

Peregrine Lochley was stuck. As the third son of Viscount Lochley, a celebrated dandy, and a man known about Town as Lochley the Last, Peregrine was not accustomed to these sorts of situations. He'd been a damn fool to have his curricle brought to the far reaches of hell—otherwise known as Hemshawe—and he'd been an even bigger fool to insist upon driving it about after the heavy rains of the night before.

He jumped down from the box and walked back to examine the wheel, rubbing one gloved knuckle over his chin. The lower half of the sphere had sunk deep into mud on the side of the so-called road. What the devil did Bertie see in Hellshawe? Why couldn't his friend have rented a house somewhere civilized, like York or Brighton, or—hell—what was the matter with London?

Lochley knew what the devil was the matter with London, and that was why he was in Hellshawe. He didn't have to like it. He peered at the wheel with some consternation. He had no footman with him. How was he to free the wheel from the mud? Perhaps his hack could manage it.

Lochley walked to the front of the conveyance, avoiding the puddles of muck as best he could. These boots were new, and he did not want to soil them. When he reached his hack, the mare eyed him dubiously.

“Now, my lovely, don't look at me like that. Just because you could not free us a moment ago does not mean you cannot manage it now.” He took hold of her halter. “Come along.” What was it his coachman always said? “Hup. Hup, now. Give it your best effort, darling.”

The horse blew out a breath and shook her head. Lochley narrowed his eyes. Just like a woman to be stubborn. He certainly knew how to deal with stubborn women.

“An extra measure of oats for you if you manage it,” he cooed. “Maybe I can even manage to slip you into that bay stallion's stall for an

hour or so. I saw you eyeing him. You and he could become better acquainted.”

He gave a light jerk on the halter, added a *hup*, and—wonder of wonders—the hack stepped forward. At least, she attempted to step forward. The curricle creaked and groaned and didn’t move even an inch.

“Bloody hell!” Lochley swore under his breath so as not to alarm the horse. Out loud, he said, “One more time, my lovely. Those oats and that handsome stallion are waiting.”

“Does she ever answer you?”

Lochley jumped and spun around at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. A woman stood on the side of the road with a basket on one arm and her other hand planted on her hip. She wore a simple day dress of an indiscriminate shade of brown with a similarly colored shawl about her shoulders. The fashion of her straw hat was little better, and though it protected her pale skin from the sun, her auburn hair had escaped most of its confines, and long wisps of it blew in the breeze around her face. She was of medium height, and even the shawl and modest neckline didn’t hide the generous swells of her bosom.

Not that he was looking.

“She keeps her own countenance.” Lochley gave the wench a charming smile that elicited sighs from most women of his acquaintance.

This wench did not even blink. “Are you stuck?”

“Eh?” He looked back at his curricle, having forgotten for a moment his predicament. “Oh, that. I don’t think the wheel can be extricated. This horse either hasn’t the will or the strength.”

She stepped closer, cocking her head to peer at his horse. “And even the promise of sexual favors with a handsome stallion did not persuade her?”

“You heard that, did you?”

She made a noncommittal sound, reached out a hand to the mare, and stroked her nose.

The woman was almost beside him now, and Lochley watched as the auburn wisps of hair turned gold and then red in the sunlight. One brushed against her cheek, contrasting sharply with the pale skin. Unusual for a ginger to have such perfect, unfreckled skin.

“What is her name?”

He'd been admiring the curve of the wench's cheek and didn't hear her question until she looked directly at him with blue eyes so dark and large they might have been twin sapphires in the queen's crown.

“Who?” he asked.

“Your horse,” she said slowly, as though he were an imbecile. Which he was. How else to account for the fact that he stood on a muddy road in the middle of the goddamn country ogling a country miss? He didn't like the country—not its roads, not its trees and sheep, not its ladies.

Lochley turned his attention to his horse. “I can't say I know her name.”

“She's not yours?”

“She's mine. I suppose I never took the time to learn her name.”

“That's not surprising,” she murmured.

Before he could ask what she meant by that, she walked right past him. He followed her around to the rear of the curricula.

“Oh, this is bad indeed. Whatever possessed you to go for a ride this morning? You should have waited until afternoon when the ground had dried.”

“That's all very well to say now.” Of course, Bertie and his sister had given him the same advice. Lochley hadn't listened to them, and he didn't have to listen to this wench either.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“At Friar's House with the Gages. Do you know them?”

Her eyes skidded away. “Not very well. I know the house. Everyone knows the house. It's about a two-mile walk from here.”

Lochley considered. He could walk the two miles, though he was no great walker. He could also unhitch the horse and ride her back. Either way, he'd be forced to eat crow when Gage learned his dire predictions about the conditions of the road had proved correct.

On the other hand, how was he to free the curricle wheel? "What I need is a man to push the wheel on this side while I prod the horse on the other."

"That might very well work," she agreed. "But you don't need a man." She set her basket on the road. "If you push the wheel, I will take charge of the horse."

Lochley was momentarily speechless. No woman he knew in Town would have ever suggested such a thing. No woman in Town so much as lifted a finger unless it was to signal for more champagne.

The wench didn't wait for his consent. She lifted her muddy skirts and trudged back through the mud to the horse. "I am ready when you are!" she called.

Lochley eyed the wheel then his riding gloves. They were pristine gloves made of soft kid leather that perfectly matched his buff riding breeches.

"Sir?"

"One moment. I must remove my gloves." He pulled them off and stuffed them in his coat pocket. Perhaps he should remove his coat as well. Lochley did not want mud on the superfine, and the coat had been made by Weston himself. But if he removed the coat, his waistcoat and shirt would be vulnerable. The waistcoat was silk and the shirt fine linen.

"Damn it all to Hellshawe," he cursed, and reached for the wheel. At the last moment, he had another idea, and balancing on one leg, he used a booted foot to shove at the wheel.

"Are you pushing?" the wench asked.

"Yes!" he gritted out.

He could hear her encouraging the mare. The curricule creaked and groaned.

“It’s not moving,” she called back.

Lochley wiped his brow though it wasn’t beaded with sweat. “The wheel is too deep in the mud. It will have to be dug out.” He would not enjoy that helping of crow, but he had no other option but to return to Friar’s House and ask to borrow one of Bertie’s grooms and a shovel.

“Let me know when you are ready to try again,” she said.

Lochley peered around the curricule. She still stood by the mare, patting the horse’s nose. What was she about? Hadn’t he just said the wheel would have to be dug out?

Her head came up, and her sapphire eyes landed on him. “You are not digging,” she said.

“Digging?” He put a hand to his cravat. “Miss, this coat was made by Weston. I don’t suppose you know who that is, but I will not ruin what is considered by many to be a national treasure by digging in the mud.”

One of her auburn brows lifted. “I know Weston. He’s an overpriced seamstress.”

Lochley inhaled sharply.

Amusement lit her eyes. “Will you challenge me to a duel or do you worry a glove flicked at my face might become irreparably damaged?”

The wench was mocking him. A country miss with no sense of fashion, no style, and no connections was mocking *him*—Peregrine Lochley.