



Saddles & Scoundrels

A Midsummer Day's Scheme



A SWEET VICTORIAN
ROMANCE



REBECCA CONNOLLY

AUTHOR OF UNDER THE COVER OF MERCY



A MIDSUMMER DAY'S SCHEME

A SADDLES & SCOUNDRELS NOVELLA



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CHAPTER 1



*D*erbyshire, 1844

“I DO NOT UNDERSTAND this obsession you have with accompanying me on this venture, Hattie. What could possibly tempt you about matters of business?”

It took all of Hattie Baldwin’s very practiced self-discipline to keep from rolling her eyes at her father’s question. Not only were they already on the train to Grindleford, but she had informed him of her intention to accompany him two weeks ago. It was a conversation she was not eager to have again, but as her father still did not comprehend ...

“You have always spoken so highly of Sir Bramwell Lowery,” Hattie told her father, managing a smile despite the headache lingering about her temples from the bumpy ride the train was taking. “And you know how I love horses. How could I deny myself the opportunity to accompany you to visit the greatest breeder of horses in the Midlands? He is your chief supplier, is he not?”

Her father frowned as he thought, likely more in confusion than in actual thought. “Yes, he is. He makes a mighty profit off his finer horses, selling to the wealthy and the titled, as you can imagine. I believe some of the extended royal family has sought him out for a horse or two. I knew his father in my younger years, before he became a baronet, and we had an

agreement for stock horses to be sold to me for distribution to the south. I believe he still manages the north himself.”

“Not unless Mr. Thatcher-Lee has already scalped the market,” Hattie grumbled, rubbing at her brow irritably.

The long pause nearly drew a grimace from her as she glanced back toward her father, who was gaping rather curiously. “How do you know about Mr. Thatcher-Lee?”

Hattie pretended to look surprised by the question. “You’ve spoken of him at dinner, Papa. Raged about his underhanded business schemes and how poorly he treats his horses.”

Her father raised a brushy, graying brow. “I never rage, Hattie.”

This time, she did roll her eyes but only out of affection. “Complain, then. You think I only pay attention when you are speaking to me, but I assure you, I hear what you and Arthur discuss at dinner quite clearly.”

“And retain it, I gather. Well, well.” He cleared his throat and shifted his weight in his seat, which immediately gave Hattie the impulse to do the same, but she refrained. “By the by, Hattie, I’ve been meaning to speak to you about Mr. Thorpe.”

Now Hattie groaned and pressed her brow to the wall of their train compartment. “What did he say this time?”

“He merely wishes that you would stop confusing his workers by contradicting everything he says,” her father said in the most placating tone she’d heard since childhood. “His ways of managing the stables and the horses are in no way incorrect.”

“No, they are simply traditions carried down from generation to generation since the Saxons arrived,” Hattie grumbled, scrunching her brows tightly in the hopes that it might keep her anger from flaring when she so needed control. “I am sure it worked very well for the horse master of King Aethelred or whatever his name was.”

She heard her father heave a sigh and smiled to herself, keeping her face averted. “Hattie, I cannot have you offending my employees. Mr. Thorpe does an excellent job, and if your brother continues to show no interest in the stock horses, I may sell that portion of the business to him instead.”

Hattie whirled away from the wall of the train, her eyes wide. “You cannot be serious. The man is a brute and an imbecile. He’ll sell mules and ponies to the farmers and keep the Shires for gentlemen only. He already misuses the Cleveland bays and put one to use on a plow last week. I saw him!”

Her father gave her a scolding look. “And what were you meant to be doing when you supposedly saw him do so? And which Cleveland bay was it? We have several, and two of them are being rehabilitated. Were you aware of that?”

She hated when he did this; she knew he meant well and that this was only his way of attempting to set her straight, but it was so very condescending. He thought her capable of a great many things and had often called her mind one of brilliance. It just appeared it did not extend to horses, in his mind.

And in a way, he was not entirely incorrect.

She’d had to look up a Cleveland bay and ask her brother what one was generally used for. She knew the Shire horses, simply because of their appearance, but she would not know much else from the breeds. She could ride any horse that was put before her, with a saddle or without, and had no fears of racing, jumping, or being thrown. In fact, she’d been thrown only last week when she’d tested out a new horse that had been labeled difficult, just to prove she could.

The bruise on her left hip was finally starting to appear less ghastly.

She did not know everything about horses. She did know now a great many things about horses.

But she did know horses—the creatures themselves. Their natures, their temperaments, their abilities. She had never met

a horse she did not adore nor one that did not adore her. And she wanted to ensure that all their horses were sold to the best owners, not simply the wealthiest or most powerful.

Surely that must count for something.

Arthur had laughed at her for such views. He was nearly as fond of horses as she was, but he refused to believe that horses were the future, given what progress was being made with the railway. And he claimed she was a fool to want to give herself to the business of workhorses.

He had been the one to suggest this foolhardy scheme of hers in the first place, more out of jesting than anything else. He clearly had not thought she would do such a thing, nor did he know what she had planned to bring about the results she wished for. There had been great satisfaction in seeing his gaping face when her father had agreed to take her along.

She had managed to extract a promise from her brother that he would work with her on the proper separation of the business, if she managed the impossible. He had been laughing, but he had promised.

She would hold him to that.

And despite her father's patronizing remarks about her general ignorance of the specifics of their horses, which would have been removed had he let her truly participate, her quarrel was not with him on this venture.

He was simply the means to get where she needed to go.

"I am sorry, Father," she murmured, sighing heavily for effect and giving him an apologetic smile. "I may have misjudged what I did not understand. I do think Mr. Thorpe is too harsh with the horses, but that may only be a matter of temperament."

Her father returned her smile, but something knitted his brow. "I have never known you to be a poor judge of character, even if the situation is something you are unfamiliar with. I will mark your words and spend a little more time directly involved and see if I agree. Will that satisfy you?"

Hattie beamed, though it offered only a little consolation. “Very much, Father. I would be pleased to be wrong in this.”

Now he chuckled. “Don’t extend your act that far, dear. You would hate to be wrong. You always hate to be wrong.”

She grinned in response and shrugged a little. “I am my father’s daughter, am I not?”

“Indeed, much to your late mother’s dismay.” He smiled fondly and averted his gaze as he usually did when her mother was brought up. He focused his attention out the train window, his expression never altering.

But Hattie knew; her parents had been less of a love match than a fervent friendship, but the loss was just as keen. She had always wanted something of the sort herself, though her actual ideas for marriage were far more theoretical.

Whoever she married, if she married, would need to embrace her business as well as her person, for she would not be parted from it. And she fully intended to have a business after this venture.

If she failed, she would likely also not have a reputation, unless Sir Bramwell was prone to keeping his opinions to himself. She knew full well she was impertinent, but she would not like to have a reputation as being forward. She might not mind her tongue, but she did have manners. She might not be mild in temper, but she was exceptionally reasonable.

Most of the time.

“Do you think Sir Bramwell might permit me to explore his stables and his grounds?” Hattie asked as though she were inquiring about the weather. “Or his grand house?”

“I am sure he will not mind the grounds and the house,” her father replied slowly, “but please, for my sake, do not see to the stables. Perhaps you might enjoy time with his dogs. He breeds hounds as well, you know. Nearly in as much demand as the horses, they are. My own hounds are from one of the litters.”

Hattie smiled a little, nodding in acknowledgement of the statement. “Well, I dare say one can tell a great deal about the nature of a man by how he treats his horse and his dog. Does he have farms as well? Tenants? Or is the entirety of his wealth based on the procreative abilities of his animals?”

The scolding look that earned her was stern indeed. “Don’t be crass, Harriett.”

It was not often that her father called her by her true given name, and she grimaced, glancing out the train window herself. “Does he have his own horse and hound, at least? For personal use? Or does he just make money off them?”

“Of course, he has his own, what kind of gentleman do you take him for?”

Hattie gave her father a quick look. “He was not born a gentleman, you said so yourself. I do not judge him for that, I dare say it made him better at business and less stuffy than one might expect. I was only wondering. One might treat animals for sale better if one has some for personal companionship and use. That is all.”

Her father slowly shook his head, looking heavenward. “Heaven help me, I may simply leave you on the train.”

“I would find my way to Knighton Hall anyway,” Hattie assured him, fluttering her lashes. “I am your most resourceful child.”

“And *that*,” he said emphatically, “you get from your mother.”

“So you’ve said.”

The train slowed and Hattie felt her heart lurch into her throat, pulsing rather ominously as they began to come to a stop. It was ridiculous to be so full of nerves when she had a clear and well-laid plan, but she had always been a better one for scheming than for enacting.

That would have to change today. Here and now.

Her plan had to work, there was no other option that she could live with. She did not want to be cooped up in the life

relegated to women of her station and time. She wanted to be independent and free, strong and capable, a force to be reckoned with rather than a trinket on a shelf to be only gazed upon and admired.

Not that anyone was doing any gazing and admiring. Which, if her gossiping neighbors were to be believed, was a horrendous thing.

Hattie rather liked it.

A dark horse, her brother had called her once. She rather liked that idea, and she wanted to maintain such an illusion of her nature and person for as long as she could. If she could surprise Sir Bramwell by her keen mind and strategy, all the better.

It was not every day that a man of business could have an engaging and competent woman as a partner. Surely he would see the merits of it, once she explained.

If he was reasonable, of course.

There was no planning on a stranger's nature.

"Hattie? Shall we?"

Shaking herself a moment, Hattie looked up at her father, whose resigned expression rather enhanced her concern about pitching her scheme to Sir Bramwell.

Resignation might have achieved results, but it was hardly satisfying.

Still, she would take it, if that was all she could get.

Willing the fluttering in her throat to cease, Hattie nodded and pushed to her feet. "Yes, Father. I believe we shall."

CHAPTER 2



Sir Bramwell Lowery did not like people.
Generally speaking, of course.

Well, no, that was not entirely true. He specifically did not like a great number of people, individually, and that number seemed to grow rather steadily. But he also disliked people in an overall sense, though he had just enough of his mother's attempts at religious instruction lingering in his mind to understand the injustice of sweeping judgment.

It did not stop him from making such judgments, but it did cause an odd twinge of something or other beneath the ribs on the right side of his chest. Nothing that a bit of whiskey and a headlong ride across his lands could not rid him of.

His aversion to people and all things social was well-known in the area, which saved him from hosting balls or luncheons or anything of the kind, as well as saving him from having to engage in the events that others put on. He hosted a harvest dinner for his tenants every year, and that was all. No one had complained about that yet, so he saw no need to do more. He had meetings of business on the regular but had finally achieved the status of not needing to entertain potential investors or clients to persuade them to join him in his ventures. He did not need to pretend at congeniality or affability, and he did not need to be particularly pleasing.

It now fell on the others to do their utmost to convince him of their worthiness and integrity, of their capabilities and

potential, and he took great delight in being rather difficult to please.

His father would never have done business this way, but Bram was not and had never been his father. In many ways, that was a shame, but not in this.

His father had risen from the lowest class of worker to become the premier breeder of horses and hounds north of Surrey, earning himself a baronetcy and lands beyond what their forebears could have anticipated. Bram and his siblings had been foisted from their simple life of urchins to middle-class adolescents and then to dining with the upper crust, until finally they were expected to maintain an unnatural superiority befitting their new realm. Their father had never lost his coarse accent, which made him a favorite with the locals and the tradesmen with whom they did business. It had never quite given the gentlemen ease, but there was no denying the quality of their dogs and stallions, so they managed to overcome their distaste.

Bram had been forced into hours of elocution to rid him of the curse of common tongue, as well as endless days and weeks spent bringing him up to snuff in education and manners with any class of gentleman or title that might seek out his business. He had been taught in the manner of business and trade, learned the shrewdness necessary to avoid being taken in, and, over time, his general discontent at the mistreatment and disrespect his father had received over the whole course of his life despite his resilience and resourcefulness had turned into full-bodied bitterness.

His father had maintained his good nature throughout his work, though his eye for business remained as keen as ever, and no evidence of insult could rile him. He had always brushed it off without concern and told Bram not to waste his energy in the offense of such things.

But Bram found no waste in such burning. When he had taken over upon his father's death, he had drawn up new contracts for most of their associates to bring the terms to a stricter vein, and when voices were raised in concern, he had coolly informed such persons that there were other breeders

and businessmen upon whom they could prey, and they were perfectly free to go there.

Not one of them had done so.

That was the benefit of being the best; he could set his own demands and people would bow and scrape to meet them.

He never required such things of his lower-class customers and associates. They had reasonable terms befitting their profits and means, which never failed to yield a profit for them all, and upon whose word he felt he could more readily rely. He would have done away with the pleasure-seeking gentry if he could, though their purchases provided amply for the funds he set aside to care for his estate and tenants.

They were a means to an end, those snobs and dandies, and while they sought him out, he would likely continue to endure their requests.

Never look a gift horse in the mouth, his father had said. And while a gift horse was a useless thing generally, the gift from the creature was practical.

“Sir Bramwell, I have received word from our man at the station. Mr. Baldwin is on his way here.”

Bram looked up from the papers in his study, frowning a little at his butler. “Baldwin? Did I know he was expected, Howard?”

Howard nodded once. “You did, sir. He is come to discuss the continuing agreement of his supply of stock horses.”

“That’s right, I recall now.” Bram sat back, frowning in thought. “He has never given any indication of being displeased with our agreement, and his returns have steadily continued to grow over the years. A mite sluggish perhaps in recent years, but hardly shocking. Think he might renegotiate?”

“I couldn’t possibly say, sir.”

Bram flicked his eyes back up to the man. “Balderdash, Howard. You’re no more a butler than I am a gentleman, and you could run this operation at least as well as me.”

Howard flashed a crooked grin. “Not as you, sir, but I did know your father’s hand of business well enough.”

“You certainly ought to. You came up right alongside him; stable-born, if you will. You could have had your own operation to compete or collaborate.”

Howard shook his head in an almost stately manner. “No head for figures, me. I’d have lost any fortune before I let it sweeten my breath. Better for all that I serve here, sir.”

Bram shrugged. “Suit yourself. I won’t tell anyone you’re also my head of stables and would-be farrier. We all must have our secrets.”

“Indeed. Would you like luncheon prepared for Mr. Baldwin and yourself?”

Checking his father’s pocket watch that hung from a new chain, Bram shook his head. “I don’t think so. This shouldn’t take long. If that changes, I’ll ring.”

Howard nodded once. “Very good, sir.” He turned on his heel, not quite crisply, and strode away, leaving Bram to chuckle to himself.

Howard might not have been trained up in service, but he had certainly learned enough to act the part decently. No one had ever dared ask about him, and Bram had no intention of telling a soul where the man had started and how he had reached his position.

It was not a far drive from the station to Knighton Hall, so he ought to prepare himself for Baldwin’s arrival. Of all the people with which he did business, Mr. Baldwin was one of the least odious. He was a man of sense and good manners, one who understood this business in a way that Bram could only wish all his associates did. He had no airs about him, no superiority with regard to any of his customers or associates. Were he a little more driven in his work, he could have been a true rival for Bram’s work, but the man seemed to enjoy a more comfortable style of business and function. Bram could not argue with that, but it was an interesting aspect to the man

with whom he and his father had done business for so many years.

A man who did not put profit above all else? Who did not drive the hardest bargains to retain the greater bulk of profit? Who was content with comfortable and did not strive for excesses? Yes, indeed, he liked Mr. Baldwin very much, all things considered, though Bram could hardly say that he was so inclined toward a more humanitarian way of business.

But it was refreshing to work with one who was.

He took a few minutes to read over their existing contracts and remind himself of the details, though once he had started to review matters, the rest was easy enough to recollect. It was not a complicated contract, after all, and they had been working together for many years.

Why exactly Baldwin was even coming out for this meeting was more a mystery.

Most of his business could have been conducted by post, honestly. Bram did not require face-to-face meetings for renewals of contracts, and many of his associates and customers preferred it that way.

Still, he would not argue. If he had to meet with people, it might as well be with people he liked.

He took a quick moment to look at himself in a nearby looking glass, more to ensure he had not disheveled his hair or upset his cravat in his absent thinking and reading. If there was one thing he *had* inherited from his father's way of business, it was the insistence that he must always look the part of a distinguished man of business, even if he had been brought up scuttling coal.

Bram had stuck by that, and it had served him well.

"Mr. Baldwin, Sir Bramwell," Howard intoned at the door before too long.

Bram, who had taken up position by the window of his study for no good reason other than to look stupidly pensive, turned with the slightest of smiles. "Mr. Baldwin, good day."

Baldwin bowed and crossed the room, hand extended. “Sir Bramwell, a good day to you as well. Thank you for seeing me.”

Bram put a hand on the man’s shoulder as he shook hands. “Of course, no trouble at all. Will you take some brandy?”

“I will, sir, if you do as well.”

“Naturally.” Bram poured two glasses and handed one to Baldwin. “Do have a seat, sir,” he suggested as he rounded the desk to return to his seat. “What can I do for you?”

Baldwin took a sip of his brandy, sighing a heavy sound of satisfaction afterward. “Well, Sir Bramwell, I am thinking about retirement. I am plenty comfortable and have set aside enough to keep me content for the rest of my time, which may not be long.”

Bram frowned at the statement. “Are you unwell, sir?”

Baldwin shrugged his narrow shoulders. “Not particularly, but I can feel age sinking her fingers into me more than I’d like, and my mind is not as sharp. It doesn’t seem fair to my customers to continue on when I am not as capable as I once was.”

That was a fair enough reason, Bram supposed, but retirement seemed extreme. “And what would become of your business?”

“My son will take it over in due course,” Mr. Baldwin said, swirling his brandy almost absently. “He has designs to shift over into racing, which we disagree on, but I cannot say the venture will not work. Indeed, there seems to be quite a demand for racing horses these days, especially in and around London. Perhaps he knows more than I do about this generation’s preferences. I have not the time nor the inclination to learn another avenue of the business.”

“I see,” Bram said slowly. “Is it your son’s desire to do away with the stock horses altogether? You are the biggest supplier south, and the loss would likely be felt in some rather keen ways.”

Baldwin nodded this assessment, offering a flat smile. “You see my predicament, then. It is natural to leave the business to my son, but I fear in his attempts to appease this new demand, we will lose all the ground we have gained in recent years. It would likely take several years for the shift, but it would give someone else the opportunity to rise up in demand, and we’d lose a great deal of profit for yourself, as well as my own business’s stores.”

“Yes, it would.” He cocked his head, his brow furrowing as he looked at the older man. “Why did you not bring your son along with you to discuss this? If he is sincere in his endeavors to make this shift, we could have discussed the options.”

“I will bring him to discuss it with you before anything official takes place,” Baldwin assured him, “but I would much prefer to have something in place to present to him that would allow us both to see our wishes fulfilled, and you are the only one with whom I would dare have such a speculative conversation.”

Bram nodded in thought, his mouth twisting a little as he did so. “I can see the wisdom in that. My brother had a similar interest in veering away from our traditional mode of doing things here when he wished to take stock into the Highlands and work solely in that environment. It did take several years of hard labor and eking out marginal earnings before any real success was found, but now he has become successful in his own right. Not to mention he has begun speaking with a brogue, which seems to entertain him. I trust your son will not become a racer himself by moving in this direction.”

Baldwin chuckled easily, sipping on his brandy again. “I cannot think so. He is a fair enough rider and knows horses well, but he has not such skill as to become quite that reckless. He has rather a head for business and a sense of people enough to keep the business afloat, in any case, but he is too active a person to become a man of leisure. No, he will certainly do well, but I worry for the losses and the connections I have maintained. I have a decent enough head of stables, though it

seems I must look at his means of controlling matters a trifle more closely ...”

“Must you, indeed?” Bram asked with interest, sitting back in his chair, one hand going to his jaw. “Who is it?”

“Thomas Thatcher-Lee. Do you know him?”

Bram snorted softly. “Unfortunately. The man is a brute and a weasel, a ladder-climbing gripe, and I have never once met a person or horse who felt comfortable around him. You’d do well to send him to work with pigs or cattle, Mr. Baldwin, if you must keep him on.”

To his surprise, Baldwin exhaled heavily, seeming more resigned than irritated. “I was afraid of that. She’ll be insufferable now.”

“Who, sir?” Bram asked, lost by the shift in conversation.

Baldwin scoffed. “My daughter. She said as much about him.”

Daughter? Bram wasn’t aware that Baldwin had a daughter, not that he had ever asked him for such personal information or detail. Truth be told, he didn’t care most of the time, but with someone he had known nearly his entire life ...

Surely he ought to have known the man had a daughter.

“What would she know about the head of your stables and the like?” Bram inquired with a light laugh.

Baldwin did not laugh. “She involves herself a great deal more than I’d care to admit, and she continues to surprise me with her insights on the animals themselves. Her mother was the same way. Happier riding a horse than dancing a reel, which makes her an oddity to most. Not to me, but to others.” Baldwin cleared his throat and smiled. “At any rate, do you even breed for racing? I suppose it would bear asking before I invite my son to take over and do what he will with things.”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Bram pushed up from his seat and gestured for Baldwin to do the same. “I have a few young stallions in the stables that will soon be on the market for such things, and I believe they warrant your examination. You can

determine for yourself if they will be of value for you. Or your son, rather.”

“Excellent, thank you, sir.”

They moved out of the study and down the corridor, Baldwin clearing his throat as though he would speak when they reached the foyer, though the reason was entirely unclear. Nothing extraordinary or remarkable to see or discuss, and certainly nothing that ought to make him uncomfortable. Perhaps the brandy was not sitting well with him.

No matter, he said nothing, so there was no cause to inquire about it.

They made no conversation as they left the house and moved to the stables, which were close to the house and nearly the size of the entire east wing. That was a point of pride for Bram, and certainly the most impressive aspect to show prospective investors and clients. For existing ones, it was rather part and parcel.

Still, it made Bram glad to see it.

“These two are from different sires, but those sires are brothers,” Bram explained as they entered. “Masterful creatures, both of them. I think your son would enjoy the sight of them against each other.”

Bram came to a stop as he looked down the line of stalls. A young woman with long curls that peeked out from a bonnet that hung loosely about her neck was rubbing the nose of his personal horse, murmuring softly to him as she did so. Zeus was nuzzling against her in return, his tail flicking visibly over the side of the stall, clearly delighted by the attention.

No one ought to have gained entrance into the stables without being attended by himself or one of the hands, and she was far too well-dressed to be one of the locals, all of whom knew better than to enter without invitation or permission.

Not this chit.

“I beg your pardon,” Bram called without manners or kindness, “but who are you, and what the bloody hell are you doing in my stables?”

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CHAPTER 3



Hattie froze, her heart immediately bouncing off the surface of her diaphragm and lodging itself squarely into the base of her throat. Her fingers caught on a snag in the beautiful stallion's mane that she had somehow not encountered in the few minutes she had been stroking him, and her toes bunched anxiously within her boots as though they could retreat fully into her feet.

She closed her eyes and swallowed an unfortunate lump, which could have been a startled sound of a rather ruinous, guttural nature, before turning to look at the new figures in the stables, her fingers still entangled in the horse's hair.

Oh heavens. Her father. Which meant the glowering man with dark hair was Sir Bramwell Lowery.

This was not good, neither for her plan nor for her reputation.

Hattie tried to swallow again, forcing a smile. "Erm ..."

Her father huffed in irritation. "Harriett Patience Baldwin!"

Blergh. Her full name.

The utterance of her middle name under these circumstances was ironic enough to warrant a laugh, should she have felt less mortified.

It also ruined her plan further still.

Marvelous.

“At your service, Father,” she managed weakly, trying to tug her fingers free of their current knotted prison.

Her father shook his head and turned to Sir Bramwell. “I cannot apologize enough, Sir Bramwell. Hattie was waiting in the foyer when I came to your study, and I *thought* my daughter was sensible enough to wait there rather than wander where she will and explore without invitation ...”

The slow heat that was entering Hattie’s cheeks increased its pace with every word her father spoke, shaming her into the size of a rag doll she had once carried in a pinafore pocket.

“I see,” Sir Bramwell murmured, his dark eyes remaining fixed on Hattie without any sort of encouragement. “Introductions seem superfluous at this point, but suffice it to say, I am Sir Bramwell Lowery, and the horse whose mane has currently ensnared your fingers is my personal stallion, Zeus. He seems pleased to meet you.”

If the straw-dotted stable floors could have opened up and swallowed Hattie whole, she would have greatly appreciated it. Words were impossible and excuses even more so. Reason was weak and sense vacant.

She was an idiot, and that was all she could say for herself.

“Sir Bramwell,” Hattie began, once she could find her tongue and the voice to use it, belatedly sinking into a curtsy of greeting. “I cannot begin to appropriately apologize for trespassing upon your property. I had every intention of waiting for your meeting to be completed before I went anywhere, but I saw the stables through the window in the drawing room ...”

“I did not leave you in the drawing room!” her father snapped, rubbing his brow in irritation. “How could you see anything from the chair you were occupying in the foyer?”

Hattie spared him a dark look. “The door to the drawing room was open and the window was visible from my seat!”

Her father’s brows rose briefly, and he looked at Sir Bramwell for confirmation.

Sir Bramwell folded his arms, still watching Hattie. “That is true, it is visible there.”

Hattie barely avoided looking smug at the revelation. “I was quite desperate to see your stables and the horses, sir, and I lost my manners. I pray that you will not look poorly upon my father or his business because of my actions.”

Sir Bramwell scoffed very softly. “No worries there, Miss Baldwin. I know your father well enough by now to be quite certain of his character and the manner of his business. Short of stealing the family jewels and Zeus himself, I doubt even your lack of trepidation could dissuade me from my opinions there.”

She released a relieved breath that made her shoulders sink against her frame. “Thank you, Sir Bramwell. That is most generous.”

“My opinion of *you*, however ...”

Hattie’s eyes narrowed and she managed to yank her fingers from the horse’s mane, folding them almost serenely before her. “I have apologized, sir. It would not be gentlemanly to judge me harshly after that.”

“Harshly, no, you are quite correct. But I do intend to judge you.” He shrugged as though his words ought to have been sensible. “First impressions, Miss Baldwin. I would never dream of going off to see another’s property without invitation, so it is difficult to understand why anyone else might.”

“Could you not take it as a compliment to your fine establishment?” she asked, biting back the desire to snap in irritation. “Or as eager interest in what you do here? After all, I have defied convention and manners with a flagrancy that could ruin me in many ways, purely to see your horses.”

Sir Bramwell’s brows lowered, yet he did not look more severe for it. Rather, the corners of his mouth began to curve ever so slightly. “I am not certain I would admit that outside of this place, Miss Baldwin. Judgment and all that.”

Hattie tilted her head a little, catching the shift in his tone. “And yet ...?”

Now his almost-smile twitched into a hint of an actual one. “I thank you for the compliment you claim it ought to be.”

Before she could say anything further, he turned to her father. “If you’ll come this way, Baldwin, you will see the horses I was mentioning.” They moved to two stalls halfway toward her, stopping and discussing two large black horses that turned to them almost at once.

Hattie might have disappeared for all her involvement in the continuing conversation. Even her father did nothing to acknowledge her, or even so much as look in her direction. They were entirely and wholly focused on the horses, and she did not dare move closer to listen in.

She was in enough trouble as it was, and she was destined to hear all about it on the journey home. She would never be allowed anywhere after this and would be fortunate indeed if she left her room for the next fortnight.

Zeus, darling creature that he was, nudged her arm with his nose, and she offered a smile for him, turning back to rub him fondly.

“At least someone in here is not vexed with me,” she murmured in a very low tone. “Perhaps you might put in a good word with your master? Someone certainly must, if anything is to be accomplished here.”

Zeus blinked his dark eyes but offered no real input of value. He snuffled and stepped closer to the stall door, settling his face more fully into her hands.

The action curved her smile further still, and she tugged softly. “You are a love, are you not? One would think you lack for affection or attention, yet I can see you’ve had a good rubbing of late. I wonder if I might see your shoe, darling. I don’t know how that would be taken, but ...”

As though Zeus could understand her words, he backed up and seemed to nod his head.

Hattie's eyes widened, and she glanced over at her father and Sir Bramwell, who were still not marking her a jot. She eyed the horse again, then smirked as she silently unlatched the stall door and pushed in, putting a finger to her lips as though the horse would confess her actions.

She ran a hand along his mane and neck, moving along the side of him, and picked up his left front leg, quickly examining the hoof and shoe. She ran her finger along the shoe itself, rubbed gently against the sole to check cleanliness and for any clogs, satisfied that his hooves had appeared to have been cleaned that morning, if nothing else.

However ...

“Hattie!”

Hattie glanced up from her inspection to see her father and Sir Bramwell standing at the stall door, watching her. Her father was all exasperation while Sir Bramwell was rather impassive about her position.

She smiled very slightly. “It would appear, Sir Bramwell, that Zeus's frog is peeling. I wonder that your man did not trim it this morning when he cleaned it. Or notified the farrier, at least.”

One dark brow rose with remarkable alacrity. “I tend to Zeus myself, Miss Baldwin. And I think you will find that his frog is intact.”

“Alas for contradiction, sir ...” She crooked a finger and made no move to adjust her position away from the animal.

Sir Bramwell's jaw shifted from side to side, then he came into the stall as well. “What do you think you see?” he inquired mildly as he stood beside her.

Hattie brushed her thumb over the frog area, revealing the peeling that was beginning to show. “Peeling, sir. Not dreadful, but enough.” She looked at him, startled that he should be so close, suddenly very aware of the tight quarters that was this stall, and the soap and tobacco scent that wafted to her from the man's presence.

His dark eyes held hers a moment, then he took the hoof from her hand and examined it himself. "So it is. But it will not need to be trimmed yet. I shall notify my farrier." He released the hoof, which Zeus replaced on the ground, shifting his weight a bit with the change.

Sir Bramwell cocked his head at her, his eyes locked on her face. "Are there no boundaries you respect, Miss Baldwin?"

There did not seem to be scorn in his tone nor any coldness. It held rather the same tone as an invitation to dance, and she was rather intrigued by that. As she also was by the hint of shadow along his jaw and the faint wrinkles on his cravat, as well as the hint of curl his hair seemed to hold in it. Rather a handsome fellow was Sir Bramwell Lowery, and what she had taken for simple breadth and stockiness was now quite clearly a rather robust array of strength and musculature rather like the horse she was standing beside.

How in the world should that make swallowing difficult?

"Of course, there are," Hattie murmured in reply, tucking her hands against her stomach. "Stable doors and stalls have never been among them, though. Much to my father's dismay."

"Yes, so I see," came the low reply, and one without inflection. He blinked and turned to face her father as he stood at the stall door. "Will you stay for luncheon, Baldwin? I think we ought to continue the conversation further, and it would seem your daughter might have some interest in seeing more of the place."

Hattie's father shook his head even as he offered a hesitant smile. "You do not need to indulge Hattie's inquisitiveness, Sir Bramwell. Truly, I should never have let her come along."

"Not at all," Sir Bramwell answered, even as Hattie's cheeks burned in embarrassment. "Any woman who can tell me with accuracy that my horse's frogs are peeling is welcome to examine any piece of this operation, though, perhaps, with permission from now on." He gave Hattie a sidelong glance at this.

She nodded, biting down on her lip hard. “Yes, sir. Of course.”

Again came the curious curving of the corner of his mouth. “Perhaps you would care to ride one of the horses, Miss Baldwin. Not Zeus, I think, but four stalls down, you will find Hickory, and she is long overdue. I fear I do not possess the requisite sidesaddle, but if I am correct—”

“I don’t need a saddle, sir,” she overrode with eagerness. “Though these skirts do not exactly allow for the requisite modesty, so perhaps I might borrow a pair of trousers for the occasion.”

“Oh my days ...” her father groaned.

Sir Bramwell folded his arms again, smirking at Hattie. “As I suspected. Well, we must preserve your modesty, certainly. Adams in the small building just down the hill will have something for you, and he’d be pleased to ride out with you, as you will not be familiar with the territory. Shall we say, an hour’s ride? Then you might have the appetite to make my cook’s efforts worth the entertainment.”

“Entertainment?” Hattie repeated, frowning at the word. “I don’t entertain, sir.”

“Neither do I. Which is why her efforts will be rather concentrated. Quite the rarity, this.” He nudged his head toward her father. “But as we have much to discuss, and you seem determined to explore whether I give you permission or not, it would seem in poor taste to send you both back to the station without a proper meal.”

Permission to ride one of his horses across his estate, as well as a meal that would extend their visit, and, perhaps, redeem herself in his eyes? It was too perfect a victory, and too important a chance to pass up.

“I shall do my utmost,” Hattie assured him, “to work up an appetite that should please your cook creditably, Sir Bramwell. And give you my opinion on the horse, the estate, and anything else I see.”

“I am not hearing this,” her father muttered.

Sir Bramwell ignored him, nodding at Hattie. “Very good, Miss Baldwin. I look forward to your assessment.” He strode out of the stall and clapped a hand on her father’s shoulder, leading him back down the stalls of horses, their conversation unintelligible to her ears.

Hattie released a long, slow breath, relief sinking her heels into the straw of the stall for a moment.

“That,” she whispered to the horse beside her, scratching gently at his ears, “was too close.”

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CHAPTER 4



*B*usiness meetings were something Bram was quite accustomed to, but he'd had a devil of a time focusing on his discussions with Baldwin. He was far more curious about the peculiar daughter of the man who was riding across his estate at the present, no doubt reckless and bold in her riding and likely a masterful sight while she did so. His irritation at seeing her in the stables had faded far more quickly than he anticipated when she had snapped at her father in defense, when she had thrown Bram's own words back into his face, and when she had acted impulsively yet again despite the embarrassed apology and shaming that had taken place moments before.

There was something intriguing about Hattie Baldwin, and he never thought such a thing about anyone, man or woman.

That she happened to be a woman was an even more interesting aspect.

The fact that she was also beautiful added a dimension he had not been prepared for, and even now, he was trying to decide if her eyes were the color of leather, of gold, or of cognac. Though something told him there was a hint of green in the mix, but the shadowed light of the stables might have betrayed his observations there. Her hair had been bound in such a way that long curls streamed down her neck like a waterfall of amber-tinted chestnut tresses. It was captivating, especially when set against her fair skin, and seeing how she interacted with his horse ...

He would have found a great deal to discuss with Miss Baldwin, should she have been in this meeting rather than her father.

Likely less profitable, but potentially more rewarding.

It would satisfy his curiosity, if nothing else.

He had not been curious in years.

Not about women in particular, but ...

Oh gads, he was rambling even in his own mind.

Not good.

He cleared his throat and turned on his heel, pacing in the foyer as he and Mr. Baldwin waited for Hattie to return from her ride.

Any minute now. Any minute.

“I cannot imagine what is keeping her, Sir Bramwell,” Mr. Baldwin announced in apologetic tones, breaking the cacophony of his thoughts in a rather unwelcome chirp.

Bram waved a dismissive hand. “Not to worry, the lands are vast, and I have no doubt she is enjoying her ride. I pace to think, not to anticipate.”

There, that should satisfy the man. He was not anxious nor was he impatient, however his actions might imply. It was simply that motion kept him from madness, and surely everyone would wish for him to be slightly less mad at any given time. Not that he was prone to madness, but there was an odd vein of the thing in every man when his thoughts became confused by a woman.

Surely that was the case here.

The business was settled with Baldwin, and his son would return with him in a few weeks to discuss figures of the shifting company focus, though Bram had a strong case for maintaining the stock horse portion for the good of the area. It would not do to lose those holdings nor to find another distributor for them when business had been going so well with Baldwin at the reins.

Even a partner for the younger Baldwin would be more preferable than giving it up entirely.

He would wait with interest for the meeting with the younger Baldwin in attendance. Business was always interesting.

Simple and interesting.

He preferred that. None of this awkward scrambling of the mind, tumbling over one's own thoughts and falling flat on the mental face. One always knew where one stood in business.

Bram gave himself a mental nod, feeling the strangeness in his mind abate.

"I am so sorry, I insisted on helping Mr. Adams tend to Hickory after the ride and quite lost track of time," a warm, bright voice called from the entry, followed by quick steps. "And then it started to rain, and I had to find some place to wash the filth from my hands, as I could not very well enter your home with my fingers covered in hoof dirt—"

"Hattie, no need to explain every breath of the time elapsed," her father interrupted firmly. "Are you prepared for the meal?"

Hattie looked at her father with a curious expression as she reached them, droplets of rain hanging precariously from the tips of her curls. "Well, I am hardly dressed for a luncheon at Knighton, but as we did not anticipate this meal and thus have nothing to change into, yes, I suppose I am."

Bram bit back a surprised laugh, swallowing the sound even as an accompanying urge to grin attacked his lips. He resisted and took a moment to observe the young woman, now that she was within the walls of his home.

Still beautiful, still fair in complexion, though there was now a touch more rosiness to her cheeks, and now that her bonnet was gone, he could see the full measure of her hair in its holdings.

It was more majestic than he had thought, and her smile was far more engaging. Her eyes flicked to him, and, sure

enough, he did catch a glimpse of a deep, captivating green in parts of them.

Alas for good memory.

“No need for ceremony,” he heard himself say, his voice oddly gruff. “I rarely change for meals myself.”

Hattie raised a trim brow. “But you do not entertain, Sir Bramwell. You said so yourself. Why should you change for your own amusement?”

He let himself smile at that, ever so slightly. “Just so. Shall we?” He gestured toward the dining room, praying that Cook had outdone herself in some impressive way. He didn’t quite care what the fare was, but he did want very much for something to be remarkable.

Why, he couldn’t have said. Food was food, and his kitchens had never once failed to provide something edible. More often than not, it was even delicious. Yet suddenly he feared the worst.

What sort of paltry lack of faith was this?

He sat at the head of the table, as per usual, Miss Baldwin at his right elbow and her father at his left. It would have been a better plan if Mr. Baldwin had been cast down to the far end of the table, much as he respected him, so Bram could chat with the more interesting of the two without his paternal correction and interference.

But if his sense of Hattie Baldwin was correct, she would speak rather freely regardless, so it may all turn out rather as he would have wished anyway.

Fate, be kind ...

“Goodness,” Hattie remarked as the food was made available. “And here was I believing luncheon to be nothing more than light sandwiches and perhaps scones with jam!”

Bram glanced over at her as he selected cold meats for his plate. “I can send for those if you wish. I prefer a heartier luncheon for the day’s work.”

“Oh no, sir, this is far more preferable,” she insisted as she reached for the bowl of potatoes.

He hid a smile at that. “And how did you find your ride, Miss Baldwin?”

She grinned as she spooned out potatoes onto her plate. “Delightful, Sir Bramwell. I had imagined your estate to be an enterprise wholly devoted to the horses, but I found marvelous farms and so much natural beauty! It is so green here; do you always retain such a shade?”

“Hardly in the autumn and winter,” he said with a soft grunt, “but this time of year, yes, I believe it does. And did you see the second stables?”

Hattie nodded and turned toward him, covering her mouth as she chewed a bit of potato. “I did. An impressive number of draft horses there, sir. Do you always separate them from the thoroughbreds?”

He nodded while he cut into his meat. “Yes, I find it enables the horses to learn from each other while we train them. They are rotated out to our private farm on the estate to train on the various apparatuses, and we’ve had great success with it.”

“One can do so much with a good draft horse, no matter what the finer folks think of stock,” Hattie said firmly, turning back to her plate and focusing on her meal. “One might even ride a good draft horse for pleasure, if one can swallow the ridiculous indignity placed upon it.”

Interesting argument. He wouldn’t contest it, but he hardly expected to hear such a thing from a woman who surely had the finest horses at hand for her riding pleasure. “You have opinions on stock horses, Miss Baldwin?”

Miss Baldwin went still in her chair, looking at him with a hard gaze he hadn’t a hope of interpreting. Her mouth formed a tight line, and a tiny pucker appeared between her brows.

Bram waited, keeping his eyes on her.

“Hattie ...” her father murmured, no doubt in warning.

Bram wished he would silence such things. He wanted the unbridled Miss Baldwin, not the reined in one.

“Yes,” she said then, turning toward him once more. “I do.”

Her father groaned and resumed his meal.

“I take a great interest in the stock horses of my father’s business,” she told Bram, her brow clearing of its lines. “Of all the horses, really, but I have a particular interest in the draft horses being purchased for the working class. I know full well my brother believes the business would do better to appeal only to the high Society of London, but I vehemently disagree.”

“Do you, indeed?” Bram hid a smile behind a few fingers carefully placed before his mouth as he listened.

Hattie nodded eagerly, her curls dancing along her neck in a rather distracting manner. “There will always be a need for good working horses, so long as they are in supply, and one should not leap to match the advances of the times in such a way that the reliable aspects are neglected. Which brings me to the point of my visit, which, I confess, was not merely a curiosity.”

“I beg your pardon?” her father blustered, but Bram ignored him.

“Go on,” he hedged, allowing his smile to show now.

“I have a proposition for you,” Hattie said with a peculiar tilt to her chin, her hands falling to her lap. “One of business.”

“Are you serious?” came her father’s hissed reaction.

Bram only flicked his fingers in invitation.

Hattie stared at Bram with an intensity that struck him. “I wish for you to invest in a scheme with me to take the portion of my father’s business that involves the stock horses.”

Astonishing. Such a beautiful, bright, capable woman that could make such an ambitious statement without much restraint, and not even blush at its slightly ridiculous nature.

He rather liked that.

“You want to do *what?*” Mr. Baldwin coughed weakly.

Bram narrowed his eyes, assessing the stubbornness and willpower of this fiery woman. “Answer me this, Miss Baldwin. If I want to take back my own animals, why would I need your involvement?”

Hattie’s chin bobbed in an odd little nod. “You have the greater portion of the enterprise here, Sir Bramwell. In my position, should you agree, I would act just as my father does: selling the stock horses and seeking out new buyers, partnering with you in providing the majority of workhorses to the counties in the south. And eventually, should our partnership prove as fruitful as I think it could, I should like to expand further into a smaller portion of the business being used for the rehabilitation for horses, both stock and thoroughbred.”

She did not want for inventiveness, that was certain. The fact that there were as many holes in her plan as there were ideas was simply a byproduct.

“Why should I concede to your scheme,” Bram wondered aloud, “when I could just as easily hire a manager to run things in my stead? It would save me the buying and selling to a third party, such as yourself, and still return to me the greater portion of returns.”

A delicate muscle in Hattie’s jaw ticked. “I suppose that is true, sir,” she eventually said, “but your manager would be required to forge connections I already have and maintain relationships not of his own making. What he will lose in the time required to gain trust for himself, I am currently in possession of. I know my father’s business intimately and would only prove of use in this.”

“You mention trust, Miss Baldwin,” Bram said slowly, finding this entire conversation far more intriguing and compelling than anything he had discussed with anyone in the past five years. “Would you not think that you would have a struggle to gain such trust for yourself once your father retires? You are, after all, a woman, and not all men are

accustomed or comfortable with women managing such things.”

One corner of Miss Baldwin’s perfect lips curved into a smile, seeming to turn his stomach in precisely the same way. “We presently have a woman as our monarch, Sir Bramwell. I think the men must get used to the idea, don’t you?”

Bram smiled fully now. “I cannot argue with that, Miss Baldwin. Very well, I will think on the matter.”

“Sir Bramwell, please forgive her,” Mr. Baldwin begged, sounding strained in his pleas.

“No forgiveness necessary,” Bram said without looking at him. “I like passion in my partners, and one cannot deny Miss Baldwin has that in spades.”

She grinned outright, and Bram forgot how to breathe for three whole beats of his heart.

Marvelous feeling, that.

“Excuse me, sir,” Howard interrupted, coming up behind Bram from the other parts of the house. “I fear the rain is now quite heavy, and the bridge into Grindleford is nearly washed out.”

Mr. Baldwin immediately pushed back his chair. “Then we will make haste to return to the station. Come, Hattie.”

“Nonsense,” Bram said before his mind could think through the matter. “You will both stay here tonight and take a train back tomorrow. No harm done.”

Hattie’s eyes widened, and she tilted her head. “You do not entertain, Sir Bramwell.”

“This is true,” he told her, feeling a crooked smile race across his lips. “Prepare for a rather boring turn of my hosting, Miss Baldwin.”

She smiled in return. “I shall endeavor to endure the tedium, sir.”

CHAPTER 5



Well, he hadn't laughed at her for daring to name herself as a potential business partner.

Hattie supposed she would have to take that as a significant victory.

The fact that he also had not cast her out of his presence and home was rather wonderful. She had imagined all sorts of options for his reactions, both before she had made his acquaintance and after, and the scope of his imagined reactions had been vast, indeed.

Oddly enough, none of those imagined incidents had involved him welcoming the idea with open arms.

The interruption of the butler at luncheon had prevented her from laying out a proper business proposal for him, which she had been carefully constructing in secret for months. She had memorized the figures and projections, knew what a decent percentage would be for his ends without crippling her financially. Whether he would have accepted that percentage

...

She had a whole plan to impress him with.

And luncheon had ended fairly promptly with the pronouncement that they would stay there overnight despite his rather encouraging teasing of her.

And that smile ...

Had there ever been a smile that had the power to remove internal organs?

Hattie was positive that her stomach had been removed, and even now, sitting in the parlor alone, hours later, she had not managed to locate it.

Something about the way the lopsided smile altered his features into something rather devilish and made his dark eyes crinkle in an intriguing way ... He became someone alive and invigorating rather than the aloof and standoffish person she had known that morning. He might have even become incandescent by comparison, though it was the darkness in that light she was vastly curious about.

And attracted to.

Ugh, it was madness. She was trying to join the man in business, and now she was watching him smile in her mind over and over again, at will and by ever-slowng degrees, just to make the torture that much more complete. Ticklish, hot, delicious torture, but torture all the same.

How was she going to engage him in conversation about breeding and percentages and, most importantly, the details of her greater plans for a rehabilitation farm for horses when she was going to be watching his mouth as though it would begin changing colors?

Not to mention her father might not let her in Sir Bramwell's company for supper after what she had already managed. He had given her a very long, very stern speech about minding her tongue and bridling her mind, laced with copious amounts of shame for having such a willful daughter and embarrassment that he should have been so indulgent about her whims.

What exactly her father was doing now to fill his time, she could not say. She had all but been dismissed from his presence after his scathing monologue, which was why she sat here in this simple but neat room at the front of the house. Perhaps he and Sir Bramwell were further discussing their existing partnership and plans, and discussing how they could further Arthur's wishes for the racehorses. They would almost certainly not be discussing Hattie's plan, unless they were to chortle over it while nursing tumblers of brandy.

Yet Sir Bramwell hadn't laughed when she'd said it, she reminded herself for the umpteenth time. He did not seem the sort to take pleasure in someone else's folly.

But what did she know?

Her father was angry enough to start the ordeal, should he so desire, and Sir Bramwell could very well be a different man in private.

So perhaps she would need to be preparing an apology as well as a business plan so that she might soothe all aspects of the disaster she had begun.

If she saw Sir Bramwell again.

He had said he would host them, but he had also made it clear that he did not entertain, so perhaps having a room in his home was the extent of his hosting. And meals, she supposed. He could not expect them to change for supper, as they had not brought any additional clothing to change into, which would make them look even more like the simple country folk he undoubtedly thought they were.

Politeness had dictated he host them, not interest.

Would it have been dreadful of her to ask for a tray in whatever room he'd be situating her in? She had never been a delicate female in her life, but she would play one for the rest of this godforsaken venture if it would save her further mortification.

Hattie glanced out of the window, morosely taking in the distant stables that had brought her such joy and curiosity hours ago. Now their beauty was dampened, just as their surface was from the storm. Pounded by heavy drop after heavy drop, reinforced by the wind, and all of it encased in a gloomy sky that dashed all hopes.

She was actually tempted to ride out in this weather, just to feel something more than her own shame.

Plus, there was something delightful about riding in the rain if the horse did not mind the experience.

Not a vicious storm, of course, but a solid rain?

She was not opposed to that.

But she was not mad enough to risk Sir Bramwell's displeasure yet again by taking his horses out in such weather.

She did have some limits. Self-preservation, mostly, but still.

Hattie started as a pounding at the door met her ears. She could hear the rain pummeling against the windows, each drop making a distinct pinging sound. And someone had come to Knighton Hall in this weather?

What sort of desperate soul were they?

She clamped her fingers together in her lap to keep from racing to let whoever it was in while the butler seemed to make his way rather sedately to the door. Was there some sort of porch or overhang at the door that would provide at least some shelter from the rain?

"Mrs. Allen! Whatever are you doing with the girls out in this weather? Come in, come in!"

Rather impertinent of a butler to offer up such a scolding reaction to a guest, even if it was one of concern.

"You think the girls would let a little thing like rain keep them from coming to see Uncle Bram and his new puppies? Hardly."

Hattie's eyes widened almost painfully.

Uncle Bram?

Two little girls suddenly darted across her line of vision in the corridor, giggling without shame, and squelching mud with every step.

"Emma! Esther! Come back here this instant! We are *not* trekking our mud through Uncle Bram's house!"

A tall woman in a simple but drenched bonnet strode across the doorway, glancing into the parlor almost absently, expression full of exasperation. She stopped at the edge of the doorway and backed up, her brows disappearing into the dark curls at her brow.

“Hello,” she greeted, making no move to enter the room. “I’m Isabella Allen, Sir Bramwell’s younger sister.”

Hattie rose as gracefully as she could, bobbing a quick curtsy. “Hattie Baldwin, Mrs. Allen. My father came to discuss business with your brother, and the storm has ... Well, Sir Bramwell has offered to be our host for the night rather than have us attempt to get to the train station.”

“So I should hope,” Mrs. Allen said with surprising firmness. “I nearly had to swim here with my girls, and we live on the estate!” She glanced down at the distance between them, then looked up at Hattie with a wry smile that showed her resemblance to her brother in an uncanny way. “I’d come in and meet you properly, but I don’t dare with my shoes in this state.”

“I’ll come to you, then,” Hattie offered, moving to the door. “Have you brought a change of shoes, perchance?”

Mrs. Allen laughed. “No, but I’ve learned to keep spare clothing here for times like these. But my daughters require almost as much wrangling as Bram’s hounds.”

“Can I help? I’m fond of horses and hounds, and children that think they’re one or the other.” Hattie grinned easily, wiping her hands on her skirts, though there was nothing on them. “Being as I was one of those children.”

“You are a guest,” Mrs. Allen insisted. “Not to worry. Mrs. Baxter, the housekeeper, will help, as per usual.”

“Nonsense, Mrs. Allen,” Hattie countered with a shake of her head. “I am here now and can help as well. Three sets of hands are better than two, eh?”

Mrs. Allen sighed while smiling. “Well, if you are certain, you had better call me Bella. We are about to get rather well acquainted, as my daughters quite take after me.”

Hattie returned her smile. “Perfect.” She followed Bella down the corridor where the little dripping girls obediently waited.

Clearly, this was not their first time incurring their mother’s stern instructions.

“Emma, Esther,” Bella began as they approached, “this is Miss Hattie, and she is staying at Uncle Bram’s house with her papa. The storm made them miss their train home, so we’re going to be very nice to her, aren’t we?”

The girls nodded, darting their wide, dark eyes toward Hattie.

“Hello, poppets,” Hattie said with a wave. “Shall we get you out of your wet and dirty things? I believe your mother said there are puppies to see?”

Both girls nodded in eager unison.

“Then we’d best be quick, hadn’t we? Bonnets first, undo those ribbons as quick as you can!”

Little fingers scrambled at little knots, not doing much but creating more giggles, but between Hattie and Bella, with the late addition of Mrs. Baxter, the bonnets were eventually off, followed by cloaks, mud-caked boots, and dirty, damp stockings.

Bella sat back on her own muddy heels, heaving a sigh. “I don’t know if we change their dresses now or after they’ve seen the puppies.”

Mrs. Baxter patted her arm. “Do it now, love. They’re bound to start shaking soon, and you need to change as well and have some tea by the fire.”

“I agree,” Hattie told her. “Come, your bonnet and boots off, too, then we’ll all go upstairs and change.”

One of the girls turned her dark eyes to Hattie with an almost pouting expression. “And then puppies?”

Hattie smiled. “If your uncle agrees, then puppies.”

The other girl took her sister’s hand. “Uncle Bram *always* lets us see the puppies. And name them.”

“Does he, indeed?” Hattie murmured just as the man in question came around the corner toward them. “What names?”

“Well, Uncle Bram says we can’t name any of them Daisy anymore,” the girl continued, unaware of his approach. “So I

always name them after other flowers.”

Sir Bramwell raised a brow as his eyes connected with Hattie’s, but he put a finger to his lips as he slowed his step to a more silent one.

“I like Rosie, and Poppy, and Posy, and Lily, and Violet, and Bluebell ... But last time he wanted to name a puppy Chrysanthemum, and I told him that was ridiculous.”

Hattie bit back a laugh, seeing plenty of Sir Bramwell in this stern little girl as well. “Did you?”

“She did,” her sister insisted. “Emma knows all about flowers.”

Hattie looked at Esther with a very serious expression. “But what about the boys, Esther? Where do their names come from?”

Sir Bramwell was nearly to them now, and the girls still had not noticed, though their mother and Mrs. Baxter were well aware and anticipating something.

“Kings of England of course!” Esther told her with a defiant gesture of a very opinionated hand.

“Of course,” Hattie said with a nod.

“Of course,” Sir Bramwell growled from behind the girls.

They gasped and whirled. “Uncle Bram!”

He put his hand at his hips, looking down at them both in playful disapproval. “Who are these muddy little mice standing here in my home? Mrs. Baxter, I am shocked at seeing such creatures inside the walls of Knighton.”

“As am I, sir,” Mrs. Baxter sighed. “I suppose I will need to ask Mr. Howard to fetch his largest net and scoop them up.”

“No time for that, I’ll have to do it myself.” Sir Bramwell stooped and picked both girls up, hoisting them up on his shoulders, making them squeal in hysterics. “Where shall I take them?”

“Bram!” his sister scolded, rising as she removed her boots and bonnet. “They are filthy!”

He looked at his sister without concern. “I presume you’re taking them to the room to change, then? Perfect, I needed to change anyway, and your room is on my way.”

Bella rolled her eyes and picked up her shoes. “Fine, come with me, we’ll all go and then see the puppies.” She started down the corridor away from them.

“Who said we’d see puppies?” Sir Bramwell countered as he followed. “I certainly never said such a thing.”

“Uncle Bram!” the girls cried, either in protest or hilarity, the tone was not quite clear.

Sir Bramwell turned slightly as they rounded another corner, facing Hattie and Mrs. Baxter with a wink that seemed specifically for Hattie.

A burst of heat told her that her stomach had returned at last.

En flambé, but it was there.

“I didn’t even say I *had* puppies,” Sir Bramwell told his nieces, grinning as he turned back around. “I don’t know where you heard such a thing.”

The argument continued as they proceeded farther away, but the words were lost.

Hattie looked at the grandmotherly housekeeper, unable to keep from smiling. “Are they always like that with each other? Sir Bramwell and his sister, I mean.”

“Always,” Mrs. Baxter assured her, eyes rather soft and fond as she spoke of them. “The closest of all the siblings, no question.”

“And the little girls?”

“Absolutely adore their uncle. And, as you could see, the feeling is mutual.”

Hattie glanced back to where the extraordinary man and his nieces had disappeared. “Yes, I could tell. I would never have suspected ...”

Mrs. Baxter chuckled when Hattie did not go on. “His bark is worse than his bite, my dear Miss Baldwin. Come, we’ll have some tea and biscuits brought up for them.”

“And then the puppies?” Hattie asked, following her.

“Of course. Even Sir Bramwell cannot resist the puppies.”

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CHAPTER 6



As if Bram needed to be more intrigued by the woman that was Hattie Baldwin, she was presently sitting on a flannel on the floor near his two nieces as they were all crawled over by his newest litter of puppies. Hattie also held one puppy in her arms, cradling it almost like an infant while it slept, its head resting perfectly in the crook of her elbow.

And she was giggling with the girls over options for names for the puppies.

She was the most unsophisticated young woman he had ever met.

And he meant that in an entirely praiseworthy way.

Granted, he hadn't met *that* many young women, as he tended to avoid social duties, but the ones he had met were filled with airs, ignorance, and fluff. Boasting of so-called accomplishments and desperate for praise and attention. Perfectly biddable, perfectly moldable, and perfectly vacant when it came to actual individuality.

Hattie, on the other hand ...

The woman was willful, to be sure, but she was also entirely unobtrusive, entertaining, intelligent, forthright, playful, bright ...

He had never met anyone like her, and he had certainly never *liked* anyone like her.

That was the detail he was struggling with at the moment.

He actually liked Hattie Baldwin, with all her uniqueness. He who did not like people liked *her*.

He did not understand how and why, but there it was.

Bram watched her for a moment, keeping his expression carefully blank in spite of the chaos of his nieces. He had never seen a more perfectly contented animal than that dozing puppy in Hattie's arms. She might have been the mother for all the comfort and security evident in the creature's position and relaxation. And she was as comfortable as anything with the puppy there. Continuing conversation and playful antics without concern, giving equal attention and affection to the other puppies and to the girls.

In the midst of madness and misrule, Hattie was unflappable and unmoved.

Ever as she was, the very same woman who had let herself into his stables and had ridden one of his horses in trousers.

What sort of woman was she, anyway?

"She'll be a fine mother."

Bram felt instant pain as his eyes widened and turned his aghast expression to his impetuous sister beside him. "I very much beg your pardon?"

Bella returned his look with a startled one of her own. "What? Isn't it Greta's first litter?"

Bram's heart beat several times in rapid succession as relief rose from his core. He inhaled and allowed his shoulders to relax as he exhaled. "Ah. Yes, it is. Sorry, yes. She is doing very well, indeed." He returned his attention to the dog who watched the entire occasion with mild interest.

His nieces were forever entertained by puppies, and, as at least one of his dogs bore puppies every year, there was no end of occasions for them to play with them. In some ways, it was bribery for him. He adored his nieces to a surprising degree, and any time he could have them over at the main house, he was pleased. Lord knew he had few enough entertainments for them in other avenues. He managed to be playful with them without too much effort, but it still took some convincing for

him to get down on the floor with them, to get involved in their games of imagination.

But if he had puppies ...

Hattie laughed at something Esther said, tossing her head back and squeezing her eyes shut, her throat seeming to dance with the laughter. He was transfixed by the motion of her skin as the warm, natural sound escaped her. He found himself smiling at hearing it, something helpless and instantaneous on his part. Laughter in general was not contagious to him, but hers ...

“Bram?”

“Hmm?”

One of the other puppies climbed on Hattie’s lap, standing up on her hind legs and laying her paws on Hattie’s shoulder. She began to lick furiously, desperate to reach Hattie’s cheek, which Hattie indulged by leaning closer, making the nieces giggle uncontrollably.

Bram shook his head, still smiling.

“Bram.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve got an uncontrollable disease involving gaping and oozing sores and a deathly infectious fever.”

Bram blinked and looked at his sister once more. “You what?”

Bella smirked as only a younger sister could. “Ah, so you are comprehending something. I couldn’t be sure; you had such a minimal reaction.”

“And you thought a description of some dreadful malady would bring about a better reaction?” he asked, ignoring how his skin faintly itched as he recalled her complaint about sores.

She shrugged. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Bram scowled at her. “May I take it, then, that you do not have the malady you described?”

“I do not, but thank you for your warm concern.” She batted her eyelashes mockingly. “Tell me about my new friend there.” She used her eyes to indicate Hattie before giving him the sort of thorough look his mother had perfected while she lived.

There was no way under heaven that Bram was going to discuss Hattie Baldwin while she sat within earshot, not to anyone. Mostly because it was impolite, but also because it would take far too much effort to attempt to understand his own thoughts and feelings enough to form coherent conversation on the subject. And then there was his personal privacy to consider, which his sister would have no qualms in invading, but he was not inclined to allow such an invasion. And then there was the fact he knew very little about the woman to begin with.

What could he say, even if he wanted to and the situation was appropriate? He met the woman yesterday, and now he liked thinking about her?

That was not the sort of thing one shared with a sister, unless one wished for hell to consume the earth.

Which he did not.

“Let me tell you my thoughts, then,” Bella announced when he said nothing.

“Please don’t,” he grumbled.

“When has that ever worked on me?”

Bram sighed and tried to appear scolding. “She is sitting right there, and she might hear you.”

Bella glanced down at Hattie and the girls in their antics, the puppies yelping and barking in innocent delight. “I believe she is readily distracted. Besides, my thoughts and opinions are all favorable.”

“You’ve known her for all of, what? Five minutes?”

“And you have so much more insight?” she shot back, ignoring his jab.

He had no response to that. He had only known Hattie today, and yet ...

And yet ...

“She is refreshing,” Bella began, sensing his lack of continued argument as acceptance. “As real a person as I have ever met, and with enough good manners to be pleasant, yet not so many as to be off-putting. She offered to help me with the girls when we were dripping and muddy. She doesn’t even live here, and she was acting as warm as any good hostess. She loves animals and does not require distance from them. I like her more than anyone else I have met on such short acquaintance in my life.”

“Good for you,” Bram said gruffly, uncomfortable with the warmth growing in his chest the more his sister praised the woman looking so perfectly situated on the floor of his kennel with the puppies.

So perfectly situated, so perfectly capable, so perfectly real.

He liked her more than anyone he had met on short acquaintance too.

But Bella did not need to know that.

“The daughter of a business partner,” Bella said, still not put off by his reticence. “What an interesting thought.”

“Is it?” he replied carefully.

“Isn’t it?”

Bram made a face of faux consideration, determined not to give his sister anything specific on which to speculate. She would certainly speculate all on her own, as there was nothing a sister loved more than to speculate on various aspects of her brother’s life, but he would not give her fodder to further those speculations.

“The rain is keeping them from their train, I understand,” his sister went on, somehow still talking. “The bridge, yes?”

Bram nodded once, keeping his eyes on a particularly intrepid puppy venturing away from the group.

“And you did not feel the need to suggest the alternate route through the village?”

In a particularly annoying show of betrayal, his face flamed at the suggestion.

Bella’s chuckle told him everything he needed to know.

“Stop,” he muttered, reaching to grab the back of his neck in his discomfort. “It seemed rude to insist they leave in those conditions. It means nothing.”

“You have done as much before,” Bella pointed out. “Don’t ask me to believe that you suddenly have grown conscientious of your business associates.”

“I haven’t!” Bram protested, feeling as though his entire personality were now in question, as well as the manner in which he managed his perfectly successful business.

Bella nodded with practiced sageness. “Ah, so it is only their daughters about which you have grown conscientious. I see. You’re a gentleman after all. So fair daughters mustn’t traipse through the rain. Even though your sister has done so.”

“You don’t count. I didn’t invite you over, and had I known you were coming, I might have sent a carriage.”

She scoffed loudly enough for Hattie to look up at them, which silenced both siblings, who looked at her in return. She smiled at them both, something almost fond and yet polite in its curve.

It succeeded in setting the sole of Bram’s left foot on fire, whatever it was.

Dash it.

“I will have you know,” Bram hissed to his insufferable sister, leaning close, “that she has made me an offer of business herself that I am considering. It would behoove me to be hospitable to anyone under those circumstances when they do not live in a conveniently located place for further discussions.”

“Ah,” Bella returned softly. “And trains being so inconvenient, you almost certainly would not want to

undertake utilizing such for travel to further those discussions, should you truly have interest.”

Bram clamped down on his lips before he could swear in a manner that would confuse his nieces and startle both his sister and his guest. He looked away, shaking his head in abject irritation.

“And if you ask me to believe,” his sister went on, her whisper becoming harsh, “that you are truthfully considering a business proposition from a woman that you cannot take your eyes off of, then you have the sort of ulterior motives that ought to be *properly* acted upon before they are *improperly* carried out.”

“Watch it,” Bram warned as he slid his gaze back to his sister, defensive hackles raising.

Bella only raised a knowing brow and stooped to pick up a puppy venturing toward her skirts. “We all know what happens when the attraction becomes too much and there isn’t enough going on to keep them apart,” she told the doleful puppy.

“And that is?” Bram demanded, his eyes narrowing.

She turned to face him. “Puppies of course. Ever so many puppies.”

He’d have challenged her to a duel had she been a man, even if she had still been a sibling. But instead he turned his attention to his nieces who were now trying to make all the puppies stand side by side without much success. “What names have you settle on, then?”

Emma pointed at the one closest to her, who was currently nipping on the ear of the puppy beside. “This one is Lilac. This one is George, and she will not stop playing with his ear.” She picked Lilac up and pulled her gently away. “No, Lilac! That is not your toy!”

Esther patted George’s head before pointing to the sibling on his other side. “That one is Billy. Then there’s Stephan, Hyacinth, Marigold, Lily, and Edward.”

Bram nodded in consideration at each, knowing the girls would probably forget which puppy belonged to which name,

as so many of them looked identical at this stage in their growth. “Excellent choices. And what of the one Miss Baldwin holds?”

Emma and Esther looked at her expectantly, and she smiled at their attention. Hattie looked at Bram and lifted the arm the puppy rested on ever so slightly. “Lionheart.”

Bram found himself smiling at her. “Not Richard?”

“We thought Richard didn’t do him justice,” she explained, her eyes crinkling in the corners. “But Lionheart is brave and strong and true. Why shouldn’t it be his name?”

“Why indeed,” he mused. He cleared his throat and looked at his nieces. “Girls, would you do me a very great favor and see if the puppies will follow you by walking toward the outer door there? Don’t go outside, since it is raining, but let’s see if the puppies will follow and get some exercise.”

Never one to refuse a new game with the puppies, the girls got to their feet quickly and started almost skipping in that direction.

As Bram had hoped, the puppies did follow, one after the other, and at various speeds, Even the sleepy Lionheart in Hattie’s arms was roused by the sounds of his siblings and hopped down from his napping place to dash off with curiosity.

“I should have those girls come live with you, Bram,” Bella said in her usual tone. “I would never need to keep them distracted or entertained, and your dogs and horses would get plenty of exercise.”

“If they don’t require payment for their services, I’ll consider opening the position for them,” Bram assured her, allowing formality to return to his tone.

Hattie chuckled at the idea. “Do they enjoy the horses as much as the puppies?”

“Not quite,” Bram answered. “But certainly enough. They ask every year if they are big enough to ride ‘the good ones,’ as they call them.”

“Which are?”

“Any one that isn’t a pony,” Bella laughed. “They are so very tired of the ponies, though they never complain when Bram lets them ride those. They only see how fast Bram rides the others, and they are wild to do the same.”

“Miss Baldwin will understand that,” Bram told his sister. “She is a skilled rider herself and knows a very great deal about horses.”

Hattie’s cheeks turned a trifle pink, which was a rather intriguing shade for her. “I pretend to know a great deal, though it does not always mean anything of significance.”

She was going to pretend at ignorance now? *Now?* After she had stollen away to his stables and discovered something about his horse that he had not noticed? After she had pitched him a business opportunity across the table from her father?

“I daresay you know more than you let on, Miss Baldwin,” Bella firmly commented. “You seem to have a keen and observant eye, and if you were the one I saw riding Hickory across the estate earlier, you have room to speak on the subject.”

Hattie lowered her eyes to the ground, her fingers plucking at her skirts. “I was not aware someone was watching. But yes, I was riding Hickory. Fine horse. Excellent gait and an endurance for the landscape. She’ll never be a racer, but she would suit for anything else. Perhaps not extreme labor, but she could pass as a thoroughbred for less experienced eyes.”

Bram barely managed to avoid grinning at the simple assessment. It was perfectly said and an excellent analysis of the horse itself. The woman certainly knew of what she spoke, which made her better than at least a third of the men he was forced to reckon with in his business.

She would make an intriguing business partner, he had no doubts there. And she would keep him on his toes where that business was concerned, that was also certain.

But could he really do it?

“My brother mentioned you have a business proposition,” Bella told Hattie, earning herself a hard look from Bram. “He didn’t say anything more. Dare I ask what?”

Hattie looked at Bram with almost fear, but he made no show of resistance or disapproval. If she wanted to discuss the idea with his sister, he would not stop her. He would not encourage the topic, but he knew full well he could not prevent Bella from speaking her mind.

He had the feeling that Hattie was the same when she was not embarrassed.

“Yes,” Hattie said slowly, looking at Bella. “I rather took over conversation at luncheon and startled both my father *and* Sir Bramwell by the proposition. My father wants to retire, and my brother wants to turn the business to racehorses, which would cut almost half of our stock. I don’t agree with doing away with the consistently successful side of the business just to pursue the potentially greater price points with fewer options. I don’t agree with being selective in the class of clientele, and there is so much that can be done with stock horses.”

For the next few minutes, Hattie talked nothing but horses, and Bram found himself entranced by the conversation. It was not so much a pitch to get him to take her on as a partner anymore but a genuine discussion of an interest. To Bella’s credit, she did not force the conversation into business-centric topics and allowed Hattie to simply talk. Without him knowing it at first, Bella was encouraging Hattie to reveal a little more of herself and her heart to them both by letting her speak of the horses within their business and home.

It was evident that she shared the same sort of love and passion for the animals that Bram did. He had suspected that with her antics earlier in the day, but this easy conversation on the subject ...

This was what he ought to require of potential business partners. If one felt this way about horses, they would always do right by them and their customers. They would honor contracts and agreements, work honestly, and be open to

suggested improvements as they were needed. Of course, not everyone could fit so simply into a single category, but it would certainly be an encouraging sign.

If only all prospects were like Hattie Baldwin.

But that was the thing about this woman: there was no one like her.

And that was what Bram liked most of all.

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CHAPTER 7



*K*nighton Hall was immense, and she was lost.

At least it was the middle of the night, and no one would catch her wandering where she ought not venture, which was a right sight better than that morning. Still, sleeping in a strange house she had not anticipated spending more than an hour or two in was a sure way to spark her curiosity, and when the storm outside raged so intensely that sleep was troublesome, she might as well take advantage of the strangeness and have a look around.

But she had not expected the place to be quite so expansive, which had led to her turning down her fourth wrong corridor in the space of ten minutes, and now she was almost certainly somewhere near the kitchens or the twelfth drawing room or a spare ballroom only for masquerades or some additional gallery purely for antiquities.

She had never been in a grand house, so she could only imagine what all the rooms truly were. What she had explored thus far had not told her there were twelve drawing rooms, any spare galleries, or indeed, even one single ballroom, but surely there must be many sets of each, if she could become so hopelessly lost in a single venture.

It was quite a gift, to be sure.

Hattie paused in her random wandering of Sir Bramwell's home to peer out of a window in the corridor, the rain of the night running down the pane of glass like curtains in one's bedchamber. The windows overlooked a courtyard, the center

of which must have once boasted a fountain, but now housed a very small plot of a neatly kept garden. Of course, now it resembled a very small pond, wherein hints of tiny blooms attempted to tread the surface so as not to drown, but she was certain that in the light of the sun, and on dryer days, it was quite a lovely little patch.

Next time, she would have to explore Knighton Hall by the light of day.

She snorted without reservation at her own stupidity. Next time. She was fortunate to not have been cast out entirely for her impetuosity already; what in the world made her think there would be anything resembling a next time? Her father had renewed his scolding of her before they had gone down to supper and begged her to keep a civil, ladylike tongue in her head. He had not known about the conversations while seeing the puppies, nor of the games she had played with Sir Bramwell's nieces, and she could only be grateful for that.

Mortification and guilt had been Hattie's bedfellows without further remonstrations, and they were not comfortable ones.

Perhaps that had been her impetus for nighttime wanderings, and her curiosity simply the continued propulsion of the thing.

Even so, wander she did, and she was not yet fatigued, so sleep would not come, even if she did return to her borrowed bedchamber.

She folded the borrowed flannel shawl more tightly about her frame, exhaling a burst of irritated air that made a wayward lock of hair dance against her brow. What a mess she had made of things. To proposition Sir Bramwell over their luncheon rather than during a quiet moment. To meet him in the stables in the midst of her own impoliteness rather than waiting with composure in his home. To give in to the impulse to actually enter Zeus's stall rather than wait demurely to be summoned or acknowledged in any way. To involve herself in his family time and sit on the floor in the midst of his puppies.

To entertain his nieces when he had likely wanted to spend time with them himself.

But that was the more unfortunate side of her nature. She never did as she was bid or what was expected of her. She balked at the restrictions she ought to have been confined by. She did exactly as she wished at any given time, unless it would scandalize people, and even then, sometimes she still did it.

Sir Bramwell was a difficult one to read, which meant she could not be sure if he disapproved of her or if he was amused by her. He had not turned overly brusque, nor had he given her the cut in any way. On the contrary, he seemed to be entertained by her outlandish behavior and, without encouraging more, allowed her to be and to do just as she was without shifting his treatment of her in the slightest.

What in the world could that mean?

One thing was certain: he was far too handsome to be her business partner. She would struggle with coherent thought if it required too much effort, and she would find herself gasping at any full smile she received from him. It was quite involuntary, and therefore, not to be helped.

Mortification, however, could be avoided. If he took her up on this scheme, if he trusted her passion in the idea enough to risk it, she would be hiring a manager to engage with him directly so she might save herself the ghastly reactions to his glory. He would never take her seriously if she swooned over the cut of his hair.

It really was quite delicious though. It probably curled first thing in the morning, dark and thick, and perhaps even tousled on the wind when he rode one of the horses. Was it so peculiar an idea to twist a short curl around a finger and see how many times one could wrap within it?

Of course it was. She was just as ridiculous in her imagination as she was in her speech, and the sooner they could be away from Knighton Hall, the better. She was far less likely to embarrass herself in writing. Indeed, she could compose a letter better than anyone she knew, and Sir

Bramwell would find the business partner he wished for there. One of clarity and sense, one who never rambled and was concise in thought and in procedure.

Yes, that was it. She would be an excellent partner by correspondence, and surely he would as well.

No breathlessness, no fluttering toes, no curl-twining.

Only business. Strictly business.

That was the ticket.

A sudden flash of light burst in the sky, illuminating the corridor in a brief but intense flicker. Thunder boomed loudly on its heels, rattling the windows and making Hattie's pulse skitter a little. Storms did not frighten her, but there was something unnerving and startling about the explosions of fury in the sky, no matter how one felt about storms in general.

She grinned at the storm now, even as her pulse raced.

They would be fortunate if the road to Grindleford was in any way manageable in the morning with torrents like this. Oh dear, oh dear, what would one do with an additional day in a great house in possession of two exceptional stables and countless numbers of horses, not to mention a delightful litter of puppies she already adored?

A quick succession of footsteps met her ears, sounding not only light but hurried, and Hattie looked toward them, frowning. That could not be Sir Bramwell unless he ran like a fairy or a dancer on the point of her toes. But one mustn't judge, and if that was the case ...

She smiled on a relieved sigh when a large dog appeared, floppy ears and drooping features speaking to his particular breed of hound and warming her heart with the reminder of the beloved dog from her youth who she had dubbed Dozy despite the fact that his name had been Tiberius.

"Well, hello there, darling," she whispered, crouching and reaching out a hand to him.

He licked his snout, whining loudly and stuttering a step toward her.

Hattie tutted softly. “Are you afraid of the storm, love? It is rather boisterous, isn’t it?”

He whined again, the panicked sounds coming in rapid succession, each one sinking into her heart like the cry of a baby in the night. Another flash of lightning sent him running toward her, nearly screeching in his distress as the thunder rumbled like a boulder barreling down the corridors of the house.

“Here, darling, come here.” Hattie sank to the floor completely, pleased when he stopped just beside her, hesitating and trembling despite his strong legs and frame. She reached out to him cautiously, in case he should bite out of fear, but managed to rest her hand on his back without incident and run her fingers into the quivering locks.

He stepped closer with a whine, his paws on the fabric of her nightdress now.

“That’s right, love,” she whispered, using both hands now to stroke and soothe him. “It’s all right.”

Lightning flashed again and the dog yelped, jumping a little, his heavy paws landing on Hattie’s legs rather painfully.

She hissed and shook her head. “That won’t do. Come on, be a lap dog for a moment.” She pulled him onto her lap and wrapped her arms around him, stroking and hugging tightly despite the awkwardness of his size and his upright position upon her. She knew of no other way to settle the poor thing, and it was highly unlikely that Sir Bramwell or his staff would wish for him to terrorize the house from fear.

How long they sat there, she could not have said. She lost count of the lightning strikes and thunder rolls, each of which garnered a reaction from the dog, though his trembling did begin to settle the longer she held and stroked him. Soon enough, he was settled enough to lay upon her, though he refused to let her move her arms from around him, which made for an even more awkward arrangement, but Hattie didn’t mind so very much. There was some comfort in holding him for herself—rather like she had found in Dozy as a girl,

though at the time, she had been the fearful one rather than the dog.

She leaned her head back against the wall behind her, starting to feel the fingers of sleepiness reach toward her. Her breathing began to settle and slow, just like that of the dog, and the sounds of the rain began to fade into the sound of that breathing.

“What are you doing?”

The soft question prodded her eyes open, though she knew the owner of the voice before she did so, and there was no fear or hesitation this time. Rather, she smiled, and the sight of Sir Bramwell standing there in an open shirt and dark trousers, sleeves rolled to his elbows, hair in almost complete disarray, sent something warm from her throat to the base of her spine.

“What?” she replied, also in a whisper.

He gestured to their position, smiling without shame. “Why are you sitting on the floor, embracing my dog?”

Hattie giggled and hugged the dog a little more. “What else should one do when a frightened hound happens upon her?” She scratched the dog’s ears gently, smiling down at his leaning into the gesture. “He needed a little love, a little reminder of his safety, that is all.”

She heard the sound of low laughter and glanced back up at Sir Bramwell, whose unfettered smile inflated her lungs with heat. “Again, I find you unexpectedly wandering my property, Miss Baldwin, and giving affection to my animals. Do you find me superfluous to the place?”

“Oh, likely not,” Hattie told him, rubbing her hands over the dog in long strokes. “But it is frowned upon to bestow familiar affection such as this on a gentleman, so if you are also frightened of the storm, I am afraid you are on your own for comfort.”

“More’s the pity.”

Hattie’s jaw dropped and she openly gaped at the man standing there like a heated image from a dream she would

never confess even to her diary. She had quipped without thinking and been ready to take it back, and he had said ...

He had said ...

“I cannot think I would be of much comfort for you in any respect, Sir Bramwell,” Hattie breathed, barely hearing the words as she spoke them for the sudden choking sensation filling her. “I’m more of a thorn than a petal.”

“I am not afraid of thorns,” he replied as he leaned against the wall, his smile easy and unfettered. “And I have no use for petals. I think you would provide more comfort than you think. Hector seems to think so, and he’s more standoffish than I am.”

Hattie swallowed, looking down at the dog. “This is Hector? Not exactly a warrior, curling in my lap like this.”

“Even warriors need a refuge, and it seems you are his.” Sir Bramwell laughed once. “I wondered where he’d gotten to. He bolted from my room at the first clap of thunder, and I’ve never known where he ventured when storms arise. Normally, I let him go, but tonight I followed. Don’t know why.”

Biting her lip, Hattie looked up at him, finding his attention on her, the dark eyes even darker in the minimal light of their location. “I don’t mind.”

Sir Bramwell’s lips curved. “My being here or my dog in your lap?”

“Both,” Hattie confessed in a small voice. “Either.”

He cocked his head, seeming to find that of interest. “I don’t intimidate you? I have it on very good authority that I intimidate and might benefit from acting more affable.”

“I don’t think anyone should act out of character,” Hattie told him, shaking her head quickly. “If you do not like Society and social engagement, do not pretend to do so to please others. I would much prefer people be exactly who they are. Then I might know with whom I am truly engaging and not doubt myself so much.”

“Why should you doubt yourself? You seem to possess all the confidence in the world.”

Hattie laughed once. “You are confusing confidence with recklessness. Or perhaps impatience. It would do me a world of good to ponder my words or my actions before I say or do them, but I seem quite incapable of waiting that long. My father is quite mortified by everything I have said and done since we’ve come here, so I must spend the next year or so proving myself composed and dignified.”

“He shouldn’t be mortified,” Sir Bramwell murmured in a low, rumbling voice. “I find you refreshing in your opinions and your strength of convictions. Would you like me to speak with him?”

“No, please and thank you.” Hattie shook her head. “He would only scold me for provoking such a statement from you. No doubt, he thinks I have ruined his business venture with my own schemes.” She heaved a deep sigh without thinking. “Alas for my plan.”

“You haven’t.”

Hattie blinked and looked at him. “Haven’t what?”

Sir Bramwell smiled a little. “Ruined his business. Not in the least.”

There was nothing to do but frown. “Sir Bramwell ...”

“Bram. Please. This is anything but formal.”

She would try very hard not to take *that* suggestion and run headlong for the hills of whimsy with it. “Do you mean to tell me that you are actually considering my proposition?”

Now it was his turn to exhale, and her stomach clenched in distress at the sound. “I don’t know, Miss Baldwin. I would need to see some figures and proposed logistics for such a risk. I cannot possibly go into business with a woman on a whim, no matter how compelling her vision is.” He flashed a quick grin at her. “And no matter how feminine our reigning monarch happens to be.”

Hattie swallowed hastily, feeling a hint of hope flare at the lack of complete refusal. She needed to claw for purchase in the possibilities. “Then you should consider marrying me. I don’t mind being a silent partner, then you won’t have to pretend you like people for a courtship one day.”

Bram stilled completely, his eyes locked on her.

Oh.

Heavenly.

Stars.

Why had she said anything so stupid and ridiculous? Why was she talking at all? She needed to push off this heavy dog and race back to her room, though she could not presently recall where it was, and burrow beneath the covers for dear life. She needed to avoid being seen for the remainder of her life. By anyone. She needed to die the slow and silent death of a withering plant in the sun, and she needed to do it now.

Right now.

Only she couldn’t move, and it had nothing to do with the dog pinning her down.

It was the eyes of the man who, it seemed, had yet to breathe as he continued to stare at her without words.

At what point did one apologize for existing, and how much drama was acceptable for such apologies?

She wet her lips, hoping a word or two would form in her mouth, though the only thing forming was an urge to giggle like a crazed hag locked in a tower.

“You didn’t tell me,” Bram said very softly, his voice wrapping around her ears like the brush of warm fingers. “Do I intimidate you, Miss Hattie Baldwin?”

At this moment? He utterly terrified her.

And yet ...

“No,” she heard herself say. “No, Bram, you don’t.” She wet her lips again, clearing her throat. “Is that acceptable?”

Slowly, Bram nodded, his smile perfectly placed and perfectly unreadable. “Perfectly so, Hattie. Quite perfectly so.”

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CHAPTER 8



*M*arry Hattie Baldwin. Marry Hattie Baldwin.
Marry. Hattie Baldwin.

The words had repeated themselves in his mind so often over the course of the rather sleepless night that he began to wonder if his name, his title, and his mother's maiden name were all named thus.

Marry Hattie Baldwin.

It was a ludicrous idea. It was a terrible business decision. It was wholly unnecessary, entirely unthinkable, and completely out of character for him to even consider such a ridiculous notion.

But all he could manage to do *was* consider the idea.

And his objections, all provided by his saner side, were growing less and less convincing.

He'd never thought of marriage. Not even once. He had thought of what he might leave to his children some day and the best ways to manage the inheritance so it would be uncomplicated and straightforward, but he had never even looked at the small but significant step that must take place before children and heirs even came into the picture that was his life. Marriage was a necessary evil, not something that one sought for, let alone looked forward to.

And yet ...

And yet.

He had known the moment Hattie had spoken the words last night that she had not thought them through, and he had not needed the drastic rounding of her eyes or the freezing of her frame to tell her that. He'd half expected apologies and frantic stammering to spew forth from her perfect lips, both of which might have unsettled Hector from his position on her lap and broken the spell of the moment.

But no apologies, no protestations, no stammering had come.

Not even from him.

Because it was an intriguing idea.

And he had been entertaining the blasted thing from the moment she had said the words.

Marry Hattie Baldwin.

Could he really?

And so, the arguments had gone back and forth and back and forth, for the idea and against the idea, considering the possibility and refusing it in the same breath. She was a gorgeous woman and growing more so every time he saw her, but he would never marry a woman just because she was a beauty. She had a quick mind and a clever mouth, but he would never marry a woman just because she could carry a conversation. She understood horses in a way he had never seen in a woman and had no aversion to sitting on the floor beneath a massive hound during a storm, but he would never ...

Oh, all right, it was a fair reason to marry her, and one of the chief positives to the idea.

The fact that she was beautiful, intelligent, and witty only added to her favor.

It was mad; how could he marry someone he had only met the day before? But he could not think he would ever meet another woman who would appeal to him the way Hattie did, and the idea that another woman should surpass her ...

That was even more far-fetched than marrying someone he had only met the day before.

Which meant he ought to marry her.

Impossibly enough.

The Baldwins would be leaving for the station shortly, once they received word as to the condition of the roads and the state of the bridge into Grindleford, so he had little time to make his decision. If he let Hattie get away from him, from this trance she seemed to have enshrouded him in, he would talk himself out of it. He would find something resembling sense, take advantage of the distance between them, and retreat back into his impending hermitude.

But he would always wonder.

And Bram hated wondering.

He should marry Hattie Baldwin.

He should.

Bram stopped his pacing, having partially forgotten that he had even been doing so, he'd been at it for so long. His feet and his calves protested at the pause in his motion, but his chest seemed to be taken over by a rather enthusiastic drummer who could not decide if he ought to beat time against the ribs or the throat, so switched between them.

He *should* marry Hattie Baldwin. Why was he dithering about it? After all, she had brought it up in the first place, so she could not be so wholly averse to the idea. If it really was as ridiculous a notion as his rational mind thought, she would never have mentioned it. If she had suggested the thing, she must have considered the possibility herself.

Did she *want* to marry him? Was she presently pacing some part of his house, thinking on the topic over and over until she felt consumed by the question and the general topic? Were her thoughts turning end over end down a lengthy staircase of matrimonial ideas, all of which bore his name?

Highly unlikely. She was probably in the stables again, bidding farewell to his horses, who had been her true draw to

the place.

Still, she *had* offered to marry him for her business venture. And a worthy opportunity ought never be discounted.

He turned on his heel then and strode out of the study and, by extension, the house, moving directly for the stables. If his suspicion was incorrect, he could return to the house and seek her out, and all he would have lost would be a few minutes of time, while the gains would be increased time to consider his wording and move his legs in a productive manner rather than an absent one.

Certainly worth the excursion.

Heart pounding, Bram walked the slight rise to the stables, hoping she would be within and dreading that she would not be. That his carefully constructed speech would vanish when he saw her or become lodged in his throat when he attempted to speak. That she would laugh at him and find not only himself but his proposal ridiculous. Despite her own suggestion of it the night before.

He was afraid. He hadn't been afraid of anything since childhood, and nothing could have matched this depth of such a fear. He hadn't even known such a vulnerability could exist in any man, let alone in himself. But exist it did, and it spread throughout his frame with every thunderous beating of his terrified heart.

He paused outside the entrance, hidden from view, and exhaled slowly. He did not love Hattie Baldwin, so he need not pretend he did. She preferred honesty, and he could give her that. But he could come to love her, and likely without any difficulty or too much delay. The potential for love was a decent one, if one could take the risk.

Bram was willing to. Would Hattie be?

“Oh, I shall miss you too, sweet Hickory. Yes, you are a love.”

Bram grinned to himself at hearing the endearment and the almost-cooing nature of Hattie's voice. Rather the way he had

heard others fuss over babies on occasion. He'd never heard such interaction with horses though. Only with Hattie.

And that made all the difference.

He stepped forward softly, peering into the stables and proceeding in as carefully as he could while making as little noise as possible.

Hattie wore the same simple gown from the day before, as she had obviously not brought a change of clothes for unexpected delays, but her hair was different. Loosely plaited and hanging over one shoulder, the curls at the end coiling up against the length of the plait itself. It was a gorgeous weaving of strands, the color seeming to shift slightly with each fold in a way he wanted to study in depth.

She ran her palms along the horse's face, tutting gently. "I don't think your master will let me come back here, sweet girl." She touched her brow to Hickory's, sighing. "I fear I've made rather a mess of things."

"No, you haven't," Bram said from his position, shaking his head.

Hattie jumped rather like she had yesterday when he'd happened upon her, only this time, the panicked look was absent. "Bram! I mean, Sir Bramwell. I did not see you, sir."

"Bram will suffice," he told her, sliding his hands into his pockets. "And no, Hattie, you haven't made a mess of things."

She gave him a sardonic look. "I most certainly have. According to anybody's reckoning, I have made a dreadful mess. Not one thing has gone according to plan, and I am leaving with only my mortification for company."

Bram nodded once, pursing his lips in thought. "Is that all? I thought there would be more to your repertoire than mortification."

"Did you? What, you think shame, guilt, and a feeling of utter foolishness ought to join the ranks?" She scoffed and turned back to the horse. "I think not; I've never been one for excess of company."

“Those weren’t the companions I envisioned for you,” Bram said slowly, starting farther into the stables at an easy pace.

Hattie glanced at him without turning his direction. “No?”

He shook his head, his pounding heart betraying the cool expression he aimed for. “No.”

He saw her swallow and something about the motion set his ribs on fire. “What did you envision, then?”

Bram let himself smile now, letting his pace turn more sedate as he neared her. “A partnership and a proposal.”

Hattie’s hand paused mid-stroke on Hickory’s mane and trembled ever so slightly. “I beg your pardon?”

“I do believe you heard me, Hattie.” He slowed further still and grinned at her. “I accept your proposition for a business venture and your proposal to marry me.”

Her eyes widened, their green and cognac and gold blend more lovely than ever before. “That was made in jest. Senselessly said. You should have forgotten it.”

Bram only shrugged. “Well, I am not laughing, I have not forgotten, and it makes a great deal of sense.”

“Does it?” she asked, her breath hitching on the question.

He gave her a slow nod. “You are the most remarkable woman I have ever met in my entire life, if not the most remarkable creature, and your fearlessness in asking for your father’s stock business directly to my face over potatoes made an impact I am not sure I can express. Your mind is sharp and your determination unmatched, and you are completely unintimidated by me and in no way aim to flatter me. How could I not consider marrying you? Plus, there are Zeus, Hector, Hickory, an entire litter of puppies, and two rather opinionated nieces to contend with. I could not deprive them of your company.”

Hattie smiled just a little, her cheeks flushing. “Is this an attempt to earn yourself some affection, matching what I have given them? Because I warn you, Bram, it won’t work.”

“Perhaps not right away,” he allowed, finally reaching her, loving this little game between them and curious as to how long he could make it last. “But I have no doubt that it will eventually work rather well, and I can be particularly patient when the rewards are sufficient.”

“And you think this reward will be?” she asked in a small voice.

He nodded once. “Oh yes. I have no doubts there.”

She clamped down on her lips, a faint giggle reaching his ears. She swallowed again. “Bram, does it make sense for your business? I concocted a scheme without thinking the matter entirely through, and it does not mean—”

“Why the hesitation now?” he interrupted gently, his eyes tracing her features. “You were so certain yesterday.”

“Everything feels different now,” Hattie admitted with a fidgety tucking of a wayward strand of hair. “After last night ... after the entire day ... after ...” She bit her lip, shaking her head. “I am not sure of anything anymore.”

Bram took that as a rather good sign, all things considered, and he felt himself smiling again. “Do you want the portion of your father’s business?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to be your partner in the venture?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then. Do you want to marry me and make the whole process much smoother and a little more interesting?”

Slowly, almost painfully slow, her perfect lips curved into a smile. “Yes,” she whispered. “Though I do hope you will make it more than a *little* interesting.”

Bram laughed. “I never entertain, but I shall try.” He reached out to take her hand, looking over her slender fingers as delight coursed through him. “I will not make you promises before our marriage; it is simply not my way. But the promises I make at our marriage, I will keep to the full. And I think ... I

hope ...” Now it was his turn to swallow, embarrassingly enough. “I believe we will be happy. I know I shall be.”

Hattie’s fingers stroked against his, turning to lace between his own. “Are you sure about this, Bram? We’ve really only struck a bargain, and it could remain as such. Marriage is so different. What if you don’t like me in all things... romantic?”

His eyes raised to hers and his heart came to a slow and steady halt. He reached up his free hand and brushed back the loose strands of hair at her brow, stroking her cheek before cupping it and leaning in. His lips brushed over hers once, twice, and then, when hers parted ever so slightly, he kissed her fully, taking meticulous care with every single pass. She responded first with hesitation, then with the same energy with which she did everything else. They kept the kiss slow and thorough, a tantalizing cascade of fire and delight rolling about and between them, the friction of lips heightening every other sense Bram possessed, and perhaps a dozen more he had been unaware of.

He pulled back just enough for a breath, stroking her cheek with his thumb before layering one more featherlight kiss on her now familiar lips.

He chuckled, the sound low and breathless. “I am not particularly concerned about that. Are you?”

Hattie’s sigh would have been response enough, but her fingers curled into his coat, and she shook her head, her brow brushing against his as she leaned closer. “Not anymore.”

They kissed a few moments more, each seeming somehow an age and yet a fleeting breath, renewing him and weakening him, defining him and confounding him. When he could bear no more, he simply wrapped his arms about the magnificent woman who had taken over his life and his world, loving how she felt in his arms and determining she ought to fit nowhere else.

“It is quite a good thing you agreed to the scheme when you did,” Hattie murmured against his neck, her arms locked about his waist.

“Indeed?” Bram asked as he ran his hands up and down her back, enjoying the odd shiver it elicited from her. “How so?”

Hattie snickered, nuzzling his shoulder. “I was prepared to make myself dreadfully agreeable, even to the extent of attempting humor.”

Bram tsked and pressed his lips to her brow. “I see I have been too hasty. And what humor would you have employed?”

She cleared her throat and pulled back enough to see his face. “How do you keep a horse fit and healthy?”

He raised a brow. “Is this a joke or a question?”

“A joke,” she insisted, her expression turning scolding. “Answer it.”

He kissed her nose. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he breathed, grinning when she shivered again.

Hattie cleared her throat. “A stable diet.”

Bram reared back to look at her, frowning at the clear expression of anticipation. “That ... is a terrible joke.”

Hattie rolled her eyes and propped her hands on her hips, releasing her hold on him. “That is a very clever joke, I will have you know.”

“No, it’s terrible.” He took her hand, immediately laced their fingers, and started walking toward the stable entrance to return to the house. “Really, it would never have worked.”

“It most certainly would have!” Hattie retorted beside him, hugging his arm to her. “And I would have had more where that came from.”

He pretended to shudder. “I can only be grateful you do not.” He brought their joined hands up to kiss her fingers. “Bad humor brings on the worst indigestion.”

“Good humor lightens the soul.”

“That was not good humor.”

“You don’t entertain, how would you know?”

They argued the entire way back to Knighton Hall, grinning all the while as they prepared to give an unsuspecting Mr. Baldwin some delightfully shocking news.

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EPILOGUE



No one had anticipated the sudden presentation of Lady Lowery of Knighton Hall when she made her grand appearance. The village had been aware of the union and had joined in the festivities hosted by the estate for the occasion, but the affair had been so limited and minimal in its scale that the gentry had been left entirely baffled by the news.

That Sir Bramwell delighted in his new wife was no secret. The man, while never affable, was never to be seen far from his wife's side or keen to have her dance with those that were affable, but he was not so possessive as to forbid such niceties. And so charming and direct was his wife that much of his new business connections were forced through those dances Lady Lowery offered.

No one truly believed that Lady Lowery was her husband's partner in the business until they came to Knighton for a meeting and found both of them in attendance, asking questions with equal intensity and knowledge. One did not meet with one without the other, and one did not insult either without some very direct remarks from the defending spouse.

All in all, they were quite the dynamic couple, and the only ones not impressed with them were the ones that had failed to secure a contract with them.

For all of his gruffness, it was rumored that Sir Bramwell smiled with startling frequency in the company of his wife, and that her presence was all that he required to be perfectly content regardless of his circumstances. Lady Lowery took great pleasure in her husband's company as well, which

baffled the public, as she was the only person they could name who had ever laughed under his influence.

The Lowerys did not mind being an oddity to the neighborhood, neither did they entertain often enough to allow many to know them better. They were a quiet couple in all social regard, but so generous in their benefactoriness that tenants and locals would have risen up as a mob to defend them from naysayers or critics. One need only mention the name to hear the finest praise and a dozen tales of their noble goodness and gentility, none of which was to be doubted.

As for the Lowerys themselves, they were far happier than any other couple who had met and become engaged over the course of a day could be. Marriage suited them well indeed, for they were partners there, as well as in business, never commanding or dismissing, never ignoring or insulting. Hardly perfection, given their mutually strong wills and stubborn natures, but sense and respect prevailed in all disagreements, and reconciliation was a much-anticipated experience for them both.

And the next time a thunderstorm struck Knighton Hall, Sir Bramwell did have the comfort he had once bemoaned; his new wife saw to that.

Though he did complain that Hector received her attentions first.

Lady Lowery wasted no time in informing him why it must be the case, and Bram spent a considerable amount of time attempting to convince her to think differently for future occasions.

Which, as it happened, was successful, and an heir to the estate arrived forthwith, followed almost exactly a year later by a sister and brother.

Esther and Emma Allen were not consulted as to the naming of their cousins.

Much to their eternal disgruntlement.

SADDLES & SCOUNDRELS NOVELS AND
NOVELLAS

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