

Chapter One

Somerset, England
December 1813

Lady Pippa stared into the open flames of the hearth—where a constant drizzle snaked down the chimney flue to pool behind the roaring fire—as the storm continued to rage outside. Her day—and night—had consisted of reading yet another book of her favorite holiday stories and watching the pooling water sizzle and dissipate as it approached the hot flames consuming the large logs. It had been her greatest tradition each year after arriving at her family’s country manor, Helton House; hours turning into days as she re-read all her favorite holiday books.

The many hours were only interrupted by a footman entering to place another log on the fire. But it had been a long while since she’d bid the servant retire for the evening.

This night, Pippa had found it difficult—nearly impossible, actually—to concentrate on anything with the storm roaring outside. Especially since she knew she was essentially alone in the large house with all the servants having gone home before the storm, and the few that were in residence safely abed. Where Pippa should be herself. She pulled the blanket tighter around her legs as a draft moved through the room and chilled her exposed ankles. Glancing behind her, she expected to see Briars, her family butler, in the doorway, but the door was securely closed, and the aging servant was long asleep for the night.

A sharp light lit the room through the windows, the draperies still pinned back from where they’d been during the daylight hours. An onslaught of heavy rain pelted the thin windowpanes. Pippa regretted her request that the windows stay uncovered in case she spotted lights moving through the dark storm, signaling her parents’ arrival.

But her wish of seeing anything through the angry storm declined as the torrential downpour continued hour after hour, making the local roads impassable by carriage. She only hoped the Duke and Duchess of Midcrest were wise enough to seek refuge from the drenching rains, lightning, and lashing wind on their way home from Bath.

Setting her book aside, Pippa removed her blanket and stood. Her toes touched the frigid floor as she moved quickly across the room to pull the drapes closed—locking out the sight of the lightning. With any luck, it would diminish the sound of the howling winds outside, as well.

She paused before the window, pulling the material back one last time, and stared out to the countryside surrounding her home. Though it was too dark to see anything, she'd spent the last eighteen years memorizing the landscape around Helton House: the rolling hills, the wooded area to the left of her property which everyone took as the border between her family and that of the Duke of Sheridan, Lady Natalie's father. In recent months, the trees had made a barrier that Pippa hadn't dared cross.

Their property even boasted a small pond that froze over during the colder months.

Unfortunately, this Yuletide celebration would not find her home surrounded by snow-covered hills or frost-kissed trees—or a pond frozen enough to walk upon. At this point, they'd be blessed to have dry, unmolded grain and hay to feed their livestock come spring. Pippa could only imagine the coming weeks of repairs the village would need due to leaking roofs and flooded dwellings.

Pippa sighed at the sight outside her manor—one that in no way resembled any Christmastide of the past. At this rate, she'd be lucky if her home didn't float away on a river created by the rain that had assaulted the area for almost a full day now—the temperature staying far above that of freezing.

Nothing about this year would be like the ones before, though the deplorable weather was not fully to blame. Pippa had sensed that things were not as they should be from the moment she'd received word that the Sheridans were hosting yet another three-day celebration to honor Natalie. This time, it was rumored that they'd announce her betrothal—to the son of a marquis, no less.

She should be happy for her dear friend—or, at least the girl she'd grown up with and thought of as a sister before Natalie had changed into a woman whom Pippa did not recognize. Her feelings toward the girl were petty, though grounded in truth. But wishing ill will on another was something Pippa found extreme discontent with.

In a huff, Pippa pulled the drapes shut, blocking out the rain and wind for good.

"I refuse to feel sorry for myself," she muttered, not for the first time since receiving the invitation to join Lady Natalie's holiday house party.

It was actually a blessing that her parents' carriage had been held up by the storm. They would likely insist on traveling the short mile to Lady Natalie's home to join in the revelry—to confirm that no animosity remained between the neighboring dukedoms.

No matter how much bitterness Pippa had locked within. Lady Natalie was to wed, and Pippa was alone—cast from society after the embarrassment of her first Season.

Even with all this, her mother staunchly believed that one could not find happiness and fulfillment in life if he or she cast negative thoughts and tidings toward another. A new reason to be thankful they were not here to witness her sulking about as if her prized gloves were missing or stained.

Picking up her book, Pippa fell back into the fluffy armchair she favored so. She tucked her feet under her and returned her blanket to ward off the growing cold in the room as the fire's intensity decreased. From her father's private study down the hall, eleven gongs could be heard, signaling the lateness of the night. For London, most would only be starting their evening by enjoying a meal with friends and acquaintances. But while in the country, Pippa delighted in being abed at sundown and rising when the sun made its next appearance on the horizon.

Early morning walks around the estate—from the house, out around the pond, and back through the stables to check on the animals—was a pastime she thoroughly found great pleasure in. She'd never thought she'd miss the freedom of her morning strolls after her introduction to society, but walking—other than in one of the many crowded parks in London proper—was frowned upon, especially without a proper chaperone. One could not think or ponder anything while being following by a maid.

The current storm had robbed Pippa of her morning out. As the day passed, she felt similar to the canaries women kept, a caged animal, longing to escape and roam.

Again, the storm was not fully to blame for her sense of overwhelming confinement.

It went far deeper than being trapped within her home during a nasty tempest.

The windowpane rattled as particularly heavy rain assaulted it once more followed by a thunderous racket. Lightning flared even through the drawn drapes. A door slamming somewhere deep within her home had her jumping with nervousness. The storm's intensity was only increasing as the night grew later.

She took a deep, calming breath before opening her book once more. Pippa started where she'd left off when she'd been distracted by the rain traveling into the chimney.

Had that been five minutes ago or five hours? Pippa had lost track of so many things of late.

Nothing contributed to her Christmastide cheer more than holiday tales of merriment—and she desperately hoped to repair her sullen mood. While in London, Pippa had discovered a small bookseller off Bond Street that was hidden from view down a narrow alley. Her mother had been more than agreeable to allow Pippa time to scour the shop while the duchess was fitted for new gowns. During one of her many visits, Pippa had found a thick tome full of ancient fables surrounding the winter months—not only tales from various Christian beliefs, but also pagan traditions, and even a few stories full of scary, hand-drawn images of ghosts and ghouls. Pippa had quickly flipped past those stories when she'd sat down to read shortly after her noonday meal, for they would only frighten her more with the storm raging so near.

Pippa was determined to banish her dour mood before her parents arrived—she may be a bit downcast, but she'd never allow that to ruin her mother's beloved holiday.

Turning the page, Pippa read yet another tale of the miracles of Christmastide, and love found during this magical time of year.

Her family property was rife with holly, and she'd had several groomsman collect large sprigs for her just the previous day in preparation for decorating the house when her mother arrived home.

Pippa was vaguely familiar with the story of her parents' past. They'd found one another at a Christmastide celebration—and had fallen in love under a holly wreath set before a roaring fire.

Obviously, Lady Natalie had done her part to secure a match...while Pippa had buckled under the pressures of society and cut her first Season short in favor of an extended stay at her childhood home. If only Pippa would have read this book the previous year, maybe she could have secured a kiss before now—as the only men in residence at Helton House were her butler, several footmen, and the stable hands.

She pondered the notion of journeying to Lady Natalie's holiday party, hoping to land an eligible man worthy of her first kiss. But she pushed the thought aside when a loud bark of thunder ripped through the room.

The downpour was only swelling, along with the wind. The roads were flooded and impassable, even on horseback. And the hour was late.

Pippa was stuck.

At any other time, she would have been at peace with her fate, but not tonight. If an opening in the storm presented itself, she'd likely take the opportunity to flee—to London...possibly even Lady Natalie's celebration. Anywhere other than being here alone.

She should retire to her chambers, get some much-needed rest, and awake in a far more agreeable mood. Most things appeared brighter by morning light, or so her mother told her.

Shaking her head, Pippa cast a sidelong glance at the covered window before setting her book aside. Staying awake would not make the night pass any quicker, or the storm dissipate any sooner. She needed a good night's rest if her mother were to arrive in the morn, for holiday preparations would swiftly follow if she did.

Another loud clap of thunder shook the room—but it did not cease as the others had; instead, it continued steadily.

Surely the gates of hell were opening and releasing the ghouls and ghosts from their fiery pits. Pippa shouldn't have opened the book of Christmastide stories. She regretted the brief moment she'd spied the hand-drawn illustrations of creatures not of this realm.

It was then that a voice yelled above the storm, reaching her in the library.

It was not thunder at all, but someone pounding on her door.

She jumped to her feet and rushed toward the foyer to allow them entrance, grabbing her book and tucking it under her arm. Her parents, as radical as they were, must have thrown caution to the wind and traveled through the storm to see her. They were foolish, and their risk great; however, Pippa was overjoyed that they'd arrived.

Many things pushed to the forefront of her mind as she ran to open the door. She needed to call Cook to prepare them a meal, their bed should be prepped for them with hot coals to warm their linens, and the stable master need be awoken to tend to their horses.

Pippa was glad for the distraction from her previous melancholy mood.

Turning the lock, Pippa threw the door wide, a smile lighting her face for the first time that day—only to be faced with a stranger. On her doorstep was a man completely unknown to her, his hair matted and his clothing drenched and sticking to his thin frame.

"Is your master home?" he asked, removing his saturated hat from his balding head.

"I am Lady Pippa." She stared at the man intensely, waiting for him to state his business on Midcrest land and be gone.

"My lady," the man started over with his greeting, bowing. "I am repentant to awaken you, but my lord seeks shelter, and we have not passed an inn for many hours. The storm made it impossible for our carriage to continue on the main road."

Pippa remained silent as the man spoke, his body shuddering with cold as his saturated livery garb clung to him. She clutched the door with one hand to avoid it opening further in invitation, while her other arm pushed solidly against her side, keeping her book from falling to the floor.

"I fear our carriage is knee-deep in mud with the storm continuing to increase, and it has thrown a spoke." He looked at her expectantly, as if offering shelter was the only option for her. "My lord, the Earl of Maddox, requests refuge for the night if you will be so kind as to accept him."

"I...well..." Pippa's manners abandoned her at the same time she realized she was alone on the first floor of the house. "There is an inn only—"

A great wind hit Pippa, forcing her back, the door ripped from her hand. It slammed against the wall behind it. The sound echoed through the empty house as it collided with the tall walls of the foyer and rattled the chandelier as her loose tresses blocked her view. A moment of sheer panic seized her when her sight was taken from her.

Pippa pushed her hair away to continue with instructing the servant to the nearest inn. "Your lord will be far more comfortable..."

The wind whipped the last of her hair from her face to reveal not the servant from before, but a tall—very tall—broad-shouldered—very broad-shouldered—man. And that was all Pippa saw of him as her glance became locked on his chest. He was drenched, with his shirt plastered to his considerable width. It hadn't been the wind that had knocked the door from her hands and allowed the storm access to her home, but rather the man before her.

And he was fuming mad—his nostrils flared as water dripped from his hair and he stared at her pointedly—not bothering to mask his aggressive stance.

"Were you truly going to turn away a man in need of shelter?" his voice boomed.

Pippa gasped, taking yet another step back. She glanced quickly over her shoulder, hoping the noise had awoken one of her servants, abed on the third floor of the house. But none came running to aid her.

“I knew I was venturing into the depths of hell when I agreed to come all this way from London, but are manners not taught in the wilds of Somerset?” The man ran his hands down the front of his shirt, pushing the water from his body to pool on the floor beneath him. “My servants will need space in your stables. I thank you for”—he eyed her up and down before continuing—“your hospitality, my lady.”

He bowed before Pippa with his last words, and his breath caressed her body, making her acutely aware of two things: *he* smelled heavily of spirits, and *she* was attired in a sheer nightshift that did not leave much to the imagination.