

## Madeline Morgan

“Why, of all the...” Madeline lay there, silently cursing a blue streak that would have made her mother (God rest) beam with pride. Not that her mother would have beamed with pride *visibly*, of course. She’d have kept all that on the inside. She’d been a lady, after all, so she’d have *acted* properly horrified. And just like her mother, Madeline knew when to act the part (as degrading as it was) when necessary.

Fortunately for her (Madeline was really grasping at straws here to call anything “fortunate” at precisely this minute), this was not one of those situations. But given a decided lack of witnesses, she could damn well act whatever way she wanted.

Or, well, she could act whatever way she wanted for the next...oh, say, six to seven minutes. But then she looked back across the trestle at the hills beyond. She could feel the vibrations in the rail, but that didn’t do her as much good as the obvious chuffs of smoke billowing from the nearest hill, approaching ever closer. She did some quick mental calculations and realized she’d just wasted a good thirty seconds with her hostility and idle speculation. And this was no time for either.

So, the first order of business was to find out just exactly how bad this situation was, saving all the “who did this to me?” and “where can I find them so I can exact painful revenge?” questions for later. Not, of course, that

she didn't have at least a pretty good idea who was responsible for putting her in this predicament in the first place. No, she was quite certain that she knew the answers to both questions, and more importantly, she also knew exactly what she planned to do to everyone concerned once she extricated herself.

Whoops, check that. It shouldn't be just her who was in trouble here. Well, unless the kidnappers simply put a bullet in his head. "No, can't think that way," she thought. She needed to be methodical, and in all things, Madeline was methodical.

She glanced up at the chuffs of smoke. "Damn," she thought again as she realized something that had escaped her notice the first time. "The train is going downhill. It's a slight downgrade, but it is there. That means she's speeding up as she gets closer, and it looks like there's really only about four to five minutes left."

While she was recalculating the time left, she started to wiggle her body, arms, legs, torso, head, and neck. All in an effort to determine if she really was...she hesitated even to say it, it was almost too cliché. She took a deep breath while she steeled herself before finally admitting, out loud, the truth of her predicament.

"Ok, so I really am tied to a railroad track. Now I just need a mustache-twirling villain and we'll be all set."

It was desperate, to be sure, but she was able to move somewhat. Her arms had been tied together, but at the wrist, so possibly, if she could get her legs up tight enough to her chest, she might be able to slide her arms around to

the front, though, she realized, they'd still be tied together. As for her neck, the kidnappers had done nothing to restrain her there, so she could turn to look down the track as well as up.

Unfortunately, they'd placed her at a slight angle, facing somewhat toward the train. That meant turning to look down the track was more than a little uncomfortable. But she still hadn't seen him, and since they were in this together, any little bit of help might mean the difference between life and death.

So, turning her head as much as she was able, and twisting her head as far back over her shoulder as she was capable of doing, she was able to see a few yards down the track. What she saw assured her the situation was every bit as desperate as she'd feared.

Near the end of her field of vision, far enough away that neither could help the other escape, but close enough that they could hear and speak to one another, was her companion in this particular adventure, Lucian Ellsworth III ("Lucy" to his friends). He was lying very still, though Madeline could see that he was still breathing, or at least thought she could. Blood—some fresh, some caked on—covered the left side of his head.

Madeline felt a pang of guilt for bringing him into all of this. It wasn't the first time she'd had such feelings, but this time his—really, their—life was at stake. But she didn't stay focused on it for very long, given that she'd have all the time in the world for self-recrimination once they were safely out of here.

Quickly, she turned back to check on the train's progress, and her stomach dropped as she saw the train itself for the first time. It was a large, heavy freight locomotive carrying a huge load. Even if the conductor had seen her before the train had made it around the bend—a physical impossibility, she knew—the train still wouldn't have had time to stop before turning them both into paste.

“Lucy!” She yelled, hoping that he would hear her words, was faking unconsciousness, or had undergone anything other than what she suspected, which was that he'd been on the receiving end of a severe beating that had left him unconscious or dead.

Unfortunately, there was no answer, so whatever solution Madeline might come up with, she was going to have to find it alone. And quickly, as she had no more than two minutes left before the train arrived.

As if to punctuate the point, the train honked its horn, loudly and repeatedly. In between horn blasts, Madeline could hear the screaming of metal on metal, indicating that the conductor had hit the brakes. But, no doubt, he knew as well as Madeline did that it was already far, far too late.

Madeline tried to block out the sounds of the train, tried not to think about Lucy behind her, unconscious or dead, but in any case no help to her and another complication she had to overcome, if only she could avoid the distractions and come up with a plan.

Then, at precisely the wrong moment, her mind went blank...

Desperate to find an answer, Madeline searched her memory. Interestingly, the first thing that came to mind was the conversation she'd had with her father just before traveling down to Peru. She'd stopped by his house to talk about something inconsequential, but when they started talking, she'd noticed he had "that" look on his face. It was the look that told her he felt he'd been put in an awkward position by something she'd done. Needless to say, it was a look she was very familiar with, as she'd seen it many, *many* times.

Given that the issue could have been any number of things besides her upcoming trip to South America, she'd waited for him to mention it first. There was, of course, another reason she'd let him bring it up first, but that involved talking about gender roles. Discussing how she'd forever be in the "one-down" position because some men were insecure due to their inability to grow a proper X chromosome gave her migraines.

"I hear you're planning on going to visit Machu Picchu in a few weeks," he'd begun, with his usual gambit of trying to lure her into revealing too much too quickly. But she was an expert at this little game, and she'd wisely let him continue talking, waiting for the full story before she decided how to respond.

"And it's come to my attention that you intend to bring a...ah...well, a friend along with you. Am I right?" She nodded but still said nothing, though inside she was starting to boil more than a little bit.

With his next words, she silently breathed a sigh of relief, as his worry had less to do with what she'd planned—which he stated was entirely none of his business given that she was an adult woman who could make her own decisions—and more to do with what might happen when other members of the family found out about it.

He'd agreed with her that it was no one's business but hers (and maybe that of her father, who had only her best interests in mind and cared about her so deeply and would rest easier knowing that she was safe, etc.) But, he reasoned, if he could find out about her trip, so could they.

In the end, with a hug, a kiss, and a promise to take extra care, he'd wished her well and promised to keep her little secret, at least until after she'd left. Not that it did more than a few seconds' worth of good.

No sooner had they come to an accord, than the front door slammed open, revealing the silhouette of Uncle Jack, who could only have looked angrier if there were steam coming out of his ears. Without preamble, he'd come storming in, demanding this, ordering that, and generally forbidding anything that she'd ever thought of (and a few things she hadn't even considered, though now that he'd mentioned it...)

When he'd finally wound down enough to start making sense, it became apparent that he knew all the details about her impending trip, including the name and gender of her companion.

Amid Uncle Jack's tirade, Madeline's father had given her "the other look." This one usually followed soon after the first look and was indicative of an "I told you so" combined with resolution. Madeline had often wondered how a man so protective of her with regard to the outside world could be so weak when it came to family. But for the time being, there was nothing to do but wait for the family's most notorious blowhard to spend his fury.

Unfortunately, just about when it looked like he'd run out of invectives and started to take a breath—which usually indicated it was time for Madeline to stand up for herself—he had instead turned on his brother, and started in with him. But rather than call his brother to task for some failing or lack of proper response, Uncle Jack had instead tried to find an ally, railing against the "mere girl" who apparently didn't know how to act properly in public, along with making other disparaging comments about her dress, deportment, and intelligence.

Madeline had felt the cold fury quickly overtake her. It was one thing to yell at her; she'd heard it a million times before. But to call her capability into question, and to do so right in front of her as though she weren't party to the conversation, was simply too much. At last she'd had enough. Physically interposing herself between the two, her back to her father, she'd stared down Uncle Jack.

She didn't like to think about what she and Uncle Jack had said after that, but it involved some very small-minded thinking from him and some well-reasoned, if loud, counterarguments from her. In the end, though, she'd let

her fury get the better of her. “Grandpa John would have agreed with everything you said, and despite that, he would never have been so disrespectful to me!”

Of course, Uncle Jack had been absolutely furious. He ranted and raved at her, fairly screaming that he didn’t care if she wanted to run off and consort with savages. And what’s more, if she were really that stupid, she deserved what she got. She obviously didn’t realize how many average tourists went missing, or were kidnapped or even murdered, and if she wanted to risk that, the family would be better off without her. But going with a male companion when she wasn’t even married was a scandal he simply wouldn’t have. And, as patriarch of the family, that was his final word on the matter.

Even now, weeks later, she could still remember the feeling that led to the sly, deviously evil smile that found its way across her face. No sooner had the words left his mouth than she’d found the flaw in his logic. And with great relish, she’d rammed it down his throat.

Sweetly, as if the thought had just entered her “simple little brain,” she’d mentioned that she would, of course, be required by convention to obey Uncle Jack *if* he were the patriarch of the family, but here, in this particular household, that distinction went to her father. Now, if Uncle Jack wanted to come into Daddy’s house and tell him what’s what, that’d be none of her affair, but she was pretty sure that until that day came, Daddy would still be the head of this household. And as far as she was concerned, he’d already given his permission.

Uncle Jack had simply stared at her, both dumbfounded and furious to immobility. Finally, he'd managed to turn just enough to see that his brother was, in fact, affirming what she'd said. And to add insult to injury, he'd reiterated that he had wished her well.

Jack had been apoplectic with fury, mostly, she suspected, because she'd turned his rules against him. Then, of course, came the only threat left for him to make: he'd suggested that this course of action could risk her piece of the Morgan inheritance. She'd smiled at him once again, this time in the "check and mate" kind of way.

While such things might have mattered to the extended family, she was the only child of one of the five wealthiest men on earth. Her lifestyle was assured, and nothing Uncle Jack could do would make any bit of difference. Not that she doubted for one second that Grandpa John had given explicit instructions for the provision of his children and grandchildren. And again, there wasn't anything Uncle Jack could do about that, either. So, rather than offering the apology he was expecting, she'd told him she didn't give a fig about the Morgan fortune. And without even waiting for him to respond, she'd turned on her heel and started for the door.

The last thing she'd heard, just before she closed the door, was Uncle Jack shouting that she'd better not expect him to use Morgan finances to free her from any kidnappers she might happen upon—that he was washing his hands of her once and for all.

How little did she know how prophetic his words would be...

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It had been wonderful for the first several days; she and Lucy had enjoyed one another's company, though not, as Uncle Jack seemed to think, in *that* way. She simply wasn't interested in Lucy, as nice as he was. The flight down was a bit rough, but the train ride to *Aguas Calientes*—the town closest to Machu Picchu—had been spectacular.

Even their vehicle, which broke down with enough frequency that Madeline had brought along her spare toolkit (which she strapped to her arm for convenience's sake) couldn't put a damper on their enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, that's when things went horribly wrong. During their drive up to the site, the kidnappers had come after them. Lucy had insisted on driving, bless his heart, and he was fine when the only challenge was curves, but when the kidnappers tried to run them off the road, he was simply in over his head. Madeline was able to get off a couple of shots, wounding one of the kidnappers despite some horrible driving, but in the end their car went off the road, and both Madeline and Lucy hit their heads hard enough that they were in no condition to put up much of a fight.

When they finally came to, they were met with burlap sacks and the usual accommodations of kidnappers. She

was confident that they would be ok, right up to the point when the kidnappers removed their sacks, allowing both Madeline and Lucy to see them. Worse, it soon became apparent that the kidnappers knew quite a bit more about them than one might expect. They thought they'd hit the jackpot with Madeline, who quietly cursed her uncle. Not that she thought he was behind this kidnapping, but rather because if she survived it, he'd never let her hear the end of it.

No more than a day later, she got the news she'd been dreading. The kidnappers had contacted her uncle (rather than her father, who, she'd pointedly and repeatedly explained to them, would be far more likely to comply with their demands). As Uncle Jack had promised, there was no ransom forthcoming. So, since she and Lucy were no longer worth anything, they were to be killed.

She assumed she'd soon be getting a bullet to the head, but it never came. Instead, they were again knocked unconscious. This time, Madeline thought she heard some kind of scuffle just before she lost consciousness. Though it could have been rats scurrying out of the hovel where she and Lucy were being held.

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