

KATHLEEN AYERS

THE ARROGANT TEARLS



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THE HAUNTING
OF ROSE ABBEY

THE HAUNTING OF ROSE ABB

**The Arrogant Earls
Novella**

Kathleen Ayers



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Text by Kathleen Ayers

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CHAPTER ONE

“*YOU’RE COLLINS?*”

Miss Edwina Collins clasped her hands before her and took an imposing gentleman behind the desk. “I am, Lord Bascomb.”

She brushed away a strand of her hair stuck to her cheek. The snuff of her traveling clothes, wet wool, and dirt filled her nostrils. Mud clung to the hem of her skirts. The trip to this remote estate a stone’s throw away from the Scottish border had not been achieved without some difficulty. She was doing her best.

“The Collins I hired to serve as my secretary?” A snort. “You’re supposed to be male.”

Under normal circumstances, when she didn’t look like a bedraggled woman, Edwina’s usual rigid politeness would come to the forefront and serve her well in dealing with Lord Bascomb. She’d known him less than an hour and already found him to be the rudest human being she’d ever encountered.

“As you can see, I am not. Nonetheless, you extended an offer of employment and I accepted,” she said in a tart, no-nonsense tone.

Bascomb had massive shoulders. Big hands. Edwina supposed if she bothered to stand when she entered the study, he would tower over her by at least a foot or more. He narrowed his eyes at her, an arresting combination of grayish green, the same hue as the lichen-strewn boulders bordering the rutted road up from Portsmouth where the coach had dropped her. She counted the immense boulders on the journey while clinging to the sides of the pony cart as it labored up the hill to Rose Abbey.

“And your cousin is the Earl of Southwell?” Bascomb possessed a jagged, wicked-looking scar, which neatly divided the left side of his face. A line of puckered flesh snaked from the corner of his eye down to the edge of his mouth.

His very full bottom lip. Oddly sensual for such a boorish man.

What a thing to notice at the moment, Edwina.

“Lord Southwell is indeed my cousin.”

Edwina wasn't about to add that South had written the recommendation for his spinster cousin under duress. Or that he was now halfway to his new bride and unavailable to answer any more of Lord Bascomb's irritating questions. All she'd asked of South was that the recommendation make no mention of her sex so that she might secure a position based on her abilities. She may also have asked him to accidentally omit the 'a' in her name, which had given Bascomb the impression she was Edwin Collins. A small mistake that may have continued through the correspondence with Bascomb. It was no one's fault really.

"I'm happy to know the truth was not stretched on that pertinent fact," growled from behind the desk. "But I seem to recall the recommendation for *Edwin Collins*."

Bascomb, or any gentleman, was unlikely to hire a woman. The salary offered was far more than what a lady's companion or governess could expect. Two positions Edwina was not remotely suitable for. She was, however, capable at ledgers, correspondence, and organization.

"I cannot speak for Lord Southwell, but mistakes happen. I'm sure this was merely an oversight."

"Which you allowed to continue."

Edwina cleared her throat. Really, wouldn't it be polite if Bascomb offered her to sit instead of continuing to allow her to stand before him with her skirts dripping off her skirts? "My skills are exemplary, my lord."

"You've wasted your time in coming here, Collins," Bascomb said, sounding very much like the grumpy, elderly curmudgeon Edwina had pictured him to be. During their short correspondence, she had the impression he was an older gentleman. Gray-haired, of course. Perhaps slightly. Bascomb admitted to her in his letters that he'd had enormous success in keeping a secretary. She'd wrongly assumed his failure in keeping a position filled was due to the remote location of Rose Abbey.

Now Edwina had a suspicion the cause was Bascomb's personal lack thereof.

"You don't seem to be in a position to be picky," she replied. "Could you offer me another candidate?"

A second growl came from Bascomb. His eyes traveled over her bedraggled form dressed in the damp wool, frowning as a small clod of wool fell with a plop from the edge of her hem.

ndation “And I’m *here*.” Edwina bristled under his assessment. “Ready to
Egyptthe task of organizing your affairs.”

comb’s “Prickly, aren’t you, Collins?” There was just the tiniest g
ndationamusement in those unusual eyes.

l on her “It has been a long journey.” Edwina had been jostled across
fter herEngland for two full days. Trapped with strangers in a coach, none of
and notbelieved in the most basic principles of hygiene. She’d gasped for air a
ut herstop. She was tired. Hungry. Dirty. And she hadn’t come all this way

Bascomb turn her out without at least giving her a chance to prove her
act,” he “I should send you back to Portsmouth so you can return you from
ion wasyou came. Outside London somewhere, I assume.” Bascomb waved
hand.

alary he Edwina looked out the window as thunder rattled the ancient p
ld earn,glass, and waited. She stretched her fingers, bruised from clutching t
r, quiteof the pony cart. “Hampshire,” she answered. Bascomb knew perfect
where she’d traveled from. He’d sent her the money for the journey he

e it was Bascomb shrugged his pair of mountainous shoulders as if Har
and the environs of London were one and the same. The green-gra
flicked over her, settling somewhere in the region of her bosom,
b askedreturning to her face.

th mud A small sensation of heat curled down the length of Edwina’s b
wholly unexpected reaction and one that made her unsure if she’d d
snarled,right thing in coming to Rose Abbey.

na had Rose Abbey—once a haven for a group of Benedictine nuns
ressionconvents and monasteries dotted England—was a dark, imposing pla
addled.estate lay at the very end of a long road, all uphill, through woods so
troublelittle sunlight filtered through the trees. Midway up the rise of t
ing theEdwina had thought night had fallen. Her first sight of Rose Abbey
reassured her.

lity. Or The part of the estate that had once been the abbey erupted out
ground just outside the study window. A series of wide gothic
Or havestretched up toward the sky, like the skeleton of some huge, fc
creature whose bones had been picked clean. Roses were every
ver hercrawling up the house as if to tear the stone apart. The bushes spru
l of dirtthe ruins in wild disarray. Crimson blooms sprouted from the sp
bramble of thorns. Not a hint of pink, white, or any other color. It g

take on illusion Rose Abbey was dripping blood.

Most disturbing and not the least welcoming.

The wind flung an untrimmed mass of twisting, torn buds against the window, the thorns scratching along the glass with an eerie sound, half of Edwina's teeth rattle. The house shuddered as rain lashed against the pane from whom "I won't send you back to Hampshire tonight," Bascomb said in a voice that reached everyone. "Not in this weather."

"How very kind of you." Edwina turned back from the window to observe him once more. Her skin tingled, the earlier warmth from his presence still lingering over her skin. The moment she'd been ushered into the room, a large hand caught sight of the large male sitting behind the desk, a shiver cascaded down the length of her arms. At first, Edwina had thought of the chill of the day, of the horrible rasping from the rosebushes outside the seat clawed at the house.

But it was Bascomb.

The last time Edwina's body had hummed in the presence of a man was Hampshire years ago. Just before her family had fallen into genteel poverty and her day-gaze hopes of wedding without a dowry had disappeared. Now, at the age of twenty-nine, Edwina was an avowed spinster. Such feelings as Bascomb aroused had been firmly pushed to the back of her mind. Locked away in a room only late at night when Edwina was alone in her bed.

Such instant...*arousal* for Bascomb was frankly more unsettling than Rose Abbey itself.

He wasn't even handsome, at least in the conventional sense. His face was savagely hewn. Those glowing green-gray eyes, far too beautiful to belong to a man, were set atop bold slashes of cheekbones. Inky black hair, straight and thick, fell to brush the tops of his broad shoulders. No cravat, waistcoat hanging open. His shirt unbuttoned enough to give a glimpse of lightly tanned skin at his throat.

Edwina shivered again.

His entire appearance, including the wicked scar stretching down the side of his face, gave Bascomb the look of a pirate. All he was lacking was an eye patch and a parrot perched on his shoulder.

She looked down at her poor, battered half boots. Bascomb possessed a rawling potent, striking masculinity. Few women would be immune to him. Edwina certainly wasn't. Resolutely, she pushed such thoughts aside and lifted her head.

gaze to his once more.

Lightning flashed outside the window, throwing the ruins of the inst theand abandoned church with its collection of gravestones into stark makingThunder shook the windowpanes once more.

anes. Bascomb muttered a string of curses under his breath. Most had a grimwith Edwina. None were the least polite, and the last few caused her to pink slightly. She was no prude. She hadn't been a maid in many dow tobut...well, *good Lord*.

; regard "My lord." She gave him an unflinching look, determined to bra e studyout despite her attraction to Bascomb, and his attempts to intimidate ver had"Did you not state your need for a secretary? Someone who could o it onlyyour affairs, handle the ledgers, and reply to correspondence? Despite as theyEdwina searched for the proper word.

"Femaleness?"

"Yes. That." She clasped her fingers tighter. "The polite thing ian waswould be to at least allow me the opportunity to show you how I ca and herassistance." There was a plea hidden in her words, the desperation : age ofthrough her show of bravery no matter how hard she struggled to ke nb nowbay. If Bascomb turned her away, Edwina wasn't sure what she would l away. "What about me, *Collins*, strikes you as the least polite?" Massive

drummed atop the desk. Thick. Blunt. How would they feel tugging ig thanbuttons of her dress? Or possibly searching beneath her skirts?

Good Lord. Something is terribly wrong with me.

eatures "Did anyone mention to you," Bascomb grumbled, "why I've run t itiful toalmost every earnest *male* secretary in England? Why I've had so ck hair,difficulty, *Collins*?" There was a tiny, almost invisible tug at his lip vat. No puckered skin bisecting his left cheek danced.

glimpse *Wretch. He's enjoying my discomfort.*

Edwina straightened her shoulders. "I assume their rapid departure something to do with your charming personality, my lord," she snapp the leftimpolite response was the result of her wet clothes, growling stoma was anunexpected attraction to Bascomb. It was certainly not the load of tr:

McDeaver, the owner of the pony cart that had transported her he essed afilled her ears with during their blessedly brief acquaintance.

Edwina Something like approval gleamed in Bascomb's eyes at her sharp 'ted her"I'm sure McDeaver took great pleasure informing you of what to

upon your arrival.”

“From you, my lord? Or Rose Abbey?”

McDeaver *had* taken morbid delight in relaying the gruesome tale of Rose Abbey. As had the wife of the tavern owner who’d brought Edwina to the inn while she’d waited for McDeaver to be located. And one of the laborers who’d sat at the cheekstable next to Edwina had seen fit to embellish the tale and give his children a good scare. For years, the denizens of Portsmouth had eyed Edwina with pity while she’d bitten into the stale biscuits served with her tea, whispering about the terrible fate that awaited her at Rose Abbey.

“Haunted. Cursed. Someone may have even said the abbey stood open like a gateway to hell.”

“My—” Bascomb’s beautiful eyes roved over Edwina once more. It appeared her interest was not solely related to whether she could organize the abbey’s correspondence properly.

“Another burst of heat stretched out across her limbs.”

“You’ve got spine, Collins. I grant you that.”

“So I’ve been told.” The traitor, while useful when dealing with the aristocracy, was an unsuitable candidate for marriage. Her lack of a proper dowry didn’t matter. Her passably pretty looks combined with a sharp tongue weren’t enough to tempt any gentleman to wed her without something more for their trouble.

“Mr. Fielding”—Bascomb’s paw of a hand stretched across the table, reaching for her—“bolted from Rose Abbey in the middle of the night, wearing nothing more than a nightshirt for his sprint down the road to Portsmouth. Boniest knees I’ve ever seen on a man. The idiot is fortunate he didn’t trip on the way down the road in the dark and break his neck.”

“Mr. Fielding?” Edwina asked.

“Your predecessor. He refused to return to collect his things. I had to have them on to Portsmouth at great expense to myself.”

There was a vengeful spirit roaming the estate, at least according to the tales of the abbey. The specter of the final abbess who presided here. She had sacrificed Rose Abbey quietly, sacrificing herself and the group of nuns who’d followed her. The abbess had refused to accept the rule of her sovereign, claiming she answered only to God. The nuns had been raped and slaughtered, their bodies run through with a sword. Whatever wealth the abbey had possessed had never been found. The abbess, McDeaver insisted, still haunted Rose Abbey.

day.

Absolutely ridiculous.

Edwina replied, "Perhaps Mr. Fielding had a delicate constitution," she replied, "but however, do not."

Edwina didn't believe in ghosts. Nor vengeful nuns. The exodus of the Rose Abbey was more likely the result of Bascomb being a difficult man to work for. She had pointed out to McDeaver, during his macabre recitation of the tales of the Rose Abbey, that there was a staff in place at Rose Abbey.

Surely if the abbey was haunted, it would be difficult for Lord Bascomb to keep servants as well.

McDeaver had shot her a churlish look.

When the pony cart had pulled up in front of Rose Abbey, a man named Collins promptly opened the weathered doors and greeted Edwina. True, the man was somewhat timid. Pale. Her voice had trembled as she'd introduced her friend to Meg.

Edwina's trunks had been unceremoniously launched out of the pony cart and landed in the dirt. McDeaver had snapped the reins and started back down the road toward Portsmouth without so much as a goodbye.

"Could it be possible Mr. Fielding found the working conditions of the abbey to his liking?" she said rather pointedly to Bascomb.

Bascomb's lips twitched once more. "I can't imagine, Collins."

More rain pelted the windows. The fireplace hissed as dripping rainwater found its way down the chimney. Finally, Bascomb gave a shrug of resignation, apparently coming to some sort of decision. He shoved a neat stack of papers toward her. "There is a desk set up in the library for you."

Perhaps you can sort through these tonight in return for a bed and a meal."

Edwina schooled her features, careful not to let the triumph show on her face. Bascomb could bluster all he liked, but it was clear he needed a great deal of it. Ledgers were strewn all over the study, as well as inkwells, bits of string, and what looked like a stuffed ferret. "I would have lived happy to, my lord."

"But I'm sending you back to Portsmouth tomorrow once the abbey clears," he grouched. "Don't bother to unpack."

"I understand completely, my lord." Edwina picked up the stack of papers. She would have preferred to be allowed to change and wash

from her hands and face before starting such a monumental task, but
remained Bascomb wasn't tossing her out. At least not yet. "Where
ied. "I, find the library, my lord?"

"Go back to the staircase and then down the hall on the other side
is from attention returned to his desk, pencil flying across a piece of paper. She
master. to catch a glimpse of what he was sketching, but all she could make
of the the shape of a peaked roof.

Abbey. Edwina came forward and picked up the stack of papers at the edge
omb to desk. Struggling with her wet skirts and the correspondence, she m
way out of the study. Rain battered the house as the wind howled aro
stone. She could almost make out the sound of the waves crashing v
aid had against the cliffs outside. The hill Rose Abbey sat atop ended with n
girl was unscalable cliffs above the ocean. Purposefully, Edwina knew, to
rself as Viking raiders who had once plied the coast. Rose Abbey's isolati
allowed the nuns who lived here to flourish, forgotten by the rest of the
ny cart for hundreds of years.

own the Until someone had remembered and their peaceful existence had en

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from her hands and face before starting such a monumental task, but the fact remained Bascomb wasn't tossing her out. At least not yet. "Where would I find the library, my lord?"

"Go back to the staircase and then down the hall on the other side." His attention returned to his desk, pencil flying across a piece of paper. She tried to catch a glimpse of what he was sketching, but all she could make out was the shape of a peaked roof.

Edwina came forward and picked up the stack of papers at the edge of his desk. Struggling with her wet skirts and the correspondence, she made her way out of the study. Rain battered the house as the wind howled around the stone. She could almost make out the sound of the waves crashing violently against the cliffs outside. The hill Rose Abbey sat atop ended with massive, unscalable cliffs above the ocean. Purposefully, Edwina knew, to avoid Viking raiders who had once plied the coast. Rose Abbey's isolation had allowed the nuns who lived here to flourish, forgotten by the rest of the world for hundreds of years.

Until someone had remembered and their peaceful existence had ended.

CHAPTER TWO

EXHAUSTION SEEPED INTO Edwina's bones as she made her way out study. Perhaps it was her fatigue that accounted for the heaviness about her shoulders. Or the sadness that suddenly filled her.

Damn McDeaver and his lurid tales.

After marching back to the staircase leading to the second floor, she turned to head down the opposite side of the house and caught sight of a trunk sitting in the foyer. A woman stood before the battered trunk, all in black with a lace cap perched atop her gray-streaked hair. Painful to the point of gauntness, the woman was all sharp bones and angles. Her expression hovered about her lips, the woman evidently not the least surprised at the sight of Edwina. Or possibly it was the muddy trail Edwina was leaving across the floor.

"I am Mrs. Page," the woman announced without preamble, her voice sharp as the rest of her. "Lord Bascomb's housekeeper. I'll have your things"—she cast a withering stare at Edwina's trunk—"taken upstairs. A room has been prepared for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Page. I am Miss Collins. Lord Bascomb's secretary."

"Indeed." A brow raised at Edwina. Mrs. Page had eyes like bits of flinty and hard, with little interest in Edwina other than annoyance. "I wish you to go to work immediately." She nodded to the papers clutched in Edwina's arms. "Not unexpected. Mr. Fielding left quite a mess in his haste to escape Rose Abbey. Please follow me and I'll escort you to the library."

"There isn't a parlor or—"

"All His Lordship's secretaries work in the library." She shook her head. "Much to their displeasure. Follow me, Miss Collins." Her skirts rustled softly as she set out down the hall to the left of the stairs. "This portion of Rose Abbey is original." She gestured with one hand. "And was once the residence of the abbess. This wing is smaller, with fewer rooms, but it contains the library, which was once the private quarters and office of the abbess."

abbess. When the first Lord Bascomb took ownership of the property, he chose to build around her original home instead of tearing it down, allowing the stone to fall to rubble as he did to the remainder of the abbey and the church. That first Lord Bascomb was not a religious gentleman.

"I saw the ruins outside Lord Bascomb's study."

"The entire backs of both wings face what remains of the core of the structure. Lord Bascomb's study is directly opposite the library but on the other side. The entire west wing was added in increments by each successive Lord Bascomb."

"I see." The slight difference in architecture as they moved into the north part of the house became readily apparent. The wood-paneled walls gave way to stone. The ceilings were lower, the space of the hall tighter, more claustrophobic. Edwina had the strange sensation Rose Abbey was trying to swallow her.

A sour Mrs. Page stopped, swinging open two large double doors at the entrance to the hall. "I expected His Lordship might have you begin your work tonight. I lit the fire in anticipation. The stone walls keep this part of the house cold and damp. Your quarters will feel much the same way." She looked up at the ceiling. "They are directly above this room. Closer to the library for your convenience."

"Thank you."

Edwina stepped into the library, taking in the room before her. The octagon shape of the library was unexpected, as were the high, arched windows at the back that gave a clear view of the abandoned church and cliffs beyond. An enormous fireplace took up the entire right wall, the stone crumbling in places, and the flames licked and hissed, devouring a stack of logs. Probably original to this part of the house. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of a woman dressed in flowing dark robes. A white headdress completely covered her hair and part of her forehead.

"Lady Renalda," Mrs. Page said in a solemn tone. "The final abbess's study was her office."

Of course it was.

Edwina looked up at the stern, unsmiling woman. McDeaver and the other residents of Portsmouth reviled the abbess for sacrificing her flock for the sake of her own stubborn pride. The woman in the portrait was young and beautiful, exactly what Edwina had expected. And pretty. A small bouquet of roses lay in a

erty, he crimson like all the roses Edwina had seen thus far. Piercing blue eyes
own or back at Edwina, seeming to follow her progress toward the small desk
e abbey the fireplace.

1.” Lady Renalda certainly had the look of a vengeful spirit.

“I’ll have Meg bring you tea and something to eat, Miss Collins. I
original you’ll find ink and paper in the desk.”

on the “Thank you, Mrs. Page. Tea would be most welcome.”

ceeding Edwina waited until the housekeeper left before settling herself
desk. Her head fell to the wooden surface as she tried to pull back th
ie older of trepidation filling her. If she were wise, Edwina would head l
ive way Portsmouth as soon as the rain stopped. Her cousin, Southwell, had
Mildly Edwina a home at his country estate. She could stay as long as she
ying to Organize all the artifacts he’d collected on his travels.

Looking around at the coldness surrounding her, Edwina thought
end of she should have taken South’s kind offer. But then, as now, Edwina c
day and imagine living on her cousin’s charity for the remainder of her days. S
e chilly no desire to be the poor, forgotten spinster relation who was trotted
p at the family gatherings only to be viewed with pity. The very idea made
or your feel small and insignificant.

Edwina lifted her head. She must brave this out. It was far too
second thoughts. She was here. The correspondence before her
er. The excellent start to prove her worth to Bascomb before moving on
arched ledgers. Not only was her penmanship splendid, but Edwina’s atten
and the detail, along with her love of numbers, was a singular skill. Her
ie stone allowed her to spot errors others did not, particularly useful when keep
stack of father’s books.

hung a A sudden wash of sadness pierced Edwina’s chest. Her father had
address desperately to hide the truth of their approaching poverty, but Edw
seen how the ledgers had been padded just the same. She’d done w
ss. This could, stretching every shilling to ensure there would be coal and sor
to eat in the larder. Kept a roof over their heads for far longer than
thought possible. In the end, all her efforts hadn’t mattered. She’d st
and the forced to sell everything.

he sake Edwina craned her neck to the side and caught Lady Renalda gl
er than her with those judgmental eyes. Why did Bascomb keep the portrait
her lap, abbess? Seemed odd given Lady Renalda’s reputation for haunting.

Edwina gazed at the lightning streaked across the windows at the back of the room, followed by another roar of thunder.

Two very distinct thuds came from the bookcase nearest the window, along with the sound of something moving along the floor.

Edwina believed she could benefit from better lighting. The back of her neck prickled, and she had the sense she was not alone in the room. Her pulse fluttered unsteadily at the clogging her throat.

She cursed McDeaver again for filling her head with nonsense.

Pushing back from the desk, Edwina stood, clutching the pen before offering it like a weapon.

"Hello?"

Moving silently toward the other side of the library, Edwina made her way to the row of bookcases and peeked around the corner. Two books couldn't sprawled, spines up, on the floor. Lowering the pen and feeling like a ghost, she had she marched over and picked up both tomes. Sliding both books back into their proper spots on the bookshelf, she took a deep breath, willing her pace to slow.

"Nothing but thunder," she said out loud. "The vibrations from that late storm shook the house, which in turn rattled the bookshelves, causing the books to fall to the floor." A laugh came from her. "Nothing ghostly about it until the next I see Mr. McDeaver, I shall have a word with him about filling my room with tales of a crazed abbess haunting Rose Abbey. If I—"

The words stalled in her mouth as another thump sounded from the other side of the library. The bookcases there nearly reached the ceiling, flush against the wall. She pushed her hands into her skirts to stop the rapid tremble of her fingers, nearly dropping the pen. There was nothing around her but books on the floor. Nothing out of place.

Feeling foolish and instructing her imagination to rein itself in, Edwina had she marched back to the center of the room, stopping before the portrait of anyone but the abbess.

"I don't believe in you," Edwina whispered.

"Miss?"

Edwina gasped, her hand coming to her throat before she turned a sharp look at the Meg in the doorway.

Good Lord. She'd not even been here an entire day and already she

library, imagining things. She was not a woman who was easily startled. C
fanciful. The house was old. The bookcases looked quite ancient. Sl
indows, lucky if they didn't suddenly burst apart and all come tumbling dow
her while she worked.

library A large tray was held aloft in Meg's quivering hands. "I've broug
she had tea, Miss Collins." Her eyes darted to the portrait of the abbess before
ly, fear back on Edwina, features stamped with fear. The tea tray trembled,
clattering against the saucer.

"Hello, Meg." Waving her away from the desk, Edwina instead c
ore her Meg to set down the tray on a low table next to an overstuffed settee.

place the tray there. It looks quite heavy." Laden with tea and
assortment of sandwiches and pastries, the tray tilted as the maid strugg
ade her place it on the table. Edwina's stomach grumbled. She hadn't thoug
oks lay Page would be so generous based on their initial introduction. "My go
n idiot, I must appear to be incredibly hungry."

into the Meg took a shaky breath as she set down the tray, looking once
ulse to the portrait of Lady Renalda. "Yes, Miss Collins." She bobbed. "Mr
said Lord Bascomb may join you so Cook made sure to include ex
e stormwater cress or cucumber. His Lordship don't like a tea tray that ain't he
ooks to So there was *also* a cook at Rose Abbey. Plus Mrs. Page and Meg
. When footman or possibly a butler. The housekeeper didn't look strong eno
ne with carry Edwina's trunk upstairs herself.

"Hearty?" Edwina smiled at the maid, who was obviously uncomf
ie other at being in the library.

sitting "There's roast beef and ham." Meg nodded at the tray. "Roast bee
e slight Lordship's favorite."

Miss. No "I'll be sure to concentrate on the ham," Edwina assured the maid.

Meg gave her a weak smile and exited the library by backing c
in, she eyes never leaving the portrait of Lady Renalda, as if the abbess woul
t of the out of the portrait and grab her.

Once she was alone again, Edwina's gaze went to the other side
library, where the second thump had come from. She strolled along t
of bookcases, taking note of the sheer volume of tomes and their
nd saw condition. If there was something out of place, Edwina couldn't tell.

I'm being ridiculous.

she was Her stomach rumbled again, so Edwina went back to the tray and

Or even herself a steaming cup of tea. She filled a plate, taking care to include what he'd be beef purely because it was sure to irritate Bascomb, and sat at the table. Edwina sipped at her tea, ate two sandwiches, and felt better immediately.

She'd only been hungry. Tired. A cup of tea and something in her stomach made a world of difference.

Thus fortified, Edwina turned her attention once more to the stacks of papers Bascomb had tasked her with organizing. A bill from the butcher.

One for coal. Several recommendations on how best to reduce the infestation of rodents from the attic. One pointed observation on how to repair a leaking portion of the roof in the west wing.

That leak was undoubtedly dripping water at this moment. The weather outside showed no sign of abating and seemed worse than when Edwina first arrived.

Organization must come first. She sorted the stack of papers into piles on the desk. A small portion were letters from Bascomb's acquaintances in London. One correspondence was from a farmer in Scotland who wanted to sell Bascomb some sheep. But there weren't any invitations for dinners or other social events. Given Rose Abbey's isolation, it was doubtful Bascomb had much of a social life. Anything having to do with maintaining a household—foodstuffs, supplies, and the like—Edwina put to the side. Correspondence of a more personal nature, she put in the middle.

Repairs to the abbey were put to the right and constituted the largest pile. Apparently, Rose Abbey had been left in poor condition until Bascomb inherited it a little over a year ago. Nodding to herself, Edwina took up the neat piles, trying to decide where to begin. She dearly wished Fielding had left notes.

Perhaps he had.

Edwina opened the drawer of the desk and poked around. More than two buttons from a man's waistcoat, possibly Fielding's. A paperweight, which she immediately put to good use. Finally, her eyes closed over a small, leather-bound book.

Fielding had left notes. As had Worthington. Larkspur. And several others with the unfortunate name of Merrywimple. She leafed through the notes, noting the different handwriting and collections of dates. Notes had been made on finding stonemasons, roofers, and the like. And a priest.

A priest?

le roast There was no indication from Merrywimple, who had made the n e desk, as to whether he'd found a priest or why he'd been looking for one. diately. Glancing out at the spikes of gravestones, barely visible in the r stomach what little light remained of the day, Edwina could see some were ver to the edge of the cliff. Perhaps Merrywimple had been arranging fo tack of graves to be moved and wanted a priest involved for religious reason ichter in ran her finger down the remainder of his notes. Merrywimple had b move a first of Bascomb's secretaries, lasting a total of two months before resi repair a *Two months.*

What would have made Merrywimple leave his position after such e stormtime? The isolation? Flipping through the pages, Edwina found Fic ina had notes. His observations ran along mostly the same lines as the Bascomb had employed. But Fielding had fled after only a few weel ito neat notation jumped out at her.

ntances *Have portrait of Lady Renalda relocated to another part of Rose A wanted can't stand for her to look at me a moment longer.*

anner or Edwina glanced up from the desk to the abbess. Lady Renalda was ascomb terrifying for a dead woman. And given the way she had perished , ing the rumors surrounding the abbey, Edwina could well understand why F ie left. wouldn't want to share the library with her. Edwina doubted she was t Related new arrival to Rose Abbey who had had to endure McDeaver's gr t stack, tales. But Lady Renalda's stern gaze still looked out over the library. F mb had hadn't won that argument with Bascomb.

κ in the The next entry was very curious indeed.

ing had *Ask Lord B about door in library.*

Edwina's gaze settled on the two double doors leading into the There was nothing unusual. Carved wood. Brass knobs. The hinges string, even squeak. Nothing appeared to be in need of repair. She frown bras turned back to the notes Fielding had made.

fingers "Well, Collins. I see you aren't cowering in your room yet."

Edwina snapped shut Fielding's notes and shoved the small book omeonethe desk. "Not as of yet, my lord." She faced him. "But it is stil pages, There's time."

id been Bascomb gave her a stern look and walked into the library, imme making the entire room smaller. His larger form dominated the space the library with the scents of bergamot and something clean and und

otation, masculine. Edwina hadn't been wrong. Bascomb was quite tall. Big, massive, gnarled oak tree. The leather breeches he wore stretched taut against his thighs, showing Edwina the carved lines of muscle beneath. They closed lengths of leg ended in immense, booted feet, which trod heavily in that direction.

is? She Awareness trailed up Edwina's spine. Bascomb's effect on her had been dimmed in the least since their initial meeting. The chill was immediately banished from the library. If anything, Edwina felt overwarm.

Bascomb's gaze slid first to Edwina, then down at the tea tray. 'a short done of Cook.' One large paw reached out, snatching up two sandwiches. 'Hearty.'

others Edwina watched the movement of his mouth as he ate, the books. One throat as he swallowed. She had never found a man devouring a bit of beef to be quite so intriguing.

Abbey. I Dear God, what was wrong with her?

"Is something amiss, Collins?"

is mildly "Not in the least, my lord. I wanted to ask, What is the size of your land that Rose Abbey? I didn't realize you had a cook—"

yielding "How do you think I eat?" He frowned. "Mrs. Oates. Lovely woman. He only you think it was Page who did the cooking? She can't boil an egg."

uesome "I'm curious why you have a housekeeper with only a cook, a maid."

yielding "And Thomas. Good lad. Lifts things. Like your trunk. Helps with repairs and such. Mr. Oates, husband to my cook, takes care of the garden. They reside in a cottage a short walk from here." He raised a brow. "Is there any point to this discussion, Collins?"

room. "Not at all." Edwina kept her expression polite. "I was only trying to ascertain who was in your employ."

ied and "Mrs. Page came with Rose Abbey, if you must know. She was my uncle's housekeeper. Perhaps something more," he said offhand. "I've been clear on their relationship. Her mother served as housekeeper as well as I do back in another Lord Bascomb. My uncle's grandfather, I believe. Very complicated early family tree. At any rate, Mrs. Page deals with all the little details I do not know about, such as whether there's enough beeswax or clean linens. If you're immediately looking at the household accounts, she is the person who knows best."

, filling "Understandable." Mrs. Page had likely grown up at Rose Abbey. Her mother had once been the housekeeper here.

Like a t acrosswas the last abness to preside here. This was once her house, or at le re longof it was. The library was her office.”

in her “Mrs. Page told me as much. She said it was your family who m renovations after being gifted the estate.”

hadn’t “‘Gifted’ is a bit of a stretch.” His eyes were on Lady Renald ediatelystor performed a sordid service for the Crown. Rose Abbey v reward. Did McDeaver leave that part out, Collins?”

“Nicely Thunder boomed again.

wiches. A shiver dusted Edwina’s skin. “The nuns were not treated kindly.”

“No.” Bascomb had a pained look on his face. “I find it shar) of hisrelation of mine, no matter how far in the past, had a part in the mu of roastinnocents. My ancestor had been promised a title and an estate”—he his arm around the room—“but first he had to evict an order of nu secure the wealth of Rose Abbey.”

“What sort of wealth?” McDeaver had been vague on the details. ur staff “Relics of a religious nature, I’d expect. Gold chalices. Silver embedded with jewels. That sort of thing. There’s no actual record an. Didwealth, but since Rose Abbey had never been raided as so many monasteries and convents had, the assumption was made that there d—” trove of gold plate and the like to be found here. However, when the s re withand my ancestor arrived”—he gave her a sideways glance—“they stables.nothing but a determined abness and her devoted flock.”

there a “McDeaver claims Lady Renalda was overly prideful. That she ref surrender to anyone but God. That their blood is on her hands. He m ying tosound very greedy.”

Bascomb shrugged his massive shoulders, drawing Edwina’s atten vas mythe pull of the fine lawn along his arms. “My ancestor confronted e neverRenalda here, in this very room, while his soldiers scoured the g well, toDemanded she give over the abbey’s wealth. She laughed in his fa plicatedordered the abbey and church set afire, hoping to force Lady Ren n’t carerelent. Ordered his soldiers to kill anyone they came across.”

you’re Edwina imagined how frightening it all must have been. “Lady I should have just surrendered.”

y if her “She didn’t. Instead she kept my ancestor in this room with her, r to budge on her position, while everything behind her burned. Lady I

it. “She brandished a sword and was cut down,” he said in a quiet voice. “But I don’t think she was mad, Collins. Or prideful. Or any of the other things McDeaver probably made her out to be. Her death, her sacrifice, was a diversion. She was buying time for the others.” He looked up at Lady Renalda with something very much like admiration.

a. “My “The others?”

Bascomb said, “Rose Abbey was once a small village on its own. Nearly thirty nuns and novices, along with a small group of orphans, resided here. Possibly Lady Renalda. He turned back to her. “I’ve looked at the archives. Only five nuns were executed with Lady Renalda. *Five*. No one else. Certainly no men or orphaned children being slaughtered. I think it makes sense to assume that she gave orders for everyone else to escape while she kept that fire burning. Bascomb and the soldiers occupied. I’m sure those innocents were long gone before the torch was put to the abbey.”

“Where did they go?” Edwina’s brow wrinkled. “There is only one way in and out of Rose Abbey. The road leading to Portsmouth. Surely the sentry crosses would have blocked it.”

Bascomb shrugged. “A mystery. The records show that the soldiers found nothing other than gold. No treasure. Not so much as a silver cross. The first Lord Bascomb was searched for weeks and enlisted half the village to look. Eventually, the soldiers took possession of Rose Abbey and began adding to the home of the abbess.

“I find it a bit morbid that he wanted to keep the room she was murdered in and merely build around it.”

Bascomb nodded. “Odd. Especially since he allowed the rest to go. I don’t think I’ve ever made her portrait. But I think the horror of what he’d done never left him. He even kept a portrait of Lady Renalda. Claimed to see her and the other nuns wandering about the grounds. Rambled away like a madman.”

Edwina looked up once more at the abbess. McDeaver had painted Lady Renalda in a very unflattering light, but Edwina supposed it was more accurate. He tells stories of a wrathful abbess than talk about this year’s crop of wheat. Lady Renalda told when a stranger visited Portsmouth. A ghost story was much more appropriate.

“The villagers in Portsmouth insist Rose Abbey is haunted.”

“Oh, it is.” Bascomb grabbed another sandwich and strolled to the door. “Have a good evening, Collins.”

Edwina
Renalda

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CHAPTER THREE

EDWINA FINISHED BRAIDING the length of her hair, stretching out her neck over her shoulders. She'd worked through the remainder of the afternoon and into the early evening, starting with the largest pile of Bascomb's papers. The ledgers and correspondence pertaining to the restoration of the estate seemed the most urgent. Opening a ledger, she'd thought to start matching receipt and debit entries but stopped after seeing the mistakes sprinkled throughout the numbers. Edwina was far too exhausted to begin what she could see a cursory glance would be quite a project.

The intensity of the storm outside hadn't abated a bit. Rain still lashed the windows with fury. She thought of Lady Renalda and the horrible evening she had taken place at Rose Abbey so long ago. Bascomb's version of what had transpired here was likely closer to the truth than the tale spun by Mclaren. It pained Edwina to know that Lady Renalda, in addition to what she had suffered in life, must also have the indignity of her good name besmirched by death.

Edwina sighed and looked out over the darkness cloaking the estate. She supposed it didn't matter what the truth was any longer. Everyone who had been involved was long dead. Despite Bascomb's parting words that Rose Abbey was haunted, Edwina didn't believe in ghosts.

The wind continued to howl and snake around the house, trying to pry the space between the stones. Thankfully, Edwina's room seemed well insulated against the storm. The stone walls had to be a foot thick. The quarters the Page had directed her to were comfortable, if not large. The bed had a thick mattress, as fine as anything that had once graced her parents' bedroom, complete with a canopy and bed-curtains. Fine fabrics, even if the style was a bit out of date. A fire roared away in the hearth, spreading a comfortable glow across the room. Soap, towels, and a pitcher of warm water awaited her. She hadn't been hungry after the enormous tray of food served her earlier, so she had instead opted for a pot of chamomile tea when Meg had knocked softly.

door.

Lying back in the bed, Edwina left the curtains open a fraction to catch the heat from the fire. Her fingers curled around the edges of the coverlet as she stared at the canopy above her head. Exhaustion settled in her bones, but she was unable to fall asleep. Again, she considered the consequences of her somewhat rash decision to accept the position with Bascomb, though in the past time, Edwina had thought it the best choice.

Since her father's death, Edwina had been stuck in a continuous cycle of survival. Her family's descent into poverty had been slow. Excruciatingly painful. Brought on by a combination of poor investments made by her father—which he'd tried to hide from her—and constant overspending by Edwina's frivolous mother. Father had refused to beg for charity from the Earl of Southwell, instead insisting that things would work themselves out around.

They never had. Edwina had spent her days negotiating with the butcher. The dressmaker. The farmer from whom they'd purchased their eggs. She'd chopped wood for their fire. Decided the price of sugar was so dear that they would drink tea without. Let go of their maid. Cook. The embarrassment of her family's decline was such that Edwina kept the worst of the situation from her father, the Earl of Southwell, as well as other members of their far-flung family. Edwina was mortified. Especially after her broken betrothal. When she'd finally been forced to sell the family home, Edwina had taken what she'd had left and arrived at Southwell's estate, the advertisement for Bascomb clutched in one hand. Edwina had begged Southwell to write a recommendation, explaining she wanted to make her own way in the world. She was too ashamed to confess the true state of her affairs.

Southwell, she'd pleaded, need only help her with this small thing. Southwell had written the recommendation, against his better judgment. He'd told Edwina she could work for him, if she were so determined to find a secretary, but Edwina had refused.

Now, listening to the wind howl outside, Edwina thought perhaps she would have been better off cataloging Southwell's collection of stone carvings, pottery, and terrifying masks.

He had quite a lot of those.

But Edwina hadn't wanted charity. Marriage certainly was no longer an option.

option. Suitors did not bang on the door of Miss Edwina Collins
allow insipid. She wasn't even a maid anymore thanks to her mildly sa-
erlet affair with the barrister whose offer of marriage she'd accepted. Of
nes, yet that was before the Honorable Jacob Duster had realized he would be
s of her nothing but Edwina and had withdrawn his offer.

1 at the Hands clenched, she thumped the mattress.

His abandonment still smarted. She'd been wildly attracted to
ycle of Experienced a decent amount of pleasure in his arms, which had bod-
ciating for their marriage. Edwina thought Duster cared for her. That there w-
r father affection between them. Yet when he'd realized the circumstances
ing by Collins family, Duster had broken off their relationship by sending a
om his Edwina's father.

d "turn Hadn't even had the decency to inform Edwina himself.

"So now I'm here. Trapped at Rose Abbey with a—man I should
the least attractive. And one with whom I should retain a profes-
sioner relationship and nothing more." Bascomb made every nerve in Ed-
ood for body stand at attention with those unusual eyes and striking look
nk their attraction between them had crackled in the air when Bascomb had
amily's her earlier in the library. Her pulse skipped at the thought of him to
cousin, her.

family. *Damn it.*

1 she'd Frowning, she plumped her pillow, pulled the blankets up to her ch-
it coins firmly shut her eyes. She was here to be Bascomb's secretary. Nothing
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option. Suitors did not bang on the door of Miss Edwina Collins, poor spinster. She wasn't even a maid anymore thanks to her mildly satisfying affair with the barrister whose offer of marriage she'd accepted. Of course, that was before the Honorable Jacob Duster had realized he would be getting nothing but Edwina and had withdrawn his offer.

Hands clenched, she thumped the mattress.

His abandonment still smarted. She'd been wildly attracted to Duster. Experienced a decent amount of pleasure in his arms, which had boded well for their marriage. Edwina thought Duster cared for her. That there was true affection between them. Yet when he'd realized the circumstances of the Collins family, Duster had broken off their relationship by sending a note to Edwina's father.

Hadn't even had the decency to inform Edwina himself.

"So now I'm here. Trapped at Rose Abbey with a—man I shouldn't find the least attractive. And one with whom I should retain a professional relationship and nothing more." Bascomb made every nerve in Edwina's body stand at attention with those unusual eyes and striking looks. The attraction between them had crackled in the air when Bascomb had visited her earlier in the library. Her pulse skipped at the thought of him touching her.

Damn it.

Frowning, she plumped her pillow, pulled the blankets up to her chin, and firmly shut her eyes. She was here to be Bascomb's secretary. Nothing more.

CHAPTER FOUR

EDWINA WOKE SLOWLY, keeping her eyes closed. Wind still threw rain through the windows. The sound of waves crashing against the cliffs was a roar. The fire, now little more than banked embers, popped and hissed.

Something was dragging along the floor of her room. Like a wet mop out of the bucket. Or thick, soaked skirts slapping against flesh.

She was not alone.

The air in Edwina's chest froze. Her lungs refused to work properly. Blind terror, the sort made of nightmares and darkness, shot through her body. Edwina couldn't move even if she wanted to. It was all she could resist the scream clawing up her throat.

Keep breathing, Edwina. Pretend to be asleep.

The bed-curtains fluttered, the sound reaching her terrified ears. The air brushed over the curve of her shoulder and teased at her hair. She struggled to keep her breathing even as the sensation of someone leaning over her pressed against her skin.

I am going to scream my bloody head off.

Just as quickly, the heaviness eased, followed by the sensation of someone stroking the back of her head, as Edwina's mother used to do. The cold fear abated, supplanted by a sense of peace and comfort. She drew in a breath and opened her eyes, unsurprised to find herself completely alone under the bed-curtains undisturbed.

Edwina sat up, pulling aside the edge of the velvet curtain to see outside the room. Nothing whatsoever stirred. There wasn't even a draft from the windows. The air in the room was cool but not the icy blast she'd felt when she'd been leaning over her shoulder.

Forcing herself out of the bed, Edwina checked to see that her door was still locked. She made the daring move of looking beneath the bed as she had when she was a child. To search for monsters.

Nothing.

Edwina drew in a shaky breath. "I was dreaming. A nightmare. No more," she said out loud to the stillness of the room. Again, she thought of Mr. McDeaver and his macabre stories. Turning back to the warmth of the fire, Edwina halted. Roses. The scent permeated the entire room, as if someone had filled a dozen vases with nothing but the bloodred blooms that sprang up all over the grounds of Rose Abbey.

against the wall. "I don't believe in ghosts," she chanted to herself. "A bad dream, no more." Edwina looked around the room. One small crimson rose petal lay on the table next to her empty teacup.

top just above the door. Edwina clasped her trembling hands together. Meg must have been arranging flowers. A petal dropped on the tray before she brought the tray to Edwina. She only hadn't noticed the petal earlier.

properly. Cautiously, still scanning her room, Edwina crawled back in, pulling the covers up to her chin. She thought of the portrait of the man in the hall. And the spray of bloodred roses lying in her lap.

It was a very long time before Edwina fell asleep once more.

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Edwina drew in a shaky breath. “I was dreaming. A nightmare. Nothing more,” she said out loud to the stillness of the room. Again, she cursed McDeaver and his macabre stories. Turning back to the warmth of the bed, Edwina halted. Roses. The scent permeated the entire room, as if someone had filled a dozen vases with nothing but the bloodred blooms that sprawled all over the grounds of Rose Abbey.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” she chanted to herself. “A bad dream, nothing more.” Edwina looked around the room. One small crimson rose petal lay on the table next to her empty teacup.

Edwina clasped her trembling hands together. Meg must have been arranging flowers. A petal dropped on the tray before she brought the tea to Edwina. She only hadn’t noticed the petal earlier.

Cautiously, still scanning her room, Edwina crawled back into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. She thought of the portrait of the abbess. And the spray of bloodred roses lying in her lap.

It was a very long time before Edwina fell asleep once more.

CHAPTER FIVE

“AH, THERE YOU are, Collins,” Lord Bascomb, with a piece of ham d from his raised fork, greeted her as she entered the breakfast ro following morning. “Wondered when you would make an appearance.

“Good morning, my lord,” Edwina answered, taking a seat.

Meg had knocked on her door earlier, informing Edwina th Bascomb had requested her presence in the breakfast room. Sl somewhat surprised to find that her employer expected them to eat to but Bascomb didn’t seem the sort to stand on ceremony. There was no to at Rose Abbey, she supposed. Or possibly he didn’t wish to eat alon

Atop the sideboard sat an enormous amount of food that Bascomb two empty plates before him were any indication, was intent on devou on his own. The thick mass of inky hair brushed against the breadth shoulders as he ate, the ends curling into his collar. No cravat or co more. And he was in dire need of a closer shave.

There had been no mention of a valet earlier when he’d listed the Rose Abbey, and from Bascomb’s rough appearance, it was clear he have one.

How odd. He is a titled lord. A gentleman.

Edwina narrowed her eyes. Titled he may be, but Bascomb gentleman, not with his apparent dislike of cravats and manners.

A tiny shiver trailed down her spine. It was not unpleasant.

“I expected you down earlier, Collins.” His eyes, more gray than g the morning light, peered back at her. “Did the storm keep you awa perhaps—” He hesitated. “—it was something else?”

If Bascomb thought she would admit to an imaginary hand strok hair and filling her room with the scent of roses, he was sorely mi “Exhaustion, my lord. I do apologize. The journey to Rose Abb lengthy. I merely overslept.”

“That was Fielding’s room. And Worthington’s.” He tapped his

“Come to think of it, I believe Mrs. Page has put each of my secretaries Easier, I suppose, to keep one room at the ready.” He leaned forward so the collar of his shirt gaped open to show a delectable slice of meat. “You do look refreshed, Collins.”

It was difficult to concentrate when Bascomb was so distracting. At least, *parts* of him were distracting. She caught the smells of bergamot soap in the air around him, which made her skin tingle once more. “I’m from the lord.”

Edwina placed a piece of toast on her plate.

“You’ll faint well before tea if that’s all you’re going to eat.” Bascomb stole a glance out the window, sighing in resignation. “And I suppose I’ll be here for tea. Can’t send you back to Hampshire today as I’ve got to see Collins.” A tiny smirk lifted his lips. “The storm hasn’t stopped. But as the rain abates and the roads are clear, off you go.”

“Of course, my lord.” Edwina sipped her tea, savoring the burn on her tongue. “I would expect as much.”

Bascomb tore into another piece of ham. “Is that sarcasm, Collins?”

“Not at all, my lord, merely agreement.” She nibbled at her toast.

His gaze lowered, focusing solely on her mouth.

Edwina had trouble swallowing and told herself it was the dry texture of her breakfast. She dribbled some honey over the top of the toast. As she took another bite, a bit of honey slid across her lips, and she caught the dribble on her tongue.

Bascomb made a feral noise. His eyes full of heat and the promise of wicked things raised to hers.

The attraction between them, so immediate and unexpected, threatened to combust, right here in the small breakfast room. A vision of Bascomb pressing Edwina down atop the breakfast table and lifting her skirts, so vivid she nearly dropped her toast.

Mrs. Page bustled in without knocking, and Edwina hastily dropping her eyes to her plate, pulse racing. For the first time since coming to Rose Green, Edwina actually welcomed the woman’s presence.

“My lord,” the housekeeper announced, “the leak in the east wing has grown exponentially larger according to Thomas. I believe several tiles have flown off the roof, threatening the guest room at the end of the third floor. Your attention is required.” A tiny nod of her chin was the

is there acknowledgment of Edwina's presence.

lightly, "Very well, Mrs. Page, though I've yet to finish breakfast."

le skin. Mrs. Page glanced at Bascomb's empty plates with a dubious look.

"Tell Thomas to grab the necessary tools, and I'll be along in a mo
}. Or atHe dismissed her with a wave. "I won't have time at present, Col
not andreview your work. I will have to trust it is acceptable."

am, my "I've sorted through a great deal of your correspondence and will
the ledgers today," Edwina replied.

"So soon?" Bascomb's face held a look of surprise. "It took F
ascombnearly a week to sort through everything."

ose you "Perhaps Fielding wasn't proficient at balancing estate ledg
wished,household accounts. I am." Edwina patted her lips with a napkin.

as soon Mrs. Page smoothed her skirts, eyeing Edwina with one brow r
disbelief.

against Well, Edwina didn't give a fig for the housekeeper's opinion.

"Is there anything else, Mrs. Page?" Bascomb muttered. "Or do yo
" to stand there and watch me eat the remainder of my breakfast?"

Mrs. Page's face tightened at the rebuke from her employer. "
wished to inform Miss Collins that I've already had the fire lit in the
xture ofshould she wish to begin her work directly after breakfast. I'll hav
he tookbrought later."

op with Bascomb rolled his eyes. "Don't coddle Collins." His eyes swe
Edwina. "She doesn't require it. And make sure the contents of the t
mise ofare *hearty*, Mrs. Page. None of those silly little iced biscuits Mrs. Oat
to make. Collins will waste away eating nothing but bits of toast. It's
ened toenough to keep a mouse alive."

scomb, "Of course, my lord." Mrs. Page bobbed politely and finally
was soroom, closing the door behind her.

"I'm not overly fond of breakfast, my lord," Edwina said, fir
ped hernecessary to explain why she wasn't tucking into the ham and e
Abbey,Bascomb did.

"Neither am I." He sopped up a bit of egg with his toast.

ing has "Yes," she replied smoothly. "It becomes more apparent by the mo

es have Bascomb grunted in annoyance, though amusement lit his gra
d floor.eyes. "You're not endearing yourself to me, Collins. Certainly you
e onlymade friends with Mrs. Page. Not entirely your fault, Collins. She

liked any of my secretaries. Detested Merryfort.”

“Merrywimple.” Edwina corrected.

“My mistake.” Bascomb was stunning when he smiled, as he was now. A soft, buttery glow spread across her midsection. The aware lines, to him returned, fiercer than before the appearance of Mrs. Page.

“Didn’t like Fielding either. Tolerated Worthless.”

“Worthington, my lord.” Edwina bit her lip to keep from giggling. Bascomb was trying to make her lose her composure. “You’re botching Fielding names on purpose, I think. I’m curious, my lord. Why didn’t Mrs. Page fire your previous secretaries?”

“Mrs. Page doesn’t like anyone, including me, Collins. Surely you noticed. Tolerating is not liking. One of the stipulations of the inheritance raised in Rose Abbey was her continued employment as housekeeper indefinitely. My uncle made sure of it. As previously mentioned, your wish uncle were...quite close. If you take my meaning.”

Bascomb was terrible to suggest such a thing. But likely correct. “I only explained a great deal about the housekeeper’s proprietary attitude at the library estate. “I do, my lord.”

“As to the ledgers, Fielding was terrible. Complained nonstop about missing bills of sale, incorrect notations, and the like. Constantly bugged over Mrs. Page for receipts. Pestered her with questions on what purchases had been made for the household. I’m sure she was relieved when Fielding went down the hill, never to return.”

Edwina thought carefully about her next words. “Did you review the accounts yourself, my lord, and find irregularities?”

Bascomb rubbed at the spot where the scar sprouted from his left eye. “When I have time.” His tone was defensive. “Why should I?”

She nodded in polite understanding. Bascomb wasn’t looking at her; he was looking at the accounts; that much was clear.

“I rarely have time, Collins,” he snapped at her. “Which is why I’m not your secretary. A competent one. But I suppose you’ll do for the moment.”

Edwina didn’t flinch from his anger, knowing that it wasn’t truly directed at her but himself. The scar told her Bascomb had suffered a head injury of some sort, possibly one bad enough that it affected his ability to

ledgers or, at the very least, be able to discern any inaccuracies. “You my lord. May I ask how you came to have it?”

His lips twisted, the man no doubt about to snap at her once more. A great sigh escaped his lips instead. Blunt fingers tossed down the

“You may. It is no great secret. Scything incident.”

“Scything?” Edwina had suspected a duel with swords possibly cutting from his horse.

“Yes. Scything.” One long arm made a sweeping motion across the air like “Come now, Collins, surely you understand the point. The cutting of

A tradition for the sons of my family to cut the first shaft of wheat you’ve harvest. My older brother managed to do so without injuring himself or my younger. I, however, was not so lucky.” The broad shoulders shifted. “A rat the size of a bloody goat ran over my foot. I must have jumped”—his foot into the air, stumbled over a rock—which should not have been and my field to begin with—and fell. So did the blade. Nearly lost the eye.

flayed open. Blood everywhere. My mother screaming her head off. It Bascomb shook his head. “Not my finest day.”

“A rat the size of a goat? My goodness, I hadn’t realized a rodent grow to such a size. You’re fortunate you weren’t trampled as well if about the case.”

“No sympathy, Collins? I expected a tiny bit.”

Edwina sincerely doubted that. Bascomb didn’t strike her as the kind of man who would welcome pity because of his injury.

“You have a quick wit, Collins. Fielding did not. Nor Worthless.”

“Worthington,” she corrected, wondering why she bothered. “A favor in my favor, I suppose.”

“You also didn’t run screaming out of the house last night,” Bascomb said with grudging approval. “Another mark of your brief success at the Abbey thus far.”

“It was raining.” A small pebble of unease formed as she thought of the dream she’d had last night. The sensation of having her hair stroke her neck. Edwina was a child in need of comfort. The scent of roses in the air

hadn’t imagined any of it. Or had a nightmare. Truthfully, Rose had directed a unnerved Edwina as it doubtless had every other secretary. Fielding’s injury of instance. The house and its inhabitants weren’t exactly warm and welcoming.

“When you’re done with the ledgers, Collins, the library should be

ur scar, “The library?” Edwina wanted to ask more about Bascomb’s inju
the lack of attention to the ledgers but decided he’d changed the te
e, but apurpose. “What is there to be done to the library?”

napkin. “Cataloging, Collins. The attic is filled with crates, all containing t
have no idea which relation of mine sent them to Rose Abbey or why
or a fallof them have probably turned to dust, which should save you some
Bascomb stood, looming over Edwina, large and male. Smelling of be
e table.and soap. Her gaze traveled over the line of his throat and the hard lin
wheat.jaw.

for the “I do hope”—Edwina quickly looked away, instructing her pulse t
lf. And—“that I’ll be able to complete both tasks before you send me l
rugged.Hampshire tomorrow, my lord.”

l nearly His tall form bent, leaning so close Edwina could have sworn she
n in thebrush of lips against the curve of her ear. A delicious, decadent se
Cheekcoursed down her spine, all thoughts of the ledgers and her nig
d off.”forgotten. How could she have formed such a strong attachment to
quickly? Every nerve in her body was standing on end.

it could “Then you should get started, Collins.” The husky words scraped
f that isher skin, and it was far too early to be aroused while eating toast. “As
as possible.”

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“The library?” Edwina wanted to ask more about Bascomb’s injury and the lack of attention to the ledgers but decided he’d changed the topic on purpose. “What is there to be done to the library?”

“Cataloging, Collins. The attic is filled with crates, all containing books. I have no idea which relation of mine sent them to Rose Abbey or why. Most of them have probably turned to dust, which should save you some time.” Bascomb stood, looming over Edwina, large and male. Smelling of bergamot and soap. Her gaze traveled over the line of his throat and the hard line of his jaw.

“I do hope”—Edwina quickly looked away, instructing her pulse to settle—“that I’ll be able to complete both tasks before you send me back to Hampshire tomorrow, my lord.”

His tall form bent, leaning so close Edwina could have sworn she felt the brush of lips against the curve of her ear. A delicious, decadent sensation coursed down her spine, all thoughts of the ledgers and her nightmare forgotten. How could she have formed such a strong attachment to him so quickly? Every nerve in her body was standing on end.

“Then you should get started, Collins.” The husky words scraped against her skin, and it was far too early to be aroused while eating toast. “As quickly as possible.”

CHAPTER SIX

EDWINA LIFTED HER head from the ledgers she'd spent the better part of the day poring over, stretching her neck until the bones made a satisfying crack. The rain continued to beat against the walls of Rose Abbey in a constant, rhythmic pattern. Even if the weather let up this instant, the roads would be muddy and unsuitable for travel for several days. Enough time, she hoped, to convince Bascomb to keep her on. She certainly couldn't do any worse a job than any of the previous secretaries he'd hired. The ledger was a mess. Small mistakes abounded. So many secretaries had touched the ledgers that almost none of the handwriting matched, making it difficult to discern where the errors originated. Or who had made them.

Edwina found the last bit far more interesting.

Extensive repairs were being done at Rose Abbey, a process that had started with the current Lord Bascomb's uncle. Oddly enough, it was the oldest part of the house that required the attention, but the wing onto which each successive Lord Bascomb had added.

Ironic. Lady Renalda's residence still stood, while her conqueror's was in a constant state of repair.

Edwina resettled herself at the desk, nibbling on a bit of apple and pear. Meg had brought a short time ago. There had been at least three different stonemasons who'd made repairs to Rose Abbey. Opening the ledger, she paged back to Merrywimple's notes, which had first made mention of the work.

The thud of a book echoed in the silence of the library.

Edwina's head jerked up, her gaze immediately settling on a dark spot in the corner by the window, the same spot where she'd found the fallen book yesterday. The noise was likely the result of an uneven shelf. The rain outside had started up again, shaking the house. It was no stretch to think the vibrations would knock a book off the shelf.

Ignoring the interruption, Edwina bent her head once more to the

hand. She picked up the bill from the first stonemason, a man named and looked back at the ledger.

The amount noted was larger than the payment requested by Jeffrey by a great deal. Barely noticeable. Obviously an oversight.

Another book dropped.

Edwina didn't look up. She would mention to Bascomb the need to reinforce the shelves on that particular bookcase.

A leather tome flew across the room, hitting the pot of tea on the table, knocking everything to the floor.

Edwina jolted from her seat as tea stained the rug. She picked up the apple she'd been using to peel the apple. A poor weapon only marginally better than the pen. Ghosts, as far as she knew, did not throw books with incredible accuracy.

The house was deadly silent around her. Then she heard it. A whisper as if someone or something moved between the bookcases.

She wasn't alone in the library.

"I don't find this the least amusing. Show yourself." Heart racing, Edwina marched over to the corner, knife raised, and stepped around the bookcase. Lightning zigzagged outside, bathing the ruins of the abbey and the corner of the library in a streak of white light.

The room was empty. Silent. Except for the sound of her own breathing.

Get ahold of yourself Edwina.

A loud creak echoed in the silence. She turned in time to see a wall of books tumbling toward her. A hand shoved hard against Edwina's back. The bookcase crashed to the floor, only managing to catch the edge of her shoulder instead of landing on top of her. Wincing at the pain in her shoulder, she had the presence of mind to squeeze herself against the windows as the bookcase fell to the floor, dust rising into the air.

Edwina pressed herself as tightly as she could against the window. A knife clapped to her chest, startled with the shock of nearly being crushed under the weight of hundreds of books. Hand trembling, weapon held, she darted her gaze about, searching for any movement in the library.

The tang of roses filled the air, pushing away the smells of mold and decay.

Her gaze jerked to the portrait of Lady Renalda, calmly watching from above the fireplace. Pushing away from the window, Edwina carefully

Jeffers,her way to the desk, dropping the knife with a small clatter. The over-
teapot on the floor lay on its side, the tea having made a large stain
ers. Notrug.

“A fresh pot of tea is definitely in order,” she said out loud. “Or br-
Straightening, Edwina commanded her feet to move in the direc-
need tothe door. Bascomb must have brandy in his study. Or something
bracing. Surely he wouldn’t begrudge her, not after having nearly beer-
e desk, Her hand went to her midsection.

Once the shock wore off, she would find Mrs. Page and info-
re knifehousekeeper there had been an accident in the library.

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her way to the desk, dropping the knife with a small clatter. The overturned teapot on the floor lay on its side, the tea having made a large stain on the rug.

“A fresh pot of tea is definitely in order,” she said out loud. “Or brandy.”

Straightening, Edwina commanded her feet to move in the direction of the door. Bascomb must have brandy in his study. Or something equally bracing. Surely he wouldn't begrudge her, not after having nearly been killed.

Her hand went to her midsection.

Once the shock wore off, she would find Mrs. Page and inform the housekeeper there had been an accident in the library.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“WHAT DO YOU mean, Collins, the bookcase just fell over?” Bascomb gave her a look. “It’s bolted into the wall.”

Edwina sat in the overstuffed settee and sipped at her brandy-laced tea. She’d poured part of the bottle straight into the teapot, and now that Bascomb was in the library, she hoped he wouldn’t ask for a cup. The brandy thankfully calmed her nerves. Somewhat. At least she wasn’t trembling anymore. Looking down at the damask-upholstered settee, Edwina thought she really detested the pattern.

“Collins.” Bascomb snapped his fingers at her.

“Bolted or not, the bookcase fell. Nearly on top of me. Perhaps the floor is uneven or the age of the wood caused one of the shelves to simply fall apart. The wood does look rather ancient.” It was none of those things Edwina well knew. The bookcase had fallen with the intent to crush her, but she hadn’t moved to the side at the last minute—

But I didn’t. I was pushed out of the way. And the smell of roses had been everywhere, mixing with those of dust and leather.

Edwina looked up from her tea to regard the portrait of Lady Rena. She’d seen the roses the abbess held in her lap. “Who planted all the rosebushes in the Abbey?”

“What?” Bascomb was examining the wall and the bookcase.

“The roses. Who planted them?”

“The nuns, I suppose.” He frowned. “The bolts must have come loose. The wood of the bookcase isn’t splintered. Strange, it looks like there should be four bolts attaching the bookcase, but two are missing and the other two pulled free.”

Edwina raised her head. “Bolts?”

“The end was bolted to the wall here.” His hand trailed down the wall. “Possibly the vibration from the thunder loosened them, but—” He shook his head and came over to Edwina, the cushions of the settee dipping

larger form settled next to her. Bascomb was far too close than was pr
necessary, a muscled thigh nearly touching her skirts.

Edwina had the inclination to lean into him, which would not do.

“Are you hurt, Collins?” There was genuine concern writ
Bascomb’s sharply hewn features, softening the edges of the scar and
him far more attractive than Edwina wished him to be. One bi
nb shot stretched out across the hideous damask of the settee, the tip of his fo
running along the edge of her skirts.

“No, my lord.” Edwina, heat flooding her cheeks, had to look awa
the sight of that big, blunt finger. She wanted him to touch her.

Oh, Edwina. You’ve had too much brandy.

“I was only a bit shaken,” she assured him, deciding not to ment
pain in her shoulder or the fact that something had pushed her out of th
decided

“I’m sure availing yourself of my best brandy has helped.”

“It was for medicinal purposes.” She paused, wondering if she
mention the book that had flown across the room and knocked o
teapot, but she decided against it. Bascomb might think her addled, or
assume she was foxed.

I very nearly am.

She took another sip of her tea, allowing the taste to settle on her
before continuing. “I heard a thud near the bookcase and went to inve
There was a crack of thunder along with a great deal of lightning. Th
creaked as it fell over. I—I thought I heard someone walking arou
small chuckle escaped her. “Perhaps a joke was being played on me.”

“A very poor one.” Bascomb’s eyes fairly glowed in the dim ligh
library. They really were quite extraordinary. Looking at them was like
oneself in the depths of a forest during a storm.

“You look a bit dazed, Collins. Are you sure you didn’t hit your he

“It’s only that you possess the loveliest eyes. Such an unusual
Edwina winced. She sounded like a young girl mooning over her fir
The brandy was to blame.

Bascomb shook his head and took the tea out of her hands, sniffed
dark brew, and set it aside. “No more of that. I’ve no desire to ca
upstairs to bed.”

Edwina’s entire body pulsed in response.

He stilled, possibly realizing the undercurrent in his words, but he

oper ortry to apologize or rephrase his statement. Instead, his eyes darkened deep, mossy green.

She clasped her hands in her lap, looking down at her fingers, trying to stop the arousal from sliding up her legs. Impossible with Bascomb's making and the brandy muddling her brain.

Fielding hated the library." His words helped banish the tension between them. "He wanted me to take down her portrait." Bascomb nodded to

Renalda. "I refused. Didn't seem right. This was her office, after all, my grandmother's. No one of my ancestors made the room a library."

"Mrs. Page informed me. You admire the abbess," Edwina said. "You don't think she's a vengeful spirit."

"Fielding"—Bascomb ignored her observation—"heard things as he walked. A book flew through the air and hit him in the head. He said there were footsteps shuffling behind him while he worked. I told him it was only shadows. He should be crawling about in the spaces in the walls."

The walls of this part of Rose Abbey were stone. Edwina decided not to mention the fact. Otherwise, the description of what Fielding had encountered matched almost exactly Edwina's earlier experience.

"He claimed to see the figure of a woman wandering outside, fluttering about the ruins of the abbey."

"Fluttering?"

"Floating." Bascomb waved his hand. "Hovering. A ghastly pale woman. Her hands stretched toward this room, beseeching Fielding. Said the ghost was in his room. Rattled the door. Scraped her nails against the woodwork. When he opened the doors, the specter floated down the hall away from him."

Her brow wrinkled. Whatever had been in her room last night had been momentarily terrifying but hadn't attempted to harm her. Instead, she had heard a scraping of nails, just the odd, damp sound moving across the floor.

"I've seen nothing at all like that, my lord." Technically it wasn't a

"Larkspur claimed a ghostly nun roamed about the remains of the abbey at that night. Lights bobbed around the graveyard and church. Merrywimple and the other young things too. Insisted he saw orbs around the church. Called them spirit

Probably just treasure hunters looking for the wealth everyone assumed was hidden in the church. I should have the stones all taken down and the graveyard leveled. I didn't do it. The story of Rose Abbey's wealth is well known in Portsmouth also.

ed to at the rest of the tale. But only Worthless—”

“Worthington,” Edwina corrected him.

ying to “—and Fielding claimed to be attacked by the ghost.” He looked
o close more at the books strewn across the library. “*Worthington*,” he emph

“insisted the ghost of Lady Renalda tried to push him down the stairs
etween followed the specter out of his room.” His massive shoulders gave a r
o Lady was a highly excitable, odd young man.”

before The briefest whiff of bergamot met her nostrils, stirring Edwina’s
in a pleasant manner. It must be the soap he used to wash, for it c
quietly. couldn’t be shaving soap. Bascomb didn’t seem to shave as offer
should.

well. A “I saw nothing here before the bookcase fell. There was an odd sh
e were sound in the corner. But I doubt any ghost, even one as fierce a
ly mice Renalda, has the strength to push over such a heavy bookcase whet
bolts are loose or not.” Edwina thought again about the book flying t
l not to the air toward the teapot. If it was Lady Renalda, she had excellent aim
endured “I’m glad to hear it.”

She didn’t know why she was so reticent to tell Bascomb everythi
ering in Edwina thought it best, for the time being, to keep the exact details to

Not because she didn’t want to tell her employer, but because Edwina
sure who else might be listening. “I should get back to the ledgers, my
figure. She wobbled slightly as she came to her feet.

visited Bascomb caught her arm. “Are you certain you can make out the n
.. When after enjoying so much...tea?”

” “Positive. I’m perfectly well.” Bascomb’s touch sent a jolt of heat
ad been arm.

’d been “I am relieved,” he hummed softly, blunt fingers curled tighter aro
ross the elbow, “that you are unhurt, Collins.” His full lips tilted at one side
semblance of a smile. “After all, I would hate for you to be injured
lie. send you back to Hampshire. The ride down the hill in McDeaver’s po
e abbey would be uncomfortable if you were bruised.”

e heard Edwina bit back her own smile. “Very sound reasoning, my lord.
t lights. get back to work promptly if I am to finish.”

es is in “I also have a decent bottle of whiskey in my study should you
fenced brandy”—the words, low and deep, sent a vibration across her sk
ng with require comfort at a later time.” Bascomb’s gaze dropped to her mou

jaw tilted in her direction.

The lovely, buttery sensation from earlier spilled once again down the full length of Edwina's body, causing her to arch, just slightly, in his direction. Did Bascomb mean to kiss her? It certainly seemed—

after he— Instead, he slowly released her arm, eyes still on her mouth as if he would kiss her. "He's fascinated by her lips, but there was also wariness. "Carry on, Colli-
said in a harsh tone before stepping away, putting a more appropriate cushion between them. "And stay away from the bookcases until I can have them certainly cleaned up."

as he— "Of course, my lord," she replied, watching as he shut the door behind him.

Edwina sat back down at the desk, heart beating wildly. It was unusual for a lady to become involved with one's employer. The idea was far more terrifying than the being nearly crushed by a bookcase. Edwina doubted any encounter through Bascomb would end with only a kiss.

She took up the ledger once more and reached for the stack of papers from Jeffers she'd been studying when the bookcase fell. The space was empty, but looking down, she checked the floor, but there was nothing there but a slight wet spot from where Meg had mopped up the tea.

The receipts were gone.
"My lord."

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jaw tilted in her direction.

The lovely, buttery sensation from earlier spilled once again down the length of Edwina's body, causing her to arch, just slightly, in his direction. Did Bascomb mean to kiss her? It certainly seemed—

Instead, he slowly released her arm, eyes still on her mouth as if he was fascinated by her lips, but there was also wariness. "Carry on, Collins," he said in a harsh tone before stepping away, putting a more appropriate distance between them. "And stay away from the bookcases until I can have this all cleaned up."

"Of course, my lord," she replied, watching as he shut the door behind him.

Edwina sat back down at the desk, heart beating wildly. It was unwise to become involved with one's employer. The idea was far more terrifying than being nearly crushed by a bookcase. Edwina doubted any encounter with Bascomb would end with only a kiss.

She took up the ledger once more and reached for the stack of receipts from Jeffers she'd been studying when the bookcase fell. The space was bare.

Looking down, she checked the floor, but there was nothing except a slight wet spot from where Meg had mopped up the tea.

The receipts were gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON EDWINA'S FOURTH day at Rose Abbey, the rain finally slowed to drizzle. The sky remained overcast, with only a bare hint of gray seeping through the clouds. Edwina had slept well the previous night had every night since the incident in the library. Nothing disturbed her if one didn't count the highly erotic dreams Edwina was having with Bascomb. Naked, wicked images of them together, his big hands roaming over her body. She'd awoken this morning flushed and aroused, the space between her thighs aching.

Making her way to the breakfast room, Edwina was unsurprised to find Bascomb enjoying his usual large breakfast. What did surprise her was that he was in the breakfast room at all. He'd not been present yesterday. Edwina had eaten alone. She'd thought it likely his avoidance of her had something to do with the kiss they'd very nearly shared. Wise of him.

An enormous plate of scrambled eggs sat before Bascomb, two slices of ham hanging off the edge of his plate. His gray-green eyes scanned over Edwina in annoyance.

"The rain has nearly stopped," he grumbled, pointing the fork at the window. "Hope you haven't unpacked, Collins."

Not much of a greeting. She would have preferred a cheerful one this morning. "Of course not, my lord." Edwina sipped her tea. "Perhaps I thought. I'm ready to leave at a moment's notice."

Her employer made a noncommittal grunt, scowling at her from across the table.

Edwina lifted her chin. "Is there something else, my lord?"

He cleared his throat and looked down at his eggs. Small touches of red shone on the curves of his cheeks. "Are you well this morning? I was well yesterday and didn't—"

"Very well, my lord," she interrupted.

Bascomb raised his eyes back to her. The green was more pronounced

today. The color of leaves at the first sign of spring. “I’ve been busy repairs in the east wing. Water leaks have sprouted in nearly every room. I had time to check on your progress.”

“Everything is well in hand,” she assured him.

They stared at each other for a moment, long enough for warmth to settle between Edwina’s breasts and settle low in her belly.

“Thomas will put the library back to rights once he’s finished helping Collins.” Bascomb stood, rather abruptly, and laid down his napkin. It flashed briefly in the depths of green, and Edwina did not think it worth more eggs. “You should get to work. Be...careful, Collins.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Edwina sipped her tea and picked absently at a piece of toast as the sound of his footsteps faded. Once the room grew silent again, she made her way to the library, balancing the cup of tea in her hand. She wasn’t at all sure how to handle the attraction between them, and apparently, neither did Bascomb. Yes, she was physically drawn to him, but Edwina also found herself drawn to Bascomb. Quite a bit.

Settling in at her desk, Edwina shuffled the papers, searching through desk drawers again for the receipts from Jeffers. The other day, a bookcase had fallen and she’d comforted herself with brandy, Edwina thought she’d only misplaced the small pile. Tucked it in a drawer where the bookcase fell and didn’t recall doing so. She’d been so shaken by the incident that anything was possible. The last day or so, she’d focused on answering correspondence and organizing the remainder of Bascomb’s receipts. The next morning, as the toes of her half boots hit the bottom of the desk, it occurred to Edwina she hadn’t looked *there*.

Getting on her hands and knees, Edwina looked at the space between the floor and the bottom of the desk. Large enough for papers to flutter. Reaching beneath the desk, she wiggled her fingers about for a slip of paper.

Mrs. Page certainly wasn’t doing her due diligence in the library. The floor under the desk was thick with dust.

As she withdrew her hand in frustration, Edwina’s fingers struck something damp. She pulled back her hand with a frown. A leaf, tucked correctly, the leaf of a rosebush. Still wet, with a bit of mud on them. Edwina sat back on the rug, staring at the leaf.

How did this get in here? She looked up at the large windows, all

makinglatched. She wasn't even sure they *could* open. Had one of the panes
m. I'veduring the storm?

Ask Lord B about door in library.

Fielding's odd notation echoed in her mind. Door. Not *doors*. The
o crawlentrance consisted of *two* solid double doors. Was there another entr
the library?

ing me, "Miss Collins?"

.onging Edwina gasped at the voice so close to her ear, turning her neck t
was forpair of pleasant, if slightly vacant, brown eyes. A young man, buil
bull, stood before her. A thatch of blond hair, ends sticking out over h
covered his head.

e sound "Thomas, I assume?"

way to The giant nodded. "Yes, Miss Collins."

how to "Goodness, you startled me." She came to her feet, a bit awkward
scomb.brushed off her skirts. "There's quite a bit of dust beneath the de
e likesneeze threatened, and she pushed a finger to her nose. "I lost a butt
lied.

ugh the "Sorry, Miss Collins." Thomas spoke slowly, as if considering eac
fter thewith care. He was square-jawed, with a thick neck and massive sho
ina had"I'm done with the roof," he said by way of explaining his appearance
hen theBascomb told me to pick up the bookcase and books." A tentativ
ncidentcrossed his lips. "And I'm not to disturb you."

swering "You won't, Thomas. I would appreciate your assistance." She tuc
But thisleaf in the palm of her hand. "Thank you."

ccurred Thomas lumbered over to the bookcase, steps echoing in the quie
library. He kept his eyes averted from the portrait of the abbess.

een the "I'm not sure what happened, exactly," she said, watching as he li
under.heavy wood with ease, as if it weighed nothing. "Lord Bascomb thi
paper. bolts may have loosened over time."

ry. The "Rose Abbey is very...old. Things break. Holes in the roof
everything with my tools."

uck on There was something childlike about Thomas, as if his body l
'. Moreoutgrown his mind. "I'm sorry we weren't properly introduced
e edge.arrived, Thomas. Lord Bascomb must keep you quite busy."

"Yes, Miss Collins." Thomas proceeded to move the bookcas
l firmlytoward its original position. "I like to be busy." He began stacking the

broken neatly on the floor, running his hands over the rug, possibly searching mysterious bolts that had come loose.

Edwina knelt next to him, helping pick up the books. "Let me help at the library the least I can do. I'm sure the bolts merely rusted after so long. The violence to the library from the storm helped—"

"You should leave," Thomas interrupted her, one broad hand resting over the stack of books in front of him. "It isn't safe for you." Softly, Edwina's eyes flitted to hers, the pleasant, vacant smile gone to be replaced by a look like a trembling lip. "She doesn't like new people," Thomas whispered into Edwina's ears, "Especially not the secretaries."

"Who? Mrs. Page?" Edwina hadn't thought Mrs. Page's dislike could be so glaring.

"No." Thomas shook his head. "The abbess." Edwina looked directly at Thomas. "I don't believe in ghosts." Thomas. And you shouldn't either."

"You will," he said under his breath.

Edwina stood and went back to the desk, unsettled by Thomas's words. He seemed a simple, kind man. Concerned for her. But she wouldn't tolerate any more nonsense about the abbess haunting Rose. "Lord, despite what she'd experienced."

Thomas said nothing else as he picked up the remainder of the books. He bowed before Edwina, informing her he'd be back later with tools to fix the bookcase.

She went back to work, focusing on the ledgers, going through the column carefully. After a few hours, Edwina stretched her arms, wondering at the inconsistencies. Reaching into the depths of the desk, she retrieved the small book containing the notes of her predecessors. Thanks to the desk, she fell open to Fielding's entry about the door.

She'd meant to ask Bascomb but forgotten. The note probably said: I fix nothing, but Edwina didn't quite believe that. She glanced around the library and took the wet leaf out of her pocket where she'd stashed it when she had first arrived. The leaf shouldn't have been in the library at all, let alone in her pocket when she was at the desk. According to Bascomb, he thought Lady Renalda had faced the soldiers in her office deliberately, to give the other residents a chance to flee back to the Abbey. She must have known the soldiers would kill everyone of those under her care in their search for what gold they assuredly had.

for the abbey possessed.

Edwina walked to the longest wall, running her hand along the border. It's Ancient castles and old homes such as this were riddled with passages, vibration holes, and hidden rooms. It wasn't far-fetched to think there would have been a secret passage from this room that led to the abbey or the church outside. Or possibly the beach below the cliffs.

Edwina looked at the ruins sprawled out toward the edge of the cliff. She would bet her best petticoat that the way out of Rose Abbey led to the forest, or possibly into the woods. The original builders of the abbey would have considered how best to hide themselves or escape if faced with a group of her to Viking longships.

Fielding must have found a hidden door. Pity he hadn't both mentioned *where* in his notes.

"I would have imagined after your last encounter with a wall of ghosts, you'd avoid them entirely."

Edwina turned to see Bascomb, leaning against the doorjamb, watching her and his. His earlier annoyance seemed to have faded; in fact, Edwina would have sworn he appeared pleased to see her.

His gray-green eyes drifted over her bosom for a moment before returning back to her face.

"Checking on me, my lord?"

"Perhaps. Or possibly I'm merely hungry." He nodded to the table he had brought earlier. Pushing up from the door, Bascomb passed Edwina and looked out the window. Pacing before the glass, he absently pushed his hair back, wave of inky hair from his brow, all the while giving Edwina an excellent view of his backside and the long, muscular lines of his legs. It was as if he were bookwatching a large bear prowl about.

Longing trailed over her skin. Desire the likes of which she could never have meant known. It was becoming incredibly problematic.

"How are the ledgers coming along?"

"Quite well, my lord." More inconsistencies had been discovered beneath and spread out over the ledgers of each secretary's brief period of employment, done in such a way that one automatically would assume the person before one had merely made a mistake. Each secretary's handwriting last was different, making it impossible to tell who had made specific entries and when. And with no one person checking the ledgers, as Bascomb should

presented the perfect opportunity.

okcase. Perhaps Edwina had far more experience in ledgers being doctors, priests she'd seen her father make the same sort of "mistakes" to hide the financial situation. Earlier, in reviewing the ledgers, she'd seen notes from yet another stonemason named Hodges. The ledgers indicated he had been paid on a particular date, yet there were two requests for payment. She from the same Hodges. One very tersely worded.

the beach Edwina walked over to the desk and picked up one of the demands. It had Hodges. "Do you remember a stonemason named Hodges?"

fleet of Bascomb shrugged. "I seem to recall a man by that name. Why?"

"He wasn't compensated properly for the work he did in repairing the roof to the—" She held up a sheet of paper she'd taken from the desk. "—corner of the southwest side. He has written for payment. More than once."

of books Bascomb came over to the desk, the scent of him and her awareness of his larger form sending a delicious pricking sensation along her arm. "Was there any oversight on Fielding's part? Or one of the others'?"

It had "The sum was noted paid during Merrywimple's tenure." But Edwina didn't think the handwriting to be his. In fact, she was certain it was not coming from him. "Spindly little nitwit. Looked like a good gust of wind might take him into the clouds. Nervous disposition." Bascomb stared down at the ledger, a small wrinkle forming between his brows.

ay Meg "You've said that about all your previous secretaries."

wina to "Untrue. Worthless was stout."

back a "I meant the nervous disposition. Not their inability to survive a cold breeze." Edwina pursed her lips, which drew her employer's gaze from the ledger to her mouth. That their attraction to each other was mutual was not for debate. "How long, may I ask, did Merrywimple serve in this position?"

l never "Mrs. Page would know for sure. He arrived shortly after I inherited the office. From London."

ed. All they assumed the previous secretary had made?"

riod of Bascomb quirked a brow. "Well, yes. Larkspur—"

ime the "Larkspur," she corrected him. "You're doing that on purpose."

writing Bascomb waved a hand, but a tiny smile ghosted his lips. "It's a matter of fact. He did mention it to me one morning over breakfast." He paused. "I would, it would only eat boiled eggs for breakfast. Had I known that, I may not

hired him. Imagine, only eating lukewarm, hardened eggs each day.”
red, for Edwina had to force her lips into a line to keep from smiling. ‘
amily’s eggs would have been a deterrent to employment?’

otations “Possibly. At any rate, Larkwith—”

Hodges “Larkspur.” He was deliberately trying to provoke her, to what
ayment wasn’t sure. Though it was vastly amusing.

“Larkspur,” he emphasized, “thought Merrywimple had made an
ds from recording the proper cost of two horses I had Thomas purchase. But

had a chance to question him further because he resigned a short time
Said he wouldn’t spend another night here no matter how much I paid

part of “And even after such a discussion, did you never seek to review
rner on ledgers yourself? Surely you would find that necessary as often
change secretaries. Perhaps even personally handle your accounts.”

s of his Bascomb’s hawkish features froze. Ice dripped from his words
is. “An addressed her. “If I was in charge of the ledgers, there would be no re
hire a secretary, Collins, now would there?”

Edwina “I meant no disrespect, my lord.” Her gaze settled on the scar. B.
ot. didn’t handle the accounts himself because she suspected he *couldn’t*
him up was the other conclusion she’d reached over the last few days. Southw
dger, a cousin, had once traveled to Egypt with a man who had taken a blow
temple during a fight. Though he bore only a small scar on the forehead
the incident, his friend had trouble reading for more than an hour at
after the fight. He claimed the words would jump about the page and
strong his head to ache. Even reading a map presented a problem.

om the “Do the numbers cause your head to ache, my lord? Since the acc
s not up Edwina lifted a hand but then lowered it abruptly when he growled.

ion?” Bascomb backed away from her, snatched an apple off the tray M.
herited. left, and went to the window. Taking a savage bite, he ignored her.

Edwina had seen him sketching but not *writing* anything. Given
ers that of some of his correspondence, it was apparent he hadn’t replied to any
Had he even *read* any of the letters addressed to him?

“The others never suspected,” he said quietly. “Or badgered
Bascomb shot her a glance filled with anger and a great deal of vulner
doesn’t “I should have tossed you out the moment I saw your skirts dripping
ed. “Hemy study. You’re more trouble than you’re worth, Collins.”

ot have “It is nothing to be ashamed of, my lord.”

“And how would you know, Collins?” He turned toward her, green eyes
“Boiled eyes glowering at her in accusation. “You can’t begin to fathom—I can
and write. I’m not some dumb animal.”

“My lord, I didn’t mean to suggest—” Empathy filled Edwina. Bascomb
and she beautiful, imposing man that he was, had a weakness. No wonder he

Rose Abbey and not gracing the balls of London.

error in “Don’t you dare pity me, Collins,” he snarled.

I never “I don’t, my lord. In fact, your unpleasant personality makes it fair
ie later for me not to.”

him.” “You’re very insubordinate,” he said in a silky tone, eyes narrowed
iew them more on her bosom.

as you The library grew warmer, much more than could be credited
meager fire Mrs. Page had lit. Edwina’s nipples grew taut beneath
s as he perusal. She turned sharply away.

reason to “Why are you *here*, Collins? At Rose Abbey. And not wed to
tedious gentleman?”

Bascomb “I don’t believe that is relevant to my position.” Edwina made her
’t. That back to the desk, not caring for his question.

Well, her “Oh, it isn’t. But I find I am curious about you beyond your excellent
v to the skills, though I’ll probably send you back to...where was it?”

and from He knew perfectly well where she was from. “Hampshire
: a time murmured.

and cause “Should I expect some rejected suitor to come riding up to the
Rose Abbey, demanding your return? Or perhaps a cuckolded husband?

ident?” There was an odd glint in Bascomb’s eyes as he waited for her to answer.
hard edge to his words. A hint of jealousy.

leg had “What makes you think I would cuckold a husband?” Edwina had

Bascomb barely a week, though it felt much longer. As if she’d
the age known him. The pull in his direction was nearly impossible to resist.

ry of it. Bascomb strolled over to the desk, discarding the apple core. He

beside her, so close his breath ruffled her hair. When the tip of his
d me.” dragged along the edge of Edwina’s ear, she squeaked in surprise.

ability. “I don’t, Collins.” One large forefinger brushed against her cheek.

and mud in you would cuckold a husband. I merely wanted to ascertain if there was
a man.”

If Edwina so much as turned, just an inch, her mouth and Bascomb

en-gray would touch. This close, she could see that there were striations in an readhovering in his pupils, splintering through the gray-green. She reached traced the line of his scar from the corner of his eye to the edge of his Bascomb, Bascomb inhaled sharply. "Careful, Collins," he whispered. "This was at Merrywimple was scared off."

"I doubt you would have welcomed the attentions of Merrywimple Worthington. Perhaps Fielding." He smiled back at her. "Possibly not." He eased away from her should return to your duties."

"Yes. There's much more work to be done."

He snatched several scones off the tea tray before walking out to the library, probably to return to the holes in the roof that seemed to nath his with regularity.

Edwina slumped down into the chair before the desk, disintegrated some completely in the ledgers before her. Part of her, the wild, reckless version of herself she rarely allowed out, wanted nothing more than to run her way Bascomb.

A danger far more frightening than whatever lurked in Rose Abbey exemplary

," she

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"Think
as such

comb's

would touch. This close, she could see that there were striations of gold hovering in his pupils, splintering through the gray-green. She reached up and traced the line of his scar from the corner of his eye to the edge of his mouth.

Bascomb inhaled sharply. "Careful, Collins," he whispered. "This is how Merrywimple was scared off."

"I doubt you would have welcomed the attentions of Merrywimple. Or Worthington. Perhaps Fielding."

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A danger far more frightening than whatever lurked in Rose Abbey.

CHAPTER NINE

EDWINA TOSSED TWO of the ledgers along with the small book holding notes by Fielding and the others onto her bed. About a quarter of the r for payment from various tradesmen did not match the notations ledgers, too many mistakes to be attributed to merely oversight, esp since the errors had occurred under the watch of each of her predece There was no possible way that *every* secretary Bascomb had hired v incompetent. Fielding had seen the errors, as had Larkspur, but the Rose Abbey before they could investigate. Bascomb wouldn't see any because he was relying on the secretary he hired to do so. And the ter those later secretaries had become briefer, the men frightened awa Rose Abbey much sooner.

Before they could put the pieces together?

Picking up a biscuit from the plate she'd set on the pillow, chewed thoughtfully.

There was a notation in one of the ledgers from over a year Merrywimple's handwriting. The purchase of a new headstone for the Lady Renalda. It was a rather large sum. Far more than Edwina would thought a headstone for a long-dead abbess would have merited. She would once she found the receipt for the headstone, *if* she found it, the amount wouldn't match the sum in the ledger.

As requested by Mrs. Page, read the note next to the headstone Merrywimple's neat handwriting, except it looked like an extra zero had added to the amount after he'd noted the sum. Edwina squinted. A seven had subtly been changed to a nine. The ink was a shade dark slightly.

Edwina sat back, tapping her finger against her lips. Had a grave actually been purchased? Merrywimple was no longer around for Edwina to ask. Nor could she question Bascomb, who would instantly become deaf about his handicap and lack of attention to the ledgers. And she could

couldn't ask Mrs. Page.

Tomorrow, Edwina would venture out to the remains of the church and see if there was a grave marker for the abbess. It should be the only one of stone in the graveyard not cracked or covered with moss, because if it had been purchased, her marker would be much younger than the rest.

A thud sounded outside her door, followed by a soft scratching of all the fingernails against the wood.

Edwina stared at the door. Fear spiked almost immediately, but she pushed it away. Thomas could be lugging about...*something*, though given the circumstances that seemed unlikely. Mrs. Page wandering about? No, her quarters were downstairs. Surely it couldn't be Bascomb. Which left only one other possibility.

Another scratch at the door, much more insistent this time.

"She doesn't like new people."

Edwina refused to be frightened away as Fielding had been, but so she looked around her room for something to use as a weapon. Grabbing one of her half boots from the floor where she had carelessly tossed her feet earlier, Edwina took a deep breath and opened the door.

The hall was dark except for a lamp left burning on a table at the top of the stairs. The house itself was silent as a tomb. Quiet. Holding the half boot up, Edwina took a confident step outside her room. "You want my attention," she said to the empty hallway. "Now you have it. Show yourself."

A flash of pale cream floated at the very edge of the light cast by the lamp. There came the sound of fingernails scratching along the wall. A shadowy shape hovered at the end of the hall near the stairs.

"You don't scare me," Edwina said firmly, raising the half boot high.

The haunting of Rose Abbey was definitely real, but she doubted it was the result of a vengeful spirit. Edwina was willing to bet that when Bascomb's secretaries began questioning the discrepancies in the accounts, the "ghost" scared them away. She'd made no secret she was reviewing the ledgers. There was a reason she'd been lured out of her room tonight.

"I'm not leaving," Edwina said into the darkness.

A hand, pale and elongated, seemed to rise from the landing, then disappeared, reappearing a moment later at the foot of the stairs, heading in the direction of the library.

Fine. Edwina was no coward. She would follow this specter.

Emboldened, she strode down the hall to the stairs and descended to the landing. Below her, the house was bathed in nearly complete darkness except for the light of a wall sconce in the foyer. As much as she wanted to raise the departing form, the wisest course would be to go back up the stairs. She took the lamp left sitting on the table before descending. She turned a corner of only mere steps from the lamp when the air stirred the edge of her nightgown, the cotton fluttering around her ankles.

Her hands pulled her nightgown, and it tightened around her neck, choking her. She lost her footing on the stairs. The half boot flew from her feet as she tilted wildly on the step. A cry of alarm left her throat as she fell back, her hip slamming against the wall before she spun toward the landing and the next set of stairs. If she didn't stop herself, Edwin would tumble down further, landing with her neck broken. She grabbed the banister, her fingers digging into the wood, trying to stop her fall. In the bed, banging against the banister, Edwina's head pointed toward the foyer as her back slammed into the landing.

Edwina held her breath, not daring to look around in the darkness, whoever had tried to pull her down the stairs assumed her to be on top of unconscious.

A lamp flared suddenly in the darkness on the opposite side of the landing. Booted feet, overly large, jumped down the stairs to her.

Panicked, thinking her assassin had returned to finish the job, she rolled away, kicking at the boots with her bare feet.

"Collins." Bascomb's stricken face appeared above her. "Ow. Stop. It's me. Jonah. Stop." Worry etched the sharp edges of his features as he held of her foot doing most of the kicking. "Edwina," he said roughly. "It was me. Jonah."

Edwina stilled. "Your given name is Jonah?"

"Yes. I'm not sure that's what is important at the moment."

He'd gotten to her quickly, far too quickly for someone who should have been asleep in his bed. In her mounting panic, she jerked away from his outstretched hand. "Did you toss me down the stairs?"

His brows drew together. "What? Of course not. Have you hurt your head?" Bascomb gently pulled her into a seated position. A warm hand gripped down her arm, checking to make sure she was whole. "Where does it hurt?"

"I'm fine—I—" Edwina's voice trembled. She'd nearly broken her

l to the falling down the stairs. Had she not grabbed at the banister, she might have tumbled all the way to the floor below.

ce after *Someone tried to kill me.*

airs and “Edwina,” Bascomb rumbled. “You’re safe.” He reached up to brush a strand of hair out of her eyes. He set down the lamp and pulled her close to the warmth and safety of his bergamot-scented chest. “I have you now.”

You’re safe. I promise.”

nearly “I thought—” She allowed herself to be pulled into his embrace. She curled her hands into his shirt, feeling the firm muscles beneath her fingers. “I heard something in the hall. I—” She stopped herself from telling him about the floating white figure that had lured her out of her room. “I could have tripped.” She pulled away from Bascomb. “An accident, nothing more.”

at the The light only reached the lower half of Bascomb’s face when he turned. Her hipback, enough so that she could see him frown. “You accused me of tripping, while you were down the stairs.”

“Maybe I did hit my head.” She gave him a weak smile and came back to her feet.

lead or Mrs. Page appeared in a circle of light below, clutching her robe. “What has happened? I heard a thud and a scream.” The shadowed light gave her features a stark, menacing look.

Edwina stared down at Mrs. Page, trying to discern whether the housekeeper seemed disappointed not to find her at the base of the stairs or if she was looking at a broken heap.

op that. “I’m sorry you were disturbed, Mrs. Page,” Bascomb answered. “I couldn’t sleep and decided to retrieve a book from the library. Her toe caught on the stair.”

Edwina turned to him. “Yes, Mrs. Page. Clumsy of me. My apology for waking you.”

“You should be more careful, Miss Collins,” Mrs. Page snipped, gathering her robe tighter to her thin form before retreating back into the darkness from whence she’d come.

Bascomb got to his feet beside Edwina, his hand sliding down her shoulder to her waist. Holding up the lamp to light the stairs, he walked forward. “Come, Collins. I’ll get you back to your room.”

urt?” She trembled at his touch, the fear melting away to be replaced by another, more problematic emotion. Edwina was intimately aware that

It was little between them except the thin cotton of her nightgown. Her
puckered beneath the material as something delicious twisted deep in.
The top of his shirt was unbuttoned, leaving that tiny space of skin
Edwina couldn't take her eyes off the small triangle, wanting to press
close to the spot.

Bascomb frowned at her. "Are you sure you haven't hit your
Because you're staring, Collins. A bit rudely, I might add," he said.

Her hand hovered between them, then she tentatively brushed
fingertips along the line of his jaw before retreating. "You really do have
most beautiful eyes. Seems wasted on a man."

"You did hit your head if you are spouting nonsense like that again."
words were quiet. Soft. He led her up the stairs, arm wrapped firmly
his waist, only stopping when they arrived before the open door of her
room. "I was nearly betrothed. Once." She looked down at her bare feet
poking out from beneath her nightgown. "He was a barrister. Incredibly tedious
to her became even more so upon realizing that marriage to me did not include
a dowry."

Bascomb inhaled softly. "A great fool, for a barrister." His fingers
rested on her chin, looking down at Edwina. "I was once nearly wed myself. I
didn't care for the scar."

"An even greater fool than my barrister," she whispered. "I find that
scars give you character."

A small grin crossed his lips before his mouth lowered to hers.

Collins *Oh.*

A soft sound left Edwina at the light pressure. She stood on tiptoes
wordless plea for him to claim her mouth more fully. Bascomb ran his
fingers along the seam of her lips, coaxing her mouth to open beneath his. She
poked out her tongue, stroking his, sucking lightly at the tip.

He groaned and pushed Edwina against the wall. Cupping her breasts
through the thin cotton of her nightgown, he caressed her nipple, teasing
stroking while she pushed herself against him. His hips rocked against
the hard length of him pressing between her thighs.

Edwina kissed him harder, her legs parting beneath the onslaught of his
bigger body. There was so little between them. Two minuscule layers
of clothing. She groaned, rubbing herself against him, feeding the flame
at the point between them.

nipples He tore his mouth from hers. "I don't believe I'll send you l
ide her.Hampshire, Collins." Bascomb pressed his forehead against hers.
xposed. "No?" Edwina pressed herself more fully along the muscled lengt
her lipsbody.

"No." He stared down at her, one large blunt finger tracing the line
: head?jaw. "You are like a peach." A big hand palmed her breast thro
nightgown. "You'll be bruised if you are bounced back down to Ports
ed her They stumbled backward into her room, Bascomb kicking the do
ave theand reaching behind him to throw the lock. She fell through the bed-c
to the coverlet.

n." The "Ouch." She sat up, pulling out the ledger poking into her side.
around "Edwina." He nipped at the skin of her neck before raising his
' room. survey the bed. "What is all this?"
peeking "Later." She would tell him all her suspicions later. Her mouth ar
ous. Hepulsed as she lay back on the bed.

clude a "Are you sure, Edwina?" Bascomb started to unbutton his shirt, w
her with hooded eyes. "The impropriety of the situation doesn't escape
rs took "I'm not a maid. I—well, there isn't any need to be gentle or spare
But shesight of your body."

Oh please, dear God, don't let him spare me.

he scar He tossed his shirt to the floor to reveal a delicious swath of mal
every muscle carved in exquisite detail rippled as his fingers moved
trousers. "Damn. My boots." After walking over to a chair, he sat and
them off.

iptoe, a "Was it the barrister?" He snapped. "The bloody fool who ther
tonguewant you?"

e darted "Jonah—"

His eyes closed for a moment. "I like the way you say my name
: breastagain."

ing and "Jonah," she said in a low, seductive tone. "The barrister doesn't n
st hers, "No, I don't suppose he does." He unbuttoned his trousers. "I've
you since the second you walked into my study. Snarling and spitting
t of hiswet cat. Dripping mud everywhere. Telling me dropping the a fro
yers ofname was an oversight." The trousers were tossed to the floor.

urning Edwina's eyes widened. She should have guessed, given the size
feet.

back to “Did you use up all your bravery earlier, Collins?”

“No.” She got up on her knees and reached for him.

h of his Bascomb’s mouth fell on hers, hot and possessive, as if he couldn’t wait another moment to have her. The heat of his skin singed the tips of her fingers as she traced the lines of his ribs. The curves of his pectorals were smooth, taut belly.

nith.” He fell on her gently, their limbs tangling, the air filling with soft murmurs and whispers. As he tore at the top of her nightgown, Edwina heard the cotton shredding beneath his assault, then felt the cooler air of the room brush her breasts. His thumb rubbed over her nipple, teasing at the peak before he sucked the tip into his mouth.

chin to “Beautiful,” he murmured against her breast. “Much lovelier than Fielding.”

id body Edwina started to giggle, but it ended in a moan as his teeth grazed her skin. She pushed her hips up, begging him silently to touch her.

atching A hand traveled over her thigh before a thick finger traced along her slit, gently teasing back and forth, drawing out the wetness.

me the Edwina gasped as her legs fell apart.

“I think you deserve gentleness, Edwina.” Bascomb’s mouth brushed her breast. He kissed the line of her jaw, pausing to brush her lips with his tongue. “Do it or not. But possibly not at this moment.” He hissed as her fingers worked to his around the hardness bumping into her thigh. “I want you too much.”

tugged She wanted him inside her. Desperately. A part of her, perhaps all of her, wanted to belong to Bascomb. Jonah. It felt right in a way it never had before. She didn’t mind the barrister. Edwina squeezed. Stroked. Listened to the beautiful sounds he made as she touched him.

He sunk his finger inside her, his thumb brushing lightly over the sensitive bit of flesh hidden in her folds. His fingers moved over her until Edwina was needy and writhing beneath him.

atter.” “Later,” he said roughly. “Later I’ll worship you properly. Take me. I wanted to feast on every bit of this delicious skin. Possibly for days on end.”

g like a *Oh, that sounds marvelous.* “Yes.”

m your Bascomb flipped her on her stomach, pushing her nightgown up over her thighs, and raised her to her knees. Fingers threaded through her hair. He kissed the line of her neck, tugging down the ends of her nightgown until her shoulders and spine were exposed. The heat of his mouth moved

down her spine as she panted beneath him.

A cry left her as Bascomb thrust inside her. He was so much larger than the barrister, which she supposed—

of her Edwina whimpered as his cock hit a sensitive spot inside her. He moaned. He took her hard. Rough. He moved his hand between her legs for purpose, drawing up her pleasure until she screamed into the pillow.

moans “I was terrified”—the words came out thick and harsh—“when I heard they were on the stairs. Never put yourself in such danger again.” Bascomb thrust into her so hard her back arched. “My heart stopped, Eddie. I thought I’d lost you and I’ve only just found you.”

Edwina’s own heart constricted at the nickname.

Her release was so blinding, so brilliant, the room spun. Bascomb’s climax came a moment later, the warmth of his seed spilling along her back. His mouth fell to the back of her neck. Beautiful words fell from his lips. Gorgeous, wicked things.

Bascomb rolled to the side, taking her with him. His arms pulled her close. “Did I hurt you?”

“Only in the best way.”

His arms tightened. They lay quietly together listening to the fire crackle in the hearth. “It looks like rain tomorrow,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

Edwina laced her fingers with his and squeezed.

of her,
and with
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CHAPTER TEN

EDWINA FLIPPED OPEN the ledgers once more, wiggling on her chair soreness between her thighs. They'd parted quietly as pearl-gray light filled her room. Kissing her hard, Bascomb had whispered he would see her at breakfast, his big hand trailing down her body as if reluctant to leave her.

But Edwina hadn't awoken until nearly nine o'clock, flustered, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Bascomb had already been gone when she reached the breakfast room, which was probably just as well. She wasn't certain how to approach him after last night. Yes, he wanted her to stay, but in what capacity? Would they return to their slightly contentious, flirtatious relationship? Or would there be something more?

Frowning, she took in the still-thunderous skies outside the window. The sun hadn't yet decided to make an appearance at Rose Hill. Mist hovered just above the grass as she looked out over the ruins of the abbey. Her eyes landed on the church, and she remembered her decision to search for the grave of the abbess.

"Good morning, Miss Collins." Mrs. Page came through the doors with a tray in her hands. "I thought you might like tea and a bite of something. You didn't come down for breakfast."

"No, I fear after my near tumble down the stairs"—she watched the housekeeper for any reaction—"I found myself tossing and turning." A blush stole across her cheeks as she thought of her and Bascomb entangled in bed. "I overslept."

A sound came from the housekeeper. Disappointment at not succeeding in pushing Edwina down the stairs? She tried to discern Mrs. Page's expression and failed. Accusing the housekeeper outright of trying to throw her down the stairs and dressing as a ghost would gain her nothing. Edwina would need proof to convince Bascomb that Mrs. Page was behind the haunting and skimming money from his accounts.

"An unfortunate occurrence, Miss Collins. You nearly broke your

last night. I leave a lamp burning at the end of the hall for a reason—for you to use.”

There wasn’t anyone else at Rose Abbey capable of manipulating ledgers besides Mrs. Page. Or dressing up like a ghost. Mrs. Oates, though never left the kitchens and was half-blind. Mr. Oates was seventy if he was a day and possessed a terrible limp. Meg, sweet and fragile, was far too young for the Thomas, though kind, was a simpleton.

That left Mrs. Page. But the question remained. *Why* would Mrs. Page do such a thing?

“I appreciate the tray, Mrs. Page.” Edwina poured herself a cup of tea. “You’ve been here a long time, haven’t you? At Rose Abbey.” Perhaps she’d engaged the older woman in polite conversation, Mrs. Page hadn’t inadvertently reveal something.

“All my life.” The housekeeper clasped her hands and looked up at the portrait of the abbess. “I was born here. You could say I grew up with Renalda.”

What an odd and slightly morbid way to put things. “So you believe the abbey is haunted by Lady Renalda’s vengeful spirit?”

“Wouldn’t you find yourself vengeful, Miss Collins, if you were removed from your home but also murdered in it? For gold? A title?”

Page raised a brow. “Add to it having your name and reputation sullied by a housekeeper stepped up to the fireplace. “I’m sure McDeaver”—Edwina curled slightly—“told you the entire tale. He seems to delight in inflicting pain on the Lord Bascomb’s secretaries of the gruesome history of Rose Abbey.”

A collection of weak gentlemen. Afraid of their own shadows. London filled with milksops. Merrywimple in particular behaved as if there were monsters hiding beneath the bed.”

“But you aren’t frightened.”

“No.” The housekeeper pierced her with a sharp look. “I’ve not been afraid of fear from Lady Renalda.”

“So you’ve seen her ghost, then?” Edwina leaned forward, searching for a woman for any trick or tell that would give her away.

“I feel her presence. The scent of roses that always accompanied Lady Renalda was a brave, courageous woman who deserved far better than to be reduced to a ghost story meant to frighten children.”

The housekeeper defended the abbess quite fiercely.

namely, “Lady Renalda,” Mrs. Page continued in a crisp tone, “was my aunt. A cousin, if you wish to think of her as such, many times removed, being the protective of her memory and Rose Abbey, as my mother was and her cook, before her. My family has served the constant stream of Lord Bascomb for many years. Rose Abbey is my home.”

so timid. Her sense that the housekeeper was possessive of the estate had been in error. Rose Abbey belonged to Mrs. Page’s family as much as it did to Lord Bascomb, considering how long her family had been here.

“When the first Lord Bascomb came to evict the nuns from Rose Abbey, he had a cup of tea.—”

as if she might interrupt. “They knew each other, Lady Renalda and that first Lord Bascomb. I’m sure McDeaver leaves out of his tale something easier to paint her as a somewhat mad, greedy woman who merely refused to get out of the way.” Mrs. Page shook her head. “Lady Renalda refused Lady Alfred Duston’s proposal of marriage and instead chose to serve the cause of the first Lord Bascomb.”

She glanced at Edwina. “That was the name of the first Lord Bascomb, not the Alfred Duston. He jumped at the opportunity to become a titled lord and marry the woman who’d once rejected him. Duston’s sword took her life. Not only every room. Can you imagine? A woman you had once loved. All that for your pride and greed dictated you do so.”

“No.” The entire story made Edwina slightly ill. Poor Lady Renalda. “Alfred Duston left a journal of sorts. More a warning to those who would succeed him. I think it must be in His Lordship’s study, though I don’t know where she’s read it.” Her eyes caught Edwina’s.

She knows he likely cannot.

“Duston got his title but was haunted by the horror of his actions during the remainder of his days. He wandered about Rose Abbey, even after he was married, speaking to Lady Renalda. Begging forgiveness for what he had done to her and her nuns.”

“But not *all* her nuns.”

“No,” Mrs. Page said quietly. “Only a handful. The rest escaped. I don’t know if they took the treasure of Rose Abbey with them or hid it. Because the nuns never found the gold plate and jewels the abbey supposedly possessed. The Crown wasn’t pleased with his failure. His stature in London faded as a result, despite the title.” She shot Edwina a thin, smug smile. “No Bascomb has been happy here since.”

ancestor. "Not even the previous one?" Bascomb had inferred to Edwina that the housekeeper and his uncle had had a long-standing affair.

Mrs. Page's cheeks colored. "I've duties to attend to, Miss Collins. For that the roads are clear, I have errands in Portsmouth. Please excuse me." She nodded to Edwina, brushed past her with a sweep of her agitated skirts, and sailed out the door.

Edwina stared at the doorway for the longest time, convinced that she had a reason for the doctored accounts, the multitude of repairs, the mysterious ghost that haunted Rose Abbey.

Mrs. Page requests a new gravestone for the abbess.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Page said, standing and going over to the fireplace, the deep well of sorrow seemed to hang over the estate finally making sense.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the portrait of Lady Renalda. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

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“I’m sorry,” she whispered to the portrait of Lady Renalda. “I’m so very sorry.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EDWINA WORKED FOR several more hours after the departure of Mrs. Page, carefully delving back into the notes of Merrywimple, Larkspur, and Worthington. The theft from Bascomb's accounts had been occurring as a steady trickle since he'd inherited the estate eighteen months ago. Lord Bascomb was really very clever. A lord who couldn't review his own accounts. A secretary who would be scared off if they got too close to the truth. Hadn't arrived, the theft could have continued for years before Bascomb realized what was happening.

Speaking of which, her employer had yet to make an appearance in the library as was his habit. Edwina tried not to be disappointed. It was one night—

“Excuse me, miss. I've brought you a fresh pot of tea.”

Edwina startled at the sound of Meg's voice, grateful the maid interrupted the direction of her thoughts. Leaving the desk, she stretched her arms overhead and made her way to the settee. “Thank you. The pot Mrs. Page brought me earlier has grown quite cold.”

As before, Meg set down the tray but kept her gaze on the portrait of Lady Renalda. The maid sidled along the wall to approach the desk and pick up Edwina's now cold pot of tea. The girl glanced at Edwina. “You look scared like them, are you, Miss Collins?”

“You mean the other secretaries?” Edwina bit into a biscuit. “No, not that. She wasn't about to allow Mrs. Page strutting about in a white dress to scare her away from discovering the extent of the theft from Lord Bascomb. Nor would she allow Mrs. Page to get away with her assault of Edwina the previous night.”

She tapped her lips with a finger. Mrs. Page must have run down the stairs after Edwina had fallen, discarded the sheet or whatever it was she wore when she pretended to be the ghost, then appeared below in her nightgown acting as if she'd just been awakened.

“Mr. Fielding told me he saw lights in the graveyard and the c
Meg gave her a wide-eyed look. “Bobbing about in the darkness. Scar
something terrible. Have you ever seen lights, Miss Collins?”

“No. And I don’t believe in ghosts. You shouldn’t either, Meg.”

The maid glanced over at Edwina’s desk stacked with papers a
ledgers. “Should I bring you another pot in a little while? Since yo
i. Page, working on the ledgers?”

“No, actually I think I’m done for the day. Now that the rain has p
r, and believe I’ll walk about the grounds and explore the ruins. The archite
ng in a quite lovely. Possibly take a look at the gravestones or peek ins
It was church. Lord Bascomb is bound to come looking for me, and Mrs. P
eries of gone to Portsmouth. Will you please inform him of my whereabouts?”
. If she

“Yes, but—Mrs. Page says for us—the staff, I mean—not to get c
ascomb the churchyard.” Meg bit her lip. “Best be careful, Miss Collins. The
e in the are loose at the edge of the cliff. And—” The girl’s eyes shifted to the
nly last of the abbess. “Well, and *she* doesn’t like it when you wander about
close to her nuns.” Meg lowered her voice to a whisper. “The ones
ground, I mean.”

“Have you seen her, Meg? The abbess?”

The maid had
hed her The maid’s feet shifted, fingers plucking at the fabric. “Only once
ot Mrs. All in white. Skirts floating about. I heard something scratching
window, and when I looked outside—” The girl paled. “I was
trait of something terrible. I heard how they talked about Rose Abbey in Ports
nd pick but never believed it.” She shook her head. “But there ain’t
I aren’t opportunities in the village. Wages here are more than I can earn at the
or taking in mending.” Her thin shoulders gave a shrug. “Been her
o, I am Lord Bascomb came. I mean, *this* Lord Bascomb, miss.”

“And you’re the only maid that’s ever worked here?”

“Another one of the girls in Portsmouth came with me, but she let
scomb. it’s just me and Thomas. And Mrs. Page told me there’s nothing to fe
/ina the Lady Renalda.”

“There isn’t,” Edwina said firmly. “If anything, say a prayer fo
wn the Renalda and her nuns.”
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CHAPTER TWELVE

EDWINA PULLED HER shawl tighter around her shoulders and strolled through the remains of the abbey, admiring the architecture of the wide, gothic windows. The ground here was swampy in patches, moisture still dripping down the stone. She jumped across a string of puddles, intent on making her way through the churchyard. The wind kicked up, billowing her skirts as she approached the first grave marker. She took her time, peering down in an attempt to read the stone etched with dates, but the elements had erased the names from the stones.

Not only did she not find the grave of Lady Renalda, but none of the stones appeared to have been recently carved.

A heavy weight landed firmly on Edwina's shoulders at the next marker. She must give Bascomb.

He'd become important to her in such a short time, almost from the instant Edwina had caught sight of him, insulting her from behind the door of his study. And regardless of what their future held after their past encounter last night, Edwina owed it to Bascomb to tell him that the housekeeper was skimming from his accounts and had frightened away the other secretaries from Rose Abbey.

Not to mention that she had tried to harm Edwina.

She stepped over a small, nearly dead rosebush, pulling up her skirts. She felt something in her pocket. Reaching inside, she pulled out the leaf she had found beneath the desk. Edwina studied the leaf, now dry and starting to crumble. When she returned to the library today, she would look more closely at the bookcases along the wall. Now that she knew more of the history of Lady Renalda, Edwina hadn't any doubt that there was a hidden door. Other nuns would have gathered in her office when the soldiers came.

If the abbey possessed any wealth, it was reasonable to expect that the gold went with the remainder of her flock, all without being seen by the soldiers. Which meant there was a passageway out of Rose Abbey, according to the old stories.

through the library.

And someone was using it. To throw books at teapots and topple bookcases. To terrify Bascomb's legion of secretaries.

The ground shifted beneath her feet, and she looked up, surprised herself at the very edge of the churchyard where the cliffs began. It stretched out before her, still rough and roiling from the recent storm. A tang of salt filled the air. Edwina turned and faced the ruins and the arches, a portion of the older part of Rose Abbey that had once been Lady Renalda's residence, noting the odd way the rosebushes had been planted as they led toward the church.

She cocked her head.

The bushes weren't planted in the pattern of any garden Edwina had ever enjoyed. There were no gatherings for a bench or a place of prayer. It was at all like the roses closer to the abbey and main house.

Incredibly odd.

Looking down over the cliffs, careful not to get too close, she realized the rosebush had been planted by itself a few feet from her. Then a path led leading around a cluster of graves to the church.

She walked back and forth several times, becoming surer with every step. The rosebushes were markers, planted on the lawn in such a way as to lead purpose. Like a map to buried treasure.

Or a series of tunnels.

Lady Renalda hadn't inhabited Rose Abbey for nearly three hundred years, and no rosebush, no matter how determined, could live there without help. Someone was ensuring the line of rosebushes stayed in place. Perhaps a series of housekeepers.

Edwina took off in the direction of the church. She jumped over the sinking graves and onto the crumbling steps of the church, her heart beating wildly at her discovery. A door in the library was an entry point to Lady Renalda's office to a series of tunnels. The church seemed a likely place for at least one exit. If the abbess had indeed bought time for her escape, some of them might have come to the church and stripped whatever gold and jeweled relics it possessed, then gone back into the tunnels. The soldiers would never have seen them.

Tentatively she tiptoed inside, nose wrinkling at the scents of mildew and dust. Broken stone lay in heaps along the floor. Weeds grew through

crack. The entire space spoke of age and disuse.

Except for the muddy footprints coming from behind the altar.

Edwina's heart nearly stopped in her chest. She wasn't the only one to find had ventured here. Meg had mentioned lights in the church at night. So the seal at least one of Bascomb's former secretaries.

She climbed over a large stack of bricks following the muddy stone cursing when her skirts caught on, of all things, a bloody rosebush that had found its way inside, springing through a crack in the floor. Why had she reached down to pull her skirt free, she saw it.

A latch. In the floor.

Stumbling over the debris in the church, she made her way over and ever trapdoor set into the base of the altar. The muddy footprints led right to the edge.

I knew it.

The door must lead to a tunnel. Was Mrs. Page using the tunnel to get into the church at night and look for the abbey's hidden gold? And she had another, also be using the passage to spy on Bascomb's secretaries, scaring them when she saw them getting too close to the truth. Edwina thought every step sounds she had heard in the library. The bookcase that had nearly collapsed with her. The stupid leaf.

She had to tell Bascomb.

Kneeling, Edwina lifted open the small trapdoor cut into the stone hundred hinges making not a sound. Someone had recently oiled them, not at long. Peering into the darkness of the tunnel, she could make out nothing. A light or lamp was needed.

Drat.

Just as Edwina resolved to return to the house and retrieve a small heart shuffler sounded behind her.

And then the world went black.

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tunnel. EDWINA BLINKED in the darkness, wincing as she tried to raise her head. She was sprawled on her back in the dirt. Silence surrounded her. Carefully she sat up, her fingers touching the tender spot at the back of her head. Then every

thing she remembered was peering into the hole beneath the altar, thinking she needed light to properly explore the tunnel below. How long had she been lying here?

A sudden rush of panic flooded Edwina. There wasn't so much as a pinprick of light. She reached up with both her hands and touched only a faint trail, but emptiness. The trapdoor must be above her, but there was no way to reach it, not without a ladder or a rope.

She took in a shaky breath, trying to calm her wildly beating heart. Someone would come looking for her. Eventually. Meg knew she was walking to the church. When Edwina didn't arrive for tea, Meg would go to ask Bascomb.

Edwina calmed herself. Bascomb would look for her. He would. She had to stay put for a time.

Whoever had hit Edwina, and it could only be Mrs. Page, had pushed her into the hole. The housekeeper knew her secret had been discovered and she must return at any moment and do far worse than merely hit Edwina on the head. Desperate people did desperate things. Going to Portsmouth that day was merely a ruse.

Edwina tried to get her bearings and found it impossible in the darkness. The tunnel undoubtedly led to the library, but there wasn't anything else. She could just as easily find herself on the beach or lost in the woods outside of Rose Abbey. But any alternative was better than simply waiting for Mrs. Page to return and finish her off.

Wishing fervently for a candle as the thick blackness enveloped her, Edwina stretched out her arms to either side. The tunnel didn't seem to be wide. Her fingertips touched the rough edges of stone. Definitely marked. Edwina walked carefully in a circle, one hand on the wall, until her fingers curved away into more emptiness. The tunnel. Drifting her fingers in the darkness she met stone again.

Very good. Only one tunnel out.

Carefully, she inched through the passage, her fingers trailing along the stone on either side. How long had it taken someone to build this tunnel? She must have been created around the same time the abbey had been built. Finally, she After a few moments, her right hand touched only emptiness as the last fell away.

Damn.

tar and She'd been afraid of this. Feeling her way around, Edwina could
ong had the tunnel split. Walking to her right a few steps, she was assaulted
scents of salt and damp earth. The distant rumble of waves met her
ch as aEdwina ignored the small burst of triumph that she'd been right. The
nothing had fled to the beach. The knowledge didn't help her at the moment.

way to "Not that way," she whispered, turning back the way she'd come. She
her way to the original passage and moved forward.

g heart. Her half boots scuffed along the dirt as she continued on, hoping
he was would end up at the library. After about half an hour, the tunnel seemed
inform take a slight incline. The toe of her boot hit something solid.

The bottom of stairs.

he only Holding on to the wall, she felt her way upward until the pitch-b
the tunnel lightened enough so she could see her hand in front of her
hed her door was in front of her. She could see the outline. Reaching the top
ed. She stairs, she ran her fingers over the wall, feeling for a lever or trigger
na over the hidden door. Finally, her thumb caught on something.

for the The door, actually the lower part of the bookcase, swung open
swoosh.

irkness. Edwina recognized that sound. She'd heard it before. Just before
g where was thrown at her pot of tea.

woods *I knew it wasn't a bloody ghost.*

ting for Stepping into the library, Edwina watched as the door slid smooth
into place. A book, covered in burgundy leather, had fallen forward b
ed her, snapped back into place as the door shut.

o be too *The lever to open the door.*

1-made. Examining the bookcase, Edwina searched for the outline of the d
fingers couldn't see it. Impossible to find if one wasn't looking. How had F
the air, seen it?

"Collins." Bascomb was seated at her desk, staring at her. His f
were creased with relief. "Thank God. Collins."

ong the Edwina pointed at the bookcase. "There is a—"

nnel? It "What the bloody hell are you doing in the wall?" he interrupted, r
. a hand through his hair. "I've been searching for you for hours. No
he wall Portsmouth has seen you, and I—" He came forward in a rush and took
his arms, kissing her cheek, her forehead, and finally her mouth.

Oh. He's been worried.

tell that Her knees buckled, but Bascomb held her tight. Squeezing her up
by the gasped for air. “Jonah. I can’t breathe.”

er ears. He cupped the back of her head, the gray-green of his eyes lumi
re nunsthe dim light of the room. “I couldn’t find you. I thought—”

“Ouch.” Edwina winced as his fingers found the lump at the base
She felt skull.

Bascomb immediately pulled his fingers away, dark with blood. “
ing she bleeding.”

med to “I am?”

He pulled her onto his lap.

Edwina struggled. Half-heartedly. “I’m fine. Set me down. So
lack of might see.”

face. A “I don’t care.” Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he pres
) of the cloth to her head gently, rocking her as if she was a child.

to open “I’m quite well, Jonah. I have to tell you—”

“I thought you left Rose Abbey,” Bascomb whispered. “I v
with a Portsmouth and looked. Searched. I found Mrs. Page at the butcher she
hadn’t seen you either.” A stricken look flashed across his featu
a book thought you were gone. Because of last night.”

“Oh.” She kissed the line of his jaw. Edwina stroked his cheek u
muscles in his arms relaxed. Bascomb, big and vital. Strong. Blusterin
ly back like a bull. A woman had left him. He’d alluded to it last night. She
out now mental note to return to that topic later. “No.” Her lips brushed his. “N

“You *said* you were leaving. Didn’t even leave me a note. No
could have read it. At least not well.”

oor and “Jonah, I didn’t leave. Clearly. You watched me walk out of a secr
ielding in the library. I was in a tunnel, and—wait, who told you I left Rose .

Let me guess, Mrs. Page, I’ll warrant.”

features Bascomb’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “No. Page was in Po
Buying a roast. Meg came to me wringing her hands. She said wh
brought you tea, you stomped about, hands in the air. You couldn’t t
running isolation. She said that I could send your things. Thomas said you did
one in wait to have your trunk brought down but insisted you be taken to Po
k her in immediately to catch the first coach to London. So I went to Portsmouth

“Is that what he told you?” Edwina looked into his beautiful gra
eyes. “But I’m not from London, as I’ve reminded you often e

until she Hampshire, my lord.” The revelation of who was truly behind the manipulation of the ledgers and the haunting had Edwina’s head swimming. It had *never* been Mrs. Page.

“Thomas is simple. London is the only city he likely can name outside of her Portsmouth.” Bascomb pulled her to him, pressing the tip of his nose into her neck. “Eddie. What the bloody hell were you doing in the wall? You’re dirty. You’re bleeding. Covered in cobwebs.”

Edwina sat back, tossing the handkerchief on the table. “Thomas is simple. Meg isn’t timid. They’ve been stealing from you since you closed Rose Abbey. There is no ghost. It’s Meg, dressed up and fluttering around someone Thomas pushed over the bookcase.”

“Dear God. The blow to your head addled you. Meg?”
“There are mistakes in the ledgers. Small, tiny little omissions. Tradesmen marked as paid, but not truly paid. Numbers altered. The numbers you didn’t check the ledgers. The sum they’ve taken is quite large all added together. Hundreds of pounds. When your secretaries discovered the irregularities, they were frightened away before making their suggestions. I know.”

Bascomb sat back, shaking his head. “That’s impossible. It can’t be true until the entirely true, I’m afraid.” Thomas came into the library, pushing Mrs. Page before him, a pistol in her back. “Do I look simple to you now, made a lord?”

“Thomas.” Bascomb stood.
“Surprised?” He pushed Mrs. Page away from him and pointed the pistol at Bascomb. “One move and I’ll blow your head off, my lord.”

Bascomb’s hands curled into fists. His eyes narrowed. “You bastard. Rose Abbey? stole from me.”

“Well, you can’t check your own ledgers. I’m really not to blame for the lack of attention. Or is it intelligence? I’m not the simpleton in the room when she made the mistake.” A growl came from Bascomb. The scar stood out stark against his skin. “I’ll see you hang for this.”

Edwina placed a hand on his arm, terrified Thomas would shoot her. “Doubtful. If Miss Collins had just stayed in the tunnel or died in the tunnel, the other attempts we made to rid Rose Abbey of her presence, you wouldn’t have ended up with nothing more than bruised pride at knowing you were fleeced.” Thomas shrugged. “As it is, I suppose you’ll all be going in

nd the tunnels together.” He looked at Edwina. “You’ve more lives than a cat
miming. Collins. I’m not sure how you escaped the bookcase. Or Meg pushing
down the stairs.”

tside of “Agility,” Edwina snapped.

nto her Meg strolled into the room, looking nothing like the timid little
mell of Edwina had taken her to be. Dressed in a gown of green silk, hair
coiled with a small hat atop, Meg looked askance at Thomas. “She sur
as isn’t Meg’s eye roved over Edwina. “Unbelievable. Well, I suppose we’ll
ame to shoot them all. Just to be sure. No one will find the bodies in the
; about. Maybe they’ll think the ghost—” She giggled and waved a hand at
Renalda. “—did away with them. Now”—her mouth hardened—“my
you will please tell us where the gold is, we’ll shoot you first and your
rsights. have to see what Thomas does to Miss Collins.”

y knew “There isn’t any gold,” Bascomb snarled. “There never was. And e
I added did know the location, I wouldn’t tell you.”

ed the Mrs. Page looked down at the rug.

spicions *She knows where the gold is.*

“A pity. I suppose you need an inducement. I refuse to believe you
e true.” didn’t leave you at least a clue.” Meg glared at him and tugged on a
ig Mrs. gloves. “But perhaps he told his lover. Thomas, shoot Mrs. Page
ow, my doesn’t tell us this instant”—Meg’s voice rose an octave—“where it is

Mrs. Page raised her chin. “Go ahead, Meg. You deceitful thing
Renalda didn’t give up Rose Abbey’s secrets, and neither will I.”

e gun at “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way.” She nodded to Thomas to po
pistol at Edwina.

rd. You Edwina watched Thomas raise the pistol. Mrs. Page screamed
Bascomb roared as he launched himself at Thomas. The air in the
or your became thick, suddenly, with the cloying scent of roses. A wall of air
m.” Edwina to the floor so hard her forehead hit the rug. She turned her
cheek. see Meg, screaming in terror and running for the doors.

And those heavy, thick doors fell completely off their hinges, kr
m. Meg to the floor.

any of A sound of pure fury filled the room. Like a hurricane forming ins
a might library.

’d been Lady Renalda’s portrait sailed across the room, the corner of the
into the gilt frame catching Thomas in the eye. Rose petals fluttered in

at, Miss Clutching his bleeding eye, Thomas wailed in pain, dropping the gun. The weapon skittered across the floor, spinning to land right in front of Edwina's nose.

Edwina lay gasping. Stunned. Roses permeated the very air around her. The press of a hand gently stroked the back of her head, though no one was anywhere near her. Peace filled her. Calm. Stretching out her arms, she lived. Edwina curled her fingers around the gun, though it was hardly necessary. Meg was moaning in pain. Blood streamed from Thomas's eye.

Mrs. Page was on her knees, weeping, a rose petal clutched against her chest.

Bascomb shot Edwina a stunned look, his shocked gaze landing on the floor where the portrait of Lady Renalda rested.

"Lady Renalda," Edwina whispered as a tear ran down her cheek. "Even if I said I didn't believe in you."

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Clutching his bleeding eye, Thomas wailed in pain, dropping the gun. The weapon skittered across the floor, spinning to land right in front of Edwina's nose.

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Mrs. Page was on her knees, weeping, a rose petal clutched against her chest.

Bascomb shot Edwina a stunned look, his shocked gaze landing on the floor where the portrait of Lady Renalda rested.

"Lady Renalda," Edwina whispered as a tear ran down her cheek. "I'm so sorry I said I didn't believe in you."

EPILOGUE

Six months later

ROSE ABBEY WAS haunted.

Edwina walked to the edge of the graveyard, now neatly fenced off as it should have been years ago. The ruins of the church and what remained of the abbey would continue to stand until they crumbled back into the earth. Neither Bascomb nor Edwina had the heart to take either from Lady Renalda. She'd already lost so much.

"Thank you," Mrs. Page said from beside Edwina, looking at the gravestone in the graveyard. It wasn't easy to miss. Stark and white, it had an angel carved atop, and one of Rose Abbey's bloodred rosebushes was curling about the stone. Mrs. Page's doing, no doubt.

"It was the very least Jonah and I could do. I still think it impossible to explain what happened that day. But I've no other way to explain any of it." Mrs. Page had tried. One explanation was that a gust of wind had blown Lady Renalda's portrait from the wall, except the windows had been shut. Another was that the doors hadn't been properly maintained so the hinges had failed. A third was the case.

"So"—the housekeeper gave her a sideways glance—"you still believe in ghosts?"

Edwina thought of all the times in the last few months when a comforting presence had enveloped her and she'd smelled roses in the air. The day she and Jonah had married, red rose petals had scattered across the bed. "I believe in Lady Renalda."

"I think she's at peace now," Mrs. Page said. "She is loved here. I hope she stays. As she always should have been. I should tell you, Lady Bascomb, she's still here—where—"

Taking the housekeeper's hand, Edwina stopped Mrs. Page from finishing. "We don't want to know. Keep Rose Abbey's secrets, Mrs. Page."

as your mother and grandmother did. As far as Lord Bascomb is concerned there is no gold buried away beneath the rosebushes.” Only a secret passage through the tunnels, the responsibility of maintaining the passage used as a hiding place, falling to each housekeeper of Rose Abbey. The secret passed down through the generations.

Her husband had chosen to keep the passage open only to the sealing the entrance from the church due to safety concerns. “You know,” he’d said and winked at Edwina, “*when we’ll need to escape a raid.*”

“I blame myself for Meg. And Thomas. You should dismiss me.”
“I’m not going to endure Lord Bascomb alone, Mrs. Page.”
Edwina squeezed her fingers again. Page had a hard, crusty shell, but inside a generous heart. She could not have known that the two servants were a husband and wife. They’d fled London after stealing from their last employer and ended up in Portsmouth. Hearing the tales of hidden gold at Rose Abbey from the tavern owner’s wife, the pair had sought positions at Rose Abbey. It was Meg who’d ascertained Bascomb’s handicap shortly after Merry had arrived.

“It was kind of you to spare them. They didn’t deserve it.”
Edwina “I’m not sure they’d agree. But indentured servitude halfway across the world isn’t nooses around their necks.” Meg and Thomas should have changed, but Edwina had asked for them to be exiled instead. Even if they’d tried to kill her. More than once. But she thought Lady Renalda would have preferred leniency.

The first thing Edwina had done once the constable had been called was to make sure the portrait of the abbess was returned to its proper place in the library. She still worked at the same desk, pausing throughout the day to speak to Lady Renalda. Edwina was fairly certain she listened.

“I should go back, Mrs. Page.” She placed a hand on the housekeeper’s shoulder, silently saying another prayer of thanks to Lady Renalda and the brave nuns. “Stay as long as you like. I’ll check on Mrs. Oates and dinner. I know

The End

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About the Author

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A Texas transplant (from Pennsylvania) Kathleen spends most summers attempting to grow tomatoes (a wasted effort) and floating in her backyard pool with her two dogs, husband and son. When not writing, she likes to visit her "happy place" (Newport, RI.), wine bars, make homemade pizza on the grill, and perfect her charcuterie board skills. Visit www.kathleenayers.com.

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