



PISTOLS  
AT  
DAWN

A LILY ADLER SHORT MYSTERY

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# PISTOLS AT DAWN

*A Lily Adler Short Mystery*

by Katharine Schellman

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Shouts echoed through the ballroom. The buzz of conversation slowed as the crowd of country gentry tried to both listen and pretend they didn't notice anything amiss. Whatever was happening was far enough away that Lily Adler couldn't make out the words, until one voice rose above the others.

"You will be there at dawn, or I will *hunt you down* and kill you where you sleep."

A few of the dancers faltered then, though the musicians played bravely on, and a moment later the sounds of confrontation were smothered. The guests in Lord Crawford's Hertfordshire ballroom laughed and returned to their entertainment, more than one making a sly comment about young men sampling the baron's good whiskey.

"As I was saying, it is miraculous, the change marriage has worked on her," one elderly woman, her head wrapped in a fiercely purple turban, said loudly, trying to regain her audience's attention. "Her father let her run absolutely wild — hunting and playing cards and romping outside with those neighbor boys. 'Mr. Hawes,' said I, more than once you may be sure, 'you must get Susie a governess, or no one will marry her no matter how much you settle on the poor girl' and lo and behold, not a year after he finally did..."

But Lily shivered, unable to rejoin the lighthearted gossip around her. She knew — though she would have preferred to forget — what someone ready to kill sounded like. That last voice had been terrifyingly serious. She kept her eyes on the door to the supper room, where the shouts had come from, until she saw a familiar figure in a blue coat emerge. Excusing herself from the group around her, Lily hurried over.

"What happened, captain?" she asked quietly, pulling her friend aside. "The whole ballroom could hear the commotion."

Captain Jack Hartley's face was grim, and that made her worried. Cheerful and easy-going, with a roguish grin that had stolen more than one heart, Jack had spent half his life fighting in His Majesty's Navy. There were few things that could ruffle his composure.

Murder had done it, just a few months before. The comparison worried her.

"Couple of idiots worked up over what should be nothing, and one of them is going to get killed because of it. We finally stop sending our men to die in France, so of course they start shooting at each other here," Jack muttered. "God, how could Burke be so stupid? Everyone knows Astin is a jealous ass."

"What happened?" Lily asked again.

Jack sighed, raking an agitated hand through his hair. "Simon Astin — Lord Crawford's heir, you know — found Charles Burke propositioning Mrs. Astin. Lord knows Mrs. Astin is beautiful enough to tempt a fellow to all kinds of stupidity, but I cannot believe Burke would do such a thing. He must have been foxed beyond belief." Jack frowned. "He never used to drink like that."

"And what did Mr. Astin do?" Lily lowered her voice, though she already could guess the answer.

“Pistols at dawn.” Jack looked even grimmer as he said it.

“Could you not talk them out of it?” she asked. Jack’s family was from Hertfordshire, and his brother had inherited significant property only ten miles distant after the death of their father. That gave him some standing in the neighborhood. “It sounds as if you know them well.”

“Burke and I both served on the *Shannon* before I was given my own ship. But he’s not the one who needs persuading. Astin...” Jack shrugged. “We’re not acquainted in any helpful way. And he was angry enough I expect it would not matter.”

“Will one of them ask you to stand as second?” Lily asked, her stomach clenching at the thought. It wasn’t often that seconds had to do more than load the pistols and call the paces, but anyone involved in a duel could be arrested — especially if someone died.

“Burke will ask his younger brother. But Astin—”

An unhappy voice broke into their conversation. “Simon’s views on seconds have been thoroughly aired.”

Lily, startled, turned to find a young man, with dark, carefully styled hair and an impressively fashionable waistcoat, standing next to them. She remembered seeing him in the card room earlier in the evening, drinking cheerfully with a man several years his senior. The two had looked so much alike that she had instantly guessed them to be brothers, both of them laughing while the younger poured them another round. But his expression now was deadly serious — a phrase that Lily regretted as soon as she thought it.

The young man bowed briefly in her direction. “Ma’am. My apologies for interrupting.”

“Mrs. Adler, Mr. Jonathan Burke,” Jack said, making terse introductions. “Charles Burke’s brother. And his second?”

Jonathan Burke nodded. “And Simon won’t have one, as usual, which means I’ve the task of organizing everything and trying to keep both those idiots alive in the morning.”

“Not to mention keeping Mrs. Astin from going into hysterics,” Jack said.

Mr. Burke’s expression grew a little lighter at that. “Not Susan,” he said with a wry smile. “She’s not the type to need much in the way of comforting. My brother and I have known her since childhood,” he added, seeing Lily’s surprise at his familiar way of speaking about another man’s wife. “We all grew up neighbors around Crawford Park. At the moment, you will find her in the card room, berating her husband for causing a fuss over nothing.”

Jack frowned. “If I know Astin, that is likely to make him dig his heels in. The man’s a stubborn ass. And prideful.”

“Which is why he refuses a second, and why I’ve come to find you,” Jonathan Burke agreed. “Mr. Perry, over at Crawford Cottage, is the closest thing we have to a surgeon around here. Would you ride

over, Hartley, and ask him to be at the southwest corner of Crawford Park at six o'clock tomorrow morning? He'll know the spot." Mr. Burke's jaw tightened. "I must see to the pistols."

"Certainly." Jack clapped a reassuring hand on the young man's arm and spoke cheerfully, though Lily could tell it took effort. "It will all come well in the end."

Jonathan Burke gave a jerky nod, then bowed in Lily's direction. "Ma'am," he said once more before disappearing back into the crowd.

"Off to the cottage, it seems." Jack sighed. "Perry will not be happy. Though perhaps he'll not be needed if everyone sobers up and comes to their senses."

"One can hope," Lily agreed quietly. She watched the spot in the crowd where the younger Mr. Burke had disappeared, but her mind was already fixed on the southwest corner of Crawford Park. "Will you also inform Mr. Perry that I will be accompanying him?"

Jack, about to take his leave, paused, his eyes going wide with surprise, then narrowing suspiciously. "And why would you want to do that?"

Lily could still hear that final, enraged shout. *I will hunt you down and kill you where you sleep.* Someone, she felt sure, needed to witness whatever would happen tomorrow at dawn. But Jack was already agitated, and she didn't want to add to his worry, so Lily shrugged.

"I have never seen a duel. I doubt I shall have the opportunity again, and I am curious how they are conducted. If, as you say, the gentlemen are likely to come to their senses and delope, then I shall be in no danger."

Jack shook his head. "Perry's a traditional old fellow, he won't agree."

"Your charm and powers of persuasion are a byword here, captain. Surely you can convince him to humor me," Lily said with a slight smile. "And if that fails, you may say that unless he allows me to accompany him, I shall simply go by myself."

"That will likely do it," Jack said, sighing. "Still, I think you ought to stay out of it. I mean to myself, once my errand is complete."

"Don't be absurd." Lily raised her brows. "You know I never stay out of anything."

#

They heard the sound of gunshots, one immediately after the other, just before they reached the clearing.

Lily gasped. Mr. Perry and the horse pulling his cart — both placid, elderly creatures — flinched at the sound, Mr. Perry cursing with surprising fluency before turning to Lily.

"Beg pardon, ma'am."

"No need to waste time apologizing, Mr. Perry, go!"

She didn't need to urge him further; the apothecary slapped the reins against the distressed horse's back, and Lily had to grab the edge of the seat as the cart sprang forward.

"What the devil are those young fools playing at?" Mr. Perry gasped as they clattered into the clearing. "They weren't supposed to start shooting at each other for half an hour yet!"

Lily didn't have breath to answer. Her eyes widened at the scene before them — two men standing, one holding a pistol still raised and smoking, a third crumpled on the ground — as the cart shuddered to a stop and the aging apothecary scrambled down from his seat. He got halfway across the clearing before turning back, shouting, "My bag!"

Lily snatched up the black bag and stood to toss it to him. He caught it against his chest, staring at her in surprise for a moment before wheeling around and dashing to the fallen man.

Breathing heavily, Lily stayed where she was. For the moment, she had the advantage of height, and she surveyed the clearing, a familiar, sick knot of dread coiling in her stomach.

Jonathan Burke had just run to his brother. Charles Burke stood frozen in shock, his face white as he stared at the man he had just shot, and he didn't protest as his younger brother pulled the pistol from his still-upraised hand.

Mr. Perry was shouting for help, and neither Burke brother was moving. Lily slid down from the cart and ran to where Mr. Astin lay.

"You going to faint?" the apothecary demanded, not bothering to look at her.

Lily tried to shut her senses against the smell of gunpowder and blood. "I've seen a man shot before," she said.

"Lucky you came then. Hold this in place."

Lily slid her hands under his, pressing them against the wad of cotton bandages that he had packed against the bullet hole. Mr. Astin's face was pale, his eyes closed and his breathing a shallow rattle. The bullet had hit just below his left shoulder, and Lily only needed one glance at Mr. Perry's face to guess there wasn't much hope the young man would live. But the apothecary wrapped another bandage around to hold it in place, his mouth set with grim determination, and called for help lifting Mr. Astin into the cart.

Lily, her hands sticky with blood, stood aside as the brothers stumbled over. Charles Burke was nearly as pale as the man he had shot, shaking his head as his brother dragged on his arm. "I didn't mean to shoot him," he said, his voice hoarse. "I deloped. I did. I didn't meant to shoot him."

"Shut your mouth and get him in the cart," Mr. Perry snapped. "The law will deal with you, my task is to try to keep him alive."

Lily glanced back down at Simon Astin's still form as Mr. Perry went to fetch the cart. Charles Burke couldn't have deloped — a bullet fired into the air wouldn't hit so close to a man's heart, unless the

pistols were so faulty as to be nearly deadly for both the target and the man firing them. No one would plan a duel with such dangerous guns.

Mr. Perry had returned and was somehow persuading the horse to hold still, though its eyes rolled frantically and it stamped the ground as it smelled blood. The brothers grabbed Simon Astin him under the arms and legs, lifting him into the back of the cart. The motion made Jonathan Burke's unbuttoned coat flap open, and Lily saw that he had thrust his brother's gun into his waistband.

The other gun, she realized, was still on the ground where Mr. Astin had dropped it. Keeping her eyes on the preoccupied men, Lily took two careful steps backward and, feeling with her toe, kicked the gun so it slid out of sight under a nearby bush.

Mr. Astin groaned as he was settled into the cart but stayed unconscious — a small mercy, Lily thought grimly as she clambered up beside him.

Jonathan Burke stared at her in surprise, as if noticing her for the first time. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to keep him alive," she snapped, kneeling in the straw next to Mr. Astin and pressing her hands once more against the bandages, trying to slow the flow of blood that was killing him. "Your brother had best pray we succeed if he doesn't want to hang for murder."

#

Simon Astin died that night, and his widow's sobs could be heard through the house.

The house party was breaking up, now that their host's heir was dead and the neighbor's son taken up for murder. Lord Crawford's servants shouldered grimly on, accepting the duty to provide at least one more meal while carriages were coming and going. Many of the guests who weren't able to leave yet opted to eat in their rooms, but Lily went to the breakfast parlor.

That was where Jack found her, his customary grin missing and his hair unkempt as slid into the chair next to her.

"I need your help, Mrs. Adler."

"Anything," Lily replied instantly. Jack and her husband Freddy had grown up together, and the two had remained close after Jack joined the navy at age fourteen. When Freddy died of a lung infection after only two years of marriage, Lily had felt lost, unable to picture what her life would become without her husband. Jack's unwavering friendship had supported her when she finally returned to society, and she trusted him as deeply as Freddy once had. "What is it?"

"I need you to help Charles Burke."

"In what way?"

“You were there. Did you see anything odd after the duel? Anything that might have been... Lord, I don’t know.” Jack dropped his head into his hands, then pushed his fingers back through his hair, his movements jerky and agitated. He looked as though he wanted to jump from his chair and pace around the room, but instead he glanced at the other guests scattered around the table and lowered his voice. “There is something amiss, I can feel it. Burke was a good man. He only came home last year after an injury.” Jack shook his head. “I refuse to believe he survived the war only to end up like this.”

“You care about him,” Lily said quietly. It was not a question, but Jack nodded.

“He saved my life once, when we sailed on the *Shannon*. I owe it to him to try to save his. He was like a brother to me.” Jack hesitated, then said, “Like Freddy.”

His words tugged at a spot beneath Lily’s breastbone that still ached whenever she thought of her husband. But she knew Jack would not say them lightly, so she nodded and took a slow drink of tea while she thought.

She knew how deep Jack’s loyalty to his friends went, so there was a chance he was mistaken about Burke. But she also trusted his judgment. And Lily could remember Burke’s shocked face as he stared at Simon Astin’s dying form. He had seemed hardly to know what he had done. What if there *had* been something wrong with the pistols? What if Mr. Astin’s death had been a horrible accident?

“Was he different when he came back?” Lily asked thoughtfully. She knew people were sometimes changed by what they saw during wartime. “Angry, perhaps? Or unhappy?”

“Burke?” Jack looked surprised. “I wouldn’t say so. I’ve not seen him much in the last year, and he was always a private fellow. But he wrote me from the hospital that he was glad to be going home. He didn’t want Jonathan to be alone anymore.”

“Alone?”

Jack nodded. “Their parents are dead. Jonathan was at school most of the time Burke was gone. After they died, he had to manage everything on his own until his brother came back from the war.”

Lily turned that over in her mind. Jonathan Burke might have been glad to have family in his life once more — or he might have resented his older brother after managing his own affairs for so long.

“Was Simon Astin a good shot?”

Jack frowned. “As far as I know. I thought he would kill Burke for sure. Never thought it would be the other way around.” Jack’s eyes narrowed. He knew Lily well enough to know that she never asked idle questions. “What are you thinking? Did you see something odd?”

“And was Mr. Astin the type of man to delope?”

“Delope?” Jack laughed bitterly. “Astin?”

Lily raised her brows. “I take that to mean no, he would not have fired in the air?”

“Not Astin. Not the sort to admit he was wrong about anything.” Jack sighed, then added, “God rest him.”

“Then there is a chance neither of their shots went where they were supposed to.” Lily nodded decisively. “We should hurry.”

“What do you intend to do?” Jack asked, standing immediately and pulling out her chair.

“We revisit the scene of the duel, captain,” Lily said, standing. “There is something there we need to look at. Meet me at the stables in twenty minutes.”

#

She hadn't planned to return to her room so quickly, so Lily was unsurprised to find a housemaid cleaning it. The girl, who looked barely more than thirteen years old, started guiltily and dropped a quick curtsy.

“Begging your pardon, ma'am, I didn't know as you would be back,” she said quickly, nervously twisting the bed linens.

“Meg was helping me get everything sorted for packing,” said Anna, Lily's own maid, who was folding dresses to lay them in their trunks for travel.

Lily managed to put aside her distraction and smile at the girl. “Then we are grateful for your help, Meg. I hope you've not packed my habit yet?” she added, glancing at Anna.

“Not yet, Mrs. Adler,” the maid said, laying down the gown she was checking for stains and going to the wardrobe. “You're going riding?”

“The captain and I decided to get some air while our things are packed. I need to take my mind off this dreadful business.” Lily shook her head, not needing to pretend to look sad as she glanced at Meg. “I imagine things are quite topsy-turvy downstairs?”

“Oh yes, ma'am, the whole household is in such a state of shock as I can't even begin to say,” Meg said, shuddering. “I never met Mr. Astin myself — I only just started last week — but how that Mr. Burke could go and shoot him is a mystery to me, and that's a fact.”

Lily saw Anna frown at the girl's talkativeness, but she caught her maid's eye before she could say anything. A chatty young maid, and one who had not known Simon Astin well enough to be too distressed by his death, was exactly the sort of useful person Lily needed. She gave her head a quick shake. Anna looked surprised but said nothing as she pulled out the pieces of the riding habit.

“Mr. Astin seemed to me to be a most distinguished gentleman,” Lily said invitingly.

“Oh yes,” Meg said as she turned back the bedclothes. “I saw him come in from riding once, and he was ever so dashing. And his valet, Mr. Robins, says Mr. Astin was always as well turned out as a gentleman could be.” She dropped her voice conspiratorially, clutching a pillow against her chest. “He knew sixteen different ways to tie his cravat, and his favorite coat cost more than two hundred pounds. Think of that! Two hundred!”

“My goodness,” Lily said, turning so Anna could begin unbuttoning her morning gown. The girl’s incredulity was easy to understand — she likely didn’t know anyone who made that much in a year of work, never mind spending it on a single article of clothing. Lily wondered cynically if Mr. Astin had the funds to pay for his lifestyle. More likely, she thought, Lord Crawford and his new heir would be left to untangle Mr. Astin’s web of debts and extravagance. “Poor Mrs. Astin, to lose such a treasure of a husband.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Meg agreed, nodding vigorously as she worked. “Becky says Mrs. Astin will likely marry her childhood sweetheart now, but I don’t see how she could marry anyone else.” She glanced up, eyes wide. “She’ll be mourning him for the rest of her life, I’m sure. I know I would.”

Lily felt her cynicism soften. “Some women do mourn for years,” she said, her voice catching a little. “I hope, Meg, that you’ll one day meet a man who deserves such devotion from you.”

“And I hope you will fetch something to lay that fire with,” Anna said briskly, glancing sympathetically at Lily’s closed expression. “If Mrs. Adler is going riding, she’ll want a warm room and a bath when she returns, I’m sure.” As Meg curtsied and scampered off to fetch more wood, Anna turned back to her employer. “You’ll get her in trouble, Mrs. Adler, encouraging her to gossip like that,” she said mildly as she settled the skirts of the riding habit, buttoning up the train so Lily could walk comfortably.

Lily turned toward the looking glass to settle her hat. “You may caution her against it when she returns — tell her not to indulge my bad habits. But I wanted to learn about Mr. Astin.”

“Mr. Astin?” Anna asked, though her tone wasn’t quite surprised. She had been Lily’s maid for years — and as Lily had said to Jack, she never stayed out of anything. “Can I ask why, ma’am?”

“Because,” Lily said, gathering her riding crop and heading for the door. “I need to know if someone wanted him dead.”

#

Jack was able to saddle two horses for them without anyone asking why, and they were walking around the back of the stables when quiet, angry voices made them both pause.

“For God’s sake, Mother, he’s not been dead even a full day yet.”

The woman’s voice was choked with tears, and Lily didn’t need to glance at Jack’s suddenly pained face to know that the speaker was the newly-widowed Mrs. Astin.

“Time is not on our side, Susan. Nor money.”

The two women were close by — just around the other side of the stable, Lily thought as she motioned Jack to stay where he was. Handing him her reins, Lily walked quietly towards the corner, stopping just where she would stay out of sight of Mrs. Astin and her mother — Mrs. Hawes, she remembered, thinking of the gossipy woman in the purple turban from the ball.

“And whose fault is that?” Mrs. Astin snapped. “If Father had set aside any money for me, instead of letting it all be tied up in the Crawford estate, I would have time to grieve properly instead of worrying about how on earth you and I are to support ourselves.”

“You were going to have a title after Lord Crawford died. It was a reasonable exchange. How were we to know Mr. Astin would die and leave nothing but debts—”

“It was a foolish exchange, and Father should have known better.”

“And you can stop with this pretense of shattered grief,” Mrs. Hawes said sharply. “I know perfectly well that you had no wish to marry Mr. Astin in the first place.”

“Two years of marriage is time enough to learn to care for a man,” Mrs. Astin’s said, her voice shaking, though Lily wasn’t sure whether it was with grief or rage. “I came here to be alone, Mother. If you insist on discussing your own vulgar concerns before he is even decently buried, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Susan, be practical...”

Lily waited for the two women to leave before turning to Jack. He was frowning as he boosted her up into the side saddle. “Dreadful that Mrs. Astin is so badly situated,” he said, turning to his own mount once Lily was settled.

“Legally, there should be some maintenance for her, as his widow.” Lily pointed out. “But if there is no actual money left...” She shook her head. Her own grief was rising again, and with it a wave of sympathy for Mrs. Astin. However badly their marriage had started, it sounded as though she was left adrift by the loss of her husband in more ways than one. “And it seems her parents did not pay much attention to providing for her when they married her off.”

“Poor woman,” Jack said, turning his horse to lead the way.

“Poor woman,” Lily agreed. “For her sake as well as your friend, we should hurry.”

#

The clearing was fortunately empty when they arrived.

“Not many people come here,” Jack explained as he dismounted. “Makes it ideal for a duel.”

“This is still Crawford Park?” Lily said, kicking her foot free and letting him help her down.

He nodded. “Edge of Lord Crawford’s deer park.” He pointed at a nearby tree, where the bark had been scuffed roughly off. “Stag rubbed his antlers there, looks like.”

“Odd season for that,” Lily commented absently. She glanced around the clearing as she spoke, trying to get her bearings. “I think Mr. Astin was standing over there.” She strode briskly across the clearing to examine the bushes, trying to remember which one she had kicked the pistol under. Jack followed, frowning.

“What made you hide it?” he asked. “You know better than to leave a gun out overnight.”

“I wanted to examine it,” Lily said, crouching to pull the gun out. Jack was right, it was wet with dew, but there were more important things to be concerned with at the moment. “And if I had put it in the cart, Jonathan Burke likely would have taken it with him.”

Jack’s pause was very deliberate. “Why shouldn’t he have it?”

Lily held the weapon carefully as she stood. “Your friend said he deloped.”

“He could have been lying,” Jack admitted unhappily. “If he hoped to avoid hanging.”

“And would that work?” Lily asked, examining the pistol with an experienced eye.

“Not likely,” Jack said. “And Burke would know that.”

“I thought as much. Given what you told me of Mr. Burke, he seems the sort to admit fault, no matter the cost. It would take a powerfully inaccurate pistol to hit a man nearly in the heart when its bearer was trying to shoot in the air. Given that Mr. Astin likely would have fired to hit his opponent, but Mr. Burke was unscathed — and that the younger Mr. Burke was the only one handling...” Lily trailed off, frowning at the pistol in her hands.

“You think Jonathan Burke tampered with the guns,” Jack said flatly. “Did he?”

“Someone did,” Lily said, looking up at last. “This pistol was never loaded.”

Jack blew out a slow, shocked breath. “No gunpowder even?” When Lily shook her head, he frowned. “So only Burke could have fired. But why? Someone wanted Astin hurt?”

“Perhaps,” Lily said slowly, still examining the gun. At last she held it out to Jack. “Will you hold onto this? Anyone we speak to will likely take the questions better, coming from you.”

“If you say so, ma’am. But we ought to hurry back.”

Lily agreed, but she paused after they mounted and glanced around the clearing.

“Impressive that Lord Crawford has a deer park at all, and that he’s not turned it over to farming,” she said.

“Family was licensed generations ago. They’re not ones to give up such a high and mighty symbol simply to gain a few acres of cropland. Astin would have inherited it, you know. I suppose his brother will now.”

“Is the younger Mr. Astin here?” Lily asked.

Jack shook his head. “Still at school, as far as I know.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “And he is only twelve, so it is unlikely he wanted his brother killed.”

Lily shrugged. “Family can hate each other to a shocking degree when money is involved,” she said quietly. “Speaking of which, it is time to see Jonathan Burke.”

#

Jonathan Burke did not want to speak to them. When Jack finally cornered him in the manor's library, Lily standing beside him, the younger Mr. Burke stayed seated at a desk, resolutely penning a letter and saying that he was too preoccupied to answer their bizarre questions.

It wasn't Jack until laid Simon Astin's pistol on the wide desk, the *thunk* of metal on wood loud in the empty room, that Jonathan Burke seemed to realize they were in earnest. His shoulders tensed as he set down his pen and lifted his head slowly. "Where did you find that?"

"In the clearing where the duel took place, of course," Lily said, hiding her satisfaction as Jonathan stood at last, his expression guarded. "It seems Mr. Astin never stood a chance in that duel, because his weapon was mysteriously unloaded."

"Of course I left Simon's pistol unloaded," Jonathan Burke said, reaching across the desk for it. When Lily slid it away, he scowled. "Do you think I wanted him to kill my brother?"

"I admit I am not intimately familiar with the proper procedure for duels of honor," Lily said dryly. "But I suspect that leaving one participant entirely unarmed is frowned upon."

"In general, yes," said Jack, his voice stiff with censure as he put the gun away once more. "Not quite the thing to give only one man the chance to kill the other."

"And gentlemen wonder why dueling is illegal," Lily sighed, rolling her eyes in exasperation before returning her attention to the man in front of her. "So you left Mr. Astin unarmed because you feared he would shoot to kill?"

"Over a misunderstanding," the younger Mr. Burke agreed earnestly. "I did not see what happened — I arrived at the same time as Astin — but even Susan knew better than to be affronted."

"Has he been unwell recently? Unhappy?" Jack demanded. At the puzzled looks from the other two, he added, "Your brother, I mean. I've not known him to behave like that before."

Jonathan Burke shrugged, looking away. "Perhaps he indulges more now than he once did. I really could not say."

Lily narrowed her eyes. "And what—"

She was interrupted by a soft, quavering voice. "Jonathan?"

The woman standing in the doorway when Lily turned around was a picture of beautiful tragedy, her pallor made even more severe by the black mourning dress she wore, a lace handkerchief in her trembling hand. She was younger than Lily had expected — certainly not much more than twenty. Her parents, Lily thought sadly, must have married Mrs. Astin off as soon as she left the schoolroom.

"Mrs. Astin." Jack bowed. "My sympathies for your loss."

Lily murmured her own scattered condolences, momentarily overwhelmed by memories of her own first year of mourning.

Mrs. Astin turned her wide gaze to them, her mouth trembling. "I thank you. I hope you were both able to make arrangements? I know no one was expecting to travel so quickly."

“I will escort Mrs. Adler to meet friends who will conduct her to her next destination,” Jack said, his face a picture of concern. “I beg you will not trouble yourself worrying about us.”

“Can I be of assistance, Susan?” Jonathan Burke asked, coming forward to bow over her hand. “Under the circumstances, I cannot be too much at your disposal.”

“You know I do not blame you,” Mrs. Astin said quietly.

“Perhaps you should,” Mr. Burke said. Mrs. Astin looked puzzled but said nothing, and after a moment’s hesitation he continued. “I.. I left your husband’s pistol unloaded.”

Mrs. Astin froze, her gaze darting to Lily and Jack before settling, wide-eyed, on Mr. Burke. “Why would you tell me such a thing?”

“I thought you ought to know,” he said, his face twisting with guilt. But Lily didn’t miss the quick glance he sent her way, and she was certain that if not for her questioning, Jonathan Burke would have kept that fact to himself.

Mrs. Astin let out a shuddering breath. “I wish you had not said that. But...” Her shoulders slumped. “I understand why you did. Simon was so hot-tempered. There is no telling what he would have done.” She brought a hand to her mouth to hold back a sob. “The whole thing was so pointless. How...” She turned abruptly, half-running toward the other side of the room as she sobbed, and Mr. Burke followed, looking miserable.

Lily frowned. She hadn’t finished with Jonathan Burke. But Jack was shaking his head at her, and she didn’t want to make a scene by refusing to go. Still, she couldn’t help pausing in the doorway.

“Mr. Burke,” she said, loudly enough that he couldn’t pretend not to hear her, even from across the room. “Why not leave both pistols unloaded?”

“What?”

“You left Mr. Astin’s pistol unloaded, why not do the same for your brother? Surely both duelists needed time to come to their senses.”

He shook his head firmly. “There was no doubt in my mind that he would fire in the air.” He glanced at Jack. “You know him, Hartley. Tell her.”

Jack looked pained. “The Charles I knew would never have done anything to provoke a duel. If somehow he did, would expect him to do everything in his power to show contrition. I could never have imagined him firing at Astin, never mind killing—” He broke off, glancing at Mrs. Astin’s stiff back. “Begging your humble pardon, ma’am.”

His expression was so unhappy that Lily couldn’t bring herself to make him stay any longer. Murmuring more condolences, they took their leave of Mrs. Astin. She nodded but did not turn around, her shoulders still shaking when they left.

“What do you think?” Jack asked quietly after the door closed behind them.

“I think,” Lily said slowly, “It is time to speak with the other Mr. Burke.”

#

Charles Burke didn't want to speak with them either. They found him a guest room with the door locked, where Lord Crawford, who was also the local magistrate, had put him until a gaol warden could come. Watching the stoic way Burke stared out the window of his makeshift cell, his face taut with unexpressed misery, Lily felt a weight of responsibility that she had tried to ignore before that moment.

Looking out of the corner of her eye at Jack was equally painful. He hadn't been able to save one friend from dying. He was clearly determined to do more this time.

"Burke."

"Hartley."

Their greetings were tense, the two of them exchanging only a brief, pained glance before they buried their emotions once more.

"You should not be here," Charles Burke said, turning back to the window. "Especially not with a lady."

"Mrs. Adler wished to speak with you about the duel," Jack said.

"I cannot imagine why."

"Because I thought you might like to avoid hanging for murder," Lily said, a touch more sharply than she intended. She couldn't blame him for his despondency, but his refusal to turn around irked her.

Burke's shoulders tensed at her words, then slumped again, and he leaned his head against the windowpane. "I cannot see that there is much chance of that. I shot him, though God knows I did not intend to, and he died. The jury at the inquest cannot find otherwise." His voice broke on the last word. "God knows what Mrs. Astin must think of me."

"You have known her for some time, I think?" Lily asked carefully. Something in his words had rung a warning chime in the back of her head, and she wanted to keep him talking until she figured out what it meant.

Burke nodded once. "Since childhood."

"I understand the marriage was due to her parents' wishes, not her own."

That made Burke turn his head at last, though it was only to stare at her. "And so I should not regret killing her husband?"

"I thought you claimed to have deloped," Lily pointed out, deliberately trying to provoke him since he seemed disinclined to respond to gentleness.

But he only slumped again. "I meant to. I thought I had. But my head was so fuzzy from the night before. If Jonathan had not roused me from bed, I doubt I would have made it in time." He shook his head. "Would that he had been less concerned for my honor."

Jack stepped forward. “Your brother—” He broke off as Lily grabbed his arm. She shook her head in warning, afraid that he would reveal that the younger Mr. Burke had left one pistol unloaded.

She shouldn’t have doubted him. Jack only said gently, “The day you were discharged from the hospital, you wrote that you were relieved to return to your brother. Now, less than a year later, you seem resigned to leaving him alone in the world.”

“Jonathan will have to learn to manage without me,” Burke sighed. “Though how he will do that, I have no idea. He’s such a wild boy. Perhaps my sad end will teach him some restraint at last.”

“Was your brother armed yesterday?” Lily asked.

“Armed? He was my second, Mrs. Adler.”

“I know. But he might have wanted to protect you. Is there any chance that he—”

“That he what?” Burke interrupted her, turning sharply. “Shot Astin? What is the meaning of this, Hartley?”

“We want to help,” Jack said quietly.

“I think my situation is rather beyond help,” Burke said, his attempt at sounding stoic hindered by the way his voice broke on the last word. He cleared his throat and continued. “No, Jonathan was not armed. And he was within my eyesight the whole time.” He looked at Jack and said, his voice gentle, “You cannot save me this time, Hartley.”

“Burke—”

“The warden will arrive soon,” Burke said, turning back to the window. “I would like to be alone until then.”

He wouldn’t be talked into hoping, Lily realized. After escaping death so narrowly in the war, he believed it had caught up to him at last. But she was even more certain that something was amiss, and she told Jack so as soon as they were alone in the hallway once more.

“What makes you so sure?” he asked. “Burke cannot remember clearly what happened, and he was the one who fired the shot.”

“Because I know what I heard,” Lily said, her jaw set with determination. “There were two shots fired that day.”

Jack froze. “But if Astin’s pistol was empty—”

“Then someone else fired the other shot,” Lily finished for him.

“The only other person there was Jonathan,” Jack pointed out. “And Burke said—”

“I know, that was why I asked.”

Jack frowned. “Could someone have been hiding nearby?”

Lily considered. “There is only one way to be certain.”

#

“Not possible,” Jack said, looking around the clearing.

Lily agreed. Though lush with early summer leaves, the trees were sparse enough that anyone standing close to the dueling ground would have been visible. But they were also dense enough that anyone standing too far away wouldn't have been able to get a clean shot.

“So the only people who could have shot Mr. Astin are the Burke brothers,” Lily said, frowning and swiping at the grass with her riding crop in irritation. “Jonathan Burke was standing where anyone would have seen if he had taken a shot.”

“And he does not benefit from Astin's death at all,” Jack pointed out.

“Does Charles Burke?”

“Not unless—” Jack broke off, looking unhappy.

“Yes?”

“I heard gossip at the ball, after word of the duel got around, though I didn't heed it at the time.” Jack forced the words out. “Someone said Charles and Mrs. Astin were... once very fond of each other.”

Lily looked around the clearing, trying to picture the moment she arrived after the duel. “One of the maids mentioned Mrs. Astin marrying her sweetheart now her husband is dead.”

“But why decide to shoot the man now? With witnesses?” Jack asked, kicking at the underbrush in frustration. “Burke and Astin hadn't seen each other in years, judging by what Jonathan said the other evening.”

“You mean when he brought you word of the duel?”

“Before that, he said—” Jack broke off. “What is it?”

Lily was staring past him at the trees that circled the clearing, her eyes wide as the pieces in her mind fell into place with sudden, satisfying clarity. “I was remembering that conversation. Jonathan Burke said...” She trailed off, then abruptly turned back to her horse.

“He said what? What is it?” Jack demanded, following after her.

“He said Mr. Perry needed to arrive at seven o'clock.” Lily grabbed her horse's reins. “We need to see Lord Crawford immediately. I know what happened.”

#

They were barely in time.

When they returned to the stables, the first person they saw was Anna pacing back and forth by the door to the house. As soon as she spotted them, she dashed over.

“Oh, Mrs. Adler, thank goodness. I didn't think you'd make it in time.”

“What is it?” Lily demanded as she dismounted.

“They’re taking Mr. Burke away. And I thought—” Anna dropped her voice, glancing around nervously. “Given what you were asking that girl Meg earlier — I know you, ma’am, after the business with that Mr. Finch — I thought you would want to speak to them before they left.”

“You were right about that.” Lily glanced at Jack, whose jaw was clenched. “Captain, I need a pair of your riding breeches.”

“My riding...” Jack stared at her, baffled by the request, but he nodded anyway. “By all means, borrow, if it will help.”

Lily didn’t waste time on thanks. “The dirtier the better,” she told Anna. “Bring them down, but don’t say anything about them until I do.”

“Ma’am.” Anna nodded, not stopping to ask questions before she raced off.

“Hurry,” Lily said, gathering her skirt in her hands, too impatient to button the train or lay down her riding crop. “We don’t have much time.”

#

A buzz of hushed speculation filled the house. Servants whispered in the corners, and the few houseguests that still remained poked their heads out of parlors and over bannisters, not even trying to pretend they weren’t watching Charles Burke be led away. He kept his head high, though his expression was anguished, as he was escorted down the stairs by the warden from the nearest village gaol, his brother at his side. Behind them followed Lord Crawford, in his role as local magistrate, deep in conversation with Mr. Perry, the apothecary.

Lily and Jack, rushing from the back of the house, caught them in the front hall. Jack didn’t wait to ask questions, but immediately put himself between the warden and the front door.

“What is the meaning of this?” the magistrate demanded. Jack nodded at Lily as he took up a wide stance, refusing to budge even as Lord Crawford blustered at him.

Lily took in the crowd with a quick glance. Mr. Perry was frowning at her. Charles Burke looked sick and tense. Jonathan Burke had stepped forward just enough to place a comforting — or perhaps restraining — hand on his brother’s shoulder. Mrs. Astin was nowhere to be seen, but a woman whose face was a pinched echo of her daughter’s beauty stood at the top of the steps, her eyes narrowed with fury as she watched the scene below.

Lily took a deep breath and turned back to the brothers. “You must be pleased, sir,” she said clearly, her words carrying through the hall and stopping the heated voices around her.

Both Burke brothers frowned at her. “I assure you I am not,” Charles Burke said quietly, his jaw clenched.

“I did not intend to address you, Mr. Burke, but your brother.” Lily turned more definitely towards Jonathan Burke. “You must be pleased,” she said again. “Though I almost admire how thoroughly you have managed to conceal it.”

He scowled. “I take no pleasure in my poor brother’s circumstances.” Pointedly turning away from her, he looked at Jack. “Hartley, what are you doing?”

“Assisting Mrs. Adler,” Jack said, planting himself even more firmly in front of the door. “I know Charles. He is no murderer.”

“It was an accident,” Charles Burke said, closing his eyes.

“It was not an accident at all,” Lily said, gazing coldly at Jonathan Burke before turning to the magistrate. “It was, sir, a calculated and cold-blooded murder planned in careful detail.”

“You claim Mr. Astin’s murder was planned?” Lord Crawford said, his eyebrows climbing. If he didn’t seem to feel any particular grief, he certainly looked angry about his heir’s death. “By Mr. Charles Burke?”

“Mr. Charles Burke is a victim as well, sir. Two murders were planned: that Mr. Simon Astin would be shot to death in a duel, and that Mr. Charles Burke would be charged with his murder and hanged by the neck until dead. Two murders.” She turned back to Jonathan Burke. “A very tidy way to handle things, was it not?”

“You claim I did such a thing?” Jonathan Burke demanded, his face growing pale, then red, as he took a step toward her. “Do you know how absurd you sound?”

“You said you deloped, Burke,” Jack said quietly, looking at his friend. “He was right, wasn’t he, Mrs. Adler?”

“He was,” she said, nodding.

“A moment,” said the magistrate, holding up a hand. “Madam, do you understand what a serious accusation you are making?”

“I do,” said Lily without hesitation. She turned to Mr. Perry, who had watched the scene unfold without speaking. “Do you remember, Mr. Perry, that we heard two shots fired?”

“Hardly surprising, considering there were two duelists,” the apothecary pointed out.

“But very surprising if only one pistol was loaded.” Lily turned back to Jonathan Burke. “You admitted, when we confronted you with Mr. Astin’s empty pistol, that you had never loaded it.”

“I was there when he said it,” Jack added for the benefit of Lord Crawford, who looked shocked.

“To protect your brother, you said,” Lily continued. “But in truth, you could not risk a third shot being fired. If you wanted both your brother and Mr. Astin to die, you needed it to appear that one of them had killed the other in a duel. That meant two shots needed to be fired.”

“What nonsense.” Jonathan Burke spoke dismissively, but she noticed he was no longer willing to look at his brother. “Why would I wish for Simon Astin’s death? It affects me not at all. And if I wanted

my brother dead, would it not have made more sense to leave Astin's pistol loaded? He could have been planning to shoot Charles."

"Could have been planning is not the same as dead. You needed to be sure," Lily said sharply, her hands clenching around her riding crop before she took a deep breath. Jonathan Burke's sneering expression enraged her — she was certain he was guilty — but losing her temper would do nothing to help her. She needed to convince the men in the hall, and for that to happen, they needed to see her being calm and rational. "And Mr. Astin was a peer's heir. If he shot a man in a duel, there was every chance it would be swept under the rug." She turned to Lord Crawford and said apologetically, "With no offence intended, sir, I think we all know these things happen from time to time."

The magistrate regarded her coldly, then inclined his head. "As you say, madam. From time to time." He turned to Mr. Perry. "You were there. Would it have been possible for Mr. Jonathan Burke to have shot Astin?"

"Absolutely not," Mr. Perry said, shaking his head emphatically. "We arrived mere moments later, we would have seen that he was armed. Or I am sure his brother would have noticed, however still in his cups he may have been."

"And he was not," Charles Burke said firmly.

"There!" Jonathan Burke crossed his arms. "I most certainly did not shoot Astin."

"No, you didn't," Lily agreed. "You did lie about the time of the duel to ensure that Mr. Perry wouldn't see your brother fire in the air. And when he did, your accomplice shot Mr. Astin."

"My accomplice?" Jonathan Burke turned to the apothecary. "Do you hear this?"

Mr. Perry regarded the younger Mr. Burke, his expression unreadable, then slowly turned to Lily. "Who do you claim was his accomplice, Mrs. Adler?"

"The woman whose father, as locals are fond of remembering, taught her to ride and climb trees and shoot — a convenient set of skills if you need to hide while committing murder."

"The scarred trees," Jack murmured, and Lily cast him a grateful look as he nodded. "They had been torn up by someone climbing, not by a stag's antlers."

"Precisely." Lily turned back to her small audience. "The woman who presents a façade of grief, though everyone knew she had no love for her husband. The woman who was clearly *Jonathan* Burke's childhood sweetheart, not his brother's, and who he still calls Susan though Mr. Charles Burke refers to her, properly and respectfully, as Mrs. Astin."

They had all been silent as she spoke, but as soon as she said Mrs. Astin's name the hall erupted with voices, the servants and guests she had forgotten breaking into a clamor of speculation. The men in the hall all stared at Lily in shock, then Charles Burke slowly turned to look at his brother.

"The two of you were always so close," he said, his voice hoarse with disbelief.

“I *knew* you were not one to drink like that,” Jack said in sudden, sharp understanding. “You were with Jonathan, and he wanted you drunk so Mrs. Astin could throw herself at you to provoke her husband. It made the duel plausible.”

“And it meant you wouldn’t trust your own judgment, Mr. Burke, when you thought you had deloped the next morning,” Lily added.

“But *why*, Jonathan? Why...” Charles Burke swallowed, barely forcing the words out. “Why see me hang?”

“For the money,” Lily said. She spoke as gently as she could out of concern for the elder brother’s feelings, though looking at the twisted, angry expression of the younger brother made her cold with fury. “The Astins lived extravagantly, which meant there was almost nothing remaining for Mrs. Astin’s maintenance after her husband’s death.”

“Made her a good choice to pull the trigger, certainly,” Jack pointed out, stepping closer to Lily now that the warden didn’t look like he was about to push his way out the door at any moment. “No one would suspect a woman left nearly penniless by her husband’s death to have a hand in his murder. I certainly did not.”

“And then there is the younger Mr. Burke, known to be extravagant himself,” Lily continued, giving Jack a brief, grateful nod. His support — delivered so firmly and rationally — was sure to help convince the magistrate, not to mention his friend. “It would have been difficult for him to support them both without constantly applying to you for money, Mr. Burke. Which I assume, from what you said earlier, he has done regularly since you returned from the war and retook control of his finances?”

“Yes,” Charles Burke said, looking ill.

“Then they needed both of you dead in a manner that would leave no one wondering how or why. With you and Mr. Astin gone, I imagine they would have waited a year for appearances sake, then married and begun to enjoy their independence and extravagance together.”

She had them, she was sure. The onlookers had fallen silent once more, the warden looked outraged, and Mr. Charles Burke was staring at his brother in stricken disbelief. Then Lord Crawford spoke.

“It would be a diabolical business, if it were true,” he said sternly. “But a duel is a much simpler, and therefore more likely, explanation. And you have no proof, Mrs. Adler.”

“Exactly!” Jonathan Burke burst out, some color coming back into his cheeks at the magistrate’s words. “The whole thing is absurd, really, how anyone could believe...” He continued talking, ignoring Lily as she turned at last to Anna, who hovered at the fringes of the small group, clutching a bundle of soiled cloth.

“Did you find them hidden in Mrs. Astin’s room?” she asked loudly.

Anna started, then stepped forward quickly, nodding. “Yes, ma’am. The men’s breeches, just as you said.”

Lily turned back to the stunned group. “Just what a lady needs for climbing trees.”

Jonathan Burke was already shaking his head, pale once more. “That’s not possible, she was supposed to *burn* them—” He broke off as Lily gestured for Anna to unfold the garment, which were clearly far too big for the delicate Mrs. Astin. He stared for a moment, then laughed hoarsely. “Those are not the ones she wore.”

“No, sir, they are not,” Lily said. “But it is too late to take back your words.”

Jonathan Burke nodded slowly at her, then glanced around the stony-faced group. He laughed sharply, the sound cutting through the appalled quiet, and ran.

The movement was so sudden that it caught them all off guard — except Lily and Jack. As Jonathan Burke tried to dash past, Lily swung her riding crop at his midsection. When he doubled over, gasping in pain, Jack grabbed him, both of them staggering to the ground. It was enough for the warden to get past his own shock, and he was there a moment later, hauling Jonathan Burke’s arms behind his back as the onlookers gasped.

A sudden swift movement in the upper gallery caught Lily’s attention, and she looked up just in time to see Mrs. Hawes take off at a run. Towards her daughter’s rooms, Lily was sure. Shouting for someone to follow her, she dashed up the stairs in pursuit.

She heard yelling and pounding feet behind her. The men from the hall, though slower than Lily to realize what was going on, were better dressed for running, and both Charles Burke and Jack caught up to her as she ran. They all slowed together, though, as they spotted Mrs. Hawes’ still form, framed in the doorway of her daughter’s room.

She turned to them, her expression bewildered. “She would not — she *could* not — I *know* my daughter—” Shaking her head in disbelief, she stepped aside.

The room had been ransacked, clothing and shoes strewn everywhere. The dressing table was a jumble, but Lily could see a jewelry box with all its drawers pulled out and emptied.

“She must have heard us and fled,” Jack said, glancing around.

Lily nodded. “They should search the house and grounds, but I suspect she left as quickly as possible. I would, if I were her. Where would she go?” she added, turning to Susan Astin’s mother, who had sunk into a chair, looking faint.

“I couldn’t say,” the woman whispered.

“Jonathan will know,” said Burke, glancing around. He let out a shaky breath, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. “I shall need to find a solicitor for him.”

Lily stared at him in surprise. “He wanted to see you hang, Mr. Burke. Surely you can leave him to face the law on his own.”

He raised his head and met her eyes steadily. "He is my brother. I'll not leave him to do anything on his own."

Jack gripped his friend's shoulder. "I knew you could not shoot a man in cold blood."

"Then you have more faith in me than I had in myself." Burke glanced at Lily. "You have an... odd mind, Mrs. Adler. But I suppose I should be thankful that you do." He nodded to her, clapped Jack on the shoulder, and turned to Mrs. Hawes. "I think, ma'am, that the magistrate will wish to speak to us downstairs."

She looked at the arm he was holding out to her as if she had never seen one before, then slowly stood, nodding, and let him escort her away.

Lily and Jack were left looking around the ransacked room.

"Thank you, Lily," he said. "I knew I could depend on you."

"And my odd mind?" she asked lightly.

That made him smile, and she was relieved to see a hint of his usual cheeky grin once again.

"And your odd mind," he agreed.

"Well, you know me, Jack." Lily met his eyes, an answering smile kicking up the corners of her own lips. "I never stay out of anything."