



## A Wicked Way to Win an Earl (Sutherland Scoundrels)

By Anna Bradley

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*England, 1811.* Delia Somerset despises the privileged ton, but her young sister, Lily, is desperate to escape their family's scandalous past and join high society. Unwilling to upset her sister, Delia reluctantly agrees to attend a party at the Sutherland estate—and avoid the gossip at all costs.

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As Delia devilishly plays along in Alec's game, determined to prove the joke is on him, they inch ever closer to repeating history. And in this game of seductive glances, scandalous whispers, and old debts, the outcome might be much more than either of them anticipated...

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Bradley’s flawlessly written debut, the first in her Sutherland Scandals series, will immediately win readers over with its intoxicating blend of wit, simmering sexual tension, satisfying sensuality, and superb characterization.”—*Booklist*

“A delightfully delicious debut that grips readers with the very first scene and doesn’t let go. With her book’s battle of wills, game of seduction, rapier-sharp banter and enchanting characters, Bradley demonstrates keen insight into the people and the era. Watch for this newcomer to become a fan favorite.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“Anna Bradley pens a delectable Regency romp that will leave readers eager for more!”—Tracy Ann Warren

“Regency-era romance feels new and bright in Bradley’s delightful debut...Bradley’s quick wit and humor keep the story flowing smoothly...Alec’s siblings and Delia’s sisters will surely make the Sutherland Scandals series a pleasure to follow.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A tart-tongued, challenging beauty and a dashing, reformed (sort of) rake who needs to get his priorities straight play a dangerous game. Full of steamy passion and sexy banter, Bradley’s debut beautifully kicks off her spicy Regency series.”—*Library Journal*

#### About the Author

**Anna Bradley** is the author of the Sutherland Scandals novels, including *A Season of Ruin* and *A Wicked Way to Win an Earl*. She lives with her husband and two children in Portland, Oregon.

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Prologue

LONDON, 1783

“Hurry, Caroline! Oh, please do hurry!” Millicent Chase cast an uneasy look over her shoulder as she rushed down the empty corridor.

Caroline Swan placed a firm hand on Millicent’s arm to keep her from breaking into a run. “Millie! Someone

will notice if we dash about. They won't be looking for you. Not yet."

*Click. Click. Click.* The heels of Millicent's elegant silver slippers made a distinct patter on the marble floors. Despite Caroline's warning, the patter only quickened. Millicent lowered the hood of her black velvet cloak as she hurried down the hallway. It was an unusually deep one, and the luxurious black jet beadwork sewn lavishly around the hood's edges glittered even in the dim light of the corridor.

The young ladies ducked into a shallow alcove just off the main passage. It was a servant's passageway, but as it didn't lead directly from the kitchens to the ballroom, it would be deserted tonight. Better yet, it let out right into the dark mews at the back of the town house.

"Just here, Caroline." Millicent pulled her friend into the alcove and turned to face her, glancing over Caroline's shoulder to make sure they hadn't been followed. She put her hands up to her flushed cheeks. "Goodness, I'm nervous!" She reached for the black mask that hid her face, which was sewn with some of the same jet beads that adorned the hood. Her fingers shook.

Caroline took Millicent's hands gently in her own and lowered them to her sides. "Let me." She removed the mask and unbuttoned Millicent's cloak. Millicent stood as docile as a child as Caroline freed her from the enveloping garment.

"Millie, I . . ." Caroline hesitated, the cloak clutched in her hands. "We may not speak for some time, and I . . ."

Millicent's eyes misted with tears. She reached down and grasped Caroline's cold fingers. "You're my dearest friend, Caroline, and I won't ever forget what you've done for me tonight. I'll miss you terribly. But surely we'll see each other again." Her voice rose hopefully. "The *ton* has a short memory for scandal."

*But a long memory for insult and social humiliation.*

Caroline didn't say it. There wasn't any point. Millicent had made up her mind, and things had gone too far for her to turn back now. There would be consequences for her actions tonight. Millicent knew it. She'd accepted it. Caroline studied her friend's face and smiled. She saw no regret in Millie's dark, famously blue eyes.

Caroline squeezed the slim fingers that clutched her own and smiled. "Here, give me the mask and help me tie it."

Millicent handed her the mask and helped Caroline tie the silken cord at the back; then she held out the cloak and Caroline slipped her arms into the voluminous folds. The black velvet billowed around her, easily concealing her gown.

Millicent arranged the hood over her friend's fair hair, then stood back and studied the effect. The girls were a similar size, both of them tall and slim. The hood came down low over Caroline's face and completely disguised her hair. The domino mask didn't hide the hazel eyes that could never be mistaken for Millicent's blue ones, but it didn't matter. There was no one to notice.

Millicent grasped Caroline's shoulders. "It will do very well. Do the best you can not to draw attention to yourself and no one will be the wiser for at least several hours."

"What about Lord Carlisle?" Caroline asked, suddenly nervous. "What shall I do if he engages me in conversation? Won't he notice if we dance together?"

Millicent shook her head, but she didn't answer, and after a moment Caroline nodded. Lord Carlisle wouldn't attempt to engage his fiancée in conversation. He wouldn't look into her eyes and wonder why they were no longer blue. He wouldn't look into her eyes at all.

Caroline straightened her shoulders and smiled. "Well," she said, making a valiant attempt at merriment. "I'm the luckiest girl at the ball. Every young lady here wishes she were Millicent Chase."

But Millicent didn't smile. Instead, her mouth twisted bitterly. For the past few months she'd been the most sought-after young lady in London. Every debutante dreamed of being the belle of her season, but Caroline knew they hadn't been two weeks into the season before Millicent felt like a fox cornered by hounds.

"That will be true for approximately three more hours. When the truth is revealed, Caroline . . ." Millicent began, but then she stopped, as if she weren't sure what to say.

But Caroline was under no illusions about her part in the drama that would unfold at midnight. One didn't betray Hart Sutherland on a whim. Not under any circumstances. Still, she brushed Millicent's concern aside with a wave of her hand. "I'll manage it, Millie. Please be careful yourself. But I'm not too worried for you, for I know Captain Somerset appreciates the value of his burden."

Millicent pressed her damp cheek against Caroline's. "Good-bye." The click of her slippers echoed in the dim hallway as she disappeared around the corner.

Caroline's heart gave a painful squeeze. Tonight would live forever in the memory of Millicent's family and friends as the night she gave up everything for the mad adventure of a lifetime.

\* \* \*

Lady Hadresham gazed down at the ballroom from her vantage point on the balcony, a satisfied smile on her face. Mrs. Gisborne's peacock plumes wilted in the heat. Ladies young and old clutched their glasses of champagne as though a drought had descended upon London. They fluttered their fans to and fro in a fruitless effort to cool their cheeks and dry their faces. Couples twirled gingerly on the dance floor, aware one missed step would send them all atilt and they'd scatter like a line of dominoes tweaked by a careless finger.

As usual, it was an intolerable crush. No one wanted to miss Lord and Lady Hadresham's annual masque ball. It was the *ton's* last chance to strut and preen before they scurried off to their country houses, rats abandoning the sinking ship that was London after the season ended.

Behind gloved hands and painted silk fans the gossip flowed steadily, buoyed along by wave after wave of French champagne. Lips to ear. Lips to ear.

*That gown! Whatever made her decide to wear that shade of green with her sallow complexion?*

It curled and drifted, clinging to the smoke that lingered over the billiards table:

*You might have a chance with her, old boy, for I hear Lord Weymouth is tiring of her . . .*

It was delivered in whispers and snickers by the debutantes and traded like currency at the card tables:

*Another season and still no offer for poor Miss Chatsworth. My dear, this is her sixth season! How sad . . .*

Lady Hadresham's eyes moved over the crush of people and the smile at the corners of her pretty mouth

grew ever more complacent.

The Chase family was here. They stood near the terrace with Anne Sutherland, Lady Carlisle, and her eldest son, Hart, now Earl of Carlisle. Even masked, they were unmistakable. They weren't inconvenienced by the crush of people. The cool air coming through the door wafted over them as if on command. It was without a doubt the one comfortable spot in the entire ballroom, but no one questioned their right to it. They were the Chases and the Sutherlands, after all. It was as it should be.

The engagement of the season would be announced at midnight. At the moment of unmasking, Lady Hadresham would be immortalized as London's premier hostess.

\* \* \*

The light from the ballroom chandeliers drifted out onto the stairs leading up to Lord and Lady Hadresham's town house, but it was no match for the dense London fog. The night swallowed the light a few steps from the doorway. Had anyone been watching the mews, they would have caught only a glimpse of a young lady, hatless and without a cloak, before she melted into the shadows.

Like the young lady, the carriage was unobtrusive. Black, with no crest. It could have been any carriage on any street in London. As the young lady approached, a tall silhouette leapt from the open door and wrapped a cloak tenderly about her shoulders. The two figures melted together until no light or shadow was visible between them.

As one, they ascended the carriage. The door closed with a quiet click, and the driver brought the ribbons down over the horses' backs.

## Chapter One

KENT, 1814

The spring mud seeped through the thin soles of her leather walking boots and began to creep into her stockings. This was no ordinary mud. Before long it would be tickling her garters.

"Blast it," Delia muttered halfheartedly. She'd known it was a mistake to come here. A mudslide would certainly prove her right, wouldn't it? There was a sort of grim satisfaction in being right, though at the moment she'd settle for being dry. And clean. And home, instead of stranded on a deserted road in Kent, with the sky turning dark over her head, at grave risk of being buried in a freak mudslide.

At the very least she should have listened to her sister Lily and stayed with the carriage, but no, she'd insisted on finding help, and now here she was in an awful predicament—

Delia stopped suddenly, one foot in a puddle. Was that . . . Yes! She crossed her fingers and sent a quick prayer up to heaven the noise she'd just heard was not a bear or some other wild animal.

Were there bears in Kent?

Delia strained to hear, and waited. No, it wasn't a bear. That was, unless the bears in this part of England were prone to high-pitched giggling. She pulled at her foot with some force to dislodge it from the puddle. The sound was coming from farther up the road, around the other side of a bend.

She staggered forward as quickly as her sopping skirts would allow. It was odd to hear giggling on a lonely road at dusk, but she was in no position to be choosy. All she wished for in the world was one single person who could help her find a conveyance. One human being. Was that too much to ask? Anyone would do. Anyone at all.

She trudged around the bend, dragging her hems.

*Oh, dear. One did need to be careful what one wished for.*

She squinted into the dusk, trying to make sense of the two shapes leaning against a tree. It was a woman, and she was . . . The squint turned into wide-eyed shock. Delia froze, as if the mud at her feet had become quicksand and she was sunk up to her neck in it.

It was a woman, indeed, and she wasn't alone. She was engaged. With a man. A very large man. He was at least a head taller than his companion. If the woman hadn't been giggling, Delia would have missed her entirely, hidden as she was by a pair of impossibly wide shoulders. The man had discarded his coat, which hung carelessly over a wet tree branch. Without it, his white shirt was just visible in the dusk, and under it what appeared to Delia to be miles of muscled arm and long, sinewy back.

Well, he wouldn't need his coat, would he? Not for what he was doing. It would only get in the way. For instance, it might prove difficult for him to trap the woman against the tree. His arms were stretched on either side of her and his palms rested on the trunk beside her head. Delia swallowed. If he wasn't right on top of her like that, his lips might not be able to reach her throat and neck so easily. And his hands . . .

Delia held her breath as one of the man's hands dropped away from the tree and slipped inside the gaping neckline of the woman's dress to caress her breast.

A hot flush began deep in the pit of Delia's belly. She looked behind her, then back at the scene in front of her, her eyes darting wildly. Was it too late to turn back the way she'd come? She'd decided in favor of the mudslide and the bears, after all. But her feet refused to move. She was rooted to the spot, unable to tear her eyes away from this man with his muscular back and his bold, seeking hand.

"Alec! Stop that!" The woman let out a little squeal and slapped playfully at the man's hand.

*Oh, thank God.* Delia breathed a silent sigh of relief. This reckless young woman was coming to her senses at last. Any moment now she'd push the man away.

Any moment now.

But then the man gave a low chuckle and murmured something in the woman's ear. Delia watched, appalled, as the woman giggled again and snaked her arms around the man's lean hips to pull him tighter against her. Once he was there, the woman sighed. And oh, it was such a sigh! Delia had never heard one like it before, and it made her ears burn with embarrassment.

And he was . . . *Oh no!* One large hand slipped down to fumble at the fall of his breeches while the other caught a handful of the woman's skirts and began to raise them up, up, and higher still . . .

Delia clapped her hand over her mouth but some noise must have escaped, some cry of distress or outrage, because suddenly the man's back stiffened. The woman peered over his shoulder, saw Delia, and with a quick, practiced tug, she freed her skirts from the man's grip, batted them down, jerked her neckline up, and disappeared around the side of the tree. Within seconds it was as if she'd never been there at all.



Delia blinked. Well, that was over quickly, wasn't it? Now that it was, she had two choices. She could ask the man for help, or she could flee back to Lily and the safety of the carriage and pretend she'd never been here, either.

Then again . . . she'd never seen a real debauchery before. Since there was no longer any danger of this one coming to its final embarrassing conclusion, Delia found she was curious.

What would he do *now*?

She watched, rapt, but for a long time he didn't do anything. He didn't turn around. He didn't speak. He just stood there, inhaling deeply, the muscles of his back rippling with each breath. *In. Out. In. Out.* He tipped his head back and for several minutes he concentrated on the tree branches swaying above him.

She was just about to conclude this was the dullest debauchery ever when he let out a frustrated groan, grabbed his coat from the branch, and turned to face her.

"Who the *devil* are you?"

Delia's mouth dropped open and she stumbled backward a few steps, her curiosity evaporating. His tone was inexcusably rude, and he was even bigger and more intimidating from the front, but the real trouble here was that . . .

He was naked.

Well, not naked *really*, but more naked than any man she'd ever seen in the flesh, and he had a great deal of flesh. His loose white shirt was open at the neck, revealing a generous expanse of his muscular chest. Delia stared, her face flaming even as her eyes moved helplessly over the bounty of bare male flesh.

He pinned her down with penetrating dark eyes that sported lashes long enough to satisfy even the vainest of women, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Miss?" he barked. "I asked you a question."

Yes—he had, hadn't he? Yes, of course—who the devil *was* she? "Delia Somerset?" She cringed when it emerged as a question.

A glint of lazy humor flashed in the black eyes. "Well, are you or aren't you? You don't seem to be sure."

Delia didn't trust that glint. Her married friends sometimes whispered about men like him. Men who became crazed with lust and were swept away by their animal passions. All manner of wicked behavior followed.

This one looked more savage than most.

"Let's assume you are indeed Miss Somerset," he drawled, when she still didn't speak. "Now that I know *who* the devil you are, may I suggest you tell me what the *devil* you're doing here?"

Why, of all the offensive, bullying . . . All at once Delia's embarrassment faded under a wave of indignation. Even an intriguingly bare chest didn't excuse profanity.

"And may *I* suggest, sir," she snapped, "that you don your coat?"

One dark eyebrow shot up in acknowledgment of this show of temper. "Forgive me, Miss Somerset." He put

on his waistcoat and began buttoning it with an air of complete unconcern, as if he spent every day half-naked on a public road. He shrugged into his coat. "I didn't mean to offend your delicate sensibilities."

Delia stared at him. "It's a bit late for that, isn't it? My sensibilities were offended, sir, when you unfastened your *breeches*."

She'd meant to give him a firm set-down, but instead of looking ashamed or embarrassed as a proper gentleman would in such disgraceful circumstances, this awful man actually *laughed*.

"I fastened them again before I turned around," he pointed out, as if this were a perfectly reasonable argument.

Delia pressed her lips together. "I see that. Are you expecting applause? A standing ovation, perhaps?"

"No, just pointing out you should be grateful for it, as it was damned difficult to do under the circumstances."

Delia sniffed. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

The man studied her face for a moment, noted her baffled expression, and all at once he seemed to grow bored with her. "Of course you don't. Now that we've discussed my clothing in more detail than I do with my valet, you will answer my question."

Delia huffed out a breath. "My sister and I have come from Surrey to attend a house party at the home of the Earl of Carlisle. We're friends with the earl's sisters."

No reaction. Delia stopped and waited, but not even a flicker of recognition crossed his face. For pity's sake. He must know who Lord Carlisle was?

"The coach we were traveling in broke an axle about a mile down the road." She pointed in the direction from which she'd just come. "My sister and the coachman—"

"You should have stayed with the coach. What possessed you to go scampering around the countryside like a curious little rabbit?"

Annoyed by his condescending tone, Delia decided to overlook the fact she'd been thinking the same thing only minutes ago. "Believe me, sir, I've come to regret that decision most bitterly. But I thought it best in this case because—"

"Why didn't you just send the coachman to the inn for a carriage?" he interrupted again, looking at her as though she were simple.

"I couldn't, because when the axle broke—"

"The Prickly Thistle is in the opposite direction," he said, as if she hadn't spoken. "Didn't you ask for directions?"

"Would you kindly stop interrupting me?" Delia nearly shouted the words.

There was a pause, then, "Why should I? You interrupted *me*."

For a moment she wasn't sure what he meant, but then she felt her cheeks go hot and she knew they'd turned

scarlet. "I'm sorry to have interrupted your"—she gestured with her hands—"your fornication, but that's no reason to—"

"Fornication?" He found this very funny indeed. "Did you just call it *fornication*?"

"Well, yes. What of it?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just very, ah, biblical of you."

Delia crossed her arms stubbornly over her chest. There was *no way* she was going to ask. He was mad indeed if he believed she would. If she asked, he might just tell her, and she didn't want to know the answer.

"Well, what do you call it?"

*Drat.*

He smirked. "Something far more descriptive, but I'd rather not repeat it now. Tell me. Precisely how much of my fornication did you witness?"

"Far more than one generally expects to see on a public road," Delia snapped. "In short, a shocking amount."

"I see. That would explain why you stood there for so long, gaping. The shock."

Delia glowered at him. "I didn't have much choice, did I? I heard a noise and so I followed it, and there you were, right in plain sight." *Pressing against each other, sighing, kissing, caressing . . .*

"You heard a noise. What kind of noise was it?" he asked, as if he were humoring her.

"At first I thought it was a wild animal," she said, then added in an undertone, "and I wasn't entirely wrong."

His eyes narrowed. "I beg your pardon, Miss Somerset?"

Delia bit her lip to keep from laughing. "I said, can't we move this along? My sister is waiting for me to return with a conveyance. She's been ill, and I would rather not leave her in the cold any longer than necessary."

He waved his hand imperiously, as if he were the lord of the manor and she a lowly servant. "Very well. Go on."

She took a deep breath and recited the facts quickly, before he could interrupt again. "The axle broke, the coachman suffered an injury, they're stranded on the road, and night is coming on. I need to find the inn, procure a conveyance, and fetch them both at once."

"The coachman is injured?" Now she had his full attention. "How badly injured?"

"Badly enough. He fell from the box when the axle broke and twisted his ankle. It's either sprained or broken. That's why he couldn't come for help. He did describe where I could find the Prickly Thistle Inn, but I must have missed a turn, for I didn't see it."

"The turn is difficult to spot from the road." He thought for a moment and came to some kind of decision. "Come." He turned and started back down the road, splashing casually through the mud puddles, clearly expecting her to follow without question, as if she were a dog or a sheep or some other kind of dense

livestock.

Delia hesitated. She was in no more danger alone with him here than she'd be a mile down the road, and she didn't have much choice, but the idea of putting herself under this man's sole protection seemed, well, unwise.

When she didn't immediately follow, he jerked around. He must have read her thoughts on her face because his arrogant gaze moved deliberately from the top of her bedraggled bonnet down over her muddy traveling dress, and came to rest at last on her ruined boots. "Believe me, Miss Somerset, *you* are perfectly safe with me."

Delia gasped in outrage. He was insulting her? She didn't need him to remind her she looked a perfect fright. "Such a gallant thing to say." She had to struggle to keep her temper. "But perhaps you're not accustomed to the company of ladies who are fully dressed."

He shrugged, then turned again and started back down the road, leaving her no choice but to stagger behind him. "Let's just say I prefer the company of ladies who are fully *undressed*."

Delia supposed he meant to shock her, but she was beyond shock at this point, and hardly turned a hair at this scandalous comment. She followed behind him, scrambling to keep pace with his long-legged stride. "I see. Well, that explains why you felt compelled to undress your friend on a public road. How terrible it must be, to be so at the mercy of your animal passions."

She was glaring at the back of his head when she noticed he'd begun shoving a hand through his thick dark hair. The crisp waves curled and caught a bit against his long fingers. Did that mean he was nettled, then? Oh, she hoped so. She'd be immensely gratified to have annoyed him.

She had just begun to enjoy that idea when he whipped around to face her. She was so surprised she crashed right into him. Strong hands reached out to steady her, but when she was upright again, he didn't release her. Instead he pulled her just a bit closer—not so close his body touched hers, but more than close enough to completely unnerve her.

"I *was* carried away by my animal passions," he murmured in a low, seductive voice. His velvety dark eyes caught and held hers. "I'm an impatient man, you see, Miss Somerset. Especially when it comes to"—he dropped his voice to a whisper—"fornication."

For one moment Delia was mesmerized, staring at him as if he were a snake charmer and she were rising from her basket after languishing there for decades. But then she noticed a hint of a smirk on his lips and jerked free from his grasp.

Goodness gracious. Her face heated yet again. "Perhaps it would be better if we didn't speak."

Another careless shrug. "If you choose."

*Awful, teasing man.*

They walked along the road for a while, the only sound now the soft, wet thud of boots against mud. After a half mile or so he turned off the road and pulled back some overgrown bushes. "The inn is on the other side." He gestured for her to walk in front of him.

As soon as Delia passed through the thick brush, she could see the path, and there at the end was the Prickly Thistle Inn. She'd walked right by it earlier without noticing, as it was impossible to see the squat stone

building from the road. She glanced resentfully at her silent companion. She had cause to regret her inattention now, didn't she?

Delia breathed an immediate sigh of relief when they entered the inn. It was almost dark outside and growing colder, but there was a massive stone fireplace at one end of the main room that threw out considerable light and heat. A grizzled little man was running a damp cloth over the scarred wooden surface of the bar. "A pint fer ye, me lord?" he called, when he caught sight of Delia and her companion hovering in the doorway.

"Not this time, thank you, George," Delia's companion replied, but he wasn't looking at the gray-haired man. He was looking at her, a smug grin lifting the corners of his wide mouth.

Delia stared back at him, aghast. *Oh, no, no, no!* But even as her brain worked frantically to deny it, she began to remember certain little details. His lack of reaction when she mentioned the earl's name. His concern over the injured coachman, a coachman who had been sent by the Earl of Carlisle to convey them to Kent. The fine quality and fit of his clothes—that was, when they were fastened.

And who else but an arrogant earl would *dare* . . .

Delia wanted to stamp her foot with ire. It couldn't be! Her mind struggled to think of anything that would prove her dreadful suspicion wrong.

Yes! The woman. The one he'd been groping. The giggler. She'd called this man *Alec*. That wasn't right, because Charlotte and Ellie's brother was named . . .

Delia closed her eyes in despair. Charlotte and Ellie's brother was named Alexander. Alexander Sutherland.

*Alec.*

The fornicator. The debaucher. The lifter of women's skirts and the unbuttoner of breeches.

*He* was Lord Carlisle.

## Chapter Two

"Miss Somerset." Alec swept her a low, mocking bow. "As you may have deduced, I am Carlisle. You'll be my guest at Bellwood for the next several weeks."

He watched with detached interest as a series of expressions flickered across her mud-streaked face. Doubt. Denial. Fury. Finally, resignation. It had been a nasty trick to play on her. Childish, too. Alec almost felt guilty. *Almost*. But a man was not responsible for his actions when his bollocks were aching.

They weren't likely to stop aching anytime soon, either, thanks to Delia Somerset. He wasn't exactly proud to be caught with one hand in a village wench's bodice and the other raising her skirts, but things had become a bit more heated than he'd intended. That did tend to happen with Maggie. He was a man, after all, and Maggie had a spectacular bosom.

"My lord." Alec jerked his attention back to Miss Somerset, who'd dipped into a very low, very deferential curtsy. He was impressed, despite himself. He'd never seen a young lady curtsy *sarcastically* before.

He knew who she was, of course—had known before she said her name. Few things happened at Bellwood

without Alec knowing about it. If his mother chose a new china pattern or one of his sisters broke a nail, he knew.

He'd expected Delia Somerset.

His sisters had revealed the information the previous evening. They'd been giggling over something for days, batting it between them like two kittens with a ball of yarn, repeating Robyn's name and the phrase "yellow gown" so often Alec had at last grown curious.

"Who is Robyn chasing now?" he'd asked idly.

"Delia Somerset," Eleanor replied. "You remember we told you we became intimately acquainted with two young ladies during our stay in Surrey, Alec? Robyn was quite struck with Delia, the elder sister. I think yellow is his new favorite color."

*Somerset.* Of course Alec knew the name. Millicent Somerset, formerly Millicent Chase, had been a legend during her London season. Trust Robyn to find a Somerset in the wilds of Surrey and deem her worthy of chasing.

"He couldn't take his eyes off her," Charlotte added, breathless with the romance of it. "He teased and teased until we invited her to the house party."

Alec froze. *Invited her to the house party?*

"Charlotte, Eleanor, I wish to speak with Robyn in my study. Please tell him."

The girls turned and stared at him, surprised by his grim tone. "Um, I think Robyn has gone out for the evening already . . ." Eleanor began.

Alec raised one black eyebrow. "At once, Eleanor."

His sisters weren't about to sacrifice themselves to the big bad wolf on Robyn's account. They must have decided Alec looked decidedly wolfish, because both girls turned without another word and hurried out the door, before he could catch their little red hoods in his teeth.

Alec walked into the study, moved behind his desk, and unstopped the decanter of whiskey. He had a feeling he was going to need a drink.

"Alec." A few minutes later Robyn breezed in and threw his long body into a full sprawl in front of the heavy mahogany desk. He nodded when Alec held up a second glass. Alec poured a measure and pushed it across to him.

Mincing words seemed pointless, so he didn't. "What will you do with the Somerset girl if you catch her, Robyn?"

There was a pause. "Delphinium," Robyn said with a faint smile.

Alec gave his brother a blank look. "I beg your pardon?"

"Her name is Delphinium."

Alec was speechless for a moment, then, "You're joking."

“No. Charming, isn’t it? Her friends call her Delia.”

“Is this really all about a damned yellow gown, Robyn?”

“The color of the gown isn’t important, Alec. It had more to do with the cut. It fit her nicely. Very nicely indeed.”

Alec didn’t leap across the polished surface of the desk and seize his brother by the throat, so he had cause to marvel at his own restraint. “Let me understand you, Robyn. You have invited Miss Somerset—*Delphinium*, if one can credit it—to Bellwood because she fills out her yellow gown?”

Robyn crossed his legs. “No, of course not. I didn’t invite her here. That wouldn’t be proper, would it, Alec? Charlotte and Ellie invited Delia and her sister Lily.”

“We wouldn’t want you to overlook propriety,” Alec muttered.

He often played this game with Robyn these days. Alec pretended to be calm while his knuckles turned white from his grip on his whiskey glass. Robyn affected casual indifference, but he watched his brother with the wariness of a hare hiding in the shadows from a hound. If Alec lost his temper before Robyn could escape the study, Alec lost the game.

“Tell me, Robyn—the Somerset girl. What level of scandal are you planning? Should I send word to London? Or will you confine yourself to the country this time?”

An angry flush rose above Robyn’s collar and surged into his cheeks, but then he recalled his role in the game, and with a visible effort, he gave a careless shrug. “Who can tell?” There was a brief pause, then, “Perhaps I just enjoy her company, Alec. She’s clever and amusing, and . . . *alive*.”

Alec stared at his brother. Something about Robyn’s inflection on that last word stopped the retort on Alec’s lips. Was that *longing* in Robyn’s voice? Christ, he hoped not. Before he could decipher it, however, Robyn reverted to the lazy, bored tone that never failed to push Alec’s temper to the boiling point. “As to warning London, I suppose you should do just what you please, Alec. You always do.”

Alec wrapped his fingers tightly around his glass. *Losing the game*. It was time for Robyn to leave. He gave a short nod. “Enjoy your evening, Robyn.”

It was a dismissal, and Robyn knew one when he heard it. He unfolded his long frame gracefully from the chair and bowed to his brother. “I always do. Good evening, Alec.”

\* \* \*

Alec hadn’t seen or spoken to Robyn since then. Not surprisingly, there had been no sign of him when Alec left Bellwood at midday. Robyn was likely even now still snoring off the remainder of last night’s debauchery. Or maybe Robyn was just avoiding him. Robyn generally did avoid him these days.

Nonetheless, Alec made it his business to know if his scapegrace brother was contemplating a new liaison. He didn’t object to Robyn *having* liaisons—he wasn’t quite such a hypocrite as that. His brother could tup whomever he wished, with Alec’s blessing. The trouble was, Robyn wasn’t discreet. Far from it, and he’d spent the past year honing his gift for causing scandal.

Well, not this time. Alec wouldn’t tolerate another scandal. Not with Lady Lisette and her mother attending the house party.

Hard to believe it to look at the girl, but Delia Somerset was another explosive scandal waiting to happen, for all she looked like a London street urchin. Alec couldn't tell whether she was pretty or not, and it made him uneasy. Robyn appreciated tangible qualities in a female, starting with a lush, obvious kind of beauty and concluding with a devastating bosom.

Delia Somerset didn't make sense, and Alec didn't like it when things didn't make sense. How had this plain chit captured Robyn's fickle, roving eye? Was it possible Alec had overlooked a devastating bosom? He lowered his eyes to her chest for a quick inspection. Her dark traveling cloak was so practical and modestly cut, her figure in general remained a mystery. Perhaps another sneaky glance would reveal—

"Lord *Carlisle*!" she snapped, crossing her arms firmly over her bosom.

Damn it. Not sneaky enough. Alec raised his eyes from her breasts to find her glaring at him.

"Before you start unbuttoning your breeches," she said acidly, "perhaps you'd care to speak to the innkeeper about a carriage?"

Alec grimaced. Sharp-tongued chit. "Have you a carriage about, George?"

Mr. George shook his head. "Fraid I don't, me lord. Not today. Mrs. George took the inn carriage off to her sister's house. I lets her take it, ye see, me lord, on account o' otherwise her sister comes to visit us here, and I'd just as soon she didn't." Mr. George grinned. "Not much in life worse than an irascible female, if ye take my meaning, me lord."

Alec glanced at his silently fuming companion. "I do, George."

"We has the hay cart." There was a brief pause; then George added doubtfully, "Yer welcome to it, me lord."

*Damnation.* It would be pitch-dark by the time they returned to Bellwood and fetched another carriage. Alec hated to leave William on the side of the road with an injury, not to mention a potentially hysterical female, but he'd pushed Miss Somerset about as far as she'd—

"We'll take the cart," she said. Then she smiled. "Thank you, Mr. George, for your kindness in offering it to us."

"Of course, miss." George, obviously charmed, beamed at her. "I'll have the lad bring it 'round fer ye."

Alec stared at her. Just when he'd made up his mind she couldn't possibly pose any real threat, she'd smiled, and there went George, scurrying off to the back room, almost tripping over his short legs in his haste to accommodate Miss Somerset. If she smiled at Robyn that way, spoke to him in that soft, husky voice . . . Well, even Alec had forgotten for a moment she was covered in mud and her bosom remained a mystery.

The mystery wouldn't be solved tonight, however. She wasn't about to agree to remove her cloak so he could inspect her bosom. She wasn't Maggie, after all. Still, if he exerted himself to be charming, who knew what he could wheedle out of Miss Somerset on the drive to Bellwood?

"The cart is ready for ye, me lord." George bustled back into the main room and took up his place behind the bar. "I wish you a good evening, miss," he added, with a nod and shy smile for Miss Somerset.

Alec rolled his eyes. It was time to get her out the door before George tried to kiss her hand.

"It won't be a comfortable ride," Alec said, once they were outside. He eyed the cart. "Or a clean one."



Miss Somerset shrugged and made a move as if to spring into the cart.

“Allow me, Miss Somerset.” Alec offered his hand. She looked at it as if it were a snake about to strike, but he seized hers anyway, determined to be charming, whether she liked it or not.

Her hand was fine-boned, her fingers long and slim. He could feel her chill even through her glove. Surprisingly, Alec felt a stab of conscience when that cold, delicate hand slipped into his. He swung up next to her on the seat, and after a silent apology to Weston, he shrugged out of his coat and placed it around her shoulders. The mud would ruin it, but if she caught pneumonia, she could be at Bellwood for months, languishing. Even a plain country mouse could snare Robyn if she languished seductively enough.

“No! I mean, no thank you, my lord. I mean, it’s not necessary to . . .” she stammered.

*Damn it.* What was wrong with the girl this time? She looked aghast, as if she thought she could catch the pox from his coat. He was about to reassure her that he was as spotless as a newborn babe when it occurred to him it was *not* charming to discuss the pox with gently bred young ladies. “Your hands are cold,” he said gruffly instead. “It will be a chilly ride to Bellwood.”

He took up the reins. “My sisters were grateful for your company during their stay in Surrey,” he began politely after a moment.

There was a brief silence, then, “They were relieved,” she allowed. “They seemed to be under the impression the neighborhood was restricted to maiden aunts and elderly widowers.”

“That’s the company their aunt usually keeps. They were fortunate to find such delightful young ladies in you and your sister.”

There. That should do. It couldn’t be that difficult to charm a rustic like Miss Somerset.

But if he’d been expecting simpering and cooing, he was disappointed. She gave a short, disbelieving laugh. “Are we to have compliments now, my lord? Ah yes, I remember. *The Mirror of the Graces* does say after a gentleman exposes his unmentionables to a lady, he should flatter her and pretend to admire her.”

Alec chuckled. Did she really think she’d seen his *unmentionables*? “I only meant any company would be more engaging than their aunt Matilda’s. She’s not exactly vivacious, though Charlotte and Eleanor don’t need more of that.”

She pounced at once. “Why is that? Do you disapprove of your sisters showing spirit, my lord?”

“Not in the proper time and place,” Alec said, then cringed. He sounded like a prig. Prigs weren’t charming. This conversation wasn’t going at all the way he’d planned, and it was her fault. Talking to her was like having a thorn stuck in his boot. Every time he took a step forward, she pricked at him.

“That rather defeats the purpose of having spirit in the first place, doesn’t it?” she asked, trying to stifle a laugh. “But truly, how unfortunate lively young ladies like Charlotte and Ellie should have such a disapproving brother.”

She was *laughing* at him? “They have only one disapproving brother, at least.” He’d started to lose patience. “My brother Robyn detests disapproval, especially when it’s directed at him. No doubt you found *him* charming, Miss Somerset.”

*Christ.* Now he sounded like a petulant child. Again, it was her fault. He felt like he was trying to charm a

stick of furniture.

“Oh, I did,” she replied without hesitation. “He has such gentlemanly manners.”

Her implication was clear. *Not like his elder brother.*

Robyn? *Gentlemanly*? Miss Somerset may be clever, but she was also hopelessly naïve if she hadn’t recognized Robyn for the rogue he was. Alec doubted she’d spent much time out of Surrey. There was one way to find out. “Did you spend the entire winter with your family in Surrey?”

“Yes. We had a quiet winter. Some find the country a bit dull, I suppose. It’s not exciting, but it’s peaceful.”

If she’d come to Kent for excitement, she was off to a promising start. “Have you seen much of the English countryside?”

“No. I haven’t had much opportunity, my lord. We did have a chance to see some of Kent while the light held today.”

“I see. Then you only go to London for the season?”

There was a short silence. He glanced over at her. A faint frown had appeared between her brows.

“I’ve never been to London, Lord Carlisle.”

“No London season?” He managed just a touch of aristocratic horror. “How extraordinary.”

“It’s grievous indeed, Lord Carlisle,” she returned dryly.

Alec paused, as if still absorbing this shocking piece of information. “You have no relations in London?”

She shrugged. “We have no relations in London who wish to host us for a season, my lord.”

She’d phrased it so it wasn’t quite a lie. Alec already knew, of course, she did have relations in London. Her maternal grandmother was even now terrifying the *ton* from her town house in St. James’s Square.

Lady Chase didn’t receive her granddaughters, then. If so, neither would anyone else. “So you and your sister don’t spend time in society?”

“I have four sisters, my lord. We don’t spend time in society and not one of us has been to London. Nor are we likely ever to go.”

Despite himself, Alec was momentarily distracted. “*Four* sisters?” Millicent Chase had been busy after her exile from the *ton*. Five girls. No money to speak of. Plenty of scandal attached to the family name, though. He had to give his brother credit. Robyn couldn’t have chosen a more spectacularly bad prospect than Delia Somerset.

“Why did your other three sisters not accompany you to Kent?” he asked. *Why not drag the whole penniless, scandalous lot along?*

“My youngest sister is just fifteen years old, and the next one in age to Lily isn’t yet eighteen. A house party isn’t appropriate for them.” She made the words *house party* sound like *den of iniquity*.

“How kind of your parents to trust you and your sister Lily among us,” he bit out. At some point during this conversation, he’d started gritting his teeth.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt it—a surge of such sudden and intense emotion he nearly dropped the reins. She’d gone still, as though she could keep it all inside her if only she didn’t move.

“My parents are dead, my lord.” Her voice was expressionless. “They were killed in a carriage accident last spring.”

### Chapter Three

She couldn’t get her breath. Grief closed over her head, a relentless, sucking tidal wave of it. She gasped a little, panicking. If she could just get her breath. *Breathe*. Breathing would stop the welling pressure behind her eyes and the torrent of painful words that rushed to her lips. Stop them before they spilled over and drowned Lord Carlisle.

She bit her lip. Hard.

Delia focused on the sky and concentrated on the fading light until the choked feeling began to ease. The afternoon dusk had long since faded into evening, but it was not entirely dark yet. Not dark enough for a sky full of stars. The faintest glimmers had begun to appear here and there in the deep blue above her, as though tiny pinpricks had been made in the dark canvas to let the starlight peek through.

She took another deep, cleansing breath and silently exhaled. Her parents’ sudden death last spring wasn’t a secret, but it was private. She didn’t want to present it for Lord Carlisle’s dispassionate inspection. Or anyone else’s. Certainly not anyone high enough in the instep to attend this house party. She’d imagined the death of a disgraced London belle and her provincial spouse would be beneath their notice. The *ton* hadn’t bothered with Millicent Chase since she’d become Millicent Somerset. Why should Lord Carlisle ask about her family now?

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He had high cheekbones and firm, sensuously sculpted lips. It was an arrogant face. An aristocrat’s face. Now that she knew who he was, she could easily trace a likeness to his sisters in his features. Charlotte and Ellie were both beauties, with dark hair and merry black eyes.

Lord Carlisle didn’t look merry at the moment. He looked grim. His large hands gripped the reins and he’d fallen silent after her last disclosure. She looked away. What did she care if he were grim? She cared only that he was silent.

And really, what was there to say? *I’m sorry you and your sisters are orphans? What an unspeakable tragedy?* She was oddly rather grateful he said nothing. It saved her the effort of having to manufacture the empty words required when someone expressed their condolences. *Thank you, my lord. Indeed it is a tragedy, my lord.* No one wanted to hear the truth. *My life as I’ve known it is over, my lord. My sisters are awash in grief, my lord. I’m not sure we’ll survive, my lord.*

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