

LORD DARVER'S MATCH

By Susanne Marie Knight

CHAPTER 1



Who on earth am I in bed with?

Hillary Logan peeked at the large, muscular—and hairy—arm curled around her ribs, then swiftly shut her eyes again.

Oh, dear God, this isn't happening. Couldn't be happening.

She stifled a hysterical urge to scream. Her husband's arms weren't hairy. Which meant... this arm did not belong to Jim.

She took another look, just to make sure the man wasn't her husband. Blood drained from her face. No! In no way, shape, or form was this sleeping giant her Jim.

But who was he—and how did she get in bed with him?

The man pressed closer, breathing softly in her ear. Frozen with terror, Hillary stuffed her fist in her mouth to prevent a scream from escaping. The last thing she wanted to do was awaken this stranger.

She had to get out of here; she had to find Jim.

Where in the world was Jim?

After a quick glance at her surroundings, she choked back another taste of fear.

Where am I?

She was supposed to be in a motel room at The Moon and Magic Inn located near Stonehenge in Great Britain. Not typical tourists, she and Jim planned to continue driving to London where Jim had a business meeting.

But warm, rustic furnishings had replaced The Moon and Magic Inn's cool contemporary decor. Even the plush pink carpet had vanished leaving dark wooden floorboards.

For goodness sake, what had happened?

Hillary frowned. Well, maybe he had left her here. He'd done worse.

But what about the décor?

What about the man?

He moved closer. The shift of his weight caused her to roll into him. Inadvertently, her bare bottom bumped against his thigh. Although totally inappropriate, burning heat flashed through her loins. How could she possibly be sexually excited by a total stranger?

Calm down. Think. Think! Try to remember what happened.

She swallowed her fear and counted to ten. First things first. She slowly pulled her nightshirt down over her rump, careful to pick up the man's hand, extricate herself, and gently lay the hand back down.

Other than a murmured protest, he continued to sleep.

So far, so good. Hillary sat up and inched her way toward the edge of the bed. From the size of his exposed arm, the man had to be absolutely huge. If he wanted to, he could probably snap her skinny body in half. So the last thing she needed was to awaken him. What if he turned out to be a modern-day Jack the Ripper?

Now poised at the edge of the bed, she rubbed beads of sweat from her upper lip. How in heaven's name did she get into this room—into this man's bed?

She jumped to her feet, refusing to look at the stranger. Cold air reminded her the nightie only covered her to mid-thigh. And she wore nothing underneath—nothing but enormous goose bumps. Her suitcase was nowhere in sight. Neither were her clothes.

A richly brocaded robe draped on a wooden bench beneath the window seemed to shout at her. Navy and beige clothing lay piled in a heap beside it. A pair of shiny black boots stood guard. She tiptoed over to the bench, put on the robe, and cinched the tie. While the robe swam on her, a musky, masculine scent reminded her of its owner.

The man.

Although with five swift steps, she could've hightailed it out of the room, for some reason, she stopped. Maybe she should have a better look at her bed partner. If she had to testify in court that this man abducted her, she should be able to identify him, right? "Yes, your honor," Hillary pictured herself saying, "this is the man who fought Jim for possession of me, then carried me away to his room!"

She blew out a resigned sigh. Right. That was a laugh. As if Jim cared enough about her to fight. Even after six years, he still called her Holly, his first wife's name.

Hillary shrugged. Her husband would never change, so why not bury that old hurt?

She'd better get going. Although careful as she stepped toward the bed, the floorboards creaked a loud warning. She froze. But by the rise and fall of the sheets, the man's breathing still appeared slow and even.

She inhaled with caution and tried again. This time she reached the bedside, then looked down at him. The man filled the small bed; outstretched, he would've had to dangle his feet off the end of the mattress. How had there been enough room for her? Although thin, she measured almost five feet six inches. She must've been wedged against him.

Her face sizzled with heat.

The man's visible arm was richly chiseled with muscles, and the cords in his neck showed tremendous strength, even as he rested. His thick black hair obscured part of his face. Morning stubble marred the long line of his jaw, but his profile showed an arrogance and sensuality.

No ninety pound weakling here. Hillary extended her hand to brush back his hair for a better look. Strong fingers suddenly clamped around her wrist.

"Ouch!" Startled, she tried to pull away, but the man maintained his vise-like grasp. He leaned up and rested his weight on his free elbow. The white bed sheet fell back to reveal a muscled chest covered with black, curly hair.

Hillary drew in a sharp breath, and tugged on the human handcuff. If this man didn't look like seduction personified, she didn't know who would.

He leisurely raked her with his gaze, taking in every last inch of her. "What is your haste, my dear? You have only just arrived and wish to leave so soon? Although I did not specifically request company, you are a pretty filly, so let us enjoy. We shall pleasure each other."

Hillary gasped.

His grip tightened on her wrist. "I assure you, m'dear, I do not bite. At least, not very hard!"

Oh, great! He thought she wanted to join him in bed! He thought she was a hooker! Prim, sedate Hillary Logan—a hooker. Was someone playing a cruel joke on her?

She yanked her arm again, but he held her fast. This couldn't be "Candid Camera," could it? Did the British have that television show? He sounded like he performed for "Masterpiece Theater," anyway. All formal and precise.

But, again, how had she gotten here? First, she had to get away—then she'd figure this mess out.

Twisting around in one more attempt to free herself, she tripped on the hem of the voluminous robe.

"Oh! Oh, this damn...." She almost bit her lip. Jim hated for her to use profanity. But then Jim wasn't here, was he? He never was around when she needed him.

Before she could recover her dignity, the man leaned forward, easily lifted her off the floor and set her down on the bed. Her left wrist, however, was still imprisoned.

"I must admit my chamber robe is not suited to your slender proportions." He leered at her, then gave her a wink. "Perhaps you can remove it?"

Brother! She was in no mood for an early morning Lothario, no matter how good looking he might be and no matter how suave he sounded. With her gaze averted, she toyed with the top button on her nightshirt and stammered, "Pl... Please, let go of me. There's been some kind of mix-up here. This isn't my room."

She looked around the room and frowned. In addition to the bed, two massive panel-backed oak chairs rested against the rough white walls. The chairs looked like thrones. Along with a candle in its wax-filled holder, a chipped pitcher and large bowl decorated the top of a sturdy dresser. These items, plus the bench, were the sum total of the Spartan furniture.

She decided to take a chance and ask him. What did she have to lose? "Do you know how I got here?" Even to her ears her voice sounded little girl lost.

The man shook his head, obviously still believing she earned her money on her back. "I assumed you walked through the door."

Unwanted tears welled in her eyes. So much for bravery in the face of the unknown. "Listen, I don't know what's going on. My husband, Jim, and I arrived at this, um, motel last night. We're from Tampa, the U.S., and today we have business in London. But because of the r... rain, we had to stop. Our room was different from this one, though, and I w... woke up here. I don't know where Jim is."

To hide her tears, she rubbed the long sleeve of the robe against her cheek. When the man didn't speak, she glanced at him from under her disheveled hair. A few of her long, spiraled brown hairs showed up dark against the white of the indented pillow next to his. He picked one up, inspected it, and compared it with hers.

Hillary flushed again. Now he knew they had been sleeping together—intimately. He released her hand and reached up to turn her face toward his. The touch of his fingers sent electric thrills through her body. She reluctantly raised her gaze to meet his.

His steel grey eyes seemed hypnotic. He tilted his head. "Motel, you say? You mean the inn." His eyes narrowed. "So, mine innkeeper did not send you to me?"

Mine innkeeper! This guy spouted phrases from a B movie! "Why would the clerk do that? Last night he gave us the key to room thirteen. Jim balked a bit, he's a little superstitious—number thirteen you know, but I said, 'What could possibly happen?'"

She remembered last night's scene clearly.

Not to miss a minute of work, Jim placed his laptop computer on the clerk's counter. Looking up from the keyboard, Jim focused his gaze on Hillary long enough to say, "Bad omen, Holly. Number thirteen—that means trouble. Get us another room."

Hillary felt her cheeks heat up. Plain as day, she had signed the inn's registration book as Hillary Logan. Sometimes she thought that was the reason he married her: so he wouldn't have to remember a new name. Holly—Hillary, it was all the same to Jim.

In a refined way, the round-faced clerk had coughed quietly. "I regret, Mr. Logan, that all our other rooms are presently occupied. Only room thirteen remains vacant."

A soft chuckle followed the man's very proper British words. Oddly enough, the clerk then winked at her and beamed a smile as if she and he shared a secret.

Before she had a chance to question the man, Jim's muttering captured her attention. She watched him save his architectural design on a floppy disk as she gnawed on her lip. He planned to leave—she just knew it.

"Don't see your parking lot filled with cars," Jim challenged the clerk. "Maybe you don't like Americans."

Hillary groaned; she couldn't help it. People like Jim gave Americans abroad a bad name. Rude, crude, and socially unacceptable.

"My sincerest apologies, sir," the clerk said smoothly. "Tonight, The Moon and Magic Inn has only one available room. However, I assure you, number thirteen is a favorite haunt of our regulars." He grinned again with a smile that lightened his whole face.

Under his breath, Jim mumbled, "I have a bad feeling about this place," and turned to leave.

Hillary held on to his sleeve. The thought of returning to the storm-drenched road had made her bold. "It'll be all right, Jim," she'd wheedled. "After all, what could possibly happen?"

She now wanted to bawl like a baby. What could possibly happen except to wake up in a strange room, in bed with a strange man? Jim had been right, hadn't he? Room thirteen had turned out to be pretty unlucky.

Hillary stood and wiped her eyes. No sense dwelling on the past. "Well, I guess you don't know how I got here either." She shrugged, again. "Sorry to trouble you. I have to find Jim."

One step later she remembered how she was dressed—or undressed. Her arms flopped about in the large sleeves. She gestured to the dresser. "I don't suppose my clothes are in there?" A quick check revealed empty drawers. Great.

Hillary plopped down on a chair, then immediately stiffened. The wooden seat had no "give" in it whatsoever.

"Now what?" she asked, more to herself than to her companion. She chewed on her lower lip. What a morning this was turning out to be! At least the man wasn't ruled by his hormones. But how on earth had she ended up in his bed?

The man cleared his throat. "If I may offer a suggestion?"

She looked at him. He probably never had a woman forget him when he was in the room; he was that handsome.

He relaxed his shoulders against the headboard, his broad chest half-exposed. Even unshaven and with his hair tousled, he appealed to her. Pure unadulterated man.

A wave of desire swept through her. Hillary licked her lips. Self-conscious, she raised her gaze from him and concentrated on the bedpost. Such lusty between-the-sheets thoughts would get her into even worse trouble—and lusty thoughts were as foreign to her as this trip to Great Britain.

Except for those lusty thoughts a moment ago when I was cuddled by his side. A fleeting grin lightened her lips.

Be still my beating heart!

She gave her libido a smack. Back to business. "Um, sure. Go ahead. I could use any suggestion at this point."

His eyes twinkled at her. "I do not usually rescue damsels in distress, but I believe I shall make an exception in your case."

His lopsided grin weakened her all the way down to her knees. Good thing she was sitting. Why was she responding this way?

"My man, Finch, should be up and about by now," he continued. "With your permission, I shall summon him to make inquiries on the whereabouts of your *husband*."

His man? How odd! He still thought she was a prostitute, though. He stressed the word "husband" as if she didn't have one.

She had to smile; no sense getting into a huff. Jim was no longer her idea of a husband anyway. Her ideals, like her love for him, died long ago.

Relaxed in the chair, she postponed any thoughts about Jim's reaction to learning she had spent the night with another man. Why worry about it? Although she was blameless, he'd retreat into his personal shell even further.

"That's a great idea. Thanks. Then Jim can bring my suitcase and I can dress." And have breakfast, too. Her stomach was beginning to rebel against its empty state. Food was becoming a priority.

"There is one problem, however." The man sounded amused.

There was always a price tag. One didn't get something for nothing. She narrowed her gaze. "What's that?"

"Unless you return my robe, I am afraid I shall reveal more of me than you might care to see." The man smiled and shifted in bed. The sheet slid further away, now only covering him from the waist down.

"Oh, no!" Hillary jumped up. "I mean, yes, of course! Here." Without thinking, she pulled off the robe and gingerly handed it to him.

Instead of putting it on fast, he seemed to take forever. He eased one arm into a sleeve, then languidly the other one. All the while he kept his gaze on her.

Her cheeks radiated heat. She knew her face had to be the color of her nightshirt—shocking pink. She was standing there half-naked in front of the most desirable man she'd ever come across—and a stranger to boot. Brother! Her dear mother was probably turning over in her grave. Hillary's nightie also had two slits up the meager sides. Not much protection against his probing stares. If she sat down, who knew how much leg she would expose? No, she had to stand.

She fingered the long line of buttons at her bodice. "I wish you'd hurry. I'm uncomfortable enough as it is without you eyeballing me."

Her frankness surprised her. She shrugged it off as a case of the nerves. Who, in her position, wouldn't be nervous?

The man unsuccessfully turned his laughter into a cough, and then he gave her that lopsided grin again. "Certainly, my dear. Although I must say I have never heard such a quaint manner of speaking. I find the term 'eyeballing' quite expressive, to be sure."

She tapped her foot. How dare he make fun of her speech when he sounded so... so British!

His eyes gleamed with mischief. "And such unusual night attire. I have never seen the like. Not that you do not look fetching."

Hillary wanted to strangle him. Through clenched teeth, she commanded, "Hurry up!"

"Impatient, m'dear?" He completed his task and, properly covered by the robe, sauntered over to the door. "May I suggest you take position behind the door? When it comes to females, Finch can be disapproving. He does not understand that women can be necessary at times."

The man knew he was infuriating. He knew it. Hillary frowned but followed his suggestion. The man's gaze moved over her bare feet, lower limbs, knees, and partially exposed thighs. She

tried to pretend his scrutiny didn't bother her but if her face got any hotter, she'd scorch her eyebrows.

He chuckled. "By the bye, shall I have a bottle of champagne sent up? To celebrate our good fortune? Or rather, my good fortune!"

She balled her fists. What she wouldn't give to floor the man. But she was in no position to argue.

Eyeing her combat-ready hands, he raised one eyebrow. "No champagne? Perhaps you do not favor things that are French?"

"If you please." She spat out the words.

He grinned, opened the door, and called out into the corridor. "Finch. Finch, old boy, are you up?"

Hillary heard a shuffling noise down the hallway. The shuffling stopped at the door and a man asked, "Did you require me, my...."

"My good man," her bedfellow interrupted. "I have a commission for you this early morn. I have an unexpected companion with me—a charming one, I might add. It seems she has misplaced her husband, Jim."

He turned to her and used the door as a barrier to hide her from Finch. "Jim what, my dear?" he asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

His eyes crinkled merriment at her predicament. Damn the man! Hillary concentrated on keeping her voice cool. "Jim Logan," she said succinctly.

With his back to Finch, the man curved a finger under her chin. "I have been remiss. We have not introduced ourselves. Simon Altmont, at your service." He waited for her response.

She met his gaze and ignored the fluttery sensations that zigzagged down her backbone. Hoping she showed no emotion, she raised her chin. "And I'm *Mrs.* Logan."

His hearty laugh shook those massive shoulders. Releasing her chin, he bowed. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, my dear."

Finch's shuffle announced that he still waited. Mr. Altmont turned back to him. "I need you to ferret out this Jim Logan—discreetly, of course. If you have no success, then you must find some suitable clothes for Mrs. Logan to wear." Mr. Altmont took another look at Hillary and gave her a wink. "Her proportions are similar to those of Ivy Sinclair."

Ivy Sinclair? Probably a girlfriend. No disguising that lusty look on his face.

He paused and outlined his upper lip with the tip of his tongue. "Yes, quite similar."

As if that wasn't embarrassing enough, Hillary caught a whiff of freshly baked cinnamon bread rising from downstairs. Her stomach decided to roar. Even Finch must have heard it.

"Oh, and Finch," Mr. Altmont drawled, "do bring Mrs. Logan and me some breakfast. We have worked up an appetite!"

Speechless, she stared at him. Had she heard right? How dare he imply....

He reached over to gently close her opened mouth. "Nothing French, however, Finch. She has an aversion to potables with a Gallic flavor!"

In that moment, there was nothing Hillary wanted to do more than to murder the man.

