

Touching the Hero's Heart by Aurrora St. James

Chapter One

Present Day

Corbin, Kentucky

What the hell have you gotten us into, Lily?

Archer Bennett's fingers clenched around the steering wheel of his Jeep and the hair on the back of his neck prickled. He'd seen nicer apartment complexes than this in Afghanistan, so why the hell was his sister living here?

The sign on the two-story roach motel advertised clean apartments and cheap rates with instant availability. He snorted. They were available because people didn't appreciate having to wear a hazmat suit in their own apartment. What a joke.

Almost a week ago, his little sister Bellamy had called him up in a panic because she couldn't reach their other sister. He'd been sure Lily was fine. Bellamy tended to get a little wound up and she'd tried to get him to come out to this tiny town with her. It had seemed like a waste of time, so he hadn't.

His stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch. Truth was, he hadn't wanted to leave his house if he didn't have to. Some days, it was just too painful.

Bellamy had called again three days ago from Lily's apartment but this time her voice was thick with worry. Their sister wasn't there, but her phone and purse were, and no one had notified the police. He'd been concerned. Of course, he had. But what could he do from Colorado that she couldn't do there? Or that's what he'd told himself. Any excuse, right? Anything to avoid facing his sisters and answering their questions about his injury. And his team.

When she hadn't called back by the next day, he'd finally called her, and received her voicemail. Four hours later, he left another. Unease had set in. Bells wanted his help with Lily; she wouldn't avoid him. When he couldn't reach her the next day, or the next, the fear—and guilt—finally punched through his walls. He'd grabbed some gear and got his ass to Kentucky. To this run-down place his sisters shouldn't have been anywhere near.

Archer kicked open the door to his Jeep, checked his knife and grabbed his cane, locking the vehicle behind him. At least three cars had missing wheels, one had a smashed in window, and graffiti covered another. He had no intention of letting his Jeep become the fourth. He was getting his sisters and getting out of this dump.

A chilly breeze blew, sending brown leaves scattering over the cracked pavement. They crunched under his boots as he limped toward the apartment office. He pulled his jacket closer and focused on his objective: Find Lily and Bellamy, then go home where he could rest in peace. Oh, and give them hell for worrying him and dragging him out here to begin with.

He scanned the area again. Piles of mechanical parts were stacked against the sides of apartment buildings that looked like they'd been painted roughly forty years ago, by toddlers. Bellamy had said it was bad, but he hadn't imagined *this*.

The glass door to the apartment office had a large crack running down the center and was covered in black metal bars. A dented, black garbage can sat by the door, with dozens of cigarette butts on the ground around it. Archer yanked the door open and stepped inside the dingy, small space. The overwhelming smell of cigarette smoke choked him and forced him to take shallow breaths.

A man in his thirties sat behind an old desk with his feet kicked up, and a cigarette clamped in his lips. Smoke curled in the air, creating a cloud that drifted along the ceiling. Piles

of paper, ratty chairs, and bookshelves cluttered the rest of the room. The only item of any value seemed to be a red enameled egg with gold filigree that looked like one of those fancy Fabergé eggs. It sat atop one of the bookshelves, looking like the crown jewels in the middle of a sewer.

The man ran a hand through his thinning brown hair when he spotted Archer, then rubbed it on his dirty white tank top.

“Help you?” he rasped.

“Which apartment is Lily Bennett's?”

“Who are you?”

Archer shifted his weight off his injured leg. “The man looking for Lily's apartment.”

The guy grinned and stabbed his cigarette out in an overflowing ashtray. “Gotta be more specific, buddy.” He pointed at a name plate that read *Dennis Rogers, Manager*. “I'm the apartment manager. I take care of this place and the people who live here. Can't let just anyone in to see one of the residents.”

“You take care of the residents. That why you haven't notified the police that she went missing?” Archer flexed his hand on the cane handle.

Dennis crossed his arms over his chest and leaned farther back in his chair. “Who says she is missing?”

Shit. He'd dealt with too many men like this during his time in the SEALs. He didn't have the time or the patience for Dennis, and he was in too much pain to be polite. He leaned in so he was eye level with the man. The smell of nicotine and sweat stung his nose. “I do. Give me the key to her apartment, or take me there. Either way, I'm getting into her apartment now.”

“Who the fu—”

Fear for his sisters overrode any courtesy he might have summoned. It churned his stomach and threatened to bring up memories he'd locked away a long time ago. Archer strode around the desk, grabbed a fistful of Dennis's shirt and jerked him to his feet. "I said *now*." He shoved Dennis toward the door. "If she's in trouble, your delaying won't do her—or you—any favors."

The man stumbled forward, then turned and glared at Archer. He must have realized that it was a fight he wouldn't win, because he muttered a few curses and slammed through the door.

Archer followed. Dennis led him to a ratty building and up the exterior stairs. There were no light bulbs in the stairway lights and more cigarette butts littered the steps.

"Damn it's cold. You should have let me grab my jacket, dude," Dennis muttered. They stopped at a door near the stairwell and he fished a ring of keys out of his dirty pants. "That other chick that came here a couple days ago never returned my original key. Had to have a locksmith make a new one. If Lily comes back, tell her she owes me the four hundred seventy it cost to get the new key."

Archer wasn't listening. He was looking at the dozens more cigarette butts clumped in little piles far too near Lily's door. The same brand Dennis smoked. He narrowed his eyes at the man. This was the guy that Bellamy said had been too busy going through Lily's apartment to call the police. Looked like he'd been spending a lot of time outside of it as well.

A chill slid down his spine as a new thought took root. Was the guy stalking Lily? Was he responsible for her and Bellamy's disappearances? What if they'd been taken and he could have prevented it by leaving his fucking house? A tight knot formed in his gut and his heart pounded. Archer forced himself to control his breathing. His nightmares were getting to him.

That was all it was. Even so... he speared Dennis with a hard look and pointed at the butts. "If I find out you had anything to do with their disappearances, you'll *beg* to go to jail."

Dennis's throat bobbed. He shrugged as if unconcerned, but the movement was stiff and his shoulders remained hunched up by his ears. "Wasn't me, man. And who says they're missing anyway? You know women. They probably went shopping or some shit, and didn't tell their guard dog. Not that I blame 'em. I wouldn't want to hang with you either."

"Just open the door."

Dennis unlocked the door with a shaky hand and pushed it open. "There ya go. I ain't leaving my key this time. If you find Lily or that other chick that looks just like Bellamy—you know that hot supermodel? Tell them to return my key and pay the rent. If it's not paid by tomorrow, then I'm boxing the place up and putting it in storage. I've got a list of people waiting to rent here. Can't keep the good places open for flighty tenants."

Fucker was delusional. He shoved past Dennis, then shut the door in his face.

"You must be related to that bitch. She always shut the door in my face too," Dennis called from the other side.

Archer swung the door back open and grabbed the man's shirt, dragging him an inch closer. "Talk about my sister that way again and it'll be the last time you speak with all of your teeth."

"You can't show up here threatening people. I'll have the cops here before—"

Archer shut the door in his face again.

Dennis swore. "Lily's car is still here, in case you're interested, asshole. So's the blonde's." He stomped away.

Archer scrubbed a hand down his face and looked around the efficiency apartment. “Dammit, Lily,” he muttered. The place was no bigger than a shoebox. The cottage he rented was bigger than this place.

A fold-out bed, a bookcase, and a table with some tools on it were surrounded by a couple of beat-up chairs. She didn't even have a kitchen. It was a half-step up from a beer fridge and a camp stove. The only personal item of Lily's that he could see was a photo of the three of them. Their mom took it on their last camping trip before he left for boot camp. He looked happy and carefree, with an arm around each of his sisters, holding up two-fingered bunny ears behind Bells.

I don't know that man anymore.

He couldn't remember being that carefree. It felt like looking at a picture of someone else. Archer shook his head and did a sweep. Lily's phone was plugged in by her purse, with her driver's license and debit card inside, but no cash. He also found what he thought was Bellamy's phone on the bed. The battery was dead, but the pink case had a sparkly butterfly on the back which was something Bells would've loved.

The tools on the table were small, more for making jewelry or something. Hadn't Lily said something about making bracelets a couple of months back? Not like he'd planned to buy one. Who the hell would he give it to? He couldn't remember the last date he'd been on. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had sex. He'd been happily married to his SEAL team, until he'd fucked up.

He pushed the thoughts away before he fell into a hole he couldn't climb out of. Bells and Lily needed him.

Something had gone down here. He was sure of it. The dried brown spot on the corner of the bookcase was clearly blood. But whose? If it was one of his sisters'...

Shit. He should have come with Bellamy. He closed his eyes and drew in a hard breath. Didn't matter. He hadn't and he knew better than anyone that you couldn't change the past. Sure as hell couldn't time travel back to fix your mistakes.

Archer turned for the door, intent to go check out the vehicles Dennis had mentioned, when something gold glinted in his peripheral vision. He gripped his cane and gingerly squatted to look. Fire burned from his calf to his thigh as his left knee bent and the muscles strained. The physical therapist said with exercise and work, it would get better. He'd heard her say that to a guy that lost a limb though, so he wasn't putting a lot of stock in it. If this was as good as his leg was going to get, he'd have to live with the pain and weakness. Because he sure hadn't died from it.

Once he was kneeling, he scanned the floor. Beneath the table, tucked against the leg, was a piece of metal. He reached for it and turned it over in his palm. The little piece of gold filigree looked delicate and out of place here. He looked around Lily's apartment but didn't see anything it might have broken off of. The intricate gold swirls belonged on something fancy. Something he'd seen recently.

Like the little Fabergé red-enameled and gold filigreed egg in Dennis' office.

A hard knot settled in his stomach as he pushed to his feet. His left leg protested and he had to lean on his cane for a moment until the muscles loosened up. Then he limped toward the door. That egg had been in this apartment and Dennis was going to answer some questions.

Starting with how he got that egg and where the hell his sisters were.

May 1814

London, England

“My brother is impossible. He promised that he would help me make a match this Season, and all he's done is introduce me to the worst boors imaginable.” Violet Hawthorne threw her hands up in the air as she paced the drawing room in their family townhouse. Because it was unseasonably cool out, the windows were closed, and the room felt stuffy. She had a mind to open them anyway to air out the room and maybe get a whiff of the roses in the garden below. Anything would be better than a stuffy drawing room furnished by a stuffy brother.

“Oh Vi, if that were true, he would have agreed to meet with Lord Comlyn last week when he expressed interest in you,” Lily replied.

“Lord Comlyn is older than the Archbishop!” Violet stopped pacing and glared at her sister-in-law. Lily had come into their life quite unexpectedly when she time traveled to a street in the village near their country estate and had almost been run over by Violet’s carriage. She'd done the proper thing of course. She'd taken Lily home and called a doctor. Her brother, Gabriel, had seen Lily and been smitten. How could he not with Lily's beautiful, dark hair with its caramel streaks and her bright, blue-green eyes? Her figure hadn't been a deterrent either. Violet envied her full bosom and curved waist, all achieved without stays—though Lily mentioned something called a “bra”. She didn’t know where one would purchase something like that, especially in this era.

She looked down at her breasts. They were smaller than Lily's, but not quite as small as Bellamy, Lily's sister. How important were breasts when it came to attracting the right man?

“Violet?”

“Hmm?” Maybe she should purchase a smaller set of stays that might enhance them under her ballgowns. Men did seem to appreciate a woman with a full bosom.

“I said that Gabriel is trying to find a match that will not only provide for you but also be someone you will care for.” Lily’s voice sounded somewhat strained.

Though really, how strained could she be? *She* was married to a man she loved—Violet’s irascible brother. “How will he find one when he growls at them like a rabid wolf when they inquire about me?” She plucked at a thread on the cuff of her sleeve, trying to keep her face blank when she added, “Last night I overheard Lady Parling gossiping with *glee* that I'd be on the shelf within the month.”

Lily sighed and set her teacup down on the table by the chaise she sat on. She patted the cushion. “Come sit.”

Violet shuffled over and sat. “I don't understand why Lord Taylor wasn't suitable.”

Lily reached over to tuck one of Violet's curls behind her ear. “Because Zeph said the man spent more time in the gaming hells than he did. Gabriel was concerned Taylor would lose the whole of his fortune before you stepped foot down the aisle.”

She frowned. Zeph Lael was one of Gabriel's closest friends. and she adored him. If he’d seen Taylor at the hells, then Violet wanted nothing to do with the man. *Only...* “How is a woman to know the measure of a man, then? If Zeph hadn't known about Taylor, we might even now be out for a ride in Hyde Park.”

Lily put her arm around Violet and laid her head on her shoulder. "I don't know. Although I suspect this is why so many men have mistresses in this time. Neither party know each other well enough to know if their marriage will work for life."

"You and Gabriel didn't have such an issue. My brother is so smitten that he'll still be in love with you in the next life."

Lily chuckled. "I certainly hope so. Otherwise I will have to track him down and force him to love me all over again."

Violet smiled at that. She truly was happy for Gabriel. He'd worked so hard to build their family fortunes back up after their father had squandered them. He deserved a love as true as the great romances.

"I don't know how we'll ever come to an agreement, Lily. I don't want a man in his dotage who won't be able to father children."

"I'll make certain he excludes men old enough to be your grandfather."

"And my father," Violet added.

"So a man younger than the Archbishop of Canterbury. What else is on this expansive list of wants in a husband?"

She raised a hand and began to tick off fingers. "One, he must be kind and a gentleman. I don't want a grouch like my brother."

Lily snorted a laugh.

"Two, he must be hale. I can't take a man to my bed who won't survive the night."

"Violet! I will not be sharing that with Gabriel. He'd lose his mind."

She pressed on, cheeks flaming a bit at having shocked her sister-in-law. But really, was that such an unreasonable request? Besides, she loved some of those odd phrases that Lily used

when Violet said something that surprised her. *Lose his mind! Perfect.* “He must also have his own home. Preferably an estate with a title and land. And, of course, be financially sound. I won't live in a shack even if I love him.”

“No shacks. Anything else?”

“Only one. He must love me as much as Gabriel loves you.”

Lily hugged her again. “That's the easy part of the list, Vi. Who wouldn't love you?”

Her eyes misted a little. What had they done before sweet Lily came into their lives? And now that Lily's sister Bellamy had come through time and decided to stay as well? Her family was almost complete. She just needed to find her own match.

“Are we having a cuddle?” Bellamy asked as she entered the drawing room. She squeezed her thin frame onto the chaise on the other side of Violet and put her arms around her, mashing her between the two sisters.

Violet laughed, her frustrations from earlier gone. She'd never had a sister, only a vexing older brother. Lily and Bellamy were what she always thought having sisters would be like. Bellamy had arrived almost a month ago. She'd time traveled using the same automaton clock that Gabriel's friend Christian had created the previous year. Instead of appearing at their country estate as Lily had, she'd arrived outside the townhouse door. Fortunately, Christian had found her and brought her inside where she and Lily reunited. Their relationship had been strained for years in their time, which meant they continued to bicker a bit in this era. But that made them all the more like real sisters. After all, she and Gabriel bickered all the time. *Well, less now since he married Lily.*

“Could I persuade either of you to go shopping with me?” Bellamy asked. “I heard that Southard's on Oxford just received a new shipment of silks.”

Violet perked up. “New silks? I’d love a new dress before the end of the Season.”

Lily yawned and laid a hand on her stomach. “This baby makes me tired. I think I’ll take a nap while you enjoy your outing.”

Bellamy waggled her eyebrows. “Does this nap include Gabriel? Shall we save supper for you or just expect to see you tomorrow?”

Lily flushed and a small smile touched her lips. “He does enjoy our naps.”

Violet envied that secret smile and the knowing look in Bellamy’s eyes. She wanted that with her own husband.

“Come on, Vi. Let’s go shopping and leave the two love birds alone. That way Lily can scream as loud as she wants without disturbing anyone.”

Her sister groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Bells!”

“What of Christian?” Violet asked quickly, hoping to divert the conversation away from her brother in any sort of amorous situation. In the months since Gabriel had married, her brother seemed to take every opportunity to steal kisses from his wife. “Will he join us?”

“He’s in his workshop working on a new automaton.” Bellamy chuckled. “He gets so involved in his projects that I doubt he’d hear them if they were in the same room.”

The love on her face sent a small pang through Violet’s heart. Was there anyone out there for her? Was she truly meant to spend the rest of her life on the shelf like Lady Parling had said? The thought distressed her. More than anything, Violet wanted love and her own family. The more time that passed, the less that seemed likely to happen. She’d turn nineteen in a few months. Most of her friends were already married. She didn’t think she’d be able to face a third Season on the marriage mart. At that point, the gossips would wonder what was wrong with her

that the Earl of Rothden's sister couldn't find a match. A sense of helplessness settled over her. Gabriel *had* to accept one of her suitors this Season. If he didn't, she'd be a spinster for life.

Bellamy stood and took her hand, pulling her to her feet. "Let's go see if they have any new colors of silk in."

Violet smiled and let Bellamy lead her from the room. She welcomed the distraction. Besides, who knew if she might meet someone new on their outing? Someone that Gabriel couldn't say no to because he was perfect?