

## Chapter One

***“I think...if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.”***

***– Leo Tolstoy***

“What do you mean, you left them above Derwerth?” Lawrence Lowery demanded. “Please tell me you possess more sense than to leave three women alone on the mountain!”

“But two of them be Americans, Your Lordship.”

The coachman frantically worked his hat’s rim.

Lowery, who stiffened at the groundless denunciation, turned to his father Baron Blakehell.

“Did you hear his imbecilic excuse? It is acceptable to treat these women with no respect because two are Americans! What the bloody hell does that mean?” Law loomed over the hired driver.

Discovering a lack of sense among those gathered at his estate, Law angrily turned toward the stable.

“I require my horse and another for a coach immediately, Sack. I want ten men saddled and ready to ride within a quarter hour,” he barked out orders.

“Yes, Your Lordship.”

The head groomsman hustled to do his bidding.

Lowery spoke privately to the baron.

“I must go.”

“You might send Beauchamp and the men,” his father counseled. “There is no requirement for you to face the danger yourself, Lawrence.”

Lowery touched the baron’s arm gently. Although his father was still quite spry for a man of his age, Law realized the time for his succession drew nearer.

“You understand I must, Father. I would not count myself a gentleman if I left three women in danger.”

Law knew what it meant to be lost in the hills surrounding the estate. At age ten, he thought himself quite grown when he set off on a dare toward the summit of the nearness mountain. He did not make it more than a mile into the wilderness before becoming disoriented. It took his father some six hours to find him, and Law could still recall the fear bubbling in his throat. He could not imagine being both a woman and an outsider and to be lost in England’s famous Peak District.

“I understand.” Blakehell turned toward the manor house. “You will take care, Lawrence. Remember you are my heir.”

Law heard those words his whole life.

“You always have Carter.”

Law could not control his constant need to deflect his father’s demands on him.

“I love my youngest child,” the baron began, “but Carter is not the right person for this title.” Which only meant Carter defied their father on more than one front—something Law rarely did. “Moreover, Carter has his property now; he does not require this one.”

“Yes, Father.”

Law knew the baron meant well, but Lawrence could not spend his life locked in the house, afraid to risk the title. Such was the reason the Baroness Blakehell delivered forth Lawrence’s younger brother Carter, along with the three sisters, which separated the two brothers. An heir and a spare, as the old adage went.

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“How long must we wait for that foolish man to return?” Abigail Tilney complained for the fifth time in an hour.

Arabella’s sister despised any form of discomfort. It was for her wellbeing they took the small coach when traveling on horseback would be more appropriate. Abigail did not ride well, and she refused anything, which did not come naturally to her; therefore, keeping her perfection in tact.

“I imagine at least a couple of hours,” Annalee Dryburgh, their cousin assured Abigail. “Walking the horse after it threw a shoe must slow Mr. Moss’s progress.”

Abigail pulled her cloak tighter about her.

“I hope it is soon. The air is much cooler in the uplands.”

“Lord, Abby, one would think a woman from Virginia’s mountainous region would appreciate the land’s beauty. I certainly prefer it to the coast lines.”

Arabella Tilney stood, feet shoulder width apart and hands on hips, admiring the craggy landscape.

“It is a bog!” Abby asserted.

Bella sighed deeply.

“But the purpose of this journey was to explore the sights. The plateau above from this angle is spectacular. Come look!”

Abby turned her body to rest her head on the coach’s soft cushions.

“The only view of which I wish to partake is the one from my room at the inn,” she grumbled. “Wake me when Mr. Moss returns.”

Bella sat good-naturedly on an uprooted tree trunk. Her party left Hayfield to visit the Kinder Plateau, but did not reach their destination. The horse threw a shoe, and now there was nothing to do but to wait and look out on the land’s beauty. If they traveled by horseback, as Arabella preferred, then they could double up and still make it back safely

to the inn. Unfortunately, they foolishly took an open carriage to pacify Abigail, and now she, her sister, and her cousin were without options. Bella wished she persisted when Mr. Moss suggested they all walk the horse out, but again, they deferred to Abby's insensibility. Now, Bella prayed for Mr. Moss's early return. She would not wish to hear her younger sister's tirade if the man did not come before nightfall. Abigail would not be happy, and Bella knew when Abby was not happy, her sister made everyone within earshot miserable.

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"Storm comin' in, Your Lordship!" Mr. Beauchamp pointed to the encroaching cloudbank. "We should call off the search until it passes. Too dangerous out in the open."

"Lead the men to the Cliff Hole cottage and wait it out. I will take the extra horse into Brook Pass. If I discover nothing, I will follow you."

The wind increased, and debris swirled about them.

"Are you certain, my lord? I could go."

Law knew the baron would claim Beauchamp's head if Law placed himself in real danger, but Law felt the need to see the situation to a satisfying end.

He shook his head in the negative.

"I must go, Beauchamp. I know it sounds unreasonable; yet, I cannot desert the search so soon."

"Seek shelter, Sir, if it the conditions become worse."

"I have it."

Lawrence took the horse's leading rope.

"See to the men."

Law rode toward where the path split, taking the one rising to the plateau. He thought the women quite foolish to attempt such a trek in a carriage, but he understood the female mind as well as any man. He possessed three sisters, and Law could easily imagine one of the Lowery sisters doing the same.

The wind whipped his coat tails, and Law removed his hat so as not to lose it. He scanned the pathway, knowing it unlikely the women strayed from the worn road. His own fears kept him at the task: Law felt the urgency of finding the ladies. He knew the rain line spread across the valley below. He and the women would require immediate shelter; therefore, he nudged the horse forward, picking up the pace.

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“Abby, we must find shelter,” Bella tugged on her sister’s hand. “A storm is coming!”

“I am going nowhere,” the girl asserted. “*I* am not afraid of lightning.”

Bella looked to where the storm clouds rolled over a nearby ridge. Thunder and lightning preceded nature’s drenching.

“Well, I am! Please, Abby!”

Bella managed to coax her sister to a standing position just as the man approached on a coal black stallion. Despite the insensibility of the idea, Bella thought he resembled a dark angel riding toward them. The stranger whipped the horse’s reins, barreling down on them, but Bella experienced no fear, at least, not from the rider. As dark and as foreboding as the man appeared, she felt her heart lurch in recognition.

Dismounting, the stranger offered them no British civilities. There was no time: Large droplets accompanied him, and they quickly soaked the open carriage seat.

“This way!” he yelled over the tumult, catching Bella’s hand and taking off on a run. By design, her sister and cousin followed.

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Without forethought, Law tugged the girl’s hand again, but she stumbled, unable to match his long strides. Feeling her go down, Law instinctively, grabbed the woman

about the waist, lifting her petite form like a sack of flour. In the other hand, he kept a death grip on the horses' reins. When he found the familiar cave, Law half shoved the woman he carried into the narrow opening, turning awkwardly to pull the other two along the trail.

The rain pelted them with a staccato of droplets, and Law felt the dampness soak his greatcoat, but before he entered the rock face's slit, he tied the horses to a Spanish oak's lowest branches. At length, Law squeezed his large form through the opening before shaking the water from his hair and coat.

In the shadowed light, he could barely make out the forms of the three women. They hugged one another tightly, cloaks wrapped around each other—unopened wings of a gigantic eagle.

“Is anyone injured?” he asked between thunderclaps.

From somewhere within the monstrous depths of cooing females, a melodic voice rang clearly,

“No, Sir. We are grateful for your finding us.”

The butterfly wings opened and closed and became three.

He sighed deeply and brushed at his coat sleeves again. Being hunched over in the low-ceilinged crevice reminded Law of his manners at last.

“I am Lord Hellsman.” He timed his introduction between God's fireworks. “I apologize for my rude entrance on the trail.”

“That is quite acceptable under the circumstances, Your Lordship.” The woman straightened her clothing. “Without you, we could be miserable, suffering the storm's worst. I am Miss Dryburgh. My father, Lord Dryburgh, is Lord Graham's second son.”

“From Staffordshire?”

Law prided himself on knowing the British aristocracy's countryseats.

“Yes, Sir.” The woman remained the group’s spokesperson. “And these are my cousins from America, Miss Tilney. And her sister Miss Abigail.”

Again, Law could not make out the ladies’ faces in the darkness. He could discern only their sizes—both small in stature—one downright petite. He could still feel the pressure of the smallest one along his side where he carried her with him to the cave. Surprisingly, Law found he missed that brief feeling of warmth.

“We are pleased for the acquaintance, Your Lordship,” the sweet voice came from the shadows.

Another lightning flash made the smaller one jump and clutch at her cousin’s arm.

“My sister does not like storms,” the taller one explained.

“Forgive me, Ladies. I must practice discourtesy again. I can barely make you out in the cave’s recess, and I remain a bit disoriented. I discerned that Miss Dryburgh is the tallest in height among the three of you, but between the Miss Tilneys, I claim confusion.”

The melodious voice continued.

“I am Abigail Tilney.”

Law turned his attention to the petite one, the one who trembled from the storm, and the one he carried.

“Then that must make you, Miss Tilney,” he half teased. A squeaky “Yes, Sir” brought a smile to his lips.

“How did you know the cave was here, Your Lordship?” Miss Dryburgh asked.

Law mocked himself.

“When I was ten, I quakingly proved my manliness by hiding in this cave until my father rescued me from my wild imagination. If I am riding in the area, I revisit this spot. It keeps me humble.”

The squeak became a screech with a powerful flash of nature's worst.

"How...how long will the storm last?"

Lawrence glanced toward the downpour.

"The rain usually lasts several hours."

"Hours?"

The woman's voice betrayed her fear.

"Do not worry, Miss Tilney. The fireworks will end soon, even if the rain remains."

"It will be dark before long," Miss Dryburgh noted. "I mean darker than it is now."

Law stared at the sheets of rain streaming along the opening. A waterfall rushing down the cliff face and splashing outside their refuge.

"When it eases a bit, I will gather some wood so we may have a fire."

"You mean for us to spend the night in this cave, Lord Hellsman!"

The sweetness left Miss Abigail's voice.

"That is not possible!"

"Miss Abigail, if there were no storm, we might maneuver the limited path down the mountain with some degree of safety. However, between the rain and the fog, which will blanket the woodlands with darkness, there is no prospect of us driving your carriage off this peak tonight. Nor would I consider walking out at this point or even riding the two horses I brought with me. The road is narrow, and one false step could send us plummeting into emptiness. Moreover, who knows what creatures the woods hold?"

"Are you attempting to frighten us, Your Lordship?"



Miss Tilney found her voice. His exaggerations caused her to momentarily forget the storm.

“Absolutely, not, Miss Tilney. Simply speaking the truth. I will not assume the responsibility of bringing danger to our door after rescuing you. No one is injured or requiring medical care; it would be foolhardy to risk our lives.”

Thinking on the conversation, Law could not help but to chuckle.

“What is so amusing, Lord Hellsman?”

The petite one took a confrontational stance.

Law wiped the grin from his lips, but something shifted in his chest.

“I suppose, Miss Tilney, I find it a bit bizarre to have this discussion hunched over from my surroundings and attempting to impress the three ladies of my most recent acquaintance with my ability to protect them through the night. It is somewhat surreal.”

“It is from the ordinary,” Miss Dryburgh took the sting from her cousin’s tone. “We Brits are practical that way, are we not, Your Lordship?”

Although the faces were still in shadows, he could recognize the timbre of their voices.

“Absolutely, Miss Dryburgh.”

“Well, I shall not sleep a wink. What if the walls collapse in on us? What if there are bugs or even snakes!” Miss Abigail declared.

“Then by all means, Abby, be unreasonable,” Miss Dryburgh asserted. “If you were *reasonable*, we would have ridden out of here hours ago. So, if you do not wish to accept His Lordship’s protection, then walk down the mountain at your own risk.”

“It is not necessary to snipe,” the girl retorted in an obvious pout.

Surprisingly, Miss Tilney took her cousin’s side.

“Yes, Annalee does. You pay no attention unless we *snipe*, Abby!”

Law felt as if he stepped into an alternate world, one where men finally heard how women really spoke to one another. Mayhap the cave held some sort of magical power: He believed so as a child.

Miss Dryburgh motioned Law to sit, and he was thankful for the lady’s kindness.

“When you wander out for the firewood, Your Lordship, there is a basket under the coach’s seat. The bread is likely ruined, but the other items should still be edible.”

“More British practicality, Miss Dryburgh?” he responded in bemusement.

“Someone must make decisions for our American counterparts. We Brits possess the impeccable manners,” the woman taunted.

“So, we do, Miss Dryburgh.”

Law began to silently count to ten, wondering how long it would be before one of the Tilney sisters reacted to their cousin’s assertion. He reached two.

“Annalee, we are not barbarians! We have culture also. America does not exist only as in the eleventh century with stampeding hordes!”

Miss Tilney closed the distance between them.

Miss Dryburgh laughed aloud.

“I am well aware Lady Althea raised you, Cousin. There is no need to convince me of your affability.” The lady straightened her cloak. “And...by the way, Bella...you have forgotten the storm.”

Arabella Tilney held her fists on her hips but the length of a breath before she joined her cousin in laughter. Hers was a laugh Law thought the most perfect one he ever heard. It held the timbre of soft tinkling bells.

Turning in Law's direction, Miss Tilney asked, "How might we be of assistance, Your Lordship?"

"I would not have you exposed to the elements, Miss Tilney. My coat is heavier and my gloves thicker." Lawrence peered through the opening. "The rain is not relenting, but it shall soon be dark. I must go while I may still make out shapes. I will bring the supplies to the opening and hand them to you? If my idea is acceptable?"

Miss Dryburgh shared conspiratorially.

"You discovered Arabella's weakness, Lord Hellsman. My cousin lives to be of use to others."

"There are worse vices, Miss Dryburgh."

Law pulled up his coat's collar. Then he squeezed through the opening and ran toward the carriage. He retrieved the basket from under the bench. There were two lap blankets stuffed behind the box; he quickly placed them under his coat and ran once again toward the cave.

"Here!" he called as he shoved the items into Miss Tilney's waiting hands.

Immediately, he turned to where he tethered the horses. At least, under the trees' thick canopy, the rain did not fall relentlessly. The thick foliage blocked the light, as well as the moisture. Law efficiently removed the saddle and blanket from Triton's back and carried them to the cave. He dropped it in the opening, saying he would move it when he returned, but Law noticed as he reversed directions that Miss Tilney tugged the leather in from the rain.

After that, Law located as much dry wood from the nearby copse as he could muster. He found several broken limbs and some branches he could use for kindling. It took four trips to stock enough wood for them to maintain a fire during the night. Law knew his men would not come until the morning, and it would be his responsibility to protect the women until then. He found it exhilarating in many ways to fend for his needs. Occasionally, Law enjoyed being from the drawing room and into nature. He often made overnight hunting or fishing trips with some of the local gentry. As one of the highest-ranking men in his county, Law felt the responsibility of maintaining a sense of Society. Yet, having been raised essentially alone, always in training to replace his father, Law appreciated the communion of a group of men enjoying sport.

“That should serve us,” he announced as Law bent over to reenter the cave.

He placed the wood to one side of the opening. Forgetting about the low ceiling, Law banged his head when he instinctively straightened. In embarrassment, he laughed at his error.

“Surprisingly, this cave’s roof descended since I was age ten.”

“It is perfectly tall enough for me, Your Lordship,” Miss Tilney taunted as she spread one of the two blankets he retrieved from the carriage on the earthen floor.

Law studied the lady closely at the diminutive form moving freely about the dead end crevice in which they sought shelter. Miss Arabella Tilney was as busy as the mouse of which she reminded him. First the squeak and now darting everywhere. He shook his head in amusement.

He turned his attention to removing his drenched greatcoat. Law sat close to the cave’s opening.

“I will start a fire. We should place it close to the opening. That will serve for circulation, keeping the heat in and the smoke out. Moreover, I think it important to deter any animal, which might also seek shelter from the elements.”

Abigail half whined as she sat bundled up against the back wall of the enclosure.

“Is there no way we might leave here tonight?”

“In truth, Miss Abigail, I pray my men do not attempt to rescue us this evening. I want none of them to perish. The danger is eminent, and although we may be a bit uncomfortable, we shall not perish. However, the fire at the cave’s opening will serve as a signal if they do search against my orders.”

Law noticed how Miss Tilney and Miss Dryburgh busied themselves with preparing what food they available, as well as a space the ladies might share overnight, while Miss Abigail offered no assistance. His scowl announced Law’s disapproval of those who would not assist themselves.

He used a small spade he kept attached to the saddle to dig a shallow pit; then, Law stacked the wood he found, lacing the kindling between the logs. He removed the flint and a small tin tinderbox he stored in his saddlebag. He struck the steel striker and the flint module against each other to create the sparks to light the tinder, the remnants of a linen cloth scorched for this very purpose. The sparks ignited the tinder, and Law used the spunks to spread the fire to kindling wood he found in the copse. Soon Law had a small fire burning steadily. The heat radiated throughout the tiny enclosure, removing the damp chill and driving away the encroaching darkness.

“That is better,” Law declared as he turned toward the women.

“Come join us, Your Lordship,” Miss Dryburgh gestured to the spread.

Law moved forward on hands and knees.

“Thank you, Miss Dryburgh.”

“One end of the bread remained untouched. It appears you reached it in time, Lord Hellsman,” Miss Tilney revealed.

Lawrence reached for an apple, permitting the women to eat before he chose any of the scarce offerings the ladies placed before him. He took a small bite to make the fruit last longer.

The fire’s muted light provided him a better awareness of the three women.

Abigail Tilney appeared the youngest, likely seventeen or eighteen years of age. She had a head of golden locks that reflected the dancing flames’ brilliance, as well as a long, slender neck. Miss Abigail was likely very lithe in stature based on his peek of her thin arms when the girl reached for the bread. She had yet to remove her cloak so he had no true idea of her figure.

Annalee Dryburgh’s full figure showed well in the gown she chose for the day. Her corset-cinched waist made the woman appear small compared to her ample bust line and hips. Not plump, but judged against the excessively thin Miss Abigail, Miss Dryburgh would be termed well fed. Her chestnut hair framed a heart shaped face.

Then his eyes rested on the elder of the Tilney sisters: Arabella. She possessed nondescript—dull, brown hair—very wavy—small breasts—excessively petite—and always

moving—foot tapping—fingers drumming. Amorphous. Yet, for some reason, Law’s eyes remained on her.

“Might we know more of your family, Your Lordship?” Miss Dryburgh asked as she wrapped some bread about hard cheese.

Law’s gaze scanned all three women, but he lingered on the elder of the two Americans.

“My home seat is Blake’s Run in Derbyshire, and I am the eldest son of Baron Blakehell, Niall Lowery. There are three sisters—Louisa, who is married to Ernest Hutton, Lord MacLauren; Marie, who recently married Viscount Sheffield; and, lastly, Delia, the Viscountess Duff. From them, I possess one nephew and two nieces. The youngest of the family is my brother Carter, upon whom the Prince Regent quite recently bestowed a baronetcy for Carter’s service during the war.”

“Two seats within one family? Quite unusual, my lord.”

“It is Miss Dryburgh, but my father is more than pleased to have both his sons holding a title. Sir Carter is renovating Huntingborne Abbey in Kent, under my father’s guidance. Actually, I believe my brother’s situation provides the baron new life; the baron thrives when he has the opportunity to instruct others in the way of the land.” Lawrence grinned knowingly. “The baron is a great one on duty and responsibility.” He took a small sip of the wine, which Miss Tilney poured for him. “And what of you, Ladies?”

“We are seeing some of the English countryside before we travel to London for the Season,” Miss Dryburgh shared. “This will be my second Season. Regrettably, we did not stay the entire Season last year because Grandmamma took ill. My cousins are being presented by our Aunt Sarah, the Marquessa of Fayarrd.”

“And you, Miss Tilney? What of you? Are you anxious for a London Season?” His tone took on a teasing tone.

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Arabella studied the man who literally carried her into their shelter. She thought it amusing in some ways. If His Lordship manhandled either Abby or Annalee as he had her, her relatives would claim a case of the vapors. But Bella knew hard work’s value and was accustomed to being around men. Even so, Lord Hellsman held a mystique, which made Bella a bit uncomfortable. Gentle and aristocratic, the gentleman exemplified the

English aristocracy; yet, raw masculinity exuded from him. He made decisions based on reason and followed them through, and Bella found those qualities very appealing.

“Our mother, Sir, was at one time a member of the court, but she left to the Americas with our father some two and twenty years prior. However, she always dreamed of sending her daughters to London to enjoy what she determined was real society.”

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“You spoke of culture earlier, Miss Tilney. Is there no society in America?” he taunted.

She smiled at him, and Law felt something like desire shoot through him.

“The Appalachian Mountains possess their particular culture, but it is not society as you know it, Lord Hellsman.”

“The Appalachians?” he questioned, rolling the word around in his mouth. “I am not familiar with the area.”

“You are in error, Your Lordship,” Miss Tilney corrected. “They are the same mountain range the English celebrates in Scotland and Wales.”

Lawrence enjoyed being challenged. Miss Tilney’s audacity was quite beguiling.

“That is just your theory, Bella,” Miss Abigail asserted. “To think the mountains at home might be under the oceans and part of this land demonstrates your blue stocking education.”

To draw Law’s attention to her, the girl lightly touched his arm.

“I am certain His Lordship does not wish to discuss geography with a mere female.”

Law casually shifted his weight to permit the lady’s hand to fall away.

“Far be it from me to correct you, Miss Abigail, but I find any mental challenge invigorating. Lamentably, any woman who chooses to be successful during the Season

must temper her words. Many men prefer their potential wives to simply be an excellent household manager.”

“See, Bella, even His Lordship agrees with me,” Miss Abigail preened. “You cannot be Papa’s hoyden if you expect to attract a husband.”

Miss Tilney shrugged her shoulders.

“Who says I wish a husband? I would be content to return home and to take care of Papa’s house.”

“Of course, you wish a husband,” her sister corrected. “Mama would be horrified to have you return to America unmarried.”

“Papa insists I meet my obligations this Season,”

Miss Dryburgh also did not guard her words.

“I possess two younger sisters who have yet to know a Come Out.”

The parallel world remained: Even his sisters never spoke so liberally before him. Mayhap the openness of the Americans led them all into an instant intimacy. The Tilneys exemplified the American spirit and the American primitiveness, especially Miss Tilney, but Lawrence thought he would not trade this moment in this cave for all the drawing rooms in England. It was *freedom*.

“Did you travel from Staffordshire?” He asked to change the subject.

“We came to Matlock with my parents,” Miss Dryburgh shared. “They traveled to Lincolnshire to share time with my paternal grandparents. My family thought the Miss Tilneys might enjoy the Peak District after leaving western Virginia. We departed Hayfield this morning.”

And so, the conversation continued over the next ninety minutes. Law told them of the areas’ history, of his estate, and of some of the other families in the area. Miss Dryburgh related like information regarding Staffordshire, and the Tilneys spoke of their lives, describing the land and the people. Ironically, Miss Abigail spoke of rolling hills and Southern manners and a genteel lifestyle at her mother’s feet, while Miss Tilney spoke of



rugged mountains, poor tenants, and the use of slaves on the adjoining properties. A more diverse description of their home could not be had. It was as if the sisters described two different lands. Yet, as he thought on it, little difference existed with what he knew of England. Poor tenants and rich landowners subsisted side by side on English estates.

Outside, the rain continued, and Law added more wood to the fire. He could not imagine women of the *ton* adapting so quickly to their surroundings. Although he suspected Miss Abigail would easily matriculate into the ways of the *beau monde*, her cousin's and her sister's censure managed to quail the girl's constant complaining.

"I will sleep near the fire to assure it does not go out overnight," Law announced as the time on his pocket watch indicated sleep might be possible. His clothes remained damp, and a chill ran up and down his spine. If alone, he would remove his boots and his waistcoat, but a gentleman would never think of doing so before a lady. Moreover, if he removed the boots, Law was not certain he could get them on in the morning. The leather would likely shrink.

He permitted the women the blankets to use along with their cloaks, and they made a "group" bed near the enclosure's back wall. Law used his saddle as a pillow and his damp greatcoat for a blanket. Miserable as he remembered being in a long while, he forced himself to settle on the floor of the rock face.

"Your Lordship," a half sleepy voice he recognized as Arabella Tilney's called out, "do you have a gun for protection?"

Law smiled at her practicality.

"Aye, Miss Tilney. Several."

"That is exceedingly fine, Lord Hellsman," she said huskily. "So do I."

Law did not answer. He just widened his smile as he closed his eyes to welcome sleep.

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Law did not know how long he slept—ten minutes or ten hours—but definitely not long enough. A sharp sound came from behind him and to the left, and Law forced his eyes open to permit the fire's light in. A squeak told him immediately *who* and a sharp crack

of thunder told him *what*, as he scrambled to his feet to reach her. This new storm, was, obviously, more violent than the previous one.

Arabella Tilney huddled, like a broken animal, against the cave's sidewall, shivering and incoherent. A quick glance behind told him neither Miss Dryburgh nor Miss Abigail heard their traveling companion, and for a moment, Lawrence wondered if he should wake them. But Miss Tilney cringed and covered her head with her arms in a protective stance, and Law could do nothing less than to take her in his embrace. He draped an arm about her small form. On his knees before her, he gently encompassed her, hiding the woman's face in his chest and pulling Miss Tilney to him.

"Easy, Sweetling," he whispered close to her ear. "I have you." Another thunderclap and an accompanying lightning bolt sent her clawing at his shirt and whimpering. "Come, Mouse."

Law rocked the lady in place, stroking her back and caressing her arms.

"I will permit nothing to harm you."

The woman clutched at him, attempting to, literally, crawl under his skin, seeking his body as her shield, Miss Tilney plastered herself to him.

"Do not leave me," she begged.

"Never, Sweetling," Law murmured.

Madness claimed his reason. He held the woman in an intimate embrace, and if either of her relatives awoke and observed them, Law would be honor bound to offer for the lady; however, he could not release Miss Tilney. More than Arabella Tilney's obvious distress, Law enjoyed the feel of her along his body: her heat mingling with his. The blood rushed to his groin. She fit. Fit as if she were made for him alone.

"Come, Mouse." Law nuzzled behind her ear. "Come with me." Bent over, Law led the woman to his makeshift bed. "I will hold you until the storm passes."

Miss Tilney came willingly, never doubting Law's honorable treatment of her. She permitted Law to ease her down beside him on the rock face and then to spoon her body with his. Beyond the opening, the storm raged on, and so Arabella Tilney scooted her backside into him. Her back pasted to Law's chest. Her hips to his groin. If she noticed

the hardened bulge, Miss Tilney lodged no objections. Instead, she wriggled closer, massaging his body with hers.

Lawrence inched nearer to her, accepting the exquisite line of Miss Tilney's form. He dropped an arm across her, holding the lady to him and stroking Miss Tilney's hair from her cheek. When she wormed nearer, Lawrence permitted himself the pleasure of grinding his erection into her buttocks' crevice. Alas, it did nothing to relieve the "itch" to possess the woman; the movement only stoked the flame. Beyond normal reason, Law wanted her more than any woman he ever knew.

The woman drew Law to her, catching his shoulder and draping his body over hers as Miss Tilney rested her head on his outstretched arm.

"Thank you," she whispered as she closed her eyes.

"Any time, Mouse," Law breathed as he lowered his head to hers. He found his breathing turning shallow. Law had not taken a woman for some time, but his instant attraction to this prosaic female made no sense. Arabella Tilney was definitely not his type. In fact, her cousin better fulfilled his usual attraction. Law preferred a woman whose breasts more than filled his palms and whose long legs wrapped easily about his body. Although he favored a local widow, Mrs. Winslow, when he required an evening of decadence, unlike other men of his rank, Law kept no mistress. *Mayhap that was the source of his reaction to this woman: He needed to call on the widow. Need and release.*

Yet, as the innocent Arabella Tilney finally went still and returned to sleep in his embrace, Lawrence felt a complete peace sweep over him. Yes, his erection still screamed for completion, and, yes, his eyes examined her body in minute detail, but Law's heartbeat became steady, as if it knew the lady as its own. The thought of such lunacy caused Law to shiver from the unknown.

As if Miss Tilney understood, the woman caught the hand, which pressed her to him and brought it to her lips. She kissed his fingertips before sighing deeply; yet, never once, did she open her eyes.

Law's erection jerked again, and he leaned forward to kiss her temple lightly.

"You are a corundum, Sweetling."

Law knew himself deranged simply to lie beside the woman, as if taunting the others to catch them together, but he did not move away. Law's heart sang a song of familiarity. He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Miss Tilney. Sweet lavender covered him as Law closed his eyes to welcome sleep.