

Chapter One

It was a balmy evening and Alan's mare, Arabella, cantered up the well-known road towards Caerdon Abbey at a gentle pace. The moon peeked out through the clouds now and again, lighting them with a luminous radiance, and the air was soft and fresh. It felt wonderfully clean and quiet after being in Paris so long, and Alan slowed his horse still further, in no hurry to arrive and end his journey, though he was later in arriving than he had meant and would not now be able to surprise his family until morning unless he chose to wake them out of a sound sleep. Smiling, he lifted his face to the sleeping house where all the lights were dimmed, grateful his diplomatic assignment had at last been dispatched so that *home* was now his business, as it should be.

But the house was not quite sleeping, and the lights were not quite all dimmed. For even as Alan fondly gazed up at the Abbey, a light flashed in the upstairs windows. Two short, three long, two short. He blinked, wondering if he had been fooled by some trick of the moonlight passing through the trees to glint off the window. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned forward in the saddle to peer. But there it was again, after a pause—the exact same signal. And upon seeing it again, Alan had no need to count windows to know which one it must be flashing from—there was only one person in the house who knew that signal, the one that meant *hasten*—his sister, Celia. And there was only one person she ought to have been flashing that signal to, and while Alan might indeed deserve a command to hasten, with such a late approach to the house, she had no reason to suspect he was in the neighborhood or, indeed, the country, that night.

He gritted his teeth and kicked Arabella sharply; the mare gave a little whicker of startled protest at the sudden change in her master's mood but instantly obeyed by lengthening her stride into a run. Celia must have taught their old childhood system of signals to some suitor of hers—and now she was signaling him to hasten, perhaps to climb to her window. Alan gave a grim smile. He would indeed be surprising his family that night, after all, and Celia might count herself lucky if he only disciplined her himself, without informing their mother what she had been up to. The sweet, willful little sister who had intrigued and charmed him for all their childhood had some explanations to make, if she didn't want to end up turned over his knee before dawn. He only hoped the situation hadn't proceeded further than that—better a spanking than arranging a shameful sudden marriage with some country swain!

* * *

Eliza peered anxiously out the window, pulling her dressing gown tighter around her as a breeze lifted her long auburn curls from her shoulders. Celia was so reckless! She had already heard Nanny's step in the hall once, and while the old woman hadn't come in, Eliza was perfectly sure that if she *did*, Celia's artfully arranged bolster under the sheets wouldn't fool her in the least. The very fact that Nanny was awake was a terrible thing. Eliza chewed her lip nervously and regarded the candle with its makeshift shutter, wondering if she should signal again. No, better not. If Celia was near enough, she must have seen the signal already. And anyway, she must realize she ought to hurry, that every moment only put her in more danger of discovery.

Oh, why had it had to happen like this? Eliza didn't blame Celia *exactly*. The dowager duchess, her mother, was so very particular, and old Nanny had a habit of lecturing for three

quarters of an hour at a time. And so, when Celia had found an old and very precious Spanish silver and pearl brooch missing when she was undressing that night, she had panicked. It was a family heirloom that Celia had been presented on her sixteenth birthday, along with many warnings about how she must always take the greatest care with it. Eliza had tried to calm her friend down, and together, they managed to work out that it must have come off when they were playing sardines at the picnic down on the bluffs. The vicar's son had hidden in a shrub, and by the time they all came out, there were a great many hairpins lost and shawls snagged.

And Celia would hear of nothing but going to fetch it herself, that very night. The next day, they were paying calls in the afternoon, and if she didn't wear the brooch, her mother would certainly notice, and that would be, Celia said theatrically, *the end*. If that would be the end, Eliza thought moodily, then being discovered climbing in the window would presumably be a general apocalypse, and she herself would be implicated in the matter as a conspirator. Perhaps Eliza would even be sent back to London for the rest of the summer—it wasn't fair. Celia didn't understand what it meant for her. To her, a long lecture or a whipping was the end of the world. Eliza peered out into the dark night again, desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of Celia's fair head in the garden in the patchy moonlight.

But within a few moments, her patience was rewarded. The great ash tree outside the window began to shake, first slightly, and then the boughs by the window swayed more energetically. Eliza sighed with tremendous relief and leaned well out, ready to give Celia a lift for the final ascent, which was tricky. But to her shock, it was not the face of her mischievous friend that faced her, but a man's face, stern and angry, and he caught her shoulder immediately. "What do you think—" he began roughly and then broke off.

Eliza gave a little terrified cry and jerked back with all her strength. She managed to pull free of the man's grip and drew back into the room. But she hadn't the time or wit to pull the window closed before he was climbing in, still looking stern, though a little less angry. And something in his manner, self-possessed, a man with rights, shifted her fear just a tiny bit. Something in her unconscious mind understood it was not at all the bearing of a man breaking into a house to accost a strange young lady. Still, she backed away until the wall prevented further retreat. Her vivid green eyes were round with confusion and fear. Eliza did not cry aloud or give an alarm, only stared at him as he finished clambering over the sill and stood there, looking at her in the darkness of the room, lit only by the single shuttered candle. "Wh-who are you?" she gasped at last.

"A man may climb in his own window without answering questions, surely?" he tossed back, pushing his thick, dark hair out of his bright blue eyes. "Who the devil are you, and where is my sister?"

His sister? His own window? But that could only mean... If Eliza had been fearful before, it was nothing to the rush of panic this realization loosed on her as she understood that she had been caught making mischief in her nightgown like a naughty child by the Duke of Caerdon. She drew in a shuddering breath and immediately dropped a very deep curtsy. "E-Elizabeth Cross, Your Grace," she murmured. "Cel—"

But before she could even try to form an explanation in response to his second question, she heard a sound that made her break off and freeze. It was the creak of a board in the hallway, and it was followed by the slow, heavy tread of Nanny. Eliza noticed that the duke had the exact same reaction she did—she supposed he knew the creaky board far better than she.

He did not question her further, nor did he hesitate. "Be silent," he whispered, and then he went out into the hallway, closing the door behind him. Eliza, listening, heard his firm, quick tread

retreating, and then voices for a moment, his and Nanny's together. Oh, what were they saying? She crept to the door and pressed her ear to it, trying to hear, but it was too thick. She could not make out the words, only the tone. Still, she could make out no angry tones from either, and though Nanny's voice did raise in surprise, she sounded pleased. Could it be he was covering for them somehow?

When the voices stopped talking and the duke's steps began to return, Eliza quickly hurried away from the door. She scampered to the big four poster bed and sat up on it, arranging herself to hide the bare feet she was horrified to realize she had been showing him without realizing.

He came in, took off his heavy traveling coat, and sat down in the armchair near the bed. Before he spoke again, he took a cigar out of his breast pocket, trimmed it to his satisfaction, and lit it at the candle, which he left unshuttered. He had the leisurely air of a man entirely at his ease. Then he smiled, a little roguishly. "With your kind permission, Miss Cross," he said charmingly, gesturing to the cigar. "It is Miss Cross, not Lady Elizabeth?"

"No, Your Grace, it is Miss Cross. I mean, it is really only Elizabeth," Eliza fumbled. "And just Eliza, most of the time."

"Less and less," he teased. "If I let you talk any longer, you won't have a name at all. I'm Alan."

"Yes, Your Grace," she replied, still a little too overwhelmed by his rank and the strangeness of it all to respond to either his joking or the implicit permission he offered.

"Very well, then. Nanny heard you cry out—I told her I'd come in late and wanted to surprise Celia, and you'd been frightened. So, it is all right. Or rather, I hope it is," he added, a note of steel entering his voice at that. "Where *is* Celia, and why were you signaling to her? I suppose, that was you?"

"Ohh..." Eliza gave a long sigh of comprehension then, as what had happened clicked in her head. When Celia had taught her the system of signals, at school, she had said her brother taught it to her. Her brother, the duke. "Yes, Your Grace. Please, it is nothing bad, I promise. Celia hasn't a lover, I will swear on anything you like. Only she lost her brooch, her special brooch, at our picnic today, and she was so frightened that she insisted on going out to find it tonight. And I heard Nanny in the hall and knew she was awake, so I was signaling to make her hurry."

Alan gave a long sigh, and the set of his broad shoulders relaxed just slightly. "I suppose I should be relieved," he mused. "But if she had gone to meet a lover, at least she'd have a swain to protect her, if she was attacked by a wild dog!"

"I went downstairs and stole a mace from the hall for her, Your Grace. To be safe."

He lifted an eyebrow. "What, the one under the escutcheon in the great hall?" When she nodded, he let out a shout of laughter. "Well, Celia is nobly armed indeed. That mace saw service at Agincourt, my dear."

"Oh...oh, I suppose it is quite precious," Eliza said, drooping.

"Rather," Alan agreed, but without any cessation of his amusement, and he laughed until he had to wipe his eyes. "Oh, Celia. Pity the wild dog. You're quite the helpful accomplice, Miss Cross."

"I'm not—" Eliza began indignantly, but as soon as she began speaking, she knew that was exactly what she was. "Better a helpful accomplice than a useless one?" she offered instead, ruefully.

"Indeed. Celia, at least, chose wisely when she was recruiting for her criminal enterprises."

Something in his cynical tone made Eliza flush and pull her dressing gown tighter at her throat, suddenly very conscious of the horrible impropriety they were committing. Still, an

unrepentant part of her thought it would certainly be a story to thrill her grandchildren with someday, the story of the night she had entertained a duke in her nightgown!

Her gesture didn't escape his attention, and he said, "You are suddenly very shy for a young lady who suggested I address her by her Christian name upon our first meeting."

"I...oh!" Eliza startled as she understood his meaning. "Only no one calls me Miss Cross, Your Grace. Only servants."

Alan tapped his cigar on the windowsill then leaned forward. "What do you mean? I suppose you have an elder sister also visiting?"

Eliza shook her head. "No, Your Grace. I have no sisters." She could feel heat radiating from her face at the perplexity and his inability to understand. Of course, he didn't understand. She was in his sister's bedroom and spoke like a young lady—how could he understand that she wasn't, not really? Biting her lip hard, she forced herself to continue. "C-Celia and I met at school, Your Grace. After my aunt died, I was taken in by kind friends, who sent me to school so I might gain an education that would allow me to support myself. When Celia asked if I might stay the holidays with her, your mother said no, of course, but Celia coaxed so, and finally, the duchess interviewed my guardian and the headmistress and saw me. She said I might come as a kind of companion, to help Celia keep up her studies over the holidays. So of course, I am not Miss Cross, you see, just Eliza, and that is what I am called," she concluded, finally lifting the gaze that had been fixed on her hands through her rapid, humiliating monologue.

What she saw made her heart sink further. The duke's face was displeased, hard and angry as it hadn't been since she first saw it among the ash leaves in the moonlight. "My mother errs gravely," he said sharply. "And I shall tell her so in the morning."

His words struck Eliza to the heart and filled her with terror as nothing else that night had done, not even the prospect of a strange man assailing her from the ash tree. She leapt from the bed and knelt at his feet quite unselfconsciously. "Oh, no, please, Your Grace, no," she begged, catching up his hand and holding it in hers, her eyes fixed on his face, which now registered astonishment. "I know you must have a very bad opinion of me, only please don't, they will all be so disappointed, and Mrs. Curton sold three spoons for m-my new dress." The last was merely a long sob as she lowered her face to his hand so that she might press her forehead to it in supplication and bathe it with her tears. "I will never do wrong anym-more, p-please," she whispered in a perfect desolation.

"Eliza." Alan's voice was very gentle and low now, and he turned his hand over, lifting her chin to force her to look up at him. "I did not mean that."

"What?" It came out in a soft, breathless whisper as she looked up at him, wide eyed. She looked very young in her fear and confusion, but also very beautiful with her curls falling all about her face, tears trembling on her long lashes, and her lips gently parted. "You said—"

"I said my mother erred, and she has, gravely. Certainly, it was proper to ensure you were a fit companion for Celia. But a companion to a young lady, paid or not, is herself always a lady and must be treated as such. Otherwise, she is likely to find herself in compromising situations." The corner of his mouth lifted fractionally. "Like so."

"Oh," Eliza gasped. "Oh." She looked up at him, still not rising or withdrawing from his touch, and he did not release her, but held her there, watching hope rise in the forlorn face.

"Who is Mrs. Curton?" he asked softly.

"M-my guardian's wife." And Eliza, feeling shy then, sat back on her heels. "She has been as good as a mother to me since my aunt died," she said loyally.

Alan let his hand drop and resumed smoking his cigar, though he was careful to keep the

smoke away from her. He looked a little unsettled himself by their very intimate exchange, and he continued questioning her. "And your guardian? I suppose he is a Mr. Curton, but what sort of man is he?"

"He is a vicar, Your Grace. At St. Mary-le-Bow in London. When I...he..." She hesitated, looking up at him a little doubtfully. She did not often disclose her history to strangers, and yet there was something about the duke that invited confidence—or perhaps it was merely the oddness of their meeting that had breached the formality that ought to have lain between them. She took a deep breath. "My father was a purser in Her Majesty's Navy. He was killed in the Sea of Azov shortly after I was born—he never even saw me. My mother died of typhoid when I was seven, and I lived with my aunt, who ran a boarding house. When she died some years ago, Mr. Curton took me in out of pity and made provision for my education so I might be independent one day." Her voice was very small and tight as she told the sad tale, and her face was quite expressionless.

And indeed, the tale did not seem to belong to her anymore. She had lived all the sorrows—the child sobbing on her mother's stiff body, the girl growing up half wild in Cheapside, fending off her aunt's boarders and creeping off to the church for a place of peace, the pitied ward so quiet, so desperate to show her merit, her obedience. She could tell the tale, but it did not seem really hers. Though, at school, she was known as a charity pupil—for even the collection Mr. Curton had taken from his parish had only half paid her tuition—her quick mind, fierce loyalty, and bright spirit had finally blossomed into the young woman she was always meant to be, and Celia was not the only one who had made a favorite of the girl so much more blessed by nature than by fortune.

Alan did not answer immediately but sat considering the story, and after a long moment, he smiled at her. "I'm very glad," he said, and there was even more intimacy in his smile and simple words than there had been in Eliza's frantic pleading.

For a moment, she smiled back at him, feeling as though he were not a duke and she a penniless visitor, but merely two people, met by chance, drawn by liking. But the strange, charged moment was broken by the sound of the ash tree scraping energetically against the side of the house, and Eliza jumped to her feet, startled.

But Alan rose more slowly, and he gave her another little smile. "Don't look so frightened. You're not likely to find two strangers coming in your window tonight." And he leaned out and yanked his little sister into the room with one swift, sure movement. "Well, young lady, what have you got—"

But the stern lecture he was trying to impart was entirely ruined by Celia's rapturous little scream as she flung herself at her tall brother and tried to climb him like a little blonde monkey. "Alan!"

"Hush, you goose," he scolded, but there was a fond chuckle he couldn't quite hide in his voice. "Haven't you troubled enough people tonight, without waking up the whole house?"

"Oh, but you are home, and a full fortnight before we looked for you! Alan, oh, Alan, you must take us out to the island now you are home, please? I want Eliza to see it, and Jarvits keeps saying he will take us out when the weather is fine, but it is never fine enough for him, the c—"

Alan, at last, achieved an interruption in Celia's rapid-fire monologue by pinching her nose so that she had to breathe in through her mouth, and he laughed when she glared at him. "Yes, and I am teaching Eliza the trick, too. Serve you right, sharing the signals, when I do recall we had a blood oath on the matter." Then, shaking his head, he firmly set his sister down on her feet, releasing her nose in the process. "Now, then. Given the circumstances, I think we've something better to discuss than the favors you'd like to beg from me, unless you'd like one spanking now, and the other after you've confessed, hmm?" He lifted his eyebrow.

Celia tossed her pretty blonde head, but when Alan gave her a stern look, she at least tried to assume a penitent air. "I wasn't really naughty, Alan, promise. It was only my brooch. Eliza told you?"

"I see. And I'm meant to be so pleased that you weren't sneaking out to make love to the pig boy—" Here, Celia gave a little scream of outrage, but Alan pushed on, ignoring her, "That I ignore the fact that you went entirely off the estate in the middle of the night? If you had met anyone at all, the very best that could have happened is that your reputation would be ruined."

"But I never let a soul see me," Celia pleaded. "That is why I waited so late."

"It is late for gentlefolks, which means it is precisely the time when servants have, at last, an hour to themselves. I suppose you would like to be ravished by the blacksmith on his way back from romancing our kitchen maid?" Alan was very serious and severe now, and he caught his sister's shoulders to give them a little shake. Eliza watched wide eyed as the duke scolded his wayward sister, feeling a strange thrill of empathetic fear, for she could not in the least imagine being as calm as Celia was under such opprobrium. When he caught Celia's shoulders, Eliza could not help shuddering a tiny bit, remembering clearly what his strong hands had felt like when he had caught her in just that way, thinking she was Celia. Watching Celia being dressed down by her brother was frightening, but also strangely exciting.

"I didn't think of that," Celia muttered finally, defeated by his good sense.

"You never think of anything except getting your own way like a selfish brat. And you have made Eliza privy to your mischief too—if you had gotten caught, she must suffer for your crimes. I am ashamed to see you so selfish to risk a friend in pursuit of your own comfort."

"I didn't—I wouldn't have—" Celia stammered, now really remorseful and looking at Eliza unhappily.

"You didn't think of that, either," Alan said unsympathetically. "And as foolish as you are to be so blind to your own safety, it's disgusting to see you so careless of your friend's position." He let that sink in for a long moment, glaring down at Celia, who seemed to have shrunk in her penitence and was now looking as sorry as could be wished. "But, Eliza, whom you have so little regarded, proves your salvation after all. I can hardly tell Mamma on you without getting her into trouble, as well."

"Oh!" Celia lifted her downcast gaze and began to express her thanks.

But Alan cut her off, lifting her finger. "Don't thank me. You know perfectly well I'm going to make sure you've learned your lesson about sneaking out at night. It's either that or cut down the ash, and I've no mind to make the tree suffer for your disobedience! I imagine it will gladly provide a switch for the lesson, though. I shall find a time to deal with you, tomorrow, is that understood?"

"Yes, Alan," Celia said, trying to assume a demeanor of pious obedience with a solemn countenance and folded hands. It was quite ruined, though, by the fact that her hands were folded over the wooden handle of the large antique mace that she was still carrying.

Alan sighed and took the weapon from her. "I'm glad Sir Henri's legacy at least survived the evening intact. Go to bed then, brat. " Though his words were sharp, he tweaked Celia's ear affectionately. Then he turned to Eliza and bowed. "Miss Cross, it was a pleasure making your acquaintance."

Wide-eyed, Eliza dropped a graceful curtsy, but did not speak. She felt strangely harrowed by the great range of emotions she had experienced that evening, terror, relief, and now, a powerful sense of fascination. The duke was so very handsome and so kind, and he had even scolded Celia about *her*! Said he wouldn't tell their mother because of *her*! At that, Eliza pulled her fancies up

short. Because he pitied her, of course, nothing more. Because he didn't want to see a young lady put in what he'd called *a compromising position*.

Alan withdrew, and Celia gave a long sigh. "Do help me with my buttons, please, Eliza?"

Eliza drew herself out of her reverie and began to unbutton Celia's dress down the back. "Was the brooch in the bush, like we thought? I hope you did get it, after all that."

"Oh, yes—and it was marvelous out tonight, you should have come along. I saw an owl swoop down and eat a rat, just fancy!"

Eliza made a face. "All things considered, I'm pretty glad I didn't come along," she pointed out gently. Although, as soon as she said it, she wondered if it was true. If he had caught both of them, would both, then, be disciplined? She shivered at the idea.

But Celia misunderstood. "Poor thing. I *am* a beast keeping you up so late. Let's go to bed and you may warm your feet on me all night, my dear. Your very own hot water bottle."

"I wonder what your mother would say to that," Eliza said wryly.

"She'd only be surprised I was fit for anything so useful." And so, the two girls snuggled down together in the big bed, as gently twined as two sweet peas on the same stem.