



The Tantalizing of a Scandalous Rake

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: When lines are crossed, sometimes it's unclear exactly who is tantalizing who... The plan was simple. Lord Adam Moncrieff was to lay low in the countryside until the scandal passed. It would've been so easy...if only he hadn't met the infamous Beauty of Buttermere there. And if he hadn't been stabbed, of course...

Rosie Seymour has no patience for the wealthy rakes who try to lure her into their beds. Especially not the ridiculously handsome one she must now nurse back to health. That's what she keeps telling herself, at least... Can a little forced proximity—and a lot of passion—put two people who are completely wrong for each other on the path to happily ever after? There's only one way to find out...

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Chapter One

“Damn you!”

Adam reclined on the spindly chair and watched his opponent fling his cards to the table and storm away, scarcely bothering to keep his smug smile to himself. At least that game had been a little bit of a challenge. Unlike most of the card games he’d played tonight.

He leaned forward and scraped the meagre winnings over to his side of the table then slipped them into his waistcoat pocket. Good job he didn’t play for money. The patrons of the inn varied from farmers to visiting gentry, but few had sums like those wagered in the London clubs.

He blew out a breath and lifted his glass of whisky in salute to his recently conquered opponent who paused briefly to mutter something to a friend before curling his lip and marching out of the inn.

How he missed London.

Or more to the point the clubs.

There, he could be guaranteed better opponents—ones who might actually test him. He always won, naturally, but the ease with which he triumphed whilst holed up in Cumbria was becoming dull indeed.

He’d come to this inn, quite some distance from the family seat in Langmere, in the

hopes of meeting a match for his skills with cards, but it seemed he was out of luck. In the several months he'd been home, he'd visited almost every drinking hole in the county. If this mess in London did not sort itself out soon, he would go out of his wits. There was only so much playing the country gent one could do.

Adam glanced around the room and eyed up several potential opponents. Ideally, one who was not in his cups. On the opposite side of the tavern, a man let rip a hearty snore, his head tilted back, his mouth ajar, while his friends proceeded to see how many things they could balance on his forehead. He smirked to himself. No opponents there.

Nor by the fireplace, where two men arm wrestled and offered loud curses as neither seemed to gain an inch. Nor to the right of him. The men there were occupied with two women who Adam suspected intended to lift coin from them.

He'd well and truly milked this inn dry and there was no more entertainment to be had.

Of course, now that his brothers were married and sickeningly in love, that did not help matters much. He rolled his eyes to himself. He warned them their mother had sent them here with the idea in mind that they would fall for a local beauty or visiting young lady and he'd been proven right not once but twice.

Well, he might be obeying by his mother's demand to stay here until the Miss Kingsley scandal blew over, but he certainly would not be falling for her plot. The woman had even had the gall to tell them to steer clear of ladies. Clearly, their mother knew all too well what such a command would do to his brothers.

Thankfully, he was smarter than the both of them and had avoided temptation of any kind. He enjoyed women as much as the next man but controlling his needs was no hardship. The area of his brother's home had been swamped with lots of wholesome,

sweet young things and he had little desire to entangle himself with a virgin looking for a husband—unlike Alexander—who had fallen far too easily for Lucy. Still, they did make a good match.

Romance was not for him, that was all. Give him a game of cards or a matching of wits in the gentlemen's clubs anyway.

“Fancy a game?” he offered to a passing gentleman, whose well-fitted garments hinted he might be able to wager a sum that might create a little more of a thrill than his previous three games.

The man didn't even acknowledge him, his attention focused ahead. Adam frowned and followed the man's gaze. In front of the bar stood a huddle of men whilst others jostled to get a spot. Either they were giving away free ale, or it was the owner of the inn. He suspected the latter.

“The Beauty of Buttermere,” he murmured to himself.

He'd yet to see her but this inn had been included in a recent popular guide book to the lakes—the book responsible for the influx of wholesome ladies.

Or more specifically the owner of the inn had been written about. He hadn't even glanced at the book himself, although apparently, he and his brothers had also been mentioned as the Lords of Scandal Row—a preposterous nickname that had been invented years ago as they all owned houses on the same row. Hell, it was rare all three of them were ever in residence at the same time and this Miss Kingsley business had been the first real scandal to follow them, but the nickname didn't bother him much.

He doubted the Beauty of Buttermere nickname bothered this lady either. It seemed it had created quite the excitement and men and women alike had come just to steal a

glance at her. The ale here was palatable and the food acceptable but he had already paid higher prices than in the two other local inns. There was something to be admired about such business acumen though he couldn't imagine she'd be as beautiful as the book supposedly portrayed. Hell, he'd been with plenty of reputed beauties in his time.

The crowd of men at the bar separated and despite himself, he held his breath. The lady emerged as though parting the seas, her chin lifted high, her stride confident. He continued to hold his breath when she met his gaze, forgetting to draw in another until a cough escaped him.

A brow arched as she made her way to his table. Vaguely aware of the envious glances of those around him, he cleared his throat and straightened his chair then plastered on a charming smile for good measure.

She came to a stop at his table and folded her arms. His throat dried a little as he found himself unable to keep his gaze confidently on her features. A simple gown and apron hugged generous curves.

She could have worn clothes that flattered them all the more, but it was unnecessary. His imagination did the job of envisioning what they would look like under the garments. If her body matched her features, then the writer was not wrong. Pale skin, a long, straight nose, generous lips and wide, blue eyes plus golden hair with wild curls that he doubted had been touched by sleeping rags. Her lashes were exceptionally dark compared to the rest of her hair, making her startling eyes all the more captivating.

"The Beauty of Buttermere," he repeated, unable to prevent himself.

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That name usually made Rosie roll her eyes but spilling out of this refined gentleman's lips, she was inclined to laugh.

She was no fool. Being a supposed beauty had its benefits—namely it had increased profits at the inn tenfold—but having people clamoring just to steal a glance at her was mightily odd and she doubted she would ever get used to it.

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Nor would she get used to obviously wealthy men tripping over their tongues at the mere sight of her. However, she did not mind the effect right now. She'd watched him all evening, watched the arrogant smirk spread across his face every time he won. If she could make him feel a little uncomfortable then she would not complain.

"Sir, you are driving my customers away."

He recovered more quickly than she would have liked, the slanted smile slipping back into place. "Perhaps it is the quality of your ale driving them away, miss."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "My ale is the best in Buttermere."

"I had better at the Eight Bells."

"That's a lie."

He lifted his shoulders. "Yours is weaker." He grinned. "No doubt you water it down now you have more patrons to cater to."

"How dare you." She moved closer to the table with a glance at the observers around them. "I would never do such a thing."

After five years of running the pub, she knew well how to deal with all kinds of men—drunken men, angry men, sad men...even smug, attractive men like this one. Though, he was by far the most attractive man to set food in her place in, well, ever.

Unfortunately, he likely knew it too. Blue eyes, slightly tanned complexion, carefully

tousled curls that revealed hints of gold amongst the brown in the lamplight. His lips were the most distracting part of him. Or perhaps it was the pale scar on the bridge of his nose. But that did not matter. Did she not know that looks did not make the person? Whilst her new reputation might be bringing increased profits, it was her hard work and shrewdness that ensured the continued patronage of her customers.

So why was she letting him make her angry?

“It is your card playing that is driving my patrons away,” she said firmly. “If you continue, I shall have to request you leave.”

“Well, that seems mightily unfair. I have already spent far more than half of these gawkers on ale and supper.”

“You seem to think your coin is worth more than dozens of patrons.” She shook her head. “Regardless of your worth, sir, I shall not have gambling in my inn.”

“They are gambling.” He gestured to a table near the fireplace.

“With buttons.”

“So I am to entertain myself with buttons?” His dark brows lifted.

Rosie sighed. She should have known such a man would not take well to being told what to do. She didn’t know his name nor his station, but the beautifully cut country jacket combined with a dark blue waistcoat trimmed in gold told her enough. He came from the sort of wealth that meant he could lose many fortunes and hardly blink. Unfortunately, he had yet to lose or else he might have quit her inn some time ago.

“Frankly, sir, I do not care how you entertain yourself. So long as you do not drive

my customers away.”

He pursed his lips. “A drink with you.”

“Pardon?”

“We can share an ale, you can persuade me it is the best in Buttermere, and I shall vow to quit gambling.”

“Or I could have you flung out on your rear.”

“Oh?” He glanced around and his grin turned wicked. “Will you be doing the flinging?”

She cursed under her breath. Usually Simon would manage the rabble but he was with his wife who was on the verge of giving birth to their first child. And Harriet was almost a head smaller than herself. There was a chance she could ask one of the patrons to aid her if she needed to physically remove him, but she risked a riot if she did so. Whilst the quality of the patronage had increased since that book had been published, even the wealthier men were only one inciting incident away from a brawl—as she knew too well. Men deep in their cups could not be counted on to keep the calm at the best of times.

But if she drank with him, every blasted man in the building would want one with her.

“One ale,” he pressed. “What harm could it do?”

She unfolded her arms and shook her head in frustration. “Fine. One ale.” She gestured to Harriet with two fingers and sank onto the chair opposite. Harriet brought over the drinks. Rosie ignored her curious stare, reached for the ale and put the

tankard to her lips. Keeping eye contact with the man, she tilted the drink back and drained it in one go. The man's grin widened when she set the tankard down and swiped her lips with the back of a hand.

“One drink, sir, and now you must cease your behavior.”

“That was a little unfair.”

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“You did not say it had to be a leisurely one.”

He chuckled. “You are right. I did not. Next time I shall have to be more careful with my words.”

Rising from the chair, she shook her head. “There will not be a next time.”

He lifted his hands. “I vowed I would stop and stop I shall, but I will have a proper drink with you, Beauty of Buttermere.”

“Not a chance.”

“You will,” he said as she turned away and pushed through the crowd of gawping customers to get back to work. She lifted her gaze to the ceiling. Oh to have the confidence of a rich man.

Or more accurately, an exceedingly handsome, rich man.

Chapter Two

Rosie smothered a yawn with the back of a hand and tried to ignore the painful throb of her feet. The sooner Simon’s wife gave birth, the better. Whilst she had been running the inn alone for nearly five years now, she missed having someone strong around to lift the barrels and control the more inebriated of their patrons.

Ensuring groups of drunken folk did not get too deep into their cups or break out into a brawl took diplomacy and tact—an exhausting juggling act. Simon’s absence

combined with this ridiculous reputation she now had as one of the most beautiful women in England—or at least the lakes—meant her days felt longer and more grueling than ever.

Still, she'd made a healthy profit and would continue to do so until the excitement over her supposed beauty dwindled. She pushed in a chair and wiped down the last table then put hands to her hips and peered around.

With any luck, tomorrow would bring continued profits and no more visits from rich, entitled men who, as promised, ceased playing cards but had made her feel all strange inside every time she glanced his way. And every time she glanced his way, she scolded herself. The man needed no attention from her, and she just knew he would take it as a sign of her interest.

Which, of course, was wrong. She merely wanted to check he was abiding by her rules. Handsome men frequented the inn more than ever now, and often made various offers. If she had not taken up any of those wealthy, handsome men on their offers of being a mistress or even a wife, she certainly was not going to find herself preoccupied by that man.

Besides, she doubted he would return. A gambler like himself would move on to somewhere else, where he could find more unsuspecting opponents.

Which was good. She never wanted to lay her eyes on him again. Never. Never, ever, ever.

As she slid the bolt across the door, she paused and frowned. A faint groan hung on the air before vanishing. The inn sat on the winding road opposite the top end of Buttermere Lake. Sheltered from the worst of the weather by the hills surrounding it and the lake being much smaller than say Langmere, they rarely suffered the ravages of the weather. Besides, it was only edging into Autumn. So that strange noise could

not have been the wind.

Drawing up her shoulders, she debated retrieving the pistol from her bedroom. Her father taught her to shoot, knowing full well his daughter would end up running the inn, and would need to defend herself, but she had never needed to use it. What if the noise was some trick—a ruse to lure her from the inn and raid her coffers?

She waited a moment and heard it again—a faint moan.

“Oh for goodness’ sake.” She threw open the bolt, flung open the door and stepped outside. “Whoever is playing silly games, needs to cease,” she commanded, her arms folded.

The darkness offered no answers, the lake motionless and black in front of her, the mountains tall, impassive outlines against a moonlight night. To the right, a few lamps burned in the windows of the few houses that made up Buttermere village. To the left, more gloom as the road vanished between the mountains.

And no sign of whoever made that noise.

Rosie swallowed and shook her head at the feel of her dry throat. She had not spent years running an inn alone only to be scared by a mere groan. She inched around the building and peered into the shadowy corners. Why had she not at least brought a lamp? She could blame fatigue she supposed. Far better than blaming a preoccupation with a certain gentleman.

Her heart gave a little, sickening leap as an unworldly moan rose from nearby. She tiptoed toward the source of the sound, not far from the stables. It could be a horse, she supposed, but she had never heard horses make such noises and she only had one horse stabled at present.

“Oh.”

When she came upon the splayed figure of a man, tucked against the wall of the stables, she could not decide whether to be grateful her flights of imagination had been wrong or not. Especially considering he looked dead.

Perfect. Just what she needed. The inn had never thrived so but a dead man on her door would damage its reputation and no amount of tales of her in books would heal the damage caused by such a tragedy.

Of course dead men could not moan, so assuming it had emanated from him, he was likely exceedingly drunk and had passed out instead of going home. She eased out a breath and moved closer.

Blast. The handsome, arrogant man. But of course it was. She had not thought he had overindulged but maybe he could not handle his ale. Rubbing a hand over her face, she debated what to do with him. It would not do for some member of the gentry to die of exposure on her doorstep.

If only Simon were here. Now she would have to drag him across the ground on her own. She was no tiny, delicate lady, but this man was tall and strong, and likely weighed a great deal.

She sighed. “Why did you have to get so deep in your cups at my inn?”

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A slight groan issued from his lips in response.

“That’s no excuse,” she told him, but his eyes remained closed, his position unmoving.

Maybe she could rouse him enough to persuade him to move to the stables. She dropped down to her knees and gave his chest a prod.

“Sir? Time to wake up, sir.” She poked him again and recoiled at the feel of something sticky. “Oh Lord, do not tell me you have vomited over yourself.”

She frowned and glanced at her finger. Her heart sank. Not vomit.

Blood.

“Oh Lord.” She lifted the edge of his jacket and grimaced. Even in the milky moonlight, she could make out the dark stain on his waistcoat. Someone had stabbed this man.

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Either Adam had fallen asleep on a beach somewhere and swallowed a mouthful of sand or he’d drunk far too much last night. He scowled to himself whilst trying to wrench open eyelids that felt as though they had been sealed shut with wax. The Beauty of Buttermere’s ale was not that strong, though, and he could not recall feeling anything more than slightly merry.

“Told her the ale was bad,” he muttered to himself, though the words came out raspier than anticipated.

He cracked open an eye and groaned. His head pounded and his vision swam. When he forced open the other eye, he just made out movement.

“My ale is fine,” someone replied.

He moved his attention to the source of the voice and waiting several painful heartbeats until the image came into focus. “The Beauty...”

He’d recognize those features anywhere, even when viewed through two tiny slits and dry eyeballs. Hell, he’d been admiring her half the night. After all, he was only human and she was the only woman he’d ever met who could drain an ale in mere seconds.

To say he had been fascinated was an understatement.

But why was she here? Despite the colorful life he led, he’d never woken up with a woman in his bed without recalling inviting her there and, during his stay in Cumbria, he’d been careful to avoid women altogether, especially any dalliances.

He was many things...or at least beencalledmany things—rogue, rake, gambler, chancer, even blackguard on occasion when he bested someone at cards—but he kept his promises. He’d vowed to his mother to avoid women and that he would do. Most especially since he knew she had engineered this whole ‘you must go to Cumbria and lay low or my heart shall surely give way’ thing to ensure they met suitable women. If the woman thought she could best him, she did not know her son at all.

Which led back to the questions—why was the beauty here?

He spread his fingers wide on the sheets and tried to push himself up, but pain seared through his side. God Lord, maybe the ale had been worse than he imagined. She had poisoned him and now his insides were wrapped around themselves.

“I’m going to die.” He huffed out the words and let his eyes shut.

“You are most certainly not going to die,” he thought she said.

“You have killed me, woman.”

“The physician has been and he assured me it is a mere scratch. You shall heal well.”

He let his brow furrow and opened his eyes again. She remained a blur—a pretty blur, though. A scratch? Whatever did she mean? He rummaged through his brain for scraps of the previous night but came up frustratingly empty. He recalled her drinking the ale, then he drank a little more, watched in amusement as she fended off many, many advances and then...then he could not recall the rest. Besides the fact he had vowed to steer clear of the opposite sex, there was no chance he would take the beauty to bed and forget it.

Never.

Adam curled his fingers into the sheets as a sharp stab of pain tore through him from his side. He released a groan.

“Stay still, I need to clean it.”

He looked down to spy her near the end of the bed. His clothing had vanished. Not a good sign. But why was she pressing against where the pain was?

He did not want to ask it. He didn’t need to be experienced in waking up next to

women and not remembering how he got there to know she would be furious he'd forgotten everything. But he suspected he had to.

“Was it good?”

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She looked up at him. “Was what good?”

“Our time together.”

She didn’t answer and he blinked a few times to clear his vision and spy the slight smile on her lips. Maybe it had been excellent. He bloody hoped so. Whatever had occurred between them had left him in agony.

When she pulled the sheets over his chest and tucked them around him, he cast his gaze slowly over the curves in front of him. Without an apron, he had a better view of a curving waist and generous hips—the sort of hips a man wanted to grab. He even found himself flexing his fingers.

Stilling, he looked down at the sheets atop him and fingered the fabric. “Not mine,” he muttered.

These were no expensive, luxurious sheets, but scratchy, simple ones. And come to think of it, the narrow bed with a lack of a canopy and decadent silk fabrics trailing from it could not be his either.

“Drink this.” She put a hand behind his head, urging him to crane his neck just enough to take the liquid from a wooden cup.

“You’ll kill me.”

“It’s laudanum. For the pain.”

Laudanum sounded pleasant. And this pain was growing excruciatingly distracting, pounding through his body and stopping him from thinking properly. He had little idea why she wanted him out of his senses but at present, he did not much care, so he drank the bitter liquid and sank gratefully onto the pillow. She paused to eye him.

“Beautiful,” he said, unable to stop himself.

He supposed it did not matter much. She already knew as much with all those men fawning to get close to her. It rather surprised him she had not married already. A woman like her could gain herself a rich husband and escape the drudgery of working as an innkeeper easily enough surely?

“You know, I am handsome.” He slapped a hand on his chest, aware the laudanum had already moved through his body, making his limbs feel warm. “And you are handsome. We should be handsome together.”

Adam let his hand flop to the side and frowned to himself. Oh dear. Had he just proposed marriage somehow?

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There was no chance Rosie would let herself feel flattered by his slurred words. The man likely had little idea what he said considering she had kept him dosed with laudanum whenever she could rouse him. The physician assured her the wound had done no lasting damage, it would take time to heal and likely left him in quite a lot of pain.

But he would live, thank the Lord.

She took a clean cloth and folded it then dipped it into the bowl of water at the bedside. Thankfully Dr. Hartley was discrete and would say nothing of her

unexpected guest. The last thing she needed was people to know a man had been stabbed at her inn. She promised her parents she would make this place her living and continue their hard work. If it became known the pub was dangerous, she would see a sharp drop in patrons.

Ringling out the cloth, she dabbed the sweat from his forehead. The creases in his forehead lingered, as though he were in pain even in sleep. She would not be surprised. The stab wound looked to be deep, even if it had not killed him. She shook her head, rung out the cloth and wiped down his neck where stubble had sprouted.

She'd managed to keep his presence here secret for two days—well, almost secret. Harriet knew but she would never do anything to harm the fortunes of the inn. However, he would need at least two weeks to recover. How long could she keep him hidden and would someone come looking for him? A wife perhaps?

Rosie stepped back and glanced him over. He did not seem married. But that did not mean much. Many married men came here to pretend they were not married for a while. Maybe he came to escape his wife, though surely she would recognize him if he lived locally.

With any luck, he was a traveler, passing through, and anyone at his destination might merely think him delayed. She did know, however, he was rich indeed. Richer than she had initially anticipated. In his waistcoat pocket, she'd discovered a beautiful timepiece and a sizeable sum of paper money. Which was even worse for her. Not only had someone been stabbed at her inn but someone important had been stabbed.

Someone important and handsome.

He wasn't wrong about that part. Something about his vulnerable expression tugged at her far more than the smug smile he'd tried to enchant her with the other night. His perfectly shaped lips were relaxed, surrounded by dark stubble that sprouted almost

instantly.

And she did not even want to think about his body. Whilst she should not have even registered it, she could not help but note the strong thighs that hinted at a man who rode horses for more than just work and the hard ridges of his stomach and shoulders. Even now, recalling the image made her wonder if she should be damping herself down and not him.

She shook her head to herself. He might be an arrogant cad, but he did not deserve her practically salivating over his body whilst he was scarcely lucid.

She set the cloth onto the tray at his bedside and gave into the temptation to push a curl from his forehead. How ridiculous she was, feeling anything other than matronly concern for him. She should be worrying about figuring out who tried to hurt him and ensuring they never set foot in her place ever again.

And most certainly not practically sighing over the pure beauty of him. If people thought her the Beauty of Buttermere, they had never seen him. He deserved the nickname far more.

Suddenly, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and drew her down. "Oh!" She pressed a hand to the side of the bed to stop herself from crushing and hurting him.

His eyes remained clamped shut but he muttered something nonsensical and hauled her closer. Surprisingly strong, his grip on her wrist prevented her from escaping before he latched his other arm around her shoulders and forced her face into his chest. Her nose scrunched against the dark, curling hair on his chest, she struggled against his determined hold and twisted her head to the side to gulp down a breath of air.

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The man murmured something again. Something about this feeling nice. It would certainly feel better if he did not hold her captive against him. She fought to press up, but his arm remained locked around her, and he released her wrist to fling the other arm about her, keeping her flat against him.

She could not recall the last time she had been in the embrace of a man—before her parents had moved to the south she supposed. Perhaps that was why she sank into the embrace. Or maybe it was simply because he left her with no choice.

Either option was better than the tiny, inkling feeling that she rather liked being in his arms. He had no idea of what he was doing. Probably scarcely understood why he was here. So she should not enjoy this moment.

No. Most certainly not.

She eased out a breath and regretted the next inhale, drawing in the musky scent of him. If only she had not bathed him with cloths and let him sit in his own sweat then she would not feel that low, low pang that reminded her it had been so long since she had enjoyed the embrace of a man.

“That’s enough,” she murmured, more to herself.

With as much strength as she could muster, she pushed up and reached around to peel away an arm. He relented and sank away from her, his arms dropping to his side.

She straightened her gown and ran a hand over her hair. “The sooner you recover, the better,” she told him. She did not want him under her roof any longer than necessary.

Chapter Three

An otherworldly groan made Adam awaken with a jerk. His heart set immediately to racing and he tore open his eyes. Only then did he realize the groan had come from him. Brow furrowed, he glanced left and right. Where the devil was he?

Little moments filtered into his memory. Someone touching him, holding him, damping down his brow.

The Beauty.

He tried to twist in search of her, but pain tore through his gut. He released another moan of pain.

Now he recalled. Some bastard stabbed him. He remembered the searing stab of the knife and falling to his knees but not much else afterwards. He remembered her, though, nursing him through the agony. But where was she? And where was he?

He turned his head to the side and squinted as daylight slipped between the thin curtains, masking a small square window. The room offered bright white walls, sloped ceilings supported by beams and simple furnishings—a wooden chair, a vanity table and a clothing chest. The bed on which he laid had to be less than half the size of his own at Eastwick.

Gingerly, Adam lifted the sheet to peer down. Bound around his gut were clean bandages. And he was naked. Exceedingly naked. Which meant—

“You shouldn’t move.”

He jerked his head in the direction of the door and instantly regretted the sudden movement.

“I warned you.” She shut the door gently behind her and came to the bed to put a hand to his forehead. Her fingers were cool and slightly rough but surprisingly soothing. “You look much better.” The strain around her eyes eased.

Maybe it was because he’d been stabbed. Or because she had been tending to him, but he’d never seen anyone so beautiful. He’d thought her mightily attractive upon their first meeting but there was something about the wild curls that indicated it had been some time since she’d combed her hair and the crumpled state of her clothing that lent her a touch of mortality. Here was a goddess but she was within his grasp.

“How long have I been here?” His words came out raspier than anticipated.

“Four days.”

His stomach grumbled in response. “No wonder I feel as though I haven’t eaten in forever.”

“You managed a few small sips of broth yesterday, though I imagine you do not recall.” Her lips curved. “The doctor recommended laudanum and willow bark for the pain.”

From the slant of her lips, he had to wonder precisely what he’d said and done but he could not bring himself to care much at present. “I take it I am to live.”

“Unfortunately yes.”

He narrowed his gaze at her amused smile. “You do not mean that.”

She sighed and poured a glass of water. “I do not. It would not be good for business to have you die upon my doorstep.”

“Not to mention you would miss me.”

“Miss you?”

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She inched a hand under his head, urging him up just enough to take a few sips of water. If it weren't for the pain throbbing its way through his gut, he might have enjoyed the tender action more, especially when it meant she had to lean over him and give him the smallest glance of her curves.

“I do not even know your name, sir. I could hardly miss you.”

“Adam,” he said. “My name is Adam.”

Setting the glass back on the table at his bedside, she went to lift the sheets.

He pressed his hands atop them, preventing her with a smirk. “I am not that sort of man.”

“Given your first thought upon waking was to enter into flirtation, I suspect you are very much that sort of man, so you need not play coy.”

Damn, the woman had the measure of him already. He let her inch down the sheets until they rested upon his hips. She viewed his dressings perfunctorily and he regretted his feeble state. Women liked his body and if he was in a better condition he would have rather liked to have rattled her with a few carefully chosen poses.

Given he couldn't really move, he flashed a grin instead. “You can give me your name, you know. Especially considering you must have undressed me.”

“With help.” She tucked the sheets and blanket back over him.

“Or I can keep calling you The Beauty of Buttermere.”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, thank you. Besides, I am certain you must have read my name in that blasted book.”

“I haven’t read it but I should have thought any woman would be flattered to be a famed beauty.”

“It brings patrons to my inn, that’s all that matters.” She glanced him over. “Beauty is a fleeting state.”

He shook his head. “I intend to be beautiful forever.”

“You make the assumption that you are indeed beautiful.” He saw her compress her lips.

“I do not need to assume. I might have no name such as yours but believe me, I have been told it.”

Hands to her hips, she eyed him. “How is it you can wake up in a strange bed, having suffered a severe stab wound, and still be wholly confident in yourself?”

“It comes naturally to me.” He let his grin widen.

“Well, now you must rest. And I have my doubt that comes naturally to you.”

“I should return home, my brothers shall be wondering where I am.”

Her face paled. “Will they search for you?”

He considered this. It wouldn’t be the first time he had vanished for a few days and

his brothers were hardly the matronly sort, but their wives might question his whereabouts. “I’m not certain.”

“You should rest. Worry about your brothers later.”

“Perhaps I should write—”

“Rest,” she ordered sharply. “The doctor said you’ll need to stay abed for some time. Maybe two weeks.” She turned away and headed toward the door. “I shall bring up some broth shortly and see if you can manage that.”

His grumbling stomach confirmed that he would indeed do whatever he needed to eat. “Do I at least get that name?” he asked.

She paused, a hand to the door handle, but did not even turn. “Miss Rosie Seymour,” she said. “You may call me Miss Seymour.”

“Think I preferred Beauty,” he muttered to himself as she left.

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Rosie paused outside the bedroom door and drew in a long breath then held it for a few moments. She should not be letting him rankle her. The man was recovering from a stab wound, for goodness’ sake. He could scarcely move, let alone seduce her.

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So why did she feel so defensive when he tried to charm her?

Maybe because he had not been lying. He was beautiful. And something in the way he faced adversity with a smile pulled at her. She recognized that for she used it herself. No matter what the inn flung at her, she put on a smile and continued on.

Shaking her head to herself, she rubbed her dry eyes, straightened her shoulders and headed downstairs. Conversation and laughter emanated from the taproom and the clatter of plates jangled through the air. She had bigger things to worry about than whether or not her patient was flirting with her.

Like, for example, how she would continue to nurse him better and run the inn efficiently. Even with aid, the increase in patronage was more than she could handle. Four days of doing as much preparation at night as possible combined with watching over Adam and praying he lived left her feeling significantly older than her six and twenty years.

At least he would live. Though she still did not want tales of his injury to become common knowledge. The inn thrived since that silly book released and so many livelihoods depended on that. From those she hired to her suppliers to the ale makers. Whilst the tales of her beauty continued, she needed to make the most of them and ensure the inn was set up to last even the leaner times.

She moved into the kitchen, checked the pies in the oven then set about brushing the tops of the uncooked ones with egg wash. She chewed on her bottom lip as she swept the brush over the pies with efficiency, scarcely noticing which she had brushed and which she had not. By the time she finished, she suspected there were a few that had

been coated twice.

Would his brothers really come searching for him? That meant Adam lived somewhere locally. She should have agreed to write a letter, but she needed time for Adam to heal and time to persuade him the tale of his injury should remain a secret.

Of course, if she responded less coolly to his flirtations, he might be more willing, but Rosie could not recall a time she had ever flirted, and she was not going to start now, no matter how much something about him tugged at a tiny part inside of her.

She pressed fingers to her temples as an ache started up behind her eyes. First, she needed to finish feeding her hungry patrons. Then she would worry about—

“Rosie.” Harriet put her head around the doorframe. “Come. Quick.”

She bit back a groan. “What now?”

Harriet slipped into the kitchen and closed the distance between them quickly. The petite, dark-haired girl rung her hands together, emphasizing the boniness of her knuckles and long fingers. “Um...”

“Well?”

“They are here.”

Rosie frowned. “Who are here?”

“His brothers.”

Her heart gave a rapid thud against the inside of her rib cage. “No.” She shook her head. How could that be? She had only just learned of them. “How did you know he

had brothers?”

“They have asked for him. Said he has been missing for four days and was intending to spend an evening here.” Harriet pressed her lips together. “It gets worse.”

“How can it possibly be worse? Once they see him and his injury, we shall be done for.”

“His brother is the Marquis of Kirbeck,” Harriet said in a rush and released her hands to eye Rosie expectantly.

Closing her eyes briefly, Rosie swallowed hard. Of course he would be brother to the marquis and the biggest landowner in the county. Naturally. Why would she expect anything different? She had seen the value of his clothes and belongings, and he acted with the self-assurance of a noble. Did she really think he would be some anonymous person passing through? Curse her wretched, wretched luck.

“They shall have me arrested for kidnapping a lord.”

Harriet’s cheeks paled. “No. You were only looking after him. They cannot suggest such a thing surely.”

Rosie gave herself a little shake. “Yes. Of course they cannot.”

She scowled. At least she hoped not. All she had been guilty of was nursing him better and was it her fault she did not know who he was or who to contact? Hardly, though she supposed she could have made more of an attempt at enquiring.

Now she had to try to charm this marquis and his brother and persuade them news of their brother’s fate should remain quiet. Perhaps her new reputation as the Beauty of Buttermere could come in handy. Perhaps she could persuade these rich, powerful

men that she had not deliberately concealed their brother nor, as they perhaps might think, that she was somehow involved in his stabbing. Goodness knew, she had little idea who had done it and no resources or time to figure it out.

She swiped clammy hands down her apron, lifted her chin and motioned to the oven. “Keep an eye on the pies.” She forced a smile. “I shall deal with these men.”

Chapter Four

Adam only just pushed himself painfully and slowly up to what one might almost call sitting when Rosie slipped in through the door. Her cheeks were red as though she had dashed up the stairs at a pace.

“I beg of you—”

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Before she could finish her sentence, Alex and Leo barged into the room. Alex paused at the sight of him, one brow lifted.

“I told you he would be alive,” Leo said.

Adam cast his gaze between his two brothers, their forms filling the room practically to capacity. “How in the devil did you find me?”

“You look bloody awful,” Leo commented.

“Why thank you. One does tend to feel pretty bloody awful after one—”

“Has a little accident!” put in Rosie, her tone thin and reedy.

Adam peered around his brothers at her.

She smiled though it did not reach her eyes then laced her hands primly together. “As you can see, I have been looking after him. Unfortunately, I had little idea who he was as he has been barely lucid these past days so could contact no one to tend to him. But he is healing fast.”

So the woman did not want his brothers knowing the truth of the attack. But why? Was she protecting someone? He and his brothers had grown closer since their confinement here in the lakes but even before that he’d never lied to them. However, the pleading look in her eyes gave him little choice.

Or perhaps it did, and he was being a fool. Maybe this stab wound had made him

weak. No other woman had ever managed to sway him with one mere panicked look.

Alex, his oldest brother and the Marquis of Kirbeck, peered down at him with his most superior look. Adam ignored it. Before his marriage to Lucy, he'd been quite the rake and adventurer.

That had not changed he supposed. For their honeymoon, they had travelled for a month, visiting castles in Wales and England. They intended to visit Scotland next year. However, that did not change the fact his brother had found himself in many dangerous situations in the past.

Adam narrowed his gaze at him. "Do not give me that look."

"Only you could..." Alex looked to Rosie, that brow still arched. "Trip and fall on a knife?"

Leo shook his head. "Getting too deep in your cups, Brother?"

"Why thank you for the sympathy? I only nearly died you know."

Adam ignored Leo's chuckle. They were close in age with scarcely a year between them and looked so similar they sometimes got mistaken for twins. It had meant they could not help but be competitive with one another and if there was anyone he did not want thinking him a fool, it was Leo.

Anyway, the man could not talk. He'd twisted himself into knots when his old love had arrived in Langmere, and Adam had been nothing if not a wise and sage confidant. Come to think of it, he'd aided them both in wooing their wives. If it were not for him, his brothers would still be chasing their damned tails so they owed him at least a bit of their respect.

“We should get you home,” Alex commented.

Rosie took a step forward. “The doctor said he cannot yet be moved. He will need more time to heal.”

Alex pressed his lips together. “The wound must have been deep.”

“It was,” Rosie confirmed, “but it was a clean wound with no sign of infection.”

“Strange given the knife was on the floor.” His brother eyed Rosie for some moments but her expression did not flicker. “I should send my own doctor, just to be certain.”

“As you will, my lord.” She gave a quick dip. “Well, I shall leave you, but I shall return soon with food.” She turned her gaze to Adam, her gaze insistent.

He gave the subtlest nod. He would keep her secret for now. Or their secret, he supposed, but she would owe him.

Leo hauled over the chair and sat, leaning back to eye him. “How the devil does one fall on a knife?”

“The same way anyone falls on anything,” Adam shot back.

“Mary-Anne has been frantic,” Alex said.

Lucy’s younger sister had been staying at the family home for some time. Adam could not help having a soft spot for the fourteen-year-old, who reminded him a little of himself at that age. Bold, curious and far too clever for her age, his brother’s new sister was already coming close to beating him at a game of whist.

“Tell her I expect her to be practicing her card games while I am gone.”

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Alex rolled his eyes. “Teaching a young girl gambling, Adam? Is that wise?”

He shrugged then grimaced when agony darted through him. “Keep her out of trouble.”

“That is true,” Leo acknowledged. “God knows, the girl likes to get into trouble.”

Alex chuckled. “No more so than Lucy these days.”

“Which is why you do not need to be worrying about me.” Adam forced a smile.

It was about time he had another dose of laudanum by his reckoning. Or at least a tender touch from Rosie. That would likely soothe any pains.

“I will send Dr. Wells,” Alex said.

“I am more than fine.”

Leo glanced at the door. “The whole tripping and falling wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain Beauty of Buttermere would it?”

“I cannot help it if my nursemaid is exceedingly beautiful.” Adam affected a nonchalant expression. “Besides, unlike you two, I have no intention of falling for our mother’s manipulations.”

“You know, she still maintains she wanted us to stay away from all women,” Leo pointed out.

Adam huffed. “That mother of ours is a master manipulator.”

Leo smirked. “I’m not saying I believe her.”

“Are you certain you will be well here?” Alex asked, his brow creased. “We could move you I think.”

Adam shook his head. “I’ll be fine. I’ll send word for the carriage once I’m healed enough to return home.”

“That’s if you ever want to leave.” Leo jerked his head toward the door. “Having the Beauty of Buttermere looking after you can be no dreadful thing, and she seems quite the strong woman. Precisely your type.”

“As I have said many times since our arrival here, you will not see me falling for a woman. Not even one as beautiful as her. I intend to come away from the lakes entirely unattached.”

“Miss Kingsley will be giving birth soon. Hopefully this whole matter will be put to rest after that,” Leo muttered.

Adam nodded. Miss Kingsley had ended up in the family way and the culprit had still not come forward. Due to some similarity between the blackguard and the three of them, it had been put about that they were to blame for leaving her with child, hence their banishment to Cumbria.

“I am looking forward to returning to my bachelor ways whilst you two play the married country gents,” Adam said smugly.

Alex rolled his eyes. “A knife to the gut and you still haven’t changed.”

He grinned in response. "I never will." Not even a beauty like Miss Seymour could alter that.

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The door creaked open and Rosie hastened to the end of the corridor that led past each of the guest rooms. She clutched the bundle of sheets and feigned a distracted look as the two men emerged from Adam's room.

Not Adam, she corrected herself. Lord Adam with some long courtesy title that she did not know but most likely sounded exceedingly important.

If only she had known. Though, she was not certain what she would have done differently. The arrogance of the man was unmatched, even when in his sickbed. She would not bow and scrape simply because he was a noble by birth.

"Miss Seymour?" the marquis beckoned her over after shutting the door behind him.

Both men were similar in appearance to Adam, with chestnut hair and strong jaws, though the marquis's curling locks were darker. She had never met the man herself but had heard tell of his recent marriage and his intention to settle in the area. She did, however, know that all three men had been known as The Lords of Scandal Row, thanks to their notorious reputations and huge, expensive townhouses located in the same area in London. The blasted book that granted her infamy also paid special attention to these men.

No wonder really. The men were attractive, broad-shouldered and had been bachelors at the time the book had been written. Many visitors to the area would have hoped for a glance of them, especially the female ones.

She would not let herself be daunted by them, however. They might be rich and

powerful, but this was her inn and they were in her territory.

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“Can I help you, my lord?”

“I’ll send for my doctor as soon as I return home. I anticipate him arriving forthwith.”

“Of course.”

“I shall send coin too. No doubt his care is expensive.”

Rosie shook her head vigorously. The laudanum had not come cheaply but she could not bear the charity. “No, please—”

The marquis glanced at the door, ignoring her. “Keep an eye on my brother if you will. Ensure he does not fall on any more knives.” His lips quirked. “He has a tendency to find trouble.”

Rosie wondered if the trouble mentioned had caused the few little scars on Adam’s face. “Your brother shall return entirely unharmed, I promise.”

“Excellent.” He gestured to the other brother. “Come, Leo, we had better report home or else Mary-Anne shall work herself into a fit.”

A tiny jab of something pricked at her, like that of a sewing needle—a short sharp prick of her insides. Who was this Mary-Anne and what did she have to do with Adam?

“Good day, Miss Seymour,” both men said with a lift of their hats.

She dropped into a curtsey and waited until their heavy footfalls retreated downstairs before releasing a breath and pressing her back against the door.

Both were suspicious of her and why would they not be? Her story of Adam falling on a knife sounded ridiculous, but she could not have them know a would-be murderer haunted the doorstep of her inn. She ran a respectable tavern and whilst it was not luxurious, many of her guests were wealthy and of rank. If word got around there was someone stabbing her rich patrons, she would be done for.

Who it even was, she did not know, and the thought the person who had done such a deed might be in her taproom at this very moment made her itch.

Straightening, she set the sheets on the long bench that sat against one wall and entered Adam's room. Sitting up in bed, his shoulders stood out in stark relief to the pale sheets and blue blanket. She glanced away briefly then chided herself for being foolish. She had seen him naked for goodness' sake.

Not that she had taken long to linger over such a sight. Frankly, she had been too worried about him dying to marvel at the strength of his body, and arrogant or not, he deserved better than her lusting over him.

Not that she was lusting over him now, either.

"You might have warned me."

His brows lifted. "Warned you?"

"That you were the marquis's brother."

His lips curved. "And you might have treated me better?"

“I have treated you perfectly well.” She pressed her closed fists to her hips. “I saved your life.”

“I will be eternally grateful for that but pray tell what would have been different had you known?”

“Well, I—” She blew out a breath. “I just would have liked to have known.”

“Perhaps then you can tell me why you concocted that story of me falling on a damned knife. My brothers did not believe it for one second.”

She grimaced. There was no use in lying to him. “If it is known that you were harmed here, it will do irreparable damage to the inn. I cannot afford for my patrons to run away scared.”

“Ah.”

“So you understand?”

He nodded. “Any chance you know who did the stabbing?”

She shook her head. “Do you recall anything?”

“It was too dark.”

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“And it could have been many people,” she added.

“Why do you say that?”

“You bested many men at cards that night. No doubt someone held a grudge against you.”

“Maybe he wanted to steal from me.”

“Yet he left you with all your belongings?” She gestured to the chest. “I think you shall find your money and pocket watch in there.”

“So you are blaming me for being a victim of a vicious crime?”

Rosie gave into the urge to smile. “No, of course not.” His face contorted and she hastened to his side. “Is all well?”

“Well, yes aside from the hole in my body and a strong need to relieve myself.”

“Charming,” she said dryly then sighed. “Come, let me help you.”

“Any chance you have a man in the building who can help?”

She pressed her lips together. “I did not expect you to be overly modest, my lord.”

“I would like to maintain some dignity, woman.”

“Very well. I’ll set the pot up by the wall so you can lean against it, but I shall have to aid you over there.”

He gestured to the sheets covering him. “Some sort of garment to preserve my dignity might be nice too.”

“You do not want much, do you?” she teased.

“Only your full and unreserved attention, Beauty.”

“Do not call me that,” she said firmly.

“Can I call you by your name? Considering you have seen me naked it only seems fair.”

“I barely noticed,” she said breezily.

“How disappointing.”

Shaking her head, Rosie tried to ignore his roguish smile. The last thing she needed was to be distracted by this man and his innate ability to flirt and charm. She had a living to worry about.

Chapter Five

Each step downstairs had Adam feeling like a new-born foal. After over a week abed, he supposed he likely looked a little like one too. Hand to the rough wall, he eased down each uneven wooden step into the faintly lit room, aware of the tightness in his gut. The pain was long gone but he’d been left tired and unsteady.

He’d be damned if he was going to lie about any longer, though. Especially with the

rumbling in his gut. The darkness he'd viewed from his room combined with the quietness of the inn suggested the hour was late, though he had not bothered checking his timepiece.

A dry thirst and aching hunger woke him, despite Rosie having brought him broth, thick, chunky bread and watered-down ale. He suspected his body was tired of broth and needed greater sustenance though what he would find in a tavern at night, he did not know.

Regardless, he did not want to disturb his nurse. She moved about with the brisk efficiency of one with too much to do and too little time to do it in. He envied her somewhat. Even in his years at Oxford, he could never claim to be particularly busy. He suspected if he'd admitted to that envy, she would laugh. Despite her harried state, she was quick to smile. He liked that about her.

He stumbled through the darkened taproom and paused at the sound of a sweet melody coming from the kitchen. It wasn't Harriet as he'd heard that girl hum and there was nothing sweet about that sound. So it had to be Rosie, though he did not think her inclined to sing. It seemed right that a woman so beautiful also had a beautiful voice.

He moved toward the sound, drawn by the light shimmering from the open doorway and the sound of her singing, lured as though by a siren. He smirked to himself. Siren was about right. She lured men here daily and he was not certain he could claim to be immune to her charms.

Adam paused in the doorway and leaned against the battered wood frame—partly to rest a moment, partly to watch her. She chopped vegetables with practiced efficiency, using the beat of the knife against the chopping board to guide her song.

With her back to him, he had a chance to admire the way the messy knot of her apron

emphasized her waist and delectable curves. He really should not be ogling the woman who had been looking after him so diligently in such a manner but, hell, he was only a mortal. And this siren had quite the hold on him at present.

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Shaking his head at himself, he pushed away from the doorframe. Anyone would think he was some whelp, hoping to get his first taste of a woman. Yes, it had been some time, and yes, there was no denying Rosie lived up to her nickname and beyond. But he had no intention of breaking a promise to his mother—even if the motive behind her manipulations was to force his hand. Either way, he would not fall for her tricks.

He cleared his throat and she whirled, knife in hand. Her eyes widened as he lifted his hands. “Good Lord, Adam. You scared me out my wits.”

“Do you mind lowering the knife?”

“Oh.” She set it down and swiped her hands over the stained apron. “What are you doing here? You should be abed. The last time I checked, you were asleep.” She drew out a chair and dragged it over to him, then put a hand to his shoulder to urge him down.

He could have fought her but the journey downstairs had tired him, so he sank onto it and peered around the generous kitchen. Lit by several candles, a table scarred by knife marks dominated the center of it. Few of the surfaces were clear with evidence of current use and the demand for food from the day. Atop the black range at the rear of the room, a huge pan awaited ingredients.

He pressed a hand to his stomach. “Alas, my hunger woke me.”

“Well, that is a good sign. You must be close to fully healed.”

Likely more than close. Another week and he could easily make the journey home without fear of injuring himself on the rough roads to Langmere. But he did not want to admit that. Not yet.

“I think my body tires of broth.” He held up a quick hand before she could respond. “Not that your broth is anything of which to complain about but a man can only live on broth for so long.”

Rosie smiled, her eyes crinkling. “You are in luck. I still have some warm pies.” She moved across the kitchen so swiftly he felt too much like an old man in his current state.

He eyed her. “I did not anticipate you being awake so late.”

She set the plate on the table and aided him in moving the chair closer. “My cook Simon is with his wife. She is to give birth soon and is in delicate health.”

“A trying time to be sure.”

“Yes, and I would not wish to be in his shoes. But it leaves me with his duties.” She gestured to the giant pot. “Stew. For tomorrow,” she explained.

“You could not find someone to replace him?”

She shook her head. “No one cooks like Simon. Besides, I would not pay a wage twice.”

He lifted his brows. “You pay a wage even though the man does not work?”

She shrugged. “He has need of it, especially now he will have an additional mouth to feed, and he shall not be gone much longer with any luck.”

“You are a more generous employer than most.”

“It has little to do with generosity and more to do with wanting to ensure my cook remains loyal to me. I would not have him take his skills elsewhere.”

Adam did not argue with her, but he suspected her generosity stemmed not only from business acumen, though from what he had observed and the confessions Harriet confided in him, Rosie ran the tavern with all the shrewdness of some of the biggest businessmen in London. However, he’d seen the care she had given him—a mere accidental burden. No doubt, this woman cared a great deal for this cook and there was more softness beneath her strong shell than she’d like to admit.

Not that he would be saying that aloud to her, however, he thought with a slight smile. Something he’d learned about Rosie over the past week was she had more pride and strength than any woman he’d ever met.

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No stranger to men not believing her capable of running a business with a shrewd and calculating mind, she ignored the smile and busied herself with finishing the vegetables for the stew that would cook overnight.

Whilst she sliced aggressively through the vast quantity of carrots, she forced her attention on the steady movement of the blade. A wise thing to be sure as Adam promised to be a distraction. With his hair tousled, his shirt open at the neck, and his feet bare, he created quite the picture. Not that he intended it of course, but Adam had the ability to look beautiful no matter what. Even when he had scarcely been lucid, his good looks tugged at her to give him a second look.

She could not believe quite how ridiculous she was being about it, though. Many handsome men came into her tavern. Goodness, many of them proposed marriage and

riches. But none of them piqued her interest quite like Adam.

Stealing a glance over her shoulder, she clenched her teeth and savagely tore through the next carrot. She'd always known she'd take over the inn and even as a child, there had been something delightful and satisfying about feeding a hungry traveler. She'd followed her Ma around while she served the food and watched avidly whilst the customers tucked into their fare.

However, feeding the hoards had never filled her with this soft, strange feeling as though her insides were suddenly made of wool. Just seeing the satisfied look on Adam's face as he devoured the pie made her yearn for something she'd never thought she'd have.

A family to care for.

It was impossible anyway. She had no time...and well, she didn't have the body for it. She'd known for a long time she could never offer a man children, ever since her erratic courses had started.

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“You know, you really should hire some additional help,” Adam commented. “You look exhausted.”

She twisted and leaned back against the kitchen worktop. “And here I thought you were supposed to be quite the charming gentleman.”

His lips quirked. “Even exhausted, you are beautiful—but you already knew that.”

Rosie rolled her eyes. “I have been looking after a patient, in case you have forgotten. On top of running an inn.”

“You shall forever have my gratitude, but why do you not hire additional help?”

“Because it will not last forever.”

His brow creased.

“The interest, the people visiting to see me. Either they will lose interest, sales of the book will go down or I shall age. And I shall have based my business on a need that no longer exists.”

“Or you will simply grow more beautiful with age and you will have expanded the inn to such a stage that it will be known across England, whether you are the Beauty of Buttermere or not.” He set down his fork and leaned back in the chair.

“Oh, forgive me, I did not realize brothers of marquises had superior business knowledge.” She drew another chair to the table and sat in front of him, her elbows to

the table, her chin on her hands. “Do tell me all you know, good sir.”

Adam chuckled. “You mock me because my wealth was not earned but one does not keep several expensive estates running and a family in comfort with no mind for business.”

“You are saying you have a hand in your brother’s affairs?”

He lifted both shoulders then winced. “Alex is no fool in business, but I have a mind for investments.”

“Speculations you mean.”

“Investments,” he said firmly. “It is only a speculation if one does not know it will make money.”

“And I suppose you know precisely where you can make money.”

“I know your inn would be a wise investment. With a touch of homely comforts and better ale, you would be the preferred stop in Buttermere.”

Rosie tried not to bristle at the criticism. It was true that the furnishings in the guest rooms were simple but the guests she housed were not known to take good care of them. It seemed foolish to invest in something better. As for the ale, she had been using the same supplier that her parents had and there were no complaints before. However, her pride did not override her interest in what he had to say. Sometimes one needed an outside view to see where one was going wrong.

However, she had no desire to admit he was correct. He did not need to have his ego inflated any more than it already was.

“Why are you running an inn anyway?” he asked. “You could be married and living the life of a wealthy woman.”

“A wealthy, married woman,” she pointed out. “With all her wealth tied to her husband.” She shook her head. “I prefer my independence, thank you. Besides, I promised my parents I would keep this inn running and I would never betray that promise.”

He nodded, as though he would feel the same but how could a man with all this wealth and privilege and good looks be counted on to stick to a promise? “Your parents are...”

“Alive but retired. They moved to the coast of Dorset for the air. My mother suffers bouts of illness and we deemed it best they move.”

“So this survival of this inn is down to you and you alone?”

“Indeed.”

He nodded. “Well, will you at least accept some aid with those vegetables?”

She blinked a few times, taking a moment to register the question. A lord, offering to aid her with something so menial? Could that be right? “I suppose...” She scowled. “But your wound...”

“I feel the need to move or else I shall seize up entirely. And I cannot lie around knowing you are working here by yourself.”

Good grief, the man had a conscience. She almost rather he was back to being arrogant and an annoyance. If he continued this way, she might very well end up liking him.

Chapter Six

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A contented sigh escaped Adam as he slipped his arms into a freshly laundered shirt. He almost felt human again now his clothes were clean and crease-free. Most likely thanks to Rosie. He shook his head and ran a hand over his bristled chin. The woman never stopped. He wasn't sure she even slept. How she always looked so damned beautiful was beyond him.

He paused to run his fingers over the new scar on his abdomen. Fatigue lingered in his body and he swore he'd lost a little weight, despite it only having been ten days since he was stabbed, but the worst of the pain was gone. He just had to move carefully he found.

Which meant he could return home easily enough.

Except he did not want to.

Evening talks with Rosie had become a habit. With no cook still, the majority of the work came down to her, so he aided her in chopping vegetables and meat for the stew every night whilst they discussed family and business and her future ambitions.

He had to admit to being envious of such aspirations. He'd never really had any unless one counted wishing to best his brothers at everything and win his next card game. It was hard to have ambitions as the third to a marquis. No one really expected much of one unless they joined the church and he had little desire to do that. Besides, his investments and skill with cards ensured he did not become some awful drain on the family.

Running a hand through his hair, he paused to eye himself in the mottled mirror. He'd

certainly looked better. A good shave, a change of clothes, and his own bed were needed. But that meant leaving Rosie.

And he could hardly do that. After all, she needed his help, did she not? And there was a potential murderer in their midst? If one could say anything about his desire to stay, it was a noble one. Heck, maybe his mother would even be proud. It did not mean, however, he was falling for his mother's plans.

He smirked at his reflection. Of course, his mother had likely expected him to find himself in love with some sweet, genteel lady. He smirked to himself. He did not think Rosie had ever been described as sweet in her life. Intelligent, yes. Bold, most certainly. Without guise or insincerity, to be sure, but never sweet.

Regardless, nothing was going to happen anyway. Simply because he found her the most fascinating and beautiful creature, did not mean he was going to let himself slip up.

"Oh, you're out of bed."

He turned as Rosie entered the room. "One day you are going to find me entirely nude if you do not start knocking."

"I have already seen it all, if you recall."

"Good Lord, woman, you really do not wish me to regain any dignity, do you?"

"There you are wrong." She set down a bowl of water on the washstand along with soap, a brush and a razor then gestured to it all. "You would look much more dignified if you shaved."

"And here I was thinking I looked ruggedly handsome." He rubbed a hand over his

face. “The damned thing itches like the devil though.”

She tilted her head. “Some women might think it a good look on you.”

“But not you?”

She shrugged. “I could not care less either way.”

He suppressed a grin. The slight bob of her throat told him otherwise. Which was good. He liked to think he was not the only person in this relationship who found the other ridiculously attractive.

It did not mean much though. They were fully aware of each other’s good looks. Why would they not be? Neither of them were blind nor simple.

He reached for the soap and winced when his side tugged.

She huffed and put a hand to his shoulder. “Sit.”

A brow lifted, he did as he was told. He’d begun to learn Rosie did not take well to people disobeying her. It was no wonder she ran the inn with so little help. He doubted the woman was capable of delegating work to others. Including him shaving apparently.

She lathered up the soap and he glanced at the blade. “Am I to trust you with a blade to my neck?”

“If I wanted you dead, Adam, I would have let you die in my stables.”

He made a dismissive noise. “I would not have died from such a wound.”

“So you mean to tell me I did not need to haul you all the way into the inn and keep watch over you for days on end?” Her lips quirked as she spread the lather over his face.

“How did you manage that anyway?”

“With difficulty,” she said dryly.

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“I wondered how I ended up so bruised. You must have hit every step on the way up.”

“I was exceedingly careful with you!”

“Tell that to the back of my head.”

She gave his arm a light tap and he pretended to wince, rubbing the spot where she struck.

Rolling her eyes, she urged him to tilt his head back. “Noble men are such soft creatures.”

“You just do not know your own strength.”

“Oh I know it well enough, now keep still.”

With the razor so close to his neck, he did as he was commanded, trying to keep his gaze from the curves that hovered around him. A difficult task indeed, considering how close they were. He kept picking up the slight scent of lavender too, working its way through the simple scent of soap. Did she rub lavender on herself or had someone gifted her some perfumed oil?

He would not be surprised if she had been given many things by her admirers, but Rosie did not seem the sort to accept gifts. Something for which he was grateful. The thought of men offering her luxuries made him curl his fingers into the arm of the chair.

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Rosie glanced at the whitening of his knuckles. Either he thought she was going to accidentally cut him, or he was in pain. She could not do much about the pain, but she had little intention of harming him. Though, he had to be no stranger to pain nor cuts, given the scars on his face. The tiny white lines marred a few spots on his face, not just his eyebrow where it was most obvious.

“How did you get this?” she murmured, rubbing a thumb over a slightly raised one on the shadows of his jaw line.

He shrugged. “Cards mostly likely.”

Smoothing soap lather over her face, she met his gaze. “Cards?”

“I seem to have the knack of playing against sore losers.”

“It seems to me you need a new occupation. Next time you might not survive.”

Adam’s lips curved. “I shall have to make sure you are nearby to nurse me better again.”

She shook her head. “I have little intention of playing nursemaid ever again.”

“But you do it so well.”

“Whilst you, sir, make a terrible patient.” She put a hand to his jaw. “Now keep still lest you really do want me to slice you.”

She ran the blade carefully over the planes of his face, her focus entirely on keeping her hand steady.

Not on the way his gaze tracked her movements and certainly not on how her fingers tingled after touching his face so intimately. She fought the desire to spread a hand across his cheek and simply hold his face. Men really should not be built this way. Beauty should be reserved for women who knew how to wield it properly. A wealthy man like Adam had no need for good looks—he would always be at an advantage in the world anyway.

She glanced briefly at his full lips. Her mouth dried a little. What would they taste like? What would it feel like to be kissed by such a mouth? An ache opened up in her gut that she hadn't felt in an eternity, if ever. By the time she reached the right side of his face, her breaths felt hot and erratic. She paused, swallowed hard and shook the thoughts from her mind.

Or tried.

Adam curled his fingers into the fabric of her skirt, tugging her ever-so-slightly closer. The tiny touch, the small gesture of need, made her stomach do a leap. Her legs brushed his thigh, and she swore she heard his breath hitch. She paused, aware the control over her hands was waning.

“Adam.”

He reached up and took the blade from her. It clattered to the floor.

“What—”

He took hold of her bodice with both hands and drew her in front of him. She could have moved away, she supposed, could have put an end to this. But his eyes were dark and searching and her mouth dried and her heart hammered when she met his gaze.

Rosie knew what he wanted. Knew what she wanted too. Her instincts warred with desire. She knew men like Adam—they frequented her inn often enough. They were bored, rich, privileged nobles who would take all she had to give then toss her aside.

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That knowledge, however, did not stop the great chasm inside her. She'd spent so long fighting to survive, to thrive. She did not much feel like fighting any longer.

He shifted his hands up, curving around the bodice of her gown. The touch, so intimate, made her suck in a breath. He drew her closer still, remaining seated, and she curled her hands about his face, his skin damp and soapy beneath her fingers.

Swallowing the tangle in her throat, she dipped her head, bending until their lips were almost touching. His breaths were warm and ragged on her mouth.

"What are you doing?" she murmured.

"The same thing as you are doing," he replied, his voice rough.

"Giving into madness..."

Adam kept his voice low. "You certainly drive me to the edge of insanity."

He refused to close the gap, making the throb in her body grow in intensity. She ground her teeth together until she could hold out no longer.

Rosie pressed her lips hard and firm to his, releasing a sound that she could not quantify. Was it relief or frustration that she had given in? She did not much care. His lips were warm, his hands insistent, holding her close. Behind closed lids, she could only savor the feel of his mouth against hers.

When he opened his mouth to hers, she gave into the desperation governing her every

move. She could blame his beauty, her loneliness and a dozen other things, but of all the men who had visited her, she had never wanted to kiss them so badly. She was not one to lie to herself. There was no doubting no one affected her like Adam.

His tongue tangled with hers, sweeping through the recesses of her mouth with a matched desperation. She gasped at the ferocity of it then gasped again when he wrapped his arms entirely around her and she gave into the inevitable, hauling up her skirts with one hand and straddling him.

His thighs were firm between hers, his arousal pressed hard against her core. She moaned and wrapped her hands back around his head, pressing them into his soft curls. Rosie met his gaze briefly.

“Good God.” His words were ragged and scarcely audible as she took his mouth once more.

As their lips clashed, he moved his hands around her waist, urging her as close as humanly possible. Her nipples chafed against her stays, her body tingled, her core ached. How easy it would be to go further—simply free him from his breeches and take all she craved.

She froze and broke the kiss.

“Rosie,” Adam protested.

She pressed a finger to his lips and twisted her head to listen. A knock at the door sounded. Through her desire-soaked mind, she must have heard the approaching footsteps. Glancing back at Adam, she sucked down a deep, cleansing breath and willed the heat and madness to disperse.

“Tell them we are busy.”

Need simmered through her and she doubted it would go, especially now she knew what it was like to have his lips upon hers and his hands desperately clawing at her body.

But she was right. She was busy. Too busy for a dalliance and too busy to have her heart shattered. Because with a man like Adam, how could one's heart not get involved? As rakish and as bold as he was, she liked him far too much.

Lips tilted, she eased off him. "I have things to do, and you should be recovering."

"What if that was helping my recovery?"

Rosie straightened her skirts, adjusted her bodice and quickly checked her hair in the mirror, shoving an errant strand back into the embrace of the simple comb then she set him with a look. "I am no fool, Adam. You cannot sway me into your arms with talk of it aiding you."

"I do not believe I swayed you at all just then." He grinned. "In fact, I do believe that was all your idea."

"Yes, well, it was a foolish one, and one that shall not be repeated."

"Shame."

Another knock sounded. She hastened to the door and paused to lift a finger. "Tell no one of this."

He lifted his hands. "Who should I tell?"

Lifting her gaze to the ceiling, she shook her head. More at herself than anything but also at his smug smile. A smile that hinted this would happen again and he well knew

it.

Well, it would not. She had no time to get tangled up with a rakish gentleman far above her station. No time and no desire.

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Perhaps the latter part was a lie, but it was one she would gladly tell herself if it meant she kept her wits about her when Adam was around.

Chapter Seven

Well, this was new.

New and uncomfortable. The deep, grating sensation in Adam's gut made him curl a fist.

He leaned against the doorway of the taproom and watched the gentleman rest a hand on Rosie's shoulder. She brushed it off as expected but kept a forced smile upon her face.

Harriet paused in front of him, an empty tray in hand. "Should you not be in bed, my lord?"

"If I stay abed any longer, I shall go out of my wits." He kept his gaze on Rosie and wondered what it was she had said to the man as she breezed off to the next table.

The petite woman glanced Rosie's direction and her lips curved. "There is not a night that goes past when Rosie does not get some proposition or other."

"Do these men have nothing better to do with their time?" he muttered.

"Than try to sway a beautiful woman into their bed?" she asked, amusement creasing her eyes when he finally looked at her.

“Rosie is simply trying to do her job. Could they not leave her to it?”

“She’s well used to handling the attention. I would not let it bother you.” She looked over her shoulder then back to Adam. “But I can see it does bother you very much.”

“As well it should.” He straightened. “They’re fools, running after her like damned whelps with their tongues hanging out.”

“You cannot deny she is a beauty and would make a fine wife. I do not think there is any foolishness in pursuing such a woman.”

No. There was not. But he wished like hell these men would steer clear. He’d already heard one man propose marriage and his heart had clenched so tightly, he feared it would never return to its normal size.

Of course Rosie had laughingly brushed it off but for one small moment, he’d feared she would tear off her apron and say yes to the stranger. After all, the gentleman had coin and an appearance of wealth. Why would she not take him up on his offer?

He clenched his jaw and watched her move to another table of drooling imbeciles. Three days since they’d kissed and they both acted like nothing happened, him aiding her in the kitchen in the evening, whilst she talked of her plans for the inn. Three days and he’d learned even more about her.

And nothing that he had learned could persuade him he did not want to re-enact that outrageously sensual kiss. For the rest of his days he would not forget that woman straddling him.

“Perhaps you should go to bed, my lord.” Harriet peered up at him. “You look a little red in the face.”

“I am perfectly well.”

“Then you shall be returning home soon?”

He narrowed his gaze at her knowing smile. Simply because he wanted to remain around a little longer and aid Rosie did not mean anything. Admittedly, he wanted another kiss. Admittedly, he wanted more. Though the doctor would likely have a thing or two to say about that. His side remained tender and the stab wound had been superficial—thankfully—but he shouldn’t be doing anything vigorous. And he knew damned well if he took Rosie to bed, it would be vigorous.

And dangerous.

Rosie was not the sort of woman one bedded then left, even if half the men in here would happily do such a thing. Not to mention, his mother would be thrilled he’d taken up with a woman, even if Rosie was likely not who she pictured for him.

“My lord?”

“I’m not yet healed,” he lied.

Her lips quirked. “Of course not. But do you not miss home? It would be more comfortable than staying here surely?”

More comfortable, yes. But there was no Rosie at his brother’s estate. Damn. The woman had a hold and a half over him.

“I must stay here until we find out who stabbed me.”

“I think if the man is smart, he has fled.”

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Adam nodded vaguely. He had his suspicions too. Though his presence here had been kept quiet, surely if someone wanted him dead badly enough they could have tried again by now?

He leaned forward when a man threw down his tankard of ale and it sloshed onto the table. Rosie held up her hands as the man rose to his feet, but Adam could not make out the conversation. He didn't need to hear them to understand the man's aggression, however, and he'd be damned if someone spoke to Rosie in such a manner.

Harriet put a hand to his arm. "Rosie can manage it, you just see."

"Like hell," he said through gritted teeth.

He did not care if she could manage it or not. She should not have to tolerate such behavior in her own establishment. He strode past the crowds and stepped between Rosie and peered down at the man. Large shouldered and muscled from farm work by the smell of him, the man might be shorter than him, but he had strength. If Adam were at full health, it would not have been something he even noted but he grew horribly aware of the slight tug that still inflicted his side.

"Adam," Rosie protested.

"I suggest you leave, sir," Adam ordered, his arms folded.

"I have every right to be here." The man came toe to toe with him, so close that the acrid scent of his breath washed over Adam.

“Not when you behave so.”

The man’s lip curled. “Who are you? Her minder?” He glanced over him. “You’re some kind of rich man aren’t you? Slumming it with her perhaps?” The man glanced around. “See here? The beauty got herself a fancy man.”

Adam’s fist met the man’s jaw before he had quite realized what he had done. Pain burst through his knuckles. The man staggered back, sending chairs tumbling to the floor with a crash. A companion rushed over to his side and squared up to Adam.

The man clutched his jaw. “What the devil?”

“Adam!” Rosie exclaimed.

Adam thrust a finger at him. “You will not besmirch the lady’s name and you shall leave. Now.” He drew up his shoulders and ignored the tearing pain in his side. He most certainly should not have done that.

Rosie stepped around him, hands to her hips. “The gentleman is correct. I do not tolerate such slander. Now leave or you shall be barred permanently.”

“You’re going to let him return?” Adam asked, his voice low.

“Indeed.”

The man eyed Adam, his stare hard and cold then glanced at Rosie. His shoulders sagged and he gave a slow nod then gestured to his friend. Rosie watched the man leave before turning to him.

She put a hand to his shoulder and jerked her head toward the kitchen. “A word, if you please.”

He grimaced. He'd known enough women in his time to know Rosie was utterly furious with him. Just wonderful.

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Rosie eased out a heated breath. She should not be impressed by the hit. She would not be impressed by it. Adam should never have interfered in her business. The men who frequented her inn needed to know that she and she alone was in charge or else who knew what would happen?

She shut the kitchen door and rounded on him. "You overstepped, Adam."

"You would tolerate such behavior?"

"He was moaning about the ale, nothing more."

"He acted with disrespect."

"And I would have solved the problem with no violence." She shook her head. "We are lucky you did not start a brawl. I have never once had one in my inn and I have no desire to change that."

"What about what he said about you?"

His jaw worked as he paced past her then rested his rear against the worktop, his arms folded. Though he did not wear his finest clothes, there was no doubting his breeding. It could be heard in his voice and seen in the stiches of his shirt and jacket, and the way he held himself, even now.

"What was said about me would not have been uttered had you not interfered!"

“You deserve better, damn it.”

Rosie threw up her hands. “Better than what? A life of independence? My own living? Would you have me become the mistress of some rich patron perhaps?”

“No, of course not.”

“Because we both know that is all I am good for.”

“Do not say that,” he said through clenched teeth.

She tilted her head. “Adam...”

“You deserve everything, Rosie.”

“Well, perhaps I do not want everything.” A lie, perhaps. Her life satisfied her, for the most part. Why would it not? At least it had until Adam arrived.

“Rosie—”

She held up a hand. “It matters not. The point still stands. How can I expect my patrons to respect me if you are jumping in to fight my battles?”

“Would that you had no battles to fight.”

She smiled. “This is a tavern, Adam. Where men and alcohol mix. It shall never be a peaceful living. If you do not like it, you are free to leave.”

His posture stiffened. “My wound...”

“Yes, your wound,” she said dryly. “Which you forgot about today. You will be in pain tomorrow.”

“I can protect you.”

“I know it might be strange to you but I do not want protection. I simply want a peaceful living.”

He shook his head, a vague smile upon his lips. “So long as you look like that, Rosie—” he gestured up and down her “—your life shall never be peaceful.”

She’d heard hundreds, maybe thousands of comments on her appearance before. It should be nothing new. Yet, somehow, when Adam mentioned her attractiveness she actually...liked it?

Lord, even her cheeks felt warm.

Adam inched forward, closing the gap between them. “Why are you so terrified of depending on someone, Rosie?”

“Terrified?” She shook her head. “I am not scared. Would I command all these men if I were scared?”

“Rosie, be honest with me for but a moment.”

“I am honest. I’m always honest.”

“Except with yourself.”

Well, if she allowed that, she would stop and wonder quite why her attraction to Adam pulled so hard at her heart. And she certainly could not let that happen.

He moved closer and she took a step back, her rear bumping upon the kitchen table, making the empty tankards rattle upon it.

“Be honest, Rosie, what do you want?” he murmured, bringing his body close to hers.

“I want...” She set her jaw with every intention of pushing him away but she saw his eyes darken and felt the flush of heat roll through her.

She wanted something for herself. A kiss, a touch. But if she admitted that, there might be no going back. Her parents left her—and she understood and even encouraged them too. But Adam would do the same too and she could not guarantee he wouldn’t take a part of her strength with him too. She needed that to get through every day of running the inn.

Chapter Eight

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Rosie had been right but Adam would never admit it. He'd overdone it.

Rising from bed, he peered into the darkness and rubbed a hand over his face with a grimace. A dull pain stabbed his side—a frustrating reminder he was not quite the fit man he usually was.

Still, he supposed he had not been wrong in wishing to stay a little longer. The journey home would be unpleasant indeed in such a state so Harriet could keep her smug glances after all.

Adam twisted slowly and eased his feet to the cold wooden floor. Slowly the shapes of the furnishing grew apparent and he fumbled for the flint to light the candle near his bedside. He'd already tossed and turned for too many hours. He needed to put his mind to work on anything other than the frustrating ache and...well...Rosie.

The blasted woman did like to occupy a rather large chunk of his mind in his waking hours too. It didn't help he wanted to repeat that kiss over and over. Aching body be damned, he wanted more too.

He shook his head. Precisely why he needed to come up with some way to engage his busy mind. If he could not best people at cards or mull over new investments, he could at least do something useful surely for Rosie's business? This called for a quill and some paper and a perusal at her accounts perhaps.

He snatched his robe from the back of a chair, grateful his brothers had thought to send clothes. Though most likely it had been the kind thoughts of his new sisters. Neither Alex nor Leo could be counted on being the most brotherly of men though

that had changed somewhat since their time here in the lakes.

Another branch to his mother's plans no doubt. Life had ensured they were too busy to spend much time together as adults and though they enjoyed one another's company, they had not been particularly involved in one another's lives.

Adam didn't regret they had all come to know each other again but he sure as hell wouldn't be saying as much to his mother.

Candle in hand, he eased open the latch on the door and winced when it squeaked. They had several guests at present and Rosie would not be impressed if he woke them, though mercifully she had put them in the far end of the inn, away from her private lodgings, so he doubted it would be possible to wake them. He slipped out of the room and eased the door shut. The latch thudded back into place, the noise ricocheting about the dark and empty hallway. He held his breath and waited a moment.

All seemed quiet. Excellent now he would just—

“Adam.”

He twisted, a hand to his heart. “Good God, woman, are you trying to kill me?”

“We established this before. If I wanted you dead, I would have left you to die.” Rosie's lips slanted.

Once the pounding of his heart slowed, the realization struck. Standing in her doorway, lit by only the glow of his candle, was about the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. No, that was a lie. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Something about the tousled perfection of the braid curled over one shoulder but

releasing little strands of hair about her face and neck made his gut clench. The way the soft, golden light caressed the smooth curve of her cheek forced his fingers to flex with the need to touch her skin. And the heavy-lidded expression she wore reminded one of a recently pleased woman.

Adam gritted his teeth so hard he was surprised they did not shatter upon impact.

“Why are you awake?” he managed to ask.

“I would ask you the same.”

He shrugged, forcing his expression to remain nonchalant. “I could not sleep.”

“Something to do with being a little too active today?”

“You should not tease a man so.”

Her brows rose and she inched the door open further, revealing a white shift that clung to curves. The garment offered nothing exceptional but that it was worn upon Rosie’s body. The woman could likely wear a flour sack and be lusted after by half the population of England. His mouth dried and he flexed his fists—a feeble attempt at doing nothing considering that whilst he did not reach for her, he still took a step closer.

“I do not see how I tease.” A crease appeared between her brows.

He almost laughed. Rosie knew full well the affect she had on men and yet she also did not. Whilst she used it to her advantage to gain patronage at the inn, she had little idea how to truly wield it. That unusual concoction of natural feminine wiles combined with a strange sort of innocence lured him to take another step.

“You tease because you make a man wish to prove just how active he can be.”

Silence governed the next few moments, making him aware of how heavy his breaths were.

And how damned close to snapping his control was.

Hell, who was he kidding? He'd lost control the moment she had straddled him. Something that never, ever occurred. In business, in cards and even in affairs, he had control. Not with Rosie, though. Never with her.

Her gaze flittered over him then met his own. Her lips were slightly parted, her chest rising and falling in what seemed to be a mirror of his struggle to breathe. The air thickened. Her tongue darted out briefly to lick her bottom lip and she inched open the door marginally.

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It might have only been the slightest movement but he could no more resist the silent invite than hold back the tides. Adam took a step forward.

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Rosie knew full well what she had done. Or to be more accurate, what shewasdoing. When she stepped back into the room, the door still ajar, she saw Adam's jaw work.

"You should return to bed," he muttered. "And shut the door."

She shook her head. Since their kiss, they'd been tiptoeing around this sensation that tangled about them like a web and drew them back to one another regardless of what they did. Despite her busy life, her gaze never failed to stray to him or if he was in his room, she would think of him, recall moments spent together. Adam made her laugh like no other.

He made her desire like no other.

Drawing in a thick breath, she lifted her shoulders and stepped a little further back, out of reach of the door.

He mirrored her movements and followed her, pausing briefly to run a hand up the surface of the door. "You should have shut it," he murmured.

She lifted one shoulder. Perhaps. But now that he stood a pace away from her in only his shirt and an open robe with his hair tousled from sleep, she could not bring herself to regret the decision.

This was foolish to be sure. He would be gone before long—maybe even tomorrow. A man like Adam did not stay for a woman like her, regardless of her current fame. Even if it went further, she could not offer him all the things a man of his station would need—like children.

However, having him in front of her, effectively hers for the taking left her with little choice. If she regretted her actions tomorrow, she regretted them. For tonight, she wanted a moment for herself.

He kicked the door shut behind him and it closed with a gentle thud and click as the latch slipped into place. Her heart pounded so fiercely she could scarcely hear anything else over the roar. She swallowed hard and a few thundering beats passed while he eyed her.

She wasn't certain if he moved first or she did, only that they met in the middle with a crash. He fisted his hands in her hair, and she latched hers around his neck. His lips were on hers in an instant, demanding and cajoling. Not that she needed any persuasion. She opened her mouth to him and kissed him back fiercely, taking all he could give.

He moved his hands down and cupped her rear, leaving her in no doubt as to the aroused state of him. When he trailed his lips down her neck to her collar bone, she tilted her head and offered herself to him, shivering in delight at the sensations coursing through her.

“I hate seeing men fawn over you,” he said against her skin.

“It is part of the job.”

“It makes me want to—”

“What?” she asked, panting.

“Claim you as mine. Over and over. They may get to look but I want to be the one to touch, to taste.”

“Oh yes.”

She arched her neck as he kissed farther down, shoving the shoulder of her slip down as he went. He cupped a breast and finally laid his mouth over one aching nipple then sucked it through the fabric.

Here she was, an independent woman, a person who needed no man, yet the words unraveled her. How wonderful it was to be so desired—properly—for all she was rather than a likeness drawn in a book or a brief description. There was no denying Adam knew her far better than any man who frequented her inn.

She pushed a hand between their bodies and curved her palm over the length of him. The hard heat of his arousal made her body flutter and pulse.

He released a noise she would have mistaken for pleasure, had it not been for the tensing of his shoulders beneath her other hand. She broke away. “You really are hurt?”

“Only a little.” He reached for her.

Rosie dodged his grasp and took another step back. “Adam, you fool, you are scarcely recovered. There is no way you should be participating in such an act.”

He blew out a long breath and pushed a hand through his hair. “You cannot expect me to simply return to bed.”

“I certainly can.”

Adam took several strides toward her until she ended up pressed against her vanity table. She curled her hands around the edge of it and peered up at him. “What would the doctor say?”

“That I might not be able to participate in the act but I can certainly do other things.”

“What...”

He silenced her with a firm kiss and bunched her shift in both hands. He inched the fabric up, cool air whispering over her thighs. Only when he dropped to his knees did she realize his intention. No man had ever touched her there and most certainly not like that. But she'd run an inn long enough to understand the act, to know the intentions behind it.

With one hand, he inched open her thighs, and with the other, he gripped her rear. She watched him, powerless to do anything else. It seemed a selfish thing, to accept such pleasures and give nothing in return but she could not bring herself to deny him. She wanted to be selfish, to have Adam pleasure her in such a manner.

She felt his breath hot on her thighs then her most sensitive flesh. He ran his tongue along her in one bold movement that had her crying out. Then he repeated the movement, and she twined her fingers into his hair. His warm tongue danced across her flesh, swirling and licking, paying special attention to that one sensitive spot. The sensations were a far cry from her own rushed ministrations.

Her thighs trembled and she clenched her eyes shut, her attention focused entirely on the pleasure he wrought from her. She rocked into his mouth as he inched her closer and closer to release. He murmured something against her skin—words of encouragement perhaps—that proved to be the undoing of her.

Her peak broke over her, trembling through her like an out-of-control carriage. She leaned back and gasped for air whilst he drew each little flutter of pleasure from her with a few more considered swirls of his tongue. Finally, the sensations ebbed and

she lifted her head to glance down at his smug expression. He rose slowly and pressed her head against his chest.

“I should...” she managed to utter.

“You should do nothing, Rosie,” he said firmly. “Seeing you reach your peak is about the most pleasurable thing I have ever done.”

Exhausted, she let herself sag against him while he rubbed his hands up and down her back. She could not be certain of what she expected of Adam but he had proved himself to be farther and farther from the rake she first suspected him to be.

Which made this dalliance all the more dangerous.

Chapter Nine

If his brothers could see him now...

Well, they'd likely think Adam had caught a fever from his wound and was addled. He was far from lazy but few people of the nobility rose with the dawn.

He rubbed a hand over his face, smothered a yawn and ambled downstairs. His reasons for rising so early were twofold. One, he'd seen how busy Rosie was in the mornings, preparing for the day alone, and two...

Two was the biggest reason, he guessed. He couldn't sleep anyway for thinking of yesterday. He did not think his previous lovers would claim him to be selfish but never before had he gained such pleasure from the simple act of giving.

Pausing in the doorway to the taproom, he smirked to himself. He supposed there had been nothing simple about what occurred between them. Tasting her, giving her

pleasure had left him coiled like an Adder waiting to strike. And he knew where he wanted to sink his teeth.

If only this blasted stab wound would heal quicker. If only he'd been able to take her to bed and not let her go. At least then he'd know how she was this morning. Whether she regretted last night, he had yet to find out.

Raised voices prevented him from moving into the room. He waited a few moments and peered around the corner to spy two men at the rear door by the stables. He could not make out their expressions but their words were aggravated enough. Rosie remained in front of them, hands to her hips while she held her ground.

"There's not a thing wrong with it!" one of the men protested.

"I am getting complaints." Rosie's posture offered a tension that radiated toward Adam, making him want to curl a fist. "You are watering down the ale."

"That's a strong accusation, lady," the other man said.

"I do not make it lightly."

The first man stepped closer to Rosie, his height forcing her to crane her neck. "If you don't take these barrels, there will be trouble."

Adam spied his menacing expression and shook his head to himself. He'd had enough. Striding forward, he came to Rosie's side. He didn't look to see if she was aggravated or relieved by his interruption but he did not much care. Let her be annoyed at him. He wasn't going to tolerate anyone speaking to her so.

"Your ale needs work," Adam said firmly, stepping in between Rosie and the taller man. A recessed chin speckled with pale whiskers gave him a rattish appearance.

Adam reckoned the man to be at least twenty years his senior but hard living might have aged him quicker. His companion, though shorter, was wide through the shoulders and scars upon his face hinted at a rough past. Or perhaps present. Adam only hoped he did not have to fight either of them. He'd win if he had to, but it would likely come at the cost of his recovery.

"We have a contract," the tall man said tightly. "And we have the barrels." He gestured to the cart in the courtyard, stacked high with wooden barrels. "The lady owes us for them."

Adam glanced around him and shook his head. "She is not paying for that swill."

"We have been supplying this inn for nearly twenty years," the man bit out, his cheeks reddening, revealing broken blood vessels that indicated the man to be a drinker.

"No," Rosie said. "Your uncle did, Gerald, and he created fine ale that my patrons enjoyed. I shall say it again, you are watering down your ale."

"That is slander." Gerald's lips tightened.

Rosie shrugged. "It is the truth."

"I will not have my business talked of in this manner." Gerald fisted his hands. "You will take the barrels and you will pay now."

Rosie lifted her chin. "Never."

"You heard the lady." Adam folded his arms, drawing himself up to his full height. "Take your ale and do not return."

The man's gaze flicked between him and Rosie. "Who is this chap anyway? He don't look like the sort to be playing innkeeper."

"That is none of your business," Rosie replied. "But if you wish to make trouble, he's been in more fights than you have."

Adam kept his expression neutral but with difficulty. Whilst it was true he was no stranger to fighting, he doubted he had more experience than this fellow. Not to mention, he was yet to recover from the stab wound.

Gerald glanced him over. Adam did his best to appear as intimidating as possible. It must have worked as Gerald stepped back. He thrust a finger at Rosie. "This isn't over, lady."

"It is," Adam said firmly.

With a grunt, the man turned away. Adam waited in the doorway with Rosie until

they had driven the cart out of the courtyard then shut the door.

“You’re lucky he did not want a fight,” he said.

“Gerald is too old to be fighting, and you have a certain look.” She gestured around her face.

He lifted a brow. “A look?”

“The little scars? Not to mention how you stand.”

“How is that?”

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “As though you are the best at everything in the world.” Her lips quirked.

“I did not think my scars were that prominent.”

“Well, I suppose I have seen them up close.” Her cheeks reddened.

“I rather expected you to be furious at me for interfering. You know, after...”

“Yesterday?” She shrugged. “Yesterday you were about to create a brawl. Today, you prevented one.”

“I told you the ale was terrible.”

“I know.” She shook her head. “I’ve known for a while. Since his uncle passed, the ale has been less and less palatable. I do believe he is guilty of watering it down to increase his profits.” Hands to her hips, she blew out a breath. “But now I do not have any ale. And I doubt they shall drop this.”

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“I shall stay then.” He offered a simple shrug as though it was the most obvious idea in the world. “They shall not do a thing whilst I am in residence.”

Rosie closed her eyes briefly and pressed a finger to the throbbing that had started in the furrow between her brows. Of course a lord like Adam would think things were solved so easily. She would wager his mere presence often solved many an issue—especially considering bowing and scraping usually ensued in his company.

“You cannot stay here forever,” she pointed out. “I shall have to come up with a solution eventually.”

“I’ll stay long enough for them to lose interest,” he offered.

“That could be weeks. Months even.”

He shrugged again.

She lifted her gaze to the ceiling. He might seem entirely comfortable staying at her inn currently but she doubted it would last. Soon he would tire of wiping tables and chopping vegetables...and kissing her. The novelty would be gone and she would be left alone once more. She could not depend on him. She would not depend on him.

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“You cannot continue to take their swill after they threatened you, Rosie.”

Hands to her hips, she lifted her chin. “You cannot tell me what to do. This is my inn.”

“Dear God, even after what he said you would—”

“It is not as easy as all that, Adam. I have to get my ale from somewhere. With any luck, my refusal to take Gerald’s ale shall give him a kick up the behind and he’ll cease watering it down.”

“With any luck,” Adam muttered.

“I cannot rely on having you here to guard me. We are lucky he did not decide to fight you. You are still in no condition and once you are fully healed you shall be gone.”

“I could have taken him if needed,” he muttered. “And who is to say I shall leave?”

“Surely you have lordly things to do? Balls to attend?” She waved a hand. “Whatever it is the nobility does these days.”

He cocked his head. “You are saying I would choose balls instead of protecting you?”

“I do not need protecting!”

“Seems to me, you do.”

She ran a hand over her face and pressed a hot breath through her teeth. Everything felt so muddled and confused since he had...

Well, she could not think on it without her entire body heating. She wanted him, yet she did not. She would inevitably slip the longer he stayed and eventually she'd want more.

Why would she not? He worked hard, was funny and witty and clever and kind. Not to mention handsome and skilled in the bedroom. It did not matter how strong her will of independence was, Adam could crack through if she did not strengthen them.

"Why are you even in the lakes anyway?" she demanded. "I thought you and your brothers rarely spent time here."

"Someone has been inquiring about me it seems." He gave a wry smile.

Actually, Harriet had been the one to gather the gossip, but Rosie could not deny she listened quite eagerly when Harriet had spoken of the brothers.

"I run an inn, Adam. There is always gossip."

"About me?"

"Well, not really," she admitted. "Just curious as to why you are here. They say it is because there are lots of ladies here but I do not believe for one moment you are inclined to wed such as your brothers have."

"You are correct." He moved closer. "Can a man not take in the country air and beautiful scenery?" His gaze darkened when he put hands to her shoulders.

She should have flinched from his touch. He was hiding something. She'd been privy

to enough secrets during her time as an innkeeper to understand when a man might try to skirt a sensitive subject.

Maybe he really was here for a wife—a sweet, genteel woman and she was merely a diversion—but she could not fathom a man such as Adam settling for such a match. Whatever it was he kept from her, it was another warning sign. Another reason for her to strengthen her fortress.

But instead, she found herself lifting her chin, meeting his gaze and letting the predictable flow of desire hum through her. Her throat dried while she took in his features and felt the heat of his fingers penetrating the fabric of her sleeves. How easy it would be to get lost again. To kiss him and touch him and forget ale or threats or marriages or secrets.

Rosie jumped back when the door swung open. Harriet paused in the doorway as Adam darted back and raised his fists.

Rosie shook her head and put a hand to his fist to lower it. “It isn’t them.”

“Who?” Harriet’s wide gaze darted between them.

“I told Gerald we would not take his ale and he is not happy about it.”

Harriet’s mouth formed an o shape. “I can imagine. But his ale is terrible these days. We always get complaints.”

Rosie sighed. “I know. But we only have a few barrels left.”

“What about Fred?” Harriet suggested.

“Fred?” Adam asked.

“He owns the inn at Grasmere and we aid each other when we can.”

“Only because he is half in love with Rosie.” Harriet giggled.

Adam’s expression hardened. “Maybe there is someone else who can help.”

“He is old enough to be my father,” Rosie muttered.

“He’s still in love with you,” Harriet said gleefully.

Rosie shot her a look and Harriet pressed her lips together with a smile.

“We shall go to Fred.” Rosie snatched her hat and coat from the hat stand and shoved her arms into the sleeves.

Adam took a step forward. “Excellent, if you—”

Rosie put a hand to his arm. “Harriet and I will go. She can aid me with lifting the barrels. If he gives us any that is.”

“Oh he will.” Harriet’s grin widened.

“You should not be going anywhere alone.” Adam took another step forward.

“And you cannot manage the ride yet.” Rosie gestured to his gut. “It is a tough journey indeed, and you cannot lift barrels. You are more use to me here.” She grabbed Harriet’s arm and dragged her toward the door before either Adam or Harriet could protest.

“I do not know why you did not wish to take him,” Harriet muttered as she settled on the seat of the wagon next to her once the horse had been hitched. “He seems well enough to me.” She nudged her with an elbow. “Besides, I would wager he would enjoy the time alone with you.”

Rosie scowled and rubbed her ribs. “It does not matter what he would enjoy.”

“What about what you would enjoy? I have never seen you look at a man so.” Harriet sighed. “You deserve some happiness. You work too hard.”

“You have seen nothing, Harriet.”

Harriet rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Rosie flicked the reins. There was nothing between them. And that would not change. A little desire between a lord and an innkeeper could lead nowhere good and she was grateful for the reminder. No matter how much the realization seemed to sear her to her very core.

Chapter Ten

Just wonderful. Rosie rubbed her temples with her fingers then eyed the damage to the barrel. She lifted a boot away from the edge of the puddle of ale.

“First you, um...” Rosie gestured at Adam’s stomach.

“Fall on a knife,” he finished for her with a smirk.

“And now this.” She thrust a hand at the cracked barrel.

“The others are intact.” He tried to keep his tone light when he shoved an undamaged barrel with a foot.

He didn’t feel ‘light’, however. His jaw hurt from tensing it. Someone had broken into the inn’s cellar overnight and damaged one of the barrels. Ale flooded the dirt floor though most of it had soaked into the dirt at this point. Whenever it occurred, it must have been in the early hours as they had both been up late, preparing for the next day. However, he didn’t want to scare Rosie with talk of someone sneaking around at night.

“I highly doubt my...knife incident is related,” he offered.

“Yes but now on top of having a potential murderer as a customer, I have someone wishing to sabotage me.”

“It’s bound to be Gerald.”

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She nodded and swiped a hand over her face. “Though why he did not simply destroy all of the barrels, I do not know.”

“He might have been scared away by something. One of the guests rising perhaps.”

“I shall have to get a better bolt.”

“And a dog,” Adam suggested.

“That’s not a terrible idea.”

He should be pleased she liked the idea but the only reason he’d suggested it was because he hated the thought of her being alone and unprotected once he was gone. She’d made it clear she did not expect him to remain around forever and she wasn’t wrong. He felt fitter than ever and he could not use the excuse of his injury for much longer. Soon it would become obvious why he was staying.

For her.

Besides, she’d made it clear she did not wish him to remain here forever. The taste of her still lingered in his mind, still kept him awake at night, but she had been careful to keep him at arm’s length since.

Adam had to face facts. He should be gone within the next week or so. For both their sakes. Rosie deserved someone with a much less sordid history. A man not being followed about by rumors that by some miracle Rosie had not heard yet. He couldn’t bring himself to explain the true reason for his being in Cumbria and that worried him

more than ever.

He had done nothing wrong, yet it bothered him what she might think of him. He smirked to himself. He could not recall the last time he'd worried what anyone thought of him.

“Go upstairs,” he ordered before he gave in and took her in his arms. The desire to kiss away the creases on her brow made his feet twitch. “I’ll clean up.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I can manage. It’s only a few bits of wood—nothing heavy.”

And he was well enough. But once he admitted that, would be like admitting he could leave. It also meant he was up to making love to her and he wasn’t certain he wanted to put that temptation into either of their heads.

She nodded slowly, eased out a breath then twisted and headed upstairs.

Adam set to work on gathering the splintered pieces of wood then snatched a broom.

“Whatareyou doing?”

He spun to find his brother Leo smirking at him. Behind him, Mary-Anne skipped down the steps and came to a stop on the last step. Nearly five-and-ten and as vivacious as her wild red hair might imply, his new sister shook her head and grinned.

“You look like you belong here, Adam!” She cocked her head and jumped down the last step to rush over and embrace him.

He bit back a grunt of pain and looped an arm around her. “What are you doing here, Mary-Anne?” He looked to Leo.

Leo shrugged. “She begged to see you.”

“I hardly begged. I asked nicely.” She stepped back. “Last I heard, you were on your deathbed.”

“That is not what we said,” Leo interrupted.

“Now you are sweeping, and you look like a regular innkeeper.” Mary-Anne peered up at Adam. “I read that the Beauty of Buttermere owns this pub, and I can see why. She’s very handsome.”

“She is,” Adam agreed.

“I knew it.” Mary-Anne turned to Leo. “I told you.”

Adam frowned. “Told him what?”

“Oh nothing.” Mary-Anne looped her hands behind her back. “When are you coming home?”

“Yes.” Leo stepped forward. “When are you returning home? Rebecca sent me to find out. Everyone is most concerned about you.”

“I am almost healed,” he lied.

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“Almost?” Leo’s brow raised.

“We miss you so,” Mary-Anne muttered. “Though I would not miss you as much if I was allowed to come here more often.”

Leo shook his head. “This is not the sort of place for a young girl.”

“Well I am here now, am I not?”

Adam eyed his brother. “Does Lucy even know you two are here?”

Leo glanced at the floor. “She is attending some talk in Kendal with Alex.”

“Lucy will have both of our heads for this.”

“Call yourselves men,” Mary-Anne muttered and peered at Adam’s midsection. “Can I see it?”

“See what?”

She lifted both hands. “The stab wound of course!”

“There’s not much to see.”

“How dull,” she muttered.

“Any idea how the knife came to be...on the floor?” Leo asked, his lips tilted. “Do we

need to worry that it might reoccur?”

“I was...” He glanced at his sister-in-law. “Doing nothing out of the ordinary. I believe someone took exception to that.”

“So you bested them at cards?” Mary-Anne asked.

He shook his head with a smile. There was no keeping secrets from the inquisitive girl, especially not when it looked as though she might end up better at cards than himself one day.

“Perhaps you should return home.” Leo’s smile faded. “If there’s a chance this person could return...”

“They stabbed a nobleman. Why would they risk returning? Besides, I do not think I can travel yet.”

“But you can sweep.” Leo shook his head.

“That’s entirely different. The doctor said I should not travel until fully healed.”

“See? I told you.” Mary-Anne nudged Leo with her boot.

“You did,” Leo agreed.

“Told him what?” Adam demanded.

Mary-Anne offered a sweet smile. “That you were not yet healed, and you would need to stay under the care of The Beauty for some time.”

Adam narrowed his gaze at the girl. So much astuteness in such a small person

shouldn't be allowed.

“Just watch your back, Brother.”

“And watch Rosie's,” added Mary-Anne. “Most closely.”

Shaking his head, he ignored the girl's knowing grin. It was quite one thing to admit to himself he desired Rosie more than anything in the world—more than his next winning hand or profitable speculation even—but quite another to admit it to his family.

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Rosie's heart gave a hard thud against her chest when she spied the paleness of Harriet's complexion. She paused beating the dough for the pies into submission. “What is it? Is there a fight? Has something else broken?” She would not be surprised with how things were going at present. Hastening over to the wash bucket, she damped her hands and wiped them on a cloth. “Is Gerald here?”

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Harriet shook her head. “No. No...it’s Simon’s wife.”

“Oh no.”

Harriet nodded grimly. “She’s been laboring for the past day. Mr. Thompson said as much. They fear the worst.”

Rosie glanced at the half-finished pies. Lunchtime had passed but dinner would be upon them soon—their busiest time.

“Go,” Harriet urged, apparently reading her intention.

“I’m not certain I can leave you.” She gnawed on the end of her thumb. “There is too much to do.”

“If you do not go, I shall fling you out myself.” Adam appeared in the doorway and leaned against the wooden frame.

She rolled her eyes. “But of course you would.”

“We can manage on our own,” Adam said.

“I do not—”

“Rosie, just go,” Harriet said, coming over to untie Rosie’s apron. She gave her a light push toward the door.

Releasing a sigh, she whipped off the apron and handed it to Harriet. She could not leave Simon to suffer this alone and she had little idea if Jane even had a midwife with her. If there was anything she could do, she ought to do it.

“Make sure—”

“Go!” Harriet repeated.

“Yes, but...”

“With haste,” Adam added.

“I know, but—”

Adam gave her a little nudge toward the door too and she chuckled and held up her hands. “Very well, I am going.” She could not hold the smile when she thought of Jane suffering, however. “I only hope I return with good news.”

Adam nodded. “As do I.”

Rosie went on foot to Simon’s house, not wanting to take the time to hitch up the horse to the wagon. Thankfully his modest cottage was not far from the inn and she arrived swiftly enough to find Simon pacing the parlor room. The usually ruddy-faced, large man appeared smaller than usual thanks to his rounded shoulders and his complexion was pale even with the afternoon sun streaming in through the window that overlooked the lake.

“How is she?”

Simon gave a tight smile. “Exhausted mostly.”

A shiver dashed down her spine when she heard the scream echo from the bedroom next to them. “I shall go to her. Why do you not sit and rest?”

“Rest? How can I when she goes through such pain?” He shook his head. “What will I do if I lose her, Rosie? If I lose both of them.”

“You shall not,” Rosie assured him, though she swore he heard the lie in her voice. If she had been laboring this long, the chances of something terrible happening were too high to think on. “Is the midwife with her?”

“Yes, though she has only been here since this morning as she was attending another birth in Grasmere. We had Mrs. Parsons with us until then, but she has gone home to rest.”

Mrs. Parsons was one of the oldest members of their community and whilst quite experienced in childbirth, Rosie imagined the elderly lady would not have managed much longer by Jane’s side.

Rosie put a hand to his arm. “Do not fear. Make a cup of tea and try to sit for a while at least.”

By the time night had set in, there was still no sign of the baby. Rosie damped down Jane’s head with a cloth and murmured reassuring words but when she met the midwife’s gaze, she knew things were still not going well.

“I’m going to get some fresh water,” Rosie told her. “Is there anything else I can do?”

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“Make some willow bark tea if you can,” Mrs. Newman instructed. “I told Jane to have some ready.”

Rubbing a hand over her face, Rosie hoped the strain did not show in her expression as she stepped into the parlor room and closed the door behind her. Though she had no doubt Simon understood how dangerous things were.

“What news?” he demanded as soon as she stepped out.

Lamps were lit in the windows, highlighting Simon’s haggard appearance. His auburn hair looked as though he had pushed his hands through it hundreds of times and his clothes were crumpled.

“The baby is facing the wrong way. It is making it difficult. But Jane is strong.” She put a hand to his arm. “Do not fear. I’m going to make her some willow bark for the pain.”

Simon gestured vaguely toward the stove. “I think there’s some over there.” He glanced toward the door as another howl of pain rattled the eaves. “What should I do?”

“You shall wait and pray and be patient.” Rosie retrieved the kettle and paused in front of him. “And sit. You will be no good to her once the baby arrives if you have not had at least a little bit of rest. Now I’m going to fetch some water. Do as I say, and rest.”

He muttered something about bossy women as she left the room but she heard the

creak of an armchair. As she went around to the back of the cottage, she paused, glimpsing the flickering light of a lantern. When it neared, she recognized her own horse and wagon, and she could not help but let out a sigh of relief when she spied Adam. Why his appearance should bring relief she did not know but there was something about having him around that provided instant comfort.

“You should be at the inn!” she declared as he clambered down.

“It is past midnight, Rosie. Everyone is abed or returned home. And I thought you might need some support.”

“Goodness, I had no idea it was so late.”

“How goes it?”

“Not well.”

“You should not have travelled.”

He gave a little shrug. “I’m fully healed by now.”

She tried not to think what that meant for him. For them. For his return home.

“You can keep Simon company and I bade him to rest. The poor man is exhausted and has not slept for hours.”

“I would wager his wife is more tired. Let the man do what he wishes. If it were me, I would be loath to sit around and do nothing.”

Her heart gave a little pang. She had no doubt Adam would be a wonderful father.

“Well, whatever you do, offer him reassurance. I do not know how much longer Jane will last and the baby’s condition is not yet known.”

He grimaced. “I shall do what I can.”

Adam took the kettle from her and filled it then she led the way into the house.

Simon scarcely glanced at Adam. “I think it’s happening.”

Rosie blew out a breath. “This is good,” she assured him.

At least she hoped so. Much longer and she could not be certain either the mother or the baby would survive. She glanced briefly at Adam, offered him a grateful smile and headed into the bedroom. No matter what happened, at least she had Adam at her side. It might not be for much longer but for now, she would make the most of it.

Chapter Eleven

The wail of a newborn filled the stuffy room that smelled of blood and sweat. Rosie, her normally fair cheeks flush, passed off the tiny thing to him, setting it swaddled in his arms. “Hold him for a moment, will you?” she asked.

Before he could consent or protest, she rushed back to Jane’s bedside, hushing the woman who had just given birth and was still writhing in barely repressed pain on the sheets. Adam looked down at the newborn in his arms. It had stopped wailing as soon as Rosie had swaddled him, and now frowned, squeezing his little eyes shut.

He averted his eyes while Rosie and the midwife cleaned Jane up, then rushed back to Adam and gently lifted the little boy from his arms. “Thank you,” she said briskly.

She set the child in Jane’s arms, and the woman who had labored for so long to bring

him into the world smiled at her first born. “He’s handsome, is he not?” she whispered.

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“Very. And strong, too.” That mother and child had survived such a birth was a miracle.

Rosie washed her hands in a basin. Adam tried not to notice the trickle of sweat sliding down the back of her neck. It only brought his attention to her skin and how much he longed to touch it.

“Thank you for delivering my baby boy,” Jane sighed. Her gaze swept to Adam. “Both of you.”

He stood. “I only did what was instructed of me,” he said, looking pointedly at Rosie, who had spent the last four hours barking commands at him like they were back at the inn and swarmed with patrons. He’d only intended to be of some vague comfort to Simon and Rosie but somehow, he’d found himself assisting in the birth when it became clear brute force was needed.

He glanced at Simon who still looked pale but relieved. The large man’s eyes were filled with tears and Adam still could not be certain the man would not faint. There was most certainly a reason the husband remained outside of the bedroom during such events. Men, he concluded, were simply not strong enough to handle such matters.

Simon met his gaze and gave him a grateful smile then moved slowly to his wife’s side.

“She just needs rest,” the midwife said. “I do not foresee any problems but I shall remain here.”

“Go to her,” Rosie urged Simon.

Jolting, Simon hastened over and dropped to his wife’s side.

Rosie finished cleaning up while the couple ogled their new child, and then the two of them took their leave.

Adam helped Rosie onto the wagon before climbing up himself, leaning against the wooden frame with a sigh. “Remind me never to agree to help deliver a baby again,” he said with a weary smile.

“What, you didn’t enjoy it?” she asked, cocking a brow.

Her periwinkle blue eyes shimmered in the evening light, her pale hair sticking out like a messy halo around her head.

“I did not expect so much blood,” he said in answer to her question. “Or screaming.”

She laughed. He appreciated her laugh, how there was substance to it. He’d never met a woman who laughed like her—full and round and genuine.

“One day, when you sire a child, you’ll know what to expect.” There was a dullness to her tone.

The urge to leap to her side of the carriage and engulf those lips in his own made him clench his fists. Now was most certainly not the time.

They arrived back at the inn to find it silent and dark. Light snores emanated from the comfiest chair by the fire.

“Should we wake her?” Adam asked, eyeing the sleeping Harriet.

“Let her rest. I imagine her day was almost as tiring as ours.”

He smothered a yawn with the back of his hand. Running the inn with just Harriet had been...well... difficult. They had managed of course, but the place simply did not function smoothly without Rosie in charge.

“Not quite as tiring, I should imagine,” he murmured.

“Straight to bed I think,” Rosie announced and he nodded, following her blindly upstairs. She paused outside her bedroom and glanced at the door when he remained behind her waiting for her to open it. “This isn’t your room, Adam.”

He blinked. “No.”

But suddenly it seemed an excellent idea to remain here.

They’d brought life into the world today. Together. He was not certain he wanted to experience it again but he could not fathom retreating to bed alone—without Rosie.

He saw her gaze widen, even in the shadows of the darkened hallway. He swore he heard a swift intake of breath. If she was not thinking the same thing as him, then someone should throw him in the asylum. He’d wager his entire fortune upon it.

Who made the first move, he could not be certain but as soon as his fingers touched her warm, soft flesh, his will vanished entirely. He gripped her arms tightly and put his mouth to hers, hard and firm. Demanding.

She kissed him with reckless abandon, her hands winding around his neck, her body writhing against his. He could scarcely breathe, let alone think, but somehow he fumbled the door open and urged her back into the room. She stumbled slightly but it did not prevent her from kissing him with such hunger his whole body flared with

need.

When he broke the kiss for a breath, she paused, and he feared he'd ruined it. She would back away again. But instead, she fumbled with the two tiny pearl buttons on the front of his shirt and pressed a hand against his skin. Her fingers were cool from the night air and he hissed out a breath and tilted his head back.

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He placed heated kisses against her neck, tasting the salt. One hand cupped to her breast, he slid the other farther up her thighs until he reached her juncture, already wet with desire. He began to gently rub between her folds. He knew when he hit the right spot because she'd arch back, sigh, or release a soft, low moan that made his cock harden and strain against his trousers.

Plunging two fingers inside her, he deftly pushed them in and out, getting them nice and slick. His breathing grew ragged and his head became lightheaded as he pleased her, imagining his cock entering where his fingers were.

As if hearing his thoughts, Rosie began to move against him, rubbing and pressing her body to him. He gritted his teeth, swearing he could come then and there. He eased her back but she wasn't done. Flipping around to face him, she straddled his lap and hungrily kissed him, biting his lower lip.

The pent-up desires of the last few weeks culminated, and all he wanted to do was undo his trousers and claim her as his own, letting his bulging cock be consumed by the wet warmth between her legs.

They passionately kissed for several minutes, then her hand went to his straining cock. His breath hitched and he groaned. "Rosie..."

"You can pleasure me but I cannot pleasure you?" She gave him a mischievous grin and unbuttoned him until he was free, his cock standing upright. She slowed down, gently touching it with her warm hands, rubbing the head. "So hard," she breathed, pushing him onto the bed.

“You made it that way—ah!” He sucked in a breath as her mouth latched around him and she took more of him in, her tongue stroking the tip. He gripped the sheets, trying to keep himself under control, but it became harder and harder the more of him she took in.

“Where the bloody hell did you learn that?”

His hands switched from the bed to her soft, golden hair, grabbing fistfuls as she sucked. She hummed, the vibration making it even more difficult for him to control himself. Just as he thought he would ejaculate into her throat, she pulled away.

“I might not have bedded a man but I have seen enough in my time as an innkeeper,” she said wryly. She sighed. “I want you inside of me, Adam.”

He stilled. Did she realize what she offered? Did she know that there would be no going back after this? That she could no longer push him away?

Unable to voice the words with any sort of sense, he tugged her to him and kissed her furiously. He eased her back into the mattress and pressed himself against her. His cock had hardened to the point of straining again, and he let it loose, desperate to lose himself in their passion. He stripped himself swiftly of his clothes and flung them to the floor. Rosie followed suit and lay back, her gaze raking him.

“What is it?” he asked wildly, his pulse beating hard in his ears.

Sprawled upon the bed, her breasts were generous, nipples hard and perked. She had a curvaceous figure that made the men who stayed at the inn pass crude jokes, but staring at her now, all he could think about was how perfect she was.

And how damned lucky he was.

Rosie was examining him, too, her eyes roaming over his chest and manhood. Her eyes twinkled. "I just wanted to see you fully. Now come back."

He did so without a moment's hesitation. He wrapped her up in his arms and showered her face and neck with kisses while her legs tangled with his. The growing heat between them made their bodies slick with a light sheen of sweat. His hands and mouth were everywhere, devouring whatever he could reach. He sucked her breasts, squeezed her buttocks and nipped at her throat.

It was Rosie who grabbed his cock and positioned it between her legs. The moment he felt the soft folds, he plunged it fully into her. Both of them gasped, and Rosie flinched when he broke through then softened into him after several heartbeats.

He pounded while she gripped his hair and shoulders as she moved with him. Jaw tight, he slammed his hips against her, digging his fingers into the softness of her thigh. Her low moans became high pitched, reaching a crescendo as he moved furiously inside her. She threw her head back and quivered.

He tried to stop but she held him firm.

"Rosie—"

"I cannot...that is...I am barren."

Even the blunt way she said it could not prevent her pleasure from peaking. He followed seconds later, murmuring her name against her neck.

When it was all over, he pulled out and laid on his back, gasping, every nerve in his body exploding. Rosie lay next to him, splayed out and gasping.

"Goodness," she murmured.

Goodness was about right.

Chapter Twelve

A floorboard creaked and Adam paused, winced and twisted to view the bed. Rosie remained asleep, her bare back scarcely covered by the bedding. He resisted the desire to tuck her in better. He had no desire to wake her. Lord knew, the woman deserved the rest.

He slipped stealthily into his clothes, pausing briefly to rub the scar on his abdomen. The slight ache from last night's activity was but a trifle and well worth it. Hell, he'd take a lot more than a twinge to have another night with Rosie. If he ever found the man who'd stabbed him, he might well shake his hand. Without him, he'd never have come to know Rosie as he had.

Adam shook his head with a smirk and eased out of the room. His mother was going to win. He'd known it the moment he took Rosie in his arms last night. But it would be a partial win. She'd expected a sweet young debutante instead of a bold, intelligent, independent woman. At this point, he hardly cared. Let this be his one wager lost. It would be well worth it.

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He set about readying the inn for the day, moving through the chores with practiced ease. He opened the shutters to let the faint trickle of morning light slip into the darkened taproom and paused to eye the empty room. Maybe his mother would be shocked enough to see him taking pleasure in such simple actions that it would be worth letting her know she had won.

Of course, he still had to persuade Rosie of such matters but after last night, surely it was obvious? He was no believer in fate, but they were meant to be together.

As he finished preparing the morning meal, Rosie hastened into the kitchen. Strands of hair were stuffed wildly into a ribbon and a red crease lingered on her cheek. She paused in the doorway to eye him setting out the toast.

“What is going on?”

“I think you should recognize breakfast, Rosie.”

She rubbed a hand over her face. “It is late. I am late. We need to—”

“Everything is done, do not fear.” He drew out a chair and motioned for her to sit then poured a coffee.

She eyed him for several moments then slowly eased onto the chair. “What are you—”

“Have some toast.” He set a piece on the plate in front of her.

She took the toast and stared at him as though he had sprouted an extra head while nibbling on the corner of it.

He chuckled, added a sausage to the plate and shoved coffee in front of her before joining her on the opposite side of the table. “I do not know about you, but I am famished.”

“Yes,” she said vaguely. She stilled, set down the toast and eyed the door to the taproom. “You know I really should—”

“It is done.”

“The ale is ready?”

He nodded.

“The oven is fired up?”

“Indeed.”

“The clean tankards and jugs?”

“All set out.”

“I shall have to purchase ale from Fred again today.” She wrinkled her nose. “Or see if Gerald has ceased watering down his ale.”

“The blaggard likely was the one to damage your barrels yesterday.”

“Yes, though it still seems strange to me he did not do more damage.”

Adam lifted a shoulder. "He is not the brightest of men. Besides, I have an answer to your ale problem."

She blinked at him. "You do."

He tugged a letter out of the inner pocket of his jacket. "I received this response from London only yesterday but I did not have time to...well...I was a little distracted."

Her cheeks turned a delightful pink color as she took the letter from him and scanned it. "This man wants to open a brewery? Here?"

Adam nodded. "He has good success in London and I can vouch for the quality of his ale. You have the space and the means. If you were to go into business with Franklin, you would have your own ale and complete control over it." He eyed her raised brow. "You would see increased profits. The numbers are there." He nodded toward the letter.

Rosie lowered the letter slowly, her posture stiff. "I do see."

"But you are not happy about it?"

"Adam, you could have at least discussed this with me."

“You have been busy.”

“I did not even know you were considering this yet you wrote to this man and offered him a partnership without my consent?” She blew out a breath. “This is my inn,” she murmured softly. “Not yours.”

“I was trying to help, Rosie.”

“Maybe I did not want your help. Maybe I do not want it.” She shoved up from the table and gathered up the plates, scarcely giving him a moment to stab a fork into his sausage and take a bite.

“You do not mean that.”

“Do I not?” She spun on him, hands to her hips. “Adam, last night was—”

“Spectacular? Marvelous? The best night of your life?”

Her lips curved. “You have a complete inability to be modest do you not?”

He shrugged. “It’s one of my many skills.”

“But that does not change things. This is my inn, and I wish to maintain control over it. You will be gone soon and what then? What happens when this deal is made and I am the one having to manage a brewery on top of everything else?”

“It makes good business sense, Rosie. It will only be a small brewery. You should

expand and take advantage of your reputation.”

“Yes. A reputation based upon my appearance! An appearance that will change with the years. That cannot be good business sense surely?”

“Or perhaps it is but you are too scared to take a risk.”

“I spent the night with you did I not?” She gestured up and down him. “That surely proves I am not scared of risk.”

“I think you are.” He rose from the chair and came to stand in front of her. “I think you are more scared than you’d like to admit.”

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Scared?

No. More than scared. Terrified more accurately described it. She’d seen men like Adam come and go throughout her years here. Even before, when her parents ran the inn, she’d witnessed serving girls swayed by rich men, lured into bed then left with nothing.

Heck, they even had the story of the notorious Roger Fortescue who had tried to seduce a local woman and take all her money before fleeing from the law in the new book that had made her famous.

But Adam was worse. She could not even say he had seduced her into bed. She’d gone there willingly with every understanding of what she was giving him. However, now he was offering her more. Offering her future prospects, offering her aid. How could she take it when she did not even know what the future held? She’d always been cautious in her running of the inn—it was why she stayed with Gerald for so

long. Why risk her living on a gamble? If she took this, she'd be endangering not only her living but her heart.

Who was she kidding? She'd already laid her heart on the line.

"I'm not scared," she managed to mutter.

"I've seen how you control everything, Rosie. If you take a leap, you will no longer be in control."

"And you think control is a bad thing?" She eased out a breath and pressed a hand to his chest when he began to close the gap. "Control is what has allowed me to run this inn smoothly without my parents."

"Control is no bad thing but if you do not let go every now and then, good things will never happen. Everything will stay the same." He gave a wicked smile. "Occurrences like last night would not happen."

She gulped down a sharp breath. It was true. Control had not even entered her mind last night. Things had been very much out of control and she had loved every wild, wicked moment.

She had loved it.

"Adam," she started before the end of the word trapped in her throat when she met his warm gaze.

She loved him.

The thought seared through her mind and remained there, like a brand that no time could heal. Having Adam at her side this past month, she had never had more fun...or

more support. The thought of relying on him terrified her.

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The thought of him leaving scared her more. Could she really admit such a thing and put her heart on the line? Would he stay if she said as much?

“I see your mind working,” he said, a soft smile gracing his lips. “What is it, Rosie?”

“I just...I wanted to thank you for everything you have done. The brewery is a good idea,” she admitted. She winced inwardly at how insipid it sounded.

“I think it shall prove successful and we should see quite the increase in profits.”

“We?”

His smile turned lopsided, almost sheepish. “That is...if you shall have me?”

“Have you?”

Adam cupped her chin and lifted her face. His fingers were warm and slightly rough on her skin—evidence of the hard labor he had partaken in since his arrival here. Hard labor he had done for her, no one else.

“Ah, Rosie, you might be blessed with the sort of beauty that enchants every man from here to Christendom but you were not blessed with the understanding of them.”

“Adam?”

“Do you not see I am trying to prove myself to you, you damned woman?” He shook his head. “Do you not see that I love you?”

“Love me?” she echoed as her heart gave a little bounce in her chest.

“Yes. It is quite a shock to me too.” He shrugged. “Actually, perhaps it is not. I think I knew it the moment you drank that entire ale.”

“You were arrogant, and you needed putting in your place.”

“Damn it, Rosie, you make it hard for a man to confess his love.”

“But what about...” She gestured low. A man like Adam would want a child, a family, surely? “I am not enough for you.”

He inched closer and eased a hand around her waist to draw her close, his palm warm upon her back. He kept her face cupped as he slowly dropped a gentle kiss to her mouth. She felt the love there, the tenderness, then the inevitable flare of desire.

“You cannot know for sure, Rosie.”

“My courses are erratic. They always have been. I have been told that it is likely I cannot conceive.”

“I want you. Regardless.”

She met his gaze, finding nothing but sincerity.

Could it be true? He loved her? He wanted a life with her. But how could they even manage such a thing? He was a member of the nobility for goodness sakes.

When he pressed the kiss deeper, she forgot her protests. Need fluttered low in her belly as he moved into her and drew her as close as humanly possible. His arousal pressed against her and she released a moan. He bundled her tight to him and his

tongue swept into her mouth.

She vaguely heard the creak of a door open but could not bring herself to care if Harriet discovered them like this. She needed Adam's touch, his kiss, needed his love. She'd been alone for so long and relying on him even for the merest moment filled her with such comfort and relief.

How they would move forward, she still could not fathom but nor did she care at present.

He eased her back against the table and she hooked a leg around his hips. A hand to her thigh, he flattened himself against her and moved his lips from her mouth to the curve of her jaw, sending tremors down her spine. She pressed her fingers into his hair and closed her eyes.

“Lord, Rosie, you have no idea what you do to me.”

She had every idea. It was the same as what he did to her—sending her to the edge of madness and beyond. It had to be madness because what sort of a world was it when a lord loved an innkeeper?

Rosie opened her eyes briefly and caught movement behind him. She scarcely had the time to press him back from her before the man lunged and tore Adam from her grasp.

Chapter Thirteen

“Bastard!”

Adam saw the fist—a blur of tensed knuckles—before he felt the hit. He staggered back a few steps and the man retreated just enough to slam his shoulder into Adam’s chest. Rosie screamed.

He landed hard against the wall, pain jarring through his rib cage and spine. Hands raised, he braced himself for another blow as the stranger retreated for another run at him. A sickly thud rang through the room and the gentleman stilled and blinked a few times. Adam used the opportunity to straighten and lift his fists.

The man’s knees gave out and he dropped hard onto them, then sagged backward, his body contorted at an odd angle.

Behind him, Rosie held a huge cast iron pan. She grimaced. “Did I kill him?”

Adam nudged him with a boot. “No. He still breathes. I think you just stunned him.”

“Oh.”

Adam smirked. “You sound disappointed.”

“Not at all! I do not need another murder at my inn!”

“I am alive you know.”

She waved a hand. “You know what I mean.” She inched closer to the man and

leaned over him. “What do we do with him?”

Adam rubbed his sore back and eyed him. “He’ll be awake any moment. It was only a light hit.”

Rosie lifted her chin. “I hit him quite hard actually.”

“It takes an awful lot to knock a man out, Rosie, despite what you may have heard. I would wager many a man has boasted about striking someone out in one hit but it’s rare.”

“Oh.”

“Let us tie him up in case he decides he wants another go at me.”

She nodded, hastened to retrieve some rope from storage and aided him with lifting the man onto a chair and binding his hands. She tilted her head and studied him. “Do you recognize him?”

“No, but I might have bested him at cards. It does happen rather a lot.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you think he was the man who stabbed you?”

Adam squinted at him. He’d seen so little that night. “Who knows.”

“Some use you are,” Rosie muttered.

“I was about to be extremely useful,” he protested.

“Shh, he awakens.”

Turning his attention to the man, Adam adopted his best lordly expression, his legs wide, his arms folded. Slowly, the man roused. He peered around and sluggishly tugged at his bonds before realization struck and he jerked forward, dragging the chair a foot or so forward.

Adam put a foot to the base of the chair. "I suggest you explain yourself, sir, or we'll be handing you over to the sheriff." He nodded toward Rosie. "And she still has her pan."

Rosie lifted it high and nodded.

"Bastard," the man muttered, his gaze burning, his arms straining against the bonds.

Adam glanced him over. Well-dressed, perfectly smooth jaw, pomaded golden hair and the soft hands of a wealthy man...surely he knew him? Something about the man tugged at his mind but he could not place him.

"If I bested you at cards, you would do well to accept your defeat. You would not be the first nor the last." He glanced at Rosie. "Well, maybe the last." Cards held little appeal now he had the challenge of Rosie and the inn.

"Cards?" The man closed his eyes briefly as his head rolled then straightened himself with a wince. "This isn't about something as ridiculous as cards." He looked to Rosie. "Do you even know the sort of man you harbor? He is a cad, a bastard, a blackguard."

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“He’s certainly no angel,” she admitted.

“He left my sister with child,” the man spat.

Rosie’s expression gave nothing away but she shot Adam a look. “Adam?”

“I most certainly did not.” Adam paused. “You’re Kingsley?”

Now he knew where he recognized the man. His features were similar to that of Miss Kingsley’s. He’d only known the family vaguely before the scandal hit and did not think he’d even been introduced to the oldest brother.

“An inconvenient name for you to hear, no doubt, seeing as you and your brothers have escaped the furor.” Kingsley wriggled against the bonds. “Now release me and let us do this as gentlemen. I demand a duel.”

Rosie gasped. “Most certainly not.”

“I’m not shooting you, Kingsley.”

He glared at Adam. “I would shoot you.”

“Not likely, I’m an incredible shot.”

“I have righteousness on my side,” Kingsley spat back.

“Oh yes, that’s won many a duel,” Adam said dryly. “But your shot would be

wasted.” He moved closer and bent to meet Kingsley’s gaze head-on. “I did not leave your sister with child. Neither did my brothers. It is all a falsehood.”

“And I am to believe that am I? I am to believe the word of a Lord of Scandal Row?”

“Has your sister stated I am the father?”

Kingsley’s cheeks reddened. “Of course not. She is a fine, upstanding woman. She would not speak of such matters.”

“So you have no proof but the word of the scandal sheets that I am the father?”

“You are the only one left. You must marry her.”

Adam glanced at Rosie who lifted her hands.

“I am sorry your sister is in such a position and would that I could help you find the blackguard who did this to her, but I did not leave her with child. I swear it.”

“Why should I believe the word of a man such as yourself?” Kingsley jerked forward. “I should have killed you.”

“Wait.” Adam gestured toward Kingsley. The man clearly had his sister’s honor in mind but he hardly appeared the murdering sort. “You stabbed me?”

“I should have stuck you a second time.”

“You would have killed the wrong man, Kingsley. I’ll say it again. I did not leave your sister with child. I have scarcely had more than the briefest conversation with her—and with your mother present. Not enough time to make a child, I would wager.”

Kingsley narrowed his gaze at him. “You are a coward. You would run rather than refute these rumors.”

Rosie folded her arms. “He has a point.”

“You are taking his side? He stabbed me!”

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She shrugged. She could not decide whether to be angry at him or not. Although she believed him, she had to wonder why he had hidden the reason for his visits to the lakes from her. “Whydido you come here?”

He blew out a breath. “Because...my mother told me to.”

“Your mother told you to?” she repeated, unable to keep the amusement from her voice.

“There were tears involved,” he muttered.

“But of course.”

“There was too much gossip surrounding us and she claimed she wished for us to leave until it had died down. All three of us apparently bear a resemblance to whoever left Miss Kingsley in such a position.” He held up hand in front of Kingsley’s face. “Not that it was any of us. But I believe my mother’s motive was more to throw us in the path of eligible ladies.”

And instead he had been thrown in front of her. Or stabbed, she supposed. Her stomach gave a painful twist. It was easy to forget who he was or his standing in life when he worked at her inn and kissed her. But the difference in their lives could not be more stark at present.

“It worked for your brothers it seemed,” she said lightly.

“It did.” He fixed her with a look that she could not quite comprehend.

“So you are here to kill me, Kingsley?” he said, finally turning toward the man.

The man’s lip curled. “I want you to do the right thing. I want you to marry my sister.”

“He could not have married her had he died from that knife wound.” Rosie shook her head. “You are lucky I found him, and he healed well.”

Kingsley glanced at the floor. "It was not a deliberate act."

"It felt deliberate," Adam said.

He lifted his head. "What I meant was...I only intended to confront you. But I saw you, drunk and merry while my sister suffers, and I could not stand it. I acted without thought."

"Naturally," Rosie murmured with a roll of her eyes.

"I'm not going to marry your sister, Kingsley. I scarcely know her, and I highly doubt she wants to marry a stranger."

"But you must!" Kingsley protested. "It is the only way to salvage her reputation."

"What of the man who truly did this to her?" Rosie asked. "Surely he should be the one to step up?"

"If it is not you—and I am still not convinced it is not you—then I do not know who it is." Kingsley's shoulders slumped. "My sister will not say and the man is likely in the wind now." He wriggled against the ropes. "Release me and marry my sister. It is the only way."

"Release you?" Rosie shook her head. "You just tried to attack him!"

"I was furious. I saw you two together and thought he had moved onto yet another woman with no thought for my sister." He looked to Rosie. "Would you not be angry too were it your sister?"

"Perhaps," she conceded. "But I would not have let my temper get the better of me."

“I have been watching for days. I thought you were dead until I heard word of you working here,” he said to Adam. “I have been peaceful and patient but when I saw you.”

“You were the one to spill my ale.”

Kingsley’s cheeks reddened. “That was an accident. I was in hiding and heard someone enter.”

Hands to her hips, she shared a look with Adam. “Well at least I know it’s not Gerald.”

“I have made mistakes,” Kingsley admitted. “I should have come to you as a man to discuss my sister’s fate. I see that now.”

“Or perhaps you could both cease speaking of her fate and talk with her as a person rather than a ruined woman.”

Adam straightened. “I did not bed her, Rosie.”

“I know.” She touched his arm. “But you could put an end to the rumors. Or you could help her. You know you could. You have more power than Mr. Kingsley here and certainly more than Miss Kingsley.”

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. “It is not that I do not have sympathy for her but what can I do except...” He shook his head slowly. “You wish me gone then?”

Rosie’s heart gave a painful thud against her chest. More than anything she wanted him to stay. To be with her. To help her run the inn until the end of their days. She wanted to wake with him and fall asleep in his arms.

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She did not wish to give him up.

“This poor woman is suffering. You will be able to return to London soon with your head held high. She will never be able to do the same.”

“Damn right,” Kingsley bit out.

“You do wish me gone then.” His words sounded hollow to her ears.

“Not by choice,” she managed to say through her tight throat.

Adam offered a grin that did not reach his eyes. “You wish me to do the right thing for once in my life.” He shrugged. “But of course.”

“You have always done right by me, Adam.” She closed the gap between them. “But you would not be the man I think you are if you did not fix this.”

He put a finger and thumb to her chin and lifted her face to meet her gaze. “What a wretched time to gain a conscience. Just when I have you in my grasp.”

Rosie lifted a shoulder, though the movement felt as though she were lifting a ton of rock upon her body. If she waited much longer, they would crush her under the pain of knowing Adam must go. He must go and do the only thing an honorable man could do in such a situation.

He would wed this Miss Kingsley and save her from a life of shame.

Chapter Fourteen

“The new ale seems to be going down well.” Harriet gave Rosie a nudge with her elbow, drawing her attention from the stain on the table to the busy taproom.

Rosie offered a tight smile and nodded. “Indeed.”

The arrangement with Adam’s friend was going well, with patrons enjoying the ale, and the development of the brewery slowly coming together. It meant more work for her but she hardly minded—at least it gave her a chance to forget how long it had been since she’d seen Adam.

And yet there had been no word of his marriage yet. She could not stop herself from scanning the newspapers for the announcement. Surely it would have been done by special license by now?

Of course, his brothers had come by once or twice and she could have asked them but the silly, cowardly part of herself could not bear to stand in front of them and listen to word of his wedding so she remained hidden in the back.

“That stain has been there for two years, Rosie. I do not think it is going to come out.”

Rosie straightened and stuffed the cloth into the waist of her apron. Harriet was right and no matter how much she wished such a tedious act would distract her from her melancholy, it would not. She snatched up an empty ale jug from the bar. Perhaps if she—

“I’m looking for the Beauty of Buttermere.”

But of course. Her reputation had not waned as yet and she was trying to be grateful

for the continued patronage of curious travelers. Rosie forced a smile upon her face and turned. The jug slipped from her fingers and landed with a clunk against the wooden floorboards, scarcely avoiding the gentleman's boots.

Adam bent slowly, his lips tugged into a bemused smile, and retrieved the undamaged jug then handed it over. "There's no need to throw things at me."

She snatched it back and hugged the jug to her chest. Two months and he'd possibly grown more attractive. Maybe marriage was good for him. His clothes were impeccable, his boots shining even in the dull light of the taproom. Though his hair was slightly mussed from where he'd removed his hat, it only drew attention to his jawline and the crooked smile that made her heart give a little jolt.

"You look hale," she managed to murmur through a tight throat.

Two months and she had been hoping for this moment every single day. Hoping and dreading. Because once she knew he was wed, she would be able to forget him. Yet a large part of her knew she never would. Running the inn no longer held the satisfaction it once did—not without him at her side. She resisted the desire to laugh out loud at herself. How silly she sounded, imagining a nobleman would wish to work at her inn for the rest of his days. Even if he had not wed this Miss Kingsley, his old life would have called him back eventually. Now she had the time and distance from their situation, she realized that.

"As do you, Rosie," he replied languidly, propping one elbow on the bar.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see you."

"And is your..." She swallowed. "Your wife at your brother's home?"

“My wife?” He straightened.

“Miss Kingsley?”

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“Ah.” His lips quirked. “I rather thought my letter explained the situation.”

“Your letter?”

“Do not tell me you did not receive it?”

She shook her head. “No.” She glanced over her shoulder at Harriet who lingered around the barrels, well within earshot of their conversation. “Did I receive a letter?”

Harriet hastened to make herself look busy with pouring ale into the empty jugs. “No letters. I would have remembered if we had received one from you, Adam.” Harriet pursed her lips. “I had wondered why you did not get in touch.”

“Well that is a pickle.” Adam set his hat down on the bar top. “Because you see, I most definitely did not marry Miss Kingsley.”

“Then what...” Rosie drew in a breath and held it in an attempt to will away the giddy excitement working its way from her foolish heart to every part of her.

Simply because she was not yet his wife did not mean anything. It had been two months after all. Perhaps he had returned to his old life and remembered how much he enjoyed it.

“What happened then?” she asked quietly.

“I found the father of Miss Kingsley’s child. It took some time but with the aid of her brother, we tracked him down.”

“Oh.” She folded her arms. “Oh, do not tell me her brother forced her into marriage with some blackguard?”

“Still always ready to argue with me,” Adam said. “Oh how I missed it.”

“Do not avoid the question.”

“The man was not a blackguard as it turns out. He simply had no idea she was with child.”

“But how? Everyone knew of Miss Kingsley?”

“You did not,” he pointed out.

“Well, I do not have time for gossip.”

“Neither did the father of her child it seems. He is a viceroy, currently stationed in Africa. Much like the postal service here it seems, he did not receive word of her situation and was entirely in ignorance.”

“So he has...”

He nodded. “Wed her and most happily so. It seems it is a love match.”

A hand to the bar top, she held her breath and tried to ignore how wobbly her legs felt. He had not married Miss Kingsley. Which meant...

Nothing. Surely? With him gone, she had come to realize what a fool she had been, and he likely felt the same. What man would give up the pampered life of a nobleman to work in an inn? And he must know she could never give up her living.

“Do you have nothing to say on the matter?”

Straightening, she forced a smile. “I am glad for Miss Kingsley. And I am glad you fixed the matter for her.”

“There will still be some gossip surrounding her and my mother is most displeased that I came back brideless but it is a far better outcome than she hoped for.” He glanced at the floor. “I should have acted sooner. My selfishness did not even let me think of Miss Kingsley and I am grateful to you, Rosie, for awakening me.”

“I take it you did not press charges against Mr. Kingsley?”

“I cannot claim I would not have done the same thing if I had a sister.” He pressed a hand to his stomach. “And thankfully for him, I am entirely healed.”

Hands laced together, she focused on his neatly tied cravat and the little glittering pin inserted into it. If she did not think on how handsome he was and how an ache built inside her, making her want to lunge forward and kiss the silly man, maybe she could bid him farewell with dignity.

“I am glad all worked out well.”

“I see the ale is a success.”

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“Indeed, thanks to you.”

He paused and she could not resist meeting his gaze to understand why.

“I cannot stand this idle chatter anymore, Rosie.” He stepped forward, swept a hand under her leg and shifted her into his arms. “I’m taking you to bed.”

Rosie gasped. “Put me down!” Around them, patrons turned to watch them, and she tapped his arm. “You cannot just come in here and expect to take me to bed!”

“I think you’ll change your mind after a kiss.”

She pressed a finger to his lips before he could bend in and give her one. “You, sir, are being outrageous.”

“Probably.” He shrugged. “Harriet, you can see to things can you not?”

Harriet waved a hand at him with a bold smile. “Of course.”

Adam ducked through the door leading to the stairwell. Rosie wriggled unsuccessfully in his hold. “Whatever are you doing?”

“Taking you away from work for one moment.”

“If you think you can just return here and use me like one of your lovers—”

“I rather hoped you’ll be my only lover, Rosie.”

“And then leave—”

“And I have no desire to leave.”

“And behave as a rich noble toward me, simply gaining his pleasure, then—”

He pressed a firm kiss to her lips, forcing her to quieten before drawing back and swiftly carrying her up the stairs. He did not stop until he stepped into her bedroom, kicked the door shut and put her on the bed.

Mouth ajar, she scrabbled to stand, finding herself tangled in the blankets and fighting to unwind them from her legs. “Adam, what the devil are you doing? You cannot just—”

He tugged away his neckcloth and she heard the pin clatter to the floor. “Two months and I’ve missed you every day.”

She said nothing. She did not dare. If she did, the gaping wound he’d left in her heart would reveal itself.

Stalking over, his jaw set determinedly, he eased her back on the bed and positioned himself over her, fists pressed into the bedding to either side of her. She gulped down a breath, feeling the heat of his body and a tremble ran through her.

“You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met.”

“Good,” she murmured, putting a hand to his chest. “Now let me get back to work.”

“Not until we have come to an agreement.”

Rosie scowled. “Agreement?”

“About our future?”

“If this is about the ale—”

“Damn it, Rosie, it is most certainly not about the ale.” He shook his head. “This is about us.”

“I am not willing to be a mistress. You know that.”

“Why on earth do you think I want a mistress?”

“What else can there be?” She tried to keep the quiver from her voice, aware she was but a thread from snapping and throwing it all to the wind. Let her be a mistress. So long as she had Adam. But how could she live in such a manner? Never knowing when he might come and go or when he might tire of her. That would be worse than never seeing him again surely?

Maybe.

He slid off her and she pushed up to sitting, ignoring the deflated sensation burning in her chest. Adam eased onto his knees and she furrowed her brow. “What are you—?”

He took her hand. “There can be many things between us, Rosie. Love for one.”

She opened her mouth then shut it.

“Marriage for two.”

Her heart gave a jolt. She’d never wanted marriage. Ever. To give over her independence to a man after she had worked so hard for it seemed folly. Yet when she thought of marriage to Adam, she could only picture herself thriving at his side.

“You would not wish to marry an innkeeper,” she managed to reply.

“I would and I do.”

“Your family would not like it.”

“My brothers already like you. As does Mary-Anne, and believe me, she’s about the most vocal member of the family.” He grinned. “My mother shall be shocked but not displeased that I am settling.”

“I cannot leave the inn. I cannot be a lady.”

“I would not wish you to.”

“And you cannot work at an inn. You’re a gentleman!”

“I hope I rather proved myself during my time here.”

She scrabbled for the rest of her arguments, but she could not find them. There had to be more. It could not be so easy. Nothing else had come this easily in her life. Love and a man she adored, a man who had become her friend? It was not possible.

“Rosie, you gave me purpose,” he said softly. “I did not know I sought it until I came to stay with you. I want nothing more than to work at your side for the rest of my days.”

“But...but...I’m the Beauty of Buttermere. You will....” She waved a hand. “You will get jealous of all the attention at some point.”

He fixed her with a look and his grin turned roguish. “We are both handsome. Should we not be handsome together?”

She sucked in a sharp breath and tried to clamp down on the smile flickering on her lips. “You are incorrigible.”

“And you are stubborn.”

“You said that already.”

“Well, because it’s especially true. Now will you cease arguing with me for once in your life?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Just for a brief moment?” he asked.

“I suppose.”

“Excellent.” He drew in an audible breath. “Rosie Seymour, I love you. You are the most beautiful, clever, witty and hardworking woman I have ever known. I should very much like to remain at your side, lifting your barrels and doing whatever else you would have me do for the rest of my life. I should like to do that as your husband.”

“Well, you could have started with that...” she murmured.

“Is that a yes?”

Unable to stop the smile from spreading across her face, she nodded slowly. She had no more arguments. No more reasons. She loved this man and could think of nothing she wanted more than the very picture he’d painted.

Looping her arms around his neck, she shifted closer. “It’s a yes,” she said. “I want that too. More than anything. You taught me how not to be alone and I should like you at my side once more.”

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He pressed his forehead to hers. “Thank goodness. I had run out of arguments.”

“I noticed. We could be handsome together? Terrible argument.” She grinned and pressed a swift kiss to his lips. “I love you, Adam.”

“I love you, Rosie.”

???

“So you’re to be an innkeeper?” Leo shook his head at Adam as he took a swing with the mallet and struck the ball perfectly, sending it through the loop.

“Indeed.”

Leo’s smile widened. “That means I win.”

Adam scowled. “You win what?”

“The wager. I told Alex you’d fall hard for Rosie.”

“You had a bet on me?”

“Indeed,” Leo mimicked.

“Blast. I do so loathe it when I am left out of a wager.”

“You won the woman did you not?”

Adam grinned. "I did."

"Well, that is prize enough I am sure, though I am not certain what Mother will say on the matter." Leo slung the putter over his shoulder.

He fixed his brother with a look. "You know full well I have little care what that manipulative woman wants. Besides—" Adam nodded toward where the wives were gathered on the lawns with their mother and Lucy's mother and sister— "she will be distracted enough once you inform her that Rebecca is with child."

Leo rubbed his forehead. "How the devil did you know that?"

"Mary-Anne gave it away."

"But of course."

"And I had a wager with her."

"Did you win?"

Adam lifted a shoulder. "Naturally."

"Well, so long as you are happy, Brother. I should have known you would pursue something different. You were always too clever to sit idle for the rest of your life." Leo paused. "And if you repeat that to anyone I shall deny it."

He smirked. "Did you say something?"

Leo clapped a hand on his shoulder. "At least our mother got her wish. All of us happily settled—and the scandal is done."

"I cannot help but be a little grateful for the scandal. And our mother's meddling. We

would never have come here otherwise.”

“That is true.” Leo looped an arm around Adam’s neck and drew him close. “But if you tell our mother that, I shall disown you, Brother.”

“Oh believe me, I shall never admit such a thing, even under pain or torture.”

“I imagine you have an inn to return to.”

“I do indeed.”

Leo’s grin turned wicked. “And the Beauty of Buttermere. Only you could wed the most famed beauty in England.”

“Would you expect anything less of me?”

His brother simply chuckled.

THE END