why would you end up living with your brother?” His tone held surprise and genuine curiosity.

Her face was on fire. “Come now. I’m not silly. Most men do not notice me and if they do, once they see my limp, they quickly find other ladies to pursue. I’m in this season’s group of wallflowers.”

That saw Calum sit up straight. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re a lovely young lady.”

“Say’s the man who thinks of me as a brother.”

“Well, I...” He looked nonplussed, and in that moment, something changed. Suddenly, there was nothing languid about the warm glance that raked over her figure. For the first time, his blue eyes flashed midnight sapphire and showed pure male interest. Could he hear how loud her heart beat?

It was impossible to ignore the captivating stare, but it was wasted on Alice. She already knew why women pursued Calum in droves. She shook her head and looked into his eyes again. The heat and desire she’d spied was now hidden, and Calum shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

She couldn't bear his discomfort. It verged on pity. "Since you stated you'd help me with Penelope and my brother, would you mind rescuing him from her clutches?"

He reluctantly looked away from her and across the ballroom. Penelope seemed to have latched herself to George's side. "I will do your bidding," he said, pressing a quick kiss to her gloved hand. As he stood, he looked at her and said, "Never let me hear you put yourself down again. You are an extraordinary, lovely young woman."

Her heart still pounded as she watched Calum stroll through the crowd as if he didn't notice the admiring glances thrown his way. She saw him stop and address Lady Penelope and soon she was escorted towards the refreshments by Calum and she preened more than a peacock.

George looked her way and mouthed, 'thank you'. She inclined her head and smiled. They were each other's world now, having lost their parents' last year from the lung disease consumption.

She stayed seated for almost the rest of the night. Totally ignored except for when George, as promised, escorted her into supper.

Yet, this night would burn forever in her memory because Calum Arden, Marquess of Skye, finally regarded her as a desirable woman.

But in the light of day, would his opinion change? He wanted George's advice on the trip to the continent he had planned. When he came to lunch tomorrow to discuss it, she would test his opinion.

Chapter Two

The next day, the men were in George's study playing chess. "By the way, the next time you ask me to accompany you to a ball, please ensure the hostess has not closed the card room."

George laughed at Calum as they sat across from each other at the chessboard by the large roaring fire. "Stop trying to put me off my game. We have your black stallion riding on the outcome of this match."

"Putting you off? Your play is so slow, this game may well last longer than my horse." They had started this game two weeks ago and so far, neither of the men was gaining the upper hand.

George rubbed his forehead. "Speaking of last night, I thank you for following Alice's direction to rescue me from Lady Penelope. It was generous of you, considering she hunted you for the rest of the evening."

"I may well have given her the wrong impression by my eagerness to escort her, but your sister is hard to turn down." Calum looked at George. "You do realize Alice thinks she's unmarriageable."

Her brother sighed and sat back in his chair and took a long drink from his wineglass. "I think some of the ladies were not particularly kind to her at the start of the season. She believes them when they say no man wants a cripple. I cannot convince her otherwise, and she's lost all confidence."

“She’s not a cripple. She merely has a limp. Besides, she’s beautiful and has a very large dowry.”

A picture of Alice formed in his head; a vision of grace and elegance, reminiscent of a delicate blossom. Her porcelain skin bore a soft, rosy hue, a testament to her youthful vitality. Her expressive hazel eyes, framed by long, dark lashes, possessed a sparkle that spoke of intelligence and kindness.

She moved with a poised demeanor, despite the noticeable limp that accompanied her every step. Her gentle sway carried a subtle rhythm, a testament to her resilience rather than a hindrance. Her petite stature, adorned with tasteful attire of the finest fabrics, always carried an air of sophistication, each garment meticulously chosen to complement her figure and reflect her exquisite taste.

Alice often styled her hair, a cascade of fair strawberry curls. in a simple yet elegant manner, adorned perhaps with a ribbon or two, framing her face in a way that highlighted her delicate features, and her smile, warm and genuine.

Though constrained by her mobility, her spirit soared freely. Alice had a sharp wit, her intellect shining through in conversations that she graciously navigated with eloquence and charm. Her keen interest in literature and the arts made her a captivating conversationalist, effortlessly weaving tales and discussing the latest novels or artistic exhibitions.

Despite the challenges she faced, Alice exuded a quiet strength that inspired admiration among those who had the privilege of crossing paths with her. If only society gave her a chance.

“I love my sister. She’s the only family I have left and she made me promise that who, and if, she wed would be her choice. She’s very firm. Alice doesn’t want a marriage of convenience. Which of course means she’s unlikely to wed. How many

love matches do you know of within the ton ?”

Calum could count them on one hand. He himself had no immediate thoughts of marriage. Not after his previous disaster. He wanted to travel. His father was as strong as an ox, he had three younger brothers, and he had little regard for women in general. They lied and flattered to get what they wanted. He’d learned that as a young man. They mostly viewed him as prey, either as a husband or a provider. He’d almost fallen into one female’s trap, and it had cost him his heart and pride.

When it did come time to marry, he would do the choosing and be more circumspect where his heart was concerned. A woman would have to prove her devotion and love before he willingly surrendered his heart. Women were often false where feelings were concerned. Money and security more of a driver than love.

Except, of course, for Alice.

As if she’d heard him, there was a soft knock at the study door and she entered. “Sorry to disturb you, but there is an urgent missive from Lord Starling,” she said and handed George the note.

Upon reading it, he cursed. “My pardon, Alice, but I can’t escort you to Lady Eversham’s musical soiree tonight. Lord Starling is in urgent need of me and you know I cannot refuse.” Lord Starling had been their father’s closest friend.

With a gleeful voice, Alice said, “What a shame. Never mind. I can have a night at home for a change.”

“Or I could escort you,” Calum didn’t know why he offered. He didn’t wish to attend a boring recital. In fact, he was supposed to meet with Lady Patricia, but he wanted Alice to be seen. He wanted to rebuild her confidence and make her see, and society see, that she would make a wonderful wife and mother. She was worth more than any

of the debutantes he'd had the misfortune to meet.

Alice's smile disappeared. "There is no need. I really don't mind not attending."

George looked at Calum and nodded. "Thank you. That is most kind."

"Shall I collect you in my carriage at, say, eight?"

Her green eyes flashed with anger. Why was Alice so reluctant? It was as if she didn't wish to be seen with him and that rankled. Most women fought for his attentions.

"That would be acceptable." Then her attention turned to the chessboard. "Gosh, one of you could have this match won in four moves." Then she cheekily added, "Do you need my help?"

Both men frowned, with George leaning closer to the board. He studied it closely for several minutes before declaring, "Bother it. I cannot see what you are talking about. Can you, Calum?"

He, too, could see no victory in what he thought would be his next four moves. His admiration for Alice grew. He understood how clever women could be. Most of them planned their entrapments as well as Wellington planned a battle, and he really didn't want to lose his best stallion.

He flashed Alice a smile only normally reserved for seducing his fancy women. "If I promised you the first foal from breeding my stallion, would you help me win?"

"That's not fair," George exclaimed.

"Oh, brother, I've already helped you. Calum would have had you two moves ago if

you'd not asked for my help," she responded teasingly.

Calum's eyebrow rose. "Is that so? Not very sporting. So, I have no qualms in asking your sister to share her skills."

"For a foal from your first breeding of the stallion?"

"Absolutely."

"Not fair," George crumbled.

Alice sat next to him and her arm brushed his. Tension, hot and rapid as summer lightning, arced between them at the contact. Giving him a startled look, she turned her attention to the board. To his surprise, his damned loins tightened in response to merely touching her. That was new. He'd never thought of Alice as a woman in that way. Why now? He kept his expression cool when he asked, "Do I move knight to king four?"

Alice arched a slender eyebrow. "You do know how to win this, but our deal stands."

Within the hour, Calum declared checkmate and George surrendered.

Alice clapped her hands in glee. "I look forward to receiving payment. Now I shall leave you gentleman to your amusements. I'll expect you at eight."

Once she'd left the room, George gave Calum a quizzical look. "Why this sudden interest in Alice?"

He took a long drink of alcohol. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You rushed to her defense at the ball last night and now jumping to escort her. If you

were any other man, I'd have suspicions regarding your intentions."

"I too have a strategy. If I look to be interested in your sister, I'm sure other men will begin to notice and seek to learn why. That should help her find someone suitable. As for me, it will stop avaricious mamas and daughters from pursuing me if they believe I'm pursuing Alice. We will help each other."

As George sat back, nursing his drink, he said, "I can only think of one drawback. What if Alice falls for you? You know what your attentions can do to a woman. I don't want my sister hurt."

Chapter Three

The twitter of fans, and the chatter filled with excited tones, surged through the room as Alice entered Lady Eversham's elegant home, her arm linked with Lord Skye. The significance assumed by those in the room regarding his escort made her feel both nervous and oddly regal, as if she'd stepped into a role far grander than her usual station. Calum's presence by her side was a reassuring anchor amidst the curious gazes and whispered conversations that swirled around them.

Calum's protective demeanor, as he sat beside her during the initial part of the recital, drew glares from Penelope, whose envy was palpable. But Alice knew the truth; Calum's regard for her was as a cherished sister, not a potential romantic interest, despite the whispers and assumptions of others.

As Calum momentarily departed to fetch refreshments, her dear friend Sarah approached, her eyes alive with curiosity and mischief. "What's the tale with Lord Skye? He seems rather attentive."

Alice sighed ruefully, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's a role he's playing, mistakenly thinking it's in my favor. He's not pursuing any romantic interest, I assure you."

Sarah's lips curved in a knowing smile. "Lady Penelope certainly thinks otherwise. Rumors of his gallantry at the ball last night have spread."

Glancing toward Calum, now surrounded by admirers, Alice couldn't help but bite her lip in mild exasperation. What was it about him that attracted so much attention?

It wasn't merely his looks; it was his commanding presence and undeniable charm, qualities that drew eyes and hearts alike.

"He was merely being courteous," Alice insisted, though Sarah's teasing nudges at romantic notions only fueled her own quiet desires. He's not for you.

"He does have the air of a hero," Sarah remarked whimsically. "A big, strong man to protect you from the wolves."

Alice shook her head, bemused by Sarah's fanciful notions. "Lady Penelope's nose is very wolf like," she responded and laughed. She'd seen Calum grow from a young lad to a mature man, and his appeal had only intensified. Her heart wished for something more, but her mind knew the unlikelihood of a romantic connection with a future duke, especially given her perceived and real shortcomings.

Seeing how determined Calum was to show she would not end up a spinster, Alice had resigned herself to her fate, realizing that being thrust into the ton's spotlight could invite cruelty, especially if Calum's efforts for her did not meet expectations. The thought of being discarded when his task proved fruitless weighed on her.

"Could Lord Hampton not attend tonight?"

Oh, dear. Alice plastered on a smile as she turned to address Lady Penelope. "Unfortunately, no."

"I knew that would be the case. He's asked Lord Skye to accompany you in his place."

What could she say? "Of course. Lord Skye is a close family friend."

"More than a friend, surely Alice." A husky voice sounded above her. She looked up

into Calum's face and once again she saw an expression that sent her heart pounding. When she looked away, she could almost see steam coming from Penelope's ears.

Lady Penelope's smug remark about Lord Skye's presence only served to stir irritation within Alice, even though she knew the truth behind it. Calum's interruption, with his husky voice and meaningful gaze, momentarily stirred a flutter in her chest, though she knew the look was more protective than amorous.

Alice tried to redirect the conversation, but Lord Skye's attention on her, his words tinged with an unexpected warmth, made her cheeks flush, leaving her momentarily flustered amidst the scrutinizing stares of the guests.

Calum's sudden interjection had thrown Alice into a whirlwind of emotions. His piercing gaze held a weight that made her heart skip a beat, and when she averted her eyes, she could sense the frustration emanating from Penelope.

Before the tense silence grew too heavy, Sarah, always quick on her feet, stepped in. "Have you enjoyed the music tonight, Lord Skye?"

Lord Skye's gaze shifted to Sarah, a charming smile gracing his lips. "Immensely, Lady Sarah, especially in such delightful company." His eyes, however, lingered on Alice, causing her cheeks to flush deeper.

As the intermission piano played by Lady Eversham's daughter filled the room with elegant melodies, Alice sat gracefully on the edge of her seat, her fingers lightly tapping, along with the music. A small crowd had gathered, drawn not just by Calum's presence, but also by the unexpected sight of Lord Hartley and Lord Walters engaged in conversation with her.

Lord Hartley, with his charming smile and polished manners, leaned in slightly, his eyes alight with interest as he addressed her. "Miss Alice, I must admit I did not

know your appreciation for music rivaled the mastery displayed tonight.”

Alice glanced up, her cheeks faintly flushed from the unexpected attention. “Lord Hartley, your words are far too kind. Music has always held a special place in my heart.” That was true. She loved to play. One thing a girl who could no longer run and jump about could do was play the piano. She’d learned quickly that the music room allowed her talent to shine without focusing on her limp.

Lord Walters, known for his quick wit and affable nature, interjected, “Indeed, Miss Alice. Your brother often speaks of your love for literature and the arts. It’s a delight to finally make your acquaintance and discuss such refined interests.”

The fact he’d made her acquaintance on numerous occasions must have slipped his mind.

The other guests stole curious glances, murmurs rising among them as they observed the interaction. It was a rare sight to witness two esteemed lords vying for the attention of someone they had previously overlooked.

Alice, though taken aback by the sudden spotlight, maintained her composure, engaging in the conversation with grace and wit. “I find solace in the works of Austen and Brontë, much like the comfort I find in the melodies that fill the air tonight.”

Lord Hartley nodded, his gaze admiring. “A shared love for literature is a rarity, Miss Alice. It’s refreshing to find someone who appreciates the nuances of storytelling as much as I do.”

Lord Walters, ever the opportunist, joined in eagerly. “Ah, Miss Alice, would you do me the honor of sharing your thoughts on the latest exhibition at the Royal Academy? Your insights would undoubtedly enrich the discussions we’ve been having.”

Heavens. Was this what it was like for the most popular ladies? The polite conversation and ridiculously wasteful topics must be tiring not only on the person but on the mind. Already her teeth wanted to grind at the mundaneness of it all.

Alice couldn't help notice the onlookers exchange surprised glances, astonished at the sudden focus on a previously overlooked figure in their midst. The sight of three esteemed lords engaging in earnest conversation with a young woman known to be more of a wallflower left them intrigued and perhaps a touch envious.

Calum sat grinning as if this was a marvelous outcome. He didn't seem to realize that she did not look on this attention favorably.

Amidst the soft murmur of the crowd and the gentle notes of the piano, Alice found herself at the center of attention, with the two lords seeking her favor. Neither one of them was of any interest to her, but now she'd had to agree to a visit to the Royal Academy.

As the orchestra took their places to begin the second half, Calum smugly whispered in her ear, "I predict spinsterhood is not in your future."

Alice predicted Calum was getting too far ahead of himself. Presenting her to two gentlemen who she had no interest in at all did not lead to marriage. She was infatuated with only one man and predicted that no other gentleman would suffice, even though that man wanted to see her married to somebody else.

And wasn't that just heartbreaking?

* * *

As predicted, her excursion to the Royal Academy with Lord Walters was a disaster. Her leg hurt after the first gallery and by the time they came to leave, she was almost

crying in pain. She'd fallen down the large marbles steps at the front of the academy upon leaving, and Lord Walter could not even look at her when the carriage dropped her home.

Thankfully, Turnbull had rushed out to help her, and give her his arm, but as soon as the front door closed behind her, she collapsed to the floor, tears of pain and humiliation rolling down her cheeks. Stanford, one of their footmen, was sent for, as he carried her to her room when her leg was too sore to walk. While she waited, she leaned against the base of the grandfather clock in the front foyer, rubbing her leg, and mopping up her tears. The pain eased to a dull ache and she gulped in air.

To her horror, this is the position Calum found her in when he arrived to see her brother, who wasn't even home.

He dropped to his knees beside her. "What happened?"

"You and your stupid ideas are what happened," she said through gritted teeth. Thankfully, her tears were dried, but she must look a pathetic mess.

"Did Walters hurt you? I'll kill him." Anger scored his mouth.

Gosh, he looked like an avenging Greek god. His face was black as thunder. "In a manner of speaking." Calum was in his riding gear and there was something so commanding about a man in hessians. Or was it the muscled thighs above the dark leather? "Please don't fuss. He made me walk all afternoon."

Only then did Calum sit back on the floor next to her. "Did you not ask him to let you rest?"

"No."

Calum cursed. “But why are you sitting here on the floor?”

Before she could answer, Turnbull arrived. “Stanford is not in at present, Lady Alice. Perhaps I could...”

Calum looked between Alice and Turnbull, and saw the situation clearly. He swore before scooping Alice into his arms and carrying her upstairs.

“I don’t know why you’re so angry. I told you this was a terrible idea. I am not like other ladies.”

Her cheeks flushed with a blend of embarrassment, but with a gracious nod, she accepted his gallant gesture, feeling a rush of butterflies in her stomach as his powerful arms enveloped her delicately.

Calum’s touch was both reassuring and stimulating as he lifted her with the utmost care, ensuring her comfort as they began the ascent up the ornate staircase. Alice couldn’t help but steal glances at his profile, illuminated by the soft glow of the flickering candles lining the walls.

Their proximity ignited a palpable tension, a silent exchange of unspoken sentiments lingering between them. Alice found herself captivated by the subtle scent of his cologne, the warmth of his breath against her cheek, and the steady rhythm of his steps, each one resonating with a quiet strength.

As they reached the top of the staircase, Alice felt a pang of disappointment, realizing their brief but intimate moment was coming to an end.

He strode in silence to the edge of her bed and held her, his eyes searching her face as if he wanted to learn something. “I’m angry because you should have told Walters you needed to rest. I bet he had no idea you were in such agony. Why did you do

that?”

She couldn't look at him. The heat from his body, his arousing scent, sucked in on each breath, and the strong arms holding her as if she weighed nothing set her body on edge. She couldn't concentrate.

“Well?”

“I didn't want to let you down. If I had to ask him to allow me to rest, he'd know my issues and you seem to want me to shine. I'm not shiny, I'm tarnished.”

She couldn't tell what he was thinking, as she dared not look at him. Slowly he lay her on the bed and, still leaning over her, he used his hand to cup her chin and made her look at him. “Never do that again. I don't expect you to be anything other than who you are. A man good enough for you will love you just the way you are.” And then he pressed a swift kiss to her cheek. She went still as stone. He'd kissed her. Why?

Before she could find her voice, he straightened. “I have a meeting with George. We have a chess wager to discuss.”

“You just won against him.”

He laughed. “Not against George, with George. We're teaming up to take on Lord Southfields and Lord Crispen. Our chess prodigy against theirs.”

She rose on her elbows as she heard her lady's maid Betsy organize her bath. “Who is your prodigy?” Did he just wince?

“George and I have backed John Cazenove.”

“Oh dear, then I gather the lords have Jacob Sarratt? Sarratt’s the better player. He has developed some interesting plays. You’ll need all the help you can get.” And she lay down, tiredness and pain making her a tad dizzy.

Suddenly, her bed dipped beside her. “Do you know these new moves? Could you coach Cazenove for us?”

She flung her arm over her eyes. “Ask me tomorrow when I’m feeling better. Right now, I’m not inclined to do you any favors. Your meddling is very upsetting.”

He didn’t move or say anything. Finally, she removed her arm from where she’d flung it across her face and looked at him.

“Will you help us if I promise not to introduce you to anyone you don’t approve of? I’ll still be your advocate in the marriage mart, but I promise no more, Lord Walters.”

That sounded interesting. “I agree on one condition.” At his raised eyebrow, she continued. “You keep Lady Penelope away from George.”

That saw the smile wiped off his face. “How am I supposed to do that without seeming as if I’m interested in the young lady myself? Which I absolutely am not. I don’t want to find myself leg shackled, let alone to a woman such as her.”

She could see Betsy hovering near the entrance to her bathing chamber. She sat up and slid her legs over the side of her bed. “I’m sure you’ll think of something, given how clever you were thinking up a plan to see me launched into society. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to bathe before the water gets cold.”

He rose to take his leave. “I’ll have to be super clever to defeat a woman as hell bent on marriage such Lady Penelope. I wouldn’t put it past her to try to trap me into marriage.”

Alice's heart flipped, and she thought it best to remain sitting. She couldn't bear to think of either Calum or George married to that snake. Perhaps she'd made a mistake in her challenge. Calum should stay away from Penelope, too.

Watching him depart with a mix of longing and admiration, Alice couldn't help but drink in his fine form. He was correct in his thinking that Penelope would stoop to anything to get what she wanted. Only now, Alice couldn't bear it if it was Calum that Penelope chose to target for marriage. A dreadful thought flashed through her head. Which man did she save?

Dear God, Alice. Not George. But neither should it be Calum.

Her heart sped up. But Calum? Why should she care? Calum would never think of her as wife material either. Too much the sister.

You want him for yourself. What a ridiculous thought.

"I can't really blame Penelope. Isn't it ironic that a young lady has to think about matrimony the minute she is out of the schoolroom? But a lord tries everything to avoid the noose for as long as he can. It puts us all in conflict from the start."

He turned and smiled that knee quaking smile of his before saying, "You're probably the only young lady I know who is not manipulating the marriage mart to her advantage."

She shrugged. "No. You're doing it for me."

His smile fled like a mouse being chased by a cat. "You are not manipulating. You are merely exposing your finer qualities that no one seems to have noticed."

"I wonder why no one's noticed," she said under her breath, rubbing her twisted leg.

Calum ignored her comment. “Cazenove will be at my house at eleven tomorrow. Please get George to escort you.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t be seen entering a bachelor’s house unescorted.

“I’ll go and find your brother. I hope your leg is feeling better soon. Until tomorrow.” On a smile that could melt snow, let alone her guarded heart, he took his leave.

Betsy arrived to aid her in undressing for her bath. Her maid already had the salve ready to rub into her leg afterwards, and she couldn’t wait.

As she soaked in the soothing hot water, Calum’s words about entrapment roared through her head. She could not shake the idea that is exactly what Lady Penelope would do.

It was up to Alice to save her brother, and his best friend, from Penelope’s machinations. She’d become Penelope’s shadow and forestall any dubious plan.

* * *

Calum’s anger built again as he descended the stairs toward George’s study. His hands clenched into fists. He really would like to find Walter and thrash him for his inconsideration of Alice, but knew it would hurt his cause of trying to make society see her as he saw her. That she was a young woman worthy of any man’s attention.

When he’d arrived to find her on the floor, the pain on her face had driven him to his knees. He’d wanted to pull her into his arms and protect her.

His foot hesitated on the last step.

He could protect her. He could marry her himself. He’d already catalogued her

suitability. She was the one woman that had never tried to trap him, manipulate him or even shown any romantic interest in him at all. Alice was perfect for a man who thought love was merely an annoying four letter word. She had no notions of romance. So his heart would never be threatened, torn up and shredded again.

She would make him a perfect wife. Intelligent, easy to get along with, they were already firm friends... and he did find her attractive.

He hated feeling like he was being hunted. Every ball saw him as the target of many mamas' machinations. In his younger, less experienced days, he'd let a young lady into his heart, only to learn that she'd wagered with the debutantes of the season that she could snag a duke. She had no feelings for him except for his potential title. He'd overheard her say, "A duke's a duke even if he has a lowly Scottish title."

Alice didn't care about titles or money. What did she care about?

He needed to learn more about the woman he'd always thought of as a sister. He critically observed that she was pretty, and the feel of her curves in his arms had been unsettling. Her breasts were high and full. Her waist was small and her hips nicely rounded. In the cold, dispassionate light of day, she was a woman who could stir any man's desire. He didn't care about her limp. A limp didn't matter lying down.

Something stirred within him. The image of Alice lying naked on his bed. Her reddish fair hair spread across his pillows and her creamy skin was his to touch and taste. He froze. He wanted her.

But he also wanted to travel. To adventure into the wide world before duty took over. He could do both. They could simply have a long engagement. She would be happy to wait, he was sure.

Now all he had to do was talk to George and get his approval. His friend would never

object. He was about to enter George's study when he heard his friend bounding up the stairs toward him.

“What's that grin on your face?”

He followed George into his study and took a seat. The late Lord Hampton's portrait hung above the fire and he thought he could see him smiling down at him as if he approved of his idea. “I have a story to tell, but I require a brandy first.”

Page 4

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Chapter Four

Alice's leg was still too sore to walk the block to the Duke of Galloway's townhouse, so George conveyed them in his carriage. Calum didn't take his own town house in London because his parents rarely travelled so far south any more. He stayed at his father's town house. Often, one of his many brothers was also in residence. She loved his brothers. Alasdair, the youngest, was her age, twenty-two. He was earning quite the reputation as a heartbreaker. Sowing his wild oats, she supposed many would call it. He was going to accompany Calum on his trip abroad.

She liked the idea of Calum having Alasdair with him. They would protect each other and ensure neither did anything too irresponsible.

As the servant helped her down from the carriage, she smoothed her gown. Betsy had taken more care of her dress this morning. She refused to acknowledge that Calum was the reason she'd asked Betsy to make her look her best. You're setting yourself up for heartache, my girl.

For one, Calum was going off on his trip abroad and was most definitely not thinking about marriage. And secondly, she bit her lip, he could have any woman he wanted. Why on earth would he want her? Nobody else did.

But they should. Want her, that is. She was a good person and she was not ugly, not beautiful like Penelope, but she was pretty. She tried to calm her nerves as she was announced into the library. The first person she saw was Calum as he stood to welcome them.

His eyes raked over her and lit with... was that approval? “Lord Hampton and Lady Montague, welcome. May I present John Cazenove?”

Her favorite chess champion bowed over her hand and the tips of his ears reddened when she said, “I’ve always wanted to meet you. Your skill at the game is legendary. It’s a privilege to watch you play.”

“I have placed a chair here for you.” Calum escorted her to her seat. “I’ve rung for some tea as well.” His hand brushed her lower back as she took her seat, sending tingles down her spine. He smiled at her as if she were the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

She was the only woman here. That is just how he smiles, she silently scolded.

Once she settled in a position that gave her a clear view of the board, her brother sat opposite John, while Calum sat beside John. As per usual, the men soon forgot she was there.

As the chess pieces shifted on the board, the gentlemen leaned over, discussing their strategic moves in low, authoritative tones. George and Calum were engrossed in the game, listening to John’s play piece by piece, analyzing potential maneuvers and counterattacks with intense focus. However, there was one move she could not let pass.

“Apologies, gentlemen, but that move will cause your bishop to be exposed and within another few moves it will be checkmate.”

Cazenove’s head snapped up, totally confused. He looked between Calum and George, obviously waiting for them to suggest she remain silent. Calum looked like he would enjoy this, and simply sat back and shrugged at Cazenove. The chess champion looked at Alice. “Chess is a game of intellect and calculation, best suited

for the minds of men,” he remarked, with a thinly veiled air of annoyance, gesturing subtly toward Alice.

However, he took his fingers off the bishop and sat back to review the board. After several minutes, his fingers moved toward the knight.

Alice, undeterred by the gentleman’s dismissive tone, leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the board. “If I may, gentlemen,” she interjected politely, “that move will expose your king to a potential threat.”

Cazenove’s eyebrows arched in evident disbelief. He regarded her with a hint of condescension. “My dear lady, chess requires a profound understanding of strategy and foresight, qualities not typically associated with the fairer sex.”

Undeterred by his skepticism, she pointed to a square on the board, explaining her reasoning with precision. “But, sir, consider the vulnerability it presents to your position here.” She threw a heated gaze at both her brother and Calum. Why didn’t they explain why she was here? Did they wish to hide the fact they’d engaged her to help Cazenove? They obviously hadn’t told the man. This was ridiculous.

Cazenove’s expression remained stoic, though a flicker of surprise flashed across his features as he studied the board. “Your enthusiasm is commendable, Lady Alice. However, chess is a game for astute minds. Your insights, while charming, may lack the depth required for such intricate maneuvers.”

Alice’s temper flared and didn’t Calum just love it. He tried to hide a smile while George continued to study the board. She leaned back, her composure unwavering. “Very well, sir. I defer to your expertise.” Let Cazenove lose. If the men wouldn’t speak up for her, then what did she care?

They played on until Cazenove made another move she deemed so inferior she

couldn't take it anymore. She tsked and stood. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I have other things to do with my time than stay here where my thoughts are obviously not wanted." It was hard to storm out when you had a limp and couldn't walk very fast but she held her head high and gave it her best.

Calum followed and drew her into his study, closing the door behind him. She swung around and hit out at his chest. "You are so infuriating. Why bring me here if you didn't tell him I was there to help?"

Calum captured her tiny hands in his while he laughed. "I couldn't tell him or he wouldn't have come."

"Well, it is a waste of my morning."

"No, it isn't. I was waiting for you to expound your plays once more before suggesting he play against you. That will prove you can match him and he will learn to listen."

"Or he'll be humiliated and leave. Then you'd forfeit the bet."

"It would be worth it to see you win," he whispered softly, and something other than a look of friendship entered his eyes and she could barely breathe.

He stood too close. The very maleness of him overwhelmed her. He still held her hands and made to pull away, but her hands didn't come free. Instead, she was conscious of her rapidly beating heart and his finger stroking the exposed skin at her wrist. He was too handsome for her... He was too everything for her...

They stood there. All she could hear was her breathing. She looked at him, frozen by his heated gaze. She quickly closed her eyes and prayed he'd kiss her, while a part of her prayed he didn't. Then she felt the soft press of his lips on hers and this time she

prayed her legs wouldn't buckle.

The kiss held a delectable light pressure; slow, erotic, and so indescribable, she simply lost herself in its magic. The pressure of his lips deepened as his arms came around her. Parting her lips, his tongue slid into her mouth, creating an intense yearning inside her that only added to the dizzying lightheadedness surrounding her.

Nothing about the kiss made sense. Yet, everything about what she felt made sense. She couldn't resist the powerful pull of feelings that swamped her body. She pressed into his embrace, and it was heavenly to be held against his muscled hardness.

As his tongue stroked provocatively against hers, her senses aroused further and the feelings of desire she'd always felt for Calum flew free. On a whimpering sigh, Alice surrendered.

In response, his kiss only deepened.

Her hands, still caught between his chest and hers, crept around his neck and sank into his thick, silky hair. He kept kissing her, fanning the flames of passion with experienced strokes of his tongue, slowly driving, deliciously plundering. Please never end.

Suddenly, his lips were gone, and he pushed her from his embrace and only then did she hear the latch to the room slowly turn.

She turned away to gather herself, desperately trying to stop her limbs from shaking.

"There you are," George said as he stood in the doorway. "Well, have you convinced her to return and take on Cazenove in a game?" He asked Calum, before turning to face her. "I've got him to agree to play against you by offering him more money, but I win the money back when you beat him, Alice."

Silence lengthened as she tried to gather her wits. She still felt dazed, and Calum's kisses left her yearning for more, but why had he kissed her? Was it only to get her to agree to play Cazenove? She shook her head. No. She would have done that for the thrill of it, and Calum would know that.

His voice wasn't even shaky as Calum answered her brother. "Of course, she agreed. She's excited and nervous to take on such a renowned player." She finally turned to face him and found his gaze fixed on her, measuring, as he slowly turned to stroll from the room. He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "Are you coming?" he asked, his eyes unreadable.

After a moment, she forced her legs to move and walked to the doorway where both men waited. Alice let out a breath as she brushed past Calum, quickly preceding them back to the library and a chess game she had to win. She could feel his eyes spearing her back and she hated how her limp became more pronounced with each step.

Once seated, she tried to concentrate on the game, but all she could see was Calum sitting behind Cazenove. He sat there calmly, as if he'd not turned her world upside down mere moments ago. She, however, still shook.

And now she had to beat Cazenove while all she could think about, or remember, was the taste of him.

She started off poorly, making several beginner's mistakes. Several times she caught herself tracing her finger over her lips and she quickly put her hands under the table on her lap. A few hours later she was holding up against Cazenove, but only just. She needed a rest.

Cazenove exchanged knowing glances with her brother and Calum, silently asserting the superiority of his play. Yet, as the game progressed, there lingered a faint curiosity in his expression—a grudging acknowledgment of Alice's potential prowess

in a domain he considered exclusively his.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I am tired and wish to halt for the day.”

Her brother immediately jumped to his feet as he glanced at the clock above the mantle. “Goodness, I was so caught up in the game I didn’t realize how late it is. I’m expected at my club shortly.”

“I can see your sister home, after I organize a hackney for Cazenove. Shall we say tomorrow afternoon at three to further the session?”

Cazenove stood and nodded. “I owe Lady Alice an apology. She is proving to be a most challenging player. I look forward to battling against her. She has already taught me a new move. With her help, we will be ready to take on my opponent and win this wager.”

Alice wanted to protest. The men were organizing her schedule as if she had nothing better to do. You don’t have anything better to do. Calum must have noted her disquiet because he suddenly said, “Does three suit you, Lady Alice?”

She sniffed. “I have an appointment in the morning, but I shall look to accommodate your requirements in the afternoon.” She tried to ignore the fact she would have no gentleman callers asking to escort her around the park.

“Thank you.” Calum said. “Wait while I see to Mr. Cazenove’s hackney.”

Her sore leg gave her little choice.

Once the men left, she studied the chess board once more. This time she could think, because Calum wasn’t watching her. She concentrated on the moves Cazenove had made today and, as if lightning had struck, she could see what his game plan was.

Unfortunately, Jacob Sarratt would see it too. Could she come up with a plan he would not see? She barely noticed Calum's return as she studied the board. When she did finally sit back, she had a plan. "I know how to beat Jacob, or at least give Cazenove a fighting chance. I would prefer to test my strategy with Cazenove if he will listen to me."

"Don't worry, Cazenove will listen. I'll make sure of that. You look tired. I bet your sore leg made it difficult to sleep last night. Come, I'll take you home."

She was tired and she was looking forward to a night at home. Perhaps another soak in her bath might ease the pain some more.

By the time they descended the stairs, Calum's carriage awaited. He handed her in, and to her surprise, he also entered and took the seat across from her. "I don't need you to escort me. I'm sure I'll be safe with your tiger and groomsman for such a short distance around the corner."

Calum merely stared at her for a few moments. "I thought we should discuss the kiss we shared earlier."

Her face heated, and she looked away from his prying eyes. "What is there to discuss? It was a mistake, obviously." He didn't speak, and the silence lengthened. His searching perusal was most unsettling, as if she had done something wrong. "I'm sure it was the heat of our argument and you merely wished to quieten me."

To her surprise, Calum leaned forward and raised a hand to touch her cheek. "Why is it you think so lowly of yourself that you cannot fathom why a man would want to kiss you? Has society been that cruel to you?"

Discomforted, Alice drew back. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

He sat back on the squab. “I suspect those such as Lady Penelope have not been kind.”

Alice looked away once more, not wanting to recall the bullying and taunting she received from Lady Penelope and her friends. “I have her measure.”

“I’m sure you do, but you shouldn’t have to. You do realize they do it out of jealousy. You are one of the most beautiful debutantes this season.”

He thinks I’m beautiful. Her breathing was erratic, as she couldn’t help but look at him. His eyes held heat that made her senses reel, but to her horror, pity too. “I don’t need you kissing me out of pity.” Warmth rose to her face, as he didn’t deny her statement.

Thankfully, they were home. He got out first, and she had to wait for him to help her from the carriage.

As he handed her down, he spoke her name in a husky murmur as he bent his head to her ear so only she could hear. “If it was a kiss solely out of pity, why do I desperately want to kiss you again?”

She saw the truth in his heated gaze, and suddenly the evening grew lighter. But as she drew back, his expression was enigmatic, unreadable, and her confusion sent her head into a dizzying spin.

“Good night, Lady Alice. Until tomorrow,” and he kissed her gloved hand and reentered the carriage, softly calling out, “Pleasant dreams.”

Managing a faint smile, Alice picked up her skirts and fled into the safety of the house as fast as she could on a gammy leg.

With George at his club, she had dinner on her own, pondering why Calum was taking such an interest in her. For the first time in her life, she had gained Calum's attention. Something she'd only ever dreamed of.

Now that she had it, what did she want to do? Firstly, she must ascertain if he was simply amusing himself in his plan to make her popular and find an appropriate husband, or if there was more.

She hugged a smile to herself. When he'd kissed her, they'd had no audience to impress. It would seem the kiss was for his pleasure alone.

And wasn't that just so exciting!

Chapter Five

The following morning, Sarah collected Alice and they set out for a turn in the park in Sarah's new barouche. Her father had bought it for her as a coming out present. The carriage itself was lavishly decorated, adorned with intricate carvings, ornate detailing, and painted in rich colors. The exterior was a dark hue, deep green, accented with gold trimmings. It was a carriage to be seen in, hence why her father had bought it. He wanted his daughter noticed and married by the end of the season.

At least George didn't try to marry her off as fast as possible. Alice felt sorry for her friend, who was made to feel as if she was a nuisance in the family home.

The horses pulling the barouche were a key part of the spectacle. They were high-stepping, well-groomed, and matched in color and stature. These horses were meticulously groomed, their harnesses adorned with shining brass fittings, and their manes and tails styled elaborately.

The horses were fine beasts. Her accident hadn't made her hate horses. She'd even fed one a small sugar cube as she waited to be handed into the barouche.

As the sleek barouche glided through the winding paths of Hyde Park, Sarah and Alice reclined comfortably, the gentle swaying of the carriage complementing their animated conversation.

"Did you hear about the latest match orchestrated between Lord Everton and Miss Worthington?" Sarah inquired, her eyes bright with anticipation for the gossip to unfold. Sarah, her curls bouncing as the carriage moved, leaned forward slightly.

“The whispers suggest it’s all but settled. Miss Worthington’s dowry is said to rival the size of the manor itself.”

“A perfect match, then,” Alice mused, her gaze drifting towards a cluster of elegantly dressed individuals sauntering along the park’s edge. “Ah, there’s the Duchess of Devonshire, resplendent in that new French gown. Have you seen anything more divine?” Alice may have a limp, and be a wallflower because of it, but she still loved fashion. She took pride in her gowns and presentation. Always trying to look her best in case a man decided to overlook her impediment.

Sarah followed her friend’s glance, nodding in agreement. “Exquisite, truly. I must inquire about her modiste; the French seem to possess the secret to unparalleled elegance.”

The conversation seamlessly shifted to the latest fashion trends, each lady sharing tidbits of information gleaned from various salons and society events. They discussed the delicate lace embellishments adorning the newest gowns, the resurgence of vibrant colors, and the merits of various milliners and dressmakers.

“And there’s Lord Harrington with Lady Penelope, both on horseback if you please,” Sarah noted, gesturing discreetly toward a pair riding along the nearby horse path. “They make quite the striking couple, don’t they?”

Alice nodded in agreement, while hoping the pair did not see them. “Indeed, but he’s her second cousin. Rumors of Lady Penelope’s secret correspondence with the Viscount of Wexford have also been circulating, but I suspect she’ll only settle for a much loftier title.” Dear me. It appeared she could be spiteful too. But the fact Penelope definitely had her eye on both her brother, George, and Calum, made her snarky. It would seem Penelope wanted all gentlemen to fall at her feet.

And she’d get them, most likely too! Her beauty saw many overlook obvious flaws in

her personality. You are not jealous of that horrible woman.

“Men are pathetic!” Sarah exclaimed, her hand flying to her chest in mock shock.

“Why is it that a woman who is so spiteful can so easily fool the men?”

“That’s easy. Men only look at the outer package. A woman who has good breeding is beautiful and would give them children. There are few gentlemen who look for love in a marriage. If they did, they most certainly wouldn’t want Lady Penelope.”

“Can we turn off here?” But it was too late. Penelope had spotted them and cantered over with Lord Harrington beside her. “Blast. We’ll have to stop and converse with her,” Sarah sighed.

“Good morning, ladies. Out on your own this morning?” Penelope said smugly.

In other words, they had no men asking them for a ride in the park. Yet she was only here with a second cousin and a viscount at that.

“A chance for a ladies only outing. To catch up with the season’s news.” Sarah answered her smiling, but her hands clenched into fists.

“I would have thought it more exhilarating to ride.” Penelope paused for effect. “But then, Lady Alice being a cripple probably prevents such a thing.” Sarah drew a sharp intake of breath, but Alice clutched her arm before her friend could protest on her behalf.

“We could have ridden, but we knew we would talk too much.” Alice said with a smile forced onto her face.

“Are you saying you can ride?” Penelope asked dubiously.

“Of course. Side saddle doesn’t require much strength in my leg.” Even Sarah seemed surprised at her declaration.

Penelope frowned. “Then perhaps we could go riding one morning. Your brother could accompany us.” Sarah and Alice looked at each other. She was about to reply when Calum and George arrived on two large black horses. “Oh, I was just inviting Alice to ride with me tomorrow, and I was hoping Lord Hampton could join us.”

George looked puzzled at Penelope’s statement. “A ride? With Alice?”

“I explained to Lady Penelope that I’m quite capable of riding.”

“We did wonder because she’s a cripple. I’m sure that’s what Penelope said,” Lord Harrington added without thought. Penelope’s face reddened.

It didn’t take Calum long to realize Penelope had goaded Alice into admitting she could ride. The fact that he knew she’d not ridden since her accident ten years ago, due to the fall that broke her leg so badly, they worried she wouldn’t survive. The bone had broken through the skin and no doubt she had a huge scar, especially as the wound got infected.

Twelve years ago, he and George blamed themselves for jumping the dangerously high hedge, wanting to escape their little shadow. They had no idea that twelve-year-old Alice would try to follow with such terrible consequences. Mercifully, she’d been knocked senseless from the fall, but he could still remember her screaming as they reset the leg and stitched her wound.

Alice’s pleading stare saw him say, “Unfortunately, Lady Alice has agreed to go riding with me tomorrow.” Alice’s shoulders relaxed, but she remained silent, not prepared to say anything that could add to the lie.

George, catching on to Calum's gallant attempt to help Alice, said, "Perhaps you'd agree to a ride in the park with me tomorrow, Lady Penelope?"

Alice frowned and if her eyes could shoot daggers, she would spear Penelope.

"That would be lovely. Thank you, Lord Hampton. Shall I expect you at ten?"

George nodded his head.

Lord Harrington looked bored and not at all concerned that the lady he was riding in the park with would ride with another man tomorrow. "Come on, Pen. Zeus here needs a good run."

"Good day," and Penelope cantered off with a huge smile on her face.

"Oh, I hate that woman," Sarah said. Alice patted her arm.

George turned to Alice. "What on earth was that about? You haven't ridden since your accident."

"She didn't ask if I rode. She implied I couldn't. I could if I wanted to."

"But you don't want to. You're petrified of being on a horse," her brother said.

"Lady Penelope doesn't have to know that," she retorted. She swung to look at Calum. "While I appreciate what you were trying to do, you've now made it so George will have to escort Penelope in the park, and when she doesn't see me riding there at least once, she'll think I was lying."

"Then we shall have to prove to her that you can ride." He watched as fear entered Alice's eyes. "I'll help you and we will take it slowly. No one will force you." She

didn't look any happier. "Come to my house this afternoon, before the chess match and we can start. You know I have a large stable in town and a very safe walled garden to practice in. No fences. I promise."

"What sort of horses do you have, though?"

Sarah answered. "I have Toby in my stable. He's the pony I learned to ride upon. He's not very big, and has such a lovely temperament. You may borrow him. He's getting bored and needs a bit of exercise. I'll get Sam, our groom," she said, nodding to the man standing on the carriage runner behind, "to bring him around to Lord Skye's stable as soon as we get home."

He watched Alice closely. Would she decline? Then her shoulders squared and he could tell she really wanted to face this fear. He suspected she hated being scared to ride. In fact, she'd hate being scared of anything.

"That could work. Thank you, Sarah. Thank you, Calum. And George, I'm sorry I put you in this situation where you have to ride with Lady Penelope."

"I'm sure I'll survive," he said dryly, but the look he sent to Calum was one that said he owed his friend for this.

* * *

A lady never looked her best with bags under her eyes. Alice's lack of sleep was compounded by a churning stomach as she prepared for today's horse riding trial. Calum had challenged her to face her fear. He knew she was petrified of riding, but he'd made her agree in front of witnesses.

Sitting in the opulent dining room, her gaze fixed on the crackling fire, memories of that fateful day flooded her mind. The warmth from the flames couldn't dispel the

chill that accompanied the recollection of that harrowing incident from her childhood.

She traced the delicate porcelain of her teacup absentmindedly, transported back to the vibrant greens of summer at their family estate, to the day she dared to follow her elder brother and his friend as they raced across the estate. She had ridden her beloved mare, Primrose.

The memory was vivid. She had been determined to keep up with her brother. The thrill of the wind in her hair, the pounding of hooves against the soft earth, the rush of adrenaline as Primrose cleared the first hedge effortlessly. But then came the second, much higher hedge. She remembered hearing the young men ahead of her screaming at her not to take the jump, but she ignored them so caught up in the joy of the chase. Suddenly, Primrose clipped the hedge and landed awkwardly. Alice remembered flying through the air, and hitting the ground with a sudden jolt, the sickening snap of bone as she hit the ground in a whirl of pain.

She must have lost consciousness because the next thing she remembered was being transported on the back of a wagon, her father holding her hand while George and Calum looked green about the gills.

Searing agony had torn through her leg, the sharpness of every breath adding to her pain due to a couple of broken ribs, as she lay there, crumpled and broken. Her brother's frantic rush, the anguish etched on her parents' faces, the distant sounds of her own screams, all echoed in her mind like a haunting melody.

She recalled the journey to the manor, the agony of each jostle in the carriage as it carried her towards the house, the fear that gripped her heart tighter with every passing moment. The estate's physician, a man of skill and precision, had worked swiftly to set the fractured bone, but not swiftly enough. She lost her voice from screaming.

The pain was unyielding, so they'd dosed her with laudanum. She remembered the needle and thread piercing her skin as they sewed the stitches, the sharp tugging sensation reminding her of her recklessness.

She looked at the clock on the mantle. Sipping her tea, the delicate cup trembled slightly in her grip, a testament to the lingering impact of that long-ago day. Though years had passed and the bone had healed, her leg was a mess with an ugly red scar. The wound had got infected and it was never certain she'd survive. Long skirts covered the deformity of her skin on her leg, but the limp was on display for all to see.

The memory of that excruciating pain remained etched in the very marrow of her being, a reminder of the consequences of youthful impetuosity. She'd never ridden again.

She drew in a deep breath, banishing the memories back into the recesses of her mind, and returned her attention to the present. Both Calum and George still blamed themselves. That's why they were so tolerant of her.

That's why Calum wanted to help her ride again. Guilt.

She would have to face her deepest, darkest fears today. In front of Calum. Could she do this? Maybe she was feeling under the weather today? Perhaps she'd send her apologies, but then she'd miss the chess match and Cazenove really needed her.

She couldn't think straight since she'd had so little sleep. She rubbed her leg absently.

Deep down inside, she knew she wanted to try. She'd loved riding, and since she could do little else in the way of activities, riding would give her freedom to be outdoors. To mix with others without the hindrance of her limp.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:00 am

Chapter Six

She reminded herself of her internal conversation as she stood in the Duke of Galloway's stable yard with his son. Calum tried to take her mind off what they were about by discussing chess tactics, but as soon as Toby was led out to the walled garden, icy fear had her shivering.

"He's not saddled, as I suspect we won't really be doing any riding today. It's only to get you used to a horse or pony today." Calum excused the groom and took hold of Toby's bridle. "Let's just start by walking Toby around the garden. He's a gentle pony."

The pounding in her heart eased when it became obvious that Calum wasn't expecting her to mount Toby immediately. They set off for a few laps of the garden and soon she was leading Toby all by herself. She even stopped and fed him an apple. He liked the attention and nudged her with his nose, so she rubbed it.

"How about I ride him first?"

She laughed. "Isn't he a little small for you? Your legs might hit the ground."

Calum merely grinned and swung onto the pony's back. Toby merely grunted when he told him to walk on. Calum looked like an idiot upon the pony. His legs didn't hit the ground, but it was close.

"Thank you."

He shrugged. "I'm partly to blame for you being afraid."

"No. You're not." She shielded her eyes against the sun because she'd stupidly not worn her bonnet. "How did you guess I was afraid?"

"I'm ashamed to say I hadn't thought about it until yesterday in the park when you declared you could ride. It was obvious to me that you could and if you didn't ride, it must be because you were afraid. You used to love riding and I hate that you've lost that."

"I hate it too. May I have a try?"

His face awash with joy, he dismounted and carefully lifted her onto Toby's back. Nerves almost got the better of her, but Calum walked beside her, and Toby, as if understanding her fear, plodded slowly around the grassed area.

They came to a stop under a large oak tree, where the shade was welcoming. "That's enough for today. Besides, you probably need some refreshment before we start the chess match."

He reached up to help her dismount, lifting her from Toby as if she weighed less than a feather. The feel of his strong arms about her sent her senses reeling. He held her longer than was necessary before gently putting her on her feet. He still didn't step back and her breasts were almost touching his chest. She licked her lips and heat flared in his eyes.

"Thank you for doing this for me. It's most kind."

He brushed a curl from her cheek. "George and I should have thought to help you long ago. I should have guessed why you never rode again."

“I probably wouldn’t have been ready to try before. The memories have faded somewhat, or maybe I remember the pain differently.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. We shouldn’t have teased you so, and we should have known you would try to follow us over a dangerous jump.” He offered her his arm and they walked Toby to the stable yard, handing him to the groom. She patted his nose and talked softly to Toby, saying she’d be back.

As they entered the house Calum’s brother Lord Alasdair met them in the foyer. “Good morning, Alice. You look very pretty today. Is George with you?”

“No. I assume he’s still abed, considering the hour he got home.” She pressed a kiss to Alasdair’s cheek and Calum’s jaw tightened. For some reason, Alice was the most relaxed and informal with his younger brother and he envied their closeness. Calum didn’t like the kiss or the smile Alice bestowed on his brother. Why?

“What are you doing in the company of Calum?” Alasdair asked.

“Your brother kindly offered to help me overcome my fear of riding.”

Alasdair’s gaze flew to his, and the look was one of astonishment. “I see.” It was clear to Calum that he didn’t. “I didn’t know we had a suitable horse in the stables.”

“Oh, my friend Lady Sarah Abbottsford has lent me her pony, Toby.”

Alasdair raised an eyebrow. “And George is not overseeing your lessons?”

Calum stepped forward to intervene in the conversation, especially since the query had sent alarm flashing across Alice’s face as she too suddenly thought of the same question. “George had other commitments. I was happy to help.”

“Yes, I had heard you were being very helpful.” Calum narrowed his eyes at his brother. Alasdair understood his mood and changed the topic. “I saw the chess wager in the book at White’s,” Alasdair grinned. “Risky taking on Sarratt. Cazenove is good and plays more often, but Sarratt’s strategic abilities usually outclass any opponent. I’m not sure who to back.”

“You’ll lose your money if you back Sarratt. George and I have a secret weapon.”

Alasdair looked at Calum as if he was an idiot. “Interesting. Do tell.”

“It’s me,” Alice said smugly.

Alasdair burst into laughter until he realized no one else was laughing. His laughter died. “You’re serious?”

Alice wrinkled her nose at Alasdair. “If you’d like to attend today’s session with Cazenove, I shall show him how I’ll have him at checkmate in three moves, but by all means, wager on Sarratt. It will be your loss.” She turned to Calum. “May I freshen up before we begin?”

“Of course. You know the way.”

“If you’ll excuse me.”

The two men watched her limp away.

His brother turned to him. “What is going on with you and Alice? There are all sorts of rumors flying about that you are courting her. Is this your damnable honor in play? You still feel guilty for causing her injury?”

Was it? “No. I pushed that guilt deep inside many years ago, realizing I could not

change what happened. This is about ensuring the wallflower blossoms into a rose that others will notice of.”

His brother poked him in his chest. “I like Alice very much, so I hope this plan of yours does not backfire.”

“How could it?”

Alasdair leveled a disappointing look at him. “What if she becomes a rose no man wants to pick? What if you get her hopes up and they are dashed? She’s accepted her position in society and now you’re building her a castle of dreams.”

“I won’t let her get hurt.”

“I don’t see how you can stop that if no man steps forward. What will you do? Marry her yourself?”

That made his eyes kindle. “You are damned inquisitive about something that is none of your affair, brother dear.” He’d never knowingly hurt Alice. But you and George did once before and it ruined her...

“On the contrary, it is my affair. I’m making it so. I won’t see her hurt just because you wish to appease your youthful guilt.”

“Maybe I plan to marry her myself,” Calum retorted archly.

Alasdair didn’t gasp at such an idea. He smiled back at him and nodded. “That would work. She’d make you a good wife.”

Why would she make Calum a good wife? And he wasn’t looking for a wife—good or otherwise—but the idea of marrying Alice didn’t feel that frightening. That in

itself was frightening. He didn't want to marry yet. He had one year of freedom to enjoy before duty took over. Then and only then would he marry. A long engagement perhaps...

Alasdair made to move past him. "Or I could marry her. She has a large dowry and is quite attractive. A good match for a third son."

Calum's hand snaked out and gripped his brother's arm. "You'll leave Lady Alice alone. "

Alasdair's eyes filled with amusement. "I thought finding a husband for Alice was what this show of favoritism within the beau monde was all about. Are you saying I'm not good enough for Alice? If you are, I'd take that as a serious insult."

His hand left his brother's arm and Calum stepped back. Alasdair was teasing him. He made his expression turn impassive. "You would be a perfect choice for Alice. You'd make her a fine husband. I shall put you on my list of acceptable choices. Perhaps you should take on the task of helping Alice get over her fear of riding?"

With a shake of his head, as he began to walk up the stairs, Alasdair said, "Thanks for the warning regarding the chess match. I'll make a fair bit of money when I back Cazenove. I'll leave Lady Alice's riding lessons to you." He stopped on the stairs and looked down. "But you know something? You can put me on the list of potential husbands. The more I think about her situation and mine, I think we could well make a good match." With that his brother continued upwards with a chuckle.

Calum wanted to hit something. Preferably his brother's smug face. He cursed under his breath. Why did the idea of Alasdair and Alice marrying cause him such discomfort? Alasdair was right. The pair would make a fine match. He didn't know why he'd not thought of it before. They liked each other and were good friends.

But as he watched his brother disappear into the library, he knew deep in his heart he couldn't live with Alice as his sister-in-law. He may have got over this unexpected fascination with her if not for the kiss during the chess match. He could still feel the softness of her lips and their sweet taste. Suddenly, Lady Alice was all he could think about.

She was such a breath of fresh air. No artifice when she was with him. No womanly wiles to flirt and entice. That he could relax and be himself around her was liberating. He didn't have to worry about motives or entrapment. Not with Alice.

A frown settled on his face as he made his way to the library. If his 'feelings'...how he hated that word, it seemed so weak. Feelings weren't weak. They had the power to make a man feel as if he'd reached heaven or fallen into the pits of hell. If his feelings had moved from that of seeing her as a sister to something quite different, had Alice's? She hadn't seemed to mind the kiss. She'd been confused, but not offended. In fact, he rather thought she liked the kiss. His lips turned up at the corner.

Cazenove hadn't arrived, and Calum was hungry, and not only for food. He thought he'd partake of the refreshments organized for Alice and perhaps get her alone before Cazenove arrived. Another taste of those sweet lips beckoned. He whistled as he trotted up the stairs.

Alice should have learned by now that nothing good came from eavesdropping. Many times, she'd chanced upon a conversation and heard what others were saying about her and her deformity.

However, as she'd started back down the stairs to ask for a note of thanks to be sent to Sarah, what she heard stung to her core. "You would be a perfect choice for Alice. You'd make her a fine husband. I shall put you on my list of acceptable choices..."

Any hope that their kiss meant anything to Calum withered deep in her breast. Tears

welled as she snuck back up the stairs. Calum didn't hesitate to suggest Alasdair and she marry. He must have been playing with her or perhaps trying to bolster her confidence. His affectionate demonstration was merely a pity kiss.

She wiped hot tears from her cheeks as she hid in the alcove on the landing, anger welling. The large framed windows looked out over the back garden. The flowers looked beautiful and she remembered the gaiety of the ride on Toby. There was no way she would allow Calum to help her ride again. She wanted no man's pity. And especially not his.

On a sigh, she wiped her face, turned around and entered the library, only to find Alasdair inside. She didn't want to face him either, let alone talk to him, after what she'd overheard.

"I hope you don't mind, Lady Alice. I thought I'd sit in on your match with Cazenove."

"You only want to see who to wager on."

He grinned. "A big brother's useful sometimes. Besides, a lowly third son needs to make his own way in this world. Every guinea counts."

Alasdair, with a smile firmly planted on his face, was a sight to behold and as handsome as sin. She'd always liked him and they had an easy friendship, but the idea of marrying him turned her cold. He didn't make her pulse race like one look at Calum did. How on earth could she consider Alasdair for a husband when she lusted after his brother?

"Then I'd place money on Cazenove. Sarratt won't see my play coming."

Alasdair's smile faded and he slumped into a chair. He sat studying her and she could

feel her face heat. “You know, I made a joke earlier with Calum about perhaps asking for your hand, but I’m thinking I should seriously consider such an arrangement.”

Her hands fisted. “As flattering as that statement is I’m not after an arrangement. With anyone.”

“Come now. Surely you’re not suggesting you want a love match?”

Her face heated and must be scarlet. “Are you saying that, because I have a limp, I’m unlovable?”

He looked horrified. “Absolutely not.” He sat up. “No. That’s not what I meant. I meant, who in the Beau monde marries for love?”

Before she could answer, Calum arrived. He took one look at her and turned on Alasdair. “What have you been saying to Lady Alice?”

Alasdair rose to his feet. “If you must know, I was exploring the idea of courting Alice, but it appears she’s looking for love.”

Heat rose higher as unwillingly she met Calum’s gaze. What would he think?

“If that is what she wants, then she should have it.” Her mouth, along with Alasdair’s, dropped open at his response. “Is there someone whom you favor?” he added, amused charm in his ocean blue eyes. She almost reached out and traced the scar on his chin. He’d tripped over the rake, trying to pull his clothes on when she spied on him and her brother in the barn with the milkmaids. He split his chin open. She could still remember crying, thinking he’d bleed to death.

Could he tell that she’d been entertaining lustful thoughts of him for years? That she was already in love with him?

“Well, if you gentlemen would stop gossiping like a pair of young ladies, I’d like to concentrate on the match,” she said as she settled in the chair in front of the black marble pieces. Even with the embarrassment of two men she considered friends bartering over her, excitement skittered around her body as she studied the board and knew she could win.

Before any further comment could be made, Cazenove arrived and the match got underway.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:00 am

Chapter Seven

Could Alice get any hotter? Ladies didn't perspire. Well, she was proving that statement wrong. She could feel liquid running down her back. Her fan was waving continuously. Tonight's ball at Lady Summerton's had drawn a large crowd. The night was unusually warm for late April. Spring had arrived early this year. Why did the French doors to the terrace remain closed? With the number of unwashed bodies and the dancing—well—a lady really did need her fan. And perhaps a peg for her nose.

For Alice, it was doubly uncomfortable because George had once again let Calum escort her and tongues were wagging. She hated the hypocrisy of it all. Calum was playing a role but too many people believed his intentions were serious. She'd end up looking an even bigger fool and she didn't need more of the ton's scorn.

The cream of society was here tonight, jostling and pushing her, and her leg was already aching. One more shove and she'd end up on the floor. Calum had tried to protect her as much as he could, but she'd had so many invites to dance that she needed to rest her leg. Calum was also expected to dance. He'd danced with Lady Penelope and what a sight that was. They did make a stunning couple, yet Alice understood the hideousness under Penelope's skin. Surprisingly, tonight Penelope had been nice to Alice. Very nice. Too nice. It made the hairs on her arms stick up!

But watching Calum being surrounded by a giggling group of beauties was too disheartening. Using the retiring room as an excuse, Alice slipped away. She decided she'd hide for the rest of the ball. She had to stop this nonsense because she was the only one who would get hurt. You're already hurt. Calum is not interested in you.

As she reached adulthood, she thought she'd developed a thick skin. She didn't consider herself inadequate or inferior because of her damaged leg. Yet, it still hurt when others took pleasure in pointing out her deformity. Plus, only she and her lady's maid knew how ugly her leg looked. The puckered skin and red jagged scar were not a pretty sight. Even she hated looking at it. The idea of showing it to a man, let alone Calum, made her stomach cramp.

There was no reason for her to stay. She should simply plead a headache and go home, but then Calum would make a fuss and draw more attention to them both. So she did her usual trick.

After years of being tormented at balls, Alice knew there was one place no one would find her. She headed upstairs to the nursery. Lady Summerton's children were long gone from the home and it would be empty.

She loved sitting in the rocking chair, imagining what it might be like to hold her babe in her arms. Before this silly intervention by Calum, she'd thought getting married and having a child of her own was a mere dream. Any man who might offer for her would do so for connections and her dowry and that was not a good enough reason to marry—not for her. Not even to have a child. She'd realized that when Lord Fenchurch tried to seduce her and George had quickly ascertained it was because he needed money. George had asked her if she wanted such a match, and it was a definite no.

The damaged muscle in her leg was beginning to uncramp and relax when, to her surprise, a footman arrived.

“Lady Alice, pardon for the intrusion, but Lord Calum has taken a turn and is asking for you.”

The painful leg forgotten, Alice jumped to her feet. “Where is he?”

“Lady Summerton’s put him in the green room. I’ll take you.”

Alice limped after him as fast as she could.

Calum ran his hand through his hair for the tenth time. He could not find Alice anywhere in the ballroom. He was responsible for her and if anything had happened... His pulse galloped at the idea. She was in trouble.

“I say, old chap, what’s put that look on your face?” Lord Rossmore asked.

“Have you seen Lady Alice? She’s been missing for over an hour.”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Perhaps she’s having a sit down,” Calum muttered to himself. Her leg would be sore from all the dancing. Not waiting for a reply, he summoned a passing footman. “Is there a room set aside for the ladies to rest in? I can’t seem to find Lady Alice.”

The man answered, “Oh, I have a note here from Lady Alice?—”

“That will be for me.” Calum took the note, read the words, and took off at a sprint.

Calum knew the way to the green room because he’d used it once before. It was known as the ‘discreet’ liaison place at the Summerton’s. It was, in fact, Lord Summerton’s billiard room.

The footman caught him up at the door. “The note’s for Lord Fenchurch, my lord.”

Calum’s blood ran cold. Alice disliked Fenchurch. Was someone setting Alice up for ruin? If she is caught in here with Fenchurch... He opened the door, but the room was empty. He breathed a huge sigh of relief.

He turned to the footman. "Thank you. If you'll excuse me, I shall wait for the lady here."

"As you wish, my lord. Shall I let Lord Fenchurch know?"

"No. I'll talk with him later." There wouldn't be much talking, more like punching, and he'd call him out if he didn't like the man's answers. He took a seat near the window and it wasn't longer than a few minutes before the door flew open and a very distressed Alice limped in. She took one look at him and slumped to the floor, panting. "He said you'd had a turn."

"Did he indeed. And who is he?"

She looked behind her, and a puzzled frown crossed her face. "But he was right behind me..." She turned to look at Calum. "A footman told me you were asking for me as you were unwell." Calum didn't seem pleased to see her. In fact, he looked livid. "What is going on? You are not unwell?"

Calum shook his head. "We'll discuss it on the way home. It's time to leave."

She remained seated on the floor, obviously in pain and her breath ragged. The thought he was unwell had frightened her and he tucked that thought away to ponder later. "May I rest for a moment, please?"

"No." Calum strode across the floor and scooped her into his arms. "We can't be caught in this room together."

A frown settled on her pretty face. "Caught? What on earth is going on?"

"I was just going to ask the same question..." but Lady Penelope's words almost ended in a scream. Lady Penelope, Lady Summerton, and their friends stood in the

doorway. A collective twittering and several gasps filled the air.

It took Alice mere moments to realize the scandalous situation that was developing. She was well and truly ruined. She was in Calum's arms, in a billiard room, unescorted and looking flushed and out of breath. What would they all be thinking?

"Oh, thank goodness you are here, Lady Summerton. My betrothed had a turn, and we were resting here while awaiting the doctor I've summoned. He's taken far too long, so I believe I shall take Lady Alice home and wait for him there. Can you organize for my carriage to be brought around?"

Alice stilled in his arms, and her eyes flew to his handsome face. Had he said betrothed?

"You're betrothed?" Lady Penelope hissed.

"Yes, we are making the announcement tomorrow. I'm thrilled Lady Alice has agreed to become my marchioness."

Alice's head really did begin to swim. What was Calum saying? How would he take all of this back tomorrow?

Lady Summerton stepped forward. "Congratulations, my lord. I've sent a footman to organize your carriage. Perhaps you could wait in the drawing room until it's ready. Let me clear everyone away and then it will be safer to carry Lady Alice down the stairs." And she turned and remarkably managed to send their audience back to the ballroom. Most of them couldn't wait to spread the gossip.

Alice turned her head away from Penelope's murderous stare and hid it against Calum's hard chest as they made their way downstairs. The carriage arrived and he carried her even though she insisted on trying to walk. Soon they settled in Calum's

carriage. Alone. He sat across from her, deep in thought.

“What just happened?”

Calum didn't look at her when he replied. “It appears someone set you up to be compromised.”

“Me? But it's also affected you.”

Then he swung to look at her. “I was not supposed to be there. I intercepted a note, purportedly from you to Lord Fenchurch.”

She gasped. “I never sent a note to that man.”

“I know. I think Lady Penelope did. How did she know to appear in the green room at that moment with Lady Summerton and friends? She expected to find you with Fenchurch.”

Alice growled. “That witch. I'll scratch her eyes out. She wanted to see me ruined and married to that awful man, so she could marry you.” She laughed. “As if you'd ever consider marriage to me.”

“Well, it's a moot point. We will have to marry now.”

He honestly wasn't jesting, she realized, dumbfounded with astonishment. He could not have shocked her more than if he'd caught a star for her. She parted her lips to speak, but nothing came out. She was, for the first time, speechless.

“Pray contain your enthusiasm,” Calum uttered. “It's not every day you become engaged.”

Her world tilted and shook. She couldn't marry Calum knowing he had no feelings other than sisterly affection towards her. She swallowed hard, striving to regain her wits. "Can't we simply wait for the gossip to dissipate and then we could...cry off?"

"How can you ask that of me? I cannot honorably call off the engagement. For a start you would be utterly ruined. And if you debunk, you'll still be utterly ruined. They caught us alone together with you in my arms, looking as if I'd just spent the last hour ravishing you. No other man would ever consider marriage to you, or at least no man you would want for a husband. Certainly no gentleman."

She bit her lip and dwelled on all he was stating, trying to find a way out. There was none, except one. "You and I both know I couldn't possibly be a duchess—let alone your duchess."

Calum gave Alice a penetrating look. "I know nothing of the sort. You are beautiful. You have a large dowry. Your family's breeding is impeccable. Our families are already close. You are intelligent, kind and have a sense of humor. All attributes I find remarkably appealing in a wife."

He thinks I'm beautiful. She heard that and then barely anything else. She shook herself out of the daydream as those words flashed into her head. "But you were not thinking of marriage."

He angled his head to look at her from head to toe. "I admit, this puts a big knife through my plans, but I was always going to have to marry. Heirs, you see, are a requirement of my role as the duke."

Picturing how those heirs would be made sent heat to each extremity. While the thought of sharing a bed with Calum sent equal parts fear and excitement coursing through her, the idea of being married to a man who didn't love her as she loved him, was like someone had dumped a bucket of ice over her head. She had to make him

see this marriage would not work. He shouldn't have to fall on his sword because a witch like Lady Penelope wanted to destroy her. She was unlikely to marry anyway. Calum walking away wouldn't really change her future at all. She was already on the outside of society.

She would appeal to his common sense. "George mentioned you were going on your continental tour. Twelve months of freedom before settling into your future. Can't we have a long engagement and then I call it off?"

Calum felt a decided twinge of exasperation. Why was she fighting him on this? If his father heard about this scandal and thought he was not behaving honorably, his chance of a tour would disappear up the nearest chimney.

What really irked him was the idea that Alice wasn't enamored of a marriage to him. But then, why should he be surprised? One of the reasons he found her interesting was she was probably the only lady within the beau monde who didn't want to be his duchess.

"I can still go on my tour, but after we marry. You could come for some of it—a honeymoon, of sorts." What the hell? He'd just invited her on his once in a lifetime trip. Well, you did just say they would marry. She would be your wife.

Tears welled in her eyes. He hated when women cried and especially one as strong as Alice. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

He moved to sit on the squab next to her. He tipped her chin up so he could look into those sparkling green eyes. "This is not your fault."

"Yes. It is. If you hadn't decided to help me find a husband, Penelope wouldn't have tried to ruin me and inadvertently ruin you."

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, and it made her start. Good. She sat back and sighed. He quietly asked, “How on earth am I ruined?”

“You could marry any woman you wanted. That choice has been taken from you.”

“True. However, I’m quite content.”

Still being a youngish man, he’d never wanted to be tied down to one woman. He wanted his freedom and adventure. In a few years, after bedding many beautiful women, he’d settle down with a ton diamond and do his duty.

But it was only now dawning on him that he didn’t want to be locked into a tedious, insipid, passionless union to continue his illustrious line. It might just be that he’d found his ton diamond, sitting next to him.

“We have a head start on most. We’re friends and there is desire between us.”

She shook her head and pushed at his chest half-heartedly with her delicate, small hand.

Determined to prove his words were not false, he lifted her from the squab and hauled her into his lap, holding her tight against his chest. He ran his finger down her cheek, stopping at her neck. He let his finger rest. “I can feel your pulse beating so hard. That my sweetness is desire. I affect you.” He took her hand and pressed it to his groin. “Just like you affect me. That’s desire and passion. Our bodies can’t deny the truth.”

Then he lowered his lips to hers and showed her how beautiful passion could be. She hesitated for a mere moment before her sweet mouth opened under his. His tongue swept in like a conquering hero. She melted in his embrace. The kiss grew and grew and he wanted her more than he’d wanted anything in his life. And he was rarely

denied.

Besides, she would be his wife.

He eased Alice round to straddle his knees. She didn't say a word, merely raised an eyebrow. "Undo my cravat," he instructed. She fumbled quite a bit so in the end he helped her. He threw the cravat onto the seat opposite. Then he opened his shirt. "Place your hands on my chest." Her hands rose so fast he barely blinked. He didn't have to instruct her further. The feel of her tiny gloveless hands on his skin made him suppress a groan. While she was distracted, Calum slipped his hand to the neckline of her gown. It took a tiny tug to send her breasts tumbling free, held pert and upright by her corset.

Her gaze flew to his. "Fair is fair." And he shivered at the sensual smile she sent him.

He trailed his fingers over the lovely mounds and gently grazed her nipples. The rose-hued buds drew taut, begging for his attentions. She copied his movements with his nipples. She was a fast learner.

She drew a shuddering breath as he cupped her fullness, cradling the weight in his palms. He wanted to hear her cry out his name. He gently kneaded and molded the soft flesh. Her breathing was shallow by the time he circled the peaks with his thumbs. So responsive. He lingered on the engorged crests, teaching her about the power of anticipation. Finally, he gave her what she needed and plucked at the straining buds.

He knew she was aroused, not only from her whimpers, but from the way she was undulating as she sat astride him. Her hands had slid lower, and she was caressing him through his breeches.

He couldn't hold back. He bent and took a nipple into his mouth, and suckled. He ran

his tongue around in slow erotic circles, laving with tender care. Her moans made him harden further.

“I’ve dreamed of doing this since our kiss,” he murmured, finally moving his mouth to her other nipple. “Tasting you is like tasting heaven.” She whimpered and clutched at his shoulders.

“I want more,” she whispered in his ear as she gripped him harder. He almost spilled in his pants. Her lithe, supple body was ripe for his touch, eager even. She felt as if she belonged in his arms. Her heated skin under his hands and mouth drove him mad. His erection throbbed, rigid and swollen with need.

“Sometimes the anticipation is as good as the event.”

She didn’t quite understand what he meant. “Can I feel you?” Without waiting for an answer, she fumbled at the opening of his breeches. When she finally worked him free and held him in her hand, he closed his eyes and kissed her hard. The contact sent a surge of desire rocketing through Calum, masculine, primal, and urgent.

His hands gathered up her skirts and swept up her leg. She stiffened as his hand moved across the puckered skin. One day, he’d show her he didn’t care, but not tonight. They had little time before they reached her house, and he wanted to show her how compatible they were.

His hands slid higher along her thigh and Alice inhaled sharply. He broke the kiss and looked into her heated gaze as his fingers slid through her wet folds. This time it was she who closed her eyes and moaned. She moved her hips closer to his questing fingers.

He found her lips again, thrusting into her mouth in time to his fingers within her body. Her hand caught the rhythm and she stroked her hand on him. Her response

was urgent and needy. She opened her mouth to him, letting him ravish and claim as pleasure soared.

She writhed against his hand, arching into his arms. Desire ran through him like wildfire as her ragged breaths filled his ears. He wanted to lay her down on this squab and drive himself inside her, plunging in hard and deep. She was so slick and swollen and so incredibly tight and hot. His chest tightened while his cock throbbed painfully at the image of making her his forever.

Alice felt as if her world was on fire. His fingers were like wands of magic, making her hips seek some nameless relief. His manhood was silken and hard as rock in her hand and she felt powerful seeing the desire she created.

Panting and flush, feverish with a storm of heat rising to consume her, she let her instincts take over. She flew free and arched convulsively as the world careened around her, eliciting a wild cry of abandon that matched one from Calum. She felt rather than saw he'd found his release too, as warm liquid spilled over her fingers.

She collapsed against his bare chest, reveling in the rapid heartbeat beneath her ear. Her breasts rose and fell against his naked chest as she tried to relive the sensual explosion her body had experienced.

He drew out his handkerchief to clean them both. "That, my darling, is passion. We are well matched, I think. You should marry me. We will have a wonderful life together."

She hid her face against his chest. He was right, but desire didn't mean love. This sensual experience was so out of this world for her, she was sure, was because she loved him. She could never imagine letting any other man do that to her, yet men like Calum slept with many women.

Men did not confuse love with desire and passion. Nor would she.

“Do you have a mistress?” The words were out before she’d had a chance to think.

He tipped her face so she had to look into his eyes. “No. I don’t have a mistress.”

“Have you ever had one?”

This time it was Calum who looked away. “Sometimes, but if I marry, there will be no mistresses.” He hesitated. “Is that your objection to this marriage?”

Without love, how was she to keep him from looking for other women? But it wasn’t her only objection. He didn’t love her.

He took her silence as acceptance. He hugged her tightly. “Sweetness, we will have an excellent marriage. Trust me.” It would probably suit him, that’s true. But she wasn’t sure. Maybe love would come. But what if it didn’t? Or worse, he found someone he could love.

Alice pushed out of his hold and sighed. “Trust is not easily earned and frequently lost.”

“I’d never deliberately hurt you.”

“I know,” and she did. He would never knowingly hurt her but unknowingly... If he didn’t understand the depth of her feelings... Her heart was a fragile organ where Calum was concerned. The pain of watching women flirt with him and the attention he gave to the ton beauties...

“Let me help you right your clothes. We are almost home. You should go up to bed while I talk with George.”

She moved off him, quickly covering her scarred leg that he'd uncovered in his passion. "George might not be home for hours. Why not come back in the morning?"

She wanted to talk to George first. To see if her brother had another solution.

"No, I'll wait. I want to speak to him immediately. We need to look at how best to handle this delicate situation.

Chapter Eight

Calum watched Alice as she limped up the stairs to bed. Irritation stirred at her obvious lack of enthusiasm for this marriage and he had no idea why. Was she in love with another? Did she prefer his brother? He didn't like the tightness in his chest.

Her question about a mistress took him by surprise. He had had mistresses, but the passion he felt for Alice, and her innate response, meant he was pretty sure he wouldn't need another woman's services. He wanted a happy marriage.

His parents hadn't been in love when they married, but they rubbed along well and it was a happy family. He wanted the same. Alice would fit in well.

That reminded him he must write and tell them the good news. They wouldn't make it to London in time for this quick wedding, but he'd have another one at the family estate later.

The front door opened behind him and George entered. By the look on his face, he'd heard the news. "I should run you through, or insist on pistols at dawn, but that won't help my sister."

"Keep your voice down. Alice will hear and it will upset her. This is not the place to have this conversation." And without giving him any choice, he ascended the stairs towards his best friend's study, hoping George would let him explain before running him through.

With curses that would make a sailor blush, George followed at his heels. As soon as

the study door closed behind George, Calum turned and even though he'd expected it, the fist that hit his cheek bloody hurt. It set him upon his arse.

"Feel better?" he asked, pushing himself to his feet. "And before you swing at me again and make even a bigger fool of yourself, I didn't seduce Alice, nor she me."

George paced the floor to his liquor decanters and poured them both a drink. "Then what on earth... How did you end up in his billiard room, of all places? You know what it's used for."

"Bloody Lady Penelope."

George sunk into a chair by the fire. "She meant to trap you? How did Alice foil that?"

He shook his head and took the chair next to him. They'd sat like this on many a night, talking about politics, women, travel and running large estates, but not tonight. Tonight would change their relationship forever. George would become his brother-in-law.

"Lady Penelope meant to set a trap for Alice. She had organized for Lord Fenchurch to be caught with Alice in that room. I luckily intercepted the note."

"Luckily? You'd have every right to say unlucky. Christ almighty. That bitch. Was Fenchurch in on this?"

"I have no idea, but I intend to talk to him. I shall let him know that if he tries this with any other woman, I shall challenge him, and I won't miss. No woman should be forced to wed in this manner."

"It seems I owe you an apology, my friend. I'm sorry I jumped to such a dishonorable

conclusion. I should have known a man of your honor would never do such a thing. Especially to my sister.”

He nodded and they sat in silence for some time, drinking and enjoying the comradery.

Finally, George asked, “How is Alice handling the situation?”

“How do you think? She’s not particularly happy, but she understands the scandal she faces and that we must wed.”

His friend’s glass halted before his mouth. “And you, my friend? How do you feel?”

Calum’s first inclination was to say he was fine, but deep inside the resentment had taken hold. He wasn’t ready for marriage. He’d had a plan. Travel, enjoy a year of no responsibilities and then come home and begin taking over the estate and look for a wife in a few years. Cautiously, he replied, “The situation is not ideal. It’s changed my plans for the next few years, but I would have to marry eventually, and I like Alice.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been caught in this trap. And I thank you for saving Alice from Fenchurch. I will owe you for the rest of my life.” He drank. “She does come with a large dowry.”

“I don’t need her money.”

“Then we can put it aside for her children.”

He nodded. “I thought we’d have a small service at the Galloway Town House in two days before heading to Scotland. I’d like to have a larger wedding in a month at home in the Highlands, so the family can attend. They can look after Alice when I go

abroad.”

George sat up and slowly put his glass down on the side table. “You’re still going on your trip? Surely not for twelve months?”

Calum took a long drink. His trip would be different. He understood that. He would not be a young man able to sleep with all the beauties of Europe. He would be married. He meant what he’d said to Alice about a mistress. But Goddamn it, he wanted to travel. Had longed for travel. Why should he be punished for rescuing the damsel in distress?

“I want to travel. I’m happy to do the honorable thing and marry Alice. She’ll make me a fine duchess. She’s the one woman who hasn’t tried to grab the position for herself. Our families are close. I know she’d suit me, but I want what my father promised me. A year off to see the world and explore the places I’ve only read about... is that too much to ask?”

George looked torn. “I understand and I and Alice owe you, but how will it look to society if you take her home and leave her there for twelve months?”

His hand fisted around his glass. “I want to travel.” He repeated through gritted teeth.

“Perhaps Alice could go with you,” George uttered hope in each note.

“You know that’s impractical. For one, what if she falls with child? There could be a risk to her or the babe not being at home. I won’t risk her life. Plus, some places I intend exploring aren’t suitable for a woman, let alone a... well... a cripple.”

He felt guilty at the use of the word, but over rough terrain she would be a cripple.

“I hate that word.” George ran a hand over his face. “What a bloody mess, and I’m

caught in the middle. One part of me wants to protect her and ensure this marriage goes ahead. The other part of me thinks I wish the two people I love most in this world could make their own choices.”

He gave a harsh laugh. “Life has a way of being unfair, but to be honest, I’m not unhappy with taking Alice as my wife.”

George stayed silent for a moment and then raised his glass. “Then I’ll drink to that. May you and my sister have a contented and happy life. Welcome to the family and if she had to marry anyone, I’m pleased it’s my best friend.”

The clink of glasses echoed round the room.

He drank the fiery liquid and prayed he was doing the best for everyone, even if not for himself.

Alice made it to her bedroom before the tears fell. This should be a happy day. The day the man she’d loved for years asked her to be his wife. Only he didn’t ask. He didn’t make a choice. He did what any honorable man would do. He did it to protect her.

She should thank him for that, but she wished that he wasn’t so honorable and would let her cry off.

She’d heard George arriving home with a few loud curses, but since then, silence. Her brother would thank Calum about now for his noble sacrifice and that’s what it was. A sacrifice.

She traced her lips with a finger and heat flared as she remembered the pleasure they’d shared in the carriage. She could picture his beautiful, ruggedly chiseled face, as if he was lying here next to her. If she wasn’t sure before, she admitted it now.

She was in love with Calum.

The glorious, searing pleasure that he'd ignited within her swept her away and grabbed at her heart. It made her yearn for him even more. She should have stopped him because now he knew she would marry him.

She'd always found Calum so overwhelming, so damnably tempting. From the first moment, she'd understood about males and females. The day he'd come home with George after their first year at Oxford together. Something about Calum had changed. He had filled out. He'd matured into a man so handsome nuns would twitter. With one smile, he'd made her heart pound and her senses reel. Ever since that day, he'd owned her heart.

He owned it now, and that was the problem. To marry a man who you worshipped but who might never return those feelings. To lie in a bed next to him and realize you were not someone he would have selected if he had a choice.

Her pride wept.

Marriage to Calum would have advantages. She would likely enjoy sharing his bed. But she only had a few days to gather herself for the biggest change in her life. The way she saw her situation was, she had two choices. One, learn to fall out of love with Calum until he loved her, or two, make Calum love her.

The only problem with that theory was she didn't know how to make Calum fall in love with her. She was passably pretty but not a great beauty and her limp... And no one to ask. Her only friend was Sarah, and she would have no idea.

Then an idea struck. A man would know how a woman could make a man fall in love. Alasdair. She'd ask Alasdair. He knows his brother better than anyone.

As she snuggled into bed, she let the tension ease from her shoulders.

A few hours later, Calum cursed himself and the position he found himself in. Not the having to marry Alice part. When he thought about settling down to marriage and family, she fit his needs perfectly. She was pretty, intelligent, and goodness oozed from every pore. She was open and honest and would never deceive. It wasn't in her nature. Besides, after that kiss at the chess match and his hands on her body in the carriage, the idea of any other man touching her stirred the jealous beast. She was his.

His problem was the timing. He had wondered if he could have accepted her offer of a twelve month engagement, but Alice already bore the full snark of the beau monde without gossip, starting about the fact she was caught in the notorious billiard room with him. An engagement may help the viciousness of the ton but then sailing off for a year before marriage—without her—the talk would be unbearable for Alice. She'd be the subject of scorn. He couldn't do that to her, and George would never allow it.

He smiled as he remembered her untutored response to his seduction in the carriage. Thank God, she was passionate. If there hadn't been a roaring desire between them, he wondered how the marriage would play out.

He'd spent the past few hours in his study drinking brandy. The entire decanter. What ate at him most was George's disappointment at his decision to travel. Because he knew it would hurt Alice even more. Would she understand? Or would she take it as a personal dismissal of their marriage when he left for his adventure?

Coatless now, he lay on his bed, his hands laced behind his head, staring at the ceiling, trying to ignore the pounding in his head and queasiness in his stomach. Why should he feel guilty when this situation was not of his making? He'd do the honorable thing, but he wanted to see the world. Had wanted that through school, through his training beside his father and his father's men of business to learn about running the estate. His father had promised him a year of freedom, and he was

petrified that if he didn't get to travel, he'd end up resenting Alice for all he'd missed and that wasn't her fault either.

Lady Elena Lockwood was the reason for his dim view of women kind in general, and the reason he was so desperate to travel. At the tender age of twenty-five, just when he'd convinced his father to let him travel abroad for the year, and enjoy his continental tour with a couple of friends, he'd met Elena.

Elena had jet black silken hair, eyes such a deep blue you could drown in them, and a body that would make a priest lust. She was the ton diamond and with one smile he knew he had to have her.

He'd courted her and followed her around like a little puppy. For once he was pleased to be the heir to a dukedom because he soon found himself at the top of her calling list. She received him whenever he wished to call. He was definitely one of her favorites.

Finally, after three months of putting everything into winning her hand in marriage, he beat his competition and his head swelled with pride. Elena agreed to become his wife. So, he canceled his trip abroad and was joyful. All thoughts of seeing the world vanished. His father was not particularly happy with his choice of bride. The Duke wondered how the belle of the ballroom would settle in the Highlands of Scotland. It was remote and cold for most of the year. Was she the right woman for Calum? For the dukedom?

To Calum, Elena was his world. His grand passion, his heart's desire. She was his everything.

He'd given her his heart and soul, and with a frenzy desire he needed to share his body. She kept intimacies at a distance, as a respectable lady should. He'd only ever kissed her gloved hand. The anticipation of taking her to his bed had his mind in

constant dizziness.

But as the wedding day drew near, the atmosphere changed. She became more demanding, and less like a woman in love.

It was George who had raised concerns with him about rumors circulating within the ton . The rumor was she was in love with Lord Byron, but because he was married, Elena sought a marriage to hide her affair with the man. Some even said she was carrying Lord Byron's child.

Calum had almost come to blows with George over his interfering, but his friend told him to suggest to Elena that they have the wedding in Scotland and that they'd spend the first eight months at his family's estate.

Elena had not liked the idea at all, and at first tried to seduce him to change his mind. Then she'd started to whine, and then she'd got quite angry, saying she didn't want to live in the wilds of Scotland. She even suggested that after they marry, they honeymoon in Paris, where Lord Bryon happened to be heading, and then Calum could go home to Scotland as she may not be able to travel if she got with child.

When he put his foot down and said as his wife she would be required at his side, and his home was in Scotland, she called off the engagement and eloped with a young officer. And yes, it would appear she may have been with child, Lord Bryon's child, as her daughter was born seven months later.

He'd been so heartbroken and he felt so foolish he couldn't face society. He'd retreated to Scotland and immersed himself in learning all he could about the estate management. While his heart had healed, as his father had said it would, he was no longer the carefree man he used to be. Oh, he'd had a lucky escape, and he knew it. He returned to London a different man. A man who would maintain tighter control over his emotions.

The entire experience had made him wiser. His pride, heart, and intelligence took a beating. He secretly vowed never to put a woman before his own plans ever again. Which now put him in conflict with himself. He admitted Alice was nothing like Elena, but he'd missed one opportunity to travel because of a woman and he wouldn't do it again.

Surely, Alice knew this wasn't a love match, or any match, it was merely the result of circumstances, and she would understand his desire to continue with his plans. She really wasn't in a position to complain, given he was saving her reputation. He'd explain it gently. He didn't mind leaving her for a year. She would never disgrace herself or him by sleeping with anyone else. He trusted her completely, and she was the only woman he would say that about.

He smiled. What a sight she was in his arms. Her hair cascading across her passion-flushed face. The way her tiny hand had gripped his cock. He'd wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any woman.

What if he got her with child before he left and he wasn't there? He'd never be able to leave if she was with child. He would never leave her side. Alice was his to protect.

Christ. Once again, he felt trapped.

As he saw it, he had two options. One, he could marry Alice and not take her into his bed until he returned from his trip, or two... goddamn it, he didn't have a two, and he wished like hell he did because not taking her into his bed would be torture.

Chapter Nine

The morning sun streamed through the lace curtains, casting a warm glow across the breakfast table adorned with delicate China and silverware. Alice traced the rim of her teacup with unsteady fingers, her mind abuzz with the details of the note from Calum that rested beside her plate. A mix of excitement and trepidation danced in her chest as she unfolded the missive.

“Calum says the special license is underway,” she read out loud to make it real, her voice carrying a hint of uncertainty. “We’ll be married in three days at his townhouse, a quiet affair, and then off to Scotland for a grander celebration on the Galloway Estate.”

The words hung in the air, both thrilling and daunting. The prospect of marrying the man she admired brought a flutter to her heart, but the pace of it all left her breathless. Her appetite waned, replaced by the weight of the impending commitment and the implications that brought with it.

Was love needed to make a happy marriage? Could she love enough for both of them?

Her brother George, with a plate in hand, joined the table. “Was that from Calum?” he inquired, his eyes reflecting curiosity and concern. She nodded, a conflicted smile playing on her lips. “We need to talk, sister dear. It was too late last night after Calum and I discussed the marriage contract and I didn’t wish to wake you. Are you all right?”

Awake most of the night thinking, she was not all right. “I’m fine. A little dizzy at the speed at which my life is changing. Through no fault of my own, I might add. Lady Penelope’s made a fine mess of things.”

“He’ll make you a fine husband,” George reassured, a supportive glint in his eyes. Yet Alice’s thoughts tangled in a web of uncertainty. “I bet Penelope’s sorry too. How I wish I could have seen the look on her face.”

“I think it’s so unfair that he has to marry me because of someone like her,” she confessed, a hint of resentment lacing her words.

“He has to marry someday, as will I. He’s made a wise choice.” That was the issue. He’d had no choice. George chuckled, a rare moment of levity breaking through the serious discussion. “She’ll probably think twice about trying something like that again.”

A giggle bubbled up from Alice. “That’s the only good thing to come from this situation—she’s been thwarted. But George, you must be on guard. Penelope will be looking for Calum’s replacement.”

“Don’t you worry. I shall ensure never to let any missive send me to any assignation.” Her brother’s fork paused mid-air as he processed her words. “Are you unhappy with this marriage? You do realize you have no choice.”

“I think we will rub along together well,” she responded, masking her inner turmoil behind a façade of composure. George nodded, accepting her words with a stoic demeanor.

She wanted to say that she was unhappy and that she didn’t want this marriage—blow her reputation. But that would cause George distress, and he was the best brother a sister could ask for. Besides, her mother would have expected her to do what was

right. Her refusal would also tarnish Calum and his good name, too. He didn't deserve that after saving her.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a note to write. And I have to call at the Galloway town house to continue the chess training." Alice's thoughts raced as she pondered the impending match, a distraction from the whirlwind of emotions.

"Goodness, I'd forgotten all about the match in all this kerfuffle." George frowned.

"It's tomorrow, the day before the wedding." A sense of urgency propelled her towards the door. "This is the last chance I'll have to coach Cazenove, and I hope it's enough to see him win. There seems to be a lot of money riding on this match. Men are so silly."

"Well, if we win, I'll finally be able to buy plenty of Marino sheep to stock our Yorkshire farms," George mused, the practicality of his ambitions contrasting with the romantic chaos of Alice's impending nuptials.

"I was hoping Calum might allow me some of his winnings. I promised Sarah I'd support her sister's orphanage," she revealed, her altruistic intentions overshadowed by the looming reality.

George said, "I think Calum was hoping to fund his trip abroad with the winnings."

As she reached the door, George's revelation halted her in her tracks. Her eyes widened, and she pivoted to face her brother. "But now that we are to marry..." Her words trailed off, realization dawning as she watched a look of horror and guilt flash across George's face. A tumult of emotions surged within her, pride battling against the need for a difficult conversation, but one that had to be had with Calum. She would not start her marriage by putting George in the middle. "I see." Turning away, she headed through the door. How on earth would she get Calum to fall in love with

her if he was sailing away for twelve months without her?

Clarity struck as she entered the carriage to take her to the Galloway town house. It proved that Calum really didn't want this marriage. She couldn't marry him if that was the case. She wouldn't do that to him. She thought about how she'd feel if she had to marry a man she didn't want. No.

An idea began to form. One that made her chest ache and her heart stutter, but an idea that was right for all concerned.

* * *

"Excuse me, my lord. There is a Lady Sarah Abbottsford asking for admittance, and she is unchaperoned."

Calum looked up from the papers he was signing. It was a bit early in the day for a social call. He had a lot to get done before the chess match and his wedding and their trip to Galloway. His butler's face was troubled and Calum was about to say he was not at home, but that name sounded familiar. He'd had plenty of young ladies try to gain admittance to his house in an attempt to trap him or his brothers, but he relaxed. He couldn't be trapped twice. Plus, he recognized the name.

"It's all right, Franklin. Lady Sarah is a friend of Lady Alice. Show her to the drawing room and I'll join her there. Perhaps some refreshments as well. Tea, I think."

What on earth was Lady Sarah doing here? Perhaps she wanted to watch the final chess practice, which would happen after lunch. After taking the time to finish a few pieces of correspondence, he finally arrived in the drawing room and was surprised to find Lady Sarah pacing the room.

“Oh, Lord Skye. I know it’s not proper to visit the home of several bachelors without your mother in residence, but given the circumstances, I’m sure I could be forgiven.”

Calum indicated for her to take a seat. “I’m sure you must have a good reason. Perhaps you’ll tell me why you are here.”

She nodded. “I’m here because Alice is going to do something very stupid. And I don’t feel that because of Lady Penelope, she should have to sacrifice herself so.”

Calum raised an eyebrow and tried to keep his displeasure from his voice. “I hope you’re not implying a marriage to me is a sacrifice on her part?”

“Oh, goodness, no. It’s not you she is going to marry. It’s Lord Fenchurch. He’s the last man on earth any woman should marry. While he admires Alice, he would bore her to tears within a month and with his gambling and womanizing... Her fortune would be gone far too soon.”

Calum thought he was in a play that he’d missed the first act of. He took a deep breath and suggested she pour herself some more tea. He noted how badly her hands shook. “Perhaps you could start at the beginning.” He gave her a smile that normally charmed his grandmother. “I was under the impression Alice was marrying me.”

“Then you must do something immediately. I believe she is planning on meeting Lord Fenchurch tonight to head for Gretna Green.”

A muscle worked in his jaw, and he ground his teeth. Even though the sun streamed through the window, the room felt suddenly chilled. Did she really want to marry Fenchurch? Had he ruined her plan? He knew George was against the match with Fenchurch for good reason. Namely, he didn’t have a stick to rub together and was a wastrel. The cad was trying to seduce his way through the ton in need of a large dowry.

“Is she in love with Lord Fenchurch?” he said in a hiss.

Sarah put down her cup with a bang. “Of course not.”

He shook his head, getting more confused. “Then why on earth would she elope with the man?”

“Because she thinks you don’t want to marry her and she feels guilty about having put you in this situation. He was her only option to save you.”

He’d wring her pretty neck. Save him . “Save me from what?”

“From having to marry her, of course.”

Last night, during the carriage ride home, he thought he’d shown her that he had no objections to their union. He’d shown her how much he wanted her. There must be more to this.

“And,” Sarah continued, wringing her hands. “And she hates putting you in this position. Since you wish to marry her and sail off and leave her behind, she’s of the opinion that you are doing this out of a sense of honor.” Sarah looked up and said, “Are you? Are you only marrying her to save her and your reputation? Because if you are, then maybe marrying Fenchurch would be better.”

He rose to his feet, anger burning. “How can marrying a man like Fenchurch be better?”

Sarah sighed and sat back in her chair. “Because marrying a man who doesn’t love you is tolerable when you don’t love him back.”

It took a few minutes for her meaning to hit him squarely in his chest. His heart

pulsed faster. “She’s in love with me?”

“She loves you so much she wants to set you free,” she said quietly.

He stumbled back into his chair. She loved him . The woman he wanted to marry, yes, he wanted to marry. He’d tried to deny his attraction, scared of being hurt again. What if Alice only saw him as a friend?

Yet, he’d known the minute he’d intercepted the note at the ball what he was going to do. He could have sent George or his brother to save Alice, or taken Lady Summerton with him to put paid to the entrapment, but he’d raced to the billiard room knowing what was likely to happen.

Yes, he wanted to travel, but he’d also used that as an excuse to keep from being hurt. It was obvious Alice hadn’t wanted to marry him. He’d hoped that a year apart might make her miss him enough to come to want him and this marriage. That she wouldn’t feel trapped. What a fool he’d been. If he’d only told her how he felt... But then she hadn’t told him either. Why was love so terrifying? Because it had the power to destroy. But it also had the power to make life wonderful, aspiring and complete... Alice completed him.

“I thought you should know. Even if you don’t love her, please stop her from marrying Lord Fenchurch. She’ll be miserable for the rest of her life, and that sacrifice is too great.”

He sat reveling in the truth. He was in love with Alice and wanted her as his wife.

He barely noticed Sarah standing. “I’ll see myself out. Please, I can see that you have feelings for Alice. If you don’t wish to lose her, speak to her. She is coming to help you with the final preparation for the chess match, but immediately afterward, she is meeting Fenchurch to head north. You must stop her.”

He scarcely heard Sarah take her leave. He sat for a moment, contemplating his situation and his next action.

If anyone was going to elope with her to Gretna Green, it would be him.

He jumped to his feet. He had preparations to make. He smiled all the way up the stairs to find his valet. Calum vowed that there was only one man this prickly wallflower would marry. And it wasn't Lord Fenchurch.

Chapter Ten

A lice wished she could forgo this afternoon's chess lesson, but the match was tomorrow, and she would not be there to help. Her heart and soul were heavy with the decision she'd made, but wasn't it the right thing to do? You sacrificed everything for those you loved. Didn't you?

And she loved Calum so much she couldn't bear to be the person who destroyed any chance he might have for future happiness. He didn't belong to her. It was a pipe dream to think he ever would.

There was quite the crowd in the library for the final lesson. Alasdair was there, as was her brother George and, of course, Cazenove. She was pleased to see Sarah was there. She'd arranged for her friend to be the excuse as to why she must leave directly after the match. Sarah was also there as a buffer against having to be alone with Calum. If Calum took her in his arms and kissed her one more time, she wouldn't be strong enough to walk away.

Then there was Calum. Beautiful, tall and powerful, handsome as sin, Calum.

One look at him and her heart gave a fierce leap, fighting the chains she'd wrapped around it, knowing she would love Calum forever, even married to Fenchurch.

His greeting was somewhat reserved, however, and everyone looked at her as if she had two heads.

"Shall we begin?" Calum asked, "Or would you like some tea first?"

She wanted this over with. Fenchurch was meeting her outside her house at five. In only two hours, she'd leave all of this behind. She'd leave the brother she loved, the house she loved and—worst of all, the man she loved. She'd head north to Gretna Green with a man who could never hurt her because she didn't care enough about him. "I'd like to play." She took the chair on her side of the chessboard. "It shouldn't take me long to demonstrate the final moves. Cazenove will then have a winning strategy."

Calum merely nodded, but Alasdair said, "I've studied the play and cannot for the life of me see how you can win from here."

Forgetting the sorrow of her situation, Alice replied, "And that's why Cazenove will lose."

A mere thirty minutes later, and she had Cazenove at check mate and the game was over.

"I see what you did. If I play this strategy against Sarratt, I'll lure him into a false sense of security. He'll assume he's winning and relax. He'll think I'm trapped." He stood and bowed over Alice's hand. "Thank you, my lady, for not only teaching me a new chess strategy, but also for humbling me with your abilities. I shall never underestimate anyone again."

"My pleasure, Mr. Cazenove. I hope you win tomorrow."

He looked aghast. "You will be there to watch me and revel in our triumph?"

Damn. She'd almost given herself away. "I was under the impression that it would be an all-male event. With Lady Galloway not in residence, it would not be proper to have a house full of bachelors and young ladies, I would think?" She looked at George, hoping her brother would support her theory.

But it was Calum who answered her. “That is quite right, but as we are engaged , and your brother will be in attendance, I think it is quite proper for you to attend.”

Did Calum just emphasize the word engaged? “Of course. That would be lovely.”

Clutching his hands to his heart, Cazenove pleaded, “You definitely should be here to share in the victory because it will be because of your help.” Alice wondered if Cazenove wasn’t a little in love with her because she’d shown him how to be a better player.

“You are most kind.” She looked at Sarah and gave her the nod, but Sarah ignored it. She waited and then rather forcibly Alice said, “We should depart. Sarah and I have an appointment at the modiste. Wedding preparations.” All eyes turned to look at her, and George looked as if he was about to have a fit. Sarah flashed a look at Calum, but Calum merely said, “Of course. Please ensure the bills are sent to me.”

On a huge sigh, Sarah followed her out the door. “What was that look you shared with Lord Skye?”

“I was merely hoping I’d receive an invitation to the match tomorrow. Even if you are doing the stupidest thing ever and eloping with Lord Fenchurch, I want to watch Cazenove win. He’s promised to tell everyone where he learned his strategy. It will be amazing to watch the look on the men’s faces when they learn it’s a woman.”

“Yes, I’d like to have seen that too.”

Sarah grabbed her arm and swung her round to face her. “Then stop this silly plan of yours. The only person hurt will be you. If I had to choose between Fenchurch or Skye, I know who I’d pick in a flash.”

Alice looked around. “Sshh. Someone might hear.” She sailed out the door and down

the steps. “I’ve made my decision. When you’re in love, you’ll understand.”

* * *

Two hours later, Alice stood in her traveling gown and cape and looked at herself in the cheval mirror. She didn’t look like a young lady in love thrilled at eloping with her beau. Because she wasn’t.

In the past hour, she’d cried all the tears she’d allow herself to shed. This was her decision, so she could hardly cry about it.

The sound of a horse and carriage pulling up outside saw her move to the window and look below. It was time, but she couldn’t get her feet to move. Her hands gripped the windowsill. She almost had to physically pull her hands away.

She’d packed one small trunk, and she’d collect it from the park at the corner where she’d hidden it in the bushes.

She could put it off no longer. As if walking to the gallows, Alice limped down the stairs, walked out the front door and refused to look back.

The door to the carriage opened and as she took one step up, a hand reached out without warning and hauled her inside. She struggled for a moment as it was dark and she suddenly realized she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t marry a man she despised. She could never share her body, or her life, with Fenchurch. She gave a cry and fought for all she was worth.

“Let me go. I’ve changed my mind. I can’t do this.”

“Well, that’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

Calum. She stopped struggling, and he hauled her into his arms, shutting the carriage door behind her. He banged on the roof and the carriage began to move.

“My trunk is in the bushes at the corner.” Callum merely raised an eyebrow and ordered the carriage to stop and collected it. Once they’d set off again Callum sat staring at her.

Breathless, her heart beating wildly, Alice stared up at him, trying to read his beautiful eyes. “How did you know?” she finally asked unsteadily.

“That is not of concern. What is concerning is your desire to marry another man.”

She bit her lip and had to look away, his expression grim and foreboding. “I thought—that is I?—”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake. If Sarah hadn’t come to me, I would never have been able to prevent you from making a disastrous mistake again. I’d already saved you from making this mistake by meeting you in the billiard room.”

“That’s just it. You have sacrificed your choices for me. I can’t accept such a sacrifice. It’s not fair to you—or to me.”

He swiftly took her lips in a searing kiss and hope soared inside her. She carefully pulled back and took several deep breaths. “I thought you might be relieved if I disappeared.”

“Relieved? I almost went out of my mind hearing you were going to elope with Fenchurch.”

Be brave. “Why? Why were you so upset? You can sail off on your travels without the burden of a wife.” She saw and felt him flinch.

“Because I want to marry you.”

Be still my pounding heart. She carefully removed her arms from around his neck and leaned back so she could watch his face. “Want to marry me? Not have to? Why?”

“Because when I thought I might lose you forever, I was finally honest with myself about how I feel about you. I love you, sweetling. I think I’ve loved you since your come out but I was scared to let you into my heart. It’s a fragile organ.”

“You love me?” Alice echoed softly, eyes widening as her arms slipped around his neck.

When she looked up at him in heart-swelling wonder, Calum’s heart opened even further. “Yes, I love you, and I want you to become my wife. How could I not? You’ve been the only woman I’ve admired for years. I love your honesty, your intelligence, your selflessness and most of all, I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.” He watched tears gather behind her eyes and he swore. “I’m not saying this to stop you. I want you. You’re mine—now and forever.”

“These are happy tears. I love you so much and I think I’m dreaming.”

He kissed her again. “Does that feel as if you’re dreaming?”

She shook her head, laughing. “I love you too. I’ve always loved you but never dreamed you’d return my feelings.”

“I want to marry you and have children with you. A family made with love. Will you marry me? Not because you have to, but because you long to.”

Her eyes blurred again. “I have never been more certain of anything in my life. I had already decided that marrying Fenchurch would be a big mistake. I’d rather marry

you and try to make you fall in love.”

“Thank God,” Calum whispered, hugging her tightly. “You don’t have to try. I already love you so much I can barely breath I’m so happy with you in my arms.”

The carriage still raced along. She looked at him, confused. “Where are we going?”

“To Scotland, my home. But first a stop to find the nearest vicar. With the special license I procured, we will be married tonight.”

“But George and Sarah... I want?—”

“They will follow along soon. We’ll marry tonight, then have another formal wedding at the Galloway Estate with my family and yours.”

Drawing her into his embrace again, Calum brushed his thumb over her lower lip. “We have a long journey ahead of us, but we will stay at The King’s Head coaching inn about an hour from here for the night, and I wished to be married when we do so.”

“So fast. Are you scared I’ll change my mind?” she asked innocently.

“No.” He gave her a sensual smile. “It’s because I want you so badly I can’t wait any longer.”

She pressed close and ran her hand down his chest. “I remember that there is much time for pleasure in a carriage if we have an hour.”

His smile widened. “You are the perfect woman for me.” She satisfied a burning need in him. One that had been growing since the day she’d matured into a stunning woman. A friendship that had burrowed under his skin until now, he couldn’t imagine

his life without her.

No sooner had Calum had that thought than the siren in his arms hiked up her skirts and moved to sit astride him. With a provocative smile, she unclipped her cloak and let it slide to the carriage floor. When he gathered her skirts in his hands, Alice stilled him. “Some things are left best in the shadows.”

His hand found the puckered scars on her leg. He pushed the material and exposed the injury. “Don’t look at it, please. It’s so ugly.”

“It’s made you who you are. The woman I love. You were so strong to survive. Surely, you should take pride in that.” Then he kissed her. “Never hide anything about yourself from me again. Every inch of you is beautiful.” He reached forward and tugged down her bodice so that her breasts spilled free. “Every glorious inch.” A finger traveled across one breast, urging a nipple into a hardened point.

“I want to see you,” she whispered as she undid his cravat.

Within minutes, his jacket and shirt were off and soon it became delicious heated skin to skin. She bent and pressed her lips against his bare chest, nipping at his flesh while her fingers unerringly found the placard of his breeches, but his hand stilled hers.

“While I want you more than I want my next breath, the first time I make love to you should be in a bed.”

“Phew. For a moment, I thought you were about to say ‘should be married’.”

He chuckled. “God, no. I’m not that strong and can’t wait that long.”

She looked at him through her long, silky eyelashes and gave him a smile that would tempt a saint. “I remember a previous carriage ride and you told me anticipation is

often as good as the event.”

“I lied and if you keep looking at me like that, I won’t be able to wait for a bed.” His grin was so wicked, his eyes so alight with love, that Alice gazed back at him with exquisite longing.

She laughed joyously. “I’ll let you in on a secret. I don’t like waiting.” Her hand undid his breeches, and this time he didn’t stop her. “I love you,” she whispered, “and I trust you to show me about love.”

Calum understood her need, lifted her and positioned himself at her wet core. “You, my darling woman, taught me how to open my heart and love. I’m so bloody lucky to have you in my life—my dearest friend and now lover.” He devoured her mouth again, his kiss wild and deep as he slowly pushed and encouraged her to slide down him. When he reached her maidenhead, he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping in her mouth, capturing her small gasp as he filled her completely.

He stilled, giving her untutored body time to adjust. She panted softly, but her eyes locked on his and she smiled. She clung to his shoulders and slowly lifted and lowered, innately understanding the way to pleasure.

He set the pace, slowing her with his hands at her hips. “Like all good things, love making should be savored.”

Taking full control of their lovemaking, he worshipped her slowly with both hands and mouth. The merging of their bodies, the ultimate act of pledging their love. Fierce, strong tenderness assailed him. This was a woman with whom he felt safe. He’d willingly hand her his body, heart, and soul, because he trusted his friend—his lover.

“I love you, Alice. Never doubt that. I’m marrying you not because we must, but

because I cannot live without you.” His voice was a harsh whisper.

The carriage journeyed on as they came together as one. No longer only friends, but true lovers. The sounds of lovemaking grew as the fusing of two hearts and two minds brought them infinitely close as a brilliant firestorm shuddered through them with their synchronized bright, hot release.

They held each other in the rocking carriage, the afterglow of their lovemaking a blissful sense of entwinement, hearts joined, his heart in hers, her touch completing him.

Boneless and sated, Alice slumped against his muscled chest, her soft breaths tickling his drying skin.

As her fingers lazily skimmed his bare chest, she asked, “Is it always like this?”

He shook his head. “Only with you has it felt so right.”

She sighed. “I’ve loved you since I was a young girl, but I didn’t know what love and desire were. You were a craving, but I didn’t fully understand what I was craving, but now I do. Now that I have you, reality exceeded my wildest dreams. And I had so many dreams.”

Calum returned her smile and gently dressed her to keep her warm. “I loved you at the beginning as a friend. I loved how you didn’t fawn over me or flirt with me. You spoke your mind. You were simply my Alice. My best friend’s little sister. But it grew into so much more. Now I love you as a lover, and I’ll never let you go.”

Alice gave a chuckle. “That’s good to know, because now you really do have to marry me.”

“You’ve got that backwards. I’ve ensured you cannot deny me again.”

Her heart aching with love and tenderness, Alice slid her arms around Calum’s neck and pressed her lips to his in yet another passionate kiss. When she finally drew back, she asked, “How long until we reach the inn?” she asked.

As he lay her down on the squab, his body covering hers, he simply said, “There is always enough time for love—with my love.”

* * *

Ten days later, on the terrace overlooking the manicured gardens of Galloway Castle, Calum regarded his bride of three hours with pride and affection. Her brother teased her about how he had planned this match all along. Like hell he had.

George also told anyone who would listen how Alice was so clever she’d helped them win an important chess match. Alasdair joined in, flush with money from backing Cazenove.

Alice looked beautiful, happily surrounded by his family. His mother had loved her the minute she’d met his bride. She’d longed for a daughter. While his younger brothers had already considered her a sister since she’d been in their lives for years.

“You’ve done well, my son,” his father, the Duke of Galloway, said. “She is everything you need in a wife.” At his raised eyebrow, his father continued. “She is intelligent, strong, and loves you with a pure heart. She will stand by your side wherever that is and support you, and she’ll be your rock when times are good and bad. She’s like your mother.”

Calum’s heart swelled as he saw the way his father looked at his mother even after all these years and he suddenly realized he’d have that too. Alice and he would grow old

together, have a family, and still be full of love.

“I have waited for her all my life.”

His father jabbed him in the ribs. “And you’ll be waiting a few more hours yet, as the party continues.”

Despite his impatience to have his bride all to himself, he would have to wait until his mother was satisfied that they had welcomed her properly into the family. At the moment, all their friends were too busy drinking champagne and toasting his glorious bride.

The marriage ceremony had been a quiet affair, considering they were already married. A grand service in the family chapel, so different to the first, followed by a luncheon for guests including tenants. Apparently, they’d been the talk of London as their elopement had been deemed romantic and everyone realized it was a love match in the most part thanks to Sarah and Alasdair’s efforts.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, father, I’d like to join my wife,” he said, and sauntered contentedly into the gardens below.

Alice glanced beyond the guests, searching for Calum. When she located him, the smile she sent him was pure sunshine, golden with warmth. The power in that smile could bring a man to his knees. He found himself gazing back, barely believing how lucky he was.

George approached and clapped him on the back. “Hello, my friend She looks so happy. Make sure she stays that way.”

“Always.” And they shook hands.

“You two are perfect for each other. I had always hoped you might marry my sister. I’ve known how she felt about you for years. You just needed to be frightened out of your complacency.”

Grinning, Calum said, “Denial more like, but you were right. The thought of losing her made me understand the feelings inside and made me brave enough to face them.”

As Alice reached his side, her tiny hand slid into his. “I think the guests can carry on without us.”

“I do not want to hear that,” George teased. “But I’ll distract this lot while you disappear.”

“Thank you, my friend. I’ll remember this act of kindness when it’s your wedding day.”

George scoffed. “That won’t be anytime soon.”

Alice kissed her brother’s cheek and looked to where Sarah danced with Alasdair. “Life has a funny way of challenging your plans.”

Hand in hand, they turned and walked toward the carriage, waiting for them. Today they were taking up residence in the Skye Manor, a hunting lodge two miles away at Loch Morn.

“I do love a good carriage ride,” she teased as he helped her inside.

“That’s one difference between us. I still prefer you laid out like a treat on my bed.”

Alice laughed gaily because the heated look in her husband’s eyes told her that he’d

love her no matter where they were.

And he always would.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:00 am

Scotland, five years later...

The warm glow of the roaring fire cast a soft light across the cozy drawing room of Skye Manor in Galloway, Scotland. It was a hunting lodge at the edge of the estate by Loch Morn and was their family home, while Calum remained the Marquess of Skye. His parents and brothers still lived in the Galloway castle. That's what she'd named it when she'd first seen the impressive house with turrets and steeples. They called it the Galloway Manor but she thought it rather too grand for just a manor.

Tonight Alice sat in a plush chair, cradling a small bundle in her arms. Her eyes filled with tender affection as she gazed down at the sleeping baby, the newest addition to the Skye family.

Calum entered the room with a contented smile on his face. Dressed in his riding gear, he crossed the room to stand beside Alice. "I took Star Blaze for a canter as you requested. She is eagerly awaiting your return to riding, but I have a funny feeling she might be in foal."

Star Blaze was her horse that she rode almost every day until her condition made it impossible. Star Blaze, a medium sized mare, was the foal she'd won from Calum for helping him win a chess match all those years ago. "Thank you. I'll be back riding soon."

She had gotten over her fear of riding and loved galloping across their fields with her handsome husband, greeting tenants and viewing their thriving estate.

His eyes met hers, and the love that passed between them spoke volumes. He still

caused her heart to race, and she wanted him with one look. Calum reached down and gently stroked the baby's cheek.

"Another blessing," he said, his voice filled with pride. "A daughter this time."

Alice nodded, her gaze never leaving the infant in her arms. She had the look of Calum about her eyes and mouth. "Our little chess piece," she mused, a playful glint in her eyes. "What shall we name her?"

Calum chuckled, taking a seat beside her, reaching out for her hand. "How about Catriona? A name as pure in heart as her mother."

Alice smiled at the suggestion. "She is gorgeous, and that is a beautiful name for our precious daughter, but don't think I'm not aware that you seem to be favoring names beginning with the letter C for our children. Our son is called Conan, and I only agreed with that name because you said it means intelligent in Gaelic."

"It does. My son has his mother's brains and our daughter has her beauty. Perfect."

She scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Catriona looks very much like her father. What are you going to do when we run out of C names?"

"My prickly little wallflower hasn't lost her thorns, even though I married you and love you with all my heart." Calum leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Or is that your way of informing me you'd like a rather large family?"

"Maybe it's my way of telling you I like making babies a lot. When I've recovered, of course."

His eyebrow arched. "I am more than willing to oblige whenever you desire." They sat in companionable silence. "After Catriona is put to bed, how about a game of

chess? I almost beat you last time.”

One of these days she should take pity on Calum and let him win, but whoever won the chess game got to decide their bed sport that night. She loved being in control of a powerful, handsome man who would do anything to please her.

Over Catriona’s head, Alice flashed him a saucy smile. “Perhaps I should let you win. It’s still too soon after Catriona’s birth. It would be a waste me winning tonight.”

“I’ll bank the win for when you’ve recovered. Then we can make another child to fulfill your demand for a large family.”

“Is that a promise?” she asked huskily. His smoldering smile warmed her. “Then let’s get the chess set out. I have a game to lose.”

She was clever enough to understand that even by losing, she won.

Being held in her husband’s arms and being loved by him, she’d treasure for the rest of their years together.

And she did.

Over the long winter nights in Scotland, the chessboard witnessed countless victories and defeats, but above all, it bore witness to the enduring love between them.

* * *

Thank you for reading Alice and Calum’s story. I’m not a great chess player, but I love how it brought these two together, and that Alice is the better player. Men can’t be good at all things, LOL.

Read on for a taste of *The Allure Of Lord Devlin* - book #3 in my *Lady Bachelorette* series.

From USA Today Bestselling Author Bronwen Evans, comes a best friend's brother, enemies to lovers romance.

Unlike her stepmother, Lady Dharma Dexter totally believes in love. She knows all Lord Byron's poems by heart and is waiting for the day when the man of her dreams woos her with sonnets. At her stepmother's bachelorette house party, she can't ignore her best friend's brother, the annoying yet stunningly handsome, Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin, a man who is there because he is in desperate need of money. For some reason, he ignores her stepmother and sets his sights on her. Dharma does have a very large dowry, but she is not giving it to any man until he wins her heart. She is not marrying for duty, or for a title. She wants love, and she's sure Devil, as he is known, does not have a heart.

Lord Devlin's father left the family estates in ruins, and Devil, as he is known to his friends, needs to marry quickly, and marry well. Only problem is, his father died with the rumor of traitor hanging over his head. No good family will let him near their daughters. With debtor's prison a real possibility, fate throws him a bone in the guise of his younger sister's friend, the very spoilt Lady Darma. She's beautiful beyond words, clever, self-assured, and would make him a fine Marchioness—except she demands the one thing he refuses to give—his heart.

Buy now or read on for the first chapter....

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:00 am

L ondon, 1 February 1817 (6 months later)

Why can't we structure life like a piece of music? Each note led you on a story that surprised you, and yet you understood what the outcome would be. The song would end and leave your senses engaged. It made you feel. Forced you to feel. Let you lose yourself in memories and emotions private to you.

Dharma ran her hands over the ebony and white keys, letting the soothing notes embrace her memories. She loved playing. She loved losing herself in the emotions the sounds produced. Clarity for the emotions swimming within her body. If she could, she'd play all day.

Today she was playing a romantic song by Handel because he had arrived back in town. Her fingers flew over the keys while she silently mouthed the words. A pianist she was, a singer she was not.

The words made her think of Devlin. Everything made her think of Devlin. She'd not seen him since her time spent at his home with Rosemary in December. Her body hummed in time to the music, wanting to see his face, his smile and feel his.... He was courting her. And her body hummed with the possibilities. The weekly letters confirmed that. He wanted her to marry him. She had to decide if giving her heart to a man who needed money before all else was wise. And, if she could live, and have her children live, with the fact his family name was tainted with the word traitor. She'd never believed the late Lord Devlin was a traitor. She could stomach the gossip and meanness, but her children would face that too...

Oh, she'd learned something over the cold winter months. He wanted her—in his bed.

Every time he'd looked at her, the heat in his eyes almost melted her resolve to wait for more. For his declaration of love.

He could not hide his desire and she was pretty sure she hadn't hidden hers, which made him dangerous. Seduction was a tool men like the Marquis of Devlin used at their will. His many, many paramours could attest to that. But she needed more than passion and desire—she demanded love—regardless of his situation.

Any man she married had to love her.

Comfortable within herself, Dharma knew what she required in a husband. Her parent's marriage was a glowing recommendation for finding the right man. A man who loved her and put his family before all other considerations. Someone she could rely upon. A man strong and protective, but who valued her intelligence and saw her as his equal—a partner to help shoulder the trials life threw at them. But most of all, a man who didn't give a fig about her dowry.

Despite being given a half share in a potentially profitable tin mine in Cornwall by Charlotte, Devlin's financial woes were not settled. Her dowry was still a big prize for him.

Refusing to let thoughts of the conundrum that was Lord Devlin ruin the mood, she closed her eyes and let the music consume her. She let her emotions fly and simply felt the love generated by the music. Finally, the song ended and she slumped exhausted over the keys, only to be startled by a slow clapping coming from the other end of the music room.

“I could watch you play all day. You make the music come alive, almost magical.”

Devlin's voice sent a shiver down her spine. “I didn't mean to disturb you, but I couldn't resist listening as I wait to see your brother. I've missed your playing. You filled the house with warmth when you played during your visit over Christmas.”

Her heart speed up as he prowled toward her with that innate languid grace. Dharma caught her breath, as she always did when he directed his gaze her way. Sharp bones rode high above the austere sweep of his cheeks down to the uncompromising square jaw. His nose was straight, definite, and fit his face perfectly.

His hair, thick, brown, fell in fashionable disarray about his head, making him look as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Large green eyes beneath sweeping brows made her wish she'd been in that bed with him. But it was his mouth that sent heat all over her body. The upper lip was straight, the lower full and sensual. Imaginings flashed through her mind of where he might put them on her body.

She couldn't believe the hunger that hit her from not seeing him for two months. The man was too handsome for her good.

A face as elegantly aristocratic as his powerful and arrogant breeding. Only she quickly remembered his father had tainted all of that. The Devlin name meant nothing. She bristled at the unfairness. Devlin didn't deserve to be tarnished by his father.

"I'd be happy to play for you whenever you so desire." Her breath hitched at the flare of heat in his eyes.

He leaned on the piano. "Play for me now." His voice suited him. Deep, slightly gravelly, as if he didn't speak very often. It was almost a command, and she felt every word.

He unsettled her like no one else could. "Aren't you in a hurry?"

For a moment, his gaze didn't shift from her face, but then his eyes left hers to travel over her body. Like fingers, they touched her everywhere and she couldn't repress a shiver. "I'm never too busy to spend time with you. You play like an angel."

“My mother encouraged me as a young child. Looking back, I believe she did so to take my mind off her illness.”

He reached out and cupped her chin. “Was it your mother you thought of while playing?”

She swallowed hard. No, it was you. “Yes.”

His smile told her he didn’t believe her. “Funny, I thought you were playing a love song when I entered.”

The infuriating man. She ignored the knowing smile and simply began playing, trying very hard to ignore his overwhelming presence. Thankfully, the music did its trick and soon she lost herself in the notes and simply played as if the world and Lord Devlin had disappeared.

When the music ended, silence rang out. She looked up, wondering if he’d left the room, but he was merely standing next to her at the keyboard, his body still and his eyes focused on her.

Heat flooded her face, and she cleared her throat.

Finally he softly applauded, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips, “Lady Dharma, your mastery of the piano never fails to astound me.”

Dipping her head modestly, “Thank you, my lord. Bach's compositions are endlessly captivating, aren't they?”

“Indeed, they are. But I daresay it's not solely Bach's genius that held my attention captive. Your playing moves more than just the keys of the piano. It stirs something within me—a melody that resonates far beyond the notes. Your passion, your finesse, it's truly enchanting.”

“You flatter me, Lord Devlin. I am but a humble enthusiast of music.”

“And yet, in your hands, the piano becomes an instrument of enchantment.” He sat on the piano stool next to her, crowding her sense as heat rolled off his hard body, his gaze unwavering. “I’ve been remiss in expressing my sentiments properly. Our time together during the Christmas festivities was a highlight of the season for me. Your company... it brought warmth to the coldest of winter nights.” He ran his finger over her lips. “I have missed you. Did you miss me too?”

She wanted to jump to her feet and run, but the magnetism of his gaze saw her glued to the piano stool. “A lady does not reveal such things. It is dangerous to her sensibilities.”

“I don’t want you to be sensible. I want you to be captivated.” He leaned closer. “Did you miss my kisses?”

She’d stupidly allowed herself to be kissed under the mistletoe at his home during her visit and she’d paid for that mistake in her dreams every night since. She made a further mistake now by looking into his eyes. Desire swirled, burned within, and panic rose deep within her along with the heat. He was too close.. too dangerous... she had a decision to make that would affect her life and how could she think the situation through when he offered her things her body wanted—desperately.

Her heart wanted more...

His lips kicked up at the ends at her silence. He took her hand, long fingers closing strongly about hers, his thumb stroking the bare skin on her palm. She’d not worn gloves, preferring to play without them. “In case you’ve forgotten, shall I kiss you now to remind you?” His whispered words sent memories to her brain. Her body, on its own accord, pressed closer.

And then her eyes closed on a small moan as he slowly lowered his lips to hers.

Time seemed to halt as she savored the sweetness of the connection, the press of his lips soft yet fervent, a delicate exploration that spoke volumes in its silence. His hand cradled her cheek, thumb caressing the skin with a feather-light touch, while her hand found its place on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath the layers of fine fabric. Hers, on the other hand, was racing. Why did she not affect him in the way just his smile could affect her?

The piano, a silent witness, echoed the melodies of their shared intimacy, its music hung in the air like an echo of their affection. They lingered in the embrace of that kiss, a moment that held the promise of more shared harmonies, more silent conversations in the language of touch and tenderness.

But she knew deep inside, passion and desire did not equal love. It gave her the strength to break the kiss and look away, trying to hide her rapid breathing. His was steady, as if he'd been totally unaffected.

“One day I shall lay you naked on top of a grand piano and play you.” The words so decadent, whispered in her ear, sent her world tilting. She could picture it so easily and God help her, she wanted to experience that. Before she could gather her wits, she heard her brother's voice in the hall.

Devlin rose slowly to his feet, towering over her, and moved round to the other side of the piano. She still could not look at him. Her emotions were too raw.

“You will save me both of the waltzes at Lady Bradshaw’s ball tonight.” Once again, his words were a command, and her senses were in no condition to deny his request. She nodded her head, words still stuck in her throat. “Good.” He strode towards the door to meet her brother. “Until this evening. Have a pleasant day.”

Then he was gone, but his scent lingered. She reached up with her fingers and traced her lips, feeling the scorching sensation from his kiss. He was so experienced, and that was unfair.

How was she expected to make such an important decision when he overwhelmed her senses with just a look, a smile, a touch...

Her fingers crashed down on the keys and the jarring notes broke his spell over her.

Philippa, her brother's wife, entered the room. "What's got you looking like you'd like to stab someone?" The teasing note to her voice showed she knew Devlin had been in this room with her.

"Do men even have emotions?" she asked her sister-in-law.

Philippa laughed. "Of course. They simply conceal them more effectively than we do because that is how they were brought up. They have to shoulder more responsibilities than us and as such feel it weakens them to show emotions." Philippa sat on the stool with her. "Besides, they usually only hide certain emotions. Other emotions they are rather free with," and she nudged Dharma in the side.

A blush raced over her cheeks. Passion and desire for men, they seem thrilled to share, that was true.

"I thought it odd the first person Devlin called on upon his return to London was Tobin. I suspect he wanted to see you." She eyed her sister-in-law dubiously. "Well, he has written to you every week. I'm lucky if I get any missive when your brother is away."

"It almost seems as if Devlin is trying too hard. I feel I have been very honest about what I expect in a marriage. He only has to share his heart and I'll say yes. So why is he—" She could hardly say he was trying to seduce her to Philippa.

Philippa patted her hand before she stood. "I think you'll learn that love is something men fear, and goodness knows why. He has feelings for you, you know that. Give him a chance to open his heart to you. It's always worth the wait, I assure you."

Long after Philippa had left the music room, Dharma continued to sit at the piano and play. She'd hoped the music would speak to her, but after an hour, all she knew was that this was not a game and she would move forward with Devlin with caution. She'd hate to lose her heart to him and never have that love returned.

Women feared love too. Or perhaps it was a woman feared unrequited love.

If she fell in love with Devlin and he did not love her... spinsterhood beckoned.

Because she would not marry for anything less.

Finally, she made her way upstairs to have a rest before the long night ahead. Would Devlin exceed her expectations and what would society think of her dancing two waltzes with him?