

Always a Scoundrel

The Notorious Gentlemen

 HarperCollins e-books

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*Who would have thought that
a group of bloggers could become
both friends and a support group?*

Thanks, ladies.

*And thanks to all the other goddess readers at
thegoddessblogs.com.*

You make me laugh every morning.

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February 1815

London

“I don’t want a well-ordered life.” Lord Bramwell Lowry Johns finished off his glass of whiskey and reached for the bottle and a refill. “I would die from boredom in a fortnight.”

“You only think that because you equate well-ordered with dull,” Sullivan Waring observed from across the table, dipping his voice below the cacophony of noise that filled Jezebel’s establishment after midnight. “For someone of your reputation, you’re amazingly naive.”

“*You’re naive,*” Bramwell retorted, annoyance touching him. He was also a bit surprised the word hadn’t combusted in mid-air upon being applied to him. *Naive. Ha.* “Can you imagine me married and sitting down to...what, do embroidery? Play whist with the darling empty-headed leg shackle? Drink tea and attempt a conversation?” He shuddered, not even having to pretend the horror likely reflected in his expression.

The third member of their party, Phineas Bromley, snorted. “Don’t blame the institution of marriage for the fact that you’d never wish to be wed to any of the women whose skirts you’ve lifted. You need to choose better for a bride, is all.”

Bram made a derisive sound. “I’m not talking about your ladies, so don’t bother with being offended. You’ve managed to find the only two decent women in England—and even so, I wouldn’t wish to trade places with either of you.”

“I find that somewhat comforting,” Sullivan noted, sipping his own drink.

“And so you should. It’s only so you’ll appreciate that I do possess some restraint, and that with the exception of your ladies, I choose not to exercise it.”

“You’ve not found a bride due to your own squeamishness, then.”

Bram eyed Phineas. “I would put it to equal parts horror and compassion, myself. I may be heartless, but I have no desire to inflict myself on a permanent basis upon some chit, innocent or otherwise. It’s not my duty to continue the family bloodline, and I can’t think of another reason to drag myself into a church before I’m put into a box.”

“So you intend to spend the remainder of your life whoring, drinking, wagering, and being as outrageous as you can manage?”

Bram shook himself. He made it a point to be serious as little as possible, and neither did he want to argue with two newly married men about the merits of being leg-shackled. “Please, Phin,” he said aloud. “I would never think so small. You know my ultimate goal is to lower the standards of morality enough that everything I do becomes acceptable.”

“That’s likely what happened at Sodom and Gomorrah,” Sullivan observed.

“One can only hope. And what are you two doing anyway, trying to preach the gospels of morality and domesticity to me? Besides it being a bloody waste of time, one of you is a former housebreaker, and the other a former highwayman. Hardly occupations any true gentleman would seek to emulate. It’s notorious of you. And selfish, to think you should be the only ones permitted to misbehave.”

His two closest friends shared a glance. He'd known them for years, since the three of them had ended up serving together in the First Royal Dragoons on the Peninsula. He'd known Sullivan for even longer—since Oxford. And he recognized the look. He was about to be counseled. Good God. If he'd had anything better to do this evening, he would have left—and taken the bottle with him. No sense walking away from fine liquor. But London during the little Season had few amusements to offer.

“Speaking of *our* particular escapades,” Phin, the more logical-minded of the two of them, began again, “in all seriousness, Bram, what the devil do you think you’re doing? This new game of yours is both reckless and pointless. And dangerous.”

“Recklessness is the point, Phin.” He pinned Sullivan with a look before the horse breeder could enter the fray as well. “And you gave me the idea, Sully. I’ve just perfected it.”

“I don’t want credit for inspiring your new hobby, thank you very much,” Sullivan retorted. “I had reason for what I did.”

“Yes, the things you burgled were yours to begin with. I’m pleased you had a cause to fight for. I don’t.”

“Then don’t rob anyone.”

“I said I didn’t have a cause. I do have a reason.”

“Such as?”

“None of your damned business. You’re beginning to bore me.”

Sullivan sat forward. “I’m not ashamed of what I did. I would do it again, considering that it led me to Isabel. But there are consequences, Bram. I nearly hanged. I would have, if—”

“If I hadn’t pretended to be you and committed another robbery.” He sent a glance at Phin. “And I pretended to be you, as well, to save your ungrateful life. And your brother’s estate. So stop lecturing, and instead help me finish off this bottle. I know perfectly well what I’m doing. I don’t need your approval.”

“The question,” Phin put in, offering his glass for a refill, “is whether you will know when to stop. Self-restraint—”

“Is an excuse invented by those without the spleen to see something through. It’s dull as dirt,” Bram interrupted, his annoyance deepening. “And so are the two of you, now that you’re married. Old hens, clucking and complaining about the fun the rooster is having.” He took a long swallow.

“Bram, the—”

“Fun they *used* to have,” he broke in, “and now can only criticize because they’ve been castrated and Mrs. Waring and Mrs. Bromley won’t allow them to play any longer.” They certainly didn’t play with him as often as they’d used to. The three of them had once been notorious, and now two had sunk into amiable domesticity. Zooks, it was shocking. A disgrace, even.

With a deep breath, Phineas shrugged. “God knows I’m no saint, and I won’t lecture you on the hazards of lawbreaking. We’ve ridden into battle and mayhem together, and you know quite well what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Yes, I do. My aims are simply different than yours. You’re happy, and that’s fine for you. As for myself, I don’t wish to live a long and proper life.” Bram gestured for another bottle. “And I’ve listened to enough of this nonsense for one damned evening. For a cart full of them.”

“You say you know there will be consequences,” Sullivan said after a moment, his voice quieter. “I just hope you truly realize that.”

“Oh, I do.” Bram curved his mouth in a smile. “I look forward to them.”

Chapter 1

May 1815

Lord Bramwell Lowry Johns ducked into the foyer just ahead of the house's butler. Pressing back against the wall, the satchel of jewelry close against his chest, he listened as the servant walked within three feet of him to pass through the nearest door. The candles inside the room began going out one by one.

With a shallow breath, Bramwell moved to the front door, edged it open, and slipped silently outside. As soon as he closed the heavy oak door behind him, he trotted down the shallow front steps and out to the street.

That had gone smoothly—the Marquis of Braithewaite needed to hire servants with better hearing. He also needed better taste in friends if he wanted to escape being targeted for any more robberies. Smiling darkly, he rounded the corner, strolled down the next street, and stopped beside the massive black coach waiting there in the deep shadows. “Back to Ackley House,” he said, stepping inside and taking a seat on the well-cushioned black leather. “But stop on Brewer Street. I’ll walk from there.”

“Very good, my lord.” With a cluck to the horses, Graham sent the coach rolling down the street.

That had been easy. No fuss, minuscule chance of discovery, and a well-sprung carriage waiting not too far away. The only thing lacking was a pounding heart and a rush of his pulse. He had never questioned why he craved that sense of excitement, or why he had to risk more each time to achieve it. But he did crave it. The choice of victims was satisfying and integral, but secondary. The items he took were a very distant third.

Without bothering to look at the contents in the satchel, Bram pulled open the hidden drawer beneath the opposite seat, tossed the bag inside, and closed it again. St. Michael's Church in Knightsbridge would find a nice surprise in its alms box this Sunday, not that he would ever admit to the charity. He wasn't any damned Robin Hood; it was only that he didn't have need of the things. Low as he prided himself on sinking, it seemed somehow beneath him to covet the valuables owned by his peers. With the notable exception of their wives, of course.

Tomorrow Mayfair would be abuzz with the news—the Black Cat had struck once more, relieving another member of the aristocracy of a selection of very fine baubles and trinkets. He was far from the first burglar to terrorize the London nobility, but he did consider that he brought the largest share of style to the profession. And unless something more...interesting came along, he had no intention of stopping his activities. Unlike certain other gentlemen of his acquaintance, he absolutely didn't wish to bag a few items and then find true love, become a pious fool, and live trapped ever after.

“My lord?” Graham's voice came from above, and the coach rumbled to a stop. “Brewer Street.” His tiger hopped to the ground and flipped down the steps, and Bram descended to the street.

“That’ll be all for the night. I’ll find my own way home.” He cracked a grin. “Or somewhere.”
—His servants were accustomed to not knowing his whereabouts by night, and Graham nodded.
“Aye, my lord.” The coach rolled back into the lane without him.

With a quick look around, Bram hopped the stone wall bordering the backside of Ackley House’s gardens, dusted off his black jacket and black trousers, and strolled past the small fish pond and up to the terrace. Twenty minutes away, and no one the wiser. Now for a stiff drink, or better yet, a stiff—

A hand wrapped around his sleeve. “There you are,” Lady Ackley murmured breathily. “I’d begun to think you’d found someone else.”

And there it was. A very nice way to combat the edginess running through him. “Someone else? Not this evening, Miranda. Now why don’t you show me the lovely fresco you mentioned earlier?”

Her fine brow furrowed, her exquisite blue eyes puzzled. “What fresco, Bram?”

“That was a ruse I utilized on the chance that someone might overhear us,” he said patiently, reflecting that if he’d wanted her for conversation, he would be sadly disappointed.

“Oh. No one’s about. I checked very closely. And Lord Ackley is in the library showing off the new atlas he acquired.”

“Very well, then. Where shall we go so we might commit the deadly sin of lust without being interrupted?”

This time she giggled. Apparently she understood that. “The gazebo, then. It has padded chairs and a chaise longue.”

“Excellent.”

Lady Rosamund Davies wondered for a moment whether her family would ever arrive at any event together and in a timely manner if she didn’t set strategic clocks forward or back depending on who would see them. Her mother, the Countess of Abernathy, would arrive before the orchestra, because she hated the idea of missing any gossip.

Her older sister, Beatrice, would think she was arriving exactly at the moment of being fashionably late, because of course Bea was perfection in human form—the reason she’d married at age eighteen, and to such an important and gracious man. In reality she would dawdle about changing her hair and her ear bobs until only the servants remained awake.

Thankfully Beatrice and her important and gracious husband Peter, Lord Fishton (good God, what a name), had decided to spend the London Season with the rest of the family at Davies House, because managing to keep two separate households on schedule would simply be too much work. Rose sighed, gazing around at the crowded Ackley ballroom.

And then there was her father, the Earl of Abernathy, who insisted on arriving precisely at the moment specified on the invitation, which of course would never do. Despite the fact that thanks to her...management they always managed to arrive in a timely manner, if any of her family members ever bothered to compare timepieces, she would be in for it.

Straightening her shoulders, Rose stepped forward to grasp the arm of the youngest family member in attendance, the one most likely to become lost on the way to any given soiree and never arrive at all. He didn’t require a clock; he needed a caretaker, and for more than one reason. “Dance with me, James.”

Her younger brother shook his tawny head. “Can’t, Rose. Might miss him.”

With a sigh Rose tugged again. “Might miss whom?” she asked.

“I saw him earlier. He’s the only fellow ever to win all the wagers he made at White’s during a single Season, you know. Every wager, Rose.”

She wasn't certain whether it would be more prudent to humor James Davies, Viscount Lester, or to attempt a distraction. "Who is this sterling statistician?"

"Ha. A statistician. That's like calling...Captain Cook a fellow who did a bit of traveling. Or Shakespeare a fellow who wrote some plays. Or—"

"I said 'sterling,'" she repeated, thinking, and not for the first time, that her parents needed to invest in a very strong padlock for her brother's bedchamber door.

"Well, Lord Bram Johns ain't a statistician. He's a...a...god."

"Oh, please," Rose returned skeptically, mentally wincing at the name. Why her brother couldn't have befriended a parson or a kindly old whist player, she had no idea.

"A demigod, then. At the least." He sent her a glare, gray eyes narrowed. "And how is it that you've never heard of Lord Bram Johns? I talk about him all the time."

"I didn't say I've never heard of him. You wouldn't tell me who you were looking for." She tugged on his arm again. "And I still wish a dance. We're at a very nice soiree, for heaven's sake."

"A soiree with a card room."

Rose sighed. "Haven't you considered that this demigod of yours might have left the Ackleys' fortune more...underhanded pursuits by now?"

"By Jove, you may be right." He pulled free of her grip. "Tell Father I'm off to Jezebel's. If Johns ain't there, I know who will be."

She suppressed a responding shudder. "James, please stay. Keep me company."

He flashed a smile over his shoulder. "Don't worry, Rose. I won't step in over my head."

He would *begin* the evening at Jezebel's in over his head—if he managed to gain entry. But chasing after him would only leave the eighteen-year-old more determined to prove his skill with cards or dice or kittens or whatever it was they would be wagering over tonight.

And she had certainly heard of Lord Bramwell Lowry Johns. From the reverence with which her brother had spoken of him over the past month, he seemed more of a myth than a man. At the least she couldn't recall ever setting eyes on him. If she ever did, she would be very much inclined to punch this Hercules of scandal in the nose for being such a successful blackguard that an idiotic young man with no Town bronze would want to emulate his awful behavior.

Desiccated old Lord Ogilvy creaked through the substantial crowd and stopped in front of her. "May I have this dance, Lady Rosamund?" he rasped.

Only if you promise not to expire in the middle of it. "Of course, my lord," she said aloud, forcing a smile. At least a dance would distract her from the volcanic destruction in which James, and by extension the rest of her family, seemed determined to be swept away. Setting clocks clearly wouldn't suffice here, but she still hadn't found the appropriate lure to keep her younger brother out of trouble. And she needed to discover it quickly.

Because as much as she dreaded whatever tales of loss her brother would share with her tomorrow, part of her almost hoped that he *would* run across Lord Bramwell Johns at Jezebel's. At least there were still some unknowns to the equation that was Johns. The man James was more likely to run into meant definite trouble. She could only hope that even Jezebel's Club had become too tame this evening for the Marquis of Cosgrove. For all their sakes.

Lord Bramwell Lowry Johns straightened his coat and strolled back into the ballroom. Lord and Lady Ackley's soirees were always well attended, and tonight the crowd had nearly been reduced to adopting the tactics of fish in a barrel—all having to swim in the same direction in order for them to make any headway at all.

As fish were wont to do, however, when they came upon a predator they broke apart and swam well around before re-forming their school. And so a pocket of space remained directly around Bram. The closest of the brightly colored fish sent him nervous glances, undoubtedly fearing his appetite. This particular shark, though, had just fed, and at the moment more than anything else he wanted a glass of Polish vodka.

He found a footman toting a tray of weak Madeira and sweet port, and placed his request. With a quick nod the fellow scampered away. The butler announced a quadrille, his voice barely audible through the cacophony, and several dozen fish split away from the school and re-formed on the dance floor.

His drink arrived, and he took a long, grateful swallow. Busy as his evening had been, what with a robbery and sex and it barely being midnight, restlessness continued to creep through his limbs. Bram sent a glance in the direction of the refreshment table, where Lord Braithewaite stood stuffing his jowls with biscuits and sugared orange peels.

The damned fat sloth had made the burglary too easy. That's what it was. Putting the family's finest gems in a Gibraltar-sized box of fine, carved mahogany, and then placing *that* squarely beneath the bed in the master bedchamber—the only thing easier to find and empty would have been a bag hanging out a window and embroidered with the words “expensive jewelry.” Bram wanted a challenge and stealing from Braithewaite would barely appease a boy in short pants.

Another figure joined the marquis at the sweets table, though he didn't touch any of the refreshments. Bram's jaw tightened. *That* was the man Braithewaite could thank for the removal of his valuables. The bloody Duke of Levonzy. Braithewaite needed to acquire better taste in both his desserts and his friends.

The two men continued to converse—round-cheeked sycophant and arrow-straight, sharp-angled tyrant. Two demons for the price of one.

Damn. Now he was being witty, and had no one with whom to share it. Taking a breath, he turned his back on the duke and went to find two of the four people in attendance tonight whose company he could tolerate.

A moment later he spied them, dancing. Married for just over six months, Phineas and Alyse Bromley looked only at each other as they twirled about the floor, both of them wearing the sickeningly sweet expression of happiness and true love. Well, no one was perfect, and Phin had simply succumbed to being more or less...human. Poor fellow.

“Your expression is distressingly dour,” a voice drawled from low by Bram's side, “especially to be looking at two very happy people.”

Ah, the third person he could tolerate. Viscount Quence sat in his wheeled chair, his ever-present valet at the handles behind him. “William,” Bram said, offering his hand. “I don't mind that your brother and his bride are happy; it's only that they exude a sweetness that's likely to rot my teeth.”

Quence chuckled. “I'll take your rotted teeth over Phin returning to the army. She saved his life, I think.”

Bram thought it more likely that the life saving had been mutual, but he offered a half grin rather than saying that bit aloud. “And the lives of untold French soldiers.” He sent a glance behind the viscount. “Speaking of lives being saved, is your sister about?”

“Beth is safely on the dance floor with the latest fellow to be smitten with her. Now that she's out, I think she may be over her infatuation with you.”

“Thank God for that. You know she terrifies me.”

“Mm hm. If you don't wish to admit that you're being honorable by sparing her from your dismal reputation, I won't contradict you.”

“I freely admit to being admirable about my god-awful reputation. As you know, it's been

painstakingly earned by multiple misdeeds and unconscionable wagers and drinking, and I'm quite proud of it."

The older man shook his head. "I'll agree that you're quite good at it."

Despite Quence's title and ownership of a very promising mineral hot springs property, the viscount sat alone. Bram swallowed his impatience and another mouthful of vodka and continued conversation with him until the country dance ended. He had worse things he could be doing, but certainly nothing better.

When Phineas and Alyse joined them, he was halfway through his second glass. Taking the chestnut-haired Alyse's hand and bowing over it, he curved his lips. "Are you certain you don't want to change your mind about this unpleasant fellow?" he asked smoothly. "I'm far more charming, and handsome, and I know people who could see him shipped off to Australia at a moment's notice."

She laughed. "Thank you for the offer, Lord Bram, but I find myself rather...happy with my circumstance."

He lifted an eyebrow. "But it's been half a year."

"I don't rot after a week or two like old fruit," Phin broke in, capturing her hand back. "And leave my wife be, you blackguard."

Anyone else would probably have been wise to warn him away from a female to which that person had a prior claim. If there was one line that Bram hadn't crossed, though, it was loyalty. And Phineas Bromley was his friend. But for Lucifer's sake, if he couldn't at least pretend to be a wolf, he might as well hang himself. "The only reason I appeared here tonight was for a waltz with your wife," he said aloud. "Or with you. I'm not particular."

"Mm hm." Phin glanced beyond him, his expression sharpening a little. "Alyse, give me a moment, will you?"

She nodded. "I'm expecting you to appear for the second waltz tonight," she said in Bram's direction, then joined Quence in greeting the frighteningly cheerful Beth as she returned from the dance with her partner.

"You wouldn't be the reason that Lady Ackley is missing one ear bob and Lord Ackley looks as though he's about to go pull a saber off the wall, would you, Bram?" Phineas asked, stepping closer and lowering his voice.

Phin had always been the observant sort. "Damnation. At times I appreciate a woman who can't keep her mouth shut, but outside the bedchamber I would prefer a little discretion."

"You are in the man's bloody house," Phin returned. "Isn't that a bit bold, even for you?"

Bram snorted, "A few minutes ago I was in the man's bloody wife. And you're no saint, yourself."

"I never claimed to be. But I have more than myself to consider now. And if Ackley's going to be challenging you to a duel, I don't want you anywhere around Alyse."

"Well, that's lovely, isn't it? Enjoy your sugar-coated domesticity, Phin."

As a rule, Bram didn't allow censure to trouble him, but Phin Bromley's conversion to piety was damned annoying. Together he and Phin and Sullivan Waring had left a well-marked trail of mayhem across half the Continent—or at least the bits that England was attempting to keep from Bonaparte. Sex, gambling, fighting, killing—they'd done it all. But now, a bare two years since he and Sully had returned, and one year less for Phin, he seemed to literally be the last man standing. They might call it a shame and say he would be happier married, but neither had they dared send any respectable, marriageable females in his direction.

"Bram?"

He blinked at Phin. "What?"

"I need to go dance with my sister. Are we still arguing, or are you going to stomp off?"

“I can’t very well stomp off now that you’ve suggested it.”

~~“Ah. Apologies.”~~

Bram took a breath, the thought of wandering about the ballroom for another two hours while avoiding both Lord and Lady Ackley making him want to gag. “Come to Jezebel’s with me.”

“I don’t—”

“I’ll tell you who I robbed this evening.”

Phin opened his mouth, then closed it again. It must be difficult for Phineas, Bram reflected, to be morally superior in front of someone who knew of his every previously committed misdeed. At the moment Bram had no sympathy for him at all.

“Let me guess,” the former highwayman and present loving husband finally said, sending a glance in the direction of the refreshment table. “Braithewaite, or Abernathy.”

“Abernathy?” Bram turned around. A third oaf had indeed joined the ranks of the overly pompous. “Now this is a fortunate turn of events. I rescind my invitation to Jezebel’s.”

“Damn it all, Bram, you can’t burgle the household of everyone who says a word to Levonzy.”

“You know I hate to be contradictory, but I believe I can.” He smiled, his so-called heart accelerating. A second robbery in one night. Everyone would be talking of the Black Cat tomorrow. Even Levonzy.

“Does the duke have any idea what you’re doing?”

“Who gives a damn? Not I.”

“The man is your father.”

“That is the one thing in my life that isn’t my fault. Pray don’t remind me.”

Phin rolled his shoulders. “I can see this isn’t going anywhere. But didn’t I see you at the Society the other day with Abernathy’s son?”

“Yes. Viscount Lester. He’s been following Cosgrove and me about like a lost puppy.”

Phin’s jaw clenched for the briefest of moments, but Bram saw it, nevertheless. If he was in for another damned lecture, he was going to flee.

“So you’d burgle the house of a friend.”

“I didn’t say Lester was a friend. And that wasn’t your complaint. Come now. Don’t spare the horses, Phin.”

“No. I am not going to wade into that with you.”

Bram forced a chuckle. “Go dance with Beth, then. And give Alyse my apologies for missing the waltz.”

Sketching a lazy bow, he strolled out of the ballroom. He’d been seen by all and sundry, so no one would name him as the Black Cat. And now he had another task to occupy the remainder of his evening. He only hoped that burglarizing Abernathy’s home would be a more interesting excursion than the visit to Braithewaite’s had been. If it wasn’t, he had no idea how to amuse himself next, or even which hobby, which activity, even remained undiscovered, unexplored, and undiscarded.

Considering both the ease and the lack of satisfaction he’d felt in making off with Braithewaite’s valuables, Bram concocted a different strategy for visiting Lord Abernathy’s home.

Other than the annoying son, James, Viscount Lester, he wasn’t acquainted with the family. That in itself added an element of danger—he’d never been invited through the front doors of Davies House, and had no idea of the floor plan. Of course there were certain givens: the bedchambers would be upstairs, the silver would be locked in its closet, and the most valuable items would be kept closest to the master of the household.

Bram leaned back against the dark wall of the Davies stable. The family had returned home from the Ackley soiree nearly thirty minutes ago, and a few lights still glowed from the upstairs windows. He could have slipped in and been gone before they ever arrived, but he'd already done that once this evening, and he hated repeating himself.

He chewed on a stalk of straw and watched the house. Phineas had become bloody sanctimonious in the last six months. He frowned at the idea of thefts when he'd committed the same sins himself, and he practically suffered an apoplexy at the mere mention of Cosgrove's name. Kingston Gore, the Marquis of Cosgrove, had never done harm to Phin or Sullivan or their families—and that was because of Bram. They should be grateful for his friendship with the marquis.

And he'd known Cosgrove longer than he'd been acquainted with Phin, or even Sullivan. The man had practically raised him—or at least proved to be a very efficient tutor—after he and Levonzy had parted moral company shortly after he'd turned sixteen.

Another candle went out upstairs, and Bram straightened. No sense making it too easy—and aside from that, it was bloody cold out in the stable yard. He tossed the straw aside, pulling a black half mask from his pocket and tying it across his eyes. Low excitement stirred in his gut, and he slowed a moment to enjoy the sensation. Too damned few deeds left him feeling alive—much less interested—these days.

Perhaps his next task should be to concoct an eighth deadly sin. Or he could work toward finding an even dozen. The devil knew he'd worn out the original seven. With a slight smile he reached a ground floor window and peered inside. Dark and empty. If he'd been one for self-reflection, that might have symbolized something—but he wasn't, and he curled his fingers under the frame and pulled. The glass swung open.

Very foolish of the Davies family, to leave their windows unlatched. A burglar was terrorizing the wealthiest residents of Mayfair, after all. Carelessness was this family's second sin, then. The first was their patriarch being caught in friendly conversation with the Duke of Levonzy.

As soon as he climbed inside, Bram closed the window again. He stood in what looked to be the breakfast room. A few baubles and bits decorated the walls and sideboard, but nothing that caught his eye. He hoped there would be something worth stealing upstairs. A lucrative satchel might even inspire the flock at St. Michael's to pray on their mysterious benefactor's behalf—or at least for his salvation.

Silently Bram pushed down on the door handle and cracked the door open an inch or so. A single candle still burned in the foyer, probably for young Viscount Lester's benefit, since the boy hadn't returned in the family coach. He was probably out somewhere, losing his shirt to Cosgrove. Again. Idiot pup.

The main stairway stood just in front of him. Taking another few seconds to listen and hearing only silence, Bram made for the stairs and swept up to the first floor. In the dark with his black greatcoat, he probably looked like a fast-moving shadow.

Who would be in residence? He'd gone over the list as he waited outside—the earl and the countess, James, and an unmarried daughter whose name escaped him but who'd obviously been too virginal or too ordinary or both to catch his attention. The married daughter seemed to be staying there as well, and had an irritating laugh and an irritatingly dull husband.

He'd call it six, then, and more than likely three times that many servants. Just the right recipe to provide a good theft without leaving him overly stuffed or wanting more—at least not until tomorrow.

A low, muffled voice sounded off to his left. Bram froze. Abernathy. A second, female voice answered, and he tilted his head, listening. The voices came from a partially closed door on the north side of the hallway, probably the library or an upstairs sitting room. That was actually a bit reassuring—he wouldn't have to creep into the earl's private rooms while the man slept, anyway. There might

remain a thing or two that could scar even his sensibilities.

~~First, though, he needed to find the earl's private rooms. Given his own dislike for the morning sun, he would start with the rooms on the west side of the house. Unable to help the dark smile curving his mouth, Bramwell started silently along the hallway.~~

If he hadn't been so restless tonight, he would have conceded that he should have done a bit more research into his target. Whereas with Braithewaite he'd known that the marquis had a particular fondness for his wife's pearl necklace and matching ear bobs, he had no idea what jewelry Lord and Lady Abernathy even owned. Ah, well. He'd wanted a challenge.

"—understand how marrying me off to that blackguard can save us from him," the female voice said.

Bram stopped his advance. The door in front of him stood ajar by an inch or so—not enough to see through, but enough to hear fairly clearly now that he was directly on top of it. He'd always had the curiosity of a cat, and this conversation perked up his ears.

"Because most of the debt James has incurred is to him," the deeper voice, Abernathy's, responded. "Do you think this family has ten thousand pounds to hand?"

"I'm certain Cosgrove would rather give us some additional time to repay him than see us bankrupted."

Not bloody likely, Bram thought. He'd been called heartless, but Cosgrove had long ago gamble away his own soul. But the chit had mentioned marriage. How did that play into anything? Bram frowned, moving closer to the door, clenching his fingers against the temptation to push it open just another fraction.

"You read his letter, Rose. He's made it quite clear that he wants either the debt made good or your hand. I can likely put him off until the end of the month to make it look more respectable, but that's all. If neither occurs, then we *will* be bankrupted."

"For heaven's sake, Father. I am not a box of bread to be traded to satisfy a debt."

"That is precisely what you are. You are a member of this family, and you will do your duty."

She made a scoffing sound. "This was James's doing—let him marry Cosgrove. He spends more time with that man and his awful cronies than he does with his own family, anyway."

"If you're going to argue, at least have something useful to say."

"You didn't ask me in here to be the voice of reason. Good night, Mother. Father."

Bram swept sideways, ducking into the dark doorway of the next room over. The library door slammed open, and a swoosh of silk passed him. The light scent of lavender followed. Seized by the abrupt desire to see this chit, Bram stepped halfway back into the hall. The tail end of a green patterned gown disappeared around the corner.

Well, this was unexpected. Most surprising of all, Cosgrove seemed to have decided to marry—and had put it in writing. He'd ruined men's fortunes and lives before, so that was nothing new. But marriage...

"She won't go along with it, you know," another female voice took up. The Countess of Abernathy, no doubt. "You should have let me put it to her. I've always been able to reason with her."

"Bah. We don't need to reason with her, Joanna. This is her duty. You had to let her sister marry that useless Fishton, so she's not available."

"But Fishton's a viscount, my dear. And mind your voice; they're sleeping just down the hallway."

"Yes. Another burden. And James is an idiot, but he's the heir. It has to be Rose, whatever her protests may be. She certainly isn't good for anything else."

"Are you certain this is the best use for her? She might marry one of Prinny's circle, or someone higher in the government than Fishton. Or—"

~~“She doesn’t show well enough for that. Bookish and flat-chested. No, it’s Cosgrove. I have no idea why he wants her. Just be grateful he does. At the least he’s wealthy, and titled. And we have no other way to pull ourselves out of this hole James has dug for us all.”~~

“Cosgrove’s reputation is nothing to brag about.”

“His reputation is horrific. But at least it will be a marriage, and we will no longer be in debt to him. Perhaps Rose will lend him some respectability. Anyway, it’s done. I’ve agreed in principle, and I’m to meet with Cosgrove tomorrow to see to the details. Just hope he agrees to the month delay, or everyone will know just how much monetary distress we’re in.”

Bram returned to the dark sitting room and sank back against the wall beside the door. So Abernathy was another man who saw his progeny as pawns and puppets. There was nothing new or unusual about that. He was one of those pawns, himself—though Levonzy would be worse than daft to attempt to use him as such now.

What struck him, though, was to hear it said so plainly, and in words that sounded so familiar. It didn’t wound, because, well, nothing did any longer, but appreciating irony as he did, he wished there was someone else to recognize that thirteen years ago when he’d heard a very similar speech, he’d gone out and found Cosgrove with whom to commiserate. And now this Lady Rose Davies was being pushed at Cosgrove because of the same sentiment.

Hm. Bram listened for another few minutes, but the lord and lady of the house seemed to have finished discussing the interesting bits. Straightening, he slipped back down the stairs and out the window through which he’d entered. He now had something on his schedule for tomorrow: Talk to Cosgrove and discover why the devil’s spawn now wanted to marry some obscure chit. And since the Black Cat’s curiosity had been roused, who knew what else he might find to do tomorrow?

Chapter 2

“Rose, may we please go now?”

Rose finished signing her name and picked up *A History of the New World* from the counter.

“Thank you, Mr. Simms,” she said. “I’ll have it back to you in a fortnight.”

The tall librarian dipped his head. “I’ll see if I can locate that book on seafaring legends for you by then. Good day, Lady Rose, Lady Margaret.”

With a pinched smile Lady Margaret Havendish led the way outside, practically dragging Rose behind her. “I did not escape tea with Mama and Aunt Joanna to go to the lending library,” she stated. “Ascott will never wish to call on me again if he thinks I’m a bluestocking.”

“Reading does not make you a bluestocking, Maggie. Quoting aloud what you’ve read makes you a bluestocking.” Rose smiled. “And it’s Ascott now, is it? What happened to Lord Bentham?”

Her petite cousin blushed to the roots of her fashionable blonde hair. “He begged me to address him as Ascott. I didn’t wish him to expire from despair.”

“Heavens, no. Especially if something as simple as calling him by his Christian name can save him.”

“Oh, don’t make fun.”

Rose took a breath, tucking the book beneath her arm as they strolled toward Bond Street. Brightly colored muslins and polished boots and jackets of the finest cloth thronged in front of the shops, with carriage traffic on the street slowed to a near snail’s pace. Generally she enjoyed the bustle of Mayfair, but today the crowds served to remind her that it was nearly noon. Less than an hour before her father would be sitting down to luncheon with the Marquis of Cosgrove.

It hadn’t helped at all that James had lost another forty pounds at faro last night—a small loss for him, but another blow that the family was ill-equipped to weather. She’d tried speaking with him, reasoning with him, but Cosgrove clearly had more influence over her brother than she did.

She supposed she should be grateful that the marquis had offered the family an alternative to debtors’ prison—though why he’d decided that marriage to her was worth ten thousand pounds, she had no idea. They’d met on two occasions, very briefly, and both times she’d made it clear that she despised him.

“Rose,” Maggie said, interrupting her thoughts, “Ascott’s uncle is quite wealthy. If your father can put Cosgrove off until after we’re married, Ascott could likely persuade Lord Palbridge to loan your father the money.”

“You haven’t received a proposal yet, Maggie. You’ve only begun using his familiar name with the last day or two.”

“You think he won’t ask m—”

“All I’m saying is that Cosgrove expects my father to make good on James’s debt. At the most, Father will be able to delay a public announcement of our betrothal until the end of the month. Twenty-six days. I prefer to deal in facts rather than fairy tales. And yes, I think Ascott will offer for

you.”

~~Her cousin’s frown smoothed away. “Very well. I’m appeased. The facts, though, can’t be very pleasing to you.”~~

The facts deeply troubled her. She’d lain awake all night, trying to figure a way for the family to raise ten thousand pounds. Nothing had come to mind other than selling James to pirates; amusing as that thought had been, at the moment she simply felt...overwhelmed.

“Come along, Rose. Let’s purchase some hair ribbons. That should cure your doldrums.”

A sack of money falling from the sky would cure her doldrums better. Rose nodded, pasting a smile on her face. “Yes, that’s just the th—”

The book jolted loose from her arm and fell to the ground. Opening her mouth to apologize to the man she’d bumped into, Rose turned around. And stopped.

“*A History of the New World*,” he read, straightening with the book in his hands.

Eyes black as pitch regarded her. She’d never seen eyes like that before. The effect of their direct, level gaze was...unsettling. Beside her, Maggie gave a small gasp. “Thank you for retrieving my book, sir,” she said, finding that her voice wanted to quaver and fighting against it. “May I have it back?”

His head tilted a little to one side, a strand of coal black hair falling forward across his forehead. He was all in black, she realized, from his beaver hat to his gloves to the soles of his boots. Only a white shirt collar and simply tied white cravat leavened his stark appearance. No, not stark, she amended as he glanced down at the book again. Predatory. All six lean feet of him.

“Do the Americas interest you?” he asked, his voice a low, cultured drawl that seemed to resonate down her spine.

“Learning things interests me,” she replied, and held out her hand.

The corner of his mouth quirked, and he slowly placed the book into her fingers. “Well, then. I could teach you such things, Lady Rosamund,” he murmured. With a last look from those midnight eyes, he turned away and vanished into the crowd as if he’d never been there at all. As if she’d imagined him.

“Oh, my word,” Maggie whispered, and clutched her arm.

Rose jumped. “What? Do you know him?”

Blonde hair shook vigorously. “Never. I know *of* him, though. So do you.”

“Who is he, then? For heaven’s sake. He knew my name.” And the way he’d said it, and what he’d said...It had made her want to blush, but on the inside.

“Heaven has nothing to do with him. My father pointed him out to me once and told me to stay well away from him.”

“Maggie.”

“That was Lord Bramwell Lowry Johns.”

Bram flipped open his pocket watch. If Abernathy was to meet Cosgrove at noon, then he was running very late. “Up, Titan,” he ordered, nudging the black in the ribs. They moved into a canter, the fastest pace possible in the environs of Pall Mall at this hour.

If the chit hadn’t spent so long in the bloody lending library—or if he’d been able to tolerate the idea of crossing the threshold to see her up close inside, he might have saved a bit of time. There were some things, though, not even he would stoop to. And entering a lending library was one of them.

The book he’d pushed out of her hands had surprised him, when he hadn’t expected anything about her to be of much interest. He’d summed her up in advance. She would be mousy, with a weak

character, close-set eyes, a dress up to her chin, a simpering laugh, no conversation, and the book would be one of those frightful gothic escapades all the young chits seemed to find so romantic.

Her eyes had not been close-set, but they annoyed him. They were green, he recalled quite clearly, complementing well her ginger hair, and they'd gazed directly at him. Women didn't often do that. Virginal, mousy chits certainly didn't.

Her father had been correct in saying that she wasn't striking, for her chest was less than ample, and her mouth a touch too wide. She stood several inches above anything that might be considered petite, and he'd spied at least a half-dozen freckles across the bridge of her nose.

As he reached the front door of the Society Club he swung down from Titan and tossed the end of the reins to the groom who came puffing up behind him. "Walk him, Redding," he instructed. "I shall be long."

"Very good, my lord."

The doorman greeted him as he stepped inside. "Lord Bramwell. Good afternoon."

"Jones. Is Cosgrove here?"

"In the dining room. He's expecting g—"

"Yes, I know." Bram walked through the square foyer and into the large, dark, wood-paneled dining room.

The place smelled of roast pheasant and red wine, and already at this early hour better than half the tables were occupied by the cream of London's male aristocracy. Even with the growing noontime crowd, the lone figure seated at the back of the room seemed to have at least one empty table between him and the rest of the diners.

"King," he said, taking the seat opposite the marquis. He generally didn't like sitting with his back to the room, but Cosgrove didn't either, and the marquis had arrived first.

"Bramwell. Surprised to see you in such proper company." The marquis lifted the bottle of port that decorated the center of the table and poured Bram a glass.

"I could say the same about you."

Pale blue eyes regarded him for a moment. "I've a luncheon engagement. Business. I'd avoid it myself, if I could."

"Yes, you're arranging your marriage." Bram took a sip of the too-sweet wine, the only thing Cosgrove ever drank before nightfall. "Came to congratulate you in advance."

Bram could count on one hand the number of times Kingston Gore had ever been truly surprised and this was one of them. His expression didn't change except for a slight narrowing of his eyes, but that was enough.

To anyone just setting eyes on him, the Marquis of Cosgrove looked very like an angel fallen from heaven. Unruly golden hair, fair skin, those pale blue eyes, tall, lean—poets wept for such subjects. Having been acquainted with him for thirteen years, though, Bram knew that his skin was pale both because he rarely ventured out of doors during daylight hours and because of the absinthe the marquis drank nearly nightly. The angelic features were as much a mask as anyone else would wear to a masquerade ball, and the creature that lurked behind it was both heartless and soulless, and was perfectly at ease with being so. As for his age, he'd never given it, but Bram would guess him to be somewhere in his middle thirties.

"One of these days," Cosgrove finally said, "you're going to tell me who you pay to get your information."

"I keep an oracle in my wine cellar. For the price of a selection of small animals and the occasional infant she tells me everything I wish to know."

"Mm hm. Everything?" King shifted his attention to the room, as he frequently did. He likely had more men wishing him dead than even Bram did.

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