

LADY AMELIA'S MESS AND A HALF

One

Jake Hillary was a keeper—keeper of his family's secret, keeper of his wayward brother, and most tragically, keeper of a hopeless love for his best friend's wife. But at least for now, he wouldn't think on the torturous evening to come of admiring Amelia from afar. His brother was due for a thrashing, and Jake planned to deliver it.

Yanking on his watch fob, he extracted the gold timepiece from his pocket. He could barely make out the hands in the dim light.

"Blast and damn."

He slipped the watch back into his pocket. There wasn't enough time to pound Daniel before the party. Instead, Jake hammered his fist against the solid door of his brother's rented room, rattling it in the frame.

"Aye!" Daniel bellowed.

Apparently, his brother had discarded common courtesy *and* manners while he was at sea, although Daniel had never been one to adhere to etiquette. Based upon his ill-mannered response, it seemed unlikely he intended to cross the room to admit Jake. Irritated, he threw the door open and barged inside.

"Dan—"

"Right there, luv." Daniel threw his head back against the chair as a blonde burrowed her face into his crotch. "Oh, yes!"

"Damnation." Jake covered his eyes and spun on his heel, cracking his elbow against the door frame. "Ouch!" He muttered another curse under his breath.

"What the hell, Jake? Haven't you heard of knocking, you reprobate?"

"I did knock. Next time I shall make more noise," he drawled. Surely all that pounding could have been heard on the other side of Mayfair. "Inform me once you have set yourself to rights."

Jake shook his head as he strolled into the corridor to wait. What a sight to stumble upon, his brother getting his butter churned. And all before dinner. It was enough to spoil his appetite.

When the foul smell from the stairwell hit him again, his lip curled. Daniel might indulge in whores and spirits, but he wasn't throwing away his fortune on rented rooms. Paper peeled from the walls in great sheets, and stains of an unknown origin splattered the scarred floor.

Smells like the bloody mews in here. Fitting, given his brother was behaving like a jackass.

After a series of bumps and muffled curses, the door flew open. His brother filled the doorway, every bare inch of him.

Jake smirked. "I asked you to summon me *after* you had dressed."

"Get in here."

Pushing away from the wall, Jake reentered the apartments. "Is your guest decent now?"

A crooked leer replaced Daniel's scowl. "Why? You want a turn?"

"Show some respect. The woman deserves at least as much for tolerating your vulgarity."

A feminine giggle drifted from the back room. "Thank you, Mr. Hillary, but I find the captain's vulgarity tolerable indeed." The young woman appeared in the threshold, her nudity now concealed with a faded ruby dress. Her lackluster hair was pinned up in a haphazard coiffure.

"Oh, my!" Her brown eyes rounded as she looked Jake up and down before turning back to Daniel. "Your brother is delicious, Captain Hillary."

Delicious? Like a meat pie? Jake coughed into his fist, uncomfortable with the nature of her compliment given there were no rules to dictate his response. Yet, he considered it bad-mannered to discount her outright. "Yes, well. Thank you."

Daniel winked at her. "You fancy the rotter, do you?"

She wandered over to Jake's brother with a smile pulling at her plump lips. "I would wager he is the most handsome of the Hillary clan."

"Aside from me."

"Aye. That goes without saying." The woman accepted the purse Daniel offered and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Same time tomorrow, sir?"

Daniel swatted her behind. "I'll send word."

Jake moved aside to allow his brother's, um... *friend* passage into the corridor.

As she moved past him, she grazed her fingers over the lapel of his jacket.

"You're definitely the pinkest of the pinks. I would be happy to pay *you* a call sometime."

Jake's smile was forced. "That's a generous offer, miss."

"Not at all, sir." She tipped her head to the side and batted her lashes, looking up at him in expectation. When Jake offered no encouragement, she heaved a sigh and sauntered to the stairway.

Daniel chuckled. "What are you about, choirboy?"

Jake closed the door and walked farther into the apartments. "I cannot decide which smell is more offensive, the corridor or you. Get cleaned up. You haven't much time."

"Time for what?" Daniel flopped onto the tattered chair in a perfect display of insolence, among other things.

Jake looked up at the ceiling to avoid catching another glimpse of his brother. "I have it on good authority you received the invitation to the dinner party Mother has planned in your honor, although you did not bother responding. *Again*. Now, get dressed. The guests will be arriving in..." He checked his watch again. "Forty-five minutes."

"Is that tonight?"

"Yes, and you can either make yourself presentable, or I will drag your smelly arse across Town as is. Either way, you are attending."

Daniel smirked. "I'd like to see you attempt it. Come on. Make me attend Mother's boring dinner party."

Jake cracked his knuckles and rolled his neck. "Must we go through this *every* time? You learned nothing from the last time I thrashed you. Why do I bother?"

Daniel threw his head back and laughed. "I only vaguely recall the incident now, but you had the advantage since I was foxed."

"You're not far from that now," Jake said dryly. "Put some clothes on. Mother has expended a lot of effort on your behalf. Try to show a little gratitude."

“Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,” Daniel mocked, a spark of enjoyment brightening his eyes. “One would think you’re still in leading strings.”

“You must discover novel ways to abuse me. I grow weary of the same insults.” Jake refused to be bothered by his older sibling. He had too many serious concerns on his mind at the moment, such as not making a cake of himself in front of Amelia this evening.

“Would you hurry?” he snapped when Daniel made no move to ready himself.

“Oh, very well.” His brother dragged his carcass from the chair and lumbered toward the back room. “Who will be in attendance? Anyone interesting?”

Jake folded his arms and rocked heel-to-toe, toe-to-heel, impatient with Daniel’s tardiness. “No one important. Unless you count your *family*.”

Daniel stuck his head through the doorway, a jaunty grin in place. “I said anyone interesting. Do you ever listen?”

“If you would only pay a visit to our parents when you return to London, Mother wouldn’t orchestrate these affairs.”

“Mother would be as happy to forget me as she is her past. She has ulterior motives for this evening’s event.”

Jake didn’t bother arguing this time. It was true their mother was too sensitive to her bourgeois origins, but she desired the best for her children. Sometimes Jake wondered if Daniel’s decision to captain his own ship had been designed simply to upset her. If so, his efforts were jolly successful.

Daniel walked from the back room dressed in his best and looking like a proper gentleman. Of course, he still smelled like a barrel of rum, but Jake couldn’t do anything to correct that unfortunate problem. The acrid scent emanated from Daniel’s skin.

“Pay Mother one call when you arrive, and you needn’t trouble yourself with her motives,” Jake said.

“I would like to see how quickly you would run home to Mum after being at sea. The first thing I need is the touch of a woman, and *not* the one who gave birth to me. Unlike you, I’m not content to dote on Mother.”

“Sod off.”

Jake craved a woman's touch, too, but not just any female. Daniel knew well where his allegiances lay. Unfortunately, the woman he desired didn't want him. And thanks to his maniacal rant in her foyer months earlier, she no longer spoke to him either.

Daniel donned his coat and adjusted his cravat. "How is Lady Audley these days? Enticed her to your bed yet?"

Searing heat crept up Jake's neck to the tips of his ears. "My personal matters are none of your concern." The last thing he wished to disclose was how he had ruined any chance for an attachment to Amelia while his brother had been abroad.

Daniel's eyebrows arched in question. "I will take your grumbling as a no. Pity. What has it been? A year?" He strolled to the outer door and tugged it open. "Perhaps *I* will try my hand with the lady tonight."

"The hell you will."

The thought of Daniel touching Amelia under *any* circumstances set Jake's blood on fire, but after what he'd walked in on a moment ago... "Just stay clear of the lady. She deserves better than the likes of you."

"Like you, Mummy's Boy?" Daniel chuckled as he disappeared into the darkened corridor. "I tire of waiting for you to woo the lady. I say tonight, may the better man win the lovely widow."

Jake stalked after his brother. "I am the better man."



Amelia, Lady Audley, leaned against the carriage seat, dreading the coming evening. She would rather be any place than a guest in Jake Hillary's home, but she couldn't snub the Hillarys, not after their generous donation to the children this afternoon. Besides, Mrs. Hillary had always been exceptionally kind to her. Amelia could face Jake this evening for his mother's sake, even if the task required herculean strength.

Amelia's dearest friend and silent partner in the foundling house renovation project, Bianca Kennell, leaned forward with a frown. "Amelia, you look as if we are attending a funeral instead of a dinner party. At least *try* to appear enthused for my sake. You know how I love parties."

"I am not attending this affair for my own pleasure. Mrs. Hillary has spoken with Lady Eldridge and the Duchess of Foxhaven about the renovation. She assures me both ladies are amenable to publically lending their support, but they wish to inquire into my specific intentions."

Bibi yawned loudly, covering her mouth in a grand gesture. "Oh, pardon me. All this talk of orphans and charity is putting me into a sleeping trance."

Amelia shook her head, smiling reluctantly. She really should be more severe with Bibi, but her dramatics amused more than vexed her. "How thoughtless of me, dearest. I shall endeavor to be more stimulating in my conversation."

"Thank you." Bibi pinched both cheeks, patted her ebony curls, and then readjusted her breasts so they swelled over the neckline of her emerald gown like rising dough. "How do I look?"

"You look lovely, as always."

Bibi flashed a brilliant smile, a wicked twinkle in her eye. "Good enough to eat?"

Amelia grinned cheekily. "Mrs. Hillary serves three-course meals. You needn't worry about anyone stuffing an apple in your mouth and serving you on a platter."

Bibi huffed and lifted her nose in the air. "You have a sharp wit tonight, Lady Audley. Try not to slice anyone to ribbons with it."

"I shall wield my weapon with care," she answered with mock graveness.

"See that you do." Bibi crossed her arms and slumped in her seat, her bottom lip protruding as she practiced her pout. "You comprehended my meaning."

Amelia lifted one shoulder, the heat of a blush flooding her cheeks. Unfortunately, she did know her friend's meaning. "Must everyone be privy to your private affairs?"

"Just because you have chosen to remain celibate does not mean I must."

Amelia hadn't chosen celibacy. Her life was simply too complicated to entertain thoughts of a liaison at the moment, and she had sworn off complications the day Jake had condemned her in her own house. She certainly didn't have time for the caliber of gentlemen Bibi took to her bed. One scoundrel had proven one too many for Amelia.

Bibi tossed her head. "What other benefit is there to being widowed if I can't

enjoy a tumble or two here and there?”

As the carriage rolled to a stop, Amelia recited a silent prayer of thanks. She didn't wish to continue this discussion.

“Do whatever you like, Bibi, but please practice discretion. I need the support of the ladies attending tonight.”

“Prudes.”

Amelia's brows lifted. “Must we hurl names at them?”

Bibi didn't answer. The footman opened the carriage door and offered her his hand. As she climbed down the steps, she tossed a look back at Amelia. “You were more fun before Jake Hillary attached that millstone of guilt around your neck.”

Amelia's heart leapt into her throat as she noted other guests alighting from their carriages or wandering into the house. “Hush, silly girl.”

She joined Bibi on the drive and they linked arms, both staring up at the massive Italianate home. Despite visiting Hillary House many times, Amelia never ceased to be amazed by the grandeur. Why, the Hillarys could house hundreds of children without ever crossing paths with a single one!

The foundlings would not have as grand a home as the wealthy landowner, but their living conditions would improve by no small amount once she had the support of a few more philanthropic souls. Of course, she couldn't approach the true holders of the purse strings, which meant she must convince their wives to do so on her behalf.

Amelia's stomach churned. Perhaps it had been a mistake to arrive with her friend. Lady Kennell had been deemed bad *ton* by several of the ladies who had developed a disliking for her. She hazarded a sideways glance. Bibi flashed an enthusiastic smile, causing Amelia's heart to soften. When she looked at Bibi, all she saw was the loyal friend who had been with her since childhood. *To the devil with those ladies.*

She hugged Bibi closer to her side and whispered in her ear, “Thank you for accompanying me tonight.”

“Where else would I be?”

Indeed. Bibi remained Amelia's constant ally in whatever ventures she

undertook.

As they approached the front doors propped open to admit the elegantly attired guests, Amelia patted her dearest friend's hand. "Are you ready to face the *ton*?"

"Face them? I am prepared to conquer, my dear."

Amelia laughed softly. "Well, go easy on them for my sake."

If she had any hope of helping the orphans, she needed the ladies to view them as benefactresses of a worthy cause, not the wanton widows of Mayfair.



Jake tried to focus on the conversation between Lord Hollister and his brother, but his attention strayed to the drawing room door every few seconds. Amelia had yet to arrive.

He must stand vigilant if he wished to spare her from Daniel's boorish company, which meant enduring his brother's ill-manners himself. Daniel was not one to alter his conduct for polite society. If possible, he became even more offensive in such circumstances. Jake only hoped this time he didn't send their mother to her bed for days afterwards.

Lord Hollister inclined his head, preparing to take his leave at last. "Good evening, gentlemen. I trust your stay in Town will be pleasant, Captain Hillary."

Daniel wiggled his eyebrows at Jake. "I'm certain my time in London will be exceptionally pleasant."

"Over my dead body," Jake said through a tight smile.

His brother's mouth twitched in amusement.

Lord Hollister wandered away then paused to scan the room, likely searching for another unfortunate guest to regale with tales of his hounds. The marquess moved toward a group of gentlemen clustered in a far corner. Jake chuckled as panic lit Lord Gilford's eyes when he noted the gentleman's approach.

"Egads!" Daniel rammed his fingers through his hair and released a loud, groaning sigh. "Does the man bore *everyone* to tears?"

Lord Hollister was out of earshot, but a few twitters indicated guests standing close by had overheard.

"Mostly." Jake handed his brother a drink.

Daniel took a swig then sniffed the glass. "What the hell *is* this?"

"Lower your voice," Jake scolded. "It's cordial water. Mother insists you wait until after dinner to hit the brandy."

Daniel sampled the drink again and snarled. "This tastes like piss," he whispered. "Bring me a drink suited for a man, not some blasted chit."

"Retrieve it yourself." Trusting in his brother's negative review of the beverage, Jake placed his untouched cordial water on a passing footman's tray. Daniel followed suit.

A flash of color at the drawing room entrance caught Jake's eye, and he turned in time to see their sister and her husband arriving. His heart warmed as it always did in her presence. He nodded in their direction. "This party should gain more life now. Lana has arrived."

Daniel glanced up. "Good God, she's become fat."

Jake elbowed him in the side. "She is with child, half-wit."

Their younger sister's smile widened when her sight landed on them, and before her husband could escort her, she hurried across the room and launched herself into Daniel's arms.

"You're back," she cried, hugging him vigorously.

Despite Daniel's sullen demeanor up to that point, he chuckled and hugged Lana in return. Lifting her feet off the ground, he placed a loud smack on her cheek. "Pumpkin pie, so good to see you."

Jake shook his head, wholly entertained by his audacious siblings and happy at least he knew how to conduct himself in public. If their mother had expected either Lana or Daniel to behave with any decorum this evening, she would be disappointed.

Lana pulled back when Daniel returned her to her feet and wrinkled her nose. "You know I hate that name, *Danny Boy*."

Jake smirked at her use of their brother's hated moniker. Served him right for teasing her. "I was just sharing your good news with Daniel," he said.

Their brother snorted. "Untrue. He said you had grown stout with marriage when clearly you are with child. Little Jakie can be quite the cur."

Lana rolled her eyes but grinned all the same. "Yes, Jake is the culprit, I'm sure." She placed her hand on her husband's arm when he joined their group.

"Drew, I would like to introduce you to my brother, Captain Daniel Hillary. Daniel, this is my husband, Lord Andrew Forest."

Daniel nodded, his dark frown returning. In Forest's less domesticated days, everyone had known him, at least by reputation. This would not be the first time their paths had crossed, but for once Daniel held his tongue.

"It is a pleasure, my lord."

"Likewise." Forest placed his hand on the small of Lana's back. "If you will excuse me, lady and gentlemen, I have a matter to discuss with your father."

"Wait. I'll come with you." Lana linked arms with her husband to halt his retreat then leaned forward to speak to Jake and Daniel as if Forest couldn't overhear. "Papa seeks his opinion on another bit of horseflesh he is considering acquiring. They appear to be in competition to see who can make the most frivolous purchases this year. I declare, our mews would be bursting at the seams if not for my vigilance."

Forest shrugged good-naturedly. "It's my only vice."

"Well, when you state it that way, I suppose I have no cause for complaint, do I?"

Forest winked. "Satisfaction *is* my aim, love."

An attractive flush infused Lana's cheeks. Since it was no longer Jake's calling to protect his little sister from scoundrels like Forest—unless, of course, she requested his assistance, in which case he would gladly step forward—he overlooked the veiled comment. The firm slant to Daniel's jaw indicated he might not be as magnanimous this evening.

"Neither of you may take your leave before you've danced with me," Lana said and blew a kiss their direction before wandering away arm-in-arm with Forest.

Once they were across the room, Daniel whirled on Jake. "How did that mutt-monger end up married to our little sister?"

"It's a long story," Jake said with a sigh. He didn't wish to rehash his failure to safeguard their dear sister from one of the biggest satyrs in Town. He still hadn't forgiven himself. But he had to admit Forest made her happy, and by all accounts, the gent had reformed. Any scandalous whispers about the former rake now

included his wife and their penchant for dark corners.

Jake glanced toward the doorway. What was taking Amelia so long? Most of the guests had already arrived. Perhaps Daniel would forget about his interest in luring her to his bed if Jake could send him sniffing in another direction.

“Father keeps brandy in his study. Shall we help ourselves?”

“Brilliant suggestion.” Daniel headed for the side door.

Jake made to follow but froze in place.

Amelia lingered in the threshold, a cool smile sliding across her perfect lips.

Hellfire. He might have just swallowed his tongue. Taking a deep breath to shore up his courage, he squared his shoulders. Tonight he would approach her, because surrendering her to Daniel was out of the question.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Well, Jake was a fool, and Amelia’s beauty rivaled any angel’s. He pulled at his cravat and rolled his neck. Hopefully, that was the only similarity she shared with the heavenly creatures, but with his luck, she too had a taste for vengeance and a fondness for smiting.

End of Chapter

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