

The Redemption of Heathcliff by Alanna Lucas

EXCERPT

What was it about him? He'd stated he wasn't Heathcliff, but there were so many things about him that reminded her...

He's twirling a lock of hair!

Catherine's world tipped on its side, and the room began to spin. She grasped the edge of her seat and fought to control her breathing so as to not attract notice. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

Images from the past slammed against her chest. That was exactly what Heathcliff would do when he was deep in thought or conversing on a topic he was passionate about. It *was* him. It had to be. Every fiber in her body told her Mr. Bell was Heathcliff. She'd been trying to convince herself otherwise, but with evidence of this one simple habit, she knew without a doubt that he *was* Heathcliff.

But why had he told her otherwise? Was it because he was angry with her? Had she done something wrong? Then why hadn't he said as much? So many questions swirled around her mind—the most important being how would she find a moment to speak to him away from gossiping tongues?

A plan began to formulate. She would bide her time, sneak away unnoticed, and find Mr. Bell. Simple.

A short time later, her opportunity came when dinner concluded, and the ladies adjourned to the parlor while the men stayed behind for a glass of brandy. Catherine waited for the perfect moment, then snuck away from the ladies, who were either engaged in a discussion about the latest fashions arrived from Paris, or—her great-aunt included—engaged in a heated discussion about the inappropriateness of Lord Vale's very public display of his mistress.

She looked briefly over her shoulder to ensure her relative was not watching, then slipped into the corridor. The men's rambunctious guffaws echoed down the hall, and she wondered if Mr. Bell was still among them. She just had to find a way to speak to him.

"May I be of service, miss?" a polite feminine voice questioned.

Catherine whipped around, her heart pounding in her chest. The moment she saw the maid, relief flooded her body. She said the first thing that came to mind. "Could you direct me to the ladies' retiring room?"

"Yes, miss. This way."

She followed the maid down a corridor, which led to another short corridor in a quieter wing of the house. As soon as she was shown into the retiring room, the maid left, leaving her quite alone. She looked around at her surroundings, wondering what to do next. Her sole purpose was to find Mr. Bell, not actually, well... this.

She waited several minutes to ensure the maid had departed, then went to the door, opened it slightly and listened. Silence. A long sigh of relief escaped her lips. So far, her plan was working. Now all she needed to do was find Mr. Bell.

She stepped into the hall and looked about. There was no one around. Contemplating her next course for a brief moment, she decided to retrace her steps to where she'd first heard the men's gaiety, then lie in wait.

Lovely vases filled with flowers adorned the elaborate side tables resting against the walls, flanked between the tall windows.

Flowers? She glanced about. She didn't remember seeing flowers when she'd followed the maid, or windows for that matter. How was it possible that she was lost? There were only two turns, and somehow, she'd managed to lose her way.

"Looking for someone?" A deep, familiar voice that sent ripples of awareness through her called from the opposite direction.

Slowly turning around, she lifted her chin and met his icy gaze. "Actually, yes." Lightning crackled through the night sky as her heart thundered in her chest. "You."

"Why would you be searching me out?" He said as he sauntered toward her.

The harshness in his eyes gnawed away at her confidence. She swallowed hard. "I...I know who you are."

"Of course, you do, I introduced myself—"

"No." She shook her head as she pointed at him. "I *know* who you are, and you are not Mr. Bell. You *are* Heathcliff."

"Oh, but I am Mr. Bell, Miss Earnshaw. My father's name was Ellis Bell. Markus was the name given to me at birth. So, you see, I *am* Mr. Markus Bell."

He may have looked like a gentleman with his dark hair clubbed back and expensive clothing. He may even have sounded like a gentleman with his refined speech. But the wild gleam in his eyes that reminded her of dark, moonless nights on the moors stated otherwise.

He circled around her. "Why are you so certain that I am this Heathcliff person?"

Despite the knot in her stomach and anxiety rising up her throat, she held her ground. "Why are you so certain you're not?"

Electric silence lingered between them for countless seconds. He did not say a word, but simply stared at her with dark, unfathomable eyes.

The calm demeanor she'd managed up to this point snapped. "At dinner, you twirled your hair around your finger. That's how I know you are my Heathcliff!"

"No, Miss Earnshaw, if I was *your* Heathcliff, *you* would not have accepted Linton's proposal."

And with that, without a second glance, he stormed away, leaving Catherine in utter disbelief, and too stunned for any coherent thoughts.

He is Heathcliff.