

BARELY PROPER

by
Shannon Donnelly

For Hilary —

Thanks for the time to get it right.

"The third of Donnelly's "Proper" regencies is simply superb, with subtly nuanced characters and a cleverly constructed plot that is bound to please readers who enjoy expertly written traditional regencies." – John Charles, Booklist, ALA

"Make a dash to the nearest bookstore and buy a copy of BARELY PROPER. It's a wonderful, uplifting story." – Jani Brooks, Romance Reviews Today

"Readers will be cheering for these two eccentric sweethearts to win the day and reap the rewards of their love." -- Teresa Roebuck, Romantic Times

CHAPTER ONE

"Well, of all the bloody..." Terrance let the curse drift away as he went down on one knee. Dunscombe lay dead. Shot. And not in the duel that ought to have taken place. Should he be relieved that he would not be facing a pistol himself this dawn, or irritated at the man for tuning an affair of honor into a mess? Or simply happy that it was not himself lifeless in the dawn? He scowled at the uncomfortable mixture of swirling emotions and pushed them aside as irrelevant. And quite useless. As usual.

His horse, skittish at the coppery smell of blood, snorted and danced a step away, but Terrance held fast to the reins, ignoring the nervous tugs as he stared at the body, still not quite able to take in the sight. He had seen death before—how could one not in parts of London where sin ruled. But he had never seen the life gone from someone known to him. And it shook him more than he wanted to admit.

Thankfully, no one was here to see such a weakness in him. It would certainly have ruined his reputation as a care-for-nobody. But what did he do now?

He had not been a friend to Dunscombe—the man had been too much the braggart. And too damn cruel. But Terrance could not bring himself to simply leave the fellow. There was also Lady Dunscombe to think of still. Though he doubted she'd be grief stricken, this would be a shock. Only, cowardly as it was, he did not want to be the one who took her the news—it might give her reason to start clinging again to him.

So what did he do?

Leave, stay? Wait for someone else to arrive?

His mind stumbled across the questions, as tangled as if snagged in brambles.

Blazes, but he ought to have drunk more last night—or less. However, he'd wanted a steady hand and a careless manner this morning. He had never fought a duel before.

His mouth crooked. It looked as if he still had that experience before him—and the pure joy of life surged up from his blood to warm his skin before sinking deep again.

Only the faintest guilt stained it.

If he had not come to Dunscombe Abbey, this might not have happened.

Becoming aware of the wet grass soaking through the knee of his buckskin breeches to chill his skin and the incongruous and cheerful trill of a lark, Terrance rose.

Something had to be done about Dunscombe. Unexpectedly, he found himself sorry for the poor sod.

The man lay face down in thick turf. An ugly hole, its edges dark with blood, tore the gray fabric of his greatcoat just below the six rows of shoulder capes, which stirred in the breeze, almost giving the appearance of life. Judging by the lack of bloodletting, the man must have died at once, before his heart could pump more than a beat or two.

Who the blazes had shot him?

The wound had the look of a single ball from a pistol, not a shotgun's blast from any shooting party. Poacher set snares. Gypsies kept to the weapons they could afford—clubs or knives. And Terrance could not imagine Dunscombe pulling the trigger to have shot himself. The man had held himself in too high a regard, and even with all his boasted athletic skills, he never could have managed a trick such as shooting himself in the back.

Ought he turn the fellow over?

His stomach clenched at the thought of staring into Dunscombe's blank eyes. Besides, there could be no mistaking that the abrasive personality once titled Lord Dunscombe no longer animated the remains of flesh and bone. Someone else would have to make the verdict official, however. Terrance considered his part in this blasted affair ended now. Or at least it would as soon as he could hand the news to the next person he saw.

Stepping to his mount, he stroked the gelding's neck, not quite certain if the gesture steadied his horse or his own hand.

The mists that had cloaked his ride to the field that lay south of the Norman tower and west of Dunscombe Abbey stirred, lifting and thinning with the breeze into gray swirls. The sky had lightened though the weak sun had yet to warm the day. It looked a typical Somerset spring morn—cold, damp, and dismal.

Bloody all, but he ought to have stayed in London. His mouth crooked at that. When had a Winslow ever kept away from trouble?

Which is how he had ended in Lady Dunscombe's bed, and that, in turn, had led to this damn, damp field. Well, with her husband gone she was now a rich widow. And he hoped the hell this would at last give her a new direction for her attentions, other than toward him.

A flash of regret stirred in him at the memory of ample breasts in his hands and her softness wrapped around him. But he thought of that last scene with her—the tears, the petulant demands, the accusations.

None of that mattered now, thank god.

Rubbing his temples, his mouth dry and sour from last night's brandy, he glanced around the field again as if that would show him a way clear of this tangle.

The field—a clearing in the woods, really—seemed eerily still in the thinning mists—a bit of unploughed, unclaimed land, too small and rocky to farm. He could not recall who even

owned the land, but it had by tradition become the locale for illicit meetings, such as an illegal duel, which required utter discretion.

Bloody idiot notion these duels.

Pity that he and Dunscombe had not settled this last night with fists. Damn Cale for stepping in to second Dunscombe, insisting he would act for Dunscombe, if need be. Yet another protocol of dueling that Terrance had not known: seconds had to be of the same rank as their principals, in case they had to act on their behalf. Which is how Terrance had ended up with Arthur Perriman—Dunscombe's foppish nephew—as his own second.

Those details had not seemed relevant last night. But now he wondered if Perriman or Cale had their own reasons to want Dunscombe dead. Had one of them shot him? Who else, after all, had known of the meet, other than the two principals and their seconds?

Well, it wasn't up to him to sort out any of that.

Leading his nervous mount away from the body, he decided he would ride to Halsage and notify Samuels, the innkeeper of The Four Feathers. Samuels, in turn, could notify the local constabulary. The village lay half a mile closer than Dunscombe Abbey, and someone from there could deal with Dunscombe's mortal remains. Lady Dunscombe—or Perriman himself, now that his uncle lay dead—would have to manage from there.

After that, he would find himself a soft bed to sink into and not rise for the rest of the day.

Blazes, how long had it been since he had slept? A day? Two? The events of the past few days—the trip to Dunscombe Abbey, the tearful confrontation with Lady Dunscombe, the argument with her husband—blurred into images that left his head pounding and his shoulders tight.

Perhaps he ought to swear off anything in petticoats.

He was still thinking that when he neared the woods at the edge of the field. He tossed the reins over his mount's head, but a glimmer of sun slid through the swirling mists and glinted on something in the grass. Bending down, he reached into the rough grass, unevenly cropped by grazing animals, and his gloved fingers closed around the hard, curved handle of a pistol. He straightened with it in his grip.

Silver filigree gleamed on the mahogany stock and on the wicked length of the barrel; there could be no mistaking the deadly shape and elegant balance for anything but a dueling pistol.

He lifted the barrel closer and the sharp sulfuric bite of gunpowder filled his nostrils, confirming his suspicions. Fired. Recently, too. Dragging off one glove, he wrapped his fingers around the metal of the barrel—not fired so recently as to leave it warm, however.

Turning, he glanced back at Dunscombe's body.

Ten paces, he guessed. From the woods to Dunscombe. An apt enough dueling distance. Someone really had done more than dislike Dunscombe. Someone had hated him enough to lie in wait and murder him.

The morning chill deepened, slipping under Terrance's coat and neckcloth to wrap around his throat like a cold hand.

A pheasant startled up from the shrubbery, and Terrance spun around, pulse fast now, as the bird's wings beat the air in a frightened flurry. Lifting its head, Terrance's gelding nickered an inquiry. Terrance heard the hoofbeats as well—someone approaching at a cautious canter. He turned toward the sound. The horse appeared from the woods, already slowing its pace as its rider dragged on the reins and halted the animal, awkward and abrupt.

Terrance at once recognized the thin figure on the flashy chestnut—Arthur Perriman. Who else would wear a yellow-stripped waistcoat, of all things, and a blindingly bright green coat to a

duel? He would have thought protocol would have had something to say about dark colors being far more appropriate.

Perriman shared his uncle's blond coloring, but nothing else showed their blood ties. Where Dunscombe had been a tall, athletic man—even in his early fifties—with a hard face and rough manners, Perriman padded his coat for broader shoulders, affected a lisp to match his almost feminine features, and aspired to the refinement of a London dandy.

He sat his horse badly as always, but the sight of his uncle dead seemed to startle him from his usual slouch into rigid shock. His face drained of color until it looked whiter than his breeches and boot tops.

Terrance strode toward him, pistol still in hand, leading his horse and glad enough to be able to give this over to a relative.

"Perriman," he called, trying to get the fellow to focus on something other than the sight of death.

Twisting, Perriman's hand jerked and his horse tossed its head and danced under the suddenly tight rein. After a glance at Terrance, he looked back at Dunscombe and to Terrance again, before blurting out, his voice reedy, high and breaking, "Gads, but you shot him!"

Impatience flooded Terrance. "Don't be an idiot!"

Perriman seemed not to take in the words, for he stabbed a shaking hand, gloved in pale green, toward the pistol in Terrance's grip, startling his horse again. "You murdered him!"

Jaw clenched, Terrance sought to check his temper, and he ground out, "Oh, for...this isn't some two-penny sheet story! And I..."

"You'll hang for this!"

Scowling, Terrance strode forward. "Don't be so bloody stupid. I didn't..."

"Stay away from me. I...I mean it!"

Terrance stopped and glared at the man, his eyes narrowed and his temper almost lost. "Blazes, but I'm half sorry someone didn't shoot you instead! Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to..."

"What—shoot me?" Perriman's hands tightened even more on his reins and the flashy chestnut flung up its head. "You're a murderer!"

His voice rose to a shrill pitch, setting his sweating, prancing horse to small, half-rears, and Terrance had to hold tight to keep his own mount in order.

Suddenly, Perriman's horse swung around and, haunches bunched, gallop into the woods. Terrance was hard put to judge just who had bolted—Perriman or his high-strung chestnut.

"Damn fool," he muttered from between clenched teeth.

He almost let the man go, but frantic shouts drifted to him on the morning breeze, "Murder! Murder's been done!"

"Oh, blazes!"

Flinging down the pistol, Terrance swung up on his gelding. If he didn't stop this flow of hysteria, the fellow would cause no end of trouble. Digging in his heels, he dropped the reins and his horse sprang after Perriman's.

The animal's stride lengthened. Hooves thudded against the turf, and shadows engulfed them as they gained the woods. Leafless branches slapped at his face, raw as whips. The wind stung tears from his eyes, and tore off his hat. He leaned closer to his horse's neck, letting the animal weave a path between oaks, ash, and apple trees. And he hoped like hell he didn't happen across any rabbit holes—it had been too long since he had hunted these woods as a lad, and he no longer knew the safest paths.

Why in blazes could not someone else have come across Dunscombe's body first? Why had he thought to arrive early for this damn meet!

But he knew the answers—he had wanted to be there, composed and nonchalant. He had wanted to have already hidden every tremor at the possibility that he faced his own mortality.

So much for putting on a good show—it had left him looking as if he had shot Dunscombe. Well, he ought to know by now that his course never ran easy.

But he wasn't about to allow a prancing dandy such as Perriman to make matters impossible. No, he'd muffle the man's delirium before it got out of hand.

With a burst of light, woods gave way to an open lane and fields already left barren for winter's kiss. Terrance drew rein, his horse plunging to a halt, blowing hard, but still dancing and ready to run. In the now-lifting fog, Perriman's green coat and his horse's red coloring flashed down the lane to the left as the horse galloped hard away. Perriman, too, had lost his hat in his mad dash, and he lay forward as if clinging to his horse's neck to keep from falling and letting the animal run wild.

If Perriman held to the lanes, that was the long way back to Dunscombe Abbey.

Terrance smiled.

Wheeling his mount, he dropped the reins again and spurred his horse to a gallop. Two strides later, the gelding handily jumped the hedge set between lane and pasture and set off again. Perriman's horse might know its way home on the roads, but Terrance knew the countryside. He had grown up riding these fields, for Winslow Park lay not five miles away. And if he cut through the edge of the woods there, he could reach the crossroad before Perriman did.

At least he hoped he could.

And he would pound some sense into that dammed fellow with some hard words or hard fists if need be.

Another hedge loomed before him and his mount tore over it, jumping flat and clever. Hooves pounded packed dirt as Terrance let the gelding open his stride. The woods that marked the edges of Winslow Park rose up, and he galloped into them, jumped his horse across a stream and turned left.

As he had expected from his memories, another hedge lay at the top of a sloping rise. It would be a straight quarter-mile before he'd be at the crossroads.

With a click of his tongue against his teeth, he urged his horse up the incline. The gelding had slowed, but responded now by digging in with his hindquarters. *Fast at brush, slow at timber*. His horse had hunted enough to know that without any help from him, but the gallop had half blown the gelding by now. Still, he had enough to best Perriman's flashy but narrow Hyde Park mount.

His horse pushed off before the hedge, jumping from further back than wise for a wider jump. They cleared the Hawthorne.

And from mid-air, Terrance saw the yawning ditch on the far side.

Too late.

The hedge had hidden it from view, else he would have checked his speed and ridden to jump close enough to get them safe over.

His horse saw it, too, for he felt the gelding stretch. His mount twisted, struggling to clear the ditch, and Terrance's legs tightened as he willed his strength to his horse. He could do no more.

In the next instant, hooves struck soft dirt.

The impact shuddered through the gelding and into Terrance, and for two heartbeats, he

thought they'd made it. Breathing hard, the horse managed one stride up the side of the ditch, but the effort cost too much. The gelding gained the top, stumbled, went down on his knees, and fell.

Ground rushed up. Earth slammed hard into Terrance. He tasted dirt, and the scrape of it stung his cheek. In the next breath, a weight crashed onto him—his horse, half-rolling, pushing him into the soft ground with a heavy grunt.

The gelding struggled upright, and as he shifted his weight to rise, something snapped and cracked in Terrance's leg. White agony shot through him, tearing loose a strangled cry. He lay still in the quiet morning, sweating in the chill, his lungs empty of air.

Pain sharpened everything: the gelding, now on his feet and steaming hot, shook himself like a wet dog and glanced around, seeming almost surprised. Wind brushed cold across Terrance's cheeks. He dragged in a breath that did not quite fill his empty chest, and he fought the panic of not being able to find any air. It would come—keep it shallow for now. His face burned. His arm ached. But his leg hurt as if someone had stuck a hot poker through it. His stomach churned, but he had not enough energy to turn and spill out its contents.

Blackness edged his vision. Shutting his eyes, he clenched his teeth to fight it. And he focused on the one thought that might keep him conscious—just what bloody idiot had dug a ditch there since he'd last been home?

*

Sylvain Harwood heard the hard pounding of galloping hooves, the heavy crash, the desperate thrashing. Silence filled the air, and she stood still, listening.

She really ought to be home, not out at dawn, for she had promised her mother just yesterday not to spend all day in the woods again. But Trace had been gone from his bed in the stables this morning—no doubt courting the vixen who had caught his fancy. And she could not leave him loose—not with cub-hunting season begun to train the young hounds for hunts.

A three-legged fox, after all, did not have a chance, not even against young cub-hounds.

Thankfully, Somerset boasted few packs of hounds, and most fox hunting seasons—autumn though spring—slipped quietly past.

But a galloping horse set her worrying. Thank heavens she had heard no shrill from a huntsman's horn, nor any bay from a hound—but who else would be galloping in the woods that lay between her home and Winslow Park?

And why had she not heard the hooves gallop away again?

Her brow tightened at that. And her curiosity stirred.

She had to at least take a look. Really, she did. What if Squire Winslow or some other neighbor had taken a spill? It would not do to leave someone lying there who might need aid.

Still, she kept her steps cautious as any fox's, and she kept the hood of her cloak pulled forward. No need to show herself unless she really was needed. That would only cause talk, after all. Such a nuisance to have to start becoming a young lady—but she had promised to make the effort. And it really would not do if tales were carried back to her parents that she had been out in the woods at dawn with only her old green cloak thrown over her faded brown woolen gown.

Stepping out from the edge of the woods, she peered over the hedge. She saw the horse first—a handsome big gray with a darker mane and tail. The horse stood on the far side of the ditch, its head down as if exhausted, and dark leather reins looped loose. One stirrup—leather and iron—lay the wrong way over the seat of the saddle instead of hanging down. Mud and dirt stained the gray's side.

Not good signs.

The horse lifted its head and glanced at her, but otherwise stood still.

She frowned at him, a suspicion already forming and a fear now tight in her chest. It could not be—not really. He was not supposed to be at home, after all. But when had Terrance Winslow ever done anything that was expected of him? And who else seemed to always be courting disasters like this?

Pulling her cloak tight, she skirted the hedge until she found a spot wide enough to push through. She slid down the ditch and scrambled up the other side. And she glimpsed him on the ground. He lay half hidden by the mists that still hugged the earth, his brown coat and buff breeches almost blending with the torn earth around him.

Fear iced her muscles, stopping her.

His body stretched out near the top of the ditch, with his right arm flung out and actually angling down into the ditch.

Heavens, please no!

Folding her cloak about her, she came closer. The movement calmed her and kept her from reaching out to him. If he knew of it, he would not care for her comforting. No, he was not a man who liked cosseting. Nor did she have any right to offer such a thing. They were but friends after all. Neighbors. And a wise lady would remember that.

So she took inventory of him by sight alone.

Like all the Winslows, he had a straight nose and square jaw, now marked by a smear of dirt. Both looked unbroken. He had torn his coat and a ragged tear lay across his left thigh as well, exposing a thickly muscled leg. But Terrance Winslow had always seemed a man made all of muscles—broad and tall as an oak. A man too full of restless impatience and energy, and that, she thought, was what really got him into trouble, over and over.

He had found his share of that yet again.

Thick, black lashes lay against his pale cheeks. His short, black hair stood up in disorder, but she saw no blood. No head injury, thank heaven. She ran her stare across him again, one hand pressed to her stomach. No blood. No bones poking out from places that ought to be covered by flesh and skin. Her fear eased.

The tight set of his mouth also told her that he had to be conscious, even if his eyes were closed. So he could not be too badly injured. And he certainly would be in a temper to have come to grief over a hedge and ditch, like some green novice.

She could almost smile at that.

Except her stomach stayed knotted and her hands quivered under her cloak.

At his side, she knelt, still not touching him, but grateful to feel the presence from him—that stir of something like a strong wind that always came with him.

And with the fear easing came a spurt of anger—would the man never learn to take better care of himself?

Tilting her head, she stared down at him and asked, her voice calm enough to betray nothing of her feelings, "Well, what have you broken this time?"

CHAPTER TWO

It took effort to open his eyes—the pain made it seem to take years. But the sound of her voice drew him with its soft cadence and low, melodic tones. He knew that voice—and hearing it could almost make a man believe in angels.

Almost, but not quite. Not when the devil seemed to have hold of his leg and was twisting it. "What makes you think I've broken anything? And who in bloody all dug a ditch here?" he asked.

Sylvain Harwood tilted her head. "Your father did this winter past. To keep the cows from pushing out through the hedge. I doubt he expected either of his sons to be galloping about like a madman."

With a groan, Terrance closed his eyes again, ignoring her added comment. Cows! He had taken a fall, and had lost the chase after Perriman for a few cows. It was almost laughable.

Forcing his eyes open, he struggled up onto one elbow. "Where's Drake?"

"Drake? Your horse? He is just over there, and in better shape than you." Twisting, she gestured to the gray, who had recovered enough to take an interest in the grass and now quietly cropped his breakfast.

Struggling to keep himself propped on one elbow, Terrance winced as pain jabbed up his leg from his calf. "Help me rise."

"Why? So you can mount up and fall off again?"

The faintest disapproval laced her tone, and he could not let that pass, so he fixed his stare on her and scowled.

She stared back at him, her expression interested but not the least shocked or anxious, nor anything else suitable to the sensibilities a young lady ought to display.

And a blessed relief it was, too, that she lacked enough delicacy to faint or have a nice bout of hysteria over this.

A green cloak enfolded her body, but she had put back the hood so he could see her narrow face and golden-red curls. She looked a fey creature, with that pointed chin and those wide, blue-green eyes. What in blazes had the ancients called those woodland creatures who transformed from trees into young maidens? His two years at Cambridge failed him. But he knew her well enough to guess that she'd wrinkle her nose in disgust at a comparison to any sort of nymph.

"You still running wild? I would have thought your family would have you tamed by now."

Wrinkling her nose, she made a face at him. "I should think you could sympathize with the difficulties of being the odd one out in a family."

He gave a laugh, and winced as it cost him a reminder not to move. "Well, I am getting back on, but I am not falling off again. And how in blazes do you always managed to have twigs in your hair?"

With an impatient gesture, she ran her fingers through the curls, missing a hedge leaf. He almost smiled—and he wanted to pluck it out himself.

Folding her hands before her again, she tilted her head again. "I am not helping you up if it is just so you might win a bet, or some other mad lark that will get your neck broken."

"Is murder a mad enough lark for you?"

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. It took a moment, but she asked, her voice still calm, "Just who has been murdered?"

"Dunscombe. Shot in the back"

Her frown deepened, pulling a line between sandy eyebrows which now flattened. "So you were galloping to the abbey to let them know about this?"

"No. I was galloping after Ashlin Perriman who saw me standing over his dead uncle with a pistol in my hand."

The frown cleared. "Oh. Oh, I see. You have landed in the mud, even more so than usual."

"Usual? I—" He bit off his protest and checked his sudden rise as a warning twinge from his

leg reminded him not to move so quickly. Back teeth gritted, he ground the words out, "Are you going to help me?"

"What? Go after Ashlin? Why? You cannot hope to...."

"Lord, you are the most...most...."

"Impertinent? Uncooperative? Unconventional?" Sandy eyebrows lifted, she smiled at him. "That's the usual list."

He did not smile back. "The most irritating female."

"I am not irritating—you are irritable. You always are when you break something. And if you would rather, I can just take myself away again." Standing, she dusted her hands.

He grabbed hold of her skirts and cloak hem. "You are not going to bloody leave me here with a bloody broken leg."

She nodded, as if he had just explained the obvious. "I knew it."

Distracted, he glared up at her. "And just how is it that you knew what?"

"When you broke your arm falling out of Mrs. Dermont's window, you were in a mood for a month. And that time you broke your wrist when you overturned...."

"I never overturned anything! And if you're referring to that race to Bristol, the blasted wheel came off!"

"It still landed you in a ditch. And you were cross as a bear. But why should I help you continue being stupid? You are not like to catch up to Ashlin."

"Well, I have to catch up with bloody Ashlin because he bloody thinks I shot his uncle!"

She drew back. "Really? But even he could not...unless... Terrance, what did you do to make him think such a thing?"

"I did nothing."

"He just took the notion into his head? Really now, Terrance, everyone knows Ashlin for the worst troublemaker, but he has no imagination. You must have done something."

"Nothing! I swear. I simply had the misfortune to find his uncle's lifeless body." He let go her skirts and sank back again. His head had started to pound to match the throbbing in his leg and a wave of exhaustion drained him.

She threw back the edge of her cloak, revealing a faded brown dress than clung tight to her slender form, and folded her arms. "I thought you would at least be honest with me."

He glanced at her, and she looked so mulish that a smile lifted his mouth. "Oh, for...well, he knew I was to have met his uncle to duel. And...and I was stupid enough to pick up a pistol to see if it had been fired."

Shaking her head, she knelt in the grass. "Which you no doubt waved at him."

Her assumption irritated him, both for its accuracy and for the tone of resigned certainty in her voice. "He'd started to yell bloody murder, so what else was I do to? Bow and politely thank him?"

Frowning, she stared at the dawn and ignored his question.

He resisted the urge to either continue protesting how none of this was his fault or to lay back down on the grass with his eyes shut and wish this away. Instead, he watched her.

She was growing up. He could see that from the interesting curves now visible—the swell of breast and hip—which he could not remember from his last time home. What a pity that soon enough her blunt speech would be curbed into polite nothings and her direct stares would be trained into coy glances, and she'd no doubt become like every other lady he knew. Pure trouble.

"You know, anyone would think your family impoverished with how you dress."

She glanced at him. "Well, we aren't. Penelope even married a lord, you know."

His mouth twisted. "So I heard."

"And you are changing the subject." Her mouth flattened into a line as she frowned. And she told him, "If I were Ashlin, and if you showed yourself at Dunscombe Abbey, I would set every male servant in the place on you and get you tossed in the cellars until the constables came and dragged you off. He is Lord Dunscombe now, after all, which means it might not be wise to go anywhere near him just now. And you would do far better thinking about the entire matter after enough sleep to clear your head. You reek of brandy, you know."

He glared at her, but his head did ache, slowing his thoughts so they tangled on one another. And he would give a good deal for a soft place to lay—blaze, but perhaps this whole disaster might blow away without his having to do anything. Perhaps Ashlin was already feeling foolish for his absurd leap in logic. Perhaps the truth indeed had come out already.

Or perhaps, even now, the law was being set on him.

Standing up, Sylvain held out her hands. "Give me your hands. And if you start to fall, do try to fall on your good side so you do not do any more harm."

Terrance grinned at her, and Sylvain fought the urge to smile back.

No man ought to own such charm. And she would not succumb to its potency. She frowned back at him, keeping her thoughts to the flaws in him, rather than his assets.

At the moment, pain dulled those amber eyes of his and drink had left them red. Hard living had also started to coarsen his handsome features, blunting the edge to his jaw, leaving his face puffy. But in some ways that had made his face more interesting—more masculine. He had been almost too beautiful as a boy, she knew.

She also knew from the gossip that reached her that woman found him irresistible. What was it about him that made it so? Was it that grin of his, so light and boyish? Or that reckless edge of danger that somehow managed to cling to him. For herself, she suspected that the truth of it was that his reputation got him more trouble than anything. He was just a man, like any, after all. But the reputation he was making for himself dangled like a lure to the ladies and a challenge to other gentlemen who wanted to be judged even more daring than the notorious Terrance Winslow.

Well, what others thought of him did not matter. She owed him a debt twice over. She would not forget that. And so she would do what she could for him. The trick would be to do so in a way that did not end with herself embroiled in his troubles.

He put his hands into hers, and she noticed that he had lost one glove. So typical of him to be so careless, and not even to notice. Or course, she had forgotten to even wear gloves out this morning, and her face warmed that she had judged him before noticing the same fault in herself.

His grip engulfed hers, but with such a weak grasp that she knew he had injured himself worse than he had let on. Her irritation with him flared again—a grown man ought to be able to take better care of himself.

But it seemed he could not.

She allowed him to take his time to leverage himself up, keeping his weight on his right leg. And she had to brace herself to keep him from pulling her over. Gracious, but she had forgotten his size and the mass of him, and as he rose to tower over her, her mouth dried and her pulse lifted.

There was indeed more to his allure than just his reputation—there was a raw masculinity that left her feeling feminine and small. She never felt feminine or small anywhere else but with him—not when she stood taller than either of her sisters now, and had not a womanly grace to her name.

By the time he had gained his feet, his face had gone pale again and sweat dampened his

forehead, even in the chill of the morning.

He offered up another grin, this one forced, and said, "If you lead Drake into the ditch, I can swing a leg over him."

"And then you can slide off as he scrambles out of such a ditch again? That is not much of a plan."

"You have a better one?"

"Yes. If you have your horse on one side to lean on and me on the other, I think we can make Harwood."

"Harwood? Why the devil would I go there?"

She pressed her lips tight to keep from telling him that if she had him at Harwood she could look after him. He would not think he needed looking after, even though he obviously did. So she went for a more persuasive argument.

"Well, I suppose you could ride to Winslow Park. The argument with your father when you show up in such a condition as this might last only a quarter of an hour, unless you lose your temper, too. Then it would no doubt end with you riding off in a huff. Or with the squire disowning you, which he has done now—what is it, three times?"

"Only twice."

"Ah, only twice."

"Mockery doesn't become you. Besides, I didn't intent to ride home. I can take a room in Halsage."

"That is five miles at the least, and Harwood is less than a field away. Besides, what if the constabulary has been set after you?"

"What if they have? I've done nothing."

"And you shall be doing more nothing if you end up in gaol while matters are sorted out. That will do your leg some good, will it not?"

"Dammit, I am not hiding away like a frightened rabbit."

"No one asked you to. But any animal has the sense to run to ground until the real danger is known. You need rest for a day or so until you actually know what is toward. And at Harwood, the entire east wing is closed—you could stay a fortnight and no one would even know you were there. But by tomorrow you may actually be able to think again, and start planning what you need to do."

Terrance shook his head. But his mouth edged up.

His practical-minded Sylvain seemed to have mistaken him for one of the creatures she was always finding in these woods and nursing back to health.

Which wasn't too far from the truth.

He had to admit that she made several good points, but still it went against the grain to think of himself as hiding from anyone. The sooner he straightened out any misunderstanding, the better.

But his leg did ache, and the miles to Halsage stretched out as an impossible distance, even assuming he could get on his horse and remain in the saddle. And he knew her to be right about Ashlin—he had lost his chance to muffle the man.

She leaned closer, tucking herself under his arm, taking his weight onto her slim shoulders and she said, her voice dropping seductively low, "I can ask slip over to Winslow Park to ask Mrs. Brown for some soup for you—she could do that without a word to anyone. And your horse can go down to the lower pasture—no one ever uses it."

He gave up. She had it all planned. A pasture for his horse, a heavenly soup from his father's

cook, and no doubt her looking after him as if he were one of her rescues.

Well, he had also grown dizzy, standing up. His leg had settled into a continual ache. And if he did not get to a bed soon, he might well have to be hauled to one.

"And just what will your parents say when they learn I am their houseguest?"

*

Sylvain peered around the corner of the stables with Terrance's saddle braced against her hip and the bridle from his horse dangling draped over her shoulder.

The journey to Harwood House had not been as easy as she had expected. Terrance's horse had balked about having anyone lean on him—the big gray kept trying to move sideways. Eventually, Sylvain gave up trying to make that work, led the animal herself, and had Terrance lean on her. It said a good deal about his condition that he said nothing about her taking command.

He was leaning heavily on her by the time they reached the house, his hand gripping her shoulder almost painfully. However, he had not complained. But she had noted the tensing of his hand when he tried to take more weight on his bad leg than was wise. And she had heard the sharp intakes of breath when a rough patch of ground jarred his step.

No one, thankfully, had seen them enter, and no one seemed present now to see her slip back into the house through the side door—the one she used for her early mornings excursions. A benefit, she supposed, to not having enough servants.

But watching eyes had not been her worry as she struggled with Terrance to the small room that had once served as her mother's study and which now lay in the neglected east wing. Terrance had collapsed onto the day-bed there without waiting for her to remove the dusty Holland coverings, and he lay unnaturally still, eyes closed and mouth pressed tight.

Her heart tightened.

"I shall have to cut the boot off," she had said. "And you may need to have the bone set."

He waved away her words, his eyes still closed. "See to Drake first. I'll do well enough. And the bone's not sticking out, so some strong linen will hold it together."

She had her doubts about that. But he opened his eyes, smiled at her and told her, "Well—what about my blasted horse? You said you had a pasture for him."

Relieved, she had pulled off her cloak and draped it across him. He could not be in that bad off if he could still curse and complain. That, at least, was her hope. So she had fetched his horse down to the far pasture, and left the animal content in the green field. She would leave the saddle and bridle with Terrance in the east wing—he would eventually have need of them.

And she had already decided not to tell her parents that Terrance Winslow would be staying at Harwood.

The decision cost her a good deal, for she disliked deceiving either her mother or father. Everyone in the family, of course, practiced small omissions, particularly with her mother, for she had a weak heart and the doctor had warned them against any excitement or shock. And her father lived more in his own world of plans and investments that might regain the fortune he had lost.

Thankfully, he seemed to have at last given up the worse of his schemes—Penelope's doing, Sylvain thought. Even though she was now Lady Nevin, Penelope still acted as older sister, and sometimes even as mother to the family. And she still sought to turn their father's interests to things such as rebuilding the family fortunes in slow, measured steps rather than in rash ventures.

Lord Nevin had been a help there, too, and with more than wise council, Sylvain suspected.

But none of them—not her parents, not her sister, and definitely not the sometimes rather starchy Lord Nevin—approved of Terrance.

Probably justly so, given his reputation for running off with ladies whom he did not marry.

With his injuries, however, she might coax her parents into granting him refuge. And that would be the last she saw of him while he was in the house. He would be given over to the servant's care, and she would be kept under strict supervision—as if he might run off with her or otherwise compromise her.

A ridiculous idea, of course. Terrance had never shown an ounce of interest in her. Well, perhaps an ounce, but that had been a single event. And quite some time ago.

And if he had shown any more interest in her than that, she would have done something to make certain he lost any such ideas at once, she told herself. Ladies who earned Terrance's interest generally were not ladylike at all. No, it was a very, very good thing that he had always treated her more as a...well, as a sister, or a...a friend.

Except for that once.

But he had forgotten that—of course he had.

With a sigh, and her mind full of a summer long ago—the summer Terrance had kissed her—she let herself into the house through the back door to the main hall, and collided with her father.

CHAPTER THREE

For a moment, she feared she would topple over, saddle and all, but her father caught her arms and steadied her.

"What daydreaming again?" he said with a smile. He glanced at the saddle in her arms, at the bridle dangling over her shoulder, and his stare sharpened. "Going for a ride inside the house today?"

She pushed her mouth into a smile and her hand tightened around the leather pommel of the saddle.

Her father started to frown. "Here now—you are not planning to take up riding astride, like some...some...some Amazon?"

"Father! Of course not! As if old Millie would allow me to fit her with anything but a side saddle!"

His frown cleared. His red-blond hair, so like her own, had gone far more silver this year and had thinned into fine wisps. He looked ready himself to go out riding in tan breeches, black boots, a buff waistcoat, and a loose-fitted brown riding jacket. And he must have tied his own neckcloth this morning, for he had it crooked and loose. Their butler, Bridges, who also acted as valet, would never have been so careless.

"Then what are you doing with that saddle? And here in the house, of all things?"

"I..." she hesitated. But the truth would probably serve best—or at least as much as was wise. She was already blushing hot, and a lie would show too clearly on her face. "I am storing it."

"Storing? Why not do so in the stables?"

She wet her lips. "Because I...I did not want it confused with our tack."

He started to frown again. "But if that's not our saddle, why do you have it? Honestly, my dear Silly, I do wish you would not speak in puzzles and explain this."

"It is not a puzzle. I found it. Or rather, I came across a horse. A big gray. His rider must have fallen. So I brought it home. Horse and saddle and bridle. I could not just leave him."

His eyes brightened with interest, and he stepped past her to glance out the door. "Really? A big gray? A mare by chance?"

"A gelding, but not one I know." And that she counted as another bit of luck. Terrance must have bought the horse in London, and fairly recently, so no one at Harwood was like to recognize the animal. Now, if only she could slip away and hope that least said was soonest forgot.

Her father turned from the door with a sigh. "Only a gelding, eh? What bad luck."

Sylvain put on what she hoped was a sympathetic expression. "Still not found any mares for Willful?" she asked, hoping to distract him.

"No—not a one. Everyone who knows his pedigree also knows he boast an even more impressive temper. I though Wilcox might breed his Firefly to him, but...well, I ought to have thought to buy my own mares before this. And when his get start winning—why even old Wilcox will be wanting his mare covered. But, here now, you had really best keep that tack in the stables. I shall ring for Bridges to take it out."

"But..."

"Oh, it's no trouble, my dear." Her father smiled as he strode to the bell pull and tugged it.

Frustrated, Sylvain searched for some reason to hang onto the saddle and bridle. Terrance would need them when he left. However, she supposed she could always go and fetch them, as well as horse—only what a great deal of bother! It meant more fuss than she had anticipated, and a greater danger of discovery.

However, she could think of no excuse to offer, so when Bridges arrived and her father explained the situation, she gave over the equipment with no word of complaint.

Her father added, "Oh, and Bridges, do ask about if anyone is missing a big gray gelding—we must see him returned."

Sylvain's stomach tightened. But protesting such a reasonable course of action would only draw more attention, so she gave Bridges her thanks and watched him and her father leave the house for the stables.

As she did, the suspicion twisted inside her that she ought to have known that anything to do with Terrance always did turn into far more of a tangle than anyone wanted. She would just have to make certain this particular tangle did not become more than she could manage.

*

Sunlight, bright and warm, woke Terrance.

It slanted across his face, streaming in with an indecent cheer, and for an instant he wondered why Burke, his manservant, had not left the curtains drawn.

Memory drifted back and he realized he was not in London.

He put up a hand to rub his face as images from yesterday tumbled back in nightmarish succession. A misty dawn—too much brandy—that damn duel—Dunscombe's body—the relief—a bone-cracking fall. Not one of his better days.

A day's stubble roughened his jaw and cheeks, and left him wishing for a razor, a hot bath, and a far softer bed than this lumpy sofa.

Sylvain had done her best to make him comfortable on the day-bed in this unused room. She had cut the boot off his injured leg—and a good thing, too, for the leg had swollen like a tick.

Fractured for a certainty. He'd broken enough bones broken to know it. At least it had not required resetting, so it ought to mend straight. He could only hope it mended fast as well.

Sylvain had also brought him pillows and blankets, musty from disuse but warm enough. He had actually dozed off under them, sleeping away most of the day. Later, she had slipped into the barren room with a lamb stew, smuggled in a thick pottery bowl from Mrs. Brown's kitchen at Winslow Park, along with crusty bread.

"She sent cheese, apples, and what she swears is the best cider in the county," Sylvain had told him, rummaging in the wicker basket she had brought with her.

He had almost felt guilty to have her waiting on him like an upstairs maid, but she seemed not to mind, and he had not the energy to protest.

Despite the tempting aroma of the stew, he found he had not the energy to do more than take a bite and down a mug of cider.

The cotton taste in his mouth today stirred a suspicion that Sylvain had put something into the cider; he'd barely been able to stay awake after he drank the stuff.

At least he had slept sound last night.

His head also no longer pounded—only a dull throb left, really. He could almost ignore the ache in his leg, and while his back muscles protested the abuse left by the fall he had taken, leaving him stiff as a Methodist preacher, he rather thought he would be able to manage well enough.

Slowly, he risked opening his eyes. The additional light did not increase the pounding in his head, so he attempted to rise.

He got no further than leaning on one elbow and just starting to shift his leg when a sharp twinge warned him against further movement. Lying back, he closed his eyes again. It was not as if he had any appointments to demand his time.

Then he remembered bloody Perriman.

He really had to do something about Perriman.

Only what urgency was there now? Perriman had either stirred up a fuss, or had not. And perhaps the truth behind Dunscombe's death had already come out, which would make any such trip to see the man unnecessary.

Besides which, at the moment he was having a hard time doing much more than lying on this damn, lumpy sofa.

The squeak of a hinge pulled his eyes open again. Tensing, he levered himself up to one elbow. But when Sylvain appeared, a silver tray weighing down one arm, he relaxed.

"You'll have to pardon me for not rising," he said, and ran a hand over his wrinkled clothes, as if that could make him any more presentable. He suspected he looked even more rumpled than he felt.

She glanced at him, her expression curious and not the least disapproving. "Could you?"

"Could I what?"

"Rise. I should think you are feeling today as if a horse fell on you—which it did."

A smiled tugged his mouth.

She looked away to concentrate on balancing the tray with one hand while she shut the door with the other.

Today she wore a faded blue gown instead of a brown one. A flounce had been added to the bottom, as if to lengthen the hem, but the dress showed more of her trim ankles than it ought. Blazes, but she had grown this past year.

And he was having a difficult time adjusting to this new version of the child he had known.

Where was the lanky frame, thin and gawky? Where was the tousled hair and the face smudged with dirt, and the sharp chin? She had been an imp of a child, and he realized suddenly that some of the best memories of his younger years at Winslow Park had her in them. Most with him finding her in the woods, rescuing some animal, or on her back watching clouds, or knee deep in the stream, catching fish with her father's pole.

She never had ever remembered to act the lady.

As she crossed the barren room, her slippers patting soft on the dusty wood floor, he knew that while she had changed in appearance, in so many others ways she was the same.

She had threaded a blue ribbon through her golden-red curls, which had been brushed free of twigs. That pointed chin had been washed clean, as had her cheeks, to show a scattering of freckles under sandy-lashed eyes. Wide and slightly tilted at the corners, those eyes had always seemed somber and far more knowing than appropriate to any child. She had at last grown into that look, and her figure had blossomed into attractive curves.

However, she had the same stubborn tilt to her chin, the same air of quiet reserve, the same streak of independence. What else, after all, would have made her think to bring him here and look after him?

She glanced up, as if sensing his stare, and offered a slight smile.

Battered as his body was, his blood quickened and his interest stirred at the warmth of that smile. He squashed those faint urges before they made more than a ripple on his awareness. And he scowled at her.

She was a child still—blast it!

A girl who'd not had so much as a season in London, nor a proper court presentation, nor even been twenty miles from Somerset's border. What, she must be all of nineteen. Or perhaps twenty. He could not recall her exact age. But that was a good few years younger than he.

Blazes, but why had he thought this idea of staying at Harwood, even for a night, a good one?

But he had not been thinking much yesterday. He had been too full of brandy, pain and—if truth be told—the shock of finding Dunscombe dead.

Settling the tray on a side table—which she had brought into the barren room yesterday—she glanced at him. "I had cook send me a tray—hot chocolate and toast. Do you care for some? Or there is still cheese and cold stew from last night."

He struggled to a sitting position, careful not to jar his leg and wincing only slightly as he resettled himself. "You may keep your chocolate. Toast will do well enough."

She gave him the plate of toasted bread, and picked up a china cup into which she poured steaming brown liquid from a silver pot. With fluid grace, she sank down to sit cross-legged on the floor.

The knot of awareness of her that had been forming inside him relaxed. A child. Just as he remembered. What lady would sit on the floor in such a casual fashion?

He bit into the toast, finding it thickly cut, richly buttered, and better than any he ever remembered having.

"Do you want the gossip as well?" she asked.

"What? Already?"

"There's been all of a night at the inn for talk. And a day. And Andrew—our stable lad—who was down at The Four Feathers told Bridges who told Betty, who sometimes does as maid for me and for mother, that you were all that anyone spoke of."

He finished his toast, put down the plate and dusted the crumbs from his fingers. Gingerly,

he swung his legs off the day-bed to rest his stocking-clad feet on the floor.

The room around him looked much like he felt—hollowed out and dusty. Brown marks on the cream walls showed where paintings had once hung. The fireplace stood empty and black. Holland covers draped some furniture—a heavy desk, perhaps, and chairs—against one wall, and the floor boards lay bare of any rug. None of it the least attractive.

Still, the sunlight streamed in bright through the windows, lighting up the dust in straight shafts, and warming the place. And he didn't have the prospect of a discussion with his father.

He only wished he had not slept in his jacket, for it looked wrinkled beyond salvation. At some point, Sylvain must have unbuttoned his waistcoat and taken off his cravat. He could not remember doing so—his uneasiness returned.

To cover it, he asked, "Does popular verdict have me guilty?"

Putting down her cup, she drew her knees to her chest and folded her hands around them. "I am afraid that Perriman has put it about that you shot his uncle."

Terrance dragged a hand through his head. "Bloody idiot."

For a moment, Sylvain sat quite, wondering if his curse was for Perriman or himself. She had intentionally stayed late in bed this morning, ringing for Betty, and offering up the excuse that she had started her time of the month as the reason she did not feel up to going downstairs for breakfast.

She squired now with guilt for the lie. And with even more guilt for having encouraged Betty to gossip.

Lifting his head from his hands, Terrance scowled at her, and Sylvain gripped one hand tighter with the other. He did not look happy at the news, and she had not expected him to. But, honestly, anyone seeing him just now might easily think him capable of any violence.

His black hair, cut short, stood up in spikes. Red rimmed his eyes, and the shadow of his beard darkened his jaw. With his disheveled state, he looked a dangerous enough rogue, and that angry glint in his tawny eyes even made her uneasy.

And she knew him well.

Which meant she must find some means to keep him from acting on that look in his eyes and getting himself into even deeper trouble.

"Is there more?" he asked, his words clipped.

"Just speculations as to why," she said, cautious with her words.

"And what is the top theory for that—other than utter stupidity?"

She hesitated before she asked, "Are you certain you want to know?"

"I did not ask a rhetorical question—yes, I want to know."

"But if..."

"Sylvain!"

"Oh, very well, most seem to think it was so that Lady Dunscombe would be free to marry you."

"What! Of all the utter nonsense!"

He gave a rude snort, and a tightness in Sylvain's chest loosened. "It is not that nonsensical—even I have heard the rumors linking your name with hers."

"You shouldn't listen to such gossip."

"I would hardly have any news for you today if I did not. Besides, I have met her, and she is a rather pretty, in a rather overblown fashion."

"Overblown?"

"Yes, like a rose past its prime."

He grinned. "Jealous are you."

"I am not. So many ladies' names have been linked with yours that I long ago stopped paying much attention to them. Now, as to the second theory, some think you must have simply been mad with drink. And, finally, a very few hold it had to be an accident."

"What sort of an accident ends with a man shot in the back?"

"I am only repeating the rumors. And I will say that everyone does seem to agree that with Dunscombe having been the local justice, and him dead, that will make it an even greater tangle. And no one seems clear on if Ashlin has actually laid charges against you."

Terrance rubbed the back of his neck, as if the muscles ached. He let out a breath and glanced down at his wrinkled clothes. "I need fresh clothes. And a shave."

She slanted a sideways look at him. "So you can go see him? We went though that, and you know you'll only end up locked in his cellar."

He glared at her. "What else am I to do? Hide myself away until he does act, or until everyone thinks I'm guilty?"

"What that matters is if you have been charged. If you have not, Ashlin might be persuaded to reconsider taking such an action. And if you have, then any time with him is wasted, for it is the magistrate in Taunton whom you'll need to seek out in order to set matters right again."

Tapping his fingers on one leg, he seemed to consider the idea, and Sylvain held her breath. Would this work?

She thought about how the plan had come to her last night, after the laudanum drops that she had put in Terrance's cider had taken effect. He had fallen asleep within a quarter hour.

As soon as he had, she undid the buttons to his tight-fitting waistcoat and stripped the spotted neckcloth from him neck. He looked ridiculously young, asleep as he was, with the lines eased from his forehead, and his mouth relaxed. He had a beautiful mouth, curved and full—and it looked even better when not pulled into a grimace or a scowl. She had been unable to resist, and had smoothed a hand across his forehead.

Someone needed to look after him. Heavens knew he would not—he never did. And, if she left matters to him, he would no doubt charge into this like a bull out to clear anyone from his pasture.

That was when she had decided that someone rational and calm needed to speak with Ashlin. Perhaps convince him how he might be liable for defaming Terrance's character if his accusations were not withdrawn.

The stumbling point had been how to approach Ashlin.

She'd been struggling with that when the plan had formed itself in her mind all at once.

Leaning forward now, she used Terrance's hesitation to give herself hope that he might agree with her. "You know, Father will have to go pay his condolences to the new Lord Dunscombe. I could easily go with him and speak to Ashlin, for I've known him since he was orphaned and came to live with his uncle."

One black eyebrow lifted with a sarcastic tilt. "So you'll go and talk of me, will you? That would earn you a fine welcome. And have you considered as well that one of the people you will be visiting must have actually shot Dunscombe."

She frowned at him. "Nonsense. Almost anyone might have shot him."

He shook his head. "Only four people knew of that duel, and one of them is dead. We took care no one else should know of it—for pity's sake, it's not legal even!"

"Really? And Ashlin must have been one of the four? Is that how he happened across you?"

"Yes. I ended with him as my second—not that I had much choice, for he happened to there

when Dunscombe forced the argument. Cale was to second Dunscombe's."

"Cale?"

"Lord Cale—no one you should know. In fact, Dunscombe's circle is not the sort you should know in the least. Gamblers and sportsmen, most of them—like himself. He despised those he could beat, and hated those who bested him, and while he was a bad sportsman, he was rich enough that he attracted all sorts of hangers-on."

"Then what were you doing in his circle?"

"I? Never you mind that!"

"Well, Father will still have to pay a call, and frankly, after all you have said, I would rather go with him than send him on his own. He would certainly be safer with my company."

Terrance scowled. He did not like this idea. And he had no reason for his dislike of it, other than it left his skin prickling to think of Sylvain anywhere near any of that lot.

Blazes, she was made for better company than such riffraff.

Only he knew no way of talking her out of it. Nor was he in any position to be able to stop her from doing as she pleased. He was not her father, nor her guardian, nor even her brother—and he was rather thankful on all accounts.

Blast this damn leg of his!

If he was up and walking easily, this would not even be an issue.

She seemed to take his silence as agreement with her plan, for she stood and smoothed her skirts. "Honestly, Terrance, you know I am right. And besides, you need not worry. I was not certain I would take this me, but with all you have said, I probably ought to."

"Take what?"

Stooping down, she reached under a cloth on the tray. When she straightened, a short-barreled pistol lay neatly in her palm.

[Buy on Amazon Kindle](#)

[Buy on B&N Nook](#)

[Buy at Smashwords](#)

For other novels by Shannon Donnelly visit sd-writer.com