

# Chapter 1

Justin Bellmore, Viscount Barkly, soaked in a hot bath. He had spent the better part of the morning getting pummeled at Gentleman Jackson's boxing salon and doing a fair bit of pummeling himself. He flexed his hands, noticing the faint redness he hoped would be gone by this evening. He relaxed and let the heat soothe his tired muscles. Thoughts of his sweet Celia flittered through his mind, making him smile. Their betrothal had been nearly a year now. Her mother was making grand plans for the ceremony and party afterwards that would have done the royal family proud. Celia was the only girl of seven children and her mother's only hope of planning the biggest, most lavish, and expensive wedding the ton had ever seen.

He would be seeing her tonight and he felt a rush of giddiness at the prospect. Silly for a man like him to feel giddy, but he was in love with the girl of his dreams. Actually, not even his dreams had prepared him for Celia. Her wit, intelligence, her imagination, her beauty, her adventurous spirit never failed to make him happy and he couldn't wait to start making her happy every day of their married life.

He yawned, his fatigue catching up to him now that his bath was cooling. He stood and twisted this way and that, stretching his muscles, then stepped out of the tub. He grabbed a towel and dried himself off, then turned to look at himself in the floor to ceiling mirror. He was fit, and swarthy, his Scottish heritage evident in his thick chest, stocky build and the red sheen in his light brown hair. At certain times his brogue cut through his proper English façade, an inheritance from his very Scottish grandfather and his summers listening to fanciful tails of warriors and dragons, banshees, and brownies, selkies in the seas and monsters in the loch.

He padded into his room, lay down on his bed, and slept like the dead for the next four hours. He woke feeling refreshed and energetic. He got up and rang for Fredrick. When the man arrived, he requested a meal be sent up while he dressed. As he wouldn't be going out for a couple of hours, he limited his dress to pants and shirt then took his meal in his private office. He went over the arrangements for his sisters to go on holiday to their maternal grandmother's house in Bath next month. After his wedding, he thought happily.

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The strike of eleven found Justin at a ball hosted by close friends of his. Lord and Lady Warrington had thrown the ball in honor of their own marriage just a few weeks past. They had forgone the traditional English ceremony, opting instead for a Scottish elopement. He thought they had the right idea. He hated having to wait to begin his life with Celia. Thinking of Celia, he scanned the ballroom looking for her distinctive cinnamon and honey hair.

He saw her across the room dancing with another friend. Oscar, Lord Mansfield, spun Celia around the room and Justin watched as her skirts floated gracefully around her legs. The candle light from the overhead chandeliers make her hair flash a spectrum of color, a flush born of exertion giving her a healthy glow. His heart constricted at the sight of her.

Unable to suppress his grin, he made his way around the room until he was stationed before the terrace doors and waited for his friend to lead her this way again. As Oscar moved toward him he spotted Justin and gave him a nod and guided Celia closer until Justin could reach out a grasp her hand from Oscar's shoulder and spin her out into the night.

If she were confused by the sudden partner exchange and change in venue, she got over it quickly when she found herself in Justin's arms concealed by tall potted evergreens lining the inner walls. She laughed up at him, her eyes blazing with joy. He kissed her, a quick kiss of greeting that left them both grinning like fools, but he didn't care.

"I missed you," he told her. Taking her hand in his, he led her to a stone bench and bid her sit. He leaned against a stone pillar, crossed his arms and faced her.

"What have you done today?" she asked him.

"I bought you a gift."

She brightened even more and asked with excitement, "What is it?"

"A desk. A beauty of a desk. I thought we could put it in my office. Soon to be our office, actually." She squealed in delight and jumped up to hug him and gave him a fleeting kiss in thanks then resumed her perch. She sat, crossing one leg over the other, swinging her foot to the rhythm of the music drifting through the open terrace doors.

"Tell me about your day." He waited as she organized her thoughts.

Finally, she looked at him with mischief in her beautiful green eyes and said, "I had the most exciting day, Justin. I went with mother for ride in Hyde Park. We were minding our own business, enjoying the weather, when we were attacked!"

"No! By whom?" he asked, merriment lighting his face.

"By Vikings of all things. They kidnapped me and drug me away from poor mamma, and carried me off to a secluded part of the park where their ancestors had been in hiding in underground caves for centuries." She spoke without a pause, and Justin knew she was making it up as she went along.

"They haven't been a nuisance in over eight hundred years," said Justin, feigning shock.

"Yes, but *these* Vikings had been biding their time, you see. A roving band of these raiders had become lost once on English soil, so they hid from their enemy in a large wood. They stayed hidden, capturing women to marry and keeping their old ways and legends alive all this time, just waiting for the day when England would drop her guard and they could rise up and conquer our land." She told her tale with such passion and sincerity Justin was drawn into her plight.

"How did you manage to get away?" he asked, striving for horrified concern, but barely managing to keep the amusement off his face.

"Well, they thought English girls were weak and silly of course, so they underestimated me. I just played along and made their leader believe I wanted to marry him and when he let me close, I slipped the key to my chains from his pocket and when no one was looking I unlocked the cuffs and ran as fast as I could. I picked up some stones as I ran and made a trail that could be followed back. I ran until I found a police officer and told him about the Vikings.

"Well, he didn't believe me of course, until I showed him a dagger I had stolen before my escape. He gathered up some of his men and led them through the woods, following my trail of stones all the way to the Viking camp and arrested them all. They are being sent back to Norway as we speak." Justin lost his composure then, laughing loudly and merrily and Celia laughed with him as he pulled her back into his arms and hugged her tightly.

"Well you certainly did have an exciting day." He laughed against her hair. "God, how I love you, Celia. Only one more month until you're mine."

"And only one more month until you're all mine."

"Darling, I'm already yours." And it had been true since the moment they had met at a ball much like this one just over a year ago. They had been introduced by the sister of a good

friend and danced a waltz together. From the moment he took her in his arms, he had noticed how well they fit together physically. After the dance, they had gone in to dinner. He sat beside her and listened to her bright, informed conversation and her ability to tell a story with passion and animation, and he realized, with a shock of certainty, he was going to marry this girl.

He had proposed less than a month later. And from the day they had announced the happy news to her family and his sisters they hadn't been alone since. Well, a few times, but of ridiculously short duration. They had been watched by her mother, and five of her six brothers. One was still at school. He had only been able to hold her hand and give her a chaste kiss goodnight under such close scrutiny. Only the inattention of an elderly great aunt had given them any passionate, stolen moments in a closed carriage.

He did feel a sting of contrition for his pre-marital activities and thought it deuced unfair that women were held to such a high standard of modesty and purity. Though they had engaged in a few passionate kisses and an embrace or two over the long course of their engagement, her virginity was still intact. Her sexual landscape had gained a few pleasurable hills and valleys, but she was still very much an innocent.

A persistent worry nagged at him and had been for a while now. He was unsure how to resolve the issue plaguing him. As he had many times before, he pushed it to the back of his mind to tackle another day, but he was running out of days. After a few more hidden kisses, he led her back into the ballroom and engaged her in the next dance.

After he danced with Celia, he had danced with Olivia, the new Lady Warrington, congratulating her on the success of her first ball. He danced with several other women, mostly wives or sisters of his friends. He noticed Jack, Lord Warrenton, danced with Celia. He even saw the man laugh as she made a joke or witty observation and had to smile to himself. He managed to catch Celia free for one more dance then said his goodbyes and left for home.