



Persuasions of an Earl's Daughter

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: She's not about to let him steal anything else from her...least of all her heart...

Lady Lilly Musgrave is strong, capable, and utterly unconcerned with what society thinks of her. So, when her newly inherited horse is stolen, hunting down the culprits seems only natural. Her first suspect is obviously the man who wanted the horse more than she did—an arrogant, unfairly handsome rake with an even more scandalous reputation than her own... Lord August Beresford is a great many things. But he's most certainly not a thief. He should let her go off on her fool's errand alone...but he can't. So, he'll do whatever is necessary to protect her while she's investigating the crime. He will not, however, do anything foolish along the way...like fall for the prickly beauty... It's not long before Lilly realizes there's more to August than meets the eye—and she likes everything she's seeing. Unfortunately, persuading him to trust her with his dark secrets won't be easy. Good thing she was never one to walk away from a challenge...or love...

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Chapter One

She should have known he'd come.

The moment Lilly had received the news, she should have known.

And been prepared.

Instead, here she was, soaked to her skin, any remnants of curls long gone and plastered to her face and probably a little gray in color considering how cold the sudden torrent of rain had left her. She would not be so lucky as to look bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked after the sudden and short April shower.

And here he was all devastating and handsome.

The bastard.

Lilly plucked a damp strand of hair from her face and shoved it behind her ear. How had he missed the sudden torrent of rain whilst she had suffered its full onslaught? Typical. Though she was willing to wager, even wet, the man would still be handsome.

And devastating.

Lord August Beresford strode across the field toward her, his coat billowing behind him. Ivy clasped the reins of the horse and took a step closer to her as, though Spirit could hide her from him or at the very least offer some sort of shield. Inexplicably,

her heart quickened its pace, echoing his efficient and easy stride.

Lilly supposed a man like the Marquis of Blackthorpe made many a pulse quicken. In fact, he probably had a multitude of physical effects on women. However, anyone who knew Lilly Musgrave, knew men did not make her heartbeat quicken.

Until now it seemed.

She tried to swallow past a dry throat and ignore the way his gaze fixated upon her. Really, she should swiftly mount Spirit and ride off. She had no need for this confrontation and even less desire to stand sopping wet in front of a man the scandal sheets claimed to be the most handsome man in all of England.

Unfortunately, they were not wrong, and unfortunately her feet refused to cooperate with her desire to flee. After all, Lilly Musgrave never fled from anything. Her body and mind just simply did not know how to back down. Her competitive desire to win at all costs got her into a great many situations that could probably be avoided. Like this one right now.

The closer he got, the more she realized the silly caricatures in the newspapers had done him little justice. The early morning sunlight streamed about him, highlighting broad shoulders emphasized by a black, slightly faded greatcoat.

He was tall, something she didn't need to be close to realize. After all, her one guilty pleasure in life was the scandal sheets and August Beresford made an appearance in them on a regular basis. She couldn't deny there was something about how he'd been described that fascinated her. How must it be to be a man so blessed with wealth and good looks that one could simply breeze through life and do whatever one wished and go wherever one felt like?

He removed his hat as he neared. Lilly couldn't decide if her heart had picked up its

pace so much that she simply could not differentiate between each beat, or if it ceased functioning all together.

“They lied,” she murmured to herself.

She pressed her lips together and forced herself to take in a long breath whilst she planted her feet firmly, her grip on her horse’s reins about the only thing preventing her from collapsing into a puddle.

August Beresford stopped a few paces from her.

The scandal sheets lied.

He was not the most handsome man in all of England.

His mouth curved in one corner as though something about her amused him. Golden sunlight glinted off his thick curls. A long, aristocratic nose led her gaze down to his chin, where a slight dimple sat as though God had decided the man needed at least one imperfection then got it entirely wrong, creating a point of utter fascination.

Her attention did not linger there long, though. How could it when he looked at her with those ridiculous blue eyes? No one should have eyes that blue, much less a man. And in any other face, they might almost look childish except when countered with the strong planes of his face it was nothing short of devastating.

He was most certainly not the most handsome man in all of England.

Lilly felt fairly confident in her assertion that he was probably the most handsome man in the whole world.

And all she had done so far was stare at him.

“No.”

He blinked and the amusement switched to puzzlement, one tawny brow lifting.

“No?” he repeated.

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It was all she could summon.

“No,” she repeated.

No, she would not let herself be affected by something as superficial as good looks. No, she would not allow herself to stand here and gawp any longer. And no, she would not enter into negotiations with him.

There was one reason and one reason alone a man like August Beresford would seek a woman like her out.

He wanted something.

“Just no?”

Lilly nodded firmly. “You heard me.”

“You have not even heard what I have to say yet.”

“I do not need to. I know why you are here.”

“My lady, I—”

“If you will excuse me, I should be returning home.” She glanced him over as coolly as she could muster. “I’m sure your carriage is awaiting you somewhere.” She peered past him to see if she could spot the vehicle on the road that wound past her father’s estate. A man like Lord Blackthorpe probably took a carriage everywhere. After all,

he would not be so foolish to let himself get caught in the rain.

“I desire but a moment of your time.”

He said it so reasonably. As though he hadn't uttered a word that sent sparks through her mind. That would send sparks through any woman's mind.

Desire.

He'd know all about that word, she supposed. Too many women desired him. Why would they not? By all accounts, he was charming, adventurous, and worldly. Some even suggested he had a touch of the devil to him which for many a woman would only increase their interest.

She hated herself for feeling even the slightest inkling of curiosity or pretending she had some idea of what sort of a man he really was. She didn't know him. Devouring every sentence written about the man didn't mean anything. After all, words could be exaggerated. Made up even. She would do herself no favors by being fascinated by a man who only wanted one thing from her.

“No,” she said one more time, managing to muster a little more volume. “No, you are not having my horse. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”

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To say August Beresford wasn't used to women saying no to him was an understatement. Unless, of course, it was no, don't leave.

He smothered the amusement the thought caused him, knowing no wicked smiles would help him in this situation.

In fact, he wasn't certain what would. He wasn't certain at all what to do with Lady Lilly Musgrave. She was nothing like he expected her to be.

Approaching her alone had been deliberate. Manipulative even. He didn't want her young brother or father over her shoulder, watching their interaction closely. He certainly didn't want them trying to change her mind about selling the horse to him. It seemed, however, it was not a brother or father he needed to worry about. The woman had already made her mind up without a second's thought.

Glancing her over, August noted the lifted chin, the firmly set jaw, the hard gaze. He took in all of her in seconds. From the lack of a bonnet or hat to the dark, damp hair clinging to a long neck, down to a gown that might have been cream once but was hemmed with mud and plastered to a slender figure devoid of curves but intriguing nonetheless, most especially when one noted the twin points of her nipples poking through fabric not designed for a sudden shower. She should have looked vulnerable or at the very least unattractive.

But something in the way she held herself, in the proud rise of her shoulders and the shameless stance that said yes sir, I am cold, and these are my nipples, but I do not rightly care made her attractive indeed.

The attitude combined with wide dark eyes set against narrow features made him wonder if he should have done more research on Lilly Musgrave. All he knew of her was that she had been out of London Society since her family had fallen out of favor years ago and that the Musgraves were considered scandalous indeed.

How that was when the rest of the Musgrave daughters were all married off to men of good standing, he wasn't certain, but because of their self-exile to Bath and his years of travelling, he'd never come across any of them. He almost regretted it now. If he'd been a little better prepared, he wouldn't have a fight on his hands.

Or should he say a little tiff? He doubted she'd fight him for long. She might seem unimpressed with him for now, but a few charming words and she'd be willing to offer more than her horse to him, he'd wager.

Not that he would take her up on the matter.

A shiver she tried to disguise with the bunching of her fists traipsed across her shoulders. Damn. He wanted her vulnerable to his deal, but he couldn't have her freezing to death.

"Perhaps this conversation would be better had if you were a little warmer." August took a step toward her and shucked off his coat.

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Her brows knitted but she remained frozen until he slung his coat about her shoulders, and she flinched, and her eyes widened. It swallowed her and if it wasn't for the way her lips pulled into a grim line of determination, he might be guilty of thinking she looked rather endearing in his coat.

“Perhaps this conversation need not happen at all, Lord Blackthorpe.”

“I only wish to make a proposal.”

A hand to the lapel of his coat, she lifted it off one shoulder, paused, then released it, letting it drape back over her body. He'd half anticipated her throwing it into the mud, but it seemed he could not anticipate a single thing about Lady Lilly Musgrave.

“Well, I have no desire to hear your proposal, Lord Blackthorpe.”

“A moment of your time is all I ask.” He moved closer until they were barely a pace away from each other. He affected his best smile and waited for the harshness to leave her expression.

It remained. Hardened more even. His smile grew genuine, and she lifted her gaze to the skies with a sigh.

“A minute. Nothing more.”

Before he could reply, she stuffed a hand under the coat and fished around before bringing out a gold pocket watch. August could only imagine where she had secreted it and his fingers twitched with the desire to feel the precious metal to see if it was

warm from where it had touched her skin.

She flicked it open and nodded at him. “Go on then.”

Damn it. She really did mean he only had a minute. “As you know, Icarus was my uncle’s horse.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Lady Lilly’s gaze remained on the clock.

“And you were gifted him in my uncle’s will.”

“I am aware of that too.” Her tone insinuated utter boredom.

The slightest pang of panic struck him. He couldn’t recall anyone ever seeming bored by him, even when he had nothing of note to say. In fact, he’d begun to take a slight perverse pleasure in muttering silly statements to see who was listening to him. Nine times out of ten, it went entirely unnoticed, and men and women alike agreed wholeheartedly with whatever ridiculous phrase he had just pronounced.

“I should be grateful indeed if you would consider selling me the horse.”

“I—”

“I would pay more than he is worth—”

“How much more?”

“Ten per cent.”

She smirked. “He is one of the best racing horses in the country.”

“Very well, twenty per cent.”

Lilly snapped the pocket watch shut. “No,” she said simply. “And your time is up.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Are you not willing to negotiate?”

“I have no need of your money, Lord Blackthorpe, and your uncle willed me that horse because he knew I loved him greatly.”

“He’s a racehorse,” August spluttered. “What on earth are you even going to do with him? He cannot live a sedentary life like your palfrey here.”

“I am not ignorant, Lord Blackthorpe.” She lifted a boot to the stirrups of the saddle and swung herself with ease over her horse. It was only then he realized she didn’t even have a side saddle. Were it not for his coat covering most of her, he was certain he would see at the very least some bare thigh.

He wanted to see bare thigh.

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He wanted to see more.

August forced his gaze to her face. A mere bit of leg wasn't going to distract him from his mission. He wanted that horse. Needed it even. And not just for the huge amounts of money it earned in flat races.

“You’re no racer, my lady.”

She flashed a grin. “That, Lord Blackthorpe, is where you are wrong.”

She dug her heels into the horse and moved away with such speed it took him a moment to realize she was flying across the fields away from her home and he had no chance of catching up with her, even if he dashed back to the carriage awaiting him on the road.

It took him another minute for him to remember she wore his coat.

August shook his head and chuckled. Not only had he not negotiated the sale of his late-uncle’s horse, but he had also lost a much-loved coat. It seemed Lilly Musgrave intended to put up quite the fight.

And a rather large part of him looked forward to the battle.

Chapter Two

It was at times like this Lilly wished she had some genteel hobby to pass the time. Like knitting perhaps. But instead of creating something wonderful and useful like

her twin Ivy would, Lilly inevitably dropped stitches and made something that looked like it had been attacked by a wild animal.

An elbow propped upon the arm of the carriage chair, her chin pressed to her knuckles, Lilly forced herself to admire the passing scenery, taking note of the way the trees arched over the road like the lychgate in front of the parish church.

The only trouble was, that was all that could be seen, and it had been like this for two miles. Endless trees covering a rutted road with no views of fields or sweet villages or pretty churches. There was only so long one could admire brown branches and thick green leaves.

Aunt Sarah cleared her throat at her next sigh. “You know you need not have come to collect the horse,” she reminded her. “We could have sent someone for him.”

Lilly shifted to meet her aunt’s gaze. Slight amusement crinkled around her eyes. She was not known for her patience when travelling and journeys more than a day were the absolute worst. She loathed staying at travelling inns which were inevitably noisy, cold, and furnished with hard beds. Even though she had smuggled her pillow in with her luggage, she had not slept more than a few hours and her eyes were gritty and her mouth dry.

However, this journey would be worth it.

Especially if it meant annoying that arrogant Lord Blackthorpe.

“I wanted Icarus to see me. He needs to know he is coming to a good home after the death of his owner.”

“I know you have a great softness for the animal—goodness knows, you are like Ivy there—but I wonder at your determination to collect it yourself and dare I say it, your

obsession with this horse.”

Lilly blinked. “Obsession?”

“You have talked of nothing but this horse since we were informed of the terms of the will.”

“Icarus is one of the best racing horses in England. I should have expected you might be excited too, Aunt, to have it in the family.”

“I am not saddened to have such an animal in your care, and I know you shall look after him as well as Sir Henry would have hoped, but did you really need to decorate the stables with flowers before you left?” Her aunt quirked one grey eyebrow. “I love flowers as much as the next woman, but he is a horse, Lilly.”

Very well, perhaps she had gone overboard. But there was a reason Sir Henry had willed the horse to her. She and Icarus had taken a shine to each other when Lilly stabled her own stallion at Cheltenham and Sir Henry invited her to watch his horse race on many occasions when Icarus partook in the flat races at Bath and Cheltenham.

The racecourse at Bath was still being developed and the facilities were meagre therefore it had turned into Icarus stabling at her father’s estate under Lilly’s watchful eye. Whilst it was common knowledge she and Ivy had a knack for animals, it was horses that really appealed to Lilly. Something about their majesty and their wonderful temperaments and willingness to aid others meant she tended to prefer horses to people.

“You know—” Her aunt paused.

“Yes?”

She fidgeted slightly in her seat. Lilly looked fully at her again to spy her throat bobbing. Odd for her aunt who was known for being outspoken at all times.

“Aunt Sarah?”

“Your mother and father I...” She gestured vaguely. “That is...”

She’d wondered at her aunt coming on this journey when a couple of footmen and the stablemaster would have done it. She was old enough to travel unaccompanied now really.

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Was there something terribly wrong with one of them and Aunt Sarah wished for some time to explain so?

“What is it?” she managed to whisper.

“Well, we’re concerned about you that is all.”

Lilly released a rush of breath. “About me?”

“Indeed.”

“But you never need worry about me!”

“You are about the toughest young lady I know, that is true, but since your sisters have all married...”

“You do not think I am worried about not having a husband, do you?”

Her aunt chuckled. “Not at all. It was quite the surprise—and I’ll admit—a relief that your sisters settled so happily, but I never in many lifetimes anticipated as much for you.”

Lilly wasn’t certain why but the thought that even her aunt thought her entirely unmarriageable made her deflate a little. It wasn’t that she did not want to marry as such, it was just that she had never met a single man who interested her. Besides, she was still a scandalous Musgrave was she not? Despite her sisters marrying well, the taint of the Musgraves’ disasters that had seen them roused from Society combined

with the ‘new money’ status of her father left her rather on the edge of society.

But it was easier there. She had been too young to know much of London Society when they were sent out of it, and she enjoyed life in Bath. Even if it meant a slightly quieter social life than some.

“We are more worried that perhaps, well...” Aunt Sarah heaved out a hefty sigh and she imagined the talk her sisters might have given her, explaining precisely how carefully she ought to say things given her usual predilection for spilling the truth no matter what.

“Aunt Sarah, just say it,” she insisted. “We were never ones to mince words with one another.”

“Our fear is that you are lonely,” she said in a rush.

“Lonely?”

“With all of your sisters gone—especially Ivy—the house is quiet.”

“I see them quite regularly.”

“That is slightly different to having them living at home.” She gave a soft smile. “I have watched all my nieces fly and become busy with their lives and it was always expected. Your parents and I were prepared for such a time. But I doubt you ever had such thoughts.”

Lilly gnawed on the end of a thumbnail. The house was quiet without her sisters and things felt odd indeed now Ivy was gone too. That didn’t mean she was lonely, though. She met her sisters regularly and she had a few good friends not to mention her horses to keep her busy.

She wasn't lonely. How could she be? She had a busy life.

Stretching a smile across her lips, she dropped her hand to her lap. "I am not lonely, Aunt. I do not have time to be lonely. My life is busy and that's the way I like it."

She fixed her with a look that told Lilly she didn't quite believe her. She would have to do better to convince her. No one ever worried about the youngest Musgrave and that's the way she liked it. They all had enough to think about without fretting for her. With Ivy pregnant and Clementine nursing a young baby and Violet being the highlight of Bath society again, they all had enough to think on.

"Sometimes a busy life is a way of escaping one's worries."

Lilly frowned. Her busy life was the way it was because she enjoyed it and she wasn't sure she liked the idea of her parents and aunt monitoring her closely. As the youngest of four, she had always rather got away with doing whatever she wanted. She'd rather hoped that might continue.

"I am more than well." She tapped a finger against the glass window and straightened. "And I am even better now. Look, we are here."

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It had been a week of unexpected incidents.

First August hadn't been able to persuade Lilly Musgrave to part with the horse she'd inherited from his uncle.

Now, he failed to capture anyone's attention as he walked through his late-uncle's house in search of his cousin.

Each room was a bustle of activity. Sheets were being thrown over furnishings while other pieces were being moved. He'd already spied several carts by the stables filled with everything from chairs to taxidermized birds to a perambulator that had to be decades old considering his cousin Percival was five-and-twenty.

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Whether any of these things would be kept in the family, August didn't know. He'd put his money on Percival stripping the house for all it was worth then leaving it to mold while he lived as luxuriously as he could for as long as he could in London. Percival was not known for planning carefully.

August paused at the library door and his heart sank when he spotted a servant filling wooden crates with books. It had been years since August spent time here but to see the floor-to-ceiling shelves barren and empty, stripped of his uncle's beloved books made his throat tighten. He shook his head. He was being ridiculous. August enjoyed reading as much as the next man, but he'd rather be outside on any given day.

He'd rather by racing a horse at top speed across the countryside.

He pressed his lips together. If it was up to him, he'd be doing just that on Icarus at this very moment, but that blasted Musgrave woman had scuppered his plans.

"Ah, Augie!"

August tightened his mouth further. He loathed that nickname.

"Percy." He greeted his cousin who carried two bright pink vases, cradled in an arm each like ugly newborns.

Curled to within an inch of its life, Percy's golden hair flopped in front of his face, and he tossed his head only for the curls to fall straight back into his vision. Calling Percy a dandy was being polite. From the tightly cinched jacket whose cut August knew was aided with a corset to the boots that were so highly polished August feared

they would start a fire should they catch the daylight in the wrong manner, Percy was every part the caricature of a fop.

“Do you want these?” Percy offered out the vases. “I cannot for the life of me figure out what to do with them.”

August peered at the hideously formed vases for several moments.

“They’re not worth anything,” his cousin added helpfully.

But of course they weren’t. Clothing oneself as his cousin did was not cheap.

“I think I shall give them a miss.”

Percy shrugged. “I’ll see if the housekeeper wants them.” He went to turn around then paused with a frown. “Are you here to help, Augie?”

“Actually, I was here to see the horse.”

Percy’s frown deepened “The horse?”

“He meansmyhorse.”

August held back an irritated breath as Lilly Musgrave strode down the hallway as though she owned the place. Servants stepped aside for her, and his cousin fumbled with the vases, nearly dropping both to the floor before he recovered.

August supposed he couldn’t blame anyone. It wasn’t just the big, beautiful eyes, but the way she held herself in a gown slightly crumpled from travel yet practically regal in a deep purple that fit a trim figure to perfection. For some reason he rather missed the damp hair all sticking to her face and making her look younger than her seven-

and-twenty years.

Oh yes, August had done his research properly this time. Born to a merchant who had done well for himself indeed by marrying a duke's sister then gaining a title from the crown, Lady Lilly Musgrave was the youngest of four sisters. Her younger brother was on the continent somewhere, doing what many young men of his age did and no doubt sowing his wild seeds. August had done similarly with the exception of sowing any seeds.

After stealing the Prince Regent's dog—albeit accidentally if an ex-servant of theirs was to be believed—the family had suffered the cut and escaped to Bath. Whether the Musgraves cared that much about their exile remained to be seen. As near as he could tell, her sisters had made excellent matches and the gossips suggested it would not be long before Society was forced to accept them back. There was even talk of the youngest Musgrave marrying a duke though which duke, no one could say, and August couldn't think of any who were unwed and young enough for Lilly.

Percy blinked several times, blew a curl unsuccessfully from his face then widened his eyes. "Oh...the horse."

"Icarus," August repeated, unable to keep the irritation from his voice. Was everyone going to ignore him today?

Hands to her hips, Lilly glanced him over. "What are you doing here?"

"Percy is my cousin," he pointed out.

She looked away from him. "Well, I have come to collect Icarus."

"He's in the small stable," Percy said as though he was not talking of one of the finest racehorses in the country.

August was mildly surprised his cousin hadn't fought the gifting of Icarus to a stranger given how valuable the horse was, but Percy had little interest in animals and was likely distracted with the income that the sale of his father's belongings would bring.

"Thank you." Lilly twisted on a heel.

"Wait!" Percy called. He lifted one of the vases as she pivoted again. "Do you want to take these too?"

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“Uh, no, but thank you.”

Percy shrugged. “Maybe the valet will want them.”

August ignored his cousin and strode after Lilly, catching up with her as she skipped down the rear steps toward the courtyard.

“Did you come alone?” he asked as he came to her side.

“No, of course not. My aunt is seeing to our own horses.” She nodded toward a carriage, black and shiny and emblazoned with her father’s crest.

“But of course. How silly of me,” he muttered dryly.

“Why do you say it like that?”

He didn’t know how to answer that. Lilly Musgrave was the sort of woman who rode astride and didn’t wear a bonnet to protect herself from the sun or the rain and came from a family who stole dogs, and climbed statues naked, and generally caused all sorts of trouble. August wasn’t averse to trouble himself, but the difference was, he didn’t mind handling the trouble that followed him.

He just didn’t need this troublesome woman getting in the way of his great plans.

“You’re of an age where you can travel unaccompanied,” he muttered vaguely.

“I rather think my father might have something to say of me staying at a traveler’s inn

alone,” she pointed out.

“Yes, well...” He didn’t manage anything more than that. She picked up the pace, forcing him to lengthen his stride until he was practically running after her.

She froze in the dim, wide entrance to the stables.

He came up behind her. “What’s the matter?”

Lilly gestured about the stables. Straw lay scattered across the stalls, tack hung from hooks upon the walls.

But there were no horses. None.

Not even Icarus.

Chapter Three

Lilly might have suspected Lord Blackthorpe to be behind the disappearance of Icarus were it not for a curse word so sharp escaping him that it made her want to cover her ears.

Not that she hadn’t uttered the word under her breath a time or two but that was a little different to hearing it bared out loud in his deep voice.

Of course, the man could be an excellent actor. After all, a rake like himself with a history of breaking women’s hearts was probably adept at playing pretend.

She spared him the briefest glance before she marched outside, put her hands to her hips, and peered around the courtyard.

“What are you doing?” he asked, coming to her side.

“Icarus has to be here somewhere.”

There was no sign of any stablehands or grooms or farriers. From the bustle inside, she imagined they were all dispatched to aid with packing up the house. She paced over to her aunt who had found a nosebag for their own horses. Any other person might be perplexed at the lack of stablehands but Aunt Sarah could never be accused of being a traditional sort of woman.

“No one to help?” she asked.

Her aunt shrugged. “Seems everyone is occupied.” She glanced past Lilly. “Lord Blackthorpe is it not?”

Lord Blackthorpe stepped past Lilly and offered a dip of his head. “Mrs. Knighton. We’ve met once or twice in London, I believe.”

“Indeed. A pleasure to see you again, my lord.”

“Call me August, please.”

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Lilly released a huff, and her aunt gave her a bemused smile. “Are we delaying you, Lil?”

“I’m going to try to find someone who knows what is happening,” she declared. “The horse has to be somewhere.”

“The horse is missing?” Aunt Sarah uttered the words as she headed back toward the house, and she responded with a wave of her hand.

Lord Blackthorpe came after her. She threw an irritated look over her shoulder. “But of course you would follow me.”

“I should like to know where the horse is too.”

Lilly stilled and looked at him. “For all I know, you took Icarus for yourself.”

“I only just arrived,” he protested.

“Perhaps you thought you could steal him away before I collected him.”

“I’m no thief, Lilly.”

She narrowed her gaze at the use of her name. The trouble was, she never felt much like a lady so some demand to be called otherwise would feel uncomfortable on her tongue. She’d long suspected that not only did she take after her father’s side with the dark looks but that she had eschewed any drop of noble blood and was meant to have been a merchant’s daughter perhaps living in the wilds of the London docks, amongst

crusty sailors and cursing dock hands.

“All I know, Augie—”

He winced and she grinned.

“—is that you wanted that horse and now it is gone. One could assume that you decided I should not have him and hid him away somewhere.”

Lord Blackthorpe’s bright gaze darkened. “One would be assuming wrong.”

“And the only other reason I can fathom you being here is to try to persuade me to part with Icarus once again.”

“It is my cousin’s house, as I pointed out.”

“Yet, you were hoping to negotiate with me were you not?”

His expression grew smug. “So you admit that I did not take Icarus? Because I would hardly negotiate on a horse I already have, would I?”

Lilly lifted a finger, opened her mouth, then dropped her hand to her side. “Well, I’m not selling him. Besides, you are wealthy enough. Surely there is some other horse you can purchase? The country is hardly devoid of racing horses, is it?”

“My uncle and I intended to race that horse together.” His tone was edged with irritation. “I have little idea why he willed Icarus to you when we were meant to go into business together.”

The crease appearing between Lord Blackthorpe’s brow could have been attributed to annoyance or frustration even, however, for the briefest moment, Lilly assumed it to

be from pain. Grief even. From what she knew of Lord Blackthorpe, the man did not even possess a heart let alone understand how to use one. It was more than likely annoyance surely?

“What sort of business?”

“We were meant to build a racecourse at Kinton. Uncle Henry was keen on the idea.”

“At Kinton? You want a racecourse built across your land? That seems—”

“My point is, Icarus was going to bring renown to the course and my uncle knew as much.”

“It’s hardly my fault Icarus was willed to me.”

Lord Blackthorpe shook his head. “I cannot fathom it. It makes no sense.”

She straightened her shoulders. “I am a fine horsewoman.”

“I saw...”

She nearly lost her thread of thought when she heard the acknowledgement that he had indeed recognized her skill the other week.

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“And...well, I...” She scrabbled for the rest of her defense.

Damn the man. It was barely a compliment. A mere two words. Simply because they came from a man who looked more like a Greek God than a regular Englishman should not mean anything. She was no simpering debutante for goodness’ sake.

“And I cared for Icarus whenever we were at Cheltenham,” she managed to finally spill out. “Your uncle knew I would look after the horse well should anything happen to him.”

“But surely—”

“Sir!” Lilly spotted a man in the gardens tending to a flower bed. “Sir,” she called again and dashed over.

The man rose to his knees and nodded toward the flower plot. “Probably no point in tending to them. If the new master has his way, even the flowers shall be torn from their roots and sold for a penny.”

Lilly struggled for a response. She didn’t disagree.

“Where’s the stablemaster, Dorridge?” Lord Blackthorpe asked.

The man’s face warmed, his eyes crinkling deep in the corners. “August! I didn’t know you were coming. Come to put a stop to your cousin’s ransacking?”

“I wish I could, but Percy can do what he wishes with the estate now.”

The gardener tutted. “A damned shame. Your uncle would hate to see this happening.”

“My uncle knew full well what Percy would do as soon as he discovered he was ailing. That’s why he gifted the best pieces before he passed.”

The man’s bushy grey brows lifted. “I always wondered where the Hercules statue vanished to.”

Lord Blackthorpe leaned in. “You might wish to come and look at the garden at Kinton one day.”

“Ah.” The gardener chuckled. “I might well do just that.”

“You could do one better. I have need of a fine gardener. If you decide there is no place for you here anymore, I would be grateful indeed if you would come work for me.”

Lilly swung her gaze between the two men. A warmth existed between them that she might never expect from a marquis and a servant. She certainly would never anticipate any act of charity or friendship from a man known for his arrogance and disdain for other’s feelings.

She’d never visited the Kinton estate, but the gardens were renowned having been designed by Humphry Repton not long ago and she doubted Lord Blackthorpe had let it go to fallow.

“I shall have a think on it, my boy,” the gardener promised. “As for stablemaster, he took off a few days ago. Reckon Brown realized he’d be out of a job before long anyway and found himself a new position.” He shrugged. “You’ll have a time finding anyone who knows anything around here. It’s all gone to chaos since the arrival of

your cousin.”

Lilly forced herself to remain still whilst August wished the man farewell, and she offered a swift, polite goodbye before marching off through the gardens. Icarus had to be here somewhere, and she’d waited too long already to be at his side.

Besides, the sooner she found Icarus, the sooner the disconcerting Lord Blackthorpe would cease shadowing her steps and the sooner she would be able to cease thinking of him.

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If August didn’t know better, he’d suspect Lilly had previous experience as a private investigator with how she marched about the gardens and courtyard looking for someone who might know something.

Of course, he should be annoyed at being accused of stealing a horse that didn’t—but should—belong to him. Instead, he found himself mildly amused at this slim woman barking demands at various members of his uncle’s household about a horse. Most looked entirely perplexed. A few suggested finding one of the stablehands though where they were was anyone’s guess.

“Perhaps we should ask your cousin.”

August snorted. “Percy? The man can’t keep track of time with a clock in his hand let alone a horse that doesn’t belong to him.”

“Rather uncharitable of you.” She stilled halfway across the lawns still damp from yesterday’s rain.

Her hems were muddy again. He couldn’t fathom why but he liked her muddy hems.

It reminded him of when he first set eyes on her, he supposed, but that still did not really make sense. All she'd done was refuse to negotiate and ride off. There was nothing about that interaction that warranted some strange, warm feeling.

In fact, none of this made sense. The horse should be here, it should be his, and Lilly Musgrave should be back in Bath riding astride her horse across her father's estate and not getting in the way of his plans.

Plans that had been set in place. He and his uncle were going to build a fine course at Kinton and use Icarus's renown to bring in the crowds and competition. What changed since his uncle had fallen ill, he didn't know.

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It had to be because of her. He watched her hasten up to a boy who had found a moment's peace sitting on an overturned bucket between the stables and the carriage house. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he ceased thinking of her as Lady Lilly Musgrave. It seemed erroneous somehow even though they were not well-acquainted enough for him to refer to her by her first name. Something about her warranted familiarity.

Her bonnet hung from its ribbons around her neck and a few dark brown curls swung about her face. In the space of minutes, she had gone from daughter of an earl to a wild country lass with rosy cheeks.

Somehow, this woman had persuaded his uncle to part with the horse. He cocked his head and eyed the interaction with the boy from a few paces away. The question was, how? He couldn't spot a single element of guile in her. Whilst she was beautiful, she seemed to have little idea how to use her good looks and her strange, stomping sort of walk hinted at someone who had never once decided to sway one's hips to snare the gaze of a gentleman.

Perhaps she was extremely clever. Perhaps it was all a trick.

Well, whatever she'd done to sway a poorly man into giving up his prize horse, August wouldn't fall sway to it, and he would most certainly cease being amused or even intrigued by her.

"You saw the horse?" he heard her exclaim.

August spurred into action and covered the distance across the yard in moments.

“You saw the horse?” he repeated.

The boy rose to his feet, took a large bite of an apple, and nodded, his cheeks bulging.

“I just asked that,” Lilly snapped.

“Where did you see him?” August demanded.

The boy shrugged and spoke around a mouthful of apple. “They took him away late last night. I thought it was whoever owned it now. Mr. Hampton said something about it belonging to a fine lady now His Lordship was dead an’ all.” He glanced at August. “Sorry, my lord...now he has passed an’ all that.”

Lilly folded her arms across her chest. “Who took him and where?”

The stablehand shrugged. “Two men. I didn’t see much. It was dark.” He took another large bite of the apple and swiped a chunk of it off his shirt. “They went north. Figured they were taking it to the lady.”

August ran a hand over his jaw. “And you did not think to tell anyone this?”

“Who would I tell? Mr. Hampton is gone and there was no one here.” The boy swung a look between the two of them, his eyes widening. “The horse weren’t my responsibility. I didn’t even know if I still had a job what with His Lordship being dead...uh...passed.”

August muttered a curse under his breath.

Lilly nodded as though in agreement with the curse. “I certainly didn’t send anyone to collect Icarus.”

“Horse thieves,” August muttered.

She cursed aloud and he fought the amusement twitching at his lips when she uttered words that should have sounded inappropriate falling from such delicate lips, but instead seemed entirely correct. Really, he shouldn’t be finding anything amusing about this situation. Who knew what would happen to the horse?

Before he could ask the boy anything else, Lilly pivoted on a heel and marched into the larger stables where both their horses were. She emerged only moments later, and August blinked several times to ensure what he was seeing was correct. She sat astride one of her horse’s which wouldn’t have shocked him given what he’d witnessed previously.

Except this time there was no saddle.

An apple dropped to the ground and rolled into August’s boot. He looked at the boy to see his mouth wide open, his eyes bulging.

“Cor...” murmured the boy.

Cor was about right.

“What are you doing?” August demanded.

“Going to find my horse,” she declared, gripping the horse’s mane and directed it toward the courtyard exit.

Before he could step in front of her or warn her of the ridiculousness of her declaration, she yelled a command to the horse and raced out across the cobbles.

The boy gave a whistle. “Never seen anything like that before.”

“Cease your gawping,” August snapped, “and saddle my horse.”

The stablehand straightened and closed his mouth. “Aye, my lord.”

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“Then find out where her aunt is and tell her her niece has run off and she and her driver must pursue her immediately.”

August doubted Lilly would catch up with any horse thieves nor would she find any evidence of Icarus, but she was out there, alone, riding bareback on a horse at speeds a woman like her had no business riding. Even without horse thieves in the mix, she was going to end up in trouble, and while it might be easier to find Icarus without her in the way, he didn't wish any harm to her.

“Tell Mrs. Knighton I'm in pursuit,” he added.

Chapter Four

Not many people would accuse Lilly of being the most sensible of people. Not that she was insensible of course, it was just that she could make rather rash decisions. She never had the patience for sitting around and debating whether an action was the right one. Usually, however, it all turned out for the best.

As she slowed the horse to a canter and took several deep breaths, she glanced up and down the road. Well-travelled, the road was flat, worn smooth by the heavy usage. She'd already passed two wagons and a mail coach, though she hadn't bothered to ask if they had seen Icarus. If he was taken last night, the horse thieves would be well ahead of her.

Poor Icarus. Was he scared? Confused? Hungry? What if the thieves harmed him in pursuit of a quick exit?

They would know this was a fine racehorse and needed looking after but desperate people made foolish decisions. All she could think of was getting to her horse and ensuring he was safe.

Though perhaps a small part of her had considered fleeing from August Beresford.

Augie.

She smirked to herself. It didn't suit him—the nickname. It belonged to a homely sort of man, and she saw it made him scowl in annoyance when she used it. There was nothing homely about August.

His full name fit him like a beautifully tailored jacket, though. From bronzed skin to golden hair, he reminded her of the last days of summer and whenever he looked at her as though he could not quite understand her, she felt warm.

That effect, unfortunately, did not help her make sensible decisions. That's why it was better she got out of there. Even if she was on a road she had only ever travelled by carriage.

Lilly was mindful of the fact there had been two incidents with highwaymen on the Great North Road in the past month. One such incident had turned violent, and she regretted reading about it now.

She had little to offer in the way of riches unless they liked gloves that were missing a button and the rather expensive mulberry silk ribbon that her bonnet clung desperately to. She did have some coin tucked into the bodice of her gown but it was mere pin money—nothing to stave off desperate thieves.

So it was with some relief when she spied The Red Lion. Her whole family had stayed in it on a journey to York a few years ago and it was comfortable and clean.

The patrons were mostly travelers with a few of the local farmers popping by for pie and ale in the evening. Maybe she could get some answers and then...

She sighed. Then figure out what on earth to do next. How could she turn around and slink back to witness Lord Blackthorpe's smug expression?

Well, she wouldn't. She'd find answers. She and her sisters had not dealt with several mysteries and problems in the past few years for nothing. Surely she had learned something?

Set at a crossroads, the coaching inn occupied a large stretch of land. A triangular frontage set onto a long length of white painted walls and black timbers was topped with an uneven tiled roof. An arched gap in the building allowed access for carriages and Lilly spied several vehicles in the courtyard. No sign of Icarus, though, and her optimism deflated somewhat, but of course he could be being tended to.

She guided her horse into the courtyard and a boy no older than five-and-ten hastened out from the eaves. He paused, tugged off his hat, and scrubbed a hand through his hair when he found no reins to snatch.

"Uh..."

Lilly slid off the horse. "Can you ensure he is fed and watered?"

"Uh..." the boy repeated.

"And perhaps you might tell me if you have seen a horse this morning."

The boy straightened and stuffed his hat back on his head, leaving it looking a little flat. "Well, I've seen plenty, ma'am."

“That is, a specific horse.” She gestured above her. “Sixteen hands high, dun colored. A fine-looking animal. You would take note of him.”

The groom wrinkled his nose. “Don’t remember any horses like that, ma’am, but I’ve only been here since five. You might want to ask Tommy.”

“Where is Tommy?”

He glanced at the sundial mounted upon the courtyard wall. “Not back for another two hours I think.”

Lilly nodded and chewed on her bottom lip. She couldn’t think what other choice she had but to wait. If this Tommy knew anything of Icarus, she needed to know. There did not seem much point in riding blindly on and if Icarus had been taken this way overnight, there was a high chance the thieves stopped here.

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That's if they were looking after him properly. And if they did not have help elsewhere. Somewhere to hide out perhaps.

"It's all about plucking at strings," she muttered, and the boy cocked his head and peered at her as though she were truly mad.

She couldn't recall who had even said that whether it was one of her sisters or even Aunt Sarah or perhaps a cousin in a letter. But mysteries were about picking at threads until everything unraveled, even when the threads seemed to lead nowhere.

At least that was what she had been told. The truth of the matter was, she hadn't been too interested in this investigation business. It seemed too slow, too tiresome. If she could not find out an answer instantly, she lost interest swiftly.

But for Icarus's sake, she would have to be patient.

"If you could inform Tommy that I wish to speak to him when he arrives, I shall be in the taproom."

The lad peered at the unsaddled horse, rubbed his forehead leaving a slight smudge of dirt on his face, then nodded. "Right you are."

Lilly strode out of the courtyard and headed toward the front door. The sound of horse hooves didn't snare her attention until they ceased but before she could turn to see who had arrived in the vague hope she had somehow already found Icarus and the thieves, a hand curled firmly around her upper arm.

Instinctively, she tugged against it.

“I don’t think so,” August said.

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August told himself the fury he felt was natural. Entirely expected really. Even when it made his hand shake as he gripped her arm and felt the warmth of her skin seeping through a thin spencer. Surely he’d feel the same worry and fear for any young woman behaving so recklessly?

And now she was here. About to step into a coaching inn entirely alone. No wonder he was furious. She hadn’t fallen to the ground, hadn’t been thrown from the horse, hadn’t been set upon by highwaymen. No, she was here, alive and well with her gaze narrowed to slits as though she was the one in the wrong for pursuing her.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

Lilly glanced down at where his hands pressed into the velvet of her spencer. “I could ask the same of you.”

He wasn’t falling for that trick. The moment he released her, she’d dart into the inn. There could be drunkards in there or criminals. Someone hoping to take advantage. But as he followed her gaze down, he came to the realization this was the first time he’d touched her. He felt strength beneath his fingertips which shouldn’t have surprised him given he’d already seen her mount two horses with the ease of someone who was unaccustomed to sitting around and embroidering or whatever it was genteel ladies did. But what was worse, was the strange sensation that shot up his arm and made the hairs on the back of his arms prick.

He’d touched plenty of woman. Not, perhaps, in the way the scandal sheets assumed,

however, a mere grasp on an arm shouldn't have affected him in such a manner, most especially when the arm belonged to someone who was steadily becoming the most irritating woman in the world.

"Let me go." She pulled against his hold, but he kept his grip firm. Her jaw firmed. "I said, release me."

"You cannot go in there."

"Watch me." She stepped forward and he dragged her back.

As strong as she might be, she was no match for him. She might not spend time embroidering but he didn't waste time sitting around in gentleman's clubs either. If he wasn't riding about the estate, he was fencing or boxing.

"Blast you, August Beresford, release me."

Well, it was better than Augie and he'd been thinking of her as Lilly ever since he'd seen her with curls plastered to her pale face.

"You cannot go in there and you most certainly should not have ridden off. What the devil were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that someone had stolen my horse and that I was not going to waste a moment more. For all you know the horse thieves could be in there right now and you are letting them get away."

"Icarus wasn't in the stables. Do you think they're hiding him in the taproom?" He let his lips quirk though he wasn't certain how amused he felt right now really. The quirk came easily, though. His practice of being the charming, scandalous, and never serious marquis had paid off.

She huffed out a breath. “I’m going to wait for the stable boy who worked last night,” she admitted. “He might have seen something.”

August swung his attention to the main road. No carriages or speeding horses made their way down the lane and it could be some time before the aunt and her men caught up with them and took her niece in hand. Short of tying her up somewhere, there was little he could do to keep her safe. His best bet was to let her wait and watch over her until her aunt arrived. Slowly, he eased his grip, one finger at a time.

Just let her go, he told his fingers.

His fingers struggled to give up the odd sensation that came with holding onto her. Perhaps it was simply his survival instincts kicking in. After all, letting this woman go was like releasing a wild stallion in a busy crowd. Anyone could be harmed in her wake.

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She shucked off his remaining touch and shoved open the creaking door to the inn. No one paid them much heed, the bubble of conversation between patrons continuing as she marched through to the taproom and stopped at the bar.

To August's relief, the inevitable den of dubious characters and drunken louts never transpired. A group of well-dressed men sat at a table in the corner and a young couple who could not tear their gazes away from one another to even notice their food being placed in front of them were seated by the window. With any luck, the wait for Lilly's aunt would be a peaceful one.

"I'll have a beer," she demanded, forcing August's attention back to her and the thick-armed barkeep.

The man's wiry eyebrows lifted. "What will you have? We have stout, porter or amber ale."

Her eyes rounded and August didn't bother to hide his smirk. If she was trying to impress him, she'd have to do better.

"I'll have a, uh, porter."

"Make that two," said August, lifting two fingers.

The man swiftly poured them two tankards of beer so black and strong-smelling, August almost couldn't wait to see Lilly take her first sip. An unusual lady she might be, but he doubted she was the beer drinking type usually.

Her hand moved to her bodice and August watched the movement for a moment before swiftly reaching into his pocket and handing over payment. She ceased her rummaging, her cheeks slightly red, and took the beer, choosing a seat by the filmy windows of the inn. August joined her. At least here, he'd be able to spot her aunt coming and put an end to this torture.

"Perhaps it would be wise to keep your coin elsewhere," he advised in low tones, trying not to think about how the coins would be warm from her bare skin and if he'd allowed her to rummage a little longer, he might have stolen a peek at something neither he nor the barkeep should be seeing.

"I am not exactly endowed with places to keep it," she said, opening her arms wide and gesturing to the spencer that did nothing more than cover her arms and the pretty purple gown that followed her lithe figure perfectly.

"No hidden pockets this time."

"None I'm afraid. I did not realize I needed to dress informally and there are only so many hidden pockets one can demand of a seamstress." She took a sip of beer, and he watched her lips purse carefully around the edge of the tankard. The moment the tang hit her tongue, he saw it, the slight wrinkle of her nose and the widening of her eyes.

"This is excellent beer," he said and took a long gulp.

"Yes." She nodded and mimicked him. "Excellent beer," she said with a strangled tone. "You need not stay with me you know."

"You forget I have an interest in ensuring Icarus is well too. He was my uncle's horse."

"Who was willed to me."

The only reason Icarus hadn't been given to August was his uncle hadn't managed to change his will. August knew his uncle had a soft spot for Lilly and the woman spent quite a lot of time around his uncle's horses. Their shared love of the animals was something on which his uncle would often comment. But Uncle Henry had been keen on August's idea to use Icarus to establish a new racecourse at August's estate—racing was his uncle's passion. There was plenty of flat acreage perfect for races and the idea of horse's thundering across land August never set foot on made him grin. His father would have hated it.

"You're not having him, you know." She tugged off her gloves, set them on the table and waved a finger at him. "Do not think you can charm me with that smile."

He hid said smile behind the tankard. His reputation usually ensured the cooperation of any lady, but this day hadn't gone anywhere near to plan. However, if nothing else this afternoon would prove an amusing one.

And a challenge. Lilly Musgrave was a pain in his rear to be sure.

But she was also about the most fascinating woman he had ever met.

Chapter Five

"Of course. It could have been you who arranged the theft of Icarus." Lilly propped her elbow on the table then her chin on a balled fist and tightened her gaze on August.

It was a mistake really. Looking at him properly. So was the porter. Of course she'd drunk ale before. In fact, she tended to prefer the refreshing flavor of the light, golden ale her father had let her steal little sips of as a girl to most alcoholic drinks.

But she swore this thick almost black drink tasted like it had dirt in it and it made her head a little fuzzy. The fact was a few delicate sips of beer was quite different to the

long gulps she'd been forced to take lest August look at her in yet more amusement.

Unfortunately those gulps had left her tongue loose. Or at least looser than usual. There would be those surprised to know she kept anything back at all. Being considered a scandalous Musgrave from quite the young age, Lilly never saw the point in being anything but. If people were to paint her with a brush, she might as well enjoy the benefits of the brushstrokes.

She hadn't quite meant to accuse the man of theft, however. Not yet at any rate. More investigation was needed.

Nor had she meant to run away and frighten Aunt Sarah. Getting a scolding from a renowned rake like August Beresford was enough to chasten any girl.

His responding smirk didn't help matters. She longed to lean forward and swipe it from his face or smother it.

With her lips.

She tilted the tankard and eyed the remnants of the porter. How much had she drunk? Thinking of joining a long line of women who imagined kissing August Beresford? Ridiculous.

Her gaze fell to his lips again while she waited for a statement of defense. How many lies had those lips formed? How many women had fallen prey to them and allowed him to sway them into bed by way of beautiful words?

Lilly sighed inwardly and let her chin rest more heavily on her hand. She had to face facts. He could state any manner of falsehoods and that would not change how beautifully full and soft his lips were or how the dip in his chin taunted her. No one could deny the beauty of August, not even her.

That did not mean, however, he could get away with stealing her horse.

“Do I look like the criminal sort, Lilly?”

She studied him, forgetting such an act would not help the whole thinking of kissing him matter. If anything, it was criminal that such a terrible rake could look so beautiful.

“Criminals can look like anyone,” she said primly, following the line of some scratches on the table with a fingertip.

“Know lots of them, do you?”

She tugged her finger away and snapped her gaze up when she realized the scratches were deliberate and formed the shape of something rather crude. Wouldn't he be surprised to know her sisters had found themselves entangled with some quite nefarious characters. The temptation to tell him all about the investigative society her late-aunt had started threatened to tumble from her lips, so she pressed them together.

"Not as many as you, I'm sure." Given his reputation for being quite the dark character, she should keep her guard up. He could still be behind the theft.

"Funnily enough, I do not spend much time with criminals." He cocked his head, a smug smile cracking across his face. "Despite what you might have read."

Warmth flowed into her face. She didn't want him knowing she'd devoured every snippet of information about him, and she had essentially just given herself away. "I only know what people say," she replied haughtily.

"I know what people say about you."

"Oh yes, well all of that is true," she shot back. "We are dog-nappers, and have a penchant for climbing statues naked and vomiting on fine ladies." She leaned in a little. "And do not forget we are new money."

"So scandalous," he agreed, his smile growing and making her feel even hotter. "How exactly did you end up kidnapping the Prince Regent's dog?"

"We petted him."

His brows lifted.

"We petted him, and he snuck into our carriage, and none of us realized until we were well on our way home." She sipped the beer and forced herself to swallow the tiny

drop. "It was all just one big mistake really."

"And the statue?"

"Yes, my brother did climb a statue naked after getting rather inebriated, but he was terribly young and could not yet handle his ale."

"Unlike you."

"Precisely." She ignored the sarcasm in his tone. "By then my father had already eaten bad fish and thrown up on Lady Beaumont's shoes so once we accidentally stole the dog, our cut from Society was complete."

"Well, you're not missing much if that's any comfort."

Lilly agreed but she wasn't going to tell him that. She didn't want him thinking they had anything in common. To save herself a response, she glanced out of the window.

The sooner this stablehand or her aunt arrived the better, then she would not be stuck drinking horrible beer with this arrogant man who was determined to argue with her about everything. If she said rain was wet, she was certain he'd tell her otherwise.

If she told him about the Duchess's Investigative Society and how she and her cousins had been instrumental in aiding many women in solving everything from mysteries to crimes, he'd probably laugh at her and then definitely argue with her. He'd claim they weren't crimes or that the mysteries had been solved by someone else perhaps. After all, because of the nature of their society, it was better it was kept quiet. Discretion was vitally important in ensuring women could come to them for aid when they were ignored by others.

Movement outside the inn caught her eye and she spied a boy scurrying past toward

the stables. Forcing her expression to remain neutral, she rose from the table.

August stood swiftly, his chair screeching back, causing several people to look their way. “Where are you going?”

Lilly eyed him coolly. “To relieve myself if you do not mind.”

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“Ah.” He dropped down and she smothered a smile. It was pleasing to see she could get the upper hand on occasion.

Before he changed his mind about accompanying her or realized she had no need to relieve herself just yet, she hastened through the side door that she hoped would take her out into the courtyard. If she was going to question this boy, she did not need August breathing down her neck and distracting her with things like how he smelled far too fresh for a man who had been sitting in the saddle for half a day or how his arrogant smile did strange things to her stomach.

“You there.” She spotted the boy as soon as she shoved open the door and stepped down the two steps into the courtyard.

Either he didn’t hear her or didn’t wish to speak to her. He didn’t even glance her way as he paced briskly into one of the stables. Lilly wrinkled her nose as the earthy scent of a stable that needed clearing out soon imbued the air as she neared. She stepped into the gloomy entrance and looked left and right, spying only horses and no boy.

“Boy,” she called, regretting she had not at least asked the other groom for a name. “I just need to—”

The world turned dark, and fabric covered her face. She screamed. The sound emerged muffled, smothered by the press of what had to be a hand across her mouth. She flailed her arms blindly. With fists, fingernails, boots, she struck out.

Panic swamped her, making her breathing sharp and ragged and painful in her lungs

as she fought the thick fabric about her face. An arm lashed about her waist, squeezing her ribs, and making even the tiniest inhale difficult.

This was not good, she thought, as her head swam, and her energy waned. Not good at all.

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August tapped the table rhythmically with his fingers until he noticed a woman throwing an irritated look his way. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been scolded for fidgeting, but he grasped the tankard instead and satisfied his need for action by taking a long gulp of the slowly warming beer. He wouldn't have minded another, however, he had the inkling he needed to stay as sober as possible in the company of Lilly, even if just so he could counter her arguments.

The door she had exited opened and closed as a serving girl stepped through, a tray laden with so many tankards balancing on one hand he couldn't fathom how not a single drop of ale was spilled as she swept through the room. He huffed out a breath and forced his gaze to the window. She'd been gone mere minutes. Women had skirts and petticoats to deal with. She was allowed to take her time for goodness' sake.

Except something was wrong.

An itching sensation settled into his gut, and he conjured their conversation into his mind. The words were a little vague now as he couldn't seem to stop thinking about the delicate gold chain around her neck and the tiny floral shaped diamond earrings in her ears that kept catching in the light and highlighting the delicate shape of her face and neck.

August scowled. He wasn't even trying to deny how attractive Lilly was, but it was her rare fine looks and simple jewelry that snared his attention. He'd been around

many a beautiful woman smothered in jewels and glimmering in gold and had never fought to keep a grasp of the conversation. It was too important that he didn't. He had a reputation to maintain, after all.

Lilly was more of a distraction than she should be.

And she still hadn't returned.

That was it. He shoved back the chair and stood. What was the worst that could happen? She'd already accused him of being a horse thief—some sort of accusation of being overly protective would hardly wound him.

Unfortunately, for some reason, he did feel overprotective. He'd seen the woman handle herself better than any man on a horse so why he thought she needed him to keep potential danger at bay, he couldn't fathom. His gut wouldn't listen to reason though and there was only so long he was willing to sit around like this.

He strode to the door, shoulders rigid. Let her fling words at him for the hundredth time that day. He'd heard worse.

Much worse.

He smirked to himself. He hadn't stolen her horse, but she had no idea how close to the mark she had come with her talk of him being a criminal.

He paused in the next room, eyeing the stairs that led up to the lodgings and the corridor from which the smell of baked pastries and the bustle of cooking emerged. The maid with the tray returned and ducked past him.

"Excuse me."

She stilled, empty tray mid-air and took a long, leisurely perusal of him, her cheeks pinkening as she did so.

“Aye, sir. Can I be of service?”

“Have you seen a young woman? Dark-haired and slim and slightly, well, muddy.”

“No, sir. Sorry. But we’re busy and I ‘aven’t had much time to see who’s ‘ere.” Her lips curved. “I have time later, though.”

August ignored the subtle invitation. “Would you be so kind as to check the upper rooms? She may have gone upstairs for privacy.”

The girl frowned. “They’re all locked, sir, and no one has requested a key.” The serving girl lifted her chin. “I would know. The gaffer put me in charge of the lodgings for tonight while George is sick.”

He cursed under his breath. He should have known she was telling falsehoods when she failed to continue their argument. If he hadn’t been thinking about how delicate her mouth was and wondering whether it tasted of porter or something else.

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He muttered a thank you and strode out of the next door that led into the courtyard. She had such an affinity with horses maybe she was simply checking on her horse.

Or maybe she was in trouble.

Having known Lilly for a mere week and all of two meetings, that seemed the most likely outcome. The woman was pure trouble.

Usually he'd like that. Women who were trouble helped him solidify his downright devilish reputation without him so much as laying a finger on them. But usually he wasn't trying to buy a horse that rightfully belonged to him and was now missing.

A groom he didn't recognize paused brushing down a horse when he spotted August approach.

"A woman, have you seen her?" August demanded before the lad could ask if he could help. "Dark-haired, slim. Muddy hems." He glanced about the empty courtyard. "Exceedingly pretty," he added, though he wasn't certain why.

The boy's face paled, and he slowly set down the brush, his gaze darting from August to a spot just behind him and back again. August was on him before he could make a move. He captured the boy's collar and ignored the squirming of his skinny frame. "What do you know of her? Where is she?" he demanded.

"It weren't nothing to do with me," he protested.

"What wasn't?"

“I only told ‘em what the man said. I didn’t know they’d take ‘er.”

“What men? Take her where?” August tightened his grip as a rush of cold fear bore through him and settled low in his gut. “Who took her?”

“Fred and Billy. But they won’t ‘arm her, I swear. They just want the ‘orse.”

August let loose a stream of curses so rough, even the boy’s eyes widened, but if now wasn’t the time for stepping back to his roots, he didn’t know when was.

“Tell me everything you know,” he ordered gruffly. “Everything.”

Chapter Six

All she had to do was not panic.

Lilly wasn’t the first Musgrave to be kidnapped, after all.

A strange claim to be able to make but it was true. So now all she needed to do was recall what Ivy had experienced and figure out a way out of this.

And breathe.

Yes, breathing was the main thing. However, the sack over her head muffled her breaths with its rough, thick fabric as it chafed against her nose and filled her nostrils with the scent of hops.

The wooden surface beneath her snagged on her dress as she rolled onto her back. The movement of what she assumed was a wagon of some kind tossed her back onto her side, so she moved again and stretched her bound hands outward. Smooth wood met her fingertips and she gripped it and hauled herself upward to sitting.

From there, she paused a moment and took a few shuddering intakes of musty air. The creak of the wheels and the clop of horse hooves combined with the sack muffled most of the low conversation between who she thought were two men and she still had no idea why they had taken her. There were several women at the inn, all dressed well and implying at least some wealth. Was this just a crime of opportunity?

Regardless, she could not very well sit around and find out. She shook her head from side to side to see if the sack would come loose. It shifted, the heavy weight rubbing against her face and making her skin feel like when she wore a woolen cloak, and it made her skin all prickly.

Next, she curled her legs underneath her and dropped her head low. Thank goodness they had not bound her legs as well or else she'd be rolling around like a loose barrel and would be bruised all over. She shook again like a dog trying to dry after a dip in a lake and the sack shifted. After inhaling deeply once more, she repeated the movement until it slid over her chin and with a toss of her head it dropped away.

Lilly blinked the dust from her eyes and gulped down the pleasant air of the country. Open fields passed by, dotted with flocks of sheep in the distance. She didn't recognize the narrow road, one that would scarcely accommodate a big closed carriage, and the road was rough with the tracks of farm vehicles.

Her kidnappers sat at the front of the wagon, oblivious to her tiny taste of freedom. She spied the sack on the floor of the vehicle, grasped it and flung it over the side. She smiled as it dropped to the side of the road amongst the bushes, and they continued on. Unless they had an endless supply of sacks, they would not be able to cover her head again.

Now she just needed to focus on her bonds. She gave them a tug and followed the line of rope to spot where it was tied to the seat at the front. One of the men whipped his head around and she froze and offered an innocent smile as though that would get

her out of trouble.

The man cursed. Almost as old as her father with a ruddy face and a large, red nose, one could be mistaken for thinking he might be a sweet old man. But when he cursed and flung the back of a hand in her direction, Lilly quickly corrected that assumption and jolted back to avoid a slap.

“Get her covered again,” the man barked to the younger man seated next to him. “And tie her better. We can’t have anyone seeing we’ve got her.”

The man’s shoulders dropped, and he stood, a hand to the seat back for support then climbed into the rear with her. He dropped onto his haunches and glanced around the wagon.

“The sack’s gone!” he shouted.

“Damn it.”

“What shall I do?” the young man asked.

Lilly watched the exchange of ideas as to how they should best keep her under control with an odd disconnection as though it wasn’t really happening to her. After all, it was not something a young, well-bred lady prepared for, no matter how many sticky situations they found themselves in. Which, as her family would tell anyone, was quite common for her. But she’d never been in anyrealdanger.

Somehow, she still did not believe she was. The man in front of her was more of a boy really. A lot younger than her and fair-haired with freckles across his nose. He had the sort of wide-eyed look of someone who wasn’t used to the world.

Or perhaps someone like her. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket as suggested by the other man and eyed it then eyed her and then the handkerchief once more.

“There’s no chance it will fit around my face,” she told him. “Besides, I shall simply rid myself of it.”

“What’s she saying?” the old man demanded, giving the reins a vigorous flick and increasing their speed. “Don’t talk to her, Bill. Just keep her quiet damn it.”

“We’re going too fast,” Lilly said calmly. “You ought to tell your—father?—to slow down or he’ll break a wheel.”

“He’s not my father,” Bill grumbled.

And he wasn’t too clever. Not unwilling to use his fists, yes, and maybe smarter than Bill, but simply by using the boy’s name, he had given away details to her.

“Then you don’t need to do what he says,” she said quietly. “You should release me before you get into too much trouble.”

Doubt flickered in his pale eyes.

“My father’s an earl,” she added for good measure. “If you harm me, you could hang.”

“We ain’t going to harm you,” Bill informed her. “We just need you to identify the horse.”

“Identify the horse?”

“We heard about the racehorse and how much he’s worth.”

“From the men who had Icarus?” She kept her expression as placid as she could manage as she curled her fingers around the clumsy knot binding her hands together and to the carriage.

Bill nodded. “Fred overheard you talking about it with that fella, and we know where the horse is, but we don’t know what it looks like. So all you need to do is tell us if it’s the horse and then we’ll let you on your way, see?”

“Where is Icarus? Where are you taking me?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Place called Grantham?” The driver twisted around to eye

them. A hand whipped out and clipped Bill around the ear. The sound of the slap made Lilly wince.

“Just tie her down and don’t talk to her,” the old man snapped.

Bill rubbed his ear and offered her an apologetic look.

“There’s not enough rope.” She worked with shaky fingers to loosen the bonds. She needed to move quickly. If they tied her tighter or tethered her to the vehicle properly, she would never escape.

The boy looked up and down the length of the rope and she nodded toward where it was tied to the seat. “Look, it’s too short.”

He grasped the end, inspected the length, and must have concluded he’d try his best as he untied the end and gripped it tight in one hand. Lilly glanced ahead and her heart began to thud hard in her chest. She’d heard it before she’d spotted it—a wide river rushing alongside the road. Ahead, a humped bridge ensured a safe crossing for the wagon.

And a potential escape for her. Her bonds were loose enough, and she could take Bill by surprise, but she wasn’t certain she could outrun them.

She reckoned she could outswim them, though.

Bill wasn’t even looking at her. He was too busy trying to fathom a way to tie her better. The bridge approached. She grasped the rope between both hands.

Standing, she yanked the rope. It slipped. The last thing she saw before she leapt into the river was Bill’s mouth dropping open.

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The icy water stole her breath and closed in over her head.

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The groom brought August's saddled horse with haste, keeping his gaze lowered. August barely bothered acknowledging the speed with which the lad had done the job. Maybe he would have felt more charitable if the groom had not overheard these men's plans to take Lilly in a bid to get their hands on the stolen horse. The woman might be a pain in the rear, but she didn't deserve to be damned well kidnapped by opportunistic bastards.

And August would never forgive himself if he nursed a beer and hoped for the best whilst she ended up harmed.

"Make better decisions next time, lad," he said sharply.

"They won't hurt her," the boy said, still avoiding August's gaze. "Billy's too kind for that."

"Yet he still considered taking a woman against her will."

August gave up on the idea of scolding the boy further. He needed to catch up with the men quickly. Though he had no weapon, the one benefit of his father's vicious tutelage was an ability to fight better than many men of good breeding.

Of course, his father never considered him of good breeding. Perhaps that was why August knew how to fight dirty.

He directed his mount out of the courtyard and gripped the reins only bringing horse to a halt at the sight of a woman dashing toward the inn, long grey hair flying free of a rich purple turban. August frowned. “Mrs. Knighton?”

She paused, gulped down a breath, and scowled up at him. “I hope you were not intending to leave my niece all alone and unprotected.”

August swallowed hard. He had, he supposed, technically left her alone but was it his fault the damned woman found trouble everywhere she went? Now he had to somehow explain to her that her darling niece had been taken and he was on his way with the intention of spilling blood to get her back if he must.

“The carriage lost a wheel,” Lilly’s aunt explained through panting breaths. “Not far from here but I could not very well leave Lilly waiting any longer.”

“Your niece has been taken,” August said plainly.

“Taken?”

“There isn’t much time, Mrs. Knighton. Speak with the landlord and find out where the local bailiff or watchman is. Tell him to talk to the groom here and if he has any men, send them toward Castleton.”

Mrs. Knighton blinked a few times and righted her turban. “But—”

He set his jaw and tightened his grip on the reins. “I’m going to pursue these men myself.”

She nodded briskly. “Right you are. Go get them then, my man.” She stepped back as August took off at a gallop.

He rode fast but scanned the surrounding countryside for sign of her. Images of her abandoned on the roadside, beaten and bruised flashed into his mind. The thought made his jaw tighten until his teeth hurt. If the men did not get what they wanted from her would they harm her? Had they already harmed her?

He resisted swearing like the base bastard his father considered him to be. August should never have let her go. Clearly, she'd intended to continue her investigations alone and look where that had left them both. She'd been taken and he was here terrified for a woman he barely knew.

By the time he made it to the next crossroads, the fear threatened to turn into blind panic. The roads were dry and left little sign of the vehicle these blackguards had used to transport her. Empty fields stretched out, punctuated only by tiny farm buildings that likely housed nothing more than a few tools.

There was no one. No one on the roads, no one in the pastures. Lilly was all alone and probably terrified and—

“Yoo-hoo.”

His heart came to a juddering halt. He slowed the horse to a canter and blinked several times until his mind connected with the sight in front of him.

Lilly rose to her feet from her hunched position on the roadside and folded her arms. He approached slowly and eyed the hedges behind her. She couldn't be here, alone and apparently unharmed. Unless one counted sodden to the skin. Her purple dress clung to every lean angle and her hair hung in sodden spirals. She'd left a dark, wet patch in the dirt where she'd been sitting.

“Took you long enough,” she declared as he stopped and dismounted.

August opened his mouth and closed it. Apart from looking a little gray around her lips, she appeared unharmed, and no men leapt out of the bushes to accost him as he approached.

“Are you well?” he demanded and took both of her arms just to assure himself she was real.

“A little wet but otherwise unharmed.”

“What the devil happened?”

“I had to escape so I jumped in the river upstream.”

She said this as though she was explaining she'd be taking tea with the Duchess of York next Saturday and had not just escaped dangerous men by taking a dunk in a river that was hardly a gentle stream. He glanced at the ropes abandoned on the ground.

And she'd done it all bound apparently.

“They were not very good kidnappers,” she explained. “Terrible at knot tying.”

“So you jumped into the river?”

“Well, I thought they might try to pursue me on foot, and they were stronger than me.” Lilly spoke slowly as though he were dense indeed.

He worked hard to match up the images in his mind with any young lady he knew and struggled. Lady Lilly Musgrave was a different sort of creature entirely. And one made for survival it seemed. He couldn't help but admire her. He also knew what it was like to fight like the devil for survival.

“Your aunt has arrived at the inn,” he said for want of anything else sensible to utter.

“Oh thank goodness. I was worried for her.”

August couldn't keep back the laugh bubbling in his throat.

"What is it?"

He shook his head. He wasn't going to explain how petrified he'd been for her. From the way she was looking at him right now, she'd think him nonsensical. Why would any man worry about Lilly Musgrave being taken against her will?

Unbuttoning his jacket, he swiftly shucked it off and slung it over her shoulders. "I want that back," he warned.

She nodded and shrunk into the jacket. It swallowed her and reminded him of how small she was. Everything about her, from the odd stumpy manner with which she walked to the way she met his gaze told him of strength, of a woman who wanted for nothing. But she needed him right now, even if just to keep her warm, and that tugged at some strange, unknown part of him.

"Did you know I'd come for you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said with the slightest of smiles. "I was tired, and I figured you would not be too far behind."

He didn't much enjoy being predictable, however, her utter faith in him made a smile stretch across his face.

"The groom said they kidnapped you to get to Icarus."

"I imagine the silly men thought they could use me to find him." She lifted her hands. "They saw Icarus and overheard where the thieves were taking him but I think their plan didn't seem very well put together at all."

Shaking his head, he eyed her and tried to imagine any other woman shrugging off a kidnapping so easily. “Let’s get you back to your aunt.”

Chapter Seven

If someone asked Lilly to explain the sensation she’d experienced when she saw August riding toward her, his expression almost wild, his appearance unpolished, she’d have struggled. All she knew was that it was like coming home to a warm fire after being caught in a storm.

She felt things deep in her chest and low in her stomach, but she couldn’t place them.

When he tugged the lapels of his jacket about her, enclosing her in warmth and spicy scent, the words settled in her mind.

It was odd to her that she liked the word. Safety had never really been something she pursued. She’d climbed trees as a child and skated over frozen lakes that were likely not frozen enough and even as an adult, she rode too fast and spoke too brashly.

There was enough safety in her life. She had a brother who would look after her in her dotage and sisters who would defend her to the ends of the earth not to mention the privilege of wealth and parents who loved her—perhaps too much at times.

It didn’t matter how many bruised knees she came home with or how often she scared her mother by vanishing for hours on end into the forests of her father’s estate—they still loved with an almost annoying dedication. Could they not see that she was real? that she was human? She was not just the youngest sister, the one they should all dote upon.

She was not just a wealthy young woman with no dreams beyond living comfortably. She craved adventure and newness so much it ached. So the idea of wishing to be

safe was odd indeed.

When she met August's gaze, the feelings in her chest only expanded. He looked her over, a crease tucked between his brows. He wore no hat, leaving his golden hair ruffled, and affording her a far too good a look at the planes of his face and the brilliant blue of his eyes.

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“Let us make haste before you freeze.” He broke the connection suddenly and turned then offered a hand.

She took it, the chill in her limbs counteracting any need for independence. If it were any other situation, she’d avoid his aid, she told herself, but she was reckless not a fool. If she didn’t take his ungloved hand, she might collapse.

It was nothing to do with the fact she wanted to see what his bare fingers felt like against hers of course. Nothing at all.

They were as warm as she’d anticipated and even though she already shuddered from the chill, it sent a flurry of awareness through her. His ungloved fingers were slightly rough which made her frown. What sort of a privileged gentleman had rough fingers? She supposed hers were no better, though.

He aided her up and she gasped as she twisted to sit with her legs to one side. A sharp stab of pain rushed through her side, making itself known like the strange, sharp pain a person sometimes felt for no reason at all after sitting in the wrong position.

August tugged her down swiftly, bundling her into his arms as she clumsily slid from the saddle. “What is it?” he demanded. “What’s the matter?”

“My side,” she said and drew in a breath to wait for the pain to abate. It remained albeit feeling more like a prickling, burning sensation rather than a sharp pull now.

He stepped back and she motioned to where the discomfort lingered.

“I must have hurt myself jumping perhaps.” She couldn’t remember much. Just the rush of water, the fight to stay afloat as the water drove her along and the relief when she was finally able to drag herself to shore by latching the rope about a branch.

His jaw ticked as he eyed the sodden bodice of her gown. His gaze swung up to hers then back to her ribs. He pressed his lips together. “Do I have your permission to look?”

Lilly almost laughed at the formality. It was the last thing she expected from a man with a reputation as sordid as August’s. She waved a hand. “Yes, yes.”

The flippant tone to her voice belied the trembling of her hands as he shoved back the jacket and set to the work on the buttons on the front of her gown.

“Wait.” August put a hand to hers and she froze. “It’s torn,” he explained then dropped to his knees. “Your dress that is.”

Any other day, she might have enjoyed having Lord August Beresford on his knees in front of her, but this was all too odd. It was made worse when his finger upon her bare skin made her gasp.

“Forgive me,” he murmured.

She wouldn’t correct his belief that his touch was painful. It was in some ways. Painfully odd at least. Even as he skimmed a finger over the sore area, she fought the desire to lean into his touch. Perhaps she had hit her head and hadn’t realized it. After all, craving the touch of a man who was by all accounts an immoral, potential horse-thief had to be about the most foolish thing she’d ever done, and had she not just told herself she was no fool.

“You must have caught yourself on something. It’s cut through your clothes.” He

rose and reached toward her.

Words and thoughts fled her when his hand brushed her side and he rummaged around in the inner pocket of the jacket, his whole body so close she only needed to take a step forward and be effectively in his embrace. It was incredibly tempting.

Lucky for her, he found a handkerchief swiftly and moved back to press it to her side. She sucked in a breath through her teeth.

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” she said through her clenched mouth. “Stop being nice to me.”

If he continued, Lilly was not certain what she would do. She might be used to being rash, but she did not fling herself at men she liked let alone the ones she did not.

“It’s quite deep.”

Either he hadn’t heard her or decided to ignore her annoyance.

August turned this way and that and pointed down the road. “There’s a village that way. Not far past the bridge. I think it best we go there for aid. Your wound needs tending.”

“Or we could just return to the inn.”

“We’re miles away and you need warmth and something clean on this wound.”

Any fight left in her vanished the moment he took her hand and set it over the clean handkerchief before looping an arm around her. She hoped it was the cold or the pain addling her wits and nothing else or else another moment in August’s company could

become more dangerous than her would-be kidnappers.

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The nearest village was but two miles away. August had travelled through it a few times on the way up north and there wasn't much there apart from a few shops and a cluster of cottages. He didn't regret his decision to take Lilly there, though. Not when she shuddered vigorously in his arms and her head lolled against his chest.

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He couldn't explain the feeling in his chest as she nestled into him, her legs slung sideways, her bare fingers gripping his shirt sleeve so tight he'd be concerned for the seams if the shirt hadn't seen him through several years of mountain hiking. All he knew was that it made him clench his jaw so tight his teeth hurt.

He wanted to hunt down the men who had turned this sharp-tongued woman into a tiny bundle of trembling limbs and chattering teeth. He longed to set her down next to a fire and rub her down until the ashen cast vanished from her skin and she was rosy and pink and accusing him of horse theft.

He wanted her safe, he wanted her warm.

As he entered the village, silence hung in the air, stirred only by the clop of his own horse. The sky turned a moody blue and lanterns warmed tiny square windows tucked under thatched eaves. He resisted the temptation to hammer on the first door he came to and pushed on to the village stores. When he spied a man exiting the shop and pausing to turn a key in the lock, he swiftly cantered over. The man glanced up at the sound of August's approach, his gaze darting over them.

"We're closed."

"A doctor," August said, the tension in his throat clamping down on the demand. "Is there a doctor here?"

The man's gaze narrowed and the furrow in his brow lessened when he looked upon Lilly. "No doctor here, but Mrs. Lambert might be able to help. She made a poultice for my Bessie last year. Drew out the fever straight away."

“Where can I find her?”

“Just next to the church. The house with the blue door.” The man waved vaguely. “I don’t know how happy she’ll be at you disturbing her supper time. Don’t tell her I sent you.”

August thanked the man and wasted no time finding the house. The light flickering in the right-hand window eased the tightness in his shoulders. With any luck, this Mrs. Lambert wouldn’t send him away for interrupting supper.

He dismounted and eased Lilly down with him. She struggled to stand and muttered something about being colder than a polar bear in the arctic. He’d have laughed if she didn’t lean so heavily upon him. This seemed worse than a mere case of being chilled to the bone. The wound wasn’t that deep, however, she’d gone into the river straight after. The wound could well be infected by whatever was in the water.

He rapped hard on the door with the side of his fist and bundled Lilly tight into his side. “Mrs. Lambert will help us,” he assured her.

“Or she’ll tan our hides for interrupting supper,” Lilly quipped weakly.

The door inched open slowly and a cautious gaze peered up at them from behind wire-rimmed spectacles. She stood barely higher than his waist, with hair so dark and unusually short for a woman, it belied the creases around her eyes and made one struggle to figure out her age. She craned her neck up to study him. “It’s suppertime,” she snapped. “Everyone knows not to—”

August forced the door further open, and she gasped at seeing Lilly in his arms.

“Oh dear. Quickly. Come in.” Mrs. Lambert flapped a hand vigorously at them. “Come in, come in.”

He followed her into a low-beamed room that forced him to remain slightly stooped. Warmth radiated from the oven in the rear of the room and the scent of gravy and herbs made August's stomach grumble. He forgot he hadn't eaten since this morning.

Two chairs covered in lace doilies faced an empty fireplace and there was no sign of the presence of a Mr. Lambert. No caps hanging from the hat stand, no muddy boots. Everything from the excess of lace to the single plate laid out on the round table by the oven told him Mrs. Lambert was widowed or a spinster who had grown fed up of being asked why she was still a miss.

She pressed her glasses up her nose and reached up to put a hand to Lilly's head.

"Terribly sorry to disturb you." Lilly offered a weak smile. "I took a little dip."

"She fell in the river," August explained then realized it wasn't much of an explanation at all. "But she has a cut on her side. I fear its..." He paused. He didn't think much frightened Lilly. However, he still mouthed infected to the woman. "Someone said you could help."

"I can help," Mrs. Lambert said with such confidence, August allowed himself a long, deep breath.

"Thank you."

"Bring her through to the bedroom. Let's get her out of those clothes to begin with."

He followed her into the next room, half carrying Lilly as she leaned heavily against him. She'd suffered a terrible experience and a long day. Perhaps it was more fatigue than anything. Perhaps there was no infection, and she wasn't going to die and leave him with regrets that he did not quite understand yet. All he knew was he wasn't ready for the silence that came with her ailing. There were more words for her to spit

at him surely? More annoyed looks to send his way? Hell, he still had several more jackets for her to steal from him.

Mrs. Lambert tossed aside the thick knitted blanket and sheets and had August lie Lilly down.

“Remove her gown,” she ordered. “I’ll go boil some water.”

The tiny woman darted out of the room before he could protest. Lilly sank into the bed and closed her eyes and he eyed her, hands clasped at his sides.

There were many who would laugh at the idea of August Beresford balking at undressing a woman. After all, he apparently undressed women with such regularity he only needed to look at a woman and their clothes would fall off. Hell, he’d supposedly undressed women he’d never even been in the same room with. Quite the feat really.

But this was a real woman. And this was Lilly. This was different.

Shewas different.

He swallowed hard, put a finger to the button at the neckline of her bodice and waited for the inevitable slap of a hand.

Nothing came and he noted the deep rise and fall of her chest. Panic spurred him into action. She might look relaxed but for all he knew she had fallen into a faint and would never wake again. With unsteady fingers, he swiftly popped open the rest of the buttons and dragged the gown down with as much business-like efficiency as he could. The thin chemise clung to her narrow body, and he only briefly noted the dark shadows of her nipples.

Mrs. Lambert returned, and he sighed in relief. She set a bowl of steaming water on the table at the side of the bed and laid out some cloths. With a yank, she took the gown he forgot he was holding from his hand and laid it over a nearby wicker chair. “You look a little gray, love. Why don’t you go and make some tea and I’ll finish tending to your wife?”

He nodded and ducked gratefully out of the room. It was only when he had dropped onto one of the kitchen chairs did he realize he hadn’t corrected the woman. Still, it was probably better she assumed she was his wife. Mrs. Lambert might not like the scandal of an unmarried couple under her roof.

She’d like it even less if she realized who he was. The reputation of the Marquis of Blackthorpe stretched far and wide—a reputation he’d been instrumental in pushing. But few old ladies would be pleased to have a rake who made deals with the devil in return for good looks and wealth and charm under their roof.

He had to admit, though, he wouldn't eschew a deal with a devil right now if it ensured Lilly remained safe.

Chapter Eight

Lilly jolted at the icy touch of something upon her abdomen. She pushed up onto her elbows only to be urged down again by a liver-spotted hand. She peered through heavy-lidded eyes at the tiny lady who bustled about and offered the sort of expression one expected of a strict governess.

"Stay still," the woman ordered. "I need to tend to your wound."

Mrs. Lambert. The name entered Lilly's mind and she recalled the blue door and the bespectacled woman and the warmth from August's embrace as he held her tightly to his side.

She tried to sit up again. "August?"

"Your husband is in the parlor room." The hand to her shoulder was more forceful this time and Lilly's limbs felt far too much like liquid for her own liking, so she dropped back onto the narrow bed.

Wait a minute. "Husband?"

"He's making tea. Doesn't have a strong stomach I'm afraid to say. He looked rather grim as we undressed you."

If it had been possible, surely heat would have flowed into her cheeks, but a chill continued to wrack her and it was only now did she realize she was in only her shift, the fabric crispy but dry against her body with a blanket slung over her legs preserving her modesty. Had August seen all? Had he touched her? Oh Lord, if only

she had been able to stay more lucid. How would they return to normal now?

Whatever normal was. Him looking at her with vague amusement or annoyance she supposed.

But maybe he hadn't cared. Maybe he wasn't the slightest bit interested in a body that offered more muscle than curves. Lilly never much cared whether she had breasts or not. When she saw her sisters trying to squeeze them into their stays, she considered how cumbersome they must be. Now her pride made her wish she had something more, something devastating for him to look upon. Something that would make him remember her and leave her with the upper hand.

She watched Mrs. Lambert mix something vigorously in a bowl. "What's that?"

"Honey and thyme." Mrs. Lambert smeared the honey over the scratch and Lilly wrinkled her nose at the sticky sensation.

"To kill any infection?" Lilly asked.

The woman's eyes widened, and her expression softened. "So you know of the healing properties of honey?"

"My sister tends to sick animals and often uses honey to aid healing." Lilly paused, cold dread wrapping around her heart. "Is the wound infected?"

"I shouldn't think so, love, but we must take precautions. You are more cold than anything I think. When your husband is done making the tea, I shall have him light the fire in here." Mrs. Lambert scowled and peered toward the doorway. "He's taking an awfully long time." She clucked her tongue. "I didn't even ask your name."

"Musgrave," Lilly said. "Lilly Musgrave."

“Mr. Musgrave?” she called with such vigor Lilly was certain the rafters shook.

August hastened in far faster than Lilly expected at a name that wasn’t even his. “What is it? Is she well?” He met her gaze and Lilly swore she spied pink in his cheeks. But surely not? A man like August couldn’t find a single thing to blush over surely?

“She is quite well,” Mrs. Lambert said patiently, “however she could do with a warm cup of tea. As could you.”

“Oh yes.” He twisted on his heel. “It’s coming right up,” he called from the other room.

When he came back in with a delicate pot of tea balancing on a tray, the china clinking together, Lilly had to smother her smile. A man like August Beresford had probably never made tea in his life.

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The way he looked so harried, his hair tousled, his clothing crinkled, and the stamp of confusion between his brows, made something inside her soften. The last time she'd seen such a look was when her brother-in-law spent the night pacing outside her sister Clementine's door as she gave birth to their son.

He set the tray down on the table next to the bed and clumsily spooned too much sugar into a cup then poured the liquid until it sloshed over the rim.

Mrs. Lambert tutted. "Perhaps you should make yourself a cup first and take several sips before you see to your wife's."

"Right." August gulped down the tea before pouring another cup. "It's two sugars, is it not, uh, darling?"

Lilly resisted the desire to pinch the bridge of her nose. She supposed it was better their host presumed they were husband and wife lest she throw them out for being unwed, but to pretend to use endearments was a stretch.

"Yes, darling," she mimicked. "Two sugars."

"Well, there is little more I can do," Mrs. Lambert declared and drew the blanket high up to Lilly's chin. "Light a fire and lie with your wife, Mr. Musgrave, and when she is settled, you can join me for supper." She looked to Lilly. "I think he is in need of something warm and filling, love. He's not as strong as you are."

The temptation to tease him about how pale he looked was only defeated by the fact she had been lying in front of him in next to nothing.

“Husband?” she whispered when Mrs. Lambert left the room and closed the door.

He shrugged. “Seemed easier than explaining what we are.”

“And what is that?”

August hesitated. She couldn’t figure out what they were either. Most especially not after he had come to rescue her and held her so tight against his chest as he murmured reassuring words of how close to help, they were and reminders of her own strength. It didn’t seem like something practical strangers did for a person.

“Vague acquaintances?” he suggested.

That told her, she supposed. Even after what he’d done for her, they were nothing to one another. She didn’t want to ponder why that left a strange, empty feeling in her chest. “Well, I still think you’re behind the theft of my horse.”

His jaw flexed. “It should have been mine.”

“Enemies then?”

He gave a sharp nod. “Enemies,” he agreed.

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“Your wife is still cold, Mr. Musgrave.” The tiny woman pushed past August, forcing him closer to the bed and saving him from any further response.

What else could he say anyway? She thought him terrible enough to engineer the theft of a horse and putting it in danger of harm. And the bloody woman had caused him enough trouble to give him a throbbing headache that threatened to splinter into

something worse if she didn't start behaving. She showed no remorse over her recklessness, no concern over the fact he feared he might find her dead at the side of the road. While she might not have orchestrated her own kidnapping, if she hadn't ridden off in the first place neither of them would be in this situation.

"Why do you not keep her warm while I bring in some logs from outside?" Mrs. Lambert shook out a thick blanket and lay it over Lilly, who had yet to cease glaring at him.

"I can do that," he said absently.

"I cannot very well embrace your wife, Mr. Musgrave." She tugged back the edge of the blanket and indicated for him to climb in next to Lilly.

August broke the connection with Lilly and peered down at the woman who gestured impatiently. He opened his mouth and closed it when he spied the determined set of Mrs. Lambert's jaw. All he'd wanted to do was make a deal to buy a damned horse and now here he was, being ordered about by two stubborn women.

Lilly shook her head marginally, her dark eyes wide. A gray cast lingered in her skin and shadows were tucked under her eyes. She kept her jaw tight, and he might have mistaken it for annoyance at him had he not heard the slight rattle of the wood bedframe as she shuddered.

For Christ's sake.

Under the watchful eye of Mrs. Lambert, he pulled off his boots and inched onto the narrow bed. He lay flat on his back, tucked his arms beside himself, and bunched his fists at his side.

Mrs. Lambert tucked them both in with a laugh. "Well, she will not get warm if you

just lie there like that, Mr. Musgrave.”

He'd never felt more ridiculous in his life. Holding back a multitude of curses, he rolled onto his side and inched an arm toward Lilly's shoulder where he let his hand rest. It was enough to satisfy Mrs. Lambert it seemed, and she scuttled off.

“You didn't need to get in bed with me,” Lilly said.

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“You try arguing with Mrs. Lambert.” August felt a shiver wrack her and drew her into him with a hand to her back.

He hadn’t even planned to really, but he couldn’t very well lie here and let her freeze to death. Knowing Lilly, she’d come back and haunt him if he let anything happen to her. She resisted at first. Then slowly, in tiny increments, he felt her muscles soften and the rasp of her breaths upon his neck slowed.

August smoothed a hand up and down her back as the warmth between them built under the blanket. His own breaths eased, and he focused on the dark curls against the cream pillow. He dared not look at her, dared not try to meet her gaze. If he did, she might spot something. Might figure out that he had no idea what he was doing. Embracing women wasn’t just unusual for him, it was entirely incongruous.

It was also more pleasant than he might have expected.

The heat of her skin met his fingertips through her shift. He was aware of the slightness of her combined with a physical strength he had tried not to spot when he aided Mrs. Lambert. It created a tantalizing intrigue. The women who usually clung onto his arms and fluttered their lashes at him were often curvaceous and dressed to enhance their charms. They assumed because of his reputation, he’d be more than willing to take them to bed.

They’d been wrong, of course. He couldn’t take that risk.

But something about the way she curled into him, the way she fit perfectly and consented to the protection his body offered; even though she did not need it, muted

every protest his brain could make.

His wild reputation benefited him in many ways. It let him keep women at arm's length because no one would expect Lord August Beresford to settle down. It ensured no one was surprised when he slipped away from parties quickly or escaped the clutches of an interested widow. After all, surely he had another lover tucked away somewhere?

Heat stirred in his body, and he couldn't blame the twin blankets. He needed to cease thinking about how perfectly she fit against him and how much he wanted to see more of her, to stroke fingers along the lines of her arms and down her torso then up to cup breasts that would fit delicately into his palm.

"Your Aunt Sarah," he blurted. Thinking of the woman's elderly escort would surely put a stop to his erroneous thoughts.

Her head jerked upward. "Aunt Sarah?"

"I forgot to tell you she came to the inn."

"Oh good. Is all well?"

"If you do not count her fretting for you, yes."

"Poor Aunt Sarah." Lilly tugged her bottom lip under her teeth. "I didn't mean to worry her. We'll have to find her as soon as possible."

"I'm certain Mrs. Lambert will not let you leave until she is assured you are well." He tried to keep his gaze from her lips, the bottom one now plump and slightly pinker, and failed. "Neither will I. But your aunt may well catch up with us."

And if that thought was not enough to stop these blasted thoughts, nothing was. Mrs. Knighton was not the most traditional of escorts, but no aunt would be pleased to find their niece in bed with a man nursing the most painful erection of his life.

Which was where things were headed right now.

All he needed to do was breathe and remind himself precisely why he did not embrace women. He needed to think of his father and the vows August had made to himself over and over again whenever temptation to break them hit.

Nothing tempted quite like holding Lilly, though. He couldn't fathom why. He didn't even like her, and she most certainly loathed him.

Her breaths stilted, the sound loud in his ears as though her every inhale was vitally important to him. When he met her gaze, he saw her pupils darken. Her lips parted.

An inch would be all it would take. He could lean in and—

She rolled away suddenly, and he grabbed her shift to prevent her from tumbling off the bed. Her wary gaze shot to his. "I'm not that sort of a woman." Her gaze drifted downward.

August jumped from the bed. One of the blankets tangled about his legs. She'd felt it. She'd felt him. What an idiot. He tore the blanket off and flung it over her and Lilly tussled to draw it up over her body, bunching it in whitened knuckles at her neck.

"You're a woman," he said, feeling like he had gravel in his throat. "And I'm a man. It's only natural." Before she could respond, he held up a hand. "And it means nothing, Lilly. Nothing at all."

Chapter Nine

This was ridiculous.

Lilly tossed the blankets aside as soon as August left the room. She'd taken a brief dip in a river and suffered a mere scratch. All this tending to her and treating her as though she was going to catch her death of cold and...and embracing her.

Entirely ridiculous.

Well, she wasn't going to stand for it any longer. August was right. It was nothing. It meant nothing. She'd been around her married sisters for long enough to know that sometimes a man got aroused and it was entirely to do with nature and nothing to do with real feelings.

So it made sense that she should have no real feelings either.

None whatsoever.

Why would she want August to even remotely like her when she didn't like him?

She most certainly didn't want to kiss him. Or think about how his hands molded to her back and how his breaths had thickened and smelled of mint.

All she wanted to do was escape.

She retrieved her gown from the nearby chair, grimacing at the feel of the cold, damp fabric as she tugged it on over her head. Lilly put a finger through the hole carved through the gown to feel the cotton Mrs. Lambert had bound around her abdomen. At least the gash in the fabric wasn't too big, she supposed.

Her soggy, disheveled state wasn't so easily hidden. She peered at her reflection in the mirror, just able to make out a wild halo of dark hair that tried desperately to cling to the pins in her hair. She smirked at her fuzzy reflection.

No wonder he didn't really want her.

Shaking her head, she crushed the thought. Since when did she care what men thought? With the exception of her brothers-in-law and her father and on occasion, her brother Anton, she found the opposite sex to be far too self-involved and entirely dismissive of her. If anyone was self-involved it was August. In fact, if there was anyone more self-involved, she'd be shocked.

Simply because he'd ridden after her to come to her rescue and seemed to have the tiniest charitable element to him did not mean anything. All her years of guiltily sneaking a read of the scandal sheets had taught her all she needed to know of the man. Whilst everyone knew many of the stories were exaggerated, they didn't come from nowhere. There was always a hint of truth behind the shocking tales.

Head held high, Lilly stepped into the parlor room to find August seated at the table, devouring a bowl of stew as though nothing had happened.

As though he had not touched her so gently or made strange sensations stir low in her belly at the feel of his hardness pressed against her leg.

He dropped the spoon into the bowl, sending little splashes of gravy onto the pristine white tablecloth. They were going to owe Mrs. Lambert a lot more than their gratitude for getting caught up in this mess between them.

"What do you think you are doing?" he demanded.

"I'm going back to the inn." She took a deep breath. "Then I am taking the carriage and going to Grantham."

"No you are not."

Lilly saw Mrs. Lambert's gaze flick between them whilst the tiniest glimmer of a smile lingered on her lips. She likely thought this was a little tiff between husband and wife.

This was no tiff. This was hot fury making Lilly's heart thud so hard she felt it in every inch of her body. How dare he make her feel things then tell her it was nothing? How dare he remind her of her own insignificance?

“I am and you cannot stop me.”

“A broken carriage wheel might.” He picked up the spoon and resumed his meal.

Lilly glared at him. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The reason your aunt was delayed was due to a carriage wheel. You won’t be going anywhere.”

She balled both fists at her side. The man just had to have an answer for everything. “I can still join her at the inn.”

“You’re not taking my horse.” August declared this without even looking her way.

It grew hard to breathe as her chest tightened. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t. The man had no heart, clearly. Icarus would be at the hands of merciless men who only wanted him to make a quick profit. They would sell him to anyone willing to pay and there was no guarantee he would be treated well. Even then, he wouldn’t be loved, not like Lilly could love him. Icarus knew and trusted her, and she was certain he would be missing August’s uncle. He needed to be with her and her alone.

Which meant she had to find a way to get to him, broken carriage wheel or not. All she had to do was make her way back to the inn, explain to Aunt Sarah what she had found out and they could hire another carriage to get to Grantham. From there, they would ask around and—

Well, she had yet to figure that part out.

“What is in Grantham?” Mrs. Lambert asked.

“My horse,” Lilly said at the same time as August said, “The horse I should have

inherited.”

“I see,” the old lady said though her brow remained furrowed.

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“But you are going nowhere,” August ordered. “Not in such a state.” He gestured to her with the spoon. “And do not even think about taking my horse.”

Tears clouded Lilly’s vision and to her horror one trickled down her face. She swiped it from her cheek, spun on her heel, and marched out of the house, her boots making a squelching noise as she went.

Lips pressed together, she pressed the flat of her palms to her eyes and willed the tears away.

It didn’t work.

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August clasped the spoon until it dug painfully into his palm. He spied the splotches of stew upon the white tablecloth and ground his teeth together. It had been a long time since the evidence of his true heritage had arisen but here it was, plain to see. Gentlemen didn’t leave a mess upon the table. Gentlemen didn’t speak to ladies so. Gentlemen didn’t make ladies cry.

Lilly had seen him for the bastard he truly was.

He set the spoon down slowly, carefully, ensuring not to make any more mess and looked toward the closed door. He didn’t like seeing Lilly cry. It would have hurt less to carve out his own heart with said spoon. But what was he meant to do? Just being near her made him crazy. He’d never found it hard to control his desires before; yet having her in his arms made him want to forget every vow he ever made.

Gentlemen most certainly did not rub their damned erections against innocent well-bred ladies.

He could almost hear the words uttered in his father's cruel tones. Except he'd be right. Lilly might have sighed and softened into him and even seemed to enjoy his touch, but he'd taken advantage like the baseborn blackguard that he was.

He eyed the half-eaten stew then the closed door and back again.

A tiny, bony hand snuck across the tablecloth to fold over the back of his. "You two are newlyweds are you not?"

August didn't know how to respond. He didn't even manage a nod or a shake of his head. It was probably for the best or else he'd likely give their ruse away and he had no desire to offend another woman today.

"The early days of marriage can be a strange thing the bringing together two lives, two souls with a different experience of the world, can be a battle." He met the woman's gaze as she smiled wistfully. "But it really can be worth it, love."

August fought with what to say. The only marriage he'd experienced was one of misery and hate, of horrible words flung at each other, and an attempt to hurt each other in the worst ways possible. He couldn't fathom how any of his parents' machinations were worth it.

"Go to her," Mrs. Lambert urged.

He wanted to sit and finish his stew then help clean up the mess he made if Mrs. Lambert would let him. Easier than cleaning up the mess he'd made with Lilly surely?

However, if he left her out there too long, who knew what the woman would do. Maybe she'd march off to Grantham in wet boots and a torn dress. Or perhaps she'd stay outside and cry and that made the splinter in his heart dig a little deeper. He'd almost rather she stomped off and put herself in danger again so he could rescue her once more.

With a sigh and aware of Mrs. Lambert's smug smile, he rose from the table and headed outside. For a moment, he thought his idea of her walking to Grantham had come true when he scanned the road running past the cottage. A few giggles reached his ears as children chased a hoop down the slight slope of the road toward the rest of the village and August let a smile flicker upon his lips.

Truth be told, despite vowing never to have any, he always rather liked children. Their ability to find enjoyment in life was something he'd never figured out when he was younger, and he envied it. He'd tried damned hard to find it in adulthood instead and he'd thought perhaps he had succeeded. No one would say Lord August Beresford led a bland life after all.

The sound of sniffing reached his ears. He marched toward the sound to spy Lilly tucked around the side of the cottage, her back pressed against the cream wall, and her nose red.

She swiped the back of her hand over her eye and glared at him. "What do you want?"

"Forgive me. I was a bastard."

She stared at him under spiked lashes for a few moments. "You're sorry?"

He nodded. "Explain it to me?"

“Explain it to you?”

Her eyes were red-rimmed, shimmering with unspent tears still. The torn gown, the wild, slightly matted hair, and water stains on expensive fabric that would never recover...none of it should have appealed. Yet somehow it was so wholly Lilly.

He fought the desire to smile at the sight. No matter what society said about the Musgraves, they were raised with wealth and privilege and education. But when he saw her like this, there was a strange familiarity to her. As though he truly recognized her.

As though he recognized himself in her.

The polish was a sheen, an act of sorts. Hell, his whole life had been one long production. First pretending to be a gentleman, then playing the scandalous rake. He couldn't help but admire how Lilly refused to be anything other than honestly, messily, wildly herself.

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“Why are you so determined to put yourself in danger? Why act so rashly to get Icarus back?”

“He could be harmed,” she said, sniffing.

August thrust a hand in his pocket, pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to her. She dabbed her eyes, and he shook his head when she offered it back. She stroked the beautifully stitched monogram declaring the article to belong to the one and only Lord Blackthorpe.

He felt a fraud.

“The horse thieves will look after Icarus,” August assured her. “They have to if they want to make money from him.”

“But he won’t understand what’s happening. He’s already lost the person he loves most and now he’s with people who do not care for him.” Her chin trembled and August could take it no longer. The woman acted so rashly out of love for his uncle’s horse. Out of the pure kindness of her heart.

He took a step forward and she folded into his embrace.

Chapter Ten

There was something about being held by August that addled her wits.

She wasn’t stupid. Usually. And she was afraid to admit, she’d never understood why

clever women could have their heads turned at the sight of a well-tied cravat or a beautifully fitted jacket. She still didn't understand, she supposed. Clothing didn't do much for her and she never really cared what a person wore so long as all the essential bits were covered.

For her, it seemed her weakness was his arms, or more specifically, his arms wrapped about her. They were strong, leaving her aware of flexing muscle that cradled her just so—the perfect mix of gentle comfort and virile protection.

Honestly, she couldn't believe she was even uttering the word virile to herself.

The way his hand cradled her head perfectly and how firm his chest was beneath her palm allowed her to take a long exhale and gather herself, as though he offered the stability she needed to make sensible decisions. The man still smelled wonderful—like wood smoke and spice. She likely stank of the river. The realization wasn't enough for her to think about withdrawing, though. Just a few moments more and she would be entirely gathered and no longer thinking through a fog of frustration.

Another silly decision, she admitted to herself. The man made her dense indeed, and she would not have cried nor stormed out had her ego not been bruised. Had she not told him she was not that sort of woman? What did she expect of him? For him to beg and plead for the attention of a muddy mess who had just denied him? It might not have been the most respectful of rejections, however, she could hardly be resentful he'd acted a gentleman and not taken advantage of her brief weakness.

Truth be told, despite her utterance and the shock at feeling his arousal pressed into her, she might well have been persuaded to remain. Everything about August Beresford was too tempting.

More proof of her addled state arrived in the form of Aunt Sarah hustling over while

Lilly was still in August's embrace.

"There you are!" her aunt declared.

When he tore away, she had to put a hand to the rough wall of the cottage to steady herself. She blinked several times, feeling as though she had only just stepped into the daylight from a dark room as she spotted the barouche driven by an older man with flushed cheeks and her aunt clambering swiftly from it.

Aunt Sarah grasped Lilly's arms and flattened her against her chest.

"Good afternoon, Aunt," Lilly said, her voice muffled by the tight embrace.

"Thank goodness you are well." Aunt Sarah released her and stepped back. "You are quite the mess. What happened?"

"I escaped."

Her aunt grinned. "But of course you did." She gestured to the barouche. "I persuaded a gentleman to give up his carriage and driver to come and find you though I am glad you were not taken too far." She leaned in. "The driver is none too happy about the whole situation."

"You can take her back to the inn," August suggested.

"I still want to go after Icarus." Lilly peered around her aunt at the sound of August's oddly flat tone. "I know where he was taken," she explained.

Aunt Sarah pursed her lips. "And where is that?"

"Grantham."

“Ah. They have a new racecourse nearby. No doubt there will be people looking for horses of good breeding. But we will not manage to get there in that carriage and I’m awaiting the fixing of the carriage wheel at the Red Lion.” Aunt Sarah tapped a gloved finger to her still pursed lips, looked to August then back to Lilly. “I should only slow you down anyway.”

“She’s in no fit state to go anywhere, Mrs. Knighton,” August protested.

Lilly attempted to pierce him with a stare. The benefit of having Aunt Sarah as an escort was she never minded partaking in adventures or bending rules. In fact, the woman had been instrumental in forming the investigative society with Lilly’s cousins and their late mother. Determined to aid women in need, her cousins and finally her sisters had joined the society when finding there was often a need for lady investigators most especially when men did not take women’s troubles seriously. Lilly didn’t know all the details of her aunt’s time as an investigator, but she was certain her aunt had more than bent many a rule in her time.

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“I’m just a little dirty, Aunt,” Lilly stated. “I had to jump into the river.”

“And you cut yourself.”

“August!” Lilly bit out.

He shrugged. “It’s true.”

“Cut yourself?” Aunt Sarah grabbed Lilly’s hands and pulled her toward her, making her stumble a step. Her aunt paced around her then bent to peer at the tear in her gown. She looked over her shoulder at August. “Was it grave?”

“The lady of this cottage tended to her. So long as there is no infection, she will be well.”

“But you have a lead,” her aunt mused.

A grin threatened to inch across her face. She should have known Aunt Sarah would not scold her for being reckless. If the tales were true, Aunt Sarah had been more rebellious than she and all her sisters and cousins put together in her youth.

“I need to go to Grantham.”

August stepped forward. “We only know this because of what the kidnappers said. It does not mean anything.”

Lilly ignored him. “I want to go to Grantham, Aunt.”

Aunt Sarah glanced at August then back to Lilly and to August again. “I shall slow you down,” she said.

“Aunt--”

“But Lord Blackthorpe has already proved his worth. You two should go together. With any luck, you shall make quick progress and find Icarus before he is sold on.”

Lilly eyed her aunt. It wasn’t exactly unexpected that her aunt would encourage her to do something potentially reckless, however, she hadn’t anticipated her aunt sending her off with a man of August’s reputation.

“You want me to go with him?”

“He has already proven himself and you need protection.”

“But Aunt—”

“You are hardly a young girl, Lilly, and the idea of you having an escort at your age is ridiculous. No one would bat an eye if you were to travel on your own.”

August held up both palms. “Wait a moment, I haven’t agreed—”

“I shall write to your father and explain that we are delayed,” Aunt Sarah said. “Then I shall await news at the inn.”

Lilly looked to her aunt, glanced sideways at August, inhaled deeply, and nodded. She didn’t know the way to Grantham alone and she wasn’t so foolish to think she didn’t need a man at her side. If she returned to the inn to take the driver, she would waste time and that was time Icarus did not have.

“Very well. Lord Blackthorpe and I shall retrieve Icarus.”

Brow furrowed, August’s shoulders dropped. “Fine,” he said tightly. “I have no desire to see Icarus sold on any more than you do. We’ll go to Grantham together.”

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August couldn’t believe he’d let himself be talked into this. Here, he was, the supposed son of a marquis, and he’d let himself be talked into escorting a woman he did not even like.

Alone.

They were going to have to find transport soon. A carriage preferably. Hell, a hay wagon would do or a cart with wobbly wheels. Anything to give August a break from the torture that was having Lilly wrapped about him. Alas, no one in Mrs. Lambert’s village had anything to spare and he was up against two stubborn women who insisted they needed to go forward not back.

There would be something available at the next village, Lilly claimed.

There better be. Because as much as he didn’t like her, there was only so long he could cope with her delicate hands banded about him as they rode, sometimes dropping a little too low and making his breath hiss from between his teeth. Only so long he could handle the thought of perfect, petite breasts pressed against his back. He couldn’t really feel them of course—not through his jacket or the shawl Aunt Sarah had slung over Lilly’s shoulders.

It didn't stop him imagining them, though.

God, anyone would think he was entirely incapable of controlling himself or his thoughts. Those who read the scandal sheets might not be surprised he'd spent the past two miles thinking sordid thoughts about what he could have done with Lilly had he not offended and insulted her with his desire but it damned well shocked him. He'd always managed to keep such feelings at bay, no matter how much the temptation bore through him.

Previously, though, the temptation never lasted this long. It had been fleeting and not enough to make him want to break the promises he'd made to himself.

"There's an inn at the next village," he told her, glancing at her from over his shoulder. "I stayed in Oakfield many years ago."

"You travel this road often?"

"Not often," he said tightly. In fact, the last time he'd travelled it, his father had been dying. He'd been in no rush to make his way up north to get to that man's bedside.

"Your estate is in Derbyshire, is it not?"

"Yes," was the only answer he offered.

He never went there. He didn't see the point. He had a London townhouse and a generous cottage by the coast in Dorset. The house in the Peak District remained closed and would stay that way for the foreseeable future. Why would he want to live

in a draughty old building that housed memories as cold and as grim as the stretch of the moorland around it?

It struck him as unusual that Lilly might not probe further but they lapsed into silence as August directed the horse over the brow of the hill that he recalled led down to the village. Not long until his torture was over. Someone would be willing to give up a cart for some coin, surely? Then they could make easy progress to Grantham, he could help her find Icarus, persuade her to part with the animal, and this would all be over.

And he'd cease being such a depraved bastard, endlessly deliberating about Lilly in ways he had no business thinking.

Perhaps he should have let her go alone. Perhaps he should have given up on this whole mess and let her plough on recklessly. But he cared for the horse too. Maybe not enough to cry over the matter, though the thought of the animal being mistreated at all left him decidedly uncomfortable. Besides, it was not just a business plan he and his uncle had, but a plot for revenge, and if Icarus was harmed at all, he'd have no chance of fulfilling his uncle's dream.

Oh yes and add the fact Lilly would most likely wind up in trouble again, and August couldn't fathom how he could sit around waiting for news of the horse.

"The inn is just..." He brought the horse to a stop and eyed the building ahead.

The only sign of the fact the building used to be a coaching inn was the metal pole hanging empty from the whitewashed walls and the arch constructed into the building to let carriages through.

"Uh, August, that doesn't look very welcoming."

It didn't. Ivy crawled up the side of the building, masking several windows and the window frames peeled with rot. He guided his horse closer and dismounted then offered a hand to Lilly. She took it and he shouldn't have felt anything at the trusting gesture.

He did feel something, though. Even as she barely glanced at his hand and peeled her bare fingers from his. The woman who was so independent that she would venture off alone to chase down a horse had needed his aid, even if only briefly, and taken it. It made August wish she needed him more.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and marched over to the building. Where these nonsensical thoughts were coming from, he didn't know. The last thing he wanted was a woman dependent on him. His life, his reputation, was fine as it was. Nothing needed to change.

Hands cupped about his face, he peered in through a grimy window to spy only gloom and a few scattered chairs.

"It's closed?" Lilly asked.

He turned and exhaled slowly. "It's closed."

"Blast."

That was one way of putting it.

She plucked at her grimy skirt. "I should have taken up Mrs. Lambert's offer of a dress."

"I doubt anything she could offer would have fit."

She nodded. “And we couldn’t wait any longer. These horse thieves have already got days on us.” She ran a finger along the neckline of her gown and August shot his gaze to a very interesting tree behind her.

“I was hoping for a wash though. I still smell like the river.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” He studied the tree until she ceased toying with her gown and drawing his attention to the place he’d just reasoned he should ignore.

A lady strolled down the street, a bucket in hand, and August waved and strode over. “Is the inn closed?”

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The woman paused, glanced him up and down, and gave him a broad, gap-toothed smile. “Hasn’t been an inn since old Mr. Beaufort died. Think his children have been fighting over it ever since.”

Lilly joined August and the look of interest in the woman’s gaze dulled.

“Is there somewhere else we can stay? We’ve been travelling for some time.”

“You can try the Swedes. They’re just down by the river.” The woman jerked her head to the right, indicating where the village dissected into four at a crossroads. “They’re happy to take lodgers though be warned they’re a little...” The woman shrugged. “Well, you’ll find out soon enough.”

August thanked her and she ambled off, whistling a tune that made August wince.

“Shall we see if we can find these Swedes?”

“I do not think we have much choice.” He grasped his horse’s lead. “Cannon needs a rest, and you most certainly need a bath.”

“Charming.”

He flashed a smile. Anything he could do to keep her at a distance would be for the best. With any luck, he’d have them back to arguing before long and any thoughts of this wild attraction to her would fade swiftly enough.

Chapter Eleven

There had been many a day when Lilly had pictured going out on adventures. As a child, she'd practically hungered for it. She blamed being born to a merchant father and the daughter of a duke who had refused to marry for anything other than love. It was practically in her blood. She'd imagined epic journeys, sailing ships around the world to places where the sand was white, and the seas were as blue as August's eyes or climbing mountains to look out over beautiful expanses of hills and valleys as the sun bathed the land in gold.

Chasing after horse thieves could most certainly be considered an adventure. However, she hadn't imagined her clothes clinging to her like mud, dry and crispy. If she dared to run a hand through her hair, she doubted she could pull it past the knots.

She also never considered a man like August might be at her side or that she would have to spend much of the journey with her arms about his waist, trying not to note the hard muscles of his body and how they flexed beneath her fingertips or what an excellent rider he was.

It wasn't that she'd never pictured adventuring with someone at her side, it was just that they'd never been real, and they'd never been like August. Their faces had been blurred, their traits vague. Here was a flesh and blood man and she hardly knew what to do with him.

Lilly nibbled on the end of a thumb nail and looked around the quiet village. "Actually, perhaps we should continue on."

Riding behind him gave her too much time to recall him lying next to her, his arms banded about her, the sensation so alien yet comforting. However, looking at him, having to talk to him was worse. She forgot who he was if she looked at him for too long.

Perhaps there was something about him that scrambled a woman's mind. When one

looked into eyes that blue framed by such long lashes one couldn't recall much but how beautiful he was. Lilly couldn't blame any of his conquests for falling for him. If he decided to seduce someone, she suspected they would be utterly powerless against him.

But he wasn't trying to seduce her. He'd even said as much. Which was good. And it wouldn't work anyway. As much as she kept pondering the planes of his face or quite why a man so wealthy and privileged looked so comfortable in an old jacket with buttons almost worn smooth, she knew him. She'd followed his escapades, had she not? Even if he had not firmly informed her, he had no intention of pursuing anything with her, she would not want him. Her parents raised her to be cleverer than that.

August shook his head. It wasn't that Lilly was ungrateful to him. In fact, she was feeling far warmer to him than she should. As strong and as independent as she prided herself on being, she didn't know the road to Grantham well enough and the journey wouldn't be without its dangers. A man like August at her side would aid her in finding Icarus quickly and he had come to rescue her, despite her having already rescued herself.

She just couldn't forget his motivations.

He wanted Icarus not her.

She had no doubt he would use this journey as a chance to persuade her to part with the horse so she would have to be on guard.

"Come, let's find this house." August held out a hand and Lilly went to take it then froze.

He glanced between his hand and hers then fisted it at his side, clearing his throat as he nodded down the road. "We shouldn't waste any more time."

“Agreed.”

August led the way to a snug cottage tucked by the riverbank. A neat, thatched roof hung over tiny windows and a door Lilly was certain August would have to duck through. She remained slightly behind him. It felt safer.

Why had she even tried to take his hand? Why had he offered it to her? They weren't husband and wife as they had pretended to be, and they certainly weren't even friends so why had that even been an instinct? At the rate she was going, she'd have to take another plunge into the river.

She eyed the fast flowing, clear water rushing over reeds and pebbles. Perhaps it would shock her mind out of her endless ramblings and doubts as to how to deal with this man. It should be simple. He was no more than an escort. It was like riding next to Mr. Davies at her father's estate. They would pass time by pondering the weather or how the crops were doing then he would deposit her wherever she needed to be.

Of course, Mr. Davies was the same age as her father, happily married with several grandchildren, and as lovely as the man was, she doubted he'd ever looked like August.

Or been as puzzling.

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August rapped the door knocker and took a step back.

The more time she spent with August, the more curious she became. Whether it was the old jacket or something else, she could not say, but what if there was more to him than the scandal sheets said?

What if she was being an utter fool considering such a thing?

“Ah!” A woman not much older than Lilly flung open the door. Flour covered the front of her apron and dusted round cheeks that still shone pink underneath the powder. “We have guests!” Her accented voice explained why the woman had called them the Swedes. She turned and called to someone inside. “Astrid, we have guests!”

“Well—” August started.

The fair-haired woman stepped out of the door, grabbed Lilly’s hand and hauled her into the front room. “Come, come!”

Lilly sent August a helpless look and allowed herself to be dragged fully into the house.

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The woman, Klara, hustled them into a bedroom scented with fresh flowers and laid with pristine bedding in hues of pale green. Sunshine dripped into the room, adding to the sensation of a room reaching out to the country garden and merging into one.

August shouldn't have been surprised that two young ladies might have attractive, feminine lodgings but he did wonder why they did not have more guests given the comfort of the room. He might not care much for flowers or lots of pillows on a bed, but it was a darned sight nicer than the coaching inn had been in its time.

"This is lovely," Lilly breathed.

Every part of August seemed to freeze solid the moment Lilly peered over her shoulder. From his breath to his heartbeat to his feet. She held him arrested simply by twisting slightly and being caught in the waning daylight.

"We're so glad you—"

"Like it," Astrid finished for Klara.

August blinked a few times and Lilly ran a finger over the petals of a pink rose. He clenched his jaw. Nothing was frozen now. No, in fact, everything rushed through him, pulsing hard and fast and making his cock twitch. It didn't matter that her hair was wild, or her gown was stained and crumpled. She was beautiful—breathtakingly so. He'd been aware that there was something about her before, something in those big dark eyes and that petite mouth. Now he knew what it was.

She kept it well hidden under her brash manners and bold tongue, but he understood now. Lilly Musgrave was a great beauty, and any man would be damned lucky to have her.

And, fool that he was, in that single moment, he wanted to have her. All to himself.

"We should pour you a bath," both the ladies said.

Lilly sighed. "That would be wonderful."

“And you shall fit in one of our gowns.” Astrid looked to Klara. “Perhaps the blue?”

Klara shook her head. “No, no, the pink.”

“Oh yes, the pink.”

“That’s very generous of you but—” Klara put a finger on Lilly’s lips and August smothered a laugh at her befuddled expression.

“You are our guests, no? That means we take care of you.” She turned her attention to August. “Now you...” She peered him up and down as though she were a seamstress eyeing him up for new garments. “A hearty meal, I think. You are in luck. We are havingkroppkakortonight.”

“Kroppkakor?”

The last time August had eatenkroppkakor, his father had just died, and he’d taken to roaming about Europe. The thought of a good meal made his stomach growl but even if he hadn’t been hungry, he would have welcomed the distraction from Lilly and the way she kept stroking that damned rose petal.

“Come, come,” Klara said. “I shall see to the husband.”

“And I shall see to the wife,” Astrid agreed.

August didn’t need the encouragement Klara offered with two palms to his back as she directed him downstairs and into the parlor room. The low beams forced him to duck intermittently but he was able to stand upright in a room surprisingly well-proportioned for a cottage.

The floral, feminine theme continued with paintings of flowers and beautiful scenery

hung on the uneven, whitewashed walls. An elegant ebony dining table gleamed proudly at the center of the room. August couldn't claim to be an expert on furniture but he'd never seen something like this piece in any modest lodging house he'd stayed in before. It would be more suited to a grand house than a simple cottage in a village no one knew about.

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“We did not bring much with us from Sweden, but this piece was my mother’s,” Astrid explained with a wistful smile.

“Have you lived in England long?”

“Nearly five years now. We find the English to be—well, not accepting—but they prefer to leave everyone to their own business, and that is the way Klara and I like it.” She moved into the kitchen and August followed her, ducking into the room to find the promises of food were not false. The aroma of meat and onions had him practically salivating.

Astrid smiled knowingly and she dunked a spoon into the pot sitting upon the oven, giving it a vigorous stir. “I shall serve you now, yes, and your wife can eat as soon as she is clean and comfortable.”

He forced himself to incline his head in a gentleman-like fashion. His father would say there wasn’t a gentlemanly bone in his body and at times he rather liked to prove the blackguard correct, however, he’d already spent half the day with his jaw clenched, trying to think of anything other than what he might have done to Lilly had she not reminded him of what a base bastard he was. He didn’t need to offend these exceedingly kind, if unusual, hosts by salivating all over their kitchen.

She filled two bowls and set them at the kitchen table then motioned for him to sit as she set spoons and napkins upon the scarred oak surface as though they were eating in a palace. “I think you do not wish to worry for manners today,” she informed him. “So we shall eat here.”

“You may well be right, Miss Nilsson.”

“Oh I am not Miss Nilsson. That is Klara.”

August waited for her to be seated then pulled out a chair and took a piece of bread from the offered basket. “Forgive me, I assumed you were sisters.”

“We are in many ways. We were friends from a young age. We have spent so much of our lives together that I could not picture my life without her. I love her dearly.” She smiled softly and carved through the potato dumplings. “Just as, I think, you love your wife.”

“Well, I—”

Astrid waved a hand. “Men of England do not talk of romance. Men of Sweden do not much either. Yet I know love when I see it.” She nodded, more to herself August suspected than to him. “Oh yes, there is a lot of love there.”

Chapter Twelve

Lilly never much minded getting dirty. It was something little girls should never do and probably a reason why she often found herself traipsing through muddy puddles without a care in the world. A habit formed in childhood, most likely.

But sitting around in a filthy dress as it dried to an uncomfortably crisp texture and smelling of a stagnant pond was a stretch even for her.

She luxuriated in the filled copper tub for longer than she should really, taking the marjoram-scented soap and scrubbing herself until pink-skinned and fragrant. Getting the knots out of her hair was still going to be a battle but it would be easier now that it was clean. Really, it was no wonder August had leapt away from her as though she

were a hideous beast come to devour him. She hadn't been exactly beautiful.

Not that she cared if he found her beautiful.

It had been one giant mistake and if her ego had not been wounded, she would have been grateful for his quick escape. Imagine if they had gone further. Whilst she might not be ignorant to what men and women do behind closed doors, thanks to her married sisters and the discovery of a naughty book in the library, it didn't mean she should be flinging herself into the arms of unsuitable men. Few people cared what Lilly Musgrave did these days. Her sisters' marriages were more of a source of gossip than the final spinster sister. However, that was no excuse to be silly and offer oneself up to the first rake who came along.

Most especially one like August. Scandal practically wrapped itself around his every breath. If he happened to step past a woman, the scandal sheets talked of it. She'd be a fool to get involved with him.

Lilly scrubbed a wet hand over her face and drew herself reluctantly up and out of the tub. She snatched the towel from the nearby chair and wrapped it about herself then did the same to her hair with the second towel. All of this was pointless thinking. Rake or not, he didn't want her, and she had a horse to find. Wasting time pondering what may and may not have been was senseless.

Drying herself off efficiently, she picked up the chemise Astrid had left her and rubbed the fabric between her finger and thumb. Fine needlework edged the garment, and it was soft. Whoever these young ladies were, they did not seem to actually need lodgers. Interesting, considering it seemed to be their only form of income but perhaps one of them had a wealthy brother somewhere.

After slipping into the chemise and silently triumphing over the fact her stays were probably ruined and she'd have to go without for a while, she patted her hair as dry as

she could then braided it to one side. A pink dress, as promised, hung over the back of the chair.

“Another fine gown,” she mused before she pulled it over her head.

She wriggled until it fell into place, fluffed out the skirts, and found it a surprisingly good fit. A ribbon had been supplied for her to tie the waist as it was a little loose around there, but she fit into whoever’s gown this was better than she might have fit into anything of Mrs. Lambert’s. Lilly twisted to eye the back of the gown in a tiny oval mirror hung near the window.

“Blast.” She’d never manage all the buttons herself. “Astrid,” she called. Maybe the woman was nearby, and she wouldn’t have to prance around with her undergarments revealed trying to find aid.

August has already seen you in your undergarments.

She waved a hand at herself as though she could bat away the unbidden thought. It didn’t cause embarrassment as it should. After all, she’d been in need of medical aid. There was nothing at all scandalous or vaguely sensual about the situation.

Yet a swirl of desire flickered down to her core at the idea of him seeing her bared to him.

“Astrid,” she tried again.

The door flung open, making the room vibrate and the washbowl rattle on its stand. Lilly squealed, clapped her hands over her chest where the dress hung low and glared at August as he whipped his head back and forth.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I called for Astrid.”

“She’s busy at present.” His gaze drifted to her.

There were times when she could not connect the man with the gossip. This was one of them. She swore his cheeks pinkened but what sort of rake would blush at a woman in a slightly revealing outfit? It was no wonder she couldn’t cease thinking of him. Goodness, she should not blame herself on jot really. Anyone would be intrigued by such a man.

“I need help with the gown.” She turned and motioned to the buttons. “Can’t do it myself.”

“Uh.” August turned to the door, put his head out, and she heard him sigh before shutting the door. “I’ll do it.”

“It’s not that much of a hardship,” she said icily over her shoulder.

It seemed the man could not stand the thought of even buttoning her gown, she was that repulsive. She didn’t blame him before but surely she was not so awful now she no longer smelled like a pond?

He remained where he was, furrows marring his brows, so she faced the window and waited. Her breaths shuddered in her lungs when the floorboards creaked, and she bunched every muscle in anticipation of his first touch. Though she could scarcely

feel his fingers on the first few buttons, it didn't stop the need to lean into him, to urge his fingers elsewhere. She bit down on her bottom lip and concentrated on breathing slowly. It would be over soon enough.

But then his breath was there. Warm upon her neck. So close she would barely have to move an inch to feel his mouth upon her skin.

She could claim temporary madness perhaps. Something brought on by the distress of having been kidnapped. He'd rejected her once just as she had rejected him, and it would be insane to do anything other than let him finish.

Lilly tilted her head and shifted closer.

"God, Lil," came a graveled utterance and she didn't understand the meaning behind it until she felt the sharp shock of warm lips upon the back of her neck.

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His decision to kiss her hadn't really registered until he felt the softness of her against his mouth.

Even then August couldn't find any reason to stop. His mind emptied the moment he brushed his fingers against her warm body as he did up the buttons of her gown. It remained empty save from the pulsing repetition of a need to kiss her.

His fate had been sealed the moment she tilted her head, giving him better access to the side of her neck. She smelled floral and soapy, and it wrapped about him, luring him in. The damp braid hanging to one side practically begged him to lay his lips upon her. Here, it said. Kiss me here. I'm all exposed just for you.

Just for him. That's what he wanted. Lilly Musgrave all for himself. The usual

arguments as to why it was a terrible idea to kiss a woman never surfaced. Instead, as he pressed another experimental kiss slightly higher and felt her responding shudder, his mind latched onto the things he admired about her. He'd spent his childhood trying to be the perfect gentleman, only to throw it away the moment his father died—and gladly. He doubted Lilly Musgrave had ever attempted to be ladylike—she was brutally, honestly, the hellion she appeared to be. Who could not admire that? The strength and determination of this woman impressed him even as it foiled every plan he had.

She sighed.

The sound both satisfied and aggravated him. She wanted his kisses and as much as he wanted to kiss her. Yet she needed to feel as he did—needed to feel the desire raging through her like the river that rushed past the house and whispered its haste to reach its destination. He didn't want her sighing.

He kissed behind her ear and nipped at her lobe then put his hands to her waist. She gasped, and he smiled against her skin.

Sliding his hands upward, he found her strength of spirit was mirrored in her body, in the shape of muscles that teased his fingers to follow their lines. Moving upward, he cupped her breasts, tucked behind two layers of fabric. Two layers too many but at least she did not wear stays.

Her lithe figure shouldn't be hindered by the wretched things in his opinion. When he rolled a nipple between his fingers, a shuddering breath escaped her. The need to see the sighs and sounds upon her lips forced him to give her soft skin one last kiss before urging her to face him.

Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted. August took in the image of her, vulnerable and wide-eyed only briefly but long enough to seal it in his mind. Then he cupped her

face and brought his mouth down upon hers.

Lilly flung her hands about his shoulders, bunching his jacket into a tight grip. He delved deep, hungry for more. Needing the taste of her more than anything he'd ever wanted. There'd been enough opportunities to kiss women in his past and he'd rejected most. None drove him to the edge like Lilly did, though. None made his pulse rage through him, made his cock impossibly hard. He'd spent a decade building up a wall of defense, ensuring his revenge upon his father would be complete. Somehow, Lilly had hurtled through it and shattered it to rubble.

She kissed him furiously, clumsily. It didn't matter. He couldn't claim his experience was much greater than hers. Somehow, it worked. Their tongues clashed and she stole the breath from him as she pressed her body firmly to his. She had to be able to feel his erection.

It seemed she didn't care. Not this time. Who knew what had changed since then but August was grateful for whatever it was. Even if she slapped him across the face and reminded him she was not that sort of a woman soon, he'd treasure this kiss for the rest of his days—he'd treasure this bold, confident woman knowing that even for a brief moment, she wanted him.

There was no pretense, no motive beyond wanting to feel his mouth upon hers. She did not like him for his reputation or for the stories told about him. Hell, she'd made it clear she practically loathed him.

But she still desired his kiss.

It was a gift he would not throw away easily.

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She paused to gulp down a breath. He took in the sight of her swollen lips and hooded lids. It would probably be the last and only time he'd ever see her like this. Perhaps it would be enough.

"I'm not—"

"That sort of woman, I know." He went to drop his hands from her face, but she moved quickly and laid her hands over the backs of his, keeping him there.

"I'm not certain what is happening here," she said.

"Nor I."

"But I cannot stop thinking about you, August."

If someone had asked him to take his next breath on pain of death, he couldn't have done so. If he breathed, he might forget the words, and he never wanted to forget that sweet admission.

"You make me as hard as a stone," he replied, voice gritty. He wished the words were more elegant. He had them in him but with Lilly he couldn't make use of them. Maybe it was the bastard in him showing his true colors.

It seemed she wanted the bastard. She moved his hands down until they were flat over her breasts. "You make me hard too." She breathed deeply, teasing him with her hard nipples. "And wet," she added breathily.

“Good God, Lil.” He might not have elegant words, but he never expected something so scandalous to escape the lips of the daughter of an earl. This woman was going to be the death of him, he swore, but by God, it would be a glorious death.

Chapter Twelve

At least if this was utter madness, Lilly could be assured they were both mad. The thought brought her some comfort as August gripped her to him, notching his arousal against her in a way that made her gasp. His muscles bunched beneath her fingertips and there was a wildness she’d never witnessed before in his eyes. Some might find it almost terrifying, but she found comfort in that too. They were both wild with desire and entirely incapable of fighting it.

He placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the side of her neck and moved steadily down, kiss after kiss after kiss. Only by gripping him tight, was she able to remain standing. Her head swirled to the point she might faint, especially when he drew down the neckline of her gown and closed a mouth over the fabric of her chemise to tease a nipple. She couldn’t hold back a moan and leaned into the touch.

The future never much concerned Lilly. What would be would be. And she couldn’t think much beyond the room now, but she needed to know there was more.

So she asked for it.

“More.”

“I’ll give you everything, Lil.”

Who knew what everything was and who cared? So long as he kept touching her in such a manner.

He moved to the other nipple then up again. When she released a noise of disappointment, he covered it with his mouth and added a soothing hand to her breast, cupping it as she arched into him.

“Do you ever pleasure yourself?” he uttered between kisses.

She met his gaze and gathered her breath. Never before did she think she’d have such a conversation with any man, let alone August Beresford. Despite everything, her natural inclination was to deny it. The world looked down upon a woman taking pleasure for herself, even in the privacy of her own bedroom. But at least if she was to be carried away on a tide of passion it was with a man who had likely seen everything—a man who could show her more perhaps.

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

“Show you?” Lilly blinked rapidly. The idea, instead of piercing her with horror or doubt, made her flush with warmth.

He nodded and inched her back toward the bed until the backs of her knees met the mattress. He laid her down, scarcely looking away as he moved to lie beside her. Skimming a hand over her body then cupping her face, he kissed her deeply before meeting her gaze once more. “Show me,” he repeated.

Lilly observed his changing expression as she hitched up her skirts. Cool air grazed her heated center and August’s throat bobbed as he watched her slide her hand down and up under her skirts to touch her wet folds. Sparks of pleasure burst through her instantly. Taking her pleasure in front of August heightened every sensation and when she released a moan, he snatched her hand, making her freeze.

Wide-eyed, she stared at him. “What—”

“My turn.”

She barely had the chance to utter a faint oh when he shifted down the bed. He moved her skirts higher so she could barely see him and as much as she missed seeing him, the strange sense of anonymity her garments gave her as though they were two masked strangers at a ball, connecting with the knowledge there would be no consequences, heightened every sensation. When he touched her with his fingers, she nearly sprang from the bed. Perhaps she should have known the touch of a man like August would make her wild.

He pressed two hands under her, and she felt herself open further to him.

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“God, Lil.” The words sounded tense. “So fucking beautiful.”

The coarseness of the words made her shiver. The only time she heard such words, they were uttered by young stable boys or tired old men. Never by beautiful gentlemen about to give her pleasure in a way she scarcely knew possible.

Yet she trusted him. She trusted a man whose self-control had snapped like hers and she trusted the words. They made her feel more beautiful than anything. She had driven him to spill curses, she had driven him to this point.

He let his breath whisper over the curls at the apex of her thighs.

“August...” His name was but a tremulous sound from her lips and she couldn’t decide if it was a plea for more or less. All she knew was if she gripped these sheets in anticipation any tighter, they might tear asunder.

Before she could offer any protest, he laved his tongue over her folds.

“Ohh.” She knew it would be good. Understood a man like August could show her things she’d never experienced before.

She hadn’t known it would feel like this. Desperate to touch him in some way, she wound her fingers through his hair as he licked her again and again. He pressed deeper, harder, searching for that tight nub that would bring her exquisite pleasure. When he nibbled, her legs quaked and she closed her eyes, giving herself up to the miracles this man was working.

Allowing her no quarter, he licked, and kissed and she bit down on her bottom lip to keep her moans turning into desperate cries. Sensation built and she tightened her grip on him and held her breath as her orgasm overtook her. It flowed through her, pulse after pulse of pleasure while he kissed her gently and drew out each little beat of pleasure. A delicious, languid feeling of relaxation washed over her. It had to have been the first time since Icarus was taken that she had thought of anything else.

August met her gaze as he adjusted her skirts, the tilted smile on her lips leaving her even more breathless. “Someone’s sleepy.”

“What of you?” she asked.

“Rest,” he told her and moved from the bed. She saw his arousal tenting his trousers. Despite growing up with only women, she knew enough to understand it had to be killing him, just as her own desire had driven her to the edge of madness.

“But—”

“You’ve had a long day and need rest, Lil. Just do as you’re told for once.” He tugged the blankets from underneath her and brought them back up, tucking her firmly in almost to her neck. The comfort of the soft sheets and thick blanket made her eyelids heavier.

“But shouldn’t I do something in return?”

“No matter what you think of me, Lil, I’m not a selfish bastard. And you gave me more than enough.”

“Oh.”

She let her eyes drift closed. She didn’t think of him as a selfish bastard. At least she

didn't think so. Not anymore at least. He might have some selfish motives for coming with her, but she'd witnessed him being giving and kind too. And when he dropped a brief kiss upon her forehead, she couldn't help but wonder what else she would find out about to him. There was more to this man than his scandalous reputation, of that she was certain.

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Contrary to everything said about him, August didn't make a habit of escaping the bedrooms of all the many hundreds of women he had supposedly seduced. In fact, he didn't make a habit of being in their bedrooms at all. So slipping past a slumbering Lilly was no easy feat. His heavy boots made the floorboards creak and he stilled, watched Lilly for a few moments and made his way to the washbowl.

He dipped a washcloth in the bowl and let the water drip gently for a few moments, watching the droplets splash and form rings in the cold water. The waning light of day turned the room gray, but it wasn't enough to smother the image of Lilly, lying relaxed in bed, her lashes soft against her cheeks and her lips slightly parted. An image of utter satisfaction.

He rubbed his face vigorously with the cloth, grateful for the chill that raced through him. He couldn't stay here and watch her sleep and he sure as hell couldn't sleep himself. Not only was the hour too early for his sleep habits, but he also hadn't rid himself of his damned erection yet. His best option was to do something useful or else he might be tempted into seeing if Lilly really wasn't that sort of a woman.

What he'd done was dangerous. For both of them. His carefully constructed image of a rake had never left him in a position of having to do the right thing—mostly because there was no one to have to do the right thing by. For the first time in his life, he almost wanted to make good on his reputation. If he had no fears for the consequences and no morals, he wouldn't think twice about bedding an innocent.

The sheets shifted and he glanced over his shoulder to watch her turn onto her front and press her face into the pillow, creating an endearing image with her cheek squished against the fabric, her mouth still open.

August smirked to himself. She'd probably have something to say about being called endearing.

And he really had no right to be thinking of her in any way other than a means to an end. Once they hunted down Icarus, he would persuade her to sell the horse to him and he could move on and never be tempted again.

Foolishly, he wasn't certain he was going to regret anything about tonight, though.

He straightened his shirt, tucking it properly into his trousers, and glanced down. At least his tired jacket hid the declining evidence of his arousal. He wagered once he hit the night air, it would be gone. All he had to do was cease thinking of the taste and scent of her and the noises she made. Only Lilly Musgrave could tempt him like this. Her words...her bold, brazen utterance of how wet she was had entirely undone him. A decade of self-control and she'd shattered it in but a moment.

Perhaps it would be enough.

It wouldn't be enough.

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It had to be, though. After the death of his father, he'd done everything in his power to be a lousy lord. From old clothes to ignoring his duties to travelling across the world in search of who knew what. When he finally returned to England and realized he at least had to ensure the welfare of his tenants, his journey and absence had helped him secure quite the reputation. That reputation kept him safe from obligation, safe from doing what the marquis wanted of him. There would never be a marriage, never be an heir. And August would never be a father. Ever. He'd made certain of that.

He made his way downstairs to find Klara and Astrid huddled in the kitchen.

Klara offered a sly smile. "Your wife is well rested now, yes?"

Somehow, he kept his expression neutral. If he'd have known bringing her to orgasm would put her to sleep, he might have been tempted to do it sooner to keep the hellion under control. "She is, thank you. Your lodgings are extremely comfortable."

"We do so love—"

"—having guests," Astrid finished.

"I need to arrange transport. My horse cannot convey the two of us alone and unfortunately our carriage threw a wheel." He didn't feel wonderful about lying to these kindly young women, but he wasn't certain he was ready to explain quite what they were up to. It all sounded a bit ridiculous, really. Horse thieves and kidnappers was quite the fantastical story.

“Do you know where I might find someone willing to sell me a cart or carriage of some kind?” he continued.

Astrid looked at Klara. “He could try the Bluebell.”

“Oh yes, the Bluebell.” Klara thrust a thumb to the right. “If you follow the river, it’s the closest pub, and many of the men from the surrounding villages spend their time there. No doubt, there shall be someone willing to aid you.”

Astrid nodded. “It’s but a small pub, however, there’s always someone willing to help here.”

“Especially if you have coin,” Klara added with a laugh.

“Perfect.”

“What shall we tell your wife if she awakens?” asked Astrid.

“Tell her I’m going to find her a carriage.” He put a finger to his mouth. “And tell her to stay out of trouble for once in her life.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lilly opened her eyes to darkness. She blinked a few times, aware of the softness of the pillow and the heavy weight of the blanket. She hadn’t known she was tired until August put her to bed.

August.

She rolled over swiftly, pressed a hand to the cold pillow and eased up to sitting. After a few moments, shadowy shapes emerged. She made out the dressing table and

the chair, the wooden box resting against one wall, and the picture frames adorning the walls. But no August.

Hand to her mouth, she nibbled on the end of her thumbnail. She should be grateful he wasn't here really. How was she going to look him in the eye when he'd kissed her so intimately? She was going to kill her sisters for never explaining quite how much pleasure could be had from such an act.

How was she ever going to forget it?

They still had a horse to find, and she needed his help. Somehow, they needed to return to normal. He'd left her in no doubt he desired her as much as she desired him—beyond all reason. Yet he had not taken his pleasure.

It puzzled her. Here was a man with a reputation for bedding numerous women during his tour of Europe. The tales of his escapades, from bedding countesses to queens, were firmly embedded in her mind. But instead of even trying to sway her into bed, he simply tucked her in and kissed her on the head.

Lilly put fingers to her forehead and frowned. She swore she still felt that kiss. So gentle, so tender, so at odds with the fierce desperation of their kisses. Talk of August could well be exaggerated, and she should take it with a pinch, however, rumors did not get started on their own. There had to be some truth behind them.

Which made his gentlemanly behavior all the more confusing. She almost wished he was back to smirking arrogantly at her as he tried to persuade her his way was correct. At least she understood him then.

Flinging her legs over the side of the bed, she smoothed down her skirts and fumbled blindly about for a tinder box, giving up when she tripped over her boots. She slipped her feet into them, ignoring the laces, and headed downstairs. August could look after

himself and she didn't really need to find him. In fact, it would be better if she avoided him until morning but she should persuade him he ought to get some sleep.

Low chatter ebbed from the kitchen, and she followed the sound to find Klara and Astrid at the kitchen table, their hands entwined and their heads close. But no August.

Astrid lifted her head, released Klara's hand, and smiled broadly when she spotted Lilly. "You must be here for food, no?"

Lilly considered how empty her stomach was and nodded. Food had been the last thing on her mind, and she knew why. How could she think of food when August had kissed her as though she were the very air he breathed?

Her experience of kisses amounted to a few sneaky pecks, one kiss with the vicar's son who she'd eventually thrown mud at when she'd found out he'd been cruel to her sister, and some rather embarrassing practice on the back of her hand plus a kiss with an older man who thought because she was a Musgrave, she would be willing to partake in scandalous behavior. Needless to say, she had put paid to that when he would not cease touching her and the knee to his crotch was well deserved.

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Which all added up to her regarding romance as something that was not for her.

At least until August.

“Come, sit.” Klara tugged out the chair next to her and patted the seat.

Lilly shuffled over in her loose boots and hoped their hosts did not notice her wrinkled skirts and the two buttons August had failed to do up.

“Where’s August?” she asked as Astrid fussed over her, first setting a spoon and a neatly folded napkin in front of her then placing a bowl of something warm and fragrant down.

“Kroppkakor,” Klara said, pressing the bowl toward her.

“It smells wonderful.” Aware of the two ladies watching her, Lilly dug into the tender dumplings and closed her eyes and groaned softly. “Itiswonderful.”

Astrid sat on the other side of her and propped her hand on her chin to eye Lilly.

“You need to eat more.”

“I eat plenty,” Lilly assured her, “just not today.” She took another spoonful and glanced around the kitchen. “Where is August?”

“He went to the pub,” Klara explained.

But of course. The man was a highlight of London society. Of course he would give

her the most pleasure she'd ever experienced then dash off for a drink and a chance to boast about his escapades. How foolish—

“He said he was going to try to get transport for you,” Astrid added.

“Oh.”

“So tell us, how did you two meet?” Astrid leaned in closer. “We do love a story of romance and there is much romance there we think.” She shared an amused look with Klara, and Lilly felt heat spill into her cheeks at the idea of their hosts hearing her cries earlier.

Lilly dabbed her lips with the napkin. She could hardly tell their hosts the truth yet the idea of lying to such lovely women didn't sit well with her. “I did not like him at first,” she admitted.

“Ah.” Klara's eyes widened. “Hate to love. How wonderful. Sometimes the heart mistakes attraction for something else.”

Lilly wasn't certain about that. Though she could not deny her physical attraction to August, she doubted her heart had much to do with it. If anything, she blamed her drive to experience more of life. She was being accompanied by the most notorious and handsome rake in England. But of course she'd end up desiring him. It was almost unavoidable.

Except she was no woman of poor control. She could have denied him if she'd wished, could have ignored his handsome looks. Quite why she reacted the way she did to August, she had yet to figure out.

Klara tapped Lilly's arm. “So what turned it from dislike?”

Lilly pursed her lips. “Well...I suppose I like how he’s kind to others. And he’s brave. He never seems to think about himself.”

She frowned as she uttered the words. It was all true. He’d scarcely rested or eaten since coming to her rescue. He’d helped nurse her better and given up too many coats to her at this point. He’d been kind to everyone from her eccentric Aunt Sarah to the stable boy at his cousin’s house who needed work.

And that, Lilly had to admit, might explain much better why she was unable to resist him. She only wished she hadn’t figured that out. It was going to make this journey all the more difficult now she knew she might feel something more than desire for him.

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In his youth, August would have welcomed the four ales set in front of him combined with a slap on the back. Alas, as he neared his thirties, drinking vast quantities of alcohol rarely served him well the next day, not to mention he needed to keep his wits about him. Not that he was worried about confronting horse thieves or travelling onward with a headache but he couldn’t afford to let Lilly work her way under his skin any further. When he’d told himself maybe one taste of her, one kiss, one chance at giving her pleasure, would cure him of the distraction that was Lilly, he knew he’d been fooling himself.

He wanted more. He wanted impossible things.

He sipped one ale and pushed another along the bar toward the man with fists so scarred and large that August had anticipated a punch or two thrown instead of the hearty welcome.

“I’ll never drink it all,” August said and prayed he didn’t offend the huge man.

The man chuckled. “And yet you look to be in need of it.”

“Need or not, I don’t have the constitution for it these days.”

A lively song started up on the piano and a cheer sprung up from the patrons combined with demands for specific songs. The skinny lad at the piano ignored the demands and played with an expertise more suited to parlor rooms. Chairs and tables were shoved aside, and several people took to dancing, drinks in hand.

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“They’ll make a bloody mess,” the innkeeper muttered but August spotted his lips quirk in the corners.

He wasn’t certain what he expected when he stepped into a pub no bigger than Astrid and Klara’s cottage. It wasn’t this, though. It wasn’t a sense of warmth and comfort in the worn furnishings and the cleanly swept and creaky wooden floors.

It wasn’t paintings that the innkeeper informed him were painted by local people that ranged in style and skill yet were hung proudly everywhere. He could see why their hosts had chosen to settle in Oakfield. Everyone knew everyone’s name, yet they did not mind August in their midst nor did they care for why he might be there. It made every ballroom he’d ever set foot in seem cold and uncharismatic.

It made him feel at home.

August smirked and took a larger gulp of the good quality ale. His father wouldn’t have been surprised he preferred it here to a ballroom.

It’s in your blood, boy.

If it was in his blood, he was grateful. Better to have been born to warm, welcoming people than a cold-hearted, cruel man like his father.

“So you need transport?” The man on the left of him took one of the spare ales. He’d introduced himself as King on account of his golden hair apparently.

“I’ll pay handsomely.”

“Coin or not, there’s few spare wagons going. You might want to talk to Long boy.” King waved vigorously to a man who stood no taller than Lilly.

August shook his head. Did everyone in Oakfield have nicknames?

Long Boy reached past August to help himself to the final beer. “You want transport I hear.”

“Long Boy has connections,” King said in low tones.

He couldn’t fathom what these connections were but if it meant they could get moving soon, he was happy to make use of them.

“A cart would do it,” August explained. “Not too heavy, though. I have the one horse.”

Long Boy nodded. “A fine horse I’m told.” He tapped a finger to his lips and made a great show of pondering the issue. “I can probably get you something by Wednesday.”

“That’s three days away,” August pointed out.

“We’re not awash with carriages, Musgrave.”

August didn’t even try to correct the man or ask where he’d heard that name. It was easier to let everyone assume he and Lilly were married.

And oddly pleasant too. The name didn’t remind him of his father or everything he’d done his best to eschew.

It connected him to her too.

He shouldn't like it, but he did.

"As I said, I'll pay handsomely."

Long Boy shrugged. "Three days is all I can do. In the meantime, you can enjoy our fine company, and Mr. Ledbury's even finer ale!" He lifted his tankard in salute to the innkeeper and drained his drink.

August allowed himself another ale before thanking the villagers for their company and making his way back to Astrid and Klara's home. There was only so long he wished to leave Lilly alone and he didn't want to ponder why too deeply. No matter how many times he tried to tell himself he was here for Icarus, he'd known probably from the moment she rode off after the thieves that he was here for her. His fanciful ideas of using Icarus to bring renown to his new racecourse seemed, well, pointless now.

So what if horses trampled his father's land? So what if his father would have loathed it? Truth be told, the moment he'd found out the one relative who had any care for him had died, it didn't matter. He just thought it did.

Staying with his uncle was the only time he felt love or even an ounce of kindness. Uncle Henry knew what a frightful brute his father was and did his best to negate the effects of August's mistreatment by his father and neglect from his mother. He was a good man and August understood why he wished for Icarus to be cared for by Lilly now. Would going against his uncle's wishes bring him any sort of comfort?

He snorted to himself as he made his way down the road toward the warmly lit windows of the cottage. He'd thought if he owned Icarus, he would have Uncle Henry with him somehow as well as get his revenge.

Perhaps it was the ale talking but the thought of revenge didn't burn bright inside him

anymore. After all, he'd spent years ensuring he was anything but the gentleman his father wanted him to be. His father would have hated him spending so long out of the country. Would have loathed the idea of a son meeting people from numerous cultures rather than swanning around ballrooms with theton. If the last decade hadn't fulfilled his need for revenge, would something so simple as a racecourse really make things any better?

The front door opened before he could knock and Astrid ushered him in, closing the door quickly.

“What is it? Is Lilly well?”

Klara shook her head. “Your wife is upstairs and thank goodness, because--”

“A large man was looking for her,” Astrid finished.

“We did not like the look of him.” Klara exchanged a look with Astrid. “He didn’t even know her name—simply described her.”

“And he would not say why he wanted your wife,” Astrid added.

The kidnappers. It had to be. Who else would be asking after her? They must have decided they still wanted to use her to get to Icarus and steal him from the original thieves.

“But we sent him away,” Klara said smugly.

August offered a grateful smile though he didn’t allow himself to relax. Not yet. Whilst the men were in Oakfield, Lilly was in danger, and he wouldn’t put it past two men who were willing to kidnap a noblewoman to threaten the locals. They needed to be dealt with and dealt with tonight.

Chapter Fourteen

Their kindly hosts meant well, Lilly had no doubt about that. However, being shooed off to bed left her pacing the bedroom and glancing out of the window as though she might be able to spot some sign of August’s return. Some glimmer or shadow in the

river perhaps. But the patter of rain upon the window and the darkness of the churning water offered her little information and she knew she was wasting her time looking even briefly out of the room.

Of course, it did not help that she had slept so heavily not long ago—albeit for a few short hours. Add that to the fact she rarely fell asleep before midnight, and August had yet to return, and she had no hope of getting much-needed rest. How was one to sleep anyway after one had every ounce of pleasure wrung from their body at the hands of a skilled rake?

Anyway, she needed some time to get her thoughts straight. Astrid and Klara were lovely company but talking to them left her confused. When she'd spoken of August and continued the ruse of him being her husband it had felt too real at times. As though she really did feel things other than desire for him. She hadn't lied when she told them he had admirable qualities, but she had hidden the fact he had a reputation for broken hearts and rash behavior. Was kissing her simply another rash act of this infamous adventurer?

It was no good. She'd have to talk to him. There was no sense on dwelling on things. If he was to tell her it was a mistake and the response of a red-blooded male to the situation, she would take that knowledge with dignity, and move on. Whilst she might desire the man, she was not willing to be added to the long list of women who had fallen at his feet and had their hearts broken.

Lilly dropped onto the bed, eyed the closed bedroom door, and resisted biting her poor, tortured thumbnail. She'd been so good at not biting her nails recently, but this journey had ruined her vow to do better.

The thud of a door rattled the windowpanes, and she held her breath. Then the sound of deep tones and hasty footsteps had her straightening her spine. Her throat tightened, her pulse sped up. All she had to do was be honest. It wasn't too difficult.

Just tell him that she desired him, but she would not be led down some foolish path.

The door flung open, and August's gaze flew to hers. His rumpled golden hair made her fingers twitch with the need to touch it. She rose straight to her feet before her courage failed her.

"August, I think we need to—"

"You need to stay here."

"—talk," the final word came out as a little puff of air. She frowned. "Stay here?"

"The kidnappers are here."

"The ones who took Icarus?"

August scowled. "That would make them horse-nappers." He shook his head. "No, the ones who kidnapped you."

"Well, good. Perhaps there is a local sheriff we can send in their direction."

"They are asking around for you," he said tightly. "It seems they've been looking for you since you escaped."

"Well, I'm not going to—"

"You're going to stay here," he ordered, jaw tense.

"And what are you doing?" Cold dread circled her stomach. She recognized that look in his eyes already. Perhaps because she often looked that way—right before she was going to do something reckless.

“I’m going to get the bastards.”

Lilly took a step toward him. “Oh no you’re not.”

“Lil, they might continue hunting you, and I’m certainly not giving them an opportunity to succeed.”

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“They kidnapped me, August. They are dangerous.”

The corner of his lip ticked up. “You got away from them. They cannot be that difficult to defeat.”

She folded her arms. “I think I am a little offended.”

“Good. Stay that way and stay here.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not.” He turned and tried to close the door, but she gripped the edge of it to prevent him from shutting it upon her then she stalked downstairs after him. “You cannot expect me to simply sit around and hope you are not harmed.”

“You can and you will.”

“But—”

He rounded on her as he reached the front door. With a glance at Astrid and Klara who hovered in the doorway between the parlor room and the kitchen, he dropped his voice. “Stay here and ensure nothing happens to these women. The men have already been here and if they figure out these two were lying to them—”

Lilly swallowed. Her kidnappers had been the useless, fumbling sort of men, but Fred was strong, and her escape had likely infuriated him. She could imagine him being the sort of man to threaten young ladies.

“Fine. I’ll stay, but if you let anything happen to you, I’ll kill you.”

He flashed a grin she swore she’d never forget, even as a chill swept through her and competed with the warmth that flushed through her face as he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “It’s a deal.”

He shut the door and Astrid dashed forward to lock it. “I am under orders,” she explained as Klara took Lilly’s arm.

“I think this calls for a cup of tea,” Klara announced. “Just what every English woman needs.”

Lilly eyed the locked and bolted door and nodded slowly. “I’ll make it,” she offered.

Anything to keep her mind off August out there, practically defending her honor. Anything to distract her from thinking about how she might not survive if something happened to him.

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Head ducked low, August pushed against the incessant rain. He swiped it from his face every few minutes to no avail. It saturated a jacket designed for warm spring weather and dripped down the back of his collar, though it was impossible to feel any chill from the droplets trailing down his skin.

Fire consumed him. He pictured the men who had taken Lilly, who had put her life at risk, who had left her weak and cold and hurt. He thought of how close they’d been to grabbing her again.

They’d never get another chance at her, he would make certain of that.

He pushed through the puddles forming on the muddy main road of the village. Candlelight sprung up in cottage windows as he passed by, their inviting glow taunting him. Yet aside from with Lilly, there was no where he'd rather be. The kidnappers made a mistake searching for their missing prize. They'd put themselves in his path.

It didn't take long for him to spot them. The weather kept people indoors and few would be mad enough to be outside aside from him and these men. August wagered all the people in the pub had decided to hunker down there until the deluge passed.

Which meant the tired wagon waiting outside a large brick house next to the church could only be the kidnappers.

His suspicions were confirmed when he spied a slender man sitting in the cart, his coat pulled over his head, his shoulders stooped, and a heavy-set man rapping on the door of the house. They were looking for Lilly.

Whilst Astrid and Klara had been happy to protect Lilly against whatever excuses the pair were making for looking for her, August couldn't be certain the men would not be directed back to their lodgings. Word of strangers in their midst would have spread fast amongst the villagers and even an innocent comment could send the two men back Lilly's way.

Curling a fist so tight it hurt his knuckles, August moved as swiftly as the thick mud would allow. The spitting rain covered his footsteps, and the darkness shielded him from view. With the driver hunched beneath his coat, August had a fine opportunity.

He waited for the door of the house to open and the large man to be distracted before leaping up onto the front of the wagon and grabbing the slender man. His brief cry of surprise was swallowed by the thrum of raindrops on wood and August tossed him to the ground, satisfied when he heard the squelch of mud.

The man scrambled to stand, slipped on the mud, then fought to stand again. August leapt down as the man managed to find purchase on the slick ground and shoved his coat out of his face.

“What the ‘eck?” the man peered at August as though he were some hell-bound demon.

Truth be told, August rather felt like he had the hounds of hell on his side. Heat ripped through him as he stared down the man who thought he could use Lilly for profit. He closed the gap between them in seconds and gripped the man by the collar.

“You’ll leave here. Now,” he ordered.

“We’re just—” He tugged against August’s grip on him.

August responded by tightening his hold as he kept an eye on the front door of the house. Light shone on the stone doorstep, but he couldn’t make out who had answered the door nor the conversation that ensued. It didn’t matter. He’d deal with this blackguard first then turn his attention to the next man.

“You are looking for the woman, and if you go near her, I shall kill you, is that understood?”

The man held up both hands, his eyes wide. He nodded vigorously. “I didn’t even want to do this.” The words were strained.

“And you’ll give me your cart.” August loosened his grip marginally.

“You can take whatever you want.” The fellow kept both hands lifted in surrender. “Fred said it was going to be simple. I didn’t want to see her hurt. We just wanted to make a few bob off the horse.”

His companion turned from the door, the light briefly highlighting his broad shoulders and puzzled expression beneath a flat cap. August shoved the man back, sending him sprawling, and focused his attention on Fred.

“What are you doing, you fool?” he barked at the prone man. “I told you not to leave the cart.”

“He’s handed it over to me,” August said. “Reparations for harm done to the young woman you tried to kidnap.”

“She is here then.” The man tugged off his hat, hung it from the corner of the wagon, and slicked back the damp remains of his thinning hair. “I knew someone was lying to me. This damned village won’t speak to anyone.”

“And you’ll never find her.”

Fred cracked his knuckles and sneered. “Unless you tell me where she is of course.”

“Fred, leave it be!” the other man said as he sought shelter near the edge of the house.

The man ignored his companion and cracked his other hand. “I’ll have that fine girl and she’ll get me that horse and you’ll beg for mercy by the time I’m done with you.” He smirked. “Maybe I’ll get a penny or two for her as well. She’d make a fine whore.”

If there had been any in the first place, no thoughts of honor remained. He wanted this man’s blood. Hot, pulsing anger ran through his veins, and he tightened his fists. August dove for him, bringing a fist across his face. Bone crunched. He released a grin of satisfaction.

His enemy staggered a few steps, wiped his nose on the back of his jacket sleeve, and glared at August. “You’ll pay for that.”

The rain pounded, the ground remained slick underfoot. Nothing existed apart from this man and the threats ringing through his mind. The need for vengeance burned bright. He let Fred come at him again. This time, Fred ducked the blow and pushed forward. Propelled by the man’s weight, they fell to the ground together. Mud coated August’s face, blurring his vision, making it difficult to breathe. He swiped aside the

dirt.

Fred grabbed for him. August rolled. He shoved up onto his knees and swung a fist. Fred responded by grabbing August and crushing him against his body. Breath wheezed from his lungs and August fought to keep his bearings in the filth and rain. The man's size offered an advantage.

But August had something—someone—to fight for.

They grappled in the mud, August gaining advantage briefly before being pressed underneath the man. A blow to his cheek sent his vision sparking. He pressed a breath through his teeth as the man scooped him up with ease and slammed him against the cart. Wood splintered and air wheezed from his lungs as the man crushed him against the vehicle.

Grip tight on the man's wrists, August thrust forward. Pain burst through August's head and Fred yowled. His grip loosened. His enemy took a step back, shook himself, and raised both fists.

"This ain't going to end well for you, boy."

August curled his fingers around the loosened plank of wood behind him. He grabbed it tight, felt it loosen, and brought it round to hold it in both hands. With one almighty swing, he smashed it into the man's head.

His eyes rolled back, and he dropped to his knees then straight onto his face. August dropped the wood, sank back against the cart, and gulped down raw breaths.

"If you want your friend to live, you better turn the bastard over," he called to the cowering man as he climbed onto the cart and took the reins. "And you'll leave as soon as he awakens, or I'll be back with more than my fists and a plank."

He'd never felt more like the common bastard his father had claimed him to be, bleeding, covered in filth, his belly hot with the fire of victory. And he was glad. He'd exacted revenge on behalf of Lilly, and he was glad.

Chapter Fifteen

If Lilly drank another cup of tea, she'd be more swollen than the river running past the cottage. The spitting rain pattered fiercely against the kitchen window and though the river couldn't be seen, it could be heard rushing past, carving a brutal path through the village. Thank goodness she'd taken her dip before it had become so vicious.

After refusing another offer of tea, Lilly turned her attention to the pots waiting in the sink. Astrid and Klara offered up their protests which she waved away. Waiting around and doing nothing usually made her feet twitch and her mind race. Waiting around for August to return was even worse.

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What if he ended up harmed? What if he was lying around in a muddy puddle somewhere, calling for aid? She should have gone with him.

She scrubbed the pots until they shone then scrubbed again. As she set the final pan to the side and looked around the kitchen for something else to do a knock resounded through the house. They all froze, and Klara motioned to Lilly to stay.

“They do not want us,” Astrid reminded Lilly as she joined Klara in her cautious steps toward the front door.

Wiping her hands on a towel, Lilly followed the ladies, and all three of them stopped a few feet away. Another knock made them all jump.

“That’s August!” Lilly declared, able to make out the faint sound of his voice on the other side of the thick wood. “It’s him.” She couldn’t help letting a relieved smile crack her face as Klara opened the door and August ducked into the cottage.

The smile didn’t last long. Covered in mud, his golden hair dark with rain and grime, he resembled less a handsome rake and more a beast brought in from the cold.

He gestured behind him with a thumb and flashed a grin. “Got it.”

She peered behind him to see a cart and horse. One she had become quite intimately familiar with when she’d been sprawled across it. “You stole their cart?”

“Seems an appropriate punishment, does it not?”

“Come inside, August.” Klara gestured vigorously. “Out of this terrible, terrible weather.”

“I’ll see to the horse.” He hissed out a breath as he twisted, and Klara grabbed his arm, hauled him in and shut the door firmly behind him.

“We shall see to the horse. You shall get clean, and your wife can tend to your injuries, no?”

August shook his head. “It’s terrible weather out there.”

Klara shook her head. “You English think no one else has rain and that we shall all melt but even in Sweden we have rainstorms and Astrid and I have sturdy boots and thick coats.”

Astrid made a shooing motion. “Go into the kitchen. There is still warm water on the stove.”

August opened his mouth and Astrid gave him a firm look before snatching her coat from the coat stand and he closed it.

Lilly took his hand, enfolding her fingers through his. Despite the coldness of his skin and the dirt scratching her bare hand, she’d never enjoyed holding a hand more. He was here and safe, and that was all that mattered.

“That was reckless,” she muttered as she took him through to the kitchen and motioned for him to sit.

He dropped heavily onto a wooden chair and winced as he did so. Under the light of several lamps and the candles upon the table, the true extent of his battle revealed itself to her. Pale tracks ate through the mud upon his face, but the rain had not been

able to wash away the evidence of his fight.

Blood followed his hairline and stained his collar. From the cautious way he moved, she'd wager there were other cuts and bruises to be seen too. The largest of her kidnappers had been a brute and even a man as strong as August could not expect to have fought him without coming away injured.

"So reckless," she said again as she searched the larder for cloths and found a pile of clean ones she could use to clean him up.

"I am not exactly known for being sensible."

"Neither am I but you did not see me picking a fight with the kidnappers."

He smirked. "Yes, but you would have done so if you could have."

"Perhaps."

After pouring warm water into a bowl, she dunked a cloth into the water and put a hand under his chin, angling his face upward. "You shall need more than a cloth wash, but we should at least see the state of the damage."

"The other man came off worse," he quipped.

Lily struggled to find any humor in the situation. She'd spent too long worrying about him and many of her fears had been realized by the looks of it. "Why do you do such things?"

He stared at her. "Why do you?"

"I did not get into a fight with a man twice my size tonight."

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“But you consider yourself reckless do you not? Or was chasing after horse thieves an extremely sensible thing to do?”

She dabbed away the grime from the side of his face to reveal a cut tucked under his hair, which at least explained why it bled so badly. He sucked in a breath as she dabbed it.

“We are not discussing my recklessness here, but yours.”

“You cannot say you are not similar, Lil. You leap into situations and hope for the best.”

“If I do not, no one else will.”

“Precisely.”

She met his gaze. A sense of meeting a fellow soul, of looking at someone who understood her better than anyone on the earth including her twin sister, burst through her. Here was a man who rarely thought before acting. Who had done all the things she so longed to do. Who had adventured and travelled and acted without consequence by virtue of his sex.

And here was a man who understood precisely why she wanted to.

It both terrified and excited her.

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He hurt. His cheek throbbed and sitting against the chair reminded August how hard he'd been flung against the cart. It would be easier to figure out which bits of him weren't caked in mud.

But nothing hurt more than having Lilly touch him so tenderly. Here was a woman so strong—physically and mentally—it took being half-drowned and injured for her to rely on him. Yet she touched him with a tenderness he'd never felt in his life. Not from his parents and never from the opposite sex.

Never from the opposite sex.

Hell, he had barely been near a woman long enough to experience the gentle way in which she might stroke her fingers through his hair or touch his jaw to angle it this way and that. He ground his teeth together as she dabbed the cloth to what had to be a graze under his hair.

When she met his gaze, the agony increased tenfold. A spark of something speared through him as though he was meeting the gaze of someone who had once shattered his heart years ago.

He didn't even know what that sensation was. He'd never allowed his heart to be open enough to allow it to be shattered. Yet as they talked, he swore he felt it inching open and he was powerless to shut himself off. Lilly kept inching inside him, impressing him with her courage and now her kindness.

“Of course, I have not adventured as you have,” she offered softly, drawing the cloth down the side of his face then dipping it back into the warm water and wringing it out.

He absently watched the water dripping into the bowl. It was easier than eyeing the dark spiral dancing over her neck or her lips pursing as she tended to him. Easier than

trying to explain why he'd travelled as far as he could after the death of his father.

"I've never even left the country," she admitted. "Unless one counts the Isle of Wight," she added with a light laugh.

He glanced at her. "I'm surprised." Even the most sheltered of wealthy young ladies had at least spent a summer in Italy by Lilly's age.

"My father loathes boats. He used to be a ship hand and was treated poorly indeed. He prefers to stay land-bound now. And my mother travelled with her parents in her younger years and finds it too exhausting now."

He heard the resignation in her tone. Here was a woman who deserved more than a life of sitting around embroidering or playing the piano or dancing in ballrooms. He understood her too well now. Understood why she leapt onto horses and rode bareback and scarcely stopped to think whether something was a good idea or not. It was the same reason he'd fled the country, because sitting and pondering and fulfilling a role he should never have been given left him feeling itchy and desperate to do something different.

"You envy them both," he stated.

"I should not. I have been given everything a lady should need or desire and my father suffered most horribly when he sailed."

"Wishing to see the world is no great sin, Lil. You should not feel guilty for such a need."

"Yet you returned home." She took his right hand and tenderly turned it over to wipe the worst of the grime from it.

His knuckles were swollen underneath the dirt, and she made a little sympathetic noise in the back of her throat.

“Leaving this country enabled me to come back. Without my adventures, I should never have felt comfortable living in England.”

August watched her as she dabbed each red knuckle, her lashes low, her brow slightly puckered. He uttered truths he never thought to give voice to yet all he could think of was how damned kissable she was.

“You must have hit him hard.”

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Her dark lashes lifted, and he cursed every syllable he'd uttered and every bloody useless thought he'd endured in her presence. He shouldn't have been sitting here pondering how desperate he'd been for escape or how far he'd travelled to leave behind the words of his father. He should have been kissing her all along.

Because here was a woman not just made for being kissed but made for being kissed by him.

Looping his fingers through hers, he pulled her close. She stumbled and put a hand to his shoulder, lips parting as she remained stooped over him, gaze dark and wary.

"I like your kisses too much," he confessed.

"I like yours too."

The words were soft and a balm to his soul. He didn't need hot cloths and soothing ointments. Only her words and her mouth.

"I want to do it again."

She nodded and allowed him to pull her closer. He placed his hands to the gentle curve of her spine and drew her into him until she straddled him. There was no chance she could avoid feeling his arousal and the fierce ache that pulsed through him when she settled on his lap. Lilly placed her hands on his shoulders.

"We should not be doing this."

He nodded. It was torture for them both. He might not need to outrun his father anymore, but he had plenty of reasons not to make love to a woman. He hadn't solidified his vows for nothing.

However, nothing seemed more important than kissing Lilly at this very moment. No vow of chastity, no fear of creating a bloodline could prevent him from slipping a hand up her neck and urging her mouth to his.

Chapter Sixteen

It didn't matter that he smelled like the earth. Or that he was entirely inappropriate for her.

Because, actually, August was entirely appropriate. And the earthy fragrance appealed to her. It reminded her of lazy days lying in the grass or brisk swims in her father's lake. He made her feel as though the sun beat down upon her body and like she had just plunged into the icy coldness of the water at the same time. Most especially when he confessed to her that he liked her kisses.

It could be an act, of course, yet she didn't think so. She'd read endlessly about the man but no ink could describe the vulnerability she'd spied in his gaze.

She had this horrible, wonderful feeling here was a man who was her match. Here was a man who would treat her as his equal. He spoke to her as though the world could be hers, as though there might be a chance she could share it with him. He admired her desires for more rather than dismissed them. There were no scoffing sounds or sniffs of dismay or even stony silence. He hadn't offered her everything or made false promises, merely talked to her as though she deserved to see all that he had.

And now, she could only imagine seeing such things at his side.

His mouth moved over hers, slightly cold. She followed his lead. It amazed her how easy it was to be swept away with his kisses. Her few fumbling explorations had been entirely unsatisfactory and left her wondering if she simply did not have the skill for kisses.

August left her hot and panting and marveling at the sensation the meeting of lips could cause.

His fingers coaxed her as close as possible and she was aware of them, as though they were leaving marks upon her skin at the same time as the whole world blurred into nothing. His tongue was a warm contrast to his lips as he tasted her, and all she could find was gratitude that he was safe and well and in her arms.

Or perhaps she was in his arms. Either way, she couldn't prevent herself from rocking into the hardness of him and creating sparks of pleasure that both satisfied and kindled.

He stilled and sucked in a sharp breath.

“Oh no. Did I hurt you?”

A hand to either side of his face, she peered down at him. Swelling marred one cheek and she did her best to avoid it, though the rest of him had fared well considering he had gone up against such a brute of a man. She wished he had come away entirely unharmed but was confident August had extracted enough revenge to appease the anger boiling in her veins at his mistreatment.

“No.” He shook his head. “Yes. But not in that way.” Creases appeared on his brow. “What is it?”

Lilly blinked a few times in a bid to remove the image of August fighting the

kidnapper. “I’m so angry the man hurt you,” she confessed.

His lips quirked. “You’re angry?”

“Yes.”

“Would you wish to protect me, Lil?”

“If I could, yes.”

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The words were foolish. What sort of a man needed a woman's protection, let alone one like August? He'd faced the dangers of the world with no one at his side. He didn't need anyone, let alone her.

"You'd make a fine warrior woman," he said with a soft smile. "A shield-maiden perhaps."

"A shield-maiden?"

"Women warriors from Scandinavian folklore. They fought alongside their men."

Lilly smiled at the image, picturing herself wielding a sword at August's side. "I should imagine our hosts would be able to tell us more."

"I find it rather difficult to think of our hosts whilst you are straddling me."

"I only hope they take even longer putting the horse away."

He curved a hand around her neck, and she leaned into his warm touch. "I forget why we should not do this."

"As do I."

"There are many who would say I am taking advantage."

She met his blue gaze, the color warmed by the candlelight. The gold strands in his hair shone and glimmered and she thought of Greek gods, yet no myths could

compare with the tangible. The feeling of his body beneath hers was firm and warm and real. Was beyond some mythical temptation. She suspected if they were in the bedroom, they would be doing more than kissing and conversing.

“Do I look like the sort of woman who could be taken advantage of?”

He considered her, his gaze running so slowly up and down that it made her breath quicken when she noted the darkness increase in his eyes.

“You look beautiful,” he concluded.

“I do not think anyone has considered me beautiful.” She was too lean, too angular. Heck, too masculine. A lifetime of riding horses and participating in every sport a woman could participate in had left her firm in places where most women were soft. “I never really wanted to be called beautiful anyway.”

“And now?”

It seemed silly to want such a compliment. It meant nothing. It did not speak on one’s soul. Yet when the words came from August’s mouth, it felt different. This was no flowery compliment that one might expect from a rake but a simple, honest statement.

“I rather like it,” she admitted. “At least when you say it.”

“Then I shall say it more.” He coaxed her closer with his hands to the back of her neck, his breath whispering over her mouth. “You are beautiful,” he said in low tones then kissed her. “You’re beautiful,” he murmured again as he briefly broke the kiss. “You. Are. Beautiful.” He took her mouth in a deep kiss the next time as the words rang through her until she was breathless.

Resting her forehead upon his, she gulped down breaths, aware of the rapid rise and fall of his shoulders beneath her hands. “We cannot keep doing this can we?”

“Probably not,” he agreed then flattened his mouth to hers and drowned her in a world of pleasure and sensation.

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Since meeting Lilly, he couldn't recall a night's sleep like the one he'd just enjoyed. When August rolled over onto his back, he noted the rain spitting against the glass and hammering the roof. Wind buffeted the window, whistling through the gaps. He rather prided himself on sleeping through anything. Long journeys aboard creaking ships combined with his father's sadistic demands for waking at all hours had taught him to sleep anywhere. But he'd never slept like this before. Damn fool that he was, he'd even woken with a smile upon his face.

He shouldn't be smiling, of course. There were too many secrets between them. At least from his side anyway. How did one explain that one never truly bedded a woman for fear of the future? What possible explanation could he give that might sound half-sane given his reputation? And how the devil would he tell her he'd been instrumental in ensuring that reputation stuck so no woman attempted to get near him; be it for his looks, his body, or his title?

She might understand, of course. Lilly was unlike anyone he'd ever met. When she spoke of her desire for adventure, he wanted nothing more than to give it to her. However, even if he told her of the lie he'd been living, of how he wasn't even his parent's true son, it wouldn't make any difference. And the lie could wind up with him at best being imprisoned for fraud. At worst, he could face the gallows. There was many a day when he wished the man he called his father had thrown him out like the bastard he was. Better to be a street urchin than the son of a man who loathed him and a woman who resented him.

Sobered by the thought, August sat up and eyed the indentation in the pillow. He touched it to find it cold. She was probably enjoying a morning meal with their hosts but despite the talking to he'd given himself, not waking up next to her left him feeling hollow. Both of them had fallen asleep swiftly after a long day, but Lilly had slept earlier in the evening so he supposed it was to be expected.

As he shoved back the blankets, the door swung open, crashing so hard against the nearby chest of drawers August feared they'd owe Klara and Astrid new furnishings. His gaze fell to Lilly's hemline.

"Muddy again? What on earth—"

"The river broke its banks overnight," she said breathlessly.

"The river?" He cursed under his breath and swung his legs over the edge of the bed then snatched his shirt from the back of a chair. When he turned back to Lilly, her gaze darted over his bare chest, and she shook her head slightly.

“The horses?” he asked.

“Both fine.”

“The cottage?” If he’d slept through the damned building flooding, he’d never forgive himself.

“We’re too high here. The flooding is farther down the road.”

“God.” He pulled his shirt over his head, and it snagged on his unshaven jaw. Cold fingers aided him in tugging it down and Lilly efficiently tied up the laces at the collar.

“You’d make a good valet.”

“I’ve never tied a cravat in my life.”

“Good thing I’m not wearing one.” He grabbed his boots, sat on the chair, and shoved his feet into them. “You’ve been wading through puddles without me I take it?”

“There’s people trapped in the houses along the river.” She met his gaze. “It’s not good, August.”

Any lingering warmth he’d felt from a night of kisses and embraces vanished. He grabbed his jacket and eyed the thin spencer she wore.

“If you give up another jacket to me, I shall be forced to toss you in the river myself.”

She straightened the damp sleeves of the brown jacket. “Besides, I could not move in yours.”

“Where are we going?” he asked as she marched downstairs.

From the interior of the parlor room, one could be entirely ignorant to the state of the village but as soon as he stepped outside, the extent of the devastation hit him like a tidal wave. He hadn’t realized how busy Oakfield could be until now. People hastened up and down the main street, barking orders, aiding people to dry ground, and hauling wheelbarrows and armfuls of belongings.

“Down here,” Lilly said, ducking into a narrow opening between two buildings.

He heard the rush of the swollen river before he saw the brown water dashing between buildings. Soon it was past his boots and soaking his feet as he waded through. Lilly’s skirts flowed around her, and he grabbed her hand when he felt the shove of the water for fear of her getting pushed away.

“This house.” She gestured frantically at a small, single story thatched cottage. Nausea tore at his gut when he spotted faces in the window.

“I tried getting the door open, but I couldn’t.” Lilly’s chin trembled. “There’s people in there, August, and the water is rising.”

Chapter Seventeen

The water surrounding the cottage had already been at hip height when she’d come upon the trapped family. As soon as she’d realized why Klara and Astrid weren’t cooking breakfast or sitting at the dining table, she’d rushed out. She discovered both ladies aiding some elderly village folk in moving to higher ground and determined she should do the same. The devastation at the far end of Oakfield stole her breath

worse than the cold water sloshing up her gown.

The taller buildings in the village center survived the water that lapped at their stone steps but as she moved closer to the river, she came upon swirls of wooden debris crashing up against buildings. Household fabrics floated past. People struggled to wade through the water with families, pets and whatever they could carry upon their person. Many headed toward the church which remained untouched and looked likely to remain so. Soon these people would need warm blankets and food.

But for now, it was about getting everyone to safety.

Lilly pushed on the door, but the water level inside was almost the same as that on the outside and she had no more chance of pushing it open than she had earlier. August joined her efforts, and she pressed her shoulder to the wood, pushing until she was certain she'd be bruised down one side by tomorrow.

"It's too heavy," she cried.

August tried one last push, opening it a fraction before the wood fought back and closed again. "Let's find another way in."

Lilly waded around the building and eyed the water that rushed past on what would once have been the riverside. It was impossible to tell where the riverbank started anymore or how deep the water was, so she stuck close to the building, palms to the brick in a bid to keep her balance. Still, the water rose, lapping close to her chest. The cottage had to have been built in the medieval era and they were typically low ceilinged with small door frames. If the water reached much higher, the family inside would have no chance.

August remained behind her, stalking her steps, and keeping hold of one part of her, be it her hand, arm or the swirl of her skirts. Lilly paused by the window to peer into

the gloom of the building. She tapped on the glass window.

“No sense in breaking the window. These frames are too narrow.”

Lilly nodded. The narrow strips of lead and iron crisscrossed every window of the building and would offer no form of escape if broken. She tapped on the window again when a face neared, and she motioned frantically to the latch she could see on the other side. What appeared to be a young woman, twisted the latch and between the three of them, they inched open the window. It gave suddenly, bashing against the wall under the weight of the water. August latched his hands about her shoulders and tugged her back away from the cracked glass.

“Climb out,” August urged the trapped people.

The woman gripped the edge of the window, her face ashen. “My parents are in here with me. They cannot possibly climb out and I cannot leave them.”

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A curse escaped August and Lilly nodded her agreement when she peered into the room to spy the elderly couple huddled together, barely standing against the force of the water which swirled about the room, carrying furnishings with it.

Curling her fingers around the edge of the window, Lilly eyed the narrow opening. “I can climb in.”

“Like hell.”

She looked to August. “We can hardly leave them, and you cannot fit through here. Perhaps if I push the door from the other side, we can create enough of an escape for you to pull these people through.”

He glanced around and though shouts could be heard not far from them, it was clear for now they were reliant on only themselves. He gave a slight nod, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to him for a quick, firm kiss. “Do not get hurt,” he warned her.

“I’ll be fine.” With August’s aid, she clambered awkwardly into the window, hauled her soaking skirts with her, and splashed inelegantly into the shadows of the building. She looked to the frail elderly couple. “We’ll get you out of here,” she vowed. “Come and help me,” she told the young woman.

The woman gripped the door handle while Lilly inched her fingers around the gap between the door and the building. No wonder the cottage had filled up so quickly. The old door offered little protection against the water. She just made out August’s command to push on the other side of the door and together they pulled as he pushed.

Her fingers hurt and her frozen toes were in agony. She wasn't certain she could feel the rest of her body at this point. Nevertheless, she pulled with all the strength she had left, and a flurry of triumph burst through her when they forced a gap.

"Can you find something to put in there," August said, grunting with effort.

Lilly glanced around and spied some floating wood. With one hand still curled around the door, she snatched it with her other, and shoved it into the gap. When she pushed upon it, she was able to create more of a gap and she motioned to the couple to come near.

"They need to go under the wood," she explained to the lady.

"Under the water," she said—a grim statement rather than a question.

"You go through first," Lilly said. "Then you can take their hands and guide them through."

Nodding, the woman's throat bobbed as she eyed the gap and the swirling dark water.

"I'm here," called August through the gap. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Taking a breath, the woman slipped under the water. She vanished and Lilly held her breath and prayed the woman didn't get swept away as soon as she escaped the building. She heard a splash and August's reassuring tones.

"We're both here, Lil. Send the other two through."

She motioned to the elderly couple. "Quickly now."

"You first, Mary." The old man hustled his wife forward, who peered at the door then

her husband.

“I can’t swim,” she muttered. “You know I can’t swim.”

“You do not have to swim,” Lilly assured her. “Just duck your head under and my friend and your daughter will grab you.”

“Come on, Mary. You’ve never been a coward before.”

She glared at her husband and Lilly might have laughed had it not been for her chattering teeth and the rising water.

“If I die, I’m coming back to haunt you, Edgar Newman.” She gripped the door and quickly ducked down.

Moments later, Lilly spied her emerging into August’s arms. He vanished from sight for a moment then returned.

“She’s safe,” he assured them, and Lilly turned to the last man.

“After you, sir.”

“Forty years living here, and this is the first flood we’ve had that’s gone higher than my ankles.” He shook his head. “Never thought I needed to learn to swim.” With that, he dropped under the water and Lilly held her breath until she saw him emerge on the other side.

“Now you, Lil,” August said, reaching for her.

She nodded, inhaled deeply and clamped her mouth shut. Just as she went to duck under the water, a crack resounded through the house. She twisted her head to spy the

open window slam against the wall and shatter into pieces as a fresh wave of water poured into the house. The sudden surge shoved her hard against the door. Her head struck something, pain jolting through her skull. Sparks danced in front of her eyes and a sudden weakness swept through her as water washed over her head. The last thing she saw before her vision turned into a pinprick of light was August's panicked expression.

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A rough curse ripped from August before he could stop it as the door slammed shut. He banged a palm against the unyielding door. Twisting, he watched the young woman guide her parents through the water then he waded to the window. He peered in but couldn't spot her amongst the floating debris. More curses burned his tongue, and he eyed the open window. Lilly was a darned sight smaller than him and had still struggled getting through. He'd have no chance.

But he had to get to her. Now.

The water still flowed about him, and he couldn't tell if the water levels were increasing any further or not. It didn't matter. He couldn't tell what happened once the door slammed shut but if she hadn't made it to the window to escape by now, something was wrong. He attempted to wedge himself through the window until the frame dug into his body.

It was no good. He was never fitting through.

He moved back and eyed the building. His heart thrummed hard in his chest, tension threatening to tangle his throat. He just needed to get to her then all would be fine. Whatever happened, he could fix it, so long as she was at his side. Damned fool woman. He should never have let her climb in in the first place.

Raking a hand through his wet hair, he studied the thatch. It was thick and well maintained but underneath would be just rafters. And enough room for him to slip through. He scanned the debris around him, spied something black bobbing up

against the wall and snatched it. Someone had taken pity on him as the scrap of metal would be perfect for what he needed it for.

August gripped the metal in one hand and the thatch in the other then pressed his boots to the window ledge and hauled himself out of the water and onto the roof. He scrambled across it until he found what he hoped was a weaker spot in the roof and he slammed the metal down into the thatch.

His breaths came hard and fast as he dug and tore and ripped at the thatch. He didn't know how long it took to create a hole. Too long in his estimation. She'd been down there too long. In the cold. Maybe knocked senseless.

Maybe dead.

He shook his head and worked on making the hole bigger. As soon as it was just wide enough for him, he slipped through it and dropped into the water. He swiped the droplets from his face and peered around the shadowed interior. A chair bobbed past him, and picture frames, linens, and various kitchen accoutrements clustered in the corners of the building. He almost mistook her for a sheet, pale against the dark water. She floated on her back like a ghost drifting through the night.

"Lilly!" He worked his way past the debris to snatch her arm and haul her to him. As soon as he touched her, she jerked, and flailed her arms.

He grabbed her tight to him and allowed himself the first deep breath he'd inhaled since she'd vanished from his sight.

"I'm well, I'm well," she assured him, fingers digging into his arms. "Just a little stunned."

"We need to get you out of here." He took her arm and led her toward the window.

“I’m not going anywhere without you.” She lifted her head. “You came in through there?”

“I didn’t have much choice.” He motioned to the open window. “Through there. I’ll be just behind you.”

“Except you will not fit.” She clung to him still as she peered upward. “And how will you climb out there?”

“I can reach.” He wasn’t certain he could and if there was anything for him to climb on it was washed away. But perhaps he could reach and haul himself up.

“You cannot.”

“Lil, just get out of this damned building, for goodness sake.”

“Not without you,” she repeated, her grip tightening on him.

He hissed out a breath. Did the woman have to be so reckless? So bloody courageous? She’d leapt into a flooding building without a single thought for herself. Why couldn’t she be some sweet little woman waiting patiently for him at the cottage?

Probably because he wouldn’t feel the same way about her if she was, he realized grimly. Which meant he’d have to tolerate many more frights from her.

The realization he pictured years of her terrifying him with whatever her latest adventure was slammed hard through him. He set his jaw and looked up at the gap in the roof. He’d be damned if he wasn’t going to give her the chance to scare him at least one more time.

“I’ll lift you up, then you grab onto the roof.”

“August...”

He pushed damp strands from her face. “Once you’re up there, you can reach in and aid me up.”

“August,” she said again, her eyes wide and wary in the darkness. “What if I—”

“Now, Lil. We cannot stay in here forever and I think the water is still rising.” He snatched her by the waist and hauled her up onto his shoulder. She wavered there and he steeled himself against the pull of the water and the weight of her sodden clothes.

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Thank the Lord, she was slight, or he'd have trouble standing still. He watched as she reached high, curled her fingers around the edge of the hole and hauled herself up. With both hands to her rear, he shoved, and she vanished onto the roof.

Watching the light glimmering through the gap in the roof, he eased out a breath. Even if he remained trapped here forever, even if he drowned, at least she was safe.

Her face reappeared, a grin that almost made him laugh curving her lips. "I'm back," she announced, and another head appeared—that of the innkeeper who shook his head at what was likely a sorry sight. "And I have assistance."

Chapter Eighteen

"One day, Lil, I'll see you in a beautiful ballgown without a single spot of mud on your hem."

Lilly wrinkled her nose at the idea. She didn't mind balls but didn't enjoy the ballgowns so much. Having said that, the idea of being pristine and glamorous rather appealed now, especially if August started telling her how beautiful she was again.

She plucked at her skirts as he shut the bedroom door behind him. "I've had enough muddy hems to last a lifetime."

"Liar."

She lifted a shoulder. How was it this man knew her so well already? The chances of her getting muddy again were quite high, though under different circumstances she

hoped.

Aware of the crisp, muddy muslin of her gown, she opted to drop onto the wooden chair and avoid any soft furnishings. Exhaustion ate through her and left her eyes scratchy and tired, and she wasn't sure if her muscles ached from exertion or were simply bruised and battered after wading through debris. She rested her elbow upon the dressing table and propped her cheek on a hand.

“Do you think Oakfield will ever recover?”

August pulled the laces at the collar of his shirt, rolled his shoulders, and rubbed the back of his neck with a hand. “From what I’ve seen today, I should think so.”

Lilly nodded. Not a single villager remained tucked in their dry home. Everyone had taken to aiding those impacted by the flood, fetching food and blankets, and ensuring they had somewhere warm to sleep.

It had taken all day to ensure everyone was safe and Lilly couldn't count how many times she'd waded back into the water to aid a mother with a screaming child in their arms or an elderly person struggling to make their way to dry ground. It was only luck most of the injuries were minor and no lives had been lost given how suddenly the river had burst its banks. When she'd spoken to the young lady who they had rescued, she'd talked of them waking to the sound of rushing water.

A shudder wracked Lilly and she shook away the image.

“There's no warm water to be had today but you should get clean and change.”

She looked to the freshly pressed gown Klara had carefully draped over the chest of drawers then to August. He'd been waist deep in that water, almost lost in the gloom, and when she'd climbed through that roof, she feared she'd never see him again.

He had to have known she wouldn't be able to lift him through. As strong as she was, she didn't have the muscles for that.

Which meant he'd chosen to save her life over his.

Her vision clouded and she swallowed hard.

"Lil?"

She smiled weakly as he neared and dropped onto his haunches in front of her. "You're the only one who gets away with calling me that, you know?"

"Good."

She released a shuddering breath. "I almost lost you."

He put his hands to her knees and met her gaze. When she searched it, her breath trapped in her lungs. His eyes were darker than she'd ever seen before, as though the memory of what they had been through shadowed his gaze. She saw his throat bob and felt his fingers press into her skin, almost branding her. He was recalling that they nearly lost each other. He was thinking of never wanting to be apart from her again. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, set her body aflame and never look back.

Somehow, she knew that all from one glance.

Perhaps she shifted forward slightly or maybe he moved closer. She wasn't certain. Either way, they wound up closer and his hands slipped up her arms. Abruptly, he hauled her to her feet. A heartbeat passed.

And then he was there, all hard muscles and rough fingers.

Those fingers delved into her hair, pulling her head back so he could kiss her. His lips met hers. After a day of moving slow, of wading through water and fighting the elements, this kiss was fast. Hard and demanding. His teeth bumped into her lip, and she whimpered. Lilly didn't think she'd whimpered once in her life, but August's kisses made her want to keen and beg for more. Snaking her hands up around his neck, she dug her nails into his skin. His tongue pressed between her lips, and she tasted sweet tea and heat.

It wasn't enough.

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Something had snapped. This was it. The point of no return. Lilly didn't care. She barely recalled a time when her family hadn't been scandalous, when there hadn't been talks of her father's behavior or her mother marrying below her rank. Or of their new money.

So why would it matter if she ruined herself in pursuit of this? Any arguments of August being inappropriate for her had washed away with the flood. What she'd witnessed today sealed her opinion of him. No scandal sheet could persuade her otherwise.

Here was a good, good man. Her equal in many ways. He understood her desires and her weaknesses, and he didn't scold her or denigrate her. In a world where society ensured she could never truly be equal to a man, Lilly felt it for maybe the first time. They could battle life together, at each other's sides, and he would never prevent her from rushing into danger or doing what was right.

And she wanted all of him.

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The rapid beat of August's heart threatened to overwhelm. Just kissing her drove him wild. The thought of losing her pushed him to the edge of insanity.

He knew now. Knew he couldn't let her go. Knew any vows he'd made were crumbling to pieces and washing away with the river. They didn't even need to discuss the fact she might very well be made for him because he swore he saw that understanding in her eyes when he drew back.

“We need to get clean.”

Lilly nodded. Her lips were pink and swollen, her hair a tangled mess again. With the exception of looking thoroughly kissed, it reminded him of when he’d first seen her. She’d made his heart pound then—this wild woman who refused to fall to her knees for him.

Thank God, she hadn’t or else they might never have ended up here.

Looping an arm around her waist, he drew her close. She burrowed her head into the crook of his neck and the thud of his pulse grew impossibly strong. Lilly needed no one yet to be relied upon for comfort from this woman had to be his proudest moment.

He coaxed her head up and smoothed a thumb over her cheek.

Her lips parted, a slight crease appearing between her brows.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Lil?”

“Why are your fingers callused?”

“Why are yours?” he countered.

“It’s not very ladylike, is it?”

“My hands are not that of a gentleman either.” He paused. “I’m not really a

gentleman at all.”

“I think all those you aided today would beg to differ.”

“Lil, I—”

“I don’t mind, and it doesn’t really matter.” She smiled so sweetly it threatened to shatter his heart. “I like the feel of your hands on me.”

When she leaned into his touch, he could only think of his fingers on other parts of her and the delicious taste of her skin. The hammering of his heart changed to a steady throb of desire, making him harder than ever before.

She tightened her grip on the back of his neck and brought her lips to his. They hovered there, an exchange of breaths and heat, and when they finally connected, the kiss was slow, as though they were savoring a fine wine. August found himself aware of every movement, every tiny touch of her mouth and body.

Before he could lose himself further, he drew back.

“We really must get you out of these clothes.”

She offered herself up to him. Damn, there was no chance she had any idea what she was doing to him. Delightfully muddy and messy and strong and sweet all at the same time. No wonder he didn’t have a chance of resisting her.

His hands shook as he worked at the buttons of her gown, and he knew he’d have to tell her the truth soon enough. His experience was limited and everything about him was a lie. But trying to find the words was like wading through those flood waters.

When he gripped her skirts and drew them up and up, he realized she had no stays

on—only a chemise and her gown. He clenched his jaw, and she lifted her arms, enabling him to pull both garments off in one clean sweep.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:45 pm

His legs threatened to give out at the sight of her—all pale skin, and delicate rosy nipples, and dark hair at the apex of her thighs begging him to drop to his knees and taste her again. The slight shadow of ribs contrasted with the firm strength of her stomach and thighs, and he knew now a person could be more than one thing. He could be more than the bastard son of stablehand and more than a reputed rake.

He might even be able to be a good father and husband.

Just as Lilly could be both strong and vulnerable. The way she offered herself up to him, despite the trembling thighs and the flush of pink on her cheeks made him certain anything was possible.

August wasted little time urging her to the bed. She sank onto the blanket, and he tucked it around her in a bid to keep her warm. She giggled and stretched her arms above her head, lifting her breasts and setting a fire in him that had to be doused.

Kissing his way up her ribs, he took the time to kiss her collarbone and décolletage, relishing the little murmurs of pleasure she made. As much as he wanted to go straight for her nipples and taste those tempting points, he dare not, or else he wouldn't take the time he needed to treasure this, to find the words. To explain everything. He might not be a gentleman, but he couldn't bed her without telling her the truth.

But then her hand moved to the back of his head and urged him down. He had no choice.

She gasped as he took her nipple in his mouth. He needed to stand up and retrieve the

wash bowl. Needed to get out of his own dirty clothes.

Needed to tell her all.

And he would. Just a few more moments he promised himself. Just a little more time tasting her.

When she arched into him, his mind blanked. He froze, lifted his head, and steeled himself before he could sink further into the abyss of pleasure she created.

She reached for him, a silent plea on her lips.

“Wait, Lil,” he said. “I need to tell you something.” He smiled briefly as she blinked at him, brows knitting. “A lot of things actually.” He was finally ready to tell someone the truth. He only hoped he didn’t end up with a rope around his neck for his troubles.

Chapter Nineteen

She knew it was too good to be true. He was too wonderfully perfect for her.

He covered her with his body, but Lilly still felt the stark vulnerability of her nudity. At the very same time, she was aware of the fabric of his clothes chafing against her skin and the weight of him on top of her. Foolishly, a fresh flush of desire rolled through her, making long and leisurely progress through her body and leaving her throat constricted.

August’s expression didn’t do anything to loosen the desire knotting her throat. The creases in his forehead had her itching to soothe them away.

None of this helped matters much. It didn’t ease the painful thump of her heart or

allow her to roll out from underneath him and cover herself up so he could tell her something she had no doubt had to be awful. His grave tone and the way his gaze hunted hers had a multitude of scenarios skitting through her mind.

The primary one was simple—he didn't really desire her.

He was a man, she was a woman, and this was simply an innocent mistake.

It didn't matter that he'd uttered sweet, sweet words to her and already worshipped her with a reverence she'd never expected to see in any man's gaze, let alone one this wonderful. Some part of her mind niggled at her, reminding her of all the times she'd tripped and fallen. Perhaps this was one of those. Perhaps this was the latest in her adventures gone awry. Her instincts had failed her again and rather than muddy and wet she'd wind up naked and alone and utterly humiliated.

"Lil," he said so softly her heart stretched.

She couldn't be wrong again. Surely this time she was right? Her instincts were correct, and this man was not the one portrayed in the scandal sheets but the flesh and blood one she'd watch risk his life and aid of others time and time again.

He reached over her, grabbed the edge of the bedsheet, and dragged it about her. The coolness of the fabric against her skin brought her to a stark reality. She tugged it around her breasts and banded both arms about herself to pin it there as she wriggled up to sitting and he moved back to perch on the edge of the bed.

"If you're going to say you have changed your mind—"

August shook his head. "I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

She searched his gaze, unable to find even a fragment of a lie there. Lilly didn't allow

herself to relax yet, though. Being raised with sisters, her education on men was limited but she did know it took an awful lot for a man in the midst of passion to stop.

And she knew how much she did not want him to stop. If he felt even a smidgen of what she did, it had to be a grave reason indeed for him to cease kissing her.

“Then what is it?” she asked, voice husky.

His jaw ticked. At the same time, her pulse began to thud in her ears. She couldn’t even latch onto a possible explanation, but she’d read enough scandalous things about him to be fearful indeed. What could be worse than affairs with married women and talk of deals with the devil to ensure he survived adventures few men returned alive from?

“August?”

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“I have never lain with a woman before.” His gaze latched firmly onto hers as the confession spilled from his lips.

The desire to laugh bubbled up inside her. It was preposterous. Even if the scandal sheets exaggerated everything about him, he was too handsome and too eligible to have never lain with a woman. Not to mention he had already shown her pleasure she didn't know her body was capable of.

“No.”

He lifted his shoulders. “It's the truth, Lil.”

“You're jesting with me.” She glanced about the room, half-expecting someone to leap out from behind the curtains and declare she had been the victim of some elaborate scheme to humiliate the least easily embarrassed of the Musgraves.

“No.”

Narrowing her gaze at him, she kept the sheet tight about herself. She didn't consider herself easily fooled. Why would she be when she had experienced the worst that people could offer in the taunting of herself and her sisters for being ousted from society? If anything, she was more likely to take her time to trust.

And August offered no signs of a lie.

“But the stories...” She waved a hand and regretted it the moment the sheet gave way a little. Clutching it tight once more, she shook her head. “I know gossip can be

conflated but rumors do not come from nothing. Goodness, even the tales of my family are half-true. We did steal a dog even if it was accidentally.”

“My tour around Europe was not without its adventures, that much is true. However, I never seduced a single woman and I never bedded one either.”

“And upon your return to England?”

“Any connections between myself and a woman are false speculation.” He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “But I was keen to encourage that speculation.”

“You enjoyed your rakish reputation?”

“I did,” he admitted. “It protected me.”

“Protected you?”

“It ensured no good woman would come near me.” He smirked. “At least until you.”

“There are those who would say I am not such a good woman.”

“They’re fools and you are the best of women. Were you not, I would not be so tempted to break my vow.”

“You made a vow to remain...” She dropped her voice, feeling almost idiotic whispering the word in front of such a renowned, scandalous and attractive man “...a virgin?”

“Until you,” he told her.

It was still unbelievable. She—the skinny, brash-tongued, and frankly most

unsophisticated Musgrave—had tempted a man who had stayed chaste despite temptation and opportunity. She shook her head. “No. It cannot be true.” She frowned and eyed him for several heartbeats. “It really cannot be true.”

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How could August blame her for not believing him? He’d spent so many years pretending to be the bachelor rake who didn’t care for the consequences of his actions and whether it harmed him or others. In truth, he hadn’t cared what the consequences for himself were. So what if he died climbing a mountain? Who cared if a bull chased him down in Spain?

And did it matter if women thought him capable of bedding them and leaving them in the family way?

So long as he ensured he never became the man his father wanted him to be, none of it mattered.

Until now.

Now, for the first time in his life, he wanted the truth known. All of it. He couldn’t bear to utter a single lie to this woman ever again.

“But, August...if that is true, how did you, um...” Her cheeks pinkened and he rather enjoyed that he could make this bold woman blush. “How did you know what to do when you...” She motioned downward.

Christ but the woman couldn’t make his cock any harder. All he had to do was think of the taste and scent and the sounds she made, and he struggled to keep himself from tearing that sheet away from her and showing her precisely what he had learned over the years.

“I’m not a monk.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:45 pm

“So you are telling me that you have been with women but never been with a woman?”

“Indeed.”

“But why?”

“Contrary to popular belief, I care if there are consequences to my actions.”

“You mean you did not wish for a woman to fall in the family way?”

Her eyes remained wide and her posture tight. Lilly clutched the sheet so tight he saw the muscles in her arms quiver. He couldn't blame her. She'd been fed lie after lie, not just by the scandal sheets but by the very way he interacted with her at their first meeting and by the secrets he kept. Maybe she would not even believe him after he told her everything. But it was a risk he was willing to take. If anyone deserved the truth, it was her.

“It was not all for honorable reasons, I am afraid to say.”

“So what were your reasons?”

He sighed and stroked a finger over the soft cotton of the sheet, wishing he could move his hand farther, perhaps smooth it up and along the length of her legs and confess all as he held her in his arms.

But he couldn't be distracted, and Lilly was the biggest distraction of all. He couldn't even keep a decade old vow with her around.

“My parents are not my parents.” The words came out firmer than he’d expected, without a flourish or a great rush of air. It was more a mere fact than a burden he had been carrying around with him his whole life.

“Your parents are not your parents?” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“As in...” She frowned and shook her head.

“The Marquis of Blackthorpe raised me, in a manner of speaking, but my parents were unable to conceive. So desperate was my father for an heir, he took me from a struggling widower and passed me off as his own.”

Any color in her cheeks vanished. “You are not of their blood?”

“No.” He held her gaze, his heart increasing its pace.

She had power over him now—a power he’d never wanted to give anyone. Yet he gave it gladly. Let Lilly have say over his future, over whether he lived or died. He didn’t care. So long as she knew he was honest with her.

“And your real parents?”

August shrugged. “A groom from the stables apparently. His lover died in childbirth. The man was paid off and never heard from again. My mother didn’t take to the plan too well and wanted nothing to do with me.”

“But, August, she could hardly blame you for your father’s plans for an heir!”

“I know that now, of course.” He offered a tight smile. “But it took a few years to

figure that out.”

“So your father passed you as his own, despite the risk to you both.” She shifted closer and the sheets bunched around her bent knees, making her look like a little bundle of cotton that he wanted to scoop up and kiss. “A risk that still exists so long as your true father is still alive.”

“Fraud is often punishable by death.”

“And pretending to be a member of the nobility...”

“Yes.”

“Good Lord, August, you shouldn’t be telling me this.”

“I could not spend another day lying to you, Lil.”

“Does anyone else know of this?”

“No one.”

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“Have you ever sought out your real father?”

He smirked. “It seemed best to vanish and pretend otherwise. Besides, I know nothing of him—not even his name—and to put an investigator onto the matter would only bring increased risk.”

She stared at the candle on the bedside table for a few moments and he eyed her profile and wished he could know what was running through her head. He imagined he knew her quite well after everything they’d been through together and in almost every instance, she reacted how he would in any given situation. He wouldn’t blame her for leaping from the bed and running away. He’d certainly wanted to when he realized the full truth of his life at the tender age of five.

“What does this have to do with not wishing to bed a woman?” she asked, her gaze continued to linger on the flickering flame.

“My father wanted me to be the perfect gentleman.”

“So you didn’t wish to disappoint him?”

“Quite the opposite actually. After he died, I realized how ridiculous all his lessons were.”

“Lessons?”

“He was determined to beat the bastard from me.”

“Oh, August.”

“It was so important that I be the perfect marquis and for a long time, I tried desperately hard to be everything he wanted me to be.”

Her hand snaked its way over his leg to curl around his hand. He gratefully looped his fingers through hers.

“It was never good enough,” he continued. “So when he passed, I travelled the world, and did everything I could not to be the perfect marquis. Wore slightly shabby clothes, threw myself into whatever adventure I could, ensured I was the opposite of a gentleman at every turn. Hell, even thinking of building the racecourse was a plan of revenge. He never really liked horses.” He looked at her ruefully. “And most of all, I ensured I never ran the risk of continuing the line.” He gave a dry chuckle. “Everyone knows a marquis is in need of a son.”

Lilly shifted so close he felt the warmth of her body reach out to his. He was exhausted. From the day and from telling her the truth. Yet nothing could prevent him from twisting and taking her into his hold.

“Maybe I’ll bring Icarus to race at Kinton,” she said with a gentle smile.

“I like the sound of that.”

“There’s still a risk, August,” she reminded him softly.

“There is.” He pressed a finger under her chin and searched her face, grateful his instincts had been entirely correct about this woman. She’d take his secret to the grave.

“And I am not exactly experienced myself.”

“Then we’ll learn together,” he promised her before he took her mouth in a firm, deep, grateful kiss.

Chapter Twenty

Every sensation in Lilly’s body heightened. August moved away from her and retrieved the wash bowl to place it on the bedside table. Her throat dried as she eyed his movements, making note of the width of his shoulders and his capable hands. Was she really going to lie with this man?

But of course she was.

There was no debate about it. She’d been fighting an attraction to him since the moment he’d hit her with that arrogant smirk. It had only heightened as she’d begun to unravel the mystery that was Lord Blackthorpe. Now that she understood the reasons behind her confusion, she couldn’t deny her feelings.

Though she’d been wrong about him in one way. He wasn’t just her match—he was better than her. He’d fought through a horrible upbringing and still came away a good man with kind intentions. She was certain many people would be jaded and bitter after such an experience. She understood now why witnessing those sparks of kindness had enflamed her feelings for him—she had been seeing the real him.

“Lie down,” he ordered, voice gritty.

They’d spoken about so much she didn’t feel the need to respond. That was, even if she could. Her voice remained trapped in her thick throat, stolen by the knowledge she was going to be his first. This heroic man who had denied himself a life of luxury and hedonism wanted her and only her. She could scarcely summon a single syllable let alone the words to tell him how much it meant to her.

“Remove the sheet, Lil.”

The command set a flutter racing through her, centering low. For someone who rarely did as she was told, she found herself eager to please. Anything to feel his hands upon her.

She uncoiled herself from the sheet and shivered in anticipation. He dipped the cloth in the water and wrung it out then dropped down beside the bed. Before he did anything, he kissed her slowly, deeply. She closed her eyes and savored the taste of him as the damp cloth touched her skin.

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Lilly opened her eyes when he broke the kiss and set to work running the cloth all over her body. He concentrated on her limbs first, her feet, her hands, leaving her itching for him to touch her in more intimate places. She swore he was enjoying torturing her and leaving her clutching at the sheets as he swirled the cloth over her pale skin, avoiding the places where she so desperately needed to be touched.

Finally, he swept over her breasts, making her gasp at the cold against her nipples. He followed his administrations by taking one nipple into his mouth and the shock of the warmth nearly made her jolt from the bed.

“You taste delicious,” he told her as he raised his head briefly.

Using his tongue, he swirled it around her nipple, between her breasts and then returned to probe her mouth. She kissed him back eagerly but matched his leisurely pace, determined to savor the flavor of him.

“Oh Lord, touch me,” she begged as the cloth skimmed her hips and down.

She reached for August in a bid to tempt him to end her agony and managed to slip a hand between them to cup his arousal. He was hot and heavy and made her ache for him.

He hissed and drew back. She went to touch him again, but he grabbed her hand. “Lil, you addle my wits when you touch me, and I’ve been thinking about this—about you—for too long now. I want this to last.”

He took his time cleaning over her belly and her breasts, and she sighed as he moved

the cloth over her aching nipples, kissing her intermittently and leaving her breathless. His gaze dropped to her breasts, her thighs, and the core of her, his usually bright gaze dark.

Warm, labored breaths whispered over her lips, and she'd never felt so desirable in her life. If ever. And while she'd never wanted such a thing before, she wanted it now. She wanted August to find her beautiful and devastating and everything he ever needed.

Once August dropped the cloth back into the bowl, he buried his head in the crook of her neck, and shifted over her, bringing warmth and relief.

"I could do that all day," he confessed. "Just a whole day of exploring your body."

"Do not," she pleaded and hooked both legs around him and rocked up so her delicate flesh rubbed against the unforgiving hardness in his trousers. Lilly throbbed with need and gripped his arms tight.

Kissing his way along her jaw, he found her mouth again and she kissed him with an open mouth, tangling her tongue with his. The pace increased as did their boldness as they discovered a perfect rhythm that made her head swirl behind closed eyes.

Rough fingers stroked her neck, her shoulder and then down her arm. He clasped her hip and skimmed down to caress her thigh. She clutched the fabric of his shirt as her breathing grew ragged. Any chill she felt vanished. Her skin was hot and clammy, and she needed him so badly, she couldn't fathom how she'd resisted this long. She continued to roll her hips in a bid to draw as much pleasure from him as possible, but she knew it would never be enough.

"August, I need you. Inside me. Please."

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Only Lilly could make his heart beat faster than a prime racing horse. All those years of risking his life in order to feel something other than the shame his father had burdened him with, and he'd never felt like this. All he'd needed was her it seemed.

"Wait there." He rose from the bed and set to work on his clothes. She wriggled against the sheets, the twin points of her breasts and the shadows between her thighs making him want to clench his jaw so tight he feared he'd crack a tooth.

"I'm not going anywhere."

No. She wasn't. This courageous woman had taken everything he'd confessed as though he was uttering nothing more than an invitation to take tea. If anyone could handle the truth of August's upbringing and true heritage, it was Lilly Musgrave.

Her eyes gleamed as he yanked his shirt over his head and her gaze landed upon the tattoo that crossed one half of his chest.

"I've never seen a tattoo before."

He glanced down at the ink. The crude outline of a heart made him cringe these days.

"Unless you're a shirtless sailor or criminal, I'm not surprised."

She rose from the bed and folded a palm over it. "It's different." She looked up at him. "Like you, August."

"And like you."

She nodded. "All of my family are different, but even compared to them I feel

different.”

“Different, perfect.” He cupped her cheek. “It’s all the same to me.”

Reaching past him, she retrieved the cloth and wrung it out. He pressed a breath through his teeth as she moved the cold fabric across his skin, taking her time just as he did with her. It was torturous yet gave him the time to admire the leanness of her, the strength that moved through her body.

Unable to resist, he slid a hand around her neck and kissed the curve of her neck then any part of her available while she worked the cloth over his body. When her hand shifted to the fold of his trousers, he groaned.

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In spite of his protest, she pressed harder, and his cock jerked and pulsed in response.

“Stop.”

He stepped back and clumsily removed the rest of his garments. He wanted to make this last, but he couldn't cope with another moment of not being flesh and flesh with her. He snatched the cloth from her while she watched wide-eyed as he performed a cursory wash then he took a moment to enjoy the way her gaze flitted over him. The desire flaring in her eyes and making her chest rise and fall faster removed any lingering doubts. She needed him as much as he needed her.

Then he was upon her, pressing her against the bed. Lilly's fingers curved around his rear as she sank onto the mattress under his weight. She was wet—so wet.

He paused long enough to connect with her gaze. “If we do this, Lil, there is no going back. For either of us.”

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip. She had to understand the enormity of it all. For a woman to give herself to a man, she had to be certain, just as he was.

August still had to press the point. “I will not let you go after this.”

She nodded again and he edged forward, weight supported on one hand with the other pressed under her rear. They locked gazes and he sank into her, inching in. She inhaled deeply as he invaded her, slowly, carefully.

His heart felt like it was going to explode out of his chest as they were enveloped in a

world of their own. Everything was hazy, even the feeling of their bodies melding. All he could focus on was the widening of her eyes and the parting of her lips. When they were fully joined, he waited a heartbeat and felt the fluttering response of the warmth of her body closing around him.

“August,” she whispered.

A primitive sense of belonging flickered inside him. One that perhaps he had recognized in her from early on. Here he was, a barely wanted bastard child living a lie, and she gave herself fully to him, accepting every flawed part of his history.

When he started to move, she arched into him and tightened her legs around him. They moved in an easy, flowing motion, as though they had always been lovers. His pledge to never bed anyone might have seemed foolish and simplistic, yet he couldn't regret it, not when he got to share his first time with Lilly.

“August,” she whispered again.

“I know.”

As he moved, he kissed her cheek, the corner of her lips, before sealing his mouth over hers. He shifted his hips and swallowed her sounds, and it took mere moments for her release and a muffled cry touched his lips.

He felt the ripples of her body, of her tightening about him. By some miracle, he held it together as she gripped his trembling arms, and he opened his eyes to find her observing him. A groan escaped him, and the tension slipped from his muscles as the pleasure built to a peak. With a gasp, she climaxed and drew the bliss from him as he thrust in one last time.

Expelling a long breath, he offered shaky kisses, and dropped down beside her while

keeping her close. He already knew everything would be different after this, but he had no idea quite how much it would feel like he had offered her his heart and soul in that one moment. And he was certain she had done the same in return.

It left him in no doubt that once they found Icarus, he would be asking Lilly to marry him.

Chapter Twenty-One

“I give up!”

August gently took the reins of the cart from her and guided it down the busy thoroughfare. The maze of buildings was worse than London to Lilly’s mind. Too haphazard, too close together.

If she was trying to be reasonable, she would argue there were plenty of parts of London that were just as busy and as confusing as Grantham, but she didn’t feel like being reasonable and it didn’t matter that she hadn’t set foot in London since she was younger and likely couldn’t find her way around Town either.

A whole day of searching for nothing. She huffed out a breath and peered at each shop and building they passed as though the windows filled with hats and fripperies and books might offer some insight into where Icarus was.

They called at every inn and stables they could find, and no one recognized the description of Icarus. Or else they were lying and in league with the thieves of course, however, Lilly didn’t believe they’d been lied to. August swung between threatening to genial with ease and everyone was eager to offer him any snippet of information they might have.

Which was, unfortunately, none.

She stole a sideways look at him. She had to wonder how he did it. How he played pretend all these years. Since leaving Oakfield and their lovely hosts, who made them promise to return and update them as to how things went, they'd discussed his upbringing a little more and his time aboard.

Lilly imagined whilst he travelled, he hardly had to pretend anything. Skipping from country to country would allow him not to get too close to anyone. Her desire for adventure felt foolish now. She'd been brought up in comfort and with loving parents who tried their best to instill confidence in her. Escaping from too much love was a ridiculous notion now she knew of all the beatings and beratements August had endured. No wonder he'd needed to leave England.

"We won't give up." August slipped a hand over hers and she rather missed the bare touch of their hands, even if they both looked more respectable in their purchased gloves and hats.

She tried not to think about how unrespectable they had been on their last night in the village before the roads had cleared as it would leave her smiling oddly to herself and she couldn't have August questioning her yet again as to what she was thinking of. He'd think her a harlot if she confessed all she could think of was their lovemaking.

Besides, it made her feel guilty. Icarus was the most important thing here. He'd spent too long in the hands of thieves and who knew how well he was faring.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:45 pm

“We should get some rest, though.” August motioned to an inn ahead, the sign swinging in the breeze that whipped along the road swinging precariously on a squeaking hinge. “This place looks to have beds.”

Lilly considered her stiff neck and sore rear from sitting so long on the unforgiving wooden seat. Then she considered poor Icarus. “We should search more. My sisters would never give up.”

“What do your sisters have to do with this?”

She exhaled. He had been entirely candid with her, so it felt like the right time to be candid with him. August would keep her secret just as she would keep his surely?

“My sisters and I are part of an investigative society.”

An eyebrow lifted. “An investigative society?”

“The Duchess’s Investigative Society to be precise.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“As well you should not have done,” she said firmly. “It was established by my aunt, the Duchess of Daventry, to aid women in need, most especially when they had problems that were ignored or trivialized. It has helped many women over the years, and my sisters have been instrumental in solving several mysteries.”

He eyed her for several moments. “And you partake in this?”

“Well, a little reluctantly but yes.” She lifted a shoulder. “I was worried about my sisters being put in a position of danger.”

August eyed her for several moments then chuckled. “I rather hope you never cease surprising me.”

A flutter in her chest reminded her of the promises he’d made—that things would never be the same, that he wouldn’t let her go. If he meant what he said, she could be surprising him for years to come.

“Lil, it’s getting late, and we still have at least half the town to search. We should rest.” He squeezed her hand as he drew the cart to a halt outside the tall inn.

Already, candles were lit in the windows, spilling golden light onto the dirt road. She smelled warm bread in the air and had to bite back a groan. The only time she’d been more tired and hungry was after the flood at the village. If this was God’s revenge for her wishing for something exciting to happen, she wasn’t impressed. She’d never been exhausted and hungry and frustrated when she imagined doing exciting things like chasing down thieves.

“But Icarus...”

“I know.” He released her hand, climbed down from the cart, and walked around the side to offer her a hand.

With a sigh, she took it. “You do not always have to be right, you know.”

“We’ll find him tomorrow, I promise you. But for now, we need rest and food.”

“I should see if I can send a letter too. I never managed to update Aunt Sarah as to where we were after the flood, and I wanted to request Papa send some aid to the

village. Perhaps he can send some fresh food and blankets.”

“A fine idea. I should do the same with my estate manager, though I would perhaps not tell your father quite how close to the flood you were.”

“Well, Aunt Sarah will have ensured he has no idea quite how close to danger I have come.” She took his hand and climbed from the carriage.

“And quite who you are travelling with,” August added.

Even her unusual family would not be impressed to know she was accompanied by such a rake. Quite how she would introduce him to them, she did not know, but that was for her to worry about later. First, they needed to find Icarus. And then...

Well, she had not quite figured out what the next part was, and for now, she did not wish to. She simply wished to enjoy the excitement and daring of being August’s lover.

“I’ll check for rooms,” he said as he opened the door to the inn and ushered her through with a hand to her back. He glanced to the taproom to the right. “Sounds busy.”

Lilly thrust a thumb toward the dining room to the left where she could see inn guests enjoying leisurely meals whilst hunched over books or writing letters. “I’ll see if anyone has any paper to spare.”

August paused, his gaze skittering over her features.

“What is it? Do I have mud?”

He gave a low chuckle. “No. No.” He leaned in and glanced her over again. “I just

cannot think of a good reason not to kiss you.”

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“Well, then kiss me.”

“Here?”

“Yes, you scandalous rake, Here.” She grabbed his cravat which she had to admit was useful for persuading August to kiss her even if she did miss his open-shirted look.

He pressed a swift kiss to her mouth, but it was enough to leave her feeling a little unsteady and needing to put a hand to the wall.

“I’ll meet you in the dining room once I’ve spoken to the innkeeper,” he said.

She nodded and watched him push through the door into the busy taproom, briefly releasing a cacophony of chatter and warbling tunes, then she eased out a breath and turned to head into the dining room. Whatever happened next, they could not lose this. She couldn’t let it go.

Which meant she might have to do the unthinkable.

She’d have to ask August to marry her.

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August only needed to step one foot into the tavern before deciding he didn’t want Lilly staying here. Forced to squeeze past people who filled the room to bursting, he narrowly dodged a deluge of ale as a man regaled his friends with a tale August couldn’t understand thanks to his slurred words. He wasn’t the only person who had

spilled beer here as the floor was sticky underfoot and huge cobwebs hung from the rafters. If this was the state of the taproom, he hated to think what the beds were like.

Women with thick make-up around their eyes, and dresses that hung precariously from their bodies lingered around the edges of the room, until invited to sit on a man's lap and August spotted one couple vanishing through the rear door. He passed by one lady who smiled coyly through thickly painted lips.

"Need some company?"

"Not tonight." He paused and fished a coin out of his pocket. "But I'm after information."

She took the coin and slipped it into her stays with a pout. "I can give you more than information, sweeting."

"Just information."

"What do you need?"

"I'm looking for a horse—a fine one."

She shrugged. "I don't know nothing about horses."

"It would draw attention."

"I'm no stablehand."

He sighed. "If you find out anything, there's more coin in it for you. He's a dun stallion. It's not likely many of the grooms will have seen one like him."

She pursed her lips then grinned, revealing red lipstick clinging to her teeth. “I can ask around.” She looked him up and down. “Will you be staying here?”

“Not likely.”

“I’m Amelie. I’m always here. Come back tomorrow, and I’ll have information for you.”

“My thanks, Amelie.” He offered her a dip of his head and went to turn around as she clucked about what a gentleman he was. Little did she know.

He paused and frowned at the sight of a heavy-set gentleman with a woman splayed across his lap. August peered around Amelie to get a better look.

“Don’t go to her. She works down the docks usually,” Amelie muttered but August ignored her and shoved through the crowds to reach the table.

“Mr. Brown is it not?” Although the man had his face burrowed against the generous pair of breasts, August recognized him with ease. He’d spent many a time in his uncle’s stables at the side of this man—anything to escape being at home. The man was known to exaggerate everything and told fanciful tales of seeking treasure in his youth and looking after horses for royalty.

“Get lost.” Brown waved a hand in his direction, keeping his attention glued to the whore’s breasts.

August set his jaw. It was no coincidence the man was here, in the town where Icarus was meant to be. Perhaps Brown thought his dreams of wealth would finally come true.

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He tapped the woman's shoulder, who twisted, glanced briefly at August's expression, and slid swiftly off Brown's lap.

Smart woman didn't want to get involved in a fight, and August was certainly not feeling like taking the peaceful way out. This man might not have been responsible for Lilly's kidnapping, but he'd set in motion events that had led them both into danger.

And led them to each other.

But he'd be damned if he was going to thank a horse thief for that.

"Hey, come back." Brown grabbed for the woman but too late. He scowled in August's direction. "Get your own—" His pink complexion paled. "Lord Blackthorpe."

"Good evening, Brown. Fancy seeing you here."

"Yes, well." He rose from his chair and smoothed his thinning hair over his head. Sweat clung to his upper lip, though by the looks of the empty tankards on the table the sweat could be from consuming too much alcohol. Either way, he knew he'd caught his horse thief by the way the man's throat bobbed.

"Celebrating, are we?" He nodded toward the table.

Brown inched away then turned to dash. The crowded room played to August's advantage, allowing him to catch up with the man and grab him by his collar.

“Going somewhere, Brown? To fetch your horse perhaps?”

“No, I—” Brown’s jaw tightened, and he met August’s glare. “Fine. Yes. I took him.”

“Take me to him.”

The man’s stare grew cold, and he tugged his shirt from August’s grip then jerked his head toward the rear door. “He’s here.”

August glanced back at the taproom door but spotted no sign of Lilly. With any luck, he’d return to her by the time she finished her letter and would even have Icarus in hand. Would gifting a once-stolen horse make a good engagement gift? He supposed not considering Icarus was hers in the first place.

“I know, you know,” Brown uttered over his shoulder.

He stalked after Brown, trudging through the thick mud of the courtyard toward the stable—a ramshackle building with rotten beams and flaking wood. “Know what?”

“I know about you.” Brown ducked into the stables and motioned to the rear of the building.

August spied Icarus but kept any relief to himself. He still had to deal with Brown. He folded his arms and eyed the man. With the vast array of rumors that had flew about London saloons from devil worshipping to affairs with royalty of both sexes, he doubted anything Brown thought he knew would shock him. “What do you know about me?”

“I know who your father is.”

August’s heart stilled. He forced himself to keep his expression blank. “Most people

do, Brown.”

“No. Who your real father is.” Frederick’s offered a smug grin. “I worked with him you see.”

“My father was the Marquis of Blackthorpe.”

Brown smirked. “I have a deal for you.”

“You’re a thief, Brown. You’ll be lucky if you don’t wind up in the wrecks.”

“I’ve kept this information secret for many years.” He inclined his head, his grin widening. “Don’t you think I deserve a little reward?”

“You don’t deserve a damned thing.”

“Cursing ain’t gentlemanly behavior, Lord Blackthorpe. Except you’re no gentleman, are you? And I think if I told the truth, there would be quite a few questions asked.” He shrugged. “Impersonating a peer of the realm is quite the crime, ain’t it?”

A multitude of curses ran through August’s mind. He doubted Brown had any proof but someone digging into August’s past would cause problems and he couldn’t be certain there weren’t others who knew the truth. How many people had his real father told? If someone questioned enough people, the truth would out.

And he’d take Lilly down with him.

August folded his arms. “What do you want?”

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“Simple.” Brown thrust a thumb toward the horse. “Let me go with this beast and I won’t ever say a word.”

He couldn’t let Icarus remain in the hands of this bastard. “I have one better. I’ll pay you for Icarus. You don’t even have to worry about finding a buyer.”

Brown chuckled. “You’d pay me for the horse I stole from your cousin?”

If it meant Lilly could have her horse, he’d pay anything. At least if she had Icarus, she wouldn’t care so much about the promises August had made.

And how he was going to break them.

He’d been foolish to think things could be different. That he could give up on running from anything other than a life of rumors and scandal. Because with Brown knowing the truth, there would always be the risk of a death sentence hanging over his head.

And he could never put Lilly through being married to a fraud.

Chapter Twenty-Two

After working her way through a cloying combination of stale sweat and ale-tinged breath that even the lavender fragrance of the ladies of the night could not combat, Lilly emerged into the courtyard. She tried not to let her heart skip to a hopeful beat.

If August wasn’t in the taproom, he had to be in the stables, and hunting down someone willing to send her letter had taken long enough for her to imagine he might

well have found something in the stables.

God, she hoped it was Icarus. The poor boy had been alone and scared for too long.

Skirts in hand, she hastened across the courtyard, determined that for once in her life she wouldn't end up with muddy hems. A single light shone from a tiny square window in a brick stable that looked as though it would collapse at any moment, sitting at a strange angle on the tired timbers threaded through it. No stablehands scurried back and forth though she imagined few of the guests at this inn owned horses.

Her heart gave another little jolt. It could be a good place to hide Icarus. If there were no hired hands to spread word of a fine horse, it would explain why they had found no sign of him.

She ducked into the doorway, turned toward the light, and spied the outline of two figures. She didn't need to see his face to recognize August. His solid build guided her to him like a lantern in a fog-filled street. He didn't notice her as she headed toward him and whoever he conversed with. She froze when she spotted the horse tucked into the dank corner of the stables.

"Icarus!"

August's head swung sharply around, and she grinned. "August, you found him!"

The momentum in her body failed the moment she spied what was in his hand.

Bank notes.

Several of them. She looked at the notes in his hand then glanced at the man to which he was handing them. She gasped. She'd spent enough time with Icarus to recognize

the stablemaster. He must have been behind the theft of Icarus.

Along with August.

She met August's gaze and found herself barely able to take a breath.

"Lil—"

"You were behind it all along?"

"Lil, I—" He looked to the stablemaster.

Mr. Brown shrugged. "You can tell her the truth." A smile that made Lilly's skin crawl worked across his face. "Or you can."

August cursed gruffly, stuffed the bank notes into the man's outstretched hand then stalked over to her. She blinked at the harsh expression on his face, the way his mouth formed a hard line and his usually bright eyes remained dull and dark. Her mouth dried and time slowed. She almost didn't want to hear his explanation, didn't want to hear what a fool she had been.

It didn't stop her from continuing to be a fool, though. "There's an explanation for this isn't there, August?"

She loathed the pleading tone to her voice, but surely there had to be? Surely everything they'd shared was real. How could the man willingly lay down his life for her have tricked her at the same time? It made no sense.

The light from the lantern left one side of his face shaded and she couldn't help but think of his talk of pretense. Was that what this all was? Had he been lying about pretending to be a scoundrel and the truth of it was, he'd been playing pretend with

her instead? Several moments passed and she could wait no longer.

“August,” she demanded, “what is going on?”

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He rubbed a hand over his face. “You’re right.”

“Right about what?”

“I was behind it all along.”

Lilly felt as though she had been standing beside a huge firework or cannon as it fired. The words rang in her ears, deafening her. Everything trembled as though it had exploded the world beneath her feet. She longed to reach out for something for support but by some miracle, she fisted her hands at her side and remained steady.

“You stole Icarus?”

“I wanted the horse.” His tone grew icy. “It seemed a good way to get it.”

She absorbed the words and every moment they’d gone through together rolled through her mind like a picture book.

“No.”

Lilly wasn’t worldly or experienced with men. However, she was no fool. She’d seen how he looked at her and the pain that had scarred his face when he spoke of his upbringing.

“I’m a bastard, remember?” he murmured. “It’s in my blood.”

“It makes no sense.” She twisted away for a second to gather herself before rounding

on him again. “Why keep up this pretense of trying to find him? Why pursue me when I was kidnapped?”

He lifted both shoulders, barely looking at her. “I couldn’t risk you finding Icarus alone.” His gaze lifted. “I figured I could distract you or persuade you to go home. I never expected you’d try to chase after horse thieves, for God’s sake.”

She nodded slowly, absorbing the words as they made their agonizing way through her and feeling strangely numb to it all. “I’m going to get a magistrate or a bailiff or—” She thrust an unsteady finger in his direction. “You won’t get to keep Icarus. I’ll—”

“Do what you must, Lilly.” August turned his back on her. It was the first time those wide shoulders had ever looked anything other than appealing. She swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth and fled the stables. Now wasn’t the time to think about her heart shattering in her chest or the tears making her throat close over. All she had to do was make sure he wouldn’t get away with this. Then she could worry about her broken heart.

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It took all August’s willpower not to chase Lilly. Or slam a fist across the smug face of the stablemaster.

“Women, eh?”

Glaring at him, August pressed the rest of the money into the man’s hand who wadded it up and slipped it inside his threadbare jacket.

“You used to be a good man, Fredericks,” August muttered.

“And you used to be a good boy but that’s what the years do to us.” He shrugged. “Looks like you broke that young lady’s heart with ease.” He smirked and nudged him with an elbow. “Cut from the same cloth you and I.”

He’d deny it but there was no point. The man wasn’t wrong. He’d seen the moment Lilly’s belief in him crumbled and while it was for the best, it was the same precise moment his heart shattered into pieces.

What a fool he’d been to think they could have something good and real. That he might have a normal life—hell, a happy one even. His past and his father’s decisions would always be hanging over his head and he couldn’t drag her into the shame that would come with if he was found out. His best bet was to take to travelling again, somewhere far, far away where he could forget Lilly for good.

As if that could ever happen.

Anyway, he’d give her Icarus once he was gone. That would keep her happy surely? She’d forget him soon enough.

He headed toward the entrance of the stables. A shadow flitted past the tiny window then a small figure appeared in the entrance way. If he’d ever doubted her strength and courage, he’d look a damned fool right now.

Hands to her hips, she stared him down with a lifted chin.

He’d never loved her more.

But she still needed to go. She deserved so much more than a life on the run or living with the shame of being married to a man put to death for fraud.

“I thought you were going to find someone to arrest me,” he said coolly, despite the

steady throb of heat running through his veins.

“I was...but then I realized...” Her eyes narrowed to slits. “I realized something.”

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“Something,” he drawled. “How enthralling. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a horse to—”

“I realized you were lying.”

“Well, yes, that was the point, Lil.”

“And I realized I’m not giving up without a proper fight.”

August inhaled at length. Did he have to fall for the strongest woman he’d ever met? Naturally, she could see through his lies. Obviously, she wouldn’t give up. This was a woman who had survived kidnappers and floods and decided she could take on horse thieves. Chasing her away with a few arrogant lies was never going to work.

“I have no intention of fighting you.” He flicked a look over his shoulder at Brown and the horse. August couldn’t get past Lilly without shoving her aside and he doubted she’d let him go with ease.

“You didn’t look at me, you know, when you said all those words.”

“Perhaps I tired of looking at you.”

A faint flicker of pain in her eyes made him wish he really was facing the gallows. Anything to escape this situation—a situation he should never have put them in. It was only ever going to lead to hurt.

“No.” She shook her head vigorously and drove a finger in his direction. “No,” she

repeated. "You have looked me in the eye and told me wonderful things and I knew them to be true. But when you told me you had used me, you could not look at me." She smirked. "That is not the natural behavior of a practiced liar."

"But as you say, I am a practiced liar."

"And I have seen you lie and pretend, August, and you did it with ease. Until now." Her smile grew smug. "I'm not leaving until you tell me why you are trying to drive me away."

Lifting his gaze up and down her determined stance, he wished he could tell her how proud he was of her, wished he could confess everything. Nothing had felt better than the moment he had told Lilly the truth about himself. He wanted to feel that way again.

Another look at Brown and his conceited expression made the heavy pound of his heart increase. He could tell her. Explain everything and still send her on her way. Except he had this feeling Lilly would refuse to accept she could never be the wife of a fake lord and he'd already proven too weak around her. If she begged for him to never let her go, he couldn't guarantee he'd deny her.

"Lil, damn it." He hissed the words out.

"Tell me," she said, the set of her chin softening. "Tell me why you are trying to drive me away."

"Lil—"

"Ack, this is getting ridiculous," Brown declared. "Out of my way!"

August pivoted at the same time Brown rushed forward upon Icarus's back. August

twisted aside and snatched Lilly's arm to move her out of Brown's path but too late. Brown thrust a boot out and the impact tore Lilly from his hold, shoving her straight to the floor. She bounced against the hard stone with a thud that made him sick to his stomach. When he dropped to his knees beside her, her eyes were closed.

"Lilly?" he shook her by the shoulders, but she remained out cold.

No. He couldn't lose her now. Not now. Not after the awful things he'd said. Not when he hadn't been able to tell her how much he loved her.

Brown needed to pay.

He rose to his feet, his breaths hot. When he stepped outside, he spotted a boy sweeping hay in the courtyard. "A lady has been hurt in the stables. See to her," he ordered.

The boy nodded, wide-eyed and flung down his broom. August raced around the front of the building and swiftly detached his horse from the cart.

"I'm coming for you, Brown," he muttered, the throb of his pulse hard in his ears. "I'm coming for you."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Ivy, no," Lilly grumbled when her sister shoved at her shoulder. "Sleepy..."

"Miss?"

That didn't sound like her sister. And the room didn't smell like fresh cut flowers. Come to think of it, her bed was uncommonly hard.

With a scowl, she dragged her eyes open, and blinked as a wave of pain and nausea crashed over her.

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“Oh dear,” was all she managed to mutter.

The vision of a boy swam in front of her eyes, and she tried to sit up only for her stomach to lurch.

“Miss, you’ve had a fall.”

She closed her eyes, sucked in a breath, and opened them again. The boy remained there and there was no sign of her twin sister or her cozy bedroom.

But of course there wasn’t. Ivy was married and Lilly hadn’t snuck into her sister’s bed to steal her warmth in over a year. She pressed her palms to the cold stones and slipped her fingers over remnants of straw. “A fall...” she murmured to herself.

It rushed back in one sharp image. The stablemaster upon Icarus rushing toward her then the sharp stomp of a boot upon her chest. Then...nothing.

She rose sharply, unable to hold back a groan when her head throbbed. A hand to the back of her scalp, she gingerly touched the lump forming there then glanced at her gloves. No sign of blood so that had to be good surely.

“Where’s August?” she asked, her tongue thick.

“That man you were with?” The boy eyed her as though he had little idea what to do with a barely awake woman. She didn’t much blame him.

“Yes, him. Where is here?”

“He ran off somewhere. Looked bloody—excuse me—looked furious.”

Lilly straightened. “Ran off? Where? In which direction?” The damned man was probably in pursuit of Icarus and Brown. She waved a hand at the boy. “Help me up.”

“I don’t think you should be standing, miss. You don’t look right if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Help me up, damn it.”

With a shrug, he took her hand, and aided her to standing. Lilly took a few deep breaths and waited for the spots dancing in front of her eyes to clear. Her head throbbed with every step, making her wince, but there was no way she was letting August face that thief alone.

A hand to the wall, she made her way out of the stables, gripped her spencer about her, and forced herself forward. When she emerged from the courtyard onto the main road, she saw no sign of August or Brown. The sick feeling in her stomach had been replaced by a rolling sensation. The stablemaster was a greedy man, intent on not only ruining August’s life but plundering as much profit as he could. What would he do if August caught up with him?

She stumbled down the road, ignoring the boy calling after her and nearly knocking into a woman strolling past.

“Watch it,” the woman shouted but Lilly ignored her too. She needed to find August, needed to know he was safe.

She heard the bellow as though it had rippled from the depths of the earth.

“Brown!”

The intermittent streetlamps offered little splashes of gold in the gloom where buildings hung close to the road. She heard laughter from the inn and the sound of carriage wheels in the distance. A chill raced up her spine when thundering hooves approached. She turned in the direction of the sound and under the light of a far-off lamp, she saw the flash of a horse and its rider.

In the next flash was August.

Her heart jumped into her throat. They hadn't gone far. And August was still safe.

She picked up her pace, forcing herself to take steady breaths and ignore the waves of pain that kept rolling over her. All she needed to do was get to August. Nothing else mattered. She'd been so lost her whole life—most especially after her sisters had married—throwing herself into looking after horses and planning races with Icarus. She still intended to race Icarus and pursue her interests, but she knew what was missing now.

She was never intended to be a gentleman's wife, but August wasn't a gentleman.

And he was perfect for her.

Now all she needed was for him to be safe and well.

The horses dashed toward her. She didn't recognize the horse on which August rode, and she scarcely recognized August. His expression remained so fierce, so dark, and he didn't spot her in the darkness of the street even as he hurtled down the road after Brown.

But Icarus did. She saw the moment the horse recognized her. Icarus stopped. He went from a gallop to a halt in mere moments. She saw the panic on Brown's face before he hurtled to the ground and landed with a thud that made her wince.

Lilly froze and blinked at the man. Brown remained on the ground, a crumpled heap. She looked between Icarus who shifted restlessly to the man who didn't move a muscle. Finally, she jolted into action and dropped beside him to feel for signs of life. The faint flutter of a pulse teased her fingertips and she straightened to look at the horse.

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“He deserved that,” she told Icarus, “but you’re lucky he’s not dead.”

August pulled his horse to a halt. He stared at her as though he didn’t know what or who he was looking at. Then he dismounted swiftly, covered the distance between them, and hauled her to her feet.

“I thought I’d lost you, Lil.”

“You nearly did.” She’d nearly given up on him. Nearly lost the one thing she could always be counted on to have—her courage. But it wouldn’t fail her again. She wouldn’t be pushed away again.

He gripped her face, his gloves cold but soothing against her skin, and she leaned into his touch.

“Never again,” he vowed. “I won’t lose you ever again.”

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His surroundings blurred. The night became a haze of shadows and lamplight and then it was just her. He almost couldn’t believe it when he spotted her on the street after chasing Frederick’s in a damned circle through the town.

She was alive and well.

She was perfect.

August held her for several moments, just taking in how lovely Lilly was and how she looked at him like he was the only person in the world. Like he was worthy of her. He couldn't even hear the sound of his father's voice berating him for his common blood.

"I thought I'd lost you for a moment," he said again, glancing around her at Brown. "I wanted to kill him." He dropped a kiss to her lips.

"He's alive," she whispered against his mouth.

"It's more than he deserves."

He smoothed a thumb over her cheek and kissed her again, taking in the sweet warmth of her mouth against the cool night air. It reassured him she was here and well and in his arms where he never wanted to let her go again. He'd thought the worst thing he could do was stay and risk her being married to a fraud. But the idea of being apart from her was so much worse.

"I was going to give you Icarus. He's yours anyway but I was never going to take him from you. Not after—"

"Not after everything we've been through."

"Not after I realized I love you." Another kiss because he couldn't resist.

Her lips curved, her eyes crinkling at the corners when he drew back. "So why try to drive me away?"

"He knows." He nodded toward Brown.

"Knows about your real father?"

“Indeed.”

“But I know already.”

“He threatened to reveal the truth to others if I didn’t pay him.”

Her expression grew smug. “I knew there was more to that exchange.”

“You are far cleverer than I am.” He went to kiss her once more, but she moved back. Thankfully she remained near enough for him to slip his hands down to her shoulders and keep her where he could touch her and assure himself all was right in the world.

“August Beresford, no more kisses until you explain to me properly why you were such a bullheaded fool.”

He sighed, released her arms, and raked a hand over his rough jaw. “If Brown reveals the truth, I risk the gallows. I thought it best to run again. Head to some country where no one would find me.” He grimaced. “I thought it best to leave you.”

“And I’ll damn well tell the truth if anything happens to me,” Brown said with a groan as he tried to push up from the ground. He swore and flopped back down. “My ribs are broken.”

Lilly thrust a finger at him. “Something else will be broken too if you don’t keep your mouth shut.”

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August couldn't keep the smile from his face at this bold, courageous woman. "I risk your reputation too," he reminded her. "I didn't want you tied to such a man."

She shrugged. "I'm a Musgrave. We hardly have a reputation in the first place."

"And if something happens to me?"

"Nothing will happen to you as long as we're together. We'll run together if we have to. I don't care."

His heart seemed to expand in his chest when she looked at him as though the whole world hinged on them being together. It felt like it too. The crushing weight of expectation and the fear of the truth no longer pressed down upon his shoulders. With Lilly at his side, he could face down anything. Hell, they'd already survived a kidnapping and a flood.

"If she knows, she could get in trouble too."

August ground his teeth together, stepped around Lilly and stood over Brown. "Need I remind you, Brown, it's a horse thief's word against that of a gentleman."

"And a lady," Lilly added coming to his side.

"I'll tell, I swear it. If you put me in prison, I'll tell." The man rolled onto his stomach with a grunt of pain and started to crawl away from them. "Your real father was buried just a few years ago. There'll be records."

August set a foot to the edge of his coat, preventing him from going anywhere, and Brown sagged, letting his head drop to the ground. “Damn you both.”

Crouching beside Brown, August leaned in. “If my real father is dead, Brown, there’s no one to corroborate your story. I’m done running.”

He straightened to find Lilly eyeing him with a cocked head. “Do you mean that?”

“I thought you deserved more, Lil.”

She wrapped her arms about him. “I always wanted more,” she mused. “But now I’ve realized you are my more.”

August had spent so long running and worrying about what a potential future might hold. So long trying to escape what his father wanted of him. But he’d let his father control him in so many ways and he’d be damned if his future would be shaped by his father’s abuse and lies any longer.

“Think you’re willing to marry a commoner?”

Her smile grew and she shook her head. “No.”

He waited a heartbeat. No. That wasn’t what she was meant to say. She was meant to—

“But I’m willing to marry the man I love.”

All the air seemed to fly from his lungs. “Thank God,” he said against her lips and kissed her gratefully until they were both breathless and laughing.

Epilogue

“I cannot believe it has taken us this long to return to London to see you all!”

Sarah didn't bother disguising a smug smile as her two eldest nieces embraced and sank onto the sofa together. With a baby on her lap and little one clinging to her legs, Charity had the tired but contented look of a busy mother and would have plenty of advice for Violet who was scarcely showing despite being nearly six months pregnant.

“Aunt Sarah!” Lilly approached and motioned for Sarah to remain as she leaned over and offered a warm embrace.

Sarah put a hand to Lilly's cheek. “You look sun-kissed.”

“I know, I should have worn a bonnet, but it was too hot in Egypt for bonnets. Half the time I wore a scarf, but it did little to protect my face.”

“It's a fine look on you.”

“Oh.” Lilly grinned. “Mama has already given me a scolding for it but I'm certain it shall fade quickly enough in this winter weather.”

“And now you are home.” Sarah lifted her brows. “For good?”

“We have seen a lot of the world, but I must admit, I missed England more than I thought I would.” She glanced at her husband who was conversing with Lilly's father. “We thought to settle in this small village we are rather fond of—Oakfield. There's a house there with a large paddock for Icarus.”

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“Well, the horse seems to have entirely forgotten his time at the hands of that beastly man who was lucky indeed to escape the death penalty.”

“He was a greedy man, but we’ll never have to worry about him again now he’s across the other side of the world.”

“And your sister has done a wonderful job of pampering Icarus whilst you have been away.”

“But of course.” Lilly chuckled. “I imagine I shall have quite the time trying to get Icarus to agree to a flat race with me after his time with Ivy.” She glanced over her shoulder as other family members poured into the drawing room. “I had better greet everyone else.” Lilly gave Sarah’s hand a little squeeze and paused before she turned away. “You knew did you not?”

“Knew what, dear?”

“That August was the one for me. That’s why you encouraged us to chase after Icarus together?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” By some miracle, Sarah kept the smug smile from her face. “Though I suspect August’s uncle may have had some idea about the two of you. I’m almost certain its why he willed Icarus to you.”

Her eyes widened and she laughed before going off to greet the others as they arrived at the London seat of the Duke of Daventry. The duke himself had opted to remain in the library as all the noise would leave him perturbed but she knew her brother would

enjoy having everyone here, even if at a distance. Like her, he enjoyed the idea that his family were happy and partaking in his hospitality.

It had been many years since both families had been together, mostly thanks to the Musgraves cut from London Society, however, with the successful marriages of all the Musgrave girls, invitations had begun to arrive in her nieces' hallways. Not that any of them cared much, but it did, however, give them a good excuse to bring the two families together.

And perhaps Sarah had been a little instrumental in that too. A few whispered words in a few select ears had persuaded her sister and brother-in-law that they would be welcome to come out of their self-exile and ensure the future generations maintained a close relationship.

The room filled with noise Sarah hadn't heard in years. She remained out of the conversations, content to simply watch the growing families discuss everything from children to animal sanctuaries to the latest investigations in which the ladies had participated in. Women would always need the aid of women and despite the girls all being busy with their families and full lives, they were always willing to help someone in need.

A nuzzle to the back of her head made her turn and pat her lap in invitation. The cat obediently jumped down from behind her, turning several circles before settling with one eye open as though keeping a close watch on the family.

"They're all happy, Simon, see?"

He lifted his head and stared at her for a few moments.

"I know, I know, you want me to be happy. But, you know, you did object to my last suitor."

The cat gave a nonchalant stretch and resettled. She hadn't forgotten Mr. Wilde. How could she? The man was as kind as her late-husband and even adored cats. But Simon had not taken well to him.

And she had yet to introduce Sir William Cameron to Simon for fear of what he might think of him. He was fun, witty, and charming. Now that all her nieces were taken care of, it was time for her to think of herself. The trouble was, she just didn't know what she wanted.

The cat closed his eyes. She sighed. "You want me to make a choice, don't you?"

A deep purr emanated from the cat, and she nodded to herself. "I will," she promised. "I'll think of myself very soon."

In the meantime, she would enjoy the warmth and love filling the room between all these wonderful couples and their growing families. She couldn't claim to have had a hand in every match made here but she had certainly been instrumental enough to take quite a lot of pride in the wonderful connections her nieces had made. Even if she never figured out what she wanted, at least she could be assured of her family's future happiness and that would be enough for her.

THE END