

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in a ballroom setting. The woman is in the foreground, wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder dress, looking towards the man. The man is behind her, wearing a dark suit, looking at her. The background is a blurred ballroom with other couples dancing under blue and purple lighting.

*New York Times Bestselling Author of
A Little Bit Wicked*

**VICTORIA
ALEXANDER**

“Victoria Alexander delivers on all counts.”

Stephanie Laurens

What A Lady Wants

VICTORIA ALEXANDER

What A Lady Wants

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

This book is dedicated with thanks
to Brian and Karen Grogan,
for brilliance, wisdom,
and knowing how to have a good time
on land or sea.

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Prologue

London
April 1854

“**A**nd now there are three,” Oliver Leighton, the Earl of Norcroft, said under his breath.

“Three.” The Honorable Nigel Cavendish, heir to Viscount Cavendish, echoed the single word with a distinct note of disgust in his voice.

“You both realize there is a positive aspect to this,” said Daniel Sinclair, the one American among them, and no doubt the only American currently present in the gentlemen’s club they favored in the heart of London. Two skeptical gazes turned toward him. “It could have been one of us.”

“Hear, hear,” Cavendish said and raised his glass.

The men had gathered to lament the passing of one of their own from the joys of bachelorhood to the bonds of holy matrimony. Although, if truth were told, the gentleman in question, Lord Warton, would have chuckled at the morose expressions on the faces of his three friends, especially as he was so blissfully happy. He was even now off somewhere in the south of Spain, no doubt enjoying the charms of the lovely new Lady Warton.

“He does forfeit his share of the tontine as well,” Oliver pointed out.

Sinclair scoffed. “I very much doubt if he cares.”

Together with Warton, who had originally proposed the idea, the four men had formed a tontine based entirely on their mutual aversion to marriage. The last man to remain unwed, the last man standing, as it were, would win the tontine.

“Ah yes.” Cavendish swirled the brandy in his glass. “One shilling from each of us, including Warton, for a grand total of four shillings.”

“And there is a bottle of Cognac at stake as well.” Sinclair grinned. “That alone is worth the effort of remaining happily unwed if indeed any of us needed further encouragement.”

“Let us not forget, gentlemen, the four shillings and the Cognac are merely a symbol,” Oliver said. “The true prize is—”

“Freedom,” Cavendish said firmly. “The right to do exactly as we please when we please without having to answer to anyone.”

And who would value that more than Cavendish? Of the three remaining members of the tontine Nigel Cavendish was the one among them most prone to scandalous behavior, particularly with members of the opposite sex. More specifically, with widows, or with wives of a certain persuasion who saw no need to remain faithful to husbands who, more often than not, were seeking their own entertainment outside the bonds of marriage. Such amorous adventures had landed Cavendish in the center of scandal on any number of occasions, and Oliver could name several instances when he had very nearly been shot as well.

Oliver had been friends with Cavendish since their school days and had to admit the man hadn't changed at all through the years. He remained the fun-loving scoundrel he'd been in his youth. Oliver had wondered now and again what would happen when Cavendish at last inherited his title and the responsibility for the Cavendish family, investments, and fortune. Still, Cavendish was a good sort and a good friend.

“And yet, Cavendish, one has to wonder if freedom of that nature is worth the trouble,” Sinclair said thoughtfully. “I suspect Warton and Helmsley would both say the love of a good woman, the prospects of family, a trusted partner for the rest of your days, even companionship, are well worth the sacrifice of some liberties. You flit from woman to woman, and what have you to show for your troubles?”

Cavendish grinned. “Memories, old chap, some damn fine memories.”

Oliver laughed. “He has you there.”

“Indeed he does.” Sinclair chuckled.

Daniel Sinclair had come into their circle when his father had arranged for him to marry Oliver's cousin. Neither Sinclair nor Oliver's cousin, Fiona, was in favor of that, which was fortunate, as Fiona had fallen in love with Lord Helmsley, an old friend of Oliver's. Still, Sinclair and Oliver had found, in spite of their cultural differences, common ground, and had become friends in the months since his arrival in England.

Sinclair was in London seeking investors for a railroad venture in America, and thus far all the members of the tontine, as well as Helmsley, had invested. The American expected it would take several more months to acquire the financing he needed, then he planned to return to America to develop his railroad. There wasn't a doubt in Oliver's mind that Sinclair would increase their fortune substantially.

“What do you think, Norcroft?” Cavendish studied his friend. “Which is worth the trouble? Liberty or love?”

“It's entirely too early in the evening and I am far too sober for a question like that.” Oliver took a sip of his brandy. “No, a question of that nature should only be discussed very late at night, after indulging in an excess of spirits. When one sees the world in an entirely different light and thinks one's own observations to be both insightful and brilliant.”

“Still, you must admit, it is an intriguing question,” Sinclair said mildly.

“And I for one would like to know what you think.” Cavendish eyed Oliver curiously. “Come now, Norcroft, what do you say? Freedom or love?”

“Very well then.” Oliver considered the question for a moment. “I think it’s all relative and very much dependent on one’s position in life. You, for example.” He met Cavendish’s gaze. “You have to come into your title and the responsibilities that accompany it. You have the freedom, and the money I might add, to do precisely as you wish, and you do. You’re charming and great fun to be with and a good friend, but your life to this point has consisted entirely of frivolity and nothing of substance whatsoever.”

“That’s rather harsh.” Cavendish winced. “True, but harsh.”

“Love, for you, would force you to change your entire existence,” Oliver added.

Cavendish grinned. “And therefore definitely not worth the trouble.”

Oliver turned his gaze toward Sinclair. “You have a father who has built a financial empire, yet you have not depended on that. You have seized the freedom you need to strive for success by your own hand and in the process have taken on a great many responsibilities. It’s quite admirable and very American of you. For you, love would be most inconvenient.”

Sinclair chuckled. “Yes, I suppose it would.”

“As for myself.” Oliver sipped his brandy and thought for a moment. “I think I fall somewhere between the two of you. I have inherited my position and my fortune. I am head of my family and have the responsibilities inherent in that. Therefore my freedoms are already limited. For me, love would neither change my life nor would it be at all awkward. Indeed, as I have said before”—he smiled ruefully—“I am not averse to marriage.”

“Then you shall, no doubt, be the next to go.” Cavendish smiled in a smug manner. “Which relieves my mind greatly.”

Oliver laughed. “While I am not fleeing for my life at the mere mention of wedded bliss, I am not actively seeking a wife either. I fear, gentlemen, I am something of a romantic. I have no doubt that one day I shall meet a woman I cannot live without. As I have not done so thus far”—he shrugged—“I suspect it will be some time before I plunge into matrimony. Therefore.” He raised his glass. “I fully intend on drinking a toast to the rest of you when I become the sole proprietor of the Cognac.”

“What an amazing coincidence.” Sinclair grinned. “I was planning the exact same thing.”

“I would advise both of you to change your plans,” Cavendish said firmly. “I fully intend to be the last man standing, and I do hate to lose a wager. Especially one that is as suited to me as this one. Why, I can practically taste the Cognac now.”

“We can debate who will be the last to fall all we wish.” Oliver considered the other men thoughtfully. “A much more interesting question is...who will be next?”

What a lady really wants is a man who will make every day an adventure.

Lady Felicity Melville

“**Y**ou should know, before I go any further, that this is contrary to everything I have ever believed in, be that God or science or nature itself.” Lady Felicity Melville braced her hands on the stone balustrade of the tiny balcony off her bedchamber and stared up into the night sky. “Still, desperate times and all that. Not that I am precisely desperate, mind you, although I will admit that when one reaches the age of three-and-twenty and is still unwed, desperation begins to nip at one’s heels like an ill-mannered spaniel.

“I’m really quite sensible, you know. I don’t believe in superstitious nonsense; I never have.” She straightened and crossed her arms over her chest. “Fairies, elves, spells, those sorts of things. It’s all absurd, and under other circumstances, I would never think of placing my future, my fate, on the ridiculous notion of wishing upon a star.”

Felicity stared at the star she had selected for the aforementioned ridiculous notion. Certainly, if this had even the vaguest possibility of working, it would require the perfect star. Not one that was overly bright. Obviously a too bright star would attract no end of attention and, therefore, no end of wishes, and would be—Felicity cringed at the absurdity of the thought—rather used up, as it were. On the other hand, a star that was scarcely noticeable might not have the strength needed for a wish of that magnitude.

She had resisted the urge to use her telescope, positioned as always in her room directly behind the open balcony doors, to select a star. It didn’t seem quite in the proper spirit to use the telescope for this purpose, although the spyglass that she’d discovered as a child in her father’s desk, the very instrument that had begun her study of the stars, might be acceptable. The spyglass had apparently once been used by a sea captain or sailor or perhaps even a pirate, something of that nature, and therefore carried a sense of romance that might suit this endeavor. Even now, the instrument was within reach on the table beside the doors to the balcony. Still, this wasn’t science, and science should have nothing to do with it. This was magic or perhaps faith or even—she grimaced—desperation.

“I should perhaps explain the situation before we continue. I am, well, the last of my kind.” Felicity sighed in an overly dramatic manner. But then this did seem to call for an excess of drama. “Who would have imagined that I would be the last among those girls I shared my first season with to remain unmarried? If I had been unkind enough to have wagered—although I would never have done such a thing, but if I had—I would have placed my money on Mary St. James.”

Mary was a quiet, unassuming girl with an unexceptional appearance and a dowry to match. But Mary had snared the heir to a dukedom—a distant heir but an heir nonetheless—when their first season had barely begun. Now she had two children and a third on the way.

Felicity shook her head. “What on earth happened to the years between then and now? This will be my sixth season.” She thought for a moment. “No, my fifth, I missed last year. Grand tour, you know. Quite lovely, really. And I am ever so much more cultured and polished now.” She wrinkled her nose. “Not that I expect it to make much difference.”

Still, she had noticed an increase in attention from the gentlemen present at the handful of social events she had attended thus far this season. Perhaps the polish acquired in travel did indeed matter. She certainly felt more assured and confident than she had in the past. And her Italian was much improved as well.

Felicity rested her back against the doorjamb. “Eugenia says”—she glanced at the star—“Eugenia Went-whistle, or rather Lady Kilbourne now, my dearest friend in the world, says my expectations are entirely too high. And if I truly wish to marry—and have no doubt of that, I do wish to marry—I shall lower my standards. I will concede her point, but I really don’t think I am particularly difficult to please.”

The star twinkled down at her in silent disbelief.

“I admit that I have met any number of pleasant enough gentlemen who would serve adequately in the position of husband, but regardless of title or wealth or appearance, none has ever struck me as anything other than ordinary and really rather dull. Even when, on occasion, I have allowed one to steal a kiss”—she glanced at the star apologetically—“which one would have thought would have been exciting by the very nature of the illicitness of the act itself, it was never the least bit exciting, nor was it particularly interesting.”

Worse yet, when she had looked into the eyes of these pleasant enough but unexceptional prospective husbands, she saw nothing but years ahead of a pleasant enough but unexceptional existence. Precisely like the unexciting, staid, and dull life that oddly enough seemed to well suit her parents.

“Sometimes I wonder if I am truly their child,” she said ruefully. “If perhaps explorers or adventurers or at the very least dreamers deposited me as an infant on their doorstep. Not that I don’t love them with my whole heart,” she said quickly. “They’re quite wonderful, all in all. Why, they’ve never pressured me to marry, whereas Eugenia’s parents were quite beside themselves at the thought of having a spinster daughter on their hands for the rest of her days. So I am extremely fortunate. Still, they are content with their lot in life.” She blew a long breath. “Their terribly ordinary, eminently forgettable, and not the tiniest bit exciting lot in life.” It was a lot Felicity saw herself heading directly toward.

“So there you have it. And here we are.” She fixed the star—her star—with a steady eye. “I need help, and you are my last resort because I have no idea what to do now.”

In truth, this was the first real step she’d taken—if indeed wishing could be considered real—to find the type of husband she wanted. Oh, certainly, it had taken her several seasons to realize she had

no interest in the gentlemen who routinely made her acquaintance. And a few more seasons to understand why. Then there was the year when she'd actively sought the acquaintance of men of a scholarly nature in hopes that a shared interest in the heavens would provide a certain element of excitement, but in that she had proven sadly mistaken. Beyond discussion of constellations, the astronomers she'd met were extraordinarily dull. And most of the past year had been spent on a grand tour of Europe, with two of her younger cousins and an assembly of older female relations, during which she'd met any number of interesting gentlemen with a significant potential for excitement, yet none of them seemed quite right.

"I'm not simply wishing for a husband. I should make that clear. I could have a husband; I have had offers. Perfectly acceptable offers. What I want...what I'm wishing for..." Felicity straightened and squared her shoulders. "Is a future that's not staid and boring and ordinary.

"I want a man who will make the rest of my days an adventure. The grandest of adventures. That's what I wish." Felicity paused. "If you please."

She held her breath. She wasn't entirely sure what would happen now although she wouldn't be all surprised if the perfect man dropped from the sky onto her balcony. Perhaps a French musketeer? D'Artagnan preferably. Or an Edmond Dantès? Or an armor-clad knight, although that might make rather a lot of noise when he landed, and it was very late in the night or quite early in the morning, depending on one's point of view.

Felicity sighed. This was absurd. Even if her wish were to come true, it certainly wouldn't happen immediately. It simply made sense that something as imprecise as a wish wouldn't be granted at once, if at all. It would need time for what ever power granted such things to evaluate her need and worthiness and who knew what else. Still...

"As much as I hate to appear impatient," Felicity said in a pleasant tone, "I would appreciate some haste on your part. I do want to marry, and if I have to settle for an ordinary life, I should decide that fairly soon and make my peace with it."

A dog barked somewhere in the distance. She ignored it.

"Unfortunately, I am of an age where I cannot expect acceptable offers to continue indefinitely. And I admit, there are some suitable gentlemen as yet unwed."

The dog continued its tirade, accompanied now by shouts. Felicity rolled her gaze toward the heavens. Goodness, you would think people would be more considerate of their neighbors at this time of night.

"As I was saying, if my wish is not to be granted, then I really should accept that my life is going to be unexceptional. I should therefore get on with it and find a gentleman of good family, acceptable fortune, and, if at all possible, pleasant appearance. I really would prefer not—"

The unmistakable sound of a shot rang out in the night.

Felicity started and, without thinking, leaned over the balustrade and peered in the direction of the noise, ignoring the voice in the back of her head that warned it might well be better upon hearing

shots to take precautions rather than give in to curiosity. A tall wall separated her family's garden from that of their neighbors, Lord and Lady Pomfrey, but from her balcony she had an excellent vantage point. The lights flickered on in an upstairs room, and she could make out the distinct figure of a man climbing down the ivy that covered the Pomfreys' house.

Felicity gasped. A burglar, no doubt. Caught in the act of robbing Lady Pomfrey's jewels or the Pomfreys' collection of art or something equally valuable. The figure ran across the Pomfreys' lawn, his white shirt illuminated by the starlight, and vanished behind the wall. *Her wall!* Felicity's heart caught in her throat. Good Lord, he wasn't coming here, was he? She grabbed her spyglass and hefted it in her hand. It was brass and quite heavy. She had never considered it a weapon before but it certainly could be.

Shouts caught her attention, and she could see two figures in the window. Even from this distance, it was apparent they were arguing. Why on earth would one argue about a burglar? And shouldn't there be servants all over the grounds by now giving chase?

Unless it wasn't a burglar at all. There certainly were enough rumors about Lady Pomfrey's, well, *interests*. Still, it could be a burglar, and one should know for certain if only to protect one's home and family. Even as Felicity raised the spyglass to her eye, she knew observing her neighbors thusly was completely improper, quite rude, and, in a moral sense, absolutely wrong. She fully intended to chastise herself about it later.

She stepped back into the deeper shadows of her room, grateful she had not lit a lamp that would expose her presence, extended the spyglass, and focused on the window. Lord and Lady Pomfrey were indeed arguing. Why, His Lordship was the color of overripe plums, although that might have been a trick of light and distance. One would think if one had a wife like Lady Pomfrey, and from all she had heard Lord Pomfrey was no better, one would be used to middle-of-the-night incidents like this and would take them in stride. Of course, regardless of their individual activities, it could well be that His Lordship was not at all pleased to come upon his wife in the act of what ever she was in the act of wi—
a—

Good Lord, where was the burglar?

Felicity scanned the area and caught a blurred glimpse of someone dropping from the top of the wall into the garden. *Her garden!* She ignored a rising sense of panic. One should keep one's head at a time like this when it was critical to properly evaluate a situation. She found the figure through the spyglass and adjusted the focus. It was far too dark to make out his features, and he did blend in rather well with the shrubbery at the base of the wall in spite of his shirt. Still, she could tell he was tall, and even in the inadequate light cast by the stars, she noted impressively broad shoulders and—

And he was staring straight at her! The immediate temptation was to step back, deeper into the shadows, but Felicity held her ground. She was made of sterner stuff than to retreat, and hadn't she just been wishing for excitement? Regardless, he couldn't possibly see her. There was no light on in the room behind her and the starlight was entirely too dim to—

"I say," he called in a stage whisper, "is it safe?"

Dear Lord, he could see her! For a moment she considered ignoring him completely and slipping,

back into the safety of her rooms. But that would be the height of cowardice. Besides, what she did or did not do scarcely mattered. *She* was precisely where she was supposed to be. *He* was the interloper.

“Miss,” he hissed from the darkness.

She lowered the spyglass reluctantly and matched her tone to his. “What do you mean, *safe*?”

“I should think *safe* would be fairly obvious.” There was a distinct hint of annoyance in the man’s voice, although it was a cultured, refined voice. Any lingering thoughts as to whether he was indeed a burglar vanished, although he could have been a well-bred burglar. A duke fallen on hard times or a prince trying to retrieve royal jewels from Lady Pomfrey’s boudoir or—

“Safe specifically as in is anyone coming after me? Have they set the dogs on me?”

She raised a brow. “You’re rather impatient, given your position at the moment.”

“One tends to be impatient when one has been shot at, forced to climb down a building, scaled a wall, and lost one’s favorite coat in the process, all with the proverbial hounds of hell nipping at one’s heels.”

“They don’t have hounds,” she murmured. “Or dogs of any kind.”

“I was certain I heard dogs.” He stepped away from the shrubbery and closer toward her house.

“Oh, there are any number of dogs in the neighborhood, all of whom were probably aroused by tonight’s activities, but Lord and Lady Pomfrey don’t have dogs, although I suppose you were speaking metaphorically. I daresay there are no hounds of hell in London at all. Even if they did have hounds or dogs, I should imagine Lady Pomfrey would have something quite small and furry and not at all capable of climbing walls. Although now that I think about it, dogs generally can’t climb walls so you would indeed be safe.”

“This might well be the strangest conversation I have ever had,” he muttered, and she wasn’t at all sure he was speaking to her. He came closer. “Coupled with one of the stranger evenings. Not the beginning, of course—”

“Yes, well...” She cleared her throat. “Perhaps it might be best if you didn’t—”

“Quite.”

He was right; the conversation was odd and abruptly uncomfortable. It struck her how terribly improper it was as well. Why, she was in her nightclothes chatting with a man who, while probably not a burglar, was certainly not to be trusted. She glanced at the neighboring property. Their Lordship could still be seen in the window but there was no rush of torch-bearing servants headed toward the wall. “It appears to me that you are indeed safe.”

“Excellent.” He chuckled. “That’s that then.”

“Is it?” She stared down at him. “Have you no shame? No morals whatsoever?”

“What do you mean?” he said cautiously.

“I mean—” She thought for a moment. “I suppose before I make any accusations regarding your morals, I should determine if you are or are not a burglar.”

“Fair enough.” She could hear the grin in his voice. “I can assure you I am most certainly not a burglar.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Good point. I have no idea.” He thought for a moment. “I would think, if I were a burglar, I probably wouldn’t be taking the time to chat with you. Furthermore, if I were a burglar, I certainly wouldn’t be plying my trade with the lady of the house present. It’s obviously a sure way to get caught.”

“That would depend on whether you were a good burglar.”

“Oh, I would be a very good burglar. However, I am not.”

She sighed. “No, I don’t suppose you are.”

“You sound disappointed,” he said slowly.

“Not precisely. One should never be disappointed to learn one’s home and family are safe.”

He stepped nearer and stared up at her. He was almost directly beneath the balcony now. She couldn’t make out his features but his voice was surprisingly nice. “And yet you definitely sound disappointed.”

“Well, if you’re not a burglar then you...It scarcely matters.”

“I should be happy to rob your house if you wish.”

She scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. I have no desire for you or anyone to rob my house.”

“That is a relief. I haven’t the faintest idea how to properly rob a house, and I should hate to be found out.” He chuckled. “A man could get shot that way.”

“A distinct possibility.” Indeed, there was an antique dueling pistol in the top drawer of her nightstand at this very moment. She had purchased it after a nasty incident in Venice and had kept it beside her bed ever since. It was of sentimental value more than true protection, really, although a pistol close at hand made her feel a little adventurous. Odd that she hadn’t remembered it before now. Of course, the weight of the spyglass still in her hand was reassuring.

“Now then, as we have resolved that question I should like—”

“As we have established that you probably are not a burglar, I assume you were”—Felicity wrinkled her nose—“dallying with Lady Pomfrey?”

Silence greeted her question, then a resigned sigh drifted upward. “Dallying is as good a word as any.”

“That’s rather reprehensible of you, isn’t it?”

He paused. “Is it?”

“Absolutely.” She collapsed the spyglass in a measured, methodical manner and searched for the right words. It wasn’t every day she chastised a man for scandalous behavior. “Lady Pomfrey is a married woman. Therefore your actions were indeed reprehensible. Morally, that is.”

“Do you think so?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“I see.” He paused for a long moment. “I, however, do not.”

She snorted in disbelief. “You can’t possibly disagree. Your behavior is improper and immoral and—”

“Aha. That’s where you’re wrong.”

“I most certainly am not.”

“Oh but you are.” An annoying note of triumph rang in his voice. “You see, I am not married.”

She furrowed her brow in confusion. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I am not married, which means I have not broken any sort of vow of fidelity or loyalty or whatever else one promises when shackling one’s life forever to a spouse.” He shrugged. “My morals therefore are not in question.”

She gasped. “Surely you don’t believe that?”

“Surely I do. I take my word, and any promises I might make, up to and including marriage vows—which I have never taken nor do I have any intention of taking in the foreseeable future—quite seriously. Honoring my word is my responsibility, my solemn duty, as it were. However, the actions others take in regard to whatever promises they might make are not my responsibility.”

“Come now. You bear some culpability. Lady Pomfrey couldn’t dally by herself.”

“I wouldn’t wager on—never mind.” He choked back a laugh. “Now then, if there’s nothing else—”

“You are a man of questionable morals, aren’t you?”

“I suppose that depends on your point of view. I have no question at all about my morals. And while I would love to continue to debate my behavior and the ethical considerations regarding that behavior, I should take my leave.”

“Indeed you should,” she murmured, struck by a vague sense of disappointment. It was ridiculous, even if this—or rather, he—was the most interesting thing to happen in her life in some time. Or ever.

“Unless you plan to summon the authorities and have me arrested?”

“Don’t be absurd. If I had wanted to summon the authorities I would have done so by now.” While it was highly improper for a man who had just escaped the justifiable wrath of an irate husband to be under her balcony in the middle of the night, it was probably not worthy of arrest. Apparently, though, this adventure had come to an end. Pity. She gestured at the far side of the garden. “If you head toward the break in the top of the wall, you’ll find a gate a few feet away. It leads to the mews and the passage to the street.”

“What break?”

“There.” She waved again. “You can see it from here, edged against the night sky. It’s just above the border of tall hedges over there.”

“I can’t see it; it’s dark. And I daresay I wouldn’t be able to see it from down here anyway.” He blew a frustrated breath and moved to the trellis. “Damnation, it’s been a hell of a night.”

“Indeed it has.” She peered over the side of the balcony. “What are you doing?”

“I’m climbing up your trellis.”

Felicity ignored the thrill that ran up her spine, whether of fear or excitement, she wasn’t entirely certain. Probably a bit of both. “Is that wise?”

“It is if I’m to see where this blasted gate of yours is and get out of here.”

“Perhaps if you looked a bit harder.” She backed away from the balcony, struck by the realization that she could indeed be in danger. She gripped the spyglass tighter and clutched it to her chest, its weight a comfort and a reassurance. It could indeed serve as a more than adequate weapon and put a nasty dent in a man’s skull. Beyond that, she had no doubt as to her ability to scream if necessary. “I really don’t think you should come—”

“If you’re fearing for your virtue, you needn’t.” An arm appeared over the balustrade, and her breath caught. Dear Lord, he was far faster than she’d expected. Although she shouldn’t have been surprised. The man had already climbed down one building, sprinted across a lawn, and scaled a wall not to mention what ever other activities he might have engaged in previously, and he hadn’t seemed the least bit out of breath.

He hauled himself onto the balcony, planted his feet on the floor, and straightened. She was right, he was tall. Nearly a head taller than she, and she was of above average height. It was far too dark to see his features well, but what she could make out was quite nice. Of course in the light of day he

could well be hideous, although she doubted Lady Pomfrey would ever be involved with an unattractive man. Regardless, his smile would be wicked and no doubt irresistible. If she knew nothing else about him, she knew that.

“I am far too tired to engage in anything other than sleep, which I intend to do the moment I am in my own bed.”

“I wasn’t the least bit worried,” she said in a lofty manner.

“Then why are you armed?” He nodded at the spyglass in her hands.

“This?” She shifted the spyglass from one hand to the other. “This is simply an old spyglass that once belonged to a seafaring relative.”

“A spyglass?” He glanced from the instrument in her hands to her telescope. “And I see you have a larger telescope as well.”

“I study the stars. I find them fascinating.”

He laughed. “As fascinating as your neighbors?”

Heat flashed up her face. “I am an astronomer. Amateur, admittedly, but an astronomer nonetheless. I do not study my neighbors!”

“No?”

“I will admit that once I heard shouting and shots I did wish to see what was happening, but I do not make a habit of peeking in other people’s houses.”

He snorted in obvious disbelief and turned away to study the garden wall. At this particular moment she regretted that she hadn’t bashed him with the spyglass, and noted that it was not too late to do so. Of course, if she rendered him unconscious he would probably be discovered and her reputation would be shattered, as he was obviously a man of disrepute and—

“You’re foolish not to be worried, you know. Speaking to a stranger of questionable morals in the middle of the night and allowing him to enter your bedchamber—”

“I allowed nothing of the sort.” Indignation sounded in her voice. “You took liberties that were not granted to you. You climbed into my garden uninvited and now, again uninvited, you appear in my room and—”

“Yes, well, that is just the kind of thing a man of questionable morals does.” He nodded. “I see the break in the wall now and how to get to it, so I shall bid you good night.”

She huffed. “Go on, then.”

“Before I once again take to the trellis, I should like to thank you for your assistance.”

She shrugged. “I really didn’t do anything.”

A grin sounded in his voice. “Precisely. And it is most appreciated.” Without warning he stepped closer, took her free hand in his, and raised it to his lips. “My dear girl, if you were my younger sister I would make certain you were locked up for the better part of the next year to ensure there would be no repetition of to night’s incident.”

“Would you?” She raised a brow. “If it were my younger sister I would make certain she was armed with something other than a spyglass should there be a repetition of to night’s incident.”

“Well said.” He laughed, released her hand, and stepped to the balcony. He swung a leg over the side and reached for the trellis. “Oh, and one more thing. Do try to keep men of questionable morals from climbing into your bedchamber in the future. At least until you are of an age to understand exactly what the consequences of questionable morals might be.” With that, he disappeared into the night. Only the sound of rustling leaves indicated he had been there at all.

“Of an age...” She stared for a moment, then laughed. The silly man thought she was a child. Certainly in the dark with her eminently practical nightclothes and her hair down, plus her telescope and spyglass, she probably did indeed look like a mere girl.

A thump sounded somewhere below her, followed by a muffled profanity. She moved to the balcony and leaned over. “Are you all right?”

“My bloody shoe caught in your blasted trellis and now I can’t find the damnable thing.”

She stifled a giggle. “Sir, your language.”

“My apologies,” he said in a clipped tone. “Apparently my indignities were not complete until now, and I am to be forced to hobble through the streets with only one shoe.”

“Divine retribution, do you think? For your sins?”

For a moment only silence greeted her comment. Then a reluctant chuckle drifted up to her. “Undoubtedly.”

With that he sauntered across the lawn, and a moment later, blended into the shrubbery at the base of the wall. He would have no problem finding the gate now.

She pulled a chair onto the balcony, sank down into it, rested her elbows on the cold stone balustrade, and propped her chin in her hands. This—he—truly had had all the elements of an adventure. There’d been excitement and not knowing what might happen next and a definite hint of danger. And oddly enough, her hand was still warm where he had kissed it. She couldn’t help but wonder how his lips might feel.

Life with him would certainly never be staid and boring and ordinary.

Felicity smiled slowly and rose to her feet. She searched the sky and found the star she had wished on.

“I should start by saying how grateful I am for your prompt attention to my wish. He shall do nicely. Certainly he needs some reformation, a great deal of work, really, but that shall add to the

challenge and, frankly, the fun. And I have no doubt he will be fun. Oh, he's not exactly what I'd hoped for. ~~All that questionable morals business. But he does seem to have a certain sense of honor,~~ twisted yes, but it is there. He shall definitely never be dull.

“Now then, if you could see your way clear for one more tiny, insignificant request.” She drew a deep breath and smiled hopefully. “I should very much like to know his name.”

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