

## TWICE UPON A TIME

### *One*

Julian Beckford, second son to Viscount Pickton, grandson to the influential Duke of Danby, and reluctant accomplice to his deranged cousin's newest venture, crossed his legs at the ankles and leaned back against the carriage seat. "Wake me when you've come to your senses."

"Ho ho! Do not count on that any time soon." Pen kept his eyes trained to the back entrance of the Lord Orrick Theatre, a small playhouse unlikely to be frequented by anyone of their acquaintance. "We will be here all night if that is what it takes."

"Fancy that," Julian drawled.

When Pen, who had been like a brother to Julian since they both wore short pants, invited him out for an evening on the Town, this was not what Julian imagined. Still, he had missed Pen's escapades these last five years. He just hadn't expected to be thrown into one of his cousin's harebrained schemes less than a week after returning to England.

Pen bolted straight up in his seat, kicking Julian's leg in the process. "There! She is the one."

Julian's gaze followed the direction of Pen's extended finger. "Her? Do you wish Grandfather to cry imposter the moment we reach Yorkshire?"

"Imposter?" Pen twirled a lock of his hair around his finger, studying the woman. "What fault do you find with this one?"

"The tucked up skirts? The generous display of bosom despite the frigid temperatures...?"

"Oh, quite right. Too daft to protect herself from the elements. She will never do."

*Jiminy.* The woman wasn't the daft one. "She's a lightskirt, Pen. Did she even come from the theatre?"

His cousin shrugged. "I don't know. I was woolgathering." He slumped against the seat with a weary sigh. "Won't you please lend your assistance? You have a better eye for these matters."

Julian would like to tell him to go to the devil and abandon this fool's mission, but his cousin inspired sympathy. Pen had never possessed the wherewithal to know when he was being manipulated.

Their grandfather was on his deathbed.

Again.

It was the fourth time this year, to hear Pen tell it. And at the end of each swift journey to Danby Castle, Pen had found the duke hearty and hale. Danby was especially lively during his speeches on the importance of marriage and offspring to give a man's life meaning.

Julian expected he was in for his own lecture when he traveled to Yorkshire at the end of the week, but he didn't mind. He'd been uncertain he would ever see his grandfather again when he left for Calcutta. A dressing down for his continued state of bachelorhood seemed a small penance to pay for another Christmas with his grandfather.

"Please, Julian. Grandfather needs reassurance before he's in the ground."

The duke wanted to meet his great grandchildren before he was too senile to remember his own name—or worse, six feet under. Not that Julian expected the formidable Duke of Danby to succumb to either fate anytime soon.

Pen's plan to hire an actress to play his betrothed was doomed, but he refused to listen. He was almost as stubborn as the duke. Julian would try to reason with his cousin later, when he was no longer frozen to the bone and bored. "I will help you, but as soon as I determine a likely candidate, we are leaving for Rendell's."

Pen's enthusiasm returned, and he wiggled back into position to watch for actresses leaving the theatre.

"Why not make a real match and be done with the matter?" Julian asked.

His cousin grimaced as if chewing a mouthful of horseshoe tacks. Julian had never seen such a pained expression cross his countenance.

"Must I take a wife, Jul?"

“Of course you must. Who else is to provide an heir to the earldom?”

“Blasted Miriam and Harriet! Neither one had the decency to be born a male.”

Pen jabbed his finger in Julian’s direction. “Do you know they’ve always been selfish, those two? Ever since they were babies. Crying and keeping me awake. Not to mention messing their nappies and contaminating the nursery.”

“That’s what babies do.”

“Well, they are an inconsiderate lot.”

Julian chuckled. His cousin might complain often about his sisters, but Pen loved them. Cousin Miriam, on the other hand, was less fond of her brother. After all, Pen had stolen her birthright: blonde curls passed down from their mother.

The backdoor of the theatre eased open and a hooded figure peeked out. Julian guessed it was a woman, given her cautious exit. She swung her head in both directions as if checking the deserted alley before hurrying out the door. Sensible dark skirts and a cloak covered every inch of skin, setting her apart from the prostitutes that had been passing through the alley all evening. She lowered her head, pulling the hood down to hide her face, and walked briskly in their direction. A large case was clutched against her side.

Julian nodded. “She is the one.”

Pen tipped his head to the side as the woman approached. “Are you certain?”

“I am, and I have done my part. Let’s make our way to the gaming hell now. I have grown impatient with this clandestine operation.”

Pen rapped sharply on the roof and opened the carriage door.

One of his footmen moved into the woman’s path before she reached the end of the alley. “Pardon me, miss.”

She froze like a rabbit poised to dash away. “Step away from me, sir.” She readjusted her grip on the sturdy looking bag.

“Lord Penlow would like a word.”

“I said step away.” The poor dear was frightened out of her wits, being accosted the minute she exited the alley, and who could blame her?

“Make it quick,” Pen called to his man. “We have somewhere to be.”

When the footman turned his head toward Pen’s voice, she took advantage of

the distraction and tried to bolt around him.

"Stop her!" Pen sprang from his seat and scrambled down the carriage steps.

"Stop her now!"

His servant lunged, hugging his arms around hers and knocking her bag from her hand. It hit the ground with a thud.

"My bag!" Her panicked voice echoed off the building.

"Quiet her," Pen said. "Put her in the carriage."

She flailed in the man's arms. "Release me at once, or I swear I will scream."

The servant clamped a hand over her mouth as she drew in a deep breath then lifted her off her feet. She kicked and wriggled until he almost dropped her. Her hood fell away to reveal a cascade of dark hair.

Julian shot out of the carriage. "What are you doing? You said nothing about staging an abduction."

Her gaze darted toward him, her eyes wide, and her thrashing increased.

"See what you've done? You've frightened her." Pen lunged for her legs. "Let's put her in the carriage before someone discovers us."

Pen and his servant struggled to toss her in the carriage before Pen clambered inside after her. "Come on, Julian."

Julian hesitated a moment, snatched up her bag, and darted into the carriage, closing the door behind him. The carriage lurched onto the street.

Pen was sitting on the bench holding his nose and moaning.

"What happened here?"

Pen only moaned louder, so Julian looked to the girl for answers and found her huddled on the floor against the carriage wall. Her shallow, rapid breathing was amplified in the small space.

"Good Lord, this will take some doing to make right," Julian mumbled. He placed her bag on the bench and reached a hand toward her. "No one is going to hurt you, miss. I'm afraid there has been a misunderstanding." As he leaned in to help her off the floor, she shot out her leg and struck him in the center of his chest.

"Oof!" He slammed into the carriage door and banged his side on the edge of the bench. Fiery pain sliced into his ribs.

With a battle cry, she barreled toward the exit, trying to run him over to escape. Her heel ground into his thigh. He grabbed her ankle and cursed. She lost her balance. Dropping like a lead ball, her knee crashed into his groin.

Julian hissed as pinpricks of light danced in the blackness, clouding his vision. His gut wrenched and nausea welled up at the back of his throat. He would never trust his judgment again. He'd chosen a wildcat.

As the waves of excruciating pain eventually receded, he became aware she was no longer struggling but sprawled atop him. His senses sharpened until the softness of her breasts pressed against him distracted him from the enduring ache in his groin. The warmth of her hands resting against his chest penetrated his waistcoat. Her face was inches from his, her lips parted and glistening in the light cast from the carriage lamps.

Her large eyes radiated concern. "Did I hurt you, sir?"

His brows arched in surprise. He hadn't expected her compassion after he'd just helped to steal her off the street.

"Of course you hurt him." Pen grabbed her around the waist and hauled her off Julian.

He missed her warmth at once. A frigid December wind howled outside, and he fought the urge to pull her back into his arms. He'd grown soft during his time in India, and typically timed his visits home to coincide with summer.

Pen plopped her on the bench beside him. "Do behave so we may conduct our interview and deliver you to your destination without further incident."

She scooted to the corner and folded her hands in her lap, warily looking between him and Pen. "Y-you plan to release me?"

"Of course," Pen said, "although I will require an apology first for bloodying my nose. And my cravat." He flicked his once pristine cravat that bore evidence of his injury.

"Oh, dear," she said. "If it's broken, there is time yet to set it."

When she reached for Pen, he recoiled.

"Do not touch me, you harridan."

Julian eased himself onto the opposite bench, tempted to ask if she wished to

examine his stones. "You had best not have broken me."

She lowered her head. It was too dim in the carriage to determine the color of her cheeks, but he suspected she was blushing. Perhaps he hadn't been wrong to select her on Pen's behalf. She played the role of innocent maiden well enough now.

He cursed beneath his breath. What did it matter if she could play the role Pen wanted? He couldn't allow his cousin to carry through with his plan.

"Shall we try this again?" Pen asked with an exaggerated huff of annoyance. "Please allow me to make introductions. I am Leander Thornhill, Baron Penlow, and this is my cousin, Julian Beckford. And you, my dear, are to be my wife."

### *End of Chapter*

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