

MISS HILLARY SCHOOLS A SCOUNDREL

One

London, England

May 26, 1816

Two types of men crowded the Eldridge ballroom this evening: the dashing gentlemen whose ardent, but proper, pursuit any debutant would welcome. And *then* there were the ones who pursued Lana Hillary.

While the pretty ladies, like the shy Miss Catherine Mitchell and her intimate circle of acquaintances, captured the hearts of the handsome Lord Giffords of Town, Lana hid behind a potted fern, hoping the desperate Lord Carrington and those of his ilk didn't spot her without the protection of her brother.

How long did it take Jake to collect two glasses of punch?

Drat!

Carrington's black gaze locked on Lana. With a satisfied smirk accentuating the viscount's droopy jowls, he came straight toward her, jostling past the elegant guests awaiting the first dance. Lana's less than subtle discouragement last evening had obviously failed.

Where *was* her blasted brother when she needed him? A quick perusal of the crowded ballroom proved futile.

Carrington stalked in her direction, a destitute predator in expensive evening dress. Rumor had it duns circled the viscount's property like merry children around a Maypole, ready to seize the last of the small luxuries left to him. He was desperate. Determined. But then so was she. Lana would never consent to become the third Lady Carrington given marriage to the lout transformed the sweetest of debutantes into empty vessels with no will to live.

He shouldered his way through the crowd, coming closer. Dread washed over her. If word of his interest reached her mother... Lana shuddered. Why, Mama would wrap her in gilded paper with bows and have her delivered to the viscount's

doorstep post haste. Nothing would thrill Mama more than hoisting her off on *any* gent. A title would simply be the icing on the wedding cake.

Dashing into the crush to evade the gentleman, Lana threw a hurried glance over her shoulder. Carrington followed, proving as skilled at tracking as the bloodhound he resembled. She reached the perimeter of the room only to realize she had nowhere to go.

Carrington flashed his rotting teeth in a triumphant leer. He had her where he wished, trapped between a wall of French doors opening to the terrace, a completely unacceptable alternative, and a doorway leading to the inner maze of the house.

Heaven help her. On impulse, Lana darted into the deserted corridor moments before Carrington reached her. She would hide in the retiring room.

The first bars of a country dance floated from the ballroom and faded as she made her escape. Oil lamps mounted on the damask walls spilled pools of light on the polished wood floor. Staying to the shadows as best she could, she glided down the wide passage past gilt-framed landscapes she had no time to admire. She didn't slow her pace until she rounded the first corner.

Lana released an elated breath. She had done it, thought quickly, and orchestrated her own rescue. She smiled as she continued to the retiring room, a newly acquired bounce to her step. Who needed Jake, or any of her older brothers for that matter? She could handle the odious viscount without their assistance, thank you very much.

"Miss Hillary?" Carrington's voice rang out in the empty corridor.

She wheeled around with a gasp. *Oh, blast it all!* He followed?

"Miss Hillary, did you come this way? I desire an audience." He sounded closer and winded, as if he hurried after her.

Lana would rather die than be discovered alone with him. Abandoning all regard for etiquette, she ran. The whisk of her slippers grew silent as she reached the thick Turkish carpets lining the corridor.

"Miss Hillary." He sounded exasperated and much too close. She would never reach the retiring room in time.

Would the blackguard truly ruin her reputation to acquire what he wanted?

“Miss Hillary, I *demand* you wait.”

What had she been thinking to leave the ballroom?

If caught in his presence without a chaperone, Carrington could demand anything once her parents forced them to marry. A shiver of revulsion shook her frame. Well, she'd not let that happen.

Lana tried the next door she came to and, finding it unlocked, slipped inside before closing it again with an almost imperceptible click. Leaning her ear against the solid oak surface, she listened for evidence of the blackguard dashing past. Minutes ticked on a clock from somewhere in the darkened room, but there was only silence from the corridor. No imperious demands, heavy footfalls, or arduous wheezing. Where was the pudding head? He should have passed the room by now.

She pressed her ear closer to the door and strained to hear any little sound. Only the thundering of her heart filled the silence. Had he abandoned his pursuit? Lana wilted against the door with a relieved sigh.

What a narrow escape. She would never do anything so foolish again. And this time she meant it. Lana brushed a hand over her skirts to set herself to rights. She really should return to the ballroom before she stumbled upon more trouble. Lana reached for the handle as a bump shook the door. She scurried backwards, banged her hip on a corner of a sturdy chest, and uttered a soft cry of surprise.

Carrington was still out there.

If any member of the *ton* discovered her and the viscount in a darkened room, her mama would *kill* her first and then force her marriage to the man.

Frantic, Lana searched for an alternate exit. *The window.*

She ran across the room, lifted the lower sash, and poked her head outside. A glow from the lanterns lining the garden pathway provided enough light to assess her situation. The second story definitely presented an obstacle, but not an impossible one. Lana eyed the rose-laden trellis, looking for footholds.

Double drat!

The thorns would rip her to shreds.

Dismissing the trellis, she contemplated a maple tree growing close to the

house. If she sat on the ledge and stretched, she could reach one of the sturdier branches. Climbing trees proved easy for Lana, a lesson she'd learned as a girl with four older brothers happy to teach her. Scaling a tree in a ball gown, however, was a feat she'd never undertaken.

She glanced between the door and window. For a long time, nothing but the constant whirring of crickets on the balmy evening air filled the silence and diminished her fears.

Now who's the pudding head?

She studied the long drop to the ground. Had she really considered such a foolhardy plan? Her parents would have her carted to Bedlam if they knew, which sounded surprisingly more appealing than marriage to the bloodhound.

Lana twittered nervously. She really should return to the ball before her brother organized a search.

The door handle squeaked.

Oh, drat, drat, drat!

Lifting her skirts, Lana scrambled to sit on the window ledge before stretching one arm toward a lower branch.

"Miss Hillary, come out, come out, my sweet."

Carrington's hushed voice invaded the space. "I know you're in here. I heard your laughter, you naughty temptress. I grow weary of these childish games. Allow me to claim my prize."

Of all the—

Lana whipped her head around to deliver a sharp retort and knocked herself off balance. She pitched forward, barely grabbing the branch with both hands before slipping from the window ledge. One second she swung through the air and the next she came up short.

Oh, heavens above. Something caught her skirt, causing it to bunch up around her waist and expose her drawers for all God's tiny garden creatures to see.

Lana tightened her grip and suppressed a whimper. Why did she leave the ballroom? Giving the miserable lout a cut direct in front of the *ton* at large would have been wiser. Now, certain death might be the reward for her hasty decision.

Nevertheless, one thing remained absolute; Lana would risk breaking her neck before she would call out for Carrington's assistance.



Andrew Forest, the Duke of Foxhaven's youngest son, tossed his cheroot to the ground and sprang forward to rescue the young lady dangling from the tree. He had been watching her with curiosity ever since she poked her head through the open window. Only a fool would have bet on her rash action. What were ladies about these days, throwing themselves from windows? She'd barely saved herself from a nasty fall, and she remained in a precarious predicament.

"Miss Hillary?" A perplexed male voice drifted out the window.

Drew froze in place, not wishing to draw the man's attention outside. Any young lady desperate enough to escape the gent's company by means of a second-story window wouldn't wish her effort for naught.

"Are you in here, dearest?" A loud bang, like the barking of a shin against a solid piece of furniture, sounded in the room. "Bloody hell. It's too bloody dark to see a bloody thing in this damned room. Bloody, no-good chit."

Drew raised his eyebrows. Quite inappropriate language if the lady were in the room, but as luck would have it, the no-good chit swung from a tree branch with her skirts up around her middle. Drew glanced between the lady and window, debating on whether he should give away her location to save her foolish neck or trust her to hang on a smidge longer.

The room brightened a brief moment followed by the slamming of a door. The foul-mouthed gentleman gave up his search without ever checking the open window, but who would have imagined any woman so bold as to climb out a window? Drew's interest was piqued.

He hastened to the dangling debutante. "This must be my lucky night," he drawled. "It's raining ladies."

The chit kicked her legs. "Oh, get me down at once, sir. Can't you see I'm in a compromised position?"

The lady's *position* revealed a great deal of shapely ankle and long leg, a poor motivator to rush to assist the damsel under normal circumstances. "It appears your

skirts are caught on the trellis. I'll climb up and release it."

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"Oh, please hurry. I—" Her voice caught on a sob.

He hurried up the trellis, ignoring the pricks and pokes of thorns through his gloves. Having had his share of narrow escapes through windows, Drew held some sympathy for the young woman, but damned if he'd ever gotten himself into a pickle like this one.

"Almost there. Just a moment longer and you may let go." Drew spoke to her as he would a spooked filly while he worked the hem of her gown loose. He climbed

halfway down the trellis then jumped to land with a thud. "Looks like a trip to the retiring room will be in order, but otherwise, you'll go unscathed, Miss Hillary, is it?"

The lady must be related to the Hillary men, a younger sister. What had Langford been moaning about at the club as of late? Something in the way of doubting his admiration for the miss could overcome his aversion to her mother.

Reaching up, Drew grasped her thighs in a hug. "You may let go, Miss Hillary. If you don't mind my asking, what manner of gentleman drives a lady to flee out a window?"

"Only the most despicable cads, I suppose." A violent tremor raced through her limbs despite her bravado.

Miss Hillary released the branch and even though they tottered, Drew held tight, unwilling to let her fall at this juncture. Once he had steadied them, he loosened his hold. She slid down his front, his hands brushing her delectable backside. It was a fleeting reward for his gallant act. He'd certainly received greater rewards from the fairer gender for less heroic acts.

When her feet touched the ground, his arms encircled her slim waist. She felt quite nice in his embrace and smelled like lily of the valley, sparking visions of a wild romp in a field. Perhaps he would keep her.

Her delicate hands rested against his chest. "You may release me, sir."

A flicker from the lanterns behind him illuminated her plump lips. Damn, she had fine kissable lips. Did she feel it too, this heat between them? He urged her closer and sensed the quickening of her breath. "They say if a gentleman snags a debutante, he's allowed to take her home."

Her fingers curled softly against his waistcoat and sent blood rushing to his groin. Inclining his head, he grazed his lips over hers, testing her receptivity.

She gasped and shoved her fists against his chest, twisting her face away. "Oh! Release me at once, you scoundrel."

Her commands brought a lazy smile to his face. How he'd love to hear her sultry voice issuing orders in the bedchamber. But alas, he wouldn't drag her there without consent.

"As you wish." Drew dropped his hands from her waist, but he didn't step away

and neither did she. Her heat and perfume enveloped him, urging him to abandon all semblances of manners and kiss her anyway.

“I have a good mind—”

A twig snapped, causing him and the temptress to startle and knock heads.

“Ouch,” she hissed and held a hand to her forehead.

“Drew?” Lady Amelia Audley called out in a hushed voice. “Did you come out here?”

Bloody nuisance. This was the last time he’d play hero to a lady in distress.

He had hoped to avoid a scene when he had spotted the widow in attendance this evening. With a tiny push, he directed the alluring Miss Hillary toward the house.

“Run along before we’re discovered,” he whispered.

End of Chapter

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