

Excerpt from "Saving Sarah" by Gail Ranstrom

Fully one hour late, Sarah arrived in the mews behind the King's Head Tavern. She whistled softly and waited for an answer. When it came, she was immeasurably relieved. She had been afraid that Dicken would leave when she was late.

He slipped from the shadows of the livery, his expression and manner betraying agitation. "Trouble, Sadie. Big trouble."

Her heartbeat sped, and her mind raced in several different directions at once. "Pray say Mr. Whitlock has taken her home again," she whispered.

"Nay. Worse 'n that," Dicken sighed. "She's been sold away. Bridey is tryin' to find out where she's gone, but Mrs. Carmichael ain't talking."

She reeled from this news and crushing guilt weighed down on her. "Oh, if I'd only stolen her away last night! If--"

"'Tweren't your fault, Sadie. We couldn't have got her out of Mrs. Carmichael's bed wi' the old lady in it. She was watched too close. By the time Mr. Hodgeson arrived to buy her, she was gone."

"We were so close," she said. Her hands balled into fists at her sides. "So close. Now how will we ever find her?"

"We will, Sadie," Dicken whispered earnestly. "Sticky Joe will wheedle it out of 'em. 'Twill be easier to steal her out of some nabob's 'ouse than out of that orphanage. You'll see."

She blinked her tears back. "The poor child. She must be terrified. We must find her, Dicken, and soon."

Dicken started at a sound from the tavern. "Let's go, Sadie. We can try again tomorrow."

The back door flew open and the proprietor peered out. "Who's there? Here now, no skulkin' about, ye thievin' rascals! Steal my customer's mounts again, will ye? I'll show ye trouble!"

A loud boom rang out and an object whizzed past Sarah's left ear before spraying splinters from the livery wall into the air. She lunged forward and pushed Dicken toward the street. "Run, Dicken!"

Sarah dashed in the opposite direction, trying to divert the tavern keeper's attention. She knew it would be a moment before the man could reload and fire again. "We're not thieves," she called. "Please, sir, desist!"

Heavy footsteps chased her down a blind alley. When she came to a high stone wall, she halted and turned to face her pursuer. He carried a lantern in one hand and his pistol in the other. A wide toothless grin split his round face like a grotesque wound.

"Got ye now," he said, slowing to a walk, menace in every step.

"Enough, Jack. Let her be. She's no horse thief," instructed a voice behind the man's beefy girth. She heard the metallic slide of a sword easing back into a sheath.

Sarah did not know whether to laugh or cry when she heard the low raspy voice. How had she made occasional forays into Blackfriars without encountering this man before, and now, of a sudden, she could not sneeze without drawing his attention?

"She?" The tavern keeper peered through the gloom. He held his lantern high to illuminate her face. "How do ye know she ain't?"

"I've had dealings with her in the past," Ethan Travis said as he shouldered the man out of his way. "Go back to the tavern, Jack. I'll handle this."

Jack took several backward steps before turning and retreating. Sarah waited for him to be out of earshot before acknowledging Ethan Travis's assistance.

"I suppose I must thank you for your interference this time, sir."

He inclined his head--an oddly elegant gesture in such a setting. "You are welcome, Miss Hunt. I do not often lie. I hope you prove worthy of it."

"You have not lied, sir. I am not a thief."

"Not a very good one, at any rate," he smiled. "Did picking pockets prove too difficult? I will grant that horses are larger and do not require you to reach into pockets, but hiding the goods is more difficult. Are you certain you wish to change your career?"

She nearly laughed but she did not want to encourage him. "I swear I am not a thief," she repeated.

"That is not what you swore just last night," he reminded her. "I believe you said you wished to supplement your income."

"You are impossible," she said, suppressing her smile.

"I? How so?"

"It is not gentlemanly to call a lady a liar."

"Thankfully I am not a gentleman and you, Miss Hunt, are not a lady."

Sarah fidgeted as he came closer. The scent of lime and French milled soap seemed incongruous in a back alley in Blackfriars, and yet appropriate for a man like Ethan Travis. It intrigued her in an oddly unsettling way. Her heartbeat sped as he closed the distance between them.

"And you are a liar," he continued as he gazed down at her. "One or the other, Miss Hunt. You cannot have it both ways."

"Very well, then," she breathed deeply, "I am a liar, but not a thief."

"And I am a thief, but not a liar," he confessed in a husky voice.

Confounded, she allowed him to take her arm and lead her toward the street. The heat from his hand penetrated the fine wool of her jacket and the memory of Lord Cedric Broxton flashed through her mind. She wondered why his touch, his nearness, awoke none of the exciting nervousness this man generated in her. When his breath, scented ever so lightly with fine brandy, fanned her cheek, she nearly stumbled. She wondered if his kiss would taste of it, or his tongue bear some residue that would make her drunken with--she caught herself with a start. *Where had that thought come from?*

"Thus, since I am not a liar," he continued, smiling at her momentary distraction, "you may rest assured that I am speaking the truth when I say that you are unsuited for thieving. Stick to . . . your other profession, Miss Hunt. It will serve you better and may keep you out of Newgate."

"Y-you think so?" she managed.

"I do." An odd expression passed over his face as he said the words, as if he was perplexed by his own advice.

She fell silent. How in the world had she got herself into this predicament? The thought flitted briefly through her mind to tell him the truth--that she was not a prostitute--but some instinct for survival stopped her just in time. She could not imagine what a man of Mr. Travis's reputation would do with the information that Lady Sarah Hunter wanders the streets of London after midnight disguised as a boy, and gives her business as that of a prostitute. The *ton* would cut her dead. Reginald would kill her! She would not mind for herself, but she could not bear to bring shame to the Hunter name or her brothers' honor. She'd already sacrificed a great deal on that score.

"You seem preoccupied, Miss Hunt. Was it something I said?"

She shook her head and, failing a better plan, assumed her persona as Sadie Hunt. "I do not want to go to Newgate, Mr. Travis. There is no one whom I could call upon to buy my way out. I would rot there."

His gaze dropped to her chest, buttoned tightly into her jacket. "I am afraid there is no way around it, Miss Hunt. The streets are cruel for women in your profession. You have chosen a dangerous occupation."

"And you would know about dangerous occupations?"

There was a long silence during which he appeared to weigh his words. When he answered, it was clear that he was not inviting further questions. "Yes, Miss Hunt. I would."

"Then I shall take your word for it, Mr. Travis."

"Thieving aside, have you considered other options?"

"What other options do you think a prostitute has, sir?"

His hand moved to her jacket front and, before she could protest, undid the top three buttons. Her shirt buttons gave way as easily and allowed her flattened breasts to swell at the deep opening. Before he dropped his hand, his knuckles brushed the heated flesh and caused her to shiver. Such an action from another man would have made her flinch, or provoked fear or anger, but this man was different, and there was no imminent threat in his manner. He was almost brotherly.

"Miss Hunt, you are a great gift wrapped as rubbish. You needn't ply your trade on the streets of Blackfriars. Any number of expensive brothels would be pleased to employ you. You'd be off the streets, under the protection of an employer, and certainly able to afford better clothing than a man's cast-offs. If you are interested, I'd be pleased to recommend you to some of the better establishments. They would, of course, wish to interview you as to your, er, qualifications and any, ah, special talents or proficiencies you may have acquired."

There was no mockery in Ethan Travis's manner, Sarah realized. She was both touched with his apparent concern and humiliated to her core that he believed

her a woman of ill repute. What could she say to such a reasonable argument? How could she refuse such an offer? "Would I have to . . . service anyone with the price?"

"I believe that is the custom," he allowed.

"Thank you, but no, sir. I value my independence too highly to sell it. As things stand, I decide who, and what, and where. I do no one's bidding. I prefer it that way, and if I must trade it for independence, I shall choose independence. 'Tis the last vestige of pride I have." At least there was an element of truth in that.

He smiled again, as if both disappointed and pleased at the same time. "As you wish. Should you change your mind--."

"I will not."

"Nevertheless, I stand ready to tender you an introduction to two or three of the better establishments. I believe, beneath the cap and trousers, you are comely enough, and I can vow your speech is pleasing."

She smiled to herself, then she realized what he was suggesting. "Would these be establishments at which you are a client?" she asked. She could not see a man of Ethan Travis's ilk purchasing favors. Neither could she see him with a demure wife in a cottage somewhere on the outskirts of London.

An angry flush colored his cheeks. "Miss Hunt, my personal habits are not relevant to this conversation. When they are, I will be certain to inform you of them. Unless. . . ."

"Unless?" she challenged.

"Unless you'd like to find out now." He stepped forward and lifted her chin with his forefinger. His mouth came down to hover just above hers as he continued speaking. "That is an interesting prospect, is it not? You could learn my 'habits' first hand whilst I test your professional qualifications."

Oh my! Nothing brotherly here! As his lips descended the half an inch that had separated them, she had the answer to her earlier question. Yes, the brandy on his lips was intoxicating. Yes, she wanted more. His arms tightened fiercely around her, drawing her so close that she felt as if she would melt into him. And she wanted him to kiss her--not this tantalizing teasing with his lips barely brushing hers in contrast to his possessive embrace. She craved a deeper contact from those lips. As deep as his embrace. She wanted to feel the weight and heat of his mouth. That realization should have frightened her. Indeed, she should be shocked. She should run.

Instead she clung to his coat to keep from swooning and ran her tongue along the seam of his lips, wanting to taste more of him. She heard a little moan and realized with horror that it was hers. With a quick intake of breath, the Demon of Alsatia dropped his hands and stepped back as if he'd been stung, a look of surprise on his face.

He could not possibly be more surprised than she. She--who'd lost her innocence but never been kissed before tonight--was playing the role of a practiced wanton.

"Nicely done, Sadie," he breathed. "Very seductive. I nearly forgot myself, and I cannot recall the last time that happened. I shall vouch that you are good at your job."

Sanity returned with the chill that replaced the heat of his body against her, and she realized he had just conceded the skirmish! He must never know that she had been more at a disadvantage than he. When all was said and done, *she* had not been able to break the spell.

He gave her a little push toward White Lion Hill. "Run, Sadie, before I pay my money and take you up on that invitation. And do not let me find you thieving again."

Sarah sprinted up the hill toward St. Paul's, desperate to escape. In mere

seconds a myriad of thoughts raced through her mind. She very much feared she was at a disadvantage when dealing with Mr. Ethan Travis. The man unsettled her. That kiss. She gulped. That kiss, her first by a man she was not related to, had been the most disconcerting event of her life.

Even when she had been assaulted and raped by four men in Vauxhall Gardens, she had not been confused or unsettled. That was terror, plain and simple. That was pain and shame and grief. But Ethan's kiss was bitter *and* sweet, terror *and* temptation.

She wanted more.

She was terrified she'd get it.