



## Prologue

Mayfair, London

April 1816

Eyes widening, eighteen year-old Annabelle Green stepped back from Quinton Carlisle, against whose hard front she'd just so scandalously pressed herself. She brought her hand against her lips. Swollen, hot, wet... Oh heavens, he'd been *kissing* her.

Dear God, she'd let him!

She bit back a groan of self-recrimination. *Let?* She'd practically jumped into the scoundrel's arms to be kissed.

"Annabelle?" he asked softly with concern. The noise from the crowded St James ball barely reached them beneath the thick rose bower at the rear of the garden, where dark shadows cocooned them together.

She stared at him, for the life of her not knowing what to say. A few minutes ago, she'd slid out the library terrace door to escape the crush of the party, to take a short turn around the garden. To give herself a few minutes of peace when she wasn't the

object of whispers and laughter from the other ladies at the ball who thought she was overreaching. She was only a lady's companion after all, with no real right to wear silk and jewels or to dance with eligible gentlemen.

But she'd come across Quinton Carlisle in the shadows. And then she'd found herself in his arms, being given the most incredible kiss imaginable.

"Are you all right?" he pressed. From the expression on his shadowed-darkened face, he was just as bewildered as she was.

"You—you kissed me," she whispered around her fingers, still pressed to her mouth.

"I certainly did." A devilish grin quirked at this lips. "And you kissed me back."

"I did not!"

He arched an amused brow at that wholly obvious lie.

Annabelle groaned. It hadn't been only a kiss, either. It had been a full-out embrace, eager and hungry, with nibbles and sucks and wandering hands—

"I'd like to do it again." He stepped forward to close the distance between them. His hot gaze dropped to her mouth. "Very much."

Her hand fell away from her lips, not to encourage him but because she was utterly confused. What on earth had come over them? "But we don't even like each other!" she squeaked out.

Well, he didn't like *her*, at any rate.

He was Quinton Carlisle, for heaven's sake. She'd known him since she was ten, with a quick smile that always set butterflies swirling in her belly and a golden handsomeness she was certain would have made Adonis jealous. One of London's most charming scoundrels, he turned the heads of bored society widows and wives everywhere he went, even at just twenty-one. Belle would have had to be dead or eighty not to be attracted to him.

But he was also the bane of her existence. He never seemed to tire of teasing her, just as he had since they were children. They were friends, certainly, but this season he seemed to take great delight in angering her until flames could have shot out of her head. While she might have fantasized about him, he certainly never gave a second thought about her.

Until tonight. When his arms had been around her. His hard body had pressed against her soft one and his lips had played over hers, teasing kiss after kiss from her until she thought she might explode from the throbbing ache he sent spinning through her.

Oh, what a delicious mouth he had, too! No wonder all those women in the *ton* practically threw themselves at him. When he knew how to kiss like that, why would they care about his reputation as one of the wild Carlisle brothers?

But *Belle* cared. Her reputation hung by a thread as it was, simply because of who she was. Nothing but the homeless daughter of one of Lord Ainsley's former housekeepers whom he and Lady Ainsley had pitied enough to take in, a penniless companion whose mother was dead and whose convict father was serving in prison. Despite Lord and Lady Ainsley's attempts to bring her into society's graces, not one person inside that ball tonight was willing to accept her. And all of them let her know it, too. Repeatedly.

Now she'd put even that tenuous position into jeopardy. Heavens, how could she have gotten herself into this situation? With Quinton Carlisle, no less! Her head spun with it.

"I do like you, Belle," he corrected in a deep and husky voice.

Then her head practically whirled itself right off her neck. He...*liked* her?

His mouth hovered just above hers, close enough that she felt the heat of his breath shiver across her lips. "I can show you how much if you don't believe me."

She pressed her hand flat against his chest to keep him away, although her traitorous fingertips curled into the brocade of his waistcoat. "Why did you kiss me like that?"

He lowered his head, to briefly bring his lips to hers. Yet that kiss was so much more than a peck. It held promises of all kinds of wicked things he'd do to her if she let him...all kinds of deliciously tempting things. "Because I wanted to."

He grinned at her in the shadows, then leaned in to kiss her again, this time with clearly more in mind than a mere touch of lips—

Her hand flew up to his shoulder, stopping him. "Why did you kiss me, Quinton?"

He shifted back at that, perplexed. Then he answered softly, "Honestly? I don't know."

Oh, that was *exactly* the last thing a young lady wanted to hear after giving away her first kiss! He couldn't even come up with a good lie to explain himself, or some affectionate compliment that he was so expert at giving to other ladies.

Apparently she didn't even merit empty flattery.

His eyes gleamed. "Annabelle, you're definitely not the sort of woman I normally end up with in the shadows."

The raw honesty of that burned into her chest. But he chuckled, as if he found their predicament humorous.

She blinked but couldn't clear the gathering tears from her eyes. "Was this only a joke to you?" Just another way for him to tease and torment her? She knew he was a rascal, but she never thought he'd stoop so low as this!

His expression grew serious beneath the shadows. "At first, yes," he admitted. "But it didn't end that way."

Anger and shame pulsed through her. With a soft cry, she shoved him back. She turned to hurry out from beneath the bower—

And tripped.

Her toe caught on a root, and she fell forward. Off-balance and unable to stop herself, her shoulder hit the post framing the entrance, and her dress snagged. The loud rip of tearing fabric sounded in her ears only heartbeats before her knees hit the dirt. For one moment, she could do

nothing in her stunned shock but rest there on her hands and knees, her head hanging with mortification and her bodice sagging loose.

“Belle!” Quinton knelt beside her and reached for her arm. “Are you hurt?”

Squeezing her eyes shut against the hot tears, she shook her head. A lie. Because her heart had shattered.

He helped her to her feet. With her arms clamped tightly over her bodice to keep it in place, as if she could also physically fight back the embarrassment pouring through her, she wrestled her arm free from his grip. Her vision was too blurred with tears and shadows to see his face clearly—oh, she was glad of it! She couldn’t have borne to see his pity. The humiliation would have killed her.

“Are you all right?” he quietly demanded, taking her shoulders in both hands so she couldn’t pull away again.

A sob choked from her. “My dress...” She’d ruined the expensive ivory and pearl silk gown that Lady Ainsley insisted she wear for her first ball. Her ripped bodice gaped open over her breasts, the skirt stained with dirt.

“Let me help.” He reached for her dress.

“Go away!” She twisted away from him. “Haven’t you done enough to me tonight?”

He stared at her incredulously, his lips parting at her angry rebuke. Then his eyes narrowed. “I’ve done *nothing*—”

“Carlisle!” A man’s voice rang out through the quiet of the garden, followed by a jarring laugh. “There you are!”

“*Christ*,” he snapped out, then tried to remove his jacket for her. But it was too late.

Two men came upon them in the dark garden, with lit cheroots and glasses of whisky in their hands. They froze when they saw Belle in her torn dress and Quinton half out of his jacket. Then lecherous grins spread across their faces, their teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“And he’s busy, too,” the first man drawled.

The second one looped his arm over his friend’s shoulders and tapped his glass against the man’s chest. “Deliciously so.”

Fresh humiliation cascaded through Belle, and she cringed at the lascivious looks the two men gave her, slowly raking their gazes over her from her dirtied hem to her torn bodice. She turned away, but it was too late. They’d surely recognized her, even in the shadows. And what they thought she and Quinn had been up to—

“Go away,” he growled, stepping between her and the men. His hands drew into fists at his sides.

The first man tsked his tongue. “And let you have all the fun?”

Belle recognized him—Burton Williams, Viscount Houghton’s youngest son. Her stomach sickened. *Oh God*, not that scapegrace and male gossip!

“I never would have figured you for a piece like this, though,” Williams muttered disdainfully.

Belle’s chest tightened so hard that she couldn’t breathe, that she was certain her heart would stop beneath the pressure of it. She lowered her head to hide her face as the first tear slid down her cheek.

“Go away,” Quinton repeated in a snarl through clenched teeth. “This isn’t your concern.”

Ignoring that, Williams laughed. He was having far too much fun chiding Quinn and humiliating her to leave. “Tore your dress, did you, pet?”

The other man slapped Williams on the shoulder and gestured toward her skirt. “Before or after she was on her knees, do you think?”

Quinton’s broad body stiffened with anger so intense that it pulsed palpably on the midnight air. “Leave,” he ordered. “And don’t say a word this about this to anyone.”

“Or what?” Williams taunted, throwing his glass away into the bushes to empty his hands to fight.

Amusement fled from the two men. Their faces turned hard, and they pulled themselves up straight. Tension sizzled like electricity in the air.

“Quinn, don’t.” She rested her hand on his right arm to stop the fisticuffs that were about to occur. Because if a fight broke out in the garden, then everyone in the ballroom would surely come pouring outside to see. All of London would find her looking like this and make the same assumption about her and Quinton that Williams and his friend had. “Just walk away. Please.”

His eyes flashed like brimstone. “And let them get away with insulting you?”

“Yes!” she choked out, afraid she would burst into sobs. “It doesn’t mean any—”

“Tapping a bluestocking?” The friend laughed. “That’s desperate.”

“Unless blue stockings taste like blueberries. Do they, Carlisle?” Williams took a step toward Quinn. “Is she a ripe juicy blueberry, ready to pop on a man’s tongue?”

His arm muscles tensed beneath her fingertips as she felt his simmering anger flame into rage.

“Quinton, don’t do this,” she begged. “*Please.*”

But he shrugged her hand away and stepped forward, fists clenched and heading straight into the fight. In an instant, punches hurled between all three men, followed by the sickeningly dull thuds of landed fists.

Panic surged inside her. She couldn’t be caught out here, not looking like this! Not with one of Mayfair’s favorite rakes bare-knuckle brawling over her.

Without thinking, only knowing she had to get away before she was seen, she ran toward the house. She was desperate to find the retiring room, to hide there until Lady Ainsley could rescue her and put this nightmare to an end.

“Belle, wait!” Quinn called out. She glanced over her shoulder only long enough to see him land a punch that sent Williams reeling. “Stop!”

But the *last* thing she would do was face him in her disgrace, or watch him get himself beaten up over her. When she heard him running toward her, the fight abandoned to chase after her, she hurried faster through the dark shadows toward the terrace door. Her shaking hand grabbed for the door handle—

“Annabelle, no!”

She flung open the door and rushed inside. Then halted in mid-step to suck in a soft scream of surprise when she saw four of the *ton*’s biggest busybodies sitting in the library. They stared at her, as if she belonged in the mews rather than in the grand townhouse with them. Then their gazes roamed slowly over her, taking in the torn and sagging bodice, the dirt stains on her skirt...*Oh God.*

Quinton arrived at her side a heartbeat later, looking disheveled and mussed from the fight. Knowing smiles spread across the women’s faces, and their eyes gleamed like hyenas relishing a feast. A scoundrel and a woman they considered too ill-bred to ever be one of them—

He shed his jacket and placed it over her shoulders to cover her, but it was too late. The damage had been done.

Her ripped and dirty dress provided all the proof—and ammunition—they needed to ruin her.

## *Chapter One*

*Cumbria, England Near the Scottish Border*

*September, 1822*

Annabelle paused as she walked with Lady Ainsley through the gardens at Castle Glenarvon, glancing up at the late afternoon sun as it slowly lowered toward the horizon. Another day gone.

Her chest tightened painfully as she whispered, “Only one month left.”

The dowager viscountess wrapped her arm around Belle’s and gave a resolute nod as she patted her arm. “There is still plenty of time.”

Belle wasn’t so certain. Hadn’t the past four years passed in the blink of an eye, only for her to still be unmarried one month before her birthday and the deadline for her inheritance?

Drawing in a deep breath, she looked across the gardens to the sweeping views of the Cumbria estate she loved, with its river and glen, and further out across the heather fields leading away to the blue mountains in the distance. Given as a gift to a favorite of the crown during the English civil war, the estate had been created to hold the border against Scottish invasion. It had passed down through the late Lord Ainsley’s family as a treasured, if financially meager, property located so far north that a strong wind could topple it over into Scotland.

Yet Annabelle loved every rock-strewn, heather-tufted inch of it. After a childhood spent moving from place to place, sometimes in the middle of the night to flee her father’s creditors and often not knowing when the next meal would be, the peace and permanence of Glenarvon still seemed like a dream to her. And in one short month, when she turned twenty-five, the property would be hers.

*If she married.*

*Or she would lose it forever if she didn’t.*

The estate would go to the Church, and Belle would lose everything...the mountains and the wilderness, the darling sheep and their pastures, even the little pond where she swam on summer evenings. The only true home she’d ever known.

*That* was the unbearable situation she found herself in. Just as she knew that it was all the fault of love.

Sensing her distress, the dowager added quietly, “We only wanted the best for you, my dear.”

“I know.” Belle squeezed her arm affectionately and turned away before Lady Ainsley could see the hint of tears in her eyes.

Lady Ainsley and her late husband were fond of Belle and always had been, ever since she came to live with them when she was ten. Her mother had died of fever, and her father, who had never been a part of her life except to cause misery, had been sentenced to prison two years earlier. She had no relatives to take her in.

Because her mother had once worked for the viscount, Lady Ainsley wanted to help by raising her to be her companion since the viscountess had no children of her own. So they welcomed her into their lives and treated her as well as they would have their own daughter. Truly, as well as Lord Ainsley’s three daughters from his first marriage, with a wonderful education, all the dresses and accessories she wanted, and a safe and stable home. They also wanted her to be well-protected for the rest of her life. So Lord Ainsley had willed Castle Glenarvon to her, held in trust by the new viscount—but only if she married by the time she turned twenty-five. The property would have been overseen by her husband and untouchable by her thief of a father.

But the road to hell was paved with good intentions, and by trying to protect her, they'd inadvertently harmed her. Because her twenty-fifth birthday was now only a month away, with no husband in sight.

"We have a plan, and it will work," Lady Ainsley reminded her, referring to the series of teas and parties they'd planned on hosting. All of the area's most eligible gentlemen would be invited, to give Belle a chance to meet them and decide if any might do for a husband. A rushed season in miniature.

Of course, the time had finally come to also reveal that Castle Glenarvon formed her dowry. With the viscountess's permission, Belle had always kept that secret, except from a few trusted persons who held a vested interest in the property...the estate foreman, the family solicitor, and Sir Harold Bletchley, who owned the neighboring estate. She'd feared being inundated by fortune hunters who wanted the land more than they wanted her and terrified that she'd end up in a marriage like her mother's. One in which her husband's lack of love for her would turn the union into a nightmare.

But now, with a looming deadline and a dearth of suitors, she had no choice but to reveal her dowry. And no choice but to consider a marriage of convenience.

"There is always Sir Harold," Lady Ainsley tossed out off-handedly. "He would make a fine husband."

Belle stiffened, certain Sir Harold *would* make a fine husband. Just not for her. Not if she wanted to enjoy any conversations with her husband other than those about hunting and hounds.

Oh, Sir Harold wasn't a villain by any stretch. But neither was he the kind of man she suspected would make her happy. One who saw his wife as a true partner in marriage, one equal to the task of running the estate and deserving of his respect.

"He has his own property and a goodly amount of wealth, the respect of the aristocracy, a fine family history..." Lady Ainsley ticked off his qualifications as if she were reading an entry in Debrett's. "By all accounts, he would be quite an advantageous match for you. You should reconsider his offer."

Belle fought back the urge to cry. Lady Ainsley was being helpful, in her own way. And she wasn't wrong. A young lady with Belle's pedigree—or rather, *lack* of one—would never have been able to marry a gentleman any other way except by bringing an estate as her dowry. But Belle had never cared about social rank or her place in society, except to please Lord and Lady Ainsley. Whether society spurned her for the rest of her life or welcomed her with open arms, she couldn't have cared less. She'd turned her back on them six years ago when they'd all turned their backs on her. The *only* thing that mattered to her now was that she be allowed to keep living right here in the home she loved, surrounded by the people she cared about.

She just hadn't planned on being forced into a marriage she didn't want in order to do it.

"I do not believe that he and I are well-suited," she countered before Lady Ainsley considered her silence to be an acquiescence. "I believe I should look elsewhere."

"As long as you keep looking," Lady Ainsley warned with all the worry and affection of a true mother. "I fear you've grown opposed to marriage."

"I'm not against marriage," Belle defended herself. "It's a perfectly fine institution." But neither had she ever been one of those young ladies who eagerly sought it out, who spent all their waking hours preening and plotting to snare the best husband, one of high rank and large fortune. "But I want a marriage based upon respect, friendship, shared interests...love." Then she added softly, certain the dowager could hear the admiration in her voice for the two people who had become a second set of parents to her, "The kind of marriage you and Lord Ainsley shared."

Marrying for love was a quaint notion to be sure, one that certainly flew in the face of modern convention, when affection was the last consideration for a marriage match among ladies of the *ton*. Yet Belle had seen first hand with her own mother what could happen to a wife who had trapped herself with a man who cared nothing for the true partnership a marriage should be.

Belle wasn't brilliant at math, but she could certainly count to nine months and knew that her untimely arrival had forced her parents into marriage. There was no love between them, and Marcus Greene thought he had the right to control his wife, if not by direct orders and insults than by his fists. He'd never provided a sound roof over their heads or adequate coin with which to buy bread and cloth—often none at all—preferring instead to spend his nights drinking and his days drifting from job to job, unable to keep one for longer than a few weeks. His wife and child had been dragged along in his wake, without means of escape. The drunkenness became worse, the beatings fierce and frequent, the debts higher...until he was arrested for theft and sent to prison. His gaol sentence had been his family's path to freedom.

But while her mother's situation exemplified the misery that a marriage could be, she'd also witnessed the true partnership that Lord and Lady Ainsley had shared. Oh, they certainly fought. Angry words had been exchanged, once with the viscountess refusing to leave her boudoir for a week until Lord Ainsley apologized. But the viscount would never have cursed her or raised his fists in anger. They both dearly loved the other, and that love made all the difference.

It all came down to love, Belle was certain. Or to the lack of it.

Given all she'd witnessed, if faced with the choice of marrying a man who did not love her or remaining unmarried, Belle would have gladly become a spinster.

But she could never utter that last aloud for fear it would break the dowager's heart. And in her current situation, with her home hanging in the balance, it seemed she no longer had a choice.

"I want a good marriage for you, too," Lady Ainsley agreed. "Which is why I sent for Quinton Carlisle."

Belle tripped.

Stumbling to regain her balance, she turned to stare at the viscountess, her eyes wide as saucers and her mouth open. She struggled to find her voice in her shock, finally squeaking out, "Why?"

Lady Ainsley kept her gaze straight ahead. "To assist in your search for a husband, of course."

Belle gaped at her, stunned. *That* rascal, to help her to find a suitable husband? What did he know about husband hunting, except for how to avoid the marriage shackles for himself? *Good Lord*. It was a measure of how desperate they'd become that Lady Ainsley felt compelled to invite that devil here.

Oblivious to Belle's deep breaths to regain her composure, the viscountess led her forward through the garden. "I tucked in a note to him when I wrote to his mother last month, to congratulate Elizabeth on finally marrying off one of her sons without scandal. Rather," Lady Ainsley corrected, "with *little* scandal. Trent married the niece of one of this tenant farmers, after all. I am certain tongues were wagging all the way to Cornwall over that."

Belle hadn't seen that note, or she certainly would have burned it. Which was most likely why the viscountess hadn't told her about it until now.

Dread pinched her stomach at the thought of seeing him again. "But why Quinton?"

"Because we need his help." The dowager turned to gaze across the glen in the distance. "If anyone can sort suitable husbands from the undesirables, it will be my great-nephew."

*Ha!* The only *help* Quinton would give would be to cause problems. Just as he'd always done for her.

In the past, whenever they'd met on those rare occasions when Annabelle accompanied Lord and Lady Ainsley to London, that scoundrel had taunted her mercilessly. Like one of those boys in the schoolyard who enjoyed pulling a girl's braid just to capture the attention of her ire. Over the years, the torment only grew, and it seemed that the more aggravated she became, the more he enjoyed it.

Until her London season, when he'd finally gone too far.

“You know what happened between us, my lady,” she whispered, struck by how painful that memory was, even now. The *very* last person Belle needed interfering in her life now was the man who was responsible for driving the final nail into her reputation’s coffin.

“Yes.” Lady Ainsley’s lips pressed into a tight line. “Which is another reason I asked him here. This is his last opportunity to apologize to you.”

Not likely. The Carlisle brothers never apologized for the havoc they wrought, and she doubted Quinton had changed that much in the past six years to become remorseful.

Besides, she didn’t want an apology. Forced contrition on Quinn’s part wouldn’t begin to make up for the havoc he’d unleashed upon her life. Thanks to that ill-fated night in St James’s garden, she had no proper suitors. She’d been clinging to the edge of society by her fingernails as it was, and every soiree she’d attended that season only reinforced how different she was from the ladies who were born into the upper-class. Although the viscount and viscountess adored her, there was no changing who she and her father were—the companion and the convict.

Before that night, gentlemen had paid her little attention. But after, she might as well have been invisible.

Which had been fine with her then. But now time was running out, and she’d have to choose from among a gaggle of men who wanted her only for her inheritance. Worse was her lingering fear over Glenarvon. To be forced into a marriage without love was bad enough...what would she do if she accidentally picked a man who refused to let her run the estate? Glenarvon would become joint property, with her husband having ultimate say over it. A good husband would let her run it as she saw fit, but there was no guarantee that the man she married wouldn’t turn out to be exactly like her father—a liar, gambler, thief, abuser...with no way to be certain of his true character until it was too late.

Lady Ainsley continued, “And with the potential for fortune-hunters to come crawling out of the woodwork as soon as they learn of your dowry, we will need a man’s strong presence to keep them all in line.”

“Did you tell him the real reason for the invitation?” A niggling guilt that they were ambushing him pricked at her. Or rather, that Lady Ainsley had ambushed *her* with her outrageous plan to bring that rogue here.

The viscountess feigned insult at the gentle accusation. “He is leaving for America, and I desire to see my great-nephew one last time before he goes. I am an old woman, and I might not live to see his return visit.”

Belle arched a brow. She’d grown to know and love Lady Ainsley as much as her own mother, and *that* was clearly a skilled dodge if ever she’d heard one. So no, Quinn hadn’t been told the truth.

But the dowager wasn’t wrong; she was along in years, and Belle couldn’t bear to think of losing Lady Ainsley as she’d lost her mother and the viscount. She guiltily bit her bottom lip. “If it makes you feel better to have Lord Quinton here, then I suppose—”

“It does.”

*That* came rather quickly. Belle eyed her suspiciously. Quinton Carlisle wasn’t the only one being manipulated by Lady Ainsley’s scheme to find Belle a husband. There was no way out of the marriage stipulation for her inheritance, and Lady Ainsley was doing everything she could to make certain Belle did not lose her home. Belle couldn’t fault her for the sentiment, although the execution—especially Quinton’s involvement—was certain to prove disastrous.

“I am a practical woman, Annabelle,” Lady Ainsley explained. “Sentiment only takes one so far. At some point, practicality must enter the room.”

Belle supposed so. She only hoped she could find a way to make it leave again.

“Perhaps Ainsley and I were wrong not to force Quinton to marry you six years ago,” the viscountess said thoughtfully. “If we had, you would not be in this situation now.”

No, her situation would have been *worse*. Which was why she’d begged Lord Ainsley not to push for marriage with Quinton as a way to salvage her reputation after the ball. Being forced

to wed would have done nothing to help her standing and everything to ruin both their lives by creating a marriage of animosity and regret. She'd never seen the viscount so angry, but he'd finally relented and let her return quietly to Glenarvon, to put London and that horrible night behind her.

As for Quinton, she suspected that the rascal knew how close he'd come to being leg-shackled then and now would never set foot on Glenarvon land, summoned by his great aunt or not. Belle took comfort in that. After all, there was already enough trouble in her life as it was.

No matter. Quinton Carlisle was the last person she wanted to think about. Not when the sunset was this beautiful and the evening most likely one of the last warm ones of the year.

"If you don't mind, my lady." Belle slipped her arm from the viscountess's. "I'd like to take a walk down by the pond, for some fresh air before dinner."

"Very well. I shall see you at dinner then."

She tilted her cheek toward Belle so she could kiss it. She obliged with a smile.

Lady Ainsley walked on toward the house, and Belle sighed out a grateful breath as she hurried away in the opposite direction, toward the end of the garden and the little path lying just beyond. One way led uphill to the tumbled ruins of the old castle, the other down toward the glen and the secluded pond. She turned downhill, her feet moving quickly over the familiar path she'd walked at least once a day for the past fifteen years.

For the first time all day, she felt at peace, and she hummed a soft tune to herself as she reached the edge of the pond and began to undress. Her worries slipped away as easily as the layers of her clothing. For a little while at least, she could forget about her troubles and simply enjoy the summer evening.

With a small shiver as she entered the cold water, she took a deep breath and plunged forward, to swim out into the center of the pond as she did on most summer evenings. As always, she had the glen to herself. The men were all up at the stables where they kept their quarters or had returned to their families and homes in the village. There was no one to see her through the thick bushes lining the pond's edge or to invade her peaceful solitude.

She closed her eyes and let the cold water refresh her, cooling away the frustrations that had engulfed her life. But it couldn't stop the sorrow that swept over her whenever she thought about the possibility of losing Glenarvon if she didn't find a husband. The estate had been a refuge for her, free from the horrors of her childhood, where she'd always had a warm bed to sleep in and food free from the mealy worms she remembered picking from the flour as a child. What would she do if she no longer had the security of this place and these special moments? How would she ever be happy again, forced away from all she held dear?

"Well, well." A man's deep voice pierced the quiet evening. "What have we here?"

Spinning around, Annabelle gasped with surprise. Her arms flew up to cover her bare breasts, and she dropped down until the cold water came up to her chin, hiding all of her beneath the pond's surface.

Unable to see his face as he stood silhouetted against the setting sun behind him, she stared at the tall stranger standing at the edge of the pond, right beside her pile of clothes. She swallowed back both her startled fear and her mortification, and anger flared inside her. To sneak up on her like this when she was alone, naked, and vulnerable—how dare he!

"Who are you?" she demanded in her sternest possible voice, which dripped with irony given the weakness of her current position. Heavens, she couldn't even run away! "What do you want?"

An impish grin blossomed through the shadows darkening his face. "Belle," he called out, a laughing lilt to his rich voice, "is that you?"

Her shoulders sagged beneath the water. God help her, she would know that grin anywhere. That handsomely smooth smile that could charm the king out of his crown...

"Quinton Carlisle," she called out tersely, peeved that he'd picked here and now of all times to arrive. Typical Quinn. Always showing up at the most inconvenient moments. And

incidentally—as if he had some sort of a rogue’s sixth sense for it—where currently stood a naked woman.

The last time she’d seen him, he was just twenty-one, fresh out of Oxford, and well on his way to becoming a rake even then. He and his two older brothers had cut a swathe through London’s most notorious venues that season, as if competing to out-do each other with drunken debauchery. The three had been the foremost topic of retiring room gossip, with the quality unable to believe that the Carlisle brothers belonged to their hallowed ranks. But while the ladies scorned them in public, privately they swarmed to them. Especially to Quinton, whose charming smile had them eagerly surrendering their hearts. And other body parts.

No wonder he hadn’t paid her much notice that spring, except to torment her. Why would he give any mind to a shy country girl who felt more at home in bookstores than in ballrooms when he had the sophisticated ladies of the *ton* vying for his attention? She should have known when he charmed her into surrendering her first kiss that she meant nothing to him. Such a goose she’d been!

“So it *is* you.” With an amused glimmer in his blue eyes, obviously thrilled that he’d caught her in such an embarrassing situation, he lowered himself onto his heels and closer to her level. “Up to your neck in it as ever, I see.”

“And you, as ever a bother,” she muttered, goaded into the same bickering they’d engaged in when they were children. Old habits were hard to break.

He gave a short laugh. A lock of blond hair fell across his forehead as he removed his beaver hat and ran his fingers through the thick waves, which were just as golden as she remembered. His crooked grin grew impossibly brighter.

Oh, she knew that look! And knew well the effect it had on women. Even now, having experienced the devilishness which lurked behind that angelic face, she felt that charming grin swirl through her, so intensely that it curled her toes into the muck at the bottom of the pond.

He pulled off his leather riding gloves and slapped them against his hard thigh as if finding her in such an embarrassing—and increasingly colder—position was a grand joke. “I wasn’t certain if it was you,” he taunted, “or if mermaids had come to Scotland.”

“We’re in England,” she shot back. The pest aggravated the daylight out of her—always had, blast him. “But if you’d like to travel on, Scotland is just ten miles that way.” She gave a jerk of her head toward the mountains in the distance. “Safe travels!”

Instead of being offended, he laughed, his eyes sparkling brightly. That, too, was typical of Quinn—boundless energy and a magnetic personality. “Your loyalty to crown and country is admirable, Belle, but I don’t think *Rule Britannia* applies to duck ponds.”

Oh, the devil take the man! Pressing her lips together tightly, she glared murderously at him, not trusting herself to respond without saying something she might regret.

He was just as aggravating as she remembered, despite being six years older, more mature, and definitely broader and more muscular. A sinking dread fell through her that Lady Ainsley had made a terrible mistake by inviting him here. How on earth was he, of all men, supposed to help her find a husband—something she didn’t want in the first place?

But her primary concern at the moment wasn’t his aunt and how the two of them were going to resolve the mess that the late viscount had created in her life—it was getting out of the pond and over to her clothes without Quinn seeing her naked. And judging from the relaxed way he rested back on his boot heels, his forearm lying casually across his thigh, he didn’t plan on being a gentleman and leaving.

“Lady Ainsley is up at the house,” she informed him, goose-bumps forming on her skin. Good Lord, the water was cold! A few minutes more, and her teeth would chatter.

“I know. My brother Robert is with her,” he explained. “But the groom said *you* were here, and I thought I’d say hello before settling into the house. So...hello.” Even in the dim light of the fading sunset his eyes sparkled like the devil’s own. “This feels like old times.”

Old times she very much wanted to forget.

When her eyes darted longingly to her clothes at his feet, he followed her glance. “Are you really...?” He gasped in feigned shock as he reached down to a hook a finger in her dress and lift it from the ground. “Goodness, Belle! You all truly do live wild here in the borderlands, don’t you?”

Despite the chill of the water, her face flushed hot. Leave it to Quinn to so cavalierly point out that she was naked.

She sighed in aggravation. And shivered with cold. Her teeth began to chatter, and as she shook, she prayed he couldn’t see it. Or anything else he shouldn’t see. “Would you please—”

“My, my, how careless!” With a shake of his head, he clucked his tongue. “Some wild animal could stumble upon your clothes and carry them off, or the wind might simply blow them—”

“Quinton James Carlisle, don’t you dare!” But her threat lacked all force, since she could do nothing to stop him. And drat him, he knew it, too.

Which only caused his grin to widen. She could see on his face how tempted he was to do just as she feared and walk away with her clothes, leaving her as naked as Eve in the garden. The deceitful snake!

“Same Belle I remember.” He laughed good-naturedly, as if he truly were happy to see her. “Tell me, do you still prefer books over people?”

“Certain people, yes,” she bit out. *And especially you.*

As if he could read her mind, he nearly doubled over hooting with laughter. The rotten scoundrel actually laughed! When he should have had the decency to be remorseful about what he’d done to her all those years ago.

In frustration, her hands fisted beneath the pond’s surface. “*Why* must you always insist on tormenting me? We’re no longer children.”

“No, we’re not.” Something in his gaze darkened heatedly as his eyes fixed on her, a look that proved he was pure man. “But teasing you puts a fire in your eyes, Belle,” he drawled in a silky voice, “and I’ve always liked seeing the fire in you.”

She shivered. This time not from the cold.

But his smooth words couldn’t be trusted. That much about him hadn’t changed, although the rest of him was most definitely different...taller, broader, more solid. And impossibly more masculine. The tight-fit of his buckskin breeches accentuated the hard muscles of his thighs and his narrow waist as much as the redingote stretching tight across his back exemplified the wide breadth of his shoulders. Since she’d last seen him, he’d transformed into a golden mountain of man, just like his older brothers, yet retained the same charismatic grin he’d possessed since he was a boy.

If he were anyone else, she would have said he was attractive. Perhaps even handsome. Unfortunately, she knew the Carlisle brothers well and knew what lurked beneath their captivating exteriors. Sebastian was the serious one, Robert was the risk-taker, and Quinton... Well, Quinn made his way through the world by his charm.

But his charisma no longer worked on her. She’d gained immunity. The hard way.

For a fleeting moment, she was tempted to show him exactly how much fire flamed inside her and simply walk out of the pond and collect her clothes, as bare bottomed as a newborn babe. Wouldn’t she just love to see the startled look on his face! Because she was certain he thought her incapable of doing anything so daring.

She trembled at the enticing idea. Despite the cold, an odd yearning of excitement fluttered up from low in her belly. Certainly the girl he knew before would never have considered it, but the woman Annabelle had become might just do something that unexpected. Something so bold that he—

She sneezed.

“God bless you,” he offered, then trailed his hand into the water at the edge. “Brrr! That is rather cold, isn’t it?”

Her eyes narrowed to slits, and she distrusted herself to speak, knowing this time she really would say something indelicate.

“Better come out now, Belle. You’re turning blue.” His eyes gleamed with enjoyment at toying with her. “Like a blueberry.”

Her breath strangled in her throat. *Blueberry*. Her eyes stung at his thoughtless words, her chest clenching painfully. To be that unkind to her even now after all these years as to bring up that horrible night— But he only continued to smile at her, oblivious to the cruelty of his off-handed comment.

Of course, Quinn wouldn’t think anything of it. His reputation hadn’t been ruined because of a fight; his heart hadn’t been shattered. But *hers* had. Although she could hide her body beneath the water, she couldn’t conceal the dark humiliation gathering on her face like storm clouds.

From his puzzled expression, he’d noted the sudden change in her but didn’t realize the full implication of what he’d said, and she didn’t dare speak past the knot in her throat to explain for fear she might cry. Because she would never allow herself to cry in front of him, *never* show him how much he’d hurt her.

“Belle, are you—Oh Christ.” His grin faded, and his eyes softened apologetically. “I’m sorry. It was so long ago that I’d forgotten all about it.”

But she hadn’t, and never would.

He rose to his full height, then turned his back to her and walked off a few paces to give her privacy. All his teasing vanished. “Come out whenever you’re ready.”

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With his back turned and his eyes focused on the darkening shadows cast across the countryside by the sunset, Quinn heard the soft splash of water as Belle moved quickly toward the bank.

He smiled. Annabelle Greene. Quick-tempered, defensive, serious...exactly as he remembered. When they were children, she’d been a bluestocking whose nose was forever pressed into one book or another. So he’d nicknamed her Bluebell, a combination of her name and bluestocking, just to antagonize her. The name stuck.

So did his enjoyment of irritating her. He hadn’t lied to her—he liked seeing the fire in her eyes, always had. Perhaps it was because all the society ladies he knew kept their true emotions carefully hidden. Not so with Annabelle, whose pretty face had never been able to hide what she was thinking, whose bright smiles had always lit up a room.

Maybe it was simpler than that. As he’d ripened into manhood, he’d come to realize how close anger lay to passion. Fires stirred by teasing were nearly as sweet as those flamed by desire.

“Are you all right?” he called out over his shoulder. Then he added, just to taunt her, “Bluebell.”

“I-I’m fine!”

He heard her teeth chatter. Guilt stabbed him for keeping her in the cold water longer than he should have. Or perhaps her answer was forced out between teeth clenched in anger. *That* would certainly be the Annabelle he knew.

Good Lord, had it really been six years since he’d last seen her?

The last time had been in London when she was starting her first season. As a late bloomer not yet grown into womanhood, she’d been at that age when her curves were just beginning to blossom and soften. The stick-with-ears she’d been all her life had grown into her long legs and big honey-hazel eyes, her gawkiness turning graceful and her shyness mellowing into a natural demureness. The Bluebell had suddenly turned interesting, even to the jaded buck he’d already become.

Then he'd kissed her. He remembered the sweet tang of honey on her lips, the wild scent of heather which clung to her skin, the pliant softness of her curves...the utter confusion which gripped him afterward. She was the Bluebell, for God's sake. Aunt Agatha's companion. Innocent and inexperienced. And wholly intriguing for all of it.

Six years had passed, and he hadn't seen her since. Based upon the barbs they'd just exchanged, though, she hadn't changed. And oddly enough, he was more relieved than he wanted to admit that she hadn't.

He offered affably, unable to stop himself, "Need any help with your stockings?"

"Just stay right where you are!"

"But I'm very good with ladies' stockings," he drawled.

"Oh," she muttered beneath her breath, "I'm sure you are."

He chuckled. Same old Annabelle, all right.

Good to know that some things hadn't changed, especially when everything else in his life was turning on end. Including the unexpected invitation to visit Glenarvon, which had nearly knocked him flat. Aunt Agatha had implied in her letter that she had financial matters to settle, which only boded well for him.

"Lady Ainsley said you'd planned to travel to America," Belle called out from behind him. "Is it true? Are you really going?"

He smiled at her stilted attempt at casual conversation. Or rather, at her not-so-subtle attempt to suss out when he planned to leave. "Yes."

But first, he needed to pay his respects to his aunt and collect whatever funds she had for him. Beggars couldn't be choosers, and he needed every penny he could get his hands on for what he had planned. To say his prospects as a third son were limited was a grand understatement. Oh, certainly he'd proven himself successful in managing the family's estate, assisting Sebastian after he'd inherited. More successful, in fact, than anyone who knew of his wild reputation would ever have imagined. In just two years, he'd increased estate profits by over fifteen percent.

But it was Sebastian's estate, not his, and he'd always chafed under the title's shadow. Proving himself on his merits meant that he had to find another path for himself, where his own capabilities decided his success and where his connections to the Duke of Trent meant nothing.

"To New England or Virginia?" she persisted, as if this conversation was nothing more unusual than discussing weather over tea. As if she wasn't naked.

"South Carolina, actually."

"Why?"

He grinned at her interrogation. "I promised my father."

"No," she corrected. "I mean, why South Carolina?"

"An old friend of my father's lives there." Asa Jeffers had served in his father's regiment during the first war with the Americans, then stayed on in the former colonies after the war, where he'd bought a significant amount of property outside Charleston along the Ashley River and settled down to raise a family. But he and his wife had only daughters. "He's getting up in age now and has no one to continue working the land after him. So he's putting it up for sale."

"And you're going to buy it?"

"I am." Just as his father had arranged. Richard Carlisle had understood Quinn's need to make his own way and hadn't dissuaded him when he'd set his sights on America. He'd encouraged them, in fact. Quinn couldn't afford the property by himself, even at the generous price Jeffers offered, so his father agreed to loan him the money. There was only one condition, that Quinn would allow Jeffers and his wife to live out their remaining days on the property, that he would care for them.

And Quinton had every intention of keeping this last promise to his father. The *very last* promise, in fact. Because the letter from Jeffers, agreeing to the terms of sale, had arrived just three days before the accident which took his father's life. Quinn's plans had been put on hold

after that, but he'd used that promise to find his way out of his grief and to be strong for his mother when she'd needed him.

Jeffers graciously understood his need to remain in England, to help his family through their mourning period and to assist Sebastian in running the estate until a proper land agent could be hired. But their mourning was now over, and a good agent had been hired. And Quinn was needed in Charleston. He couldn't be there at his father's side to take care of him the night he'd had the accident that took his life, but he could take care of Asa Jeffers.

"Then shouldn't you already be on a ship sailing for the west?" she asked.

Good question. Time was running out. He had to make his way to Charleston before the new year, when Jeffers would no longer be able to hold the land for him, having to sell before taxes were levied. Given the need to be on a ship bound for America in just four weeks in order to meet that deadline, this trip to the borderlands wasn't convenient. But he wasn't too proud to pass up any additional funds Aunt Agatha might be willing to provide that would help his new venture to found not only his own American estate but a trade business, as well.

"I will be soon enough," he answered resolutely.

Of course, he also knew that the visit to Glenarvon meant seeing Annabelle. They hadn't last parted under the best of circumstances, but he'd assumed that they could tolerate each other for a few days before he rode on to the coast. Then his future would begin. And not a moment too soon.

"Quinton! You got dirt in my stockings!"

He grinned. Yep. The same Bluebell he remembered.

Unless...

How much *exactly* had Belle changed during the past six years?

The temptation to satisfy his curiosity was too great to ignore. And who could really fault him for taking a quick glance? After all, any man would be curious about a woman he hadn't seen since she was eighteen, since the night she'd kissed him breathless.

"And look! There's grass all over my dress."

Would she be the same gangly girl he remembered? Would she still be nothing but skin-and-bones, sharp angles, and big feet? Fate would undoubtedly make him pay for this, but he couldn't help himself—

He glanced over his shoulder.

His breath hitched in his throat when he caught sight of her in the fading golden-purple sunset, all curvy naked and dripping wet, her body half-turned toward him as she hurried into her clothes. *Sweet Lucifer*. Full breasts with dusky-pink nipples drawn taut from the cold water, round hips and long legs that stretched all the way from her toes to her... *Well*. She'd certainly grown into her feet, all right, along with the rest of her.

He swallowed. Hard. The Bluebell had become a woman.

And God help him, he wasn't prepared for that, or for the visceral reaction in his tightening gut. Good Lord, for the *Bluebell*. And when she turned to drop her shift over her head and across her shoulders, unknowingly teasing him with another angle of her ripe body, the new view ripped his breath away.

He turned around before she caught him staring at her. Clenched at his sides, his hands trembled, and he inhaled deep, slow breaths to steady himself.

Well. Some things had certainly changed in the past six years. In all kinds of new and interesting ways.

"Just one moment more," she called out. "I can't quite reach..."

More fabric rustled behind him, and Quinn imagined her lissome body twisting to reach behind her to fasten her dress, her breasts straining tantalizingly against her low-cut bodice as her back arched. One long leg half exposed by a raised skirt revealing the lacy-edge of her stocking, which he could slowly roll down her thigh and follow along in its wake with his mouth.

"I'm almost through!"

Squeezing his eyes closed, he tried not to think of how round and full her derriere as she bent over to slip on her half-boots. He blew out a harsh breath of aggravation. That she of all woman could elicit such a response from him that even now his cock tingled—

“Hurry up, will you?” he prodded irritably. Because he wasn’t certain how much longer he could stand there, not looking.

“There,” she announced. “I’m dressed.”

*Thank God.* He turned.

And froze beneath the full force of her presence.

Sweet and genuinely enchanting—and far more beguiling than he remembered—Belle gazed up at him through long, lowered lashes. In her sprigged muslin dress, with her damp, caramel-brown hair now pinned into place, she looked perfectly proper, as if she hadn’t just been caught swimming naked. She barely came up to his shoulder yet packed the punch of an Amazon with her quiet allure and natural grace. Gone was her insecurity, replaced by a shining confidence he remembered seeing in her only once before, right as she’d wrapped her arms around his neck to kiss him.

She held her hand out to him, and he caught the scent of heather wafting on the air. The same wild, floral scent he remembered. Her cheeks pinked delicately, and the tingle in his cock turned into a longing ache that twined up his spine.

She said softly, “Welcome to Castle Glenarvon.” She added with a touch of begrudging politeness and a flash of her eyes that reminded him of smoldering coals right before they flamed into a fire, “I hope you enjoy your stay.”