



*Nine*



“Miss Forsythe!”

Ariana stiffened with fear. The whole party was searching for her! Had she been gone so long? Her first thought was to scurry down, but it was too likely that someone might spot her. The mortification would be unendurable. Her only choice was simply to huddle lower and try to remain unseen. To come forward now, to risk being spotted climbing down a tree was too horrible a thought for words.

“Please, Miss Forsythe,” she heard. “Let us rescue you! Let us be heroes!” Laughter.

Even if I am not discovered, she thought bitterly, my name alone shall be sufficient to provoke derision.

The guests by now were making their way across the property in all directions, and Ariana watched helplessly. She held her breath whenever anyone approached the tree, but apparently it did not occur to them to actually search within it. No one had any reason to suppose she was hiding; they assumed if they only got within range of her, she would of course come forward. Only she *was* hiding, and praying desperately that no one would find her.

After what felt like hours, though it must only have been minutes, the party began heading en masse towards the hedgerows. From where Ariana sat she could now see that behind the hedges were more of them: it was a maze. They thought she had got lost in it—what a relief! She waited for the last few stragglers to leave the area, but it was with increasing impatience. She now longed to get down. There was still a party of four making its way leisurely across the lawn in her direction. How vexing! If it were not for them, she knew she could slip down easily and be none the worse for the incident.

As they got yet nearer, Ariana could hear the loud conversation that characterized people’s voices when they were enjoying themselves socially.

“I say,” a gentleman proclaimed, “Why do we not truly find this missing creature? Perhaps she is a ravishing beauty, and would reward her rescuer with a kiss.” There was the overcharged gasp of a female pretending to be offended.

“Upon my word, Hartley, but it would be the only way you could procure a kiss!”

Ariana recognized that voice—and the enormous bonnet. Good grief, Lady Covington! Her humiliation would be ten times worse if the countess discovered her. Mr. Hartley feigned offense. In an over-dry tone he objected, “I was speaking, my lady, to

Mornay.”

*Mornay?* Oh, goodness, not him again! But she stretched her neck to get a glimpse.

“I say this was planned,” spat out the Countess. “Mrs. Bentley has a great desire to put forth her niece, and she is nothing but a pretty child, I tell you. A mere child. I saw her earlier.”

“Planned? I daresay, not; Mrs. Bentley seemed wild with worry.” Mr. Hartley looked plaintively at the countess. But the second lady laughed.

“Worry? Mrs. Bentley most decidedly wanted her niece back, yes, but to say she was worried is going a good distance from the truth.” After a meaningful pause, she added, “She was merely indignant that her niece, who is her key to invitations this year, was not forming acquaintances. In my opinion,” she added importantly, “the young lady saw an opportunity to escape her aunt’s expectations, and took it.”

“My point exactly,” stated Mr. Hartley “It wasn’t *planned*.” The foursome was still approaching and now stopped a mere ten yards or so from Ariana’s tree. The man named Hartley drew near Mr. Mornay.

“What do you say, Mornay? Is the wandering Miss Forsythe in dire need of help, or has she taken a flight of fancy and wished us all to the devil?” There was silence while the others waited for his response. Ariana’s anguish took a leap, for the hot-tempered man chanced to look in her direction. Her heart beat painfully and so loudly she thought it must give her away. And then it didn’t matter. For Mr. Mornay, after looking at the others with an unreadable expression, glanced back towards the trees, and then right up to where she was perched, scrunched and uncomfortable, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Ariana felt roundly humiliated. Here was his moment for revenge. First, she had stared at him rudely. She hadn’t meant to be rude, but she was sure it seemed so to him. Then, worse, she had trespassed on his property and collided into him at top speed. A dreadful shiver ran down her spine and drops of ungentle sweat began to pop out on her forehead, despite a mild breeze.

Meanwhile, Mr. Mornay was squinting up at her. The others, though close behind him, were speaking among themselves and failed to notice the direction of his gaze. With a drooping heart, Ariana waited for his inevitable announcement. So much for thinking of herself as the *elegant newcomer*; now she would be known as the absurd one! But the announcement did not come. Thinking it would, she had unknowingly raised her chin—she would face the worst with her head high.

Mr. Mornay turned suddenly to the others. “I doubt there is any need for—ahem (to Hartley)—a hero.” The ladies laughed. He continued, “And if Miss—Forsythe, did you say?—has had the sense to leave the party, I can but congratulate her.”

“Mornay, you beast!” chided Lady Covington, from within the reaches of her enormous, plumed bonnet. The gentleman was unmoved by the reproach and made no answer except his usual haughty expression. Mr. Hartley smiled.

“In that case, let us escort these ladies back to the tables. I am in dire need of being rescued, myself. A touch of claret should do the trick!” They turned to go, smiling. Mr. Hartley politely held out his arm to the second lady but Mr. Mornay did not offer his arm to Lady Covington. Her reaction, to Ariana’s amusement, was to pout and hurry to him, taking his arm brassily. He looked annoyed.

“Breathe easy, Mornay.” Her tone was loud and irked. “I have no delusions regarding your affections.” With that, they walked off.

Mr. Mornay had seen her, she was certain. Why had he not revealed her? That was probably something she would never know. As they left, no one looked back at the tree, and she felt an enormous relief. Even while they were still in view, she could wait no longer and moved to edge herself down, and then—to her horror—discovered her gown was stuck!

She forced herself to relax; and tried again. The tugging from the back of the gown persisted. Ariana reached as far as she could behind her, realized it was a ribbon from the back of the dress that was caught, but could not free the snagged piece. She took a deep breath and tried again, and was again without success. She felt tears coming to the surface of her eyes, but forced them away. It was all so provoking! When would this day end!

If she tore her gown she would never hear the end of it from Aunt Bentley. And bad as that was, it would be nothing next to the disdain which would arise when the whole party saw the result—for, with only the short spencer to wear over her dress, the torn fabric would be impossible to hide. Her legs were cramped and aching, and she was heartily sick of the tree. How foolish of her to climb!

She made a last attempt to get the ribbon free without having to force it. She could follow the snag with her fingers only so far—she would have to let it tear. She had no choice. But wait—she hadn’t thought to pray. She had, earlier, about not being discovered and so far God had been merciful. Mr. Mornay had seen her, but he hadn’t shared his discovery.

Reflecting quickly on her behaviour, Ariana felt utterly unworthy of divine help. But she closed her eyes to pray. *Thank you, Father, that I do not need to earn your favour. Thank you for freely giving it to me in Christ. Please help me get out of this tree without tearing my gown!*

She continued praying in a low voice, her eyes still closed, ending upon the words, “Oh, help me, *dear* Lord!” A polite cough came from below. She looked down in astonishment and saw that someone—Mr. Mornay—was looking up at her with a dark countenance. Her heart jumped into her throat. How could it be he? How could he have returned so quickly?

And, even more puzzling, why?

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