

*"Prepare to fall in love."*

JULIA QUINN



AVON  
BOOKS

USA TODAY BESTSELLER

# Tessa Dare

A Week to Be  
Wicked

# ***A Week to Be Wicked***

Tessa Dare



**AVON**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

## **Dedication**

*For all the girls who walk and read at the same time.*

# Contents

[\*Dedication\*](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Thirty](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[\*Author's Note\*](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*An Excerpt from A Lady by Midnight\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

[\*By Tessa Dare\*](#)

[\*Copyright\*](#)

[\*About the Publisher\*](#)

## Chapter One

**W**hen a girl trudged through the rain at midnight to knock at the Devil's door, the Devil should at least have the depravity—if not the decency—to answer.

Minerva gathered the edges of her cloak with one hand, weathering another cold, stinging blast of wind. She stared in desperation at the closed door, then pounded it with the flat of her fist.

“Lord Payne,” she shouted, hoping her voice would carry through the thick oak planks. “Do come to the door! It's Miss Highwood.” After a moment's pause, she clarified, “Miss Minerva Highwood.”

Rather nonsensical, that she needed to state just *which* Miss Highwood she was. From Minerva's view, it ought to be obvious. Her younger sister, Charlotte, was an exuberant yet tender fifteen years of age. And the eldest of the family, Diana, possessed not only angelic beauty, but the disposition to match. Neither of them were at all the sort to slip from bed at night, steal down the back stairs of the rooming house, and rendezvous with an infamous rake.

But Minerva was different. She'd always been different. Of the three Highwood sisters, she was the only dark-haired one, the only bespectacled one, the only one who preferred sturdy lace-up boots to silk slippers, and the only one who cared one whit about the difference between sedimentary and metamorphic rocks.

The only one with no prospects, no reputation to protect.

*Diana and Charlotte will do well for themselves, but Minerva? Plain, bookish, distracted, awkward with gentlemen. In a word, hopeless.*

The words of her own mother, in a recent letter to their cousin. To make it worse, Minerva hadn't discovered this description by snooping through private

correspondence. Oh, no. She'd transcribed the words herself, penning them at Mama's dictation.

Truly. Her own *mother*.

The wind caught her hood and whisked it back. Cold rain pelted her neck, adding injury to insult.

Swiping aside the hair matted to her cheek, Minerva stared up at the ancient stone turret—one of four that comprised the Rycliff Castle keep. Smoke curled from the topmost vent.

She raised her fist again, pounding at the door with renewed force. "Lord Payne, I know you're in there."

*Vile, teasing man.*

Minerva would root herself to this spot until he let her in, even if this cold spring rain soaked her to the very marrow. She hadn't climbed all this distance from the village to the castle, slipping over mossy outcroppings and tracing muddy rills in the dark, just to trudge the same way back home, defeated.

However, after a solid minute of knocking to no avail, the fatigue of her journey set in, knotting her calf muscles and softening her spine. Minerva slumped forward. Her forehead met wood with a dull *thunk*. She kept her fist lifted overhead, beating on the door in an even, stubborn rhythm. She might very well be plain, bookish, distracted, and awkward—but she was determined. Determined to be acknowledged, determined to be heard.

Determined to protect her sister, at any cost.

*Open*, she willed. *Open. Open. Op—*

The door opened. Swiftly, with a brisk, unforgiving *whoosh*.

"For the love of tits, Thorne. Can't it wait for—"

"Ack." Caught off balance, Minerva stumbled forward. Her fist rapped smartly against—not the door, but a chest.

Lord Payne's chest. His masculine, muscled, shirtless chest, which proved only slightly less solid than a plank of oak. Her blow landed square on his flat, male nipple, as though it were the Devil's own door-knocker.

At least this time, the Devil answered.

"Well." The dark word resonated through her arm. "You're not Thorne."

"Y-you're not clothed." *And I'm touching your bare chest. Oh . . . Lord.*

The mortifying thought occurred to her that he might not be wearing trousers either. She righted herself. As she removed her spectacles with chilled, trembling fingers, she caught a reassuring smudge of dark wool below the flesh-colored blur of his torso. She huffed a breath on each of the two glass discs connected by brass, wiped the mist from them with a dry fold of her cloak lining, and then replaced them on her

face.

He was still half naked. And now, in perfect focus. Devious tongues of firelight licked over every feature of his handsome face, defining him.

“Come in, if you mean to.” He winced at a blast of frost-tipped wind. “I’m shutting the door, either way.”

She stepped forward. The door closed behind her with a heavy, finite sound. Minerva swallowed hard.

“I must say, Melinda. This is rather a surprise.”

“My name’s Minerva.”

“Yes, of course.” He cocked his head. “I didn’t recognize your face without the book in front of it.”

She exhaled, letting her patience stretch. And stretch. Until it expanded just enough to accommodate a teasing rake with a sieve-like memory. And stunningly well-defined shoulders.

“I’ll admit,” he said, “this is hardly the first time I’ve answered the door in the middle of night and found a woman waiting on the other side. But you’re certainly the least expected one yet.” He sent her lower half an assessing look. “And the most muddy.”

She ruefully surveyed her mud-caked boots and bedraggled hem. A midnight seductress she was not. “This isn’t *that* kind of visit.”

“Give me a moment to absorb the disappointment.”

“I’d rather give you a moment to dress.” Minerva crossed the round chamber of windowless stone and went straight for the hearth. She took her time tugging loose the velvet ties of her cloak, then draped it over the room’s only armchair.

Payne hadn’t wasted the entirety of his months here in Spindle Cove, it seemed. Someone had put a great deal of work into transforming this stone silo into a warm, almost comfortable home. The original stone hearth had been cleaned and restored to working order. In it blazed a fire large and fierce enough to do a Norman warrior proud. In addition to the upholstered armchair, the circular room contained a wooden table and stools. Simple, but well made.

No bed.

Strange. She swiveled her gaze. Didn’t an infamous rake need a bed?

Finally, she looked up. The answer hovered overhead. He’d fashioned a sort of sleeping loft, accessible by a ladder. Rich drapes concealed what she assumed to be his bed. Above that, the stone walls spiraled into black, cavernous nothingness.

Minerva decided she’d given him ample time to find a shirt and make himself presentable. She cleared her throat and slowly turned. “I’ve come to ask—”

He was still half naked.

He had not used the time to make himself presentable. He'd taken the chance to pour a drink. He stood in profile, making scrunched faces into a wineglass to assess its cleanliness.

"Wine?" he asked.

She shook her head. Thanks to his indecent display, a ferocious blush was already burning its way over her skin. Up her throat, over her cheeks, up to her hairline. She hardly needed to throw wine on the flames.

As he poured a glass for himself, she couldn't help but stare at his leanly muscled torso, so helpfully limned by firelight. She'd been used to thinking him a devil, but he had the body of a god. A lesser one. His wasn't the physique of a hulking, over-muscled Zeus or Poseidon, but rather a lean, athletic Apollo or Mercury. A body built not to bludgeon, but to hunt. Not to lumber, but to race. Not to overpower unsuspecting naiads where they bathed, but to . . .

Seduce.

He glanced up. She looked away.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she said.

"You didn't wake me."

"Truly?" She frowned at him. "Then . . . for as long as it took you to answer the door, you might have put on some clothes."

With a devilish grin, he indicated his trousers. "I did."

Well. Now her cheeks all but caught fire. She dropped into the armchair, wishing she could disappear into its seams.

*For God's sake, Minerva, take hold of yourself. Diana's future is at stake.*

Setting the wine on the table, he moved to some wooden shelves that seemed to serve as his wardrobe. To the side, a row of hooks supported his outerwear. A red officer's coat, for the local militia he led in the Earl of Rycliff's absence. A few finely tailored, outrageously expensive-looking topcoats from Town. A greatcoat in charcoal-gray wool.

He passed over all these, grabbed a simple lawn shirt, and yanked it over his head. Once he'd thrust his arms through the sleeves, he held them out to either side for her appraisal. "Better?"

Not really. The gaping collar still displayed a wide view of his chest—only with a lascivious wink instead of a frank stare. If anything, he looked more indecent. Less of an untouchable, chiseled god and more of a raffish pirate king.

"Here." He took the greatcoat from its hook and brought it to her. "It's dry, at least."

Once he'd settled the coat over her lap, he pressed the glass of wine into her hand. A signet ring flashed on his little finger, shooting gold through the glass's stem.

“No arguments. You’re shivering so hard, I can hear your teeth chatter. The fire and coat help, but they can’t warm you inside.”

Minerva accepted the glass and took a careful sip. Her fingers did tremble, but not entirely from the cold.

He pulled up a stool, sat on it, and fixed her with an expectant look. “So.”

“So,” she echoed, stupidly.

Her mother was right in this respect. Minerva considered herself a reasonably intelligent person, but good heavens . . . handsome men made her stupid. She grew so flustered around them, never knew where to look or what to say. The reply meant to be witty and clever would come out sounding bitter or lame. Sometimes a teasing remark from Lord Payne’s quarter quelled her into dumb silence altogether. Only days later, while she was banging away at a cliff face with a rock hammer, would the perfect retort spring to mind.

Remarkable. The longer she stared at him now, the more she could actually feel her intelligence waning. A day’s growth of whiskers only emphasized the strong cut of his jaw. His mussed brown hair had just a hint of roguish wave. And his eyes . . . he had eyes like Bristol diamonds. Small round geodes, halved and polished to a gleam. An outer ring of flinty hazel enclosed cool flashes of quartz. A hundred crystalline shades of amber and gray.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Enough dithering.* “Do you mean to marry my sister?”

Seconds passed. “Which one?”

“Diana,” she exclaimed. “Diana, of course. Charlotte being all of fifteen.”

He shrugged. “Some men like a young bride.”

“Some men have sworn off marriage entirely. You told me you were one of them.”

“I told *you* that? When?”

“Surely you remember. That night.”

He stared at her, obviously nonplussed. “We had ‘a night’?”

“Not how you’re thinking.” Months ago now, she’d confronted him in the Summerfield gardens about his scandalous indiscretions and his intentions toward her sister. They’d clashed. Then they’d somehow *tangled*—bodily—until a few cutting insults severed the knot.

Curse her scientific nature, so relentlessly observant. Minerva resented the details she’d gleaned in those moments. She did not need to know that his bottom waistcoat button was exactly in line with her fifth vertebra, or that he smelled faintly of leather and cloves. But even now, months later, she couldn’t seem to jettison the information.

Especially not when she sat huddled in his greatcoat, embraced by borrowed warmth and the same spicy, masculine scent.

Naturally, he’d forgotten the encounter entirely. No surprise. Most days, he

couldn't even remember Minerva's name. If he spoke to her at all, it was only to tease.

"Last summer," she reminded him, "you told me you had no intentions of proposing to Diana. Or anyone. But today, gossip in the village says different."

"Does it?" He twisted his signet ring. "Well, your sister is lovely and elegant. And your mother's made no secret that she'd welcome the match."

Minerva curled her toes in her boots. "That's putting it mildly."

Last year, the Highwoods had come to this seaside village for a summer holiday. The sea air was supposed to improve Diana's health. Well, Diana's health had long been improved and summer was long gone, yet the Highwoods remained—all because of Mama's hopes for a match between Diana and this charming viscount. So long as Lord Payne was in Spindle Cove, Mama would not hear of returning home. She'd even developed an uncharacteristic streak of optimism—each morning declaring as she stirred her chocolate, "I feel it, girls. Today is the day he proposes."

And though Minerva knew Lord Payne to be the worst sort of man, she had never found it in herself to object. Because she loved it here. She didn't want to leave. In Spindle Cove, she finally . . . belonged.

Here, in her own personal paradise, she explored the rocky, fossil-studded coast free from care or censure, cataloging findings that could set England's scientific community on its ear. The only thing that kept her from being completely happy was Lord Payne's presence—and through one of life's strange ironies, his presence was the very reason she was able to stay.

There'd seemed no harm in allowing Mama to nurse hopes of a proposal from his lordship's quarter. Minerva had known for certain a proposal wasn't coming.

Until this morning, when her certainty crumbled.

"This morning, I was in the All Things shop," she began. "I usually ignore Sally Bright's gossip, but today . . ." She met his gaze. "She said you'd given directions for your mail to be forwarded to London, after next week. She thinks you're leaving Spindle Cove."

"And you concluded that this means I'll marry your sister."

"Well, everyone knows your situation. If you had two shillings to rub together, you'd have left months ago. You're stranded here until your fortune's released from trust on your birthday, unless . . ." She swallowed hard. "Unless you marry first."

"That's all true."

She leaned forward in her chair. "I'll leave in a heartbeat, if you'll only repeat your words to me from last summer. That you have no intentions toward Diana."

"But that was last summer. It's April now. Is it so inconceivable that I might have changed my mind?"

"Yes."

“Why?” He snapped his fingers. “I know. You think I don’t possess a mind to change. Is that the sticking point?”

She sat forward in her chair. “You can’t change your mind, because you haven’t *changed*. You’re a deceitful, insincere rake who flirts with unsuspecting ladies by day, then takes up with other men’s wives by night.”

He sighed. “Listen, Miranda. Since Fiona Lange left the village, I haven’t—”

Minerva held up a hand. She didn’t want to hear about his *affaire* with Mrs. Lange. She’d heard more than enough from the woman herself, who’d fancied herself a poetess. Minerva wished she could scrub her mind of those poems. Ribald, rhapsodic odes that exhausted every possible rhyme for “quiver” and “bliss.”

“You can’t marry my sister,” she told him, willing firmness to her voice. “I simply won’t allow it.”

As their mother was so fond of telling anyone who’d listen, Diana Highwood was exactly the sort of young lady who could set her cap for a handsome lord. But Diana’s external beauty dulled in comparison to her sweet, generous nature and the quiet courage with which she’d braved illness all her life.

Certainly, Diana *could* catch a viscount. But she *shouldn’t* marry this one.

“You don’t deserve her,” she told Lord Payne.

“True enough. But none of us get what we truly deserve in this life. Where would God’s sport be in that?” He took the glass from her hand and drew a leisurely sip of wine.

“She doesn’t love you.”

“She doesn’t dislike me. Love’s hardly required.” Leaning forward, he propped an arm on his knee. “Diana would be too polite to refuse. Your mother would be overjoyed. My cousin would send the special license in a trice. We could be married this week. You could be calling me ‘brother’ by Sunday.”

No. Her whole body shouted the rejection. Every last corpuscle.

Throwing off the borrowed greatcoat, she leaped to her feet and began pacing the carpet. The wet folds of her skirt tangled as she strode. “This can’t happen. It cannot. It *will* not.” A little growl forced its way through her clenched teeth.

She balled her hands in fists. “I have twenty-two pounds saved from my pin money. That, and some change. It’s yours, all of it, if you promise to leave Diana alone.”

“Twenty-two pounds?” He shook his head. “Your sisterly sacrifice is touching. But that amount wouldn’t keep me in London a week. Not the way I live.”

She bit her lip. She’d expected as much, but she’d reasoned it couldn’t hurt to try a bribe first. It would have been so much easier.

She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. This was it—her last chance to dissuade

him. “Then run away with me instead.”

After a moment’s stunned pause, he broke into hearty laughter.

She let the derisive sounds wash over her and simply waited, arms crossed. Until his laughter dwindled, ending with a choked cough.

“Good God,” he said. “You’re serious?”

“Perfectly serious. Leave Diana alone, and run away with me.”

He drained the wineglass and set it aside. Then he cleared his throat and began, “That is brave of you, pet. Offering to wed me in your sister’s stead. But truly, I—”

“My name is Minerva. I’m not your pet. And you’re deranged if you think I’d ever marry you.”

“But I thought you just said—”

“Run away with you, yes. Marry you?” She made an incredulous noise in her throat. “Please.”

He blinked at her.

“I can see you’re baffled.”

“Oh, good. I would have admitted as much, but I know what pleasure you take in pointing out my intellectual shortcomings.”

Rummaging through the inside pockets of her cloak, she located her copy of the scientific journal. She opened it to the announcement page and held it out for his examination. “There’s to be a meeting of the Royal Geological Society at the end of this month. A symposium. If you’ll agree to come with me, my savings should be enough to fund our journey.”

“A geology symposium.” He flicked a glance at the journal. “This is your scandalous midnight proposal. The one you trudged through the cold, wet dark to make. You’re inviting me to a geology symposium, if I leave your sister alone.”

“What were you expecting me to offer? Seven nights of wicked, carnal pleasure in your bed?”

She’d meant it as a joke, but he didn’t laugh. Instead, he eyed her sodden frock.

Minerva went lobster red beneath it. Curse it. She was forever saying the wrong thing.

“I’d have found that offer more tempting,” he said.

*Truly?* She bit her tongue to keep from saying it aloud. How lowering, to admit how much his offhand comment thrilled her. *I’d prefer your carnal pleasures to a lecture about dirt.* High compliment indeed.

“A geology symposium,” he repeated to himself. “I should have known there’d be rocks at the bottom of this.”

“There are rocks at the bottom of everything. That’s why we geologists find them so interesting. At any rate, I’m not tempting you with the symposium itself. I’m

tempting you with the promise of five hundred guineas.”

Now she had his attention. His gaze sharpened. “Five hundred guineas?”

“Yes. That’s the prize for the best presentation. If you take me there and help present my findings to the Society, you can keep it all. Five hundred guineas would be sufficient to keep you drunk and debauched in London until your birthday, I should hope?”

He nodded. “With a bit of judicious budgeting. I might have to hold off on new boots, but one must make some sacrifices.” He came to his feet, confronting her face-to-face. “Here’s the wrinkle, however. How could you be certain of winning the prize?”

“I’ll win. I could explain my findings to you in detail, but a great many polysyllabic words would be involved. I’m not sure you’re up to them just now. Suffice it to say, I’m certain.”

He gave her a searching look, and Minerva marshaled the strength to hold it. Level, confident, unblinking.

After a moment, his eyes warmed with an unfamiliar glimmer. Here was an emotion she’d never seen from him before.

She thought it might be . . . respect.

“Well,” he said. “Certainty becomes you.”

Her heart gave a queer flutter. It was the nicest thing he’d ever said to her. She thought it might be the nicest thing *anyone* had ever said to her.

*Certainty becomes you.*

And suddenly, things were different. The ounce of wine she’d swallowed unfurled in her belly, warming and relaxing her. Melting away her awkwardness. She felt comfortable in her surroundings, and more than a little worldly. As though this were the most natural thing in the world, to be having a midnight conversation in a turret with a half-dressed rake.

She settled languidly into the armchair and raised her hands to her hair, finding and plucking loose her few remaining pins. With slow, dreamy motions, she finger-combed the wet locks and arranged them about her shoulders, the better to dry evenly.

He stood and watched her for a moment. Then he went to pour more wine.

A sensuous ribbon of claret swirled into the glass. “Mind, I’m not agreeing to this scheme. Not by any stretch of the imagination. But just for the sake of argument, how did you see this proceeding, exactly? One morning, we’d just up and leave for London together?”

“No, not London. The symposium is in Edinburgh.”

“Edinburgh.” Bottle met table with a *clunk*. “The Edinburgh in Scotland.”

She nodded.

“I thought you said this was the Royal Geological Society.”

“It is.” She waved the journal at him. “The Royal Geological Society of Scotland. Didn’t you know? Edinburgh’s where all the most interesting scholarship happens.”

Crossing back to her, he peered at the journal. “For God’s sake, this takes place less than a fortnight from now. Marietta, don’t you realize what a journey to Scotland entails? You’re talking about two weeks’ travel, at the minimum.”

“It’s four days from London on the mail coach. I’ve checked.”

“The *mail* coach? Pet, a viscount does not travel on the mail coach.” He shook his head, sitting across from her. “And how is your dear mother going to take this news, when she finds you’ve absconded to Scotland with a scandalous lord?”

“Oh, she’ll be thrilled. So long as one of her daughters marries you, she won’t be particular.” Minerva eased her feet from her wet, muddy boots and drew her legs up beneath her skirts, tucking her chilled heels under her backside. “It’s perfect, don’t you see? We’ll stage it as an elopement. My mother won’t raise any protest, and neither will Lord Rycliff. He’ll be only too happy to think you’re marrying at last. We’ll travel to Scotland, present my findings, collect the prize. Then we’ll tell everyone it simply didn’t work out.”

The more she explained her ideas, the easier the words sprang to her lips and the more excited she grew. This could work. It could really, truly work.

“So you’ll just return to Spindle Cove unmarried, after weeks of travel with me? Don’t you realize you’d be . . .”

“Ruined in good society? I know.” She looked into the roaring fire. “I’m willing to accept that fate. I had no desire for a society marriage, anyhow.” No *hopes* of one, to put it finely. She didn’t relish the thought of scandal and gossip. But could it really be so much worse to be cut off from fashionable society than to feel forever squeezed to its margins?

“But what of your sisters? They’ll be tainted by association.”

His remark gave her pause. It wasn’t that she hadn’t thought about this possibility. To the contrary, she’d considered it very carefully.

“Charlotte has years before her debut,” she said. “She can weather a bit of scandal. And as for Diana . . . sometimes I think the kindest thing I could do for my sister is ruin her chances of making a ‘good’ marriage. Then she might make a loving one.”

He sipped his wine thoughtfully. “Well, I’m glad you’ve worked all this out to your satisfaction. You have no compunction ruining your reputation, nor those of your sisters. But have you given a moment’s thought to mine?”

“To your what? Your reputation?” She laughed. “But your reputation is terrible.”

His cheeks colored, slightly. “I don’t know that it’s *terrible*.”

She put her left forefinger to her right thumb. “Point the first. You’re a shameless

rake.”

“Yes.” He drew out the word.

She touched her index finger. “Point the second. Your name is synonymous with destruction. Bar fights, scandals . . . literal explosions. Wherever you go, mayhem follows.”

“I don’t really try at that part. It just . . . happens.” He rubbed a hand over his face.

“And yet you worry this scheme would tarnish your reputation?”

“Of course.” He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. He gestured with the hand holding the wineglass. “I’m a lover of women, yes.” Then he lifted his empty hand. “And yes, I seem to break everything I touch. But thus far I’ve succeeded in keeping the two proclivities separate, you see. I sleep with women and I ruin things, but I’ve never yet ruined an innocent woman.”

“Seems like a mere oversight on your part.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps. But it’s not one I mean to remedy.”

His eyes met hers, unguarded and earnest. And a strange thing happened. Minerva believed him. This was one snag she never would have considered. That he might object on *principle*. She hadn’t dreamed he possessed a scruple to offend.

But he did, evidently. And he was baring it to *her*, in an attitude of confidence. As though they were friends, and he trusted her to understand.

Something had changed between them, in the ten minutes since she’d pounded on his door.

She sat back in the chair, regarding him. “You are a different person at night.”

“I am,” he agreed simply. “But then, so are you.”

She shook her head. “I’m always this person, inside. It’s just . . .” *Somehow, I can never manage to be this person with you. The harder I try, the more I get in my own way.*

“Listen, I’m honored by your invitation, but this excursion you suggest can’t happen. I’d return looking like the worst sort of seducer and cad. And justly so. Having absconded with, then callously discarded, an innocent young lady?”

“Why couldn’t I be the one to discard you?”

A little chuckle escaped him. “But who would ever believe—”

He cut off his reply. A moment too late.

“Who would ever believe that,” she finished for him. “Who indeed.”

Cursing, he set aside the wineglass. “Come now. Don’t take offense.”

Ten minutes ago, she would have expected him to laugh. She would have been prepared for his derision, and she wouldn’t have allowed him to see how it hurt. But things had changed. She’d accepted his coat and his wine. More than that, his honesty. She’d let down her guard. And now this.

It cut her deep.

Her eyes stung. “It’s unthinkable. I know that’s what you’re saying. What everyone would say. It’s inconceivable that a man like you could be in—” She swallowed. “Could be taken with a girl like me.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Of course you did. It’s preposterous. Laughable. The idea that you might want me, and I might spurn you? I’m plain. Bookish, distracted, awkward. Hopeless.” Her voice broke. “In a geologic age, no one would believe it.”

She wriggled her feet into her boots. Then she pushed to her feet and reached for her cloak.

He rose and reached for her hand. She pulled away, but not fast enough. His fingers closed around her wrist.

“They would believe it,” he said. “I could make them believe it.”

“You horrid, teasing man. You can’t even remember my name.” She wrestled his grip.

He tightened it. “*Minerva.*”

Her body went still. Her breath burned in her lungs, as though she’d been fighting her way through waist-deep snow.

“Listen to me now,” he said, smooth and low. “I could make them believe it. I’m not *going* to do so, because I think this scheme of yours is a spectacularly bad idea. But I could. If I chose, I could have all Spindle Cove—all *England*—convinced that I’m utterly besotted with you.”

She sniffed. “Please.”

He smiled. “No, truly. It would be so easy. I’d begin by studying you, when you aren’t aware of it. Stealing glances when you’re lost in thought, or when your head’s bent over a book. Admiring the way that dark, wild hair always manages to escapes its pins, tumbling down your neck.” With his free hand, he caught a damp strand of her hair in his fingertips and smoothed it behind her ear. Then he brushed a light touch over her cheek. “Noting the warm glow of your skin, where the sun has kissed it. And these lips. Damn. I think I’d have to develop quite a fascination with your lips.”

His thumb hovered over her mouth, teasing her with possibilities. She ached for his touch, until she was miserable with it. This . . . unwanted *wanting*.

“It wouldn’t take long. Soon everyone around us would take note of my interest,” he said. “They’d believe my attraction to you.”

“You’ve been mercilessly teasing me for months now. No one would forget that.”

“All part of the infatuation. Don’t you know? A man might engage in flirtation with disinterest, even disdain. But he never teases without affection.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You should. Others would.” He placed his hands on her shoulders. His gaze swept her body from boots to unbound hair. “I could have them all believing I’m consumed by a savage, visceral passion for this enchantress with raven’s-wing hair and sultry lips. That I admire her fierce loyalty to her sisters, and her brave, resourceful spirit. That I’m driven wild by hints of a deep, hidden passion that escape her sometimes, when she ventures out of her shell. “ His strong hands moved to frame her face. His Bristol-diamond eyes held hers. “That I see in her a rare, wild beauty that’s been overlooked, somehow, by other men. And I want it. Desperately. All for myself. Oh, I could have them believing it all.”

The rich, deep flow of words had worked some kind of spell on her. She stood transfixed, unable to move or speak.

*It’s not real, she reminded herself. None of these words mean a thing.*

But his caress was real. Real, and warm, and tender. It could mean too much, if she let it. Caution told her to pull away.

Instead, she placed a light, trembling touch to his shoulder. Foolish hand. Foolish fingers.

“If I wished,” he murmured, drawing her close and tilting her face to his, “I could convince everyone that the true reason I’ve remained in Spindle Cove—months past what should have been my breaking point—has nothing to do with my cousin or my finances.” His voice went husky. “That it’s simply you, Minerva.” He caressed her cheek, so sweetly her heart ached. “That it’s always been you.”

His eyes were sincere, unguarded. No hint of irony in his voice. He almost seemed to have convinced himself.

Her heart pounded in her chest with violent force. That mad, hammering beat was all she could hear.

Until another sound intruded.

Laughter. A woman’s laughter. Trickling down from above, like a cascade of freezing water. A brisk, dousing shock.

*Oh God.*

“Bloody hell.” He looked up, to the sleeping loft.

Minerva followed his gaze. From behind the draped bed hangings, the unseen woman laughed again. Laughed at *her*.

*Oh God. Oh God.*

How could she have been so stupid? Naturally, he wasn’t alone. He’d all but told her as much. He’d taken forever to open the door, but he hadn’t been sleeping. He’d paused first to . . .

To put on trousers.

*Oh God oh God oh God.*

The whole time. Whoever she was up there, she'd been listening the whole time.

Minerva groped numbly for her cloak, jerking it on with shaking fingers. The fire's smoky heat was suddenly cloying and thick. Suffocating. She had to leave this place. She was going to be ill.

"Wait," he said, following her to the door. "It's not how it looks."

She cut him a freezing glare.

"Very well, it's mostly how it looks. But I swear, I'd forgotten she was even here."

She ceased struggling with the door latch. "And that's supposed to make me think better of you?"

"No." He sighed. "It's supposed to make you think better of *you*. That's all I meant. To make you feel better."

Amazing, then, how with that one remark, he made a mortifying situation thirteen times worse.

"I see. Normally you reserve the insincere compliments for your lovers. But you thought to take on a charity case." He started to reply, but she cut him off. She glanced up at the loft. "Who is she?"

"Does it matter?"

"Does it *matter*?" She wrenched the door open. "Good Lord. Are women so interchangeable and faceless to you? You just . . . lose track of them under the bed cushions, like pennies? I can't believe I—"

A hot tear spilled down her cheek. She hated that tear. Hated that he'd seen it. A man like this wasn't worth weeping over. It was just . . . for that moment by the fire, after years of being overlooked, she'd finally felt *noticed*. Appreciated.

*Wanted.*

And it had all been a lie. A ridiculous, laughable joke.

He pulled on his greatcoat. "Let me see you home, at least."

"Stay back. Don't come near me, or my sister." She held him off with a hand as she backed through the door. "You are the most deceitful, horrid, shameless, contemptible man I have ever had the displeasure to know. How do you sleep at night?"

His reply came just as she banged the door closed.

"I don't."

## Chapter Two

**H**e didn't sleep that night.

After Minerva Highwood stormed off into the rain, even a dissolute, soulless rake like Colin couldn't simply continue where he'd left off. He roused the widow from his bed, put her in her clothes, and saw her back to the village. Once he'd satisfied himself that Minerva had made it home safe—by glimpsing her muddied boots outside the rear door of the rooming house—he returned to his quarters at the castle and uncorked a new bottle of wine.

But he didn't sleep a wink.

He never did. Not at night, not alone.

God, he hated the country. All the sunshine and sea air in Sussex couldn't make up for the dark, quiet nights. Lately, Colin thought he'd give his left nipple—bollocks were never up for negotiation—for a decent night's sleep. Ever since Fiona Lange had left the village, at best he'd been able to cobble together a few hours in the early dawn. For most of the winter, he'd taken to drinking himself into a nightly stupor. But his body, already taxed from lack of rest, was beginning to fray from the volume of liquor required. If he wasn't careful, he'd become a habitual drunk. He was too young for that, damn it.

So he'd finally given in and accepted the clear invitation Mrs. Ginny Watson's smiles and cocked hips had been making for some time. He'd resisted the young widow for months now, not wanting to entangle himself with a village resident. But he'd be leaving in a matter of days. Why not make his last few nights bearable? Who could it possibly hurt?

Who, indeed.