

Excerpt from "Unlacing Lilly" by Gail Ranstrom
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Devlin watched as Miss O'Rourke huddled beneath the canopy of a sheltering elm in Green Park, her straw bonnet dripping from the sudden rainstorm. She clutched a box against her chest and seemed to be arguing with her maid. A moment later, the maid dashed into the rain and ran along the path. She would likely be going to summon a coach.

This was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. It had been easy enough to find out which fashionable modiste had been employed to make the Rutherford wedding gown. He could not imagine the Duchess of Rutherford using an ordinary modiste. And it had been just as easy to discover that the finishing touches were just being made and that the gown would be retrieved before tea.

So he'd waited patiently in his coach across the street from the modiste. It had not mattered to him who came to fetch the frippery, only that whoever it was would lead him back to Miss O'Rourke's home. And thus he would know where to find her when he was ready.

But this was even better. Miss O'Rourke, herself, had come to claim her gown. And better still, the storm had broken as his coach was following her home, and now she was now alone and vulnerable--an opportunity not to be squandered. While he watched, she fished through her reticule to find a handkerchief to dab the rain from her face and the action dislodged a scrap of paper which fluttered to the ground without her noticing. He gave his driver instructions to wait, hopped down into the rain and crossed the street to the park at a run.

The storm did not let up, but rather increased in intensity. People scattered, running for protection or for the doorways of houses across the street. Even better. They'd be as good as alone. Her back was turned to him and he swept

up the small scrap of paper and secreted it in his waistcoat pocket before speaking.

"Miss O'Rourke!"

She spun in his direction, looked momentarily pleased, then covered it quickly. He arrived beside her and removed his hat to shake the rain from the brim.

"Mr. Devlin," she answered. She brushed the strands of wet hair peeking beneath her bonnet out of her eyes and gave him the tiniest of smiles. "Good heavens! You should not have gotten out of your coach. Now you are all wet."

"A small price to pay to rescue a pretty girl." He removed his jacket and made a canopy over her with his arms. "Come, I shall give you a ride home."

"Oh, thank you, but no. My maid will be returning with an umbrella any moment. She would be terrified to find me gone."

"We could watch for her along the way. Truly, an umbrella could not give you the protection of a coach."

"Thank you again, but no. I would not like to do anything that could look improper. Perhaps when Nancy comes back, you could give us both a ride?"

Drat! He could not drag her across the street and toss her into his coach in broad daylight, even if it was in the middle of a drenching thunderstorm.

"Properly chaperoned, you mean. Is that because you are to say your vows tomorrow?"

She looked down at her box she clutched to her chest, then back up at him.

"Yes. We just heard this morning that the king has given his permission, if

not his approval."

"You look a bit disconcerted about that."

"I...was not certain it would arrive in time. I really thought there would be a delay."

"Did you want a delay? Are you having second thoughts, Miss O'Rourke?"

"No!" Her quick denial belied her words. "I mean, of course not. It will be lovely to be a marchioness, and then a duchess."

She blushed. How charming. He could not resist teasing. "Ah, is that what you are looking forward to?"

A mutinous light filled her eyes. "But of course. How perfectly exquisite to have people defer to me, ape my words and actions, regard me with fear and awe. I cannot think of anything more divine. I would have to be mad to not want it, Mr. Devlin. Of course I want it."

Tears welled in her eyes and she turned away. Good God! What was wrong with her? "Miss O'Rourke, are you quite all right?"

"Yes!" She gasped and looked at him with a horrified expression. He would wager she had not meant to say any of that aloud, let alone to have betrayed her misgivings.

Devlin chuckled. "If you say so. Just as well that you are not having second thoughts, though. With everything set for tomorrow, it would be a shame to delay or cancel."

She nodded. "I shan't. I cannot speak for Olney or his family."

"He'd be mad to let one more day pass with you not his wife."

She looked up at him and he was drawn into the raw emotion in her eyes-- eyes as clear and seductive as a lazy summer afternoon. The rain had eased somewhat and Devlin slipped his jacket on before he cupped her chin, removed his handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and dabbed at her tears. She sighed and swayed toward him.

Unable to resist, he bent his head until his lips were mere inches away from hers. "You are too damned tempting, Miss O'Rourke."

She did not move, did not even breathe. Then, as powerless to stop himself as he was to fly, he brushed his lips over hers and groaned. A quick jolt of desire shot through him. Damn! He had not meant for this to happen. He could ill afford any sentiment now. He released her and stepped back. "Olney is a lucky man. I hope he knows that."

She blinked. "I...I think he would not feel so lucky if he had seen that." She glanced around, but no one had noticed.

He cleared his throat. "I apologize for my familiarity. I shouldn't have done that."

"No, you shouldn't. And I cannot believe...I allowed you that liberty."

"Believe me, Miss O'Rourke, I am as surprised as you. Shall we forget it? I swear I shall never mention it again."

She bobbed her head in agreement and glanced away. Her embarrassment was painfully obvious. "Where has Nancy got to?"

That question was concerning him, as well. She would be back soon, and Devlin did not want to give her any chance to ask questions or be able to describe him later. "I think we can safely assume that Nancy will wait for the

worst of this to pass before she comes after you. I am afraid you shall have to come with me or wait beneath a dripping tree."

"It is not necessary for you to wait with me, sir. There is nothing you can possibly do for me that I cannot do for myself."

He could not help but grin at the wide opening she had left him. "Oh, I think there may be a few things."

The remark was lost on her and she fussed with the box she'd been holding, straightening it and holding it closer.

"What do you have in the box that you are protecting so fiercely, Miss O'Rourke?"

She glanced down at the package she was now crushing against her chest. "My wedding gown."

"Ah. I wager it is a stunning creation."

She emitted an unladylike snort. "Are you coming to the wedding, Mr. Devlin?"

He nodded.

"You must tell me what you think of it."

"At the first opportunity." He glanced over his shoulder and sighed. The maid, still a block away, was returning with an umbrella. One last try. "Are you certain I cannot take you home, Miss O'Rourke. I hate to leave you alone out here in the weather."

"I am certain," she confirmed.

He put his hat on and took a step back. "Tomorrow, then."

"Oh, I had forgot! I owe you for the ribbons, Mr. Devlin. Here, if you will hold my box, I shall get the sum from my reticule."

"Never mind, Miss O'Rourke. I shall collect it from your new husband tomorrow. In full."