

Christian strolled slowly to the lake, the happy conversation of the other guests floating through the air. He pulled at his collar, careful not to muss his cravat. Miss Penelope Beasley had been partnered with him for this outing, and she had kept up a steady commentary on the current fashions and the gowns she'd had made for the house party. All that was required of him was to nod at regular intervals, which left him free to focus on Alice. Something had changed between them in the wood that morning. Their thread of connection had become something much stronger, and the pull toward her was becoming hard to resist.

And he was finding that he didn't want to.

He watched Pembroke help her into the boat, intent on rowing her to the privacy of the small island that boasted a Roman folly. Alice glanced his way, and when their gazes locked, she smiled and tilted her head in acknowledgment. Their growing attachment seemed mutual and Christian was glad of it. He'd never met a woman who'd captivated him so thoroughly.

She sat down in the boat and turned her attention back to Pembroke. He was nervous, wiping his hands on his breeches before taking out a handkerchief and mopping his brow. Something was definitely troubling the man, and Christian had no doubt Alice could ferret the cause out of him. Christian just wanted to stay close and offer any assistance she might need.

"Are you ready for our boat excursion?" he asked the woman at his side, lengthening his stride a bit to get to the edge of the lake and not be far behind Alice.

"Of course, my lord," she said, hurrying to keep pace with him.

He stepped to the next available boat and held out his hand to help Miss Beasley into it. She was quite unsteady and it took several moments before she was settled. The second she was, he climbed in as well, taking the oars in his hands, while a footman pushed them into the water.

He started off at a leisurely pace, keeping Alice and Pembroke in his view. She wore a fetching blue walking dress with a matching bonnet that framed her face just enough to leave room for a few curls to escape. He remembered how soft those curls had been against his cheek as he'd carried her to the horses after the attack. He'd been quite tempted to remove his gloves this morning to touch them again and see if his memory did them justice, but had decided against it. Touching her hair might have led to wanting to kiss her, and that wouldn't do.